



## 24 Hours In Hanoi: A Culture Lover's Travel Guide

The capital and second largest city of [Vietnam](#), Hanoi's charm lies in its paradoxes: the coexistence of historical and new, of French colonial architecture and pagodas, of bustle and calm. Hanoi is a great base to explore other parts of northern Vietnam, such as the UNESCO World Heritage Site Ha Long Bay, the terraced hills of Sapa, or the rice fields of Tam Coc, with travel agencies around every corner offering deals and guided tours. However, if you only have a few hours, here are some of the places and experiences you shouldn't miss.

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Lake Hoan Kiem by night | © Kriti Baja

### Getting around

The French Quarter consists of regal buildings reminiscent of the country's colonized past, now housing museums, hotels and shopping complexes. The Old Quarter has narrow streets - Hanoi's original layout - bursting with street food, budget hotels and tourists, and small artisan shops. Also called the "city of lakes," Hanoi is very walkable, though crossing roads needs some getting used to, and there are also readily available cyclos.



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Vietnamese Women's Museum | © Kriti Bajaj

### Day 1

#### 2 pm - Vietnamese Women's Museum (VWM)

Start your trip with a dose of Vietnamese history and culture - all from a female perspective - at this beautiful and unique museum in the French Quarter of Hanoi. A spotless white building with pastel-hued windows, the museum was founded in 1987 and is run by the Vietnam Women's Union. It opened to the public in 1995, and has since been listed as one of Asia's top 25 museums by TripAdvisor. The exhibitions, spread over several floors, present a history of Vietnam - political, social, anthropological - addressing themes such as rituals and community traditions (marriage, kinship), fashion, as well as political history and Vietnam's wars, highlighting important women icons and the role of women in Vietnam's history and contemporary life through various media and engaging storytelling.

*Vietnamese Women's Museum, 36 Ly Thuong Kiet, Hoan Kiem, Hanoi, Vietnam*

*Open daily from 8 am to 5 pm. Further information [here](#).*



Hanoi Opera House in the French Quarter | © Kriti Bajaj

#### 3 pm - The French Quarter

Exit the Vietnamese Women's Museum and take a walk through the [French Quarter](#). Located to the southeast of the Hoan Kiem Lake, the French Quarter is a stark contrast from the rest of the city, featuring French-style villas, wide tree lined boulevards, squares and fountains. The architecture is the legacy of the 19th century French colonization of Vietnam, during which Hanoi was the capital of French Indochina and many existing Vietnamese buildings were demolished. Some highlights of the Quarter include the Trang Tien Plaza, the Sofitel Metropole hotel, the Opera House, and the National Museum of Vietnamese History (also the Presidential Palace and Hoa Lo Prison - see Day 2). Stop for



Vietnamese history (also the Presidential Palace and Ho Chi Minh - see Day 2). Stop for an ice cream at Kem Trang Tien, maybe browse a bookshop or two - it's quite an experience seeing the Vietnamese editions of popular English novels. Walk back by way of the statue of Ly Thai To toward Hoan Kiem Lake.



*The entrance to Ngoc Son Temple | © Kriti Bajaj*

#### 4 pm - Ngoc Son Temple

Đền Ngọc Sơn (Temple of the Jade Mountain) is located on an island on Lake Hoan Kiem. A blue Vietnamese-style archway and pillars emblazoned with text and artworks of fish, tigers and dragons lead through to the striking red bridge Cầu Thê Húc (Rising Sun Bridge), followed by another arch leading into the temple complex. The layout of the complex follows feng shui and Taoist symbolism. The picturesque temple is dedicated to the 13th century war hero Tran Hung Dao, Confucian philosopher Nguyen Van Sieu and scholar Van Xuong. Apart from the area for worship, there is a small grove with benches where visitors can sit and observe the lake and surroundings in serenity. A small souvenir shop is also located here.

*Ngoc Son Temple, Đình Tiên Hoàng, Hàng Trống, Hoàn Kiếm, Hanoi, Vietnam*

*Closes at 5.30 pm (last entry 5 pm). Tickets are 20,000 VND.*



*In the shade by Lake Hoan Kiem | © Kriti Bajaj*

#### 5 pm - Lake Ho Hoan Kiem

After visiting the Ngoc Son temple, take a leisurely stroll around Lake Hoan Kiem and engage in some people-watching - the streets around here are busy and there are always interesting scenes for the observer. There is a shopping complex across from the lake, and the mouth of the Old Quarter as well, lined with many souvenir and artisan shops. Don't be afraid to bargain.

Buy tickets to the Water Puppet Theatre (ask for the ticket office) to ensure that you get the seats of your choice: the theater is very popular.



*Water puppet theatre performance | © Kriti Bajaj*

### 6:30 pm - Thang Long Water Puppet Theatre

[Water puppetry](#) is a centuries-old art in Vietnam with many different guilds and styles of puppets, such as string, hand and shadow puppets, and even kites and puppets with fireworks. The performance combines these various styles with live music to create a whimsical and colorful tableau that children will especially appreciate, but it is a unique experience for adults as well. The show is in Vietnamese (introduced in English) but not difficult to follow, and involves various scenes from Vietnam's myths and folklore with the country's agrarian life as a backdrop. The theater is located near Lake Hoan Kiem. Buy tickets slightly in advance, or alternatively book them via email. There are performances daily, at five different timings: the first at 3 pm and the last at 8 pm.

*[Thang Long Water Puppet Theatre, 57b Dinh Tien Hoang Str., Hanoi, Vietnam, +84 4 3936 4335](#)*

*Tickets cost 60,000 VND or 100,000 VND (20,000 VND extra for cameras).*



*Night Food Street | © Kriti Bajaj*

### 8 pm - Dinner on the street

Eat like a local - on the street. Though this idea might take some getting used to, it's definitely worth a try. Most streets in the Old Quarter consist of small street restaurants where customers are seated on kindergarten-style plastic stools (you're better off choosing one that has many customers already), but if this makes you uncomfortable, head over to Tong Duy Tan, also called Night Food Street. Here the cafés and restaurants are slightly larger and outdoor seating is more comfortable, and the entire street is devoted to food so there is not much traffic around. They are open all night, and are quieter during the day. Sit outdoors and enjoy traditional Vietnamese street cuisine including *pho*, Vietnamese spring rolls, *banh mi* and *chao*.

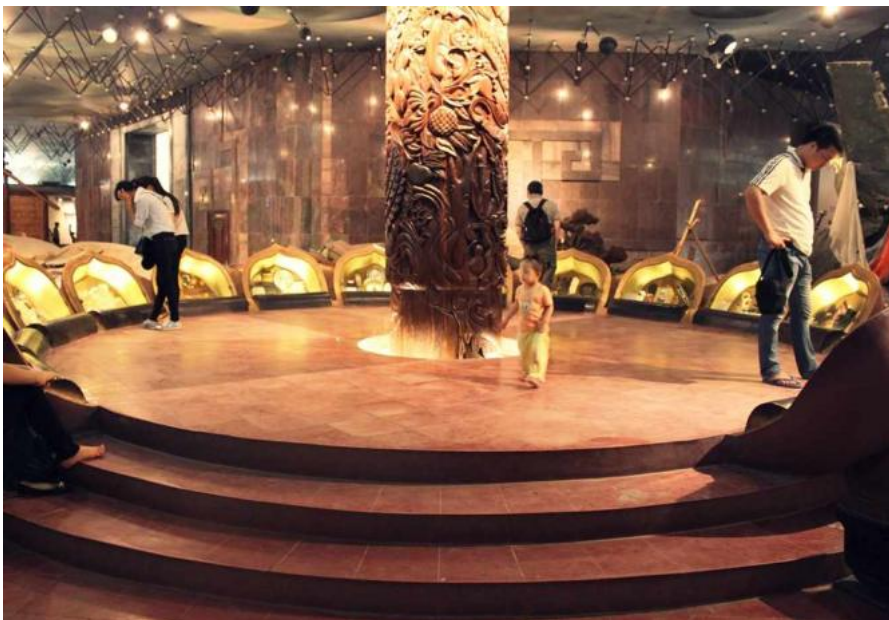




Night Food Street | © Kriti Bajaj

### 9.30 pm - Weekend Night Market

If you happen to be in Hanoi on a weekend (Friday-Sunday), visit the night market extending from Hang Dao street for some bargains. The range of items on sale is varied and seems to go on and on; you'll find everything from souvenirs to clothes and bags and even food. Traffic is blocked off and the market is frequented by many locals.



Inside the Ho Chi Minh Museum | © Kriti Bajaj

## Day 2

### 9 am - Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum complex

No trip to Hanoi is complete without a visit to the famous [Ho Chi Minh memorial](#), connected with Vietnam's political history and the final resting place of their revered national hero Ho Chi Minh. Ho Chi Minh was chairman of the Communist Party of Vietnam from 1951 to 1969 (his death), prime minister from 1945-1955 and Vietnam's president from 1945-1969, and also a leadership figure in the Vietnam War, leading the Viet Minh Independence Movement and defeating the French Union in 1954.

The Declaration of Independence was read at the Mausoleum by Ho Chi Minh on September 2, 1945, following which Vietnam was deemed a Democratic Republic. The architecture incorporates Russian and Vietnamese elements. It is advisable to dress

conservatively and carry a scarf to cover bare shoulders when visiting the Mausoleum (the dress code is strictly enforced). The Mausoleum is open for viewing from 9 am until noon.

Also within the complex is the Presidential Palace, a beautiful French-style villa surrounded by mango groves. It is the former residence of the French governor general of Indochina, later used by Ho Chi Minh to receive state guests (he lived in quarters behind the palace, choosing not to make the palace his home). Only the palace grounds are open to the public for a fee.

The impressive Ho Chi Minh Museum is located near the mausoleum and documents

Vietnam's political history and fight for independence, as well as hybrid cultural aspects arising from its French colonial past.

*[Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, Hùng Vương, Điện Biên, Ba Đình Square II, Hanoi, Vietnam, +84 4 3845 5128](#)*

*[Ho Chi Minh Museum, 19 Ngoc Ha Str., Ba Dinh, Hanoi, Vietnam, +84 4 3846 3757](#)*



*Hoa Lo Prison | © Kriti Bajaj*

#### 11:30 am - Hoa Lo Prison OR Tran Quoc Pagoda

From Ba Dinh Square, walk or take a cyclo either to Hoa Lo Prison or to West Lake, depending on your interests and preferences. Hoa Lo was the largest prison in Indochina, used by the French to punish Vietnamese political prisoners, and later by Vietnam to imprison American prisoners of war during the Vietnam War - Ironically dubbed "Hanoi Hilton" by the latter. Only a small part of the prison remains today as a museum, but it makes for an impactful visit.







*Tran Quoc Pagoda | © Kriti Bajaj*

Tran Quoc Pagoda is located by the West Lake, and belongs to the sixth century - it is the oldest Buddhist temple in Hanoi. It is still active and bustles with monks and visitors, with an impressive shrine inside, and replete with ornaments and elements of Buddhist symbolism.

*[Hoa Lo Prison, Hoà Lò, Trần Hưng Đạo, Hoàn Kiếm II, Hanoi, Vietnam, +84 4 3824 6358](#)*

*[Tran Quoc Pagoda, Thanh Niên, Trúc Bạch, Ba Đình, Hanoi, Vietnam, +84 4 3829 3869](#)*





Inside the Temple of Literature compound | © Kriti Bajaj

### 12:30 pm - Temple of Literature

Move on to the tranquil Temple of Literature, a Confucian temple that also houses Vietnam's first national university. The temple was originally built in 1070 and has since been reconstructed several times, the latest restoration being in 2000, and is a fine example of Vietnamese architecture. The university was established in 1076, remaining operational until 1779. There is considerable information about the university and temple inside, as well as the stelae of 82 of the university's scholars, highlighting their successes in Confucianism, literature and culture.

[Temple of Literature, Văn Miếu, Đống Đa, Hanoi, Vietnam](#), +84 4 3511 4855



Lunch at Koto | © Kriti Bajaj

### 1:30 pm - Lunch at KOTO Van Mieu Training Restaurant

Located directly opposite the Temple of Literature, [KOTO](#) is a multi-level restaurant and bar serving both local and international cuisine. It is also a vocational center for training underprivileged and disadvantaged youths in hospitality and the culinary arts, with a Graduate Gallery on the third floor dedicated to the successful careers of the organization's alumni. Most of the operations at the restaurant are handled by trainees. KOTO restaurants are an undertaking of KOTO Foundation ("Know One, Teach One"), founded over a decade ago. The food and ambience are excellent, and, to top it all off, your money goes towards a good cause!

[KOTO Van Mieu Training Restaurant, 59 Van Mieu, Dong Da District, Hanoi, Vietnam](#), +84 4 3747 0337

By Kriti Bajaj

Kriti Bajaj is a New Delhi-based writer and editor with an interest in photography and visual



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