

#VIETNAM  
Cultural  
connections in  
Vietnam

Puppetry and rice paddies: Hoi An is the perfect destination for a cultural family holiday. *By Sue White*



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HERE ARE DOZENS OF REASONS to love Hoi An, but for families the historic town's versatility is undeniably appealing. Not only is Hoi An visually beautiful, but it wraps the best of Vietnam's coastline and culture into one easy holiday destination. Stay in one of the beach resorts around An Bang, just five kilometres from Hoi-An's UNESCO protected old town, and when you're not relaxing poolside dip into Hoi An's excellent cultural offerings.

#### 1 } CYCLE THE ISLANDS

Hoi An is excellent for cycling. Outside peak hour the streets aren't busy and the whole area is flat. Bike tours abound, but the best cultural experiences here come when cycling with only a vague commitment to your final destination. Cross one of the many bridges to Cam Kim, Thuan Tinh or any of the other neighbouring islands for quiet streets, rural houses (often with piglets or chickens running through) and a chance to watch locals at work on tasks like boat building on the edge of the Thu Bôn river.

Most hotels have free bicycles for guests, and will provide a child seat for toddlers. Older children can ride their own bike or prop on the back carrier of yours. Head out before the heat hits, returning home for a lazy buffet breakfast and dip in your hotel pool. Packing tip: Take a bike helmet from home; they're not used here.

OPPOSITE PAGE: In Hoi An, families will see locals going about their work in green fields. RIGHT: Cycling is the best way to get around the ancient and colourful UNESCO town.

#### 2 } WATCH WATER PUPPETS

Many countries have a culture of puppetry, but Vietnam's puppet shows take place on water. Held at 6.30pm each Tuesday, Friday and Saturday, Hoi An's interpretation of this thousand-year-old cultural tradition is a visual delight that will impress two to 82-year-olds.

The outdoor undercover auditorium fills quickly so come early with takeaway dinner in hand (buy food near your hotel – there's little nearby).

It's hard to follow the ancient fables in the plotline but that doesn't matter: the 45-minute show (A\$6) is filled with short vignettes of everything from fish to fire breathing dragons, all controlled by puppeteers standing waist high in water behind the scenes.

Afterwards, follow the crowds – Hoi An's taxis don't cruise the streets, so it's better to walk somewhere busier and get restaurant staff to order you a taxi home. Remember; carry your hotel's business card to help drivers with minimal English.

#### 3 } WANDER THE RICE PADDIES

Cycle almost any direction from Hoi An's centre and you'll soon pass a bright green rice paddy. True, these are disappearing fast thanks to construction for new hotels, but dozens are still dotted around Hoi An's fringes.

Tours exist but you don't need one. Instead, leave your bike and wander on foot through the narrow dirt tracks, waving to the farmers hard at work. Most speak no English but are usually delighted with an approach. Your child will be your entry ticket to lots of smiling and pointing as you try to understand the cultivation process despite language barriers.

#### 4 } MEANDER THROUGH MARKETS

Hoi An's spectacular old town deserves its popularity, but for a cultural experience packed with locals rather than tourists, get up early (6.30am) and head to the morning Central Market along the Thu Bôn river's edge. Stock up on lychees and dragon fruit, perfect for feeding the kids on the cycle home.

#### 5 } VISIT MY SON

For an easy daytrip with a cultural pay off, rent a car and driver and spend a morning at My Son. An hour's drive from Hoi An, this ancient Cham temple complex offers kids a couple of hours exploring and climbing. Take snacks for a picnic in the lush jungle valley site – although there is a small café near the entrance, it's a longish walk. Arrive for the 6.30am opening and you'll be leaving when the tour groups descend. ☺

