

Child's play in Hanoi

Perilous cyclo rides, stir-fried worms and delicious doughnuts are part of the charm of bustling Hanoi. Here is how to navigate the chaotic city with a child in tow



Tan Keng Yao

Ask my six-year-old son BBC what his favourite moment in Hanoi was and he will tell you it was riding in a cyclo, the pedal-powered pedicabs found everywhere in Hanoi's Old Quarter.

To him, the cyclo is a novelty on the scale of a carnival ride. My husband and I saw it as a tourist gimmick – but one with one major difference – the journey provides a constant near-death experience.

On a cyclo, you, the passenger, sit up front in the bucket seat with nothing coming between you and the madness that is Hanoi's traffic. Meanwhile, the cyclo driver is sitting snugly behind you, secure in the knowledge that he has you acting as an airbag should anything happen.

Things get especially hairy when the cyclo driver rides headlong into a throng of motorcycles, some of which are not travelling in your direction.

BBC? He was thrilled. His first words after we alighted, my husband and I dazed and dusty, yet blazing with gratitude for the gift of life, was: "Can we ride again?"

The Old Quarter is Hanoi's heart of commerce dating back to the 13th century, its streets named after the trades that set up shop there. Hang Bac, which means Silver Street, for example, was and still is a street lined with silversmiths. Other streets, however, now feature trades other than what they were named for.

So in the tree-lined, motorcycle-clogged lanes, you can find streets selling musical instruments, festive decorations, or even gravestones. Other sights include street hawkers cooking on tiny stoves and women selling pyramids of oranges, strawberries and fresh flowers from baskets or the back of bicycles.

In our cyclo, we glided past tourists sitting on little stools at corner coffee shops and overtook women selling gigantic bunches of Minion and Hello Kitty helium balloons. (Which BBC clamoured to buy, but by the time he made his plea, we had already left the balloon sellers behind. Tough.)

To get a closer, less death-defying look at the Old Quarter, the three of us took a walking tour of the area with Hidden Hanoi (www.hiddenhanoi.com.vn), whose guide gave us a primer on the history and architectural style of the Old Quarter. The area is filled with old buildings nicknamed tube houses because their profiles are long and narrow, up to 70m long but only 2m wide. Some tube houses have been converted into shops, but others remain for residential use. The guide took us to a very old and gloomy tube house, into which eight families were crammed, each occupying a room smaller than a bedroom in an HDB flat. All the families shared a tiny common kitchen and an even tinier bathroom and wash area.

It was getting a little grim, so the guide added, perhaps from personal experience: "You get used to living with so many people. Everyone knows everyone's business. And when you move out, you actually miss your neighbours."

Writer Tan Keng Yao's son, BBC, eating at a street-side stall in Hanoi.



And then, just as my group was filing out of the house through its narrow corridor, a motorcycle inexplicably appeared and cut through the house to get to the other side, forcing us to scramble onto tiny ledges on the walls to avoid getting our toes run over.

After leaving the house, we went to a street-side market, where something caught my son's eye. He squatted by a styrofoam box on a kerb containing squirming worms in shades of beige and pink, each as thick as a finger. Thinking that maybe the Vietnamese were really big on fish pets and bought these worms as fish food, I asked the guide about them.

"For eating," said the guide. "Stir-fried with egg."

Also worth checking out in the Old Quarter is the Thang Long Water Puppet Theatre (www.thanglongwaterpuppet.org), which puts on water puppet shows several times a day. The Vietnamese artform, which features colourful wooden puppets manipulated by performers standing waist-deep in a pool of water and hidden behind a screen, dates back to the 11th century when villagers staged performances in flooded padi fields to celebrate the harvest.

If you are taking small children to the theatre, try to get seats in the first row for an unblocked view but do buy your tickets early because seats fill up quickly.

The 45-minute production we watched was a rowdy and fun-filled affair featuring flame-snorting dragons, wooden boys spinning in basket boats and funny skits starring leaping fishes and wily foxes.

BBC could barely contain his questions: How is it possible for the dragon to surface from underwater while simultaneously breathing out flames and sparks? How did the fox leap from the water up onto the tree?

Where are the puppeteers hiding? And, what is it like to be in a job that involves being wet all the time?

Meanwhile, a toddler on my right was furiously punching and kicking the air during the climactic parts. On my left, BBC was squealing and clapping. I wanted to stand on my seat and shout: "Bravo! Encore!"

About 10 minutes' walk from the theatre is Luong Van Can Street, more commonly known as Toy Street as it is populated with all manner of toy shops. It is as interesting for kids and for grown-ups: Trust me, we visited this road five times during our trip.

On our first visit, my husband and son went from shop to shop comparing boxes of plastic construction bricks and studying the pictures on the boxes like they were university prospectuses.

There were endless deliberations. Should they get a crime-fighting vehicle set that fired missiles, or one that builds a ninja city and comes with flying discs with serrated edges?

With the patience of a saint, I waited for the boys to make up their minds. And waited.

By the fifth visit, I had lost it. Why were we spending the entire holiday lurking at toy shops? I snapped.

As with all arguments, there were two sides to the story. My stand was that I must have spent hours at the toy shops. My husband insists it took no more than an hour in total.

The winner here was, of course, BBC, who walked away with an armful of toys that we would never have bought in Singapore.

All I can say is, if you have kids with you, you, too, can make them very happy at Toy Street. Just make sure you set a time limit for all the kids (the big ones too, such as spouses).

If the exhaust fumes and non-stop honking from motorcycles overwhelm you or your child, one

place to retreat to is Hoan Kiem Lake, the focal point of Hanoi and a short walk from the Old Quarter.

Despite being in the centre of the action, the lake is an oasis of calm, where trees with overhanging branches dip into its waters.

BBC enjoyed being at the lake because there was space to run about and expend his energy. And he especially loved the doughnut hawkers – women selling baskets of deep-fried sugar-glazed fritters.

I managed to resist the first two times they came around pushing their basket of goodies under our noses. But when the third hawker came by with those deep-fried sugar-coated babies, I caved.

Another nice chill-out spot is Cafe Nola (www.facebook.com/Nola.cafe.inhanoi), an eatery hidden in the upper levels of a tube house in the Old Quarter. The cosy little garden on its rooftop was nice, but what really gave the place a touch of whimsy was a canopy of about a dozen open umbrellas hanging from a frame. BBC spent ages dashing in and out from under them, playing some imaginary game he devised.

Cafe Nola was also home to two cats who were not at all shy about creeping up your chair or jumping onto your table. Between the cats and the umbrella canopy, BBC was distracted long enough for my husband and I to sit back to drink coffee and enjoy the view of the surroundings from the rooftop.

So, despite the chaos and the motorcycle madness that is Hanoi's Old Quarter, it can be a place that children, too, will dig.

Back in Singapore, besides enjoying his spoils from the toy shops, BBC still speaks fondly of the cyclos.

And yes, he still wants another ride in those vehicles of near death.

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Travel tips

CROSSING THE ROAD WITH A CHILD

Hanoi is a city where motorcycles and pedestrians have found a way to co-exist peacefully, but non-Hanoians may lose a few years of their lives from the sheer fright of trying to cross a road.

But know one thing: The motorcycles are not out to get you. They have as little desire to kill you as you have desire to be killed by them.

When we were there, we saw a troop of about 30 kindergarteners cutting diagonally through a busy cross junction in a single file, each kid holding on to the shirt of the one before him. There were only two teachers with them and about 253 motorcycles, three cyclos, five bicycles and four cars coming at the kids in all directions, but not a single child was scathed in the crossing of the junction. So really, the roads are safer than you think, even if you have children in tow.

The trick to crossing the road with a child is to keep him firmly by your side – but not in front of you – and make sure he moves together with you. Walk slowly but steadily through the stream of motorcycles, which will then swerve to avoid hitting you. Do not make any sudden movements or stop suddenly.



Motorcyclists and toy-sellers co-exist on Hanoi's busy streets.

EATING STREET FOOD

Eating street food sitting on tiny stools is a quintessential experience of being in Vietnam. There are some things to keep in mind, hygiene-wise.

Ask your hotel for recommendations on where to eat. Hotel staff are likely to point you to stalls with a stricter standard of hygiene.

Eat at stalls with a lot of customers. This ensures food is freshly cooked instead of sitting around breeding bacteria.

Eat at stalls where you can see the food being prepared so you know it is cooked properly.

If you're really not sure which stalls to hit but don't want to miss out, consider signing up for a street food tour. Tour companies will have vetted the hygiene and food standards of stalls they take you to. Another plus point is that a food tour may take you to places you may not discover on your own. A Google search will turn up many tour companies offering street food tours in Hanoi.



A doughnut street hawker with sugar-glazed fritters.