



Memories of a different Hue

This Vietnamese city is a bit off the beaten track but it's well worth taking a detour for. By Marleena Forward

Vietnam is famous for many things: its food, its incredible natural scenery (think Ha Long Bay), its buzzing cities, its infamous battlefields. However, this South East Asian nation is more than just a stereotype, as my travel companion and I discovered on our arrival in the city of Hue.

A motorbike tour seemed the best way to see the sights, so, clad in purple plastic ponchos, we sped out of Hue clutching tightly to the waists of our drivers. With rain whipping our faces, our apprehensions were forgotten as we passed quaint rural villages and buffaloes at work in the green rice fields.

We soon arrived at a small temple where we heard monks perform their morning chanting ritual, and then it was onward and upward to the magnificent tomb of Emperor Tu Duc. Built in the 1860s during the Nguyen dynasty, the tomb is situated on a small lake in a pine forest and includes not only Tu Duc's tomb, but also several palaces and temples where he lived with his many wives and concubines.

Back in Hue, we explored Thien Mu Pagoda, an octagonal tower built in 1601. Here we found an old Austin car displayed in a small room in the monastery, a strangely incongruous sight. However, we soon

realised its chilling significance as the car that carried monk Thich Quang Duc to downtown Saigon before he set himself alight in protest to South Vietnam's Ngo Dinh Diem regime in 1963 – a sobering reminder of Vietnam's tumultuous history, old and new.

Our final stop was the Imperial Citadel, a grand complex of temples, moats, walls and pavilions. Sadly, the Citadel was badly damaged during the 1968 Tet Offensive; nevertheless, the site was strangely peaceful, a rarity in this country.

Hue sticks in our minds as one of the highlights of Vietnam. It just goes to show that it's always worth looking beyond the brochures.

Fast Fact: Hue

- Many of Hue's tombs and other monuments are listed among UNESCO's World Heritage Sites.
- In Vietnam, the word "temple" is used to describe a structure built to honour someone or something, whereas a pagoda is a place of worship.
- The Vietnamese believe that drinking ruou ran – a snake pickled in rice wine – will cure just about everything.



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