

Culture

VIETNAM



Rise and shine: (Left) Ho Chi Minh City's Notre Dame; (above) tai chi in the park; (below), a street vendor sells produce.
Photos: Alamy

Good morning Saigon

Craig Tansley forgets his sleep-in and hits the streets as the sun rises on a hectic Ho Chi Minh City.

It's 5am and smog-filtered sunlight is already streaming through my hotel window; I silently curse the three-hour time lag between here and Australia that won't allow me to doze again. Sounds of early morning activity already enter my living space, so I walk to my window and stare out. I'm in Vietnam's largest city by far, Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), formerly known as Saigon and home to more than 9 million people who appear to have surrounded me in huge, rambling apartment blocks during the night.

On tiny balconies and rooftops beside me, I spy an army of spritely residents – they're stretching, they're squatting, they're star-jumping, they're swinging their arms. I ride the elevator to street level; it's warm outside already, although pleasantly so. Dawn lacks the claustrophobia induced by the stale humidity that will soon descend.

The concierge tells me the best park in central HCMC is Cong Vien Van Hoa Park, a few blocks away. Also known as Cultural Park, it was created for the French elite (the former colonial rulers of HCMC). Now it's HCMC's most active gathering spot, and one of south-east Asia's best people-watching locations. My watch has barely ticked over to 5.10am and yet Cong Vien Van Hoa Park is in a state of



perpetual motion. Locals move vigorously without a hint of self-consciousness. A city of contortionists stretch their nimble bodies – some to music, others look lost in silent meditation.

A group of about 100 residents, from supple twentysomethings to those on the downward slide from middle age, join in a frenetic free jazzercise class – Vietnam's take on Jane Fonda – they listen to awful, whiny songs on an old cassette deck I'd gladly silence.

I leave the park for HCMC's streets but the blur of movement barely abates; shopkeepers on the city's pretty, tree-lined streets contort themselves into unlikely

positions beside their simple stalls. I sit down, ordering myself a ca phe nong voi sua dac. Vietnam is the second-largest producer of coffee (after Brazil), the French having introduced the crop in the 19th century. The Vietnamese drink their coffee strong... and sweet. I'm served a syrupy concoction in a single-cup brewer, and wait while the water drips from the filter into my cup. When it's full, I add teaspoons of sweetened condensed milk.

Around me, women in conical hats favoured by the country's farmers walk the streets with poles across their slender shoulders selling bread and exotic fruits.

Food vendors on the footpath boil huge pots of coconut rice, but it's the pho merchants I'll soon seek.

Vietnam's national dish, pho is a simple, but delicious, noodle soup flavoured by meats, herbs, chillies and lime. I stroll past stores where women in bright green, yellow and purple silk gowns chop meat, onion, Asian basil, coriander, chilli peppers, limes and bean sprouts.

It's argued HCMC offers the world's best street food (Singapore may have cause to argue), so any pho will do. But I drag the buying process out all the same, leading my inspection by nose, while studying the freshness of the herbs and the tenderness of the meat. I find it eventually; the perfect pho stall. A friendly octogenarian in a purple gown brings me a bowl. I add chilli peppers (too many), basil (never too much), bean sprouts and chilli paste (hardly necessary) and mix it all in. My mouth burns with the first taste; I can only imagine the sweat that'll come when I finish my bowl.

Around me, 4 million motorbikes ply suicidal paths through a genuine colossus of a city (by 2025, it's estimated, HCMC will be home to 15 million residents), but there's a transcendental calm on offer here for those prepared to sacrifice a sleep-in. **T**

The writer travelled courtesy of Vietnam Airlines.

FIVE OTHER GREAT CITIES TO ENJOY AT DAWN



TOKYO

It's a case of first-come-first-served at the world's biggest fish markets – Tsukiji Market in central Tokyo. You'll need to get there by 5am to ensure your place among the early-morning chaos, but it's the liveliest place to be at dawn anywhere in Japan. Finish your tour with the best fresh sushi breakfast in Tokyo.

HONG KONG

Join a city full of apartment dwellers on their daily dawn exercises (those pets won't walk themselves). Try a free tai chi class on the harbour foreshore at Tsim Sha Tsui before sampling congee rice porridge or steamed dumplings at a dim sum eatery washed down with green tea at bustling Kowloon.

PARIS

Watch the world's most romantic city as it wakes. Stroll along tree-lined avenues, take a solitary dawn traverse of the Champs-Élysées, smell the heavenly aromas of freshly baked croissants throughout the city, then sit on the banks of the Seine sipping coffee while mist lifts from the river.

MELBOURNE

Venture into the city centre and watch dawn rowers effortlessly pass by on the Yarra River and hot-air balloons float overhead. Sample pastries and Australia's best coffee in the hidden historic laneways or among the frenetic activity of the city's best markets – the Queen Victoria Markets.

VENICE

There's nowhere prettier in the world to wake up to. Beat the tourists by strolling along the Grand Canal at dawn beside locals in tracksuits walking dogs, before crossing the Rialto Bridge for all the early-morning action of the centuries-old Rialto Markets.

TRIP NOTES

MORE INFORMATION

vietnamtourism.gov.vn/english

GETTING THERE

Vietnam Airlines has a fare to Ho Chi Minh City for about \$955 low-season return from Sydney and Melbourne including taxes. Fly non-stop from Sydney in 9 hours and from Melbourne in 8hr 50min; see www.vietnamairlines.com. Australians require a visa.

STAYING THERE

New World Saigon Hotel offers luxury rooms in the middle of HCMC's bustling District 1, close to Cong Vien Van Hoa Park and a thousand pho stalls. See saigon.newworldhotels.com.

EATING THERE

Head to District 1 for the world's best pho. Try Pho Hung, 241-243 Nguyen Trai; Hong Hanh, 17A Nguyen Thi Minh Khai; and the streets around Ben Thanh Market, Le Loi. Saigon Street Eats also makes the task easier. See saigonstreeteats.com.