5 Incredible Vietnam experiences in and around the ancient city of Hoi An

Cape Town - If there's one thing South Africa can learn from Vietnam, it's to embrace and showcase its UNESCO World Heritage sites.

I know we embrace and love our natural, cultural and historical heritage, don't get me wrong. But reflecting on a trip through Vietnam, I think we can do better to promote these sites as sustainable tourist attractions.

Our countries have the same number of Heritage Sites, and yet a typical Vietnam travellers' guide would lead you straight to their UNESCO declared wonders first.

In SA, apart from Robben Island in Cape Town, visitors to our country often only learn about the rich cultural heritage of the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape or the Richtersveld Cultural and Botanical Landscape after they've ticked off all the 'other' travel hotspots like Cape Town, the Garden Route and the Kruger National Park.

In Vietnam, I found, it was the other way around. When asking around, the locals all proudly directed us to their UNESCO sites as the most prominent places to experience first. And nowhere in Vietnam was this more prevalent than in Hoi An - one of the most beautiful towns I've ever laid eyes on.

Hoi An is itself a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and then it's also surrounded by two other individually declared sites. All are cultural heritage sites, all dating from different eras and tied together beautifully by the Old Town UNESCO area in the heart of Hoi An, where ancient Chinese culture meets French-inspired colonial architecture and influence.

But wait, let me not get carried away. Travelling isn't all about ticking off UNESCO World Heritage Sites anyway. It's about getting a sense of the destination and the local people that make it great.

Just go exploring...

Wherever you're stationed, whether it be at a hotel or Airbnb spot, ask someone local to give you a few pointers on where to go. Then whip out Google Maps and mark down the places that seem interesting. Then, go...

To the Gardens

Before you head go in search of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites, just take a day to explore the town of Hoi An and surrounds.

Hike a bike (it costs $5, about R70, for a day) or take the hotels' complimentary bicycles and ride out to the rice paddies, or Bale Well and local gardens just outside town.

The local villagers tend to the garden, and there are a few little restaurants where you can eat the local produce.
To the Beach

An Bang Beach sits right by the local gardens and is a lovely spot with straw umbrellas and desk chairs laid out by the restaurant operators. The vibe is definitely more touristy, with big beer gardens hogging the beachfront. But for an afternoon chill, it's just the spot to hang out and take a dip in the (surprisingly cold) South China Sea.

To the Island

Cam Nam is a little river island that is accessible from Hoi An via a single bridge only. We took the motorbike to the island to a little restaurant, on the recommendation of Noel Cameron, hotel manager at our Anantara Hoi An.

He said that Cam Nam serves a small-scale representation of everything agricultural Vietnam offers - from fishing, rice plantations and small piggeries and chicken coops - and right he was.

In a single afternoon, I got a base knowledge of what all to expect from Hoi An, and where exactly the fresh local fish came from.
Thu Bon River cruising

Another way to gain some perspective - geographically speaking - on how exactly Hoi An looks, is by doing a cruise on the Thu Bon River which runs right through the heart of the city.

We were there when a monsoon struck central Vietnam, but judging by the locals' nonchalance about this imminent disaster, this was the sort of this that happened quite often...

Either way, the elevated river gave us an even better view of the famous Hoi An market at dusk, just when the Chinese lanterns lit up the streets...
What was an even greater experience, was sleeping on a renovated old fishing boat which had been converted into a lovely, romantic houseboat, complete with a sundeck on top (where our crate of local Saigon beers tasted even better at sunset).

Enter the Old Town

Speaking of sunset, Hoi An's Ancient Town and UNESCO World Heritage Site closes its streets after the workday, leaving the narrow cobblestone alleys open to exploring.

I must admit, the first time we walked into the Old Town, I didn't even realise I was walking into a World Heritage Site. The ancient culture had been preserved immaculately, no doubt. But this is done alongside sustainable tourism initiatives to get people into the area, spending time and spending money.

We did both, and we went back to Hoi An's Ancient Town every day during our week long stay to spend time and money. It was truly the most beautiful city I've ever seen.
Local craftspeople occupied the heritage buildings, offering tailoring services and making the most beautiful leather products. I bought a couple of dresses, hand-made and tailored to my body on the spot.

I picked the fabric and style and 10-hours later, picked up my exact order. My husband had a pair of leather shoes made, also fitted and tailored to his feet exactly, and collected them a day after ordering.

Then, the night market. The iconic Chinese lantern-lit fairy tale market. You can't help but feel the 'love in the air' walking underneath those rich coloured lights, eating some freshly fried banana pancakes or coconut ice-cream.

The markets are also the place to buy some well-made Vietnamese souvenirs like dainty porcelain bowls or bamboo chopsticks. And the food markets are perfect for buying fresh or fermented Vietnamese goodies.
Exploring the wild side in Hue ancient city

Located on the banks of the Perfume River, Hue is the ancient city which served as the national capital from 1802 to 1945 when the Nguyen Dynasty emperors ruled the lands.

The vast, 19th-century Citadel, surrounded by a moat and thick stone walls is certainly the biggest attraction, but the UNESCO World Heritage Site encompasses the Imperial City, with palaces and shrines, the Forbidden Purple City (once the emperor’s home) as well as a replica of the Royal Theater.
History and culture are certainly the main attractions here, but if you're after something different, there are many tour agencies that operate boat trips along Perfume River, from which tourists can see the beautiful scenery.

At 1 450-metres-high, the Bach Ma National Park also provides a wild escape from the city in some four-seasons-type weather and immaculate views. Hook up with a local guide and do a hiking trail to the various lakes in the park - you'll be blown away by the beauty.
Drive out to My Son Sanctuary

Tour operators will try to persuade you to go on a group tour to the My Son Sanctuary and UNESCO World Heritage Centre, about 40km from Hoi An. But my advice is: Go alone.

It's a gravel road, and you'll need a good map, but if you're up for the adventure, a motorbike drive to the My Son Sanctuary is a must-do experience.

It's about an hours’ bike ride out of Hoi An through the most beautiful rural areas - which just keeps getting more and more beautiful as you approach the old ruins.

My Son Sanctuary dates from the 4th to the 13th centuries. In this time, a unique culture which owed its spiritual origins to Indian Hinduism developed where My Son Sanctuary is now. This is graphically illustrated by the remains of a series of impressive tower-temples located in a dramatic site that was the religious and political capital of the Champa Kingdom for most of its existence.
What to read next on Traveller24:

- Vietnam Honeymoon: 5 experiences that are easy to plan
- PICS: This massive cave has its own beach
- Vietnam on a shoestring budget