

Part 1:  
Hanoi to  
Da Nang

# Xin chào!

## Darren Calpin travels on Vietnam's Reunification Express – a 1,000 mile train route between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City that serves as a symbol of the country's peaceful rebirth

FOR MUCH OF its recent history, Vietnam has been a divided nation: north and south bitterly opposed in their respective politics, philosophies and allegiances. It took several wounding wars, but the people of this indefatigable state have managed to create, in today's Vietnam, a modern, peaceful and entirely unified nation.

Like Vietnam itself, the so-called Reunification Express, a 1,000-plus mile single-track train route running between Hanoi in the north and Ho Chi Minh City in the south, has been bombed to hell and back. And, like Vietnamese society, it has been rebuilt and reopened for business. It is a metaphor of the country's turbulent recent past, and a symbol of its rebirth and reconciliation.

This, combined with the jaw-dropping scenery and the romance of long distance train travel, is what makes the Reunification Express arguably the best way to discover what

21st-century Vietnam is really like. Completed by the occupying French in 1936 to improve the infrastructure of what was then French Indo-China, this steel spinal cord linking the far north and south is certainly an impressive feat of engineering, despite catastrophic colonial mismanagement.

However, it only ran until 1954, ceasing service when the country officially split in two, and not resuming again until 1976, just 20 months after the 'American War' (as the Vietnam War is known in these parts) was over.

### THE JOURNEY BEGINS

The north-to-south journey starts in the capital of Hanoi, a rapidly developing metropolis of gleaming skyscrapers and, at this time of year (early summer), brow-wiping humidity. This sprawling, vibrant city is home to more than 8,000,000 souls, most of whom

seem to spend their time welded to the deftly maneuvering scooters that zip around the gridlocked streets like impatient dragonflies.

Respite is on hand at the picturesque Temple of Literature, a revered academic retreat originally built as a university in 1070 and dedicated to the life and work of Confucius. The well-preserved courtyards, ponds and landscaped gardens within the hushed, well-preserved grounds are supremely calming; the perfect antidote to the capital's relentless energy.

The timeless Old Quarter, a collection of intimate, narrow alleys and ancient commercial lanes scattered around Hoan Kiem Lake, is the city's must-see district.

As such, the neighbourhood is often packed with fleets of cyclos, quaint three-wheeled bicycle taxis that ferry curious tourists in sedate style past the tiny Buddhist temples, regal pagodas, banyan trees and medieval

merchants' houses that line the evocative old streets. The affluent grandeur of the handsome French Quarter, with its wide boulevards, colonial villas and stunningly grandiose Opera House is, despite being very close by, a whole world away.

### A NIGHT ON THE RAILS

Overnight trains for the 1,070 mile journey to Ho Chi Minh City, still known locally as Saigon, leave every evening from Hanoi station, a stark, rather imposing grey building

that's managed to retain some of its attractive 1900s features, despite being bombed by the US Air Force in 1972.

The train itself is a relatively modern diesel locomotive coupled to a long line of red, white and blue liveried carriages and a buffet car. Boarding is swift and straightforward, and Hanoi's sprawling suburbs soon drift away at a stately speed as the sun inches ever closer to the horizon. Daytime, as is the way around here, will soon retreat at speed.

Home for the night is a comfortable four-berth compartment (two upper beds, two lower) with air conditioning and a cute little table next to the window. A serious-looking guard-cum-porter-cum-hostess in a smart blue uniform tries to navigate a packed snack trolley along the carriage's side corridor, but is persistently thwarted by small children loitering in compartment doorways, too excited to go to bed. In contrast, most grown-ups find the rhythmic clackety-clacking and gentle swaying so relaxing that sleep comes easily.

There's nothing quite like waking up after a good night's sleep on a train. For that first few seconds the brain tricks the passenger into thinking they're at home in their own

Darren's en route to Ho Chi Minh City, still known locally as Saigon



Hanoi is home to more than 8,000,000 people, many of whom take to the streets on two wheels (or three)

### GET METHERE

- GRJ Independent tailor make holidays to Vietnam for group tour organisers who are developing itineraries for small and/or large groups.
- The journey mentioned here is a sample trip of eight days, which included return air travel with Vietnam Airlines, hotel stays in Hanoi, Hue, Nah Trang and Saigon, excursions and selected meals. Flight upgrades available to premium economy or business class on request, and price subject to date of travel.
- The team at GRJ can create itineraries to suit group interests, including a guest speaker for groups interested in the history of Vietnam's railways.
- Find out more at [www.greatrail.com/grj-independent](http://www.greatrail.com/grj-independent) or call 01904 527181.

bed. Soon enough though, the bemused traveller gets their bearings and immediately reaches for the tiny window curtains in the same way a young child might open an advent calendar door. Outside, rice paddies tended by farm workers sheltering under conical non la bamboo hats spool past, slow enough to make out faces, yet fast enough to be a mere memory in seconds.

This is rural Vietnam; lush, hot and oh so green. It makes a pleasant backdrop to a modest breakfast of warm sticky rice or »





Hanoi's Old Quarter



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## NEXT MONTH:

In the second leg of Darren's Vietnamese rail adventure, he leaves Da Nang's high-rise hotels behind, heading to the Marble Mountains as he journeys further south towards his final destination, Ho Chi Minh City.

dried noodles, which can be hydrated via the free boiling water dispensers at the end of every carriage.

It's a leisurely start to the day, with yawning travellers leaning against the corridor windows, making small talk with fellow passengers and taking snaps of incredulous water buffalo on smartphones. Within an hour though, the tentacle-like outskirts of Vietnam's former capital chase these rustic vistas away.

### THE IMPERIAL CITY

Though it's quite possible to journey from Hanoi to Saigon in one straight 33-hour run, most first-time visitors to Vietnam opt to stop off at few places along the way. The ancient city of Huế, Vietnam's capital up until 1945, makes a fine pit-stop in this respect. Trips in dragon-style tour boats along the famed Perfume River, typically up to the scenic Thien Mu pagoda, are particularly popular. The river is so-called because, every autumn, flowers from orchards further along the river fall into the water, giving it a pleasant, perfume-like aroma.

Huế's biggest draw though is undoubtedly the Imperial City, a huge walled palace and UNESCO World Heritage Site that was the seat of power of Vietnam's ruling Nguyen Dynasty right up until the end of the Second World War.

Highlights include an unbelievably large flag tower and the sublime Forbidden Purple City,

an ornate inner sanctum used as a residence by the royal family. Unfortunately, both the Imperial City and surrounding citadel suffered substantial damage during the Tet Offensive stage of the Vietnam War.

Restoration is diligent, sympathetic and slow; bullet holes can still be seen in many of the two-metre thick stone walls. Despite this, the friendly guides who lead visitors around the complex, some of whom remember that period and are willing to talk candidly about the war, speak of forgiveness and looking to the future. This lack of bitterness; this absence of aggression is, in a quite profound way, even more moving than the bombed out monuments and shattered ruins that continue to scar one of the country's most revered sites.

### STRIKING SCENERY

Easily ensconced in a roomy and thankfully very airy seating car, the 08.37 southbound Reunification Express rambles languidly out of Huế station. Though there are plenty of Westerners onboard, the majority of passengers are Vietnamese, many of them families. The parents chat casually in hushed tones, while the kids are smiley yet somewhat reserved. Things are a little different in the convivial buffet car where off-duty train staff sit at tables playing cards with gregarious kitchen hands, and tourists with gangly, unfurled maps

compare itineraries and swap Facebook details over a couple of Saigon Green beers.

This part of the journey is known for its striking scenery. Even the notoriously grumpy travel writer Paul Theroux once enthused: "Of all the places the railway had taken me since London, this was the loveliest."

Sure enough, it isn't long before sweeping vistas of the glinting South China Sea drift in from the east. One after another, arcing bays and secluded coves parade themselves in part, then full view while the creeping loco screeches its way up and around the cliff-traversing track.

Not to be outdone, Vietnam's mountainous interior joins the spectacle, presenting its jungle covered slopes and intimidating peaks for inspection as the determined diesel engine starts the ascent to the route's highest point nearly 500m above sea level.

A series of tunnels enables the train to inch its way up and along the majestic Hai Van ('Sea Cloud') Pass with the dogged yet laboured efficiency of an aging heavyweight boxing champ who refuses to retire. Pass negotiated and the locomotive gets a second wind, rolling gingerly and quickly back down toward the bays and boats of the coast, before curving east into the ultra-modern city of Da Nang. [GTW](#)