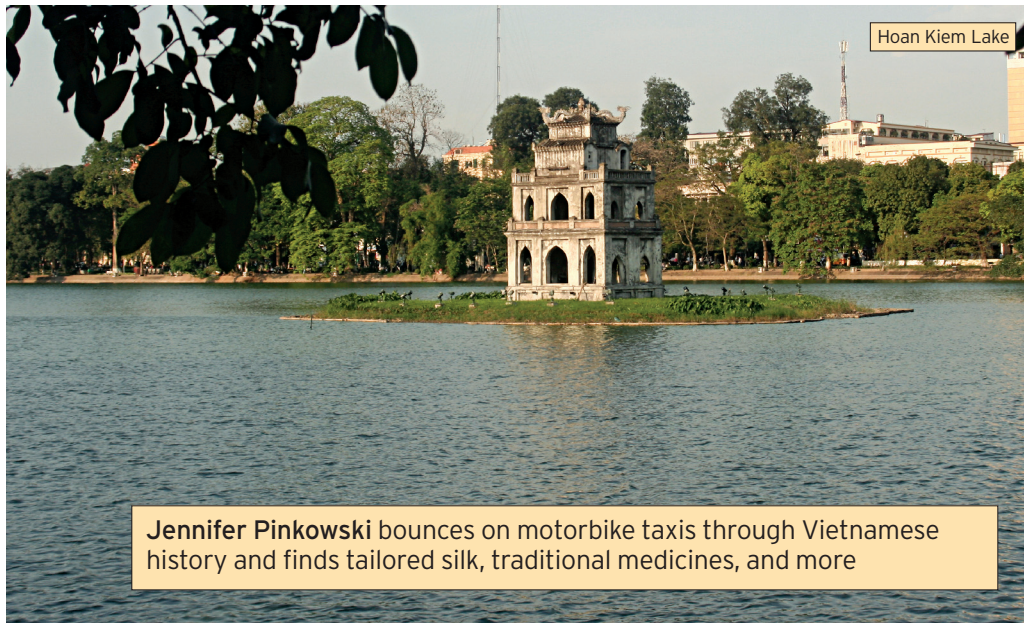


## 4 HOURS IN HANOI



### 1 HOAN KIEM LAKE

Hanoians consider the tiny “Lake of the Restored Sword” the city’s heart. According to legend, after a 15th-century emperor successfully defeated Chinese invaders with the help of a sword he had fished from the lake, he returned to make a sacrifice to the lake’s spirit. The turtle god rose from the waters and swallowed the sword whole. Today, the occasional endangered turtle may make an appearance, but more prominent is the Tortoise Tower, a small island pavilion.

A pretty red footbridge leads to the main attraction, the dramatic 18th-century *Den Ngọc Sơn*, or Jade Mountain, a temple dedicated to various historic Vietnamese heroes. Within is a glittering collection of statuary to which Buddhists make small donations. A stroll around the lake, which takes about 30 minutes, is a good way to orient yourself to the city. It passes by elderly chatters, smooching teenagers, and an array of trinket hawkers. Sunrise at Hoan Kiem finds locals doing tai chi and then heading for a traditional breakfast of *pho bo*, or beef soup, at a storefront stall.

### 2 OLD QUARTER

The merchants’ sector established centuries ago still thrives today in the Old Quarter. The wares may have changed a bit—you’re just as likely to find high-tech cookware as you are paper votives—but the streets largely retain their 500-year-old names. *Hang Gai*, or Hemp Street, is now the place to find tailored silk and souvenirs, while *Hang Chieu* merchants still sell mats, plus other wovens like ropes and screens. As generations have before, find traditional medicines on *Lang Ong*. Whether you shop or not—the merchants aren’t terribly pushy—the Old Quarter’s colors, sights, and sounds are essential to take in on foot. When you weary of the crowds and noise,

hop on the back of one of the motorbike taxis lingering on nearly every corner, and hang on as you join the buzz of motorbike traffic.

### 3 HO CHI MINH MAUSOLEUM

Several important historical sites cluster around Ba Dinh Square, where Ho Chi Minh declared the formation of an independent Vietnam in 1945. The one that draws the most visitors is the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum. Despite his wishes to be cremated, “Uncle Ho” was embalmed after his death in 1969 in the style of Communist leaders such as Mao and especially Lenin, whose Moscow tomb inspired the designers of Ho’s mausoleum. Come early, as it is never open past noon. Take a leisurely Vietnamese lunch at one of the nearby restaurants until 2 p.m., when the remaining sites reopen. These include the simple house, inspired by native stilt houses, where Ho lived out his last decade; the museum devoted to his life as a revolutionary; the Presidential Palace of the governor of Indochina, built in 1901; and the Pillar Pagoda, erected nearly a thousand years ago by King Ly Thai To, the founder of Hanoi.

### 4 HANOI OPERA HOUSE

Completed in 1911, the Hanoi Opera House is French colonial architecture at its finest. Inspired by the Opéra National de Paris, the butter-yellow Nha Hat Lon rises at the head of Trang Tien Street from leafy grounds; adjacent is the Hanoi Opera Hilton, perhaps the most dramatically situated of the city’s finer hotels. (The other “Hanoi Hilton” is Hoa Lo Prison, nicknamed thus by brutalized American POWs. A small section remains as a museum that is a 10-

minute walk from the opera house on Hoa Lo Street.) Long a symbol of colonial oppression, the opera house was where in 1945 the Viet Minh proclaimed victory in the August Revolution. Today, East meets West more positively at the venue, which features regular performances of classical Western and Vietnamese music, symphonies, and theater by the Hanoi National Conservatory of Music and other national artists, as well as foreign orchestras performing Beethoven, Mozart, and more. Check with your hotel for current performances.

### 5 NATIONAL MUSEUM OF VIETNAMESE HISTORY

Located behind the Opera House, the museum melds French and Vietnamese architectural sensibilities on gated grounds dominated by muscular trees draped with vines. Housed on its two floors are artifacts dating from the prehistoric age through the 20th century. English signage may be wanting, so pick up an informative brochure in the lobby. Highlights include 2,000-year-old bronze funerary drums from the Dong Son culture and a 15th-century book of geography and poetry that contains the oldest map of Hanoi. The exhibitions covering 20th-century history come with a heavy dose of spin; regardless of their original purpose, different kinds of axes are uniformly labeled “weapons in the struggle for independence”—historically questionable, but fascinating for what it reveals about state ideology. Across the street from the museum is a *Bia Hoa* (beer hall) where VND32,260 buys a delicious (and enormous) traditional dish and a few glasses of icy local beer. ■



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