

Down Time In DANANG

Home to the legendary China Beach and US military troops during the Vietnam War, Danang, is today an idyllic mix of heritage and world-class scenery, says Samantha Coomber. Photography by Deanna Ng.



During the Vietnam War, Danang was a US military town with the greatest concentration of military personnel in South Vietnam. And briefly, its airport was the busiest in the world.

Today, Vietnam's third largest city and Central Vietnam's most dominant port is far less frantic and experiencing slightly different arrivals at its international airport: tourists, business people and entrepreneurs.

Danang City itself hasn't many tourist attractions to speak of, although it certainly offers a laconic, amiable charm and is endearingly friendly. Its strategic position is now being promoted as a major selling point by regional tourism authorities.

Located roughly midway between Ho Chi Minh City (in the south) and Hanoi (in the north), and with a vastly improved road infrastructure, Danang as the main gateway to Central Vietnam makes an ideal base to explore several fascinating UNESCO World Heritage Sites. These include the former Imperial City of Hue 100 kilometres to the north (via the breathtaking Hai Van Pass; at 1,200 metres, it is the highest in Vietnam), as well as the ancient port town of Hoi An and My Son Cham Sanctuary – 30 kilometres and 70 kilometres respectively to the south. They are all part of the official World Heritage Road (www.worldheritageroad.com).

For the more adventurous, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Central Highlands and Laos border lie further to the west.

When you tire of all that sightseeing, simply retire to Danang's long stretch of coastline along the sparkling South China Sea, offering deserted white sandy beaches, framed by pine trees and distant mountains.

SITES AND SOUNDS

Long overshadowed by the more well-visited Hoi An further south, Danang is more like a work-a-day Vietnamese city, with few traces of blatant tourism. In fact, Danang resembles a sleepy country town rather than a city – its "rush hour" is dozens of giggling schoolgirls on bicycles, with their white silk ao dais (a national costume of baggy trousers and long tunic), wafting in the breeze.

Danang's downtown area is tourist-friendly for strolling around, with tree-lined wide boulevards and little traffic.

The name "Danang" originates from the Cham language, meaning "big river", which is appropriate, given that the city is built along Han River. A walk along **Bach Dang Street's** new riverside promenade is a charming distraction, lined with several restored, French colonial buildings. Each year, on 29 March, the city hosts a traditional boat race on Han River, marking Vietnam's Liberation Day. But at any time, the **Hana Kim Dinh** – a floating bar-restaurant moored at No 15 – is a perfect place to watch dramatic summertime sunsets and the bright blue, fishing trawlers plying the river.

Danang's piece de la resistance however is the **Cham Museum** (2 Trung Nu Vuong Street, off Bach Dang Street), opened in 1916, courtesy of the French Far-East Research Institute in Vietnam. The museum, built in Cham architectural style but painted with unmistakably French pastel yellow, displays a unique collection of Cham Sculpture – acknowledged as the finest and most comprehensive Cham art in the world.

Danang was the former capital of the ancient Champa civilisation (founded by the



China Beach is on *Forbes* magazine's list of the world's most luxurious beaches.

finest Cham art.



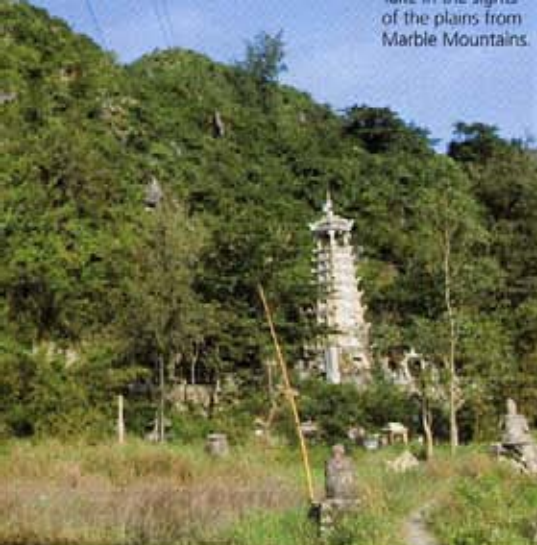
Stock up on small provisions at a friendly street vendor's stall.



Danang is the gateway to Hoi An, where this gallery resides.

When you tire of all that sightseeing, retire to Danang's long stretch of coastline.





Savour the old world charm of Hoi An.

Chams around AD192), which covered Vietnam's Central Provinces. Most of the 300 or so terracotta and sandstone figures here were excavated and collected from the region and date from the 7th to the 15th century.

OUT OF TOWN

Heading south, around 12 kilometres out of town, you can't miss **Marble Mountains**. Vietnam's most southerly limestone outcrops look out of place among the flat plains: once a group of five offshore islets, these are now part of the mainland, due to silting.

Marble Mountains – also known as "Mountains of the Five Elements" – have hundreds of carved narrow steps leading to pagodas and sacred caves, where altars of Cham, Hindu and Buddhist deities have been worshipped for centuries. But some not-so-holy practices also took place here:

Vietnamese revolutionaries used the caves as a base for military action during wartime.

Once at the top of the highest peak, you get stunning views of the surrounding plains and coastline. Marble Mountains are popular with domestic tourists and can get crowded, so go early to beat the crowds (and heat). At the base is the stone-carving village of Non Nuoc, where craftsmen have been producing marble and sandstone sculptures for centuries. Modern-day consumerism rears its head with dozens of open-fronted showrooms selling marble sculptures, artifacts and souvenirs.

LIFE'S A BEACH

Danang is perhaps best known for its legendary **China Beach**, used by US marines for a spot of rest and relaxation during the Vietnam War. Made famous by the US television series of the same name, China

Beach was recently listed by US *Forbes* magazine as one of the "World's Most Luxurious Beaches" – along with Bondi Beach (Australia) and Bahia Beach (Brazil).

But ask a local to take you to China Beach and you could end up on any one of three beaches. *Forbes* magazine pinpointed China Beach as that nearest the five-star Furama Danang Resort – Bac My An Beach.

But nearby My Khe Beach and Non Nuoc Beach also lay claim to the "China Beach" mantle – which in tourism terms, is valuable kudos and worth fighting over.

My Khe Beach is the nearest to the city centre, so not surprisingly it's the most developed and gets overrun with locals at the weekends.

The quieter blond, broad sands of Bac My An Beach (about seven kilometres south of town) merges with the even more deserted Non Nuoc Beach (two kilometres south of Marble Mountains and 10 kilometres from the city).

Danang's beaches are lovely distractions, with pure white sand and clear water, whether you're gazing at crashing waves from a hammock strung between coconut palms, or devouring fresh seafood at beachside shacks.

Surf's up from October to February, with scuba diving available at Bac My An Beach and Son Tra. Danang's first-ever International Sailing Regatta is penciled in for August.

What is surprising is how little development there is along this dramatic, lovely coastline; but this could all change soon, as developers are already eyeing Danang's numerous beaches, and resorts are already in the pipeline. **Tiger Tales**

* TIGER AIRWAYS FLIES TO DANANG THREE TIMES A WEEK. BOOK YOUR FLIGHTS AT WWW.TIGERAIRWAYS.COM

REST ASSURED

Most of Danang's tourist or corporate hotels are concentrated downtown, especially along Bach Dang Street, which overlooks Han River.

■ **Bamboo Green Riverside** (68 Bach Dang Street, tel: +84 (511) 832591, www.vitours.com.vn) It's part of the Bamboo hotel chain, with 32 rooms priced from USD30 (SGD48.50). Central, with good river views.

■ **Bach Dang Riverside Hotel** (50 Bach Dang Street, tel: +84 (511) 823 649, email: bdhotel@dng.vnn.vn) A larger hotel with rooms from USD25 (SGD40.40). Also centrally located, with a good view of the river.

■ **Furama Danang Resort** (68 Ho Xuan Huong Street, tel: +84 (511) 847 333, www.furamavietnam.com) This hotel set a precedent in 1997 as Vietnam's first five-star resort and is still the top international-style beach resort. Royalty, film stars and international leaders have signed the guest book at this award-winning beach haven. Among lush tropical gardens, the prestigious resort blends French colonial with traditional Vietnamese architecture. Its 198 guest rooms (from USD200 or SGD323) have private balconies with views of the sea and freshwater swimming lagoon.

■ **Sandy Beach Resort** (255 Huyen Tran Cong Chua Street, tel: +84 (511) 836 216, www.sandybeachdanang.com.vn) For something less corporate and more informal, this four-star hotel located south on Non Nuoc Beach is a friendly, peaceful alternative. Practically in the shadow of Marble Mountains, the low-key beach resort – owned by the Australian Norfolk Group – offers spacious and comfortable beach or garden bungalows, or wing rooms in the main building (from USD98 or SGD158), among 16 hectares of private gardens dotted with pines.



Furama Danang Resort