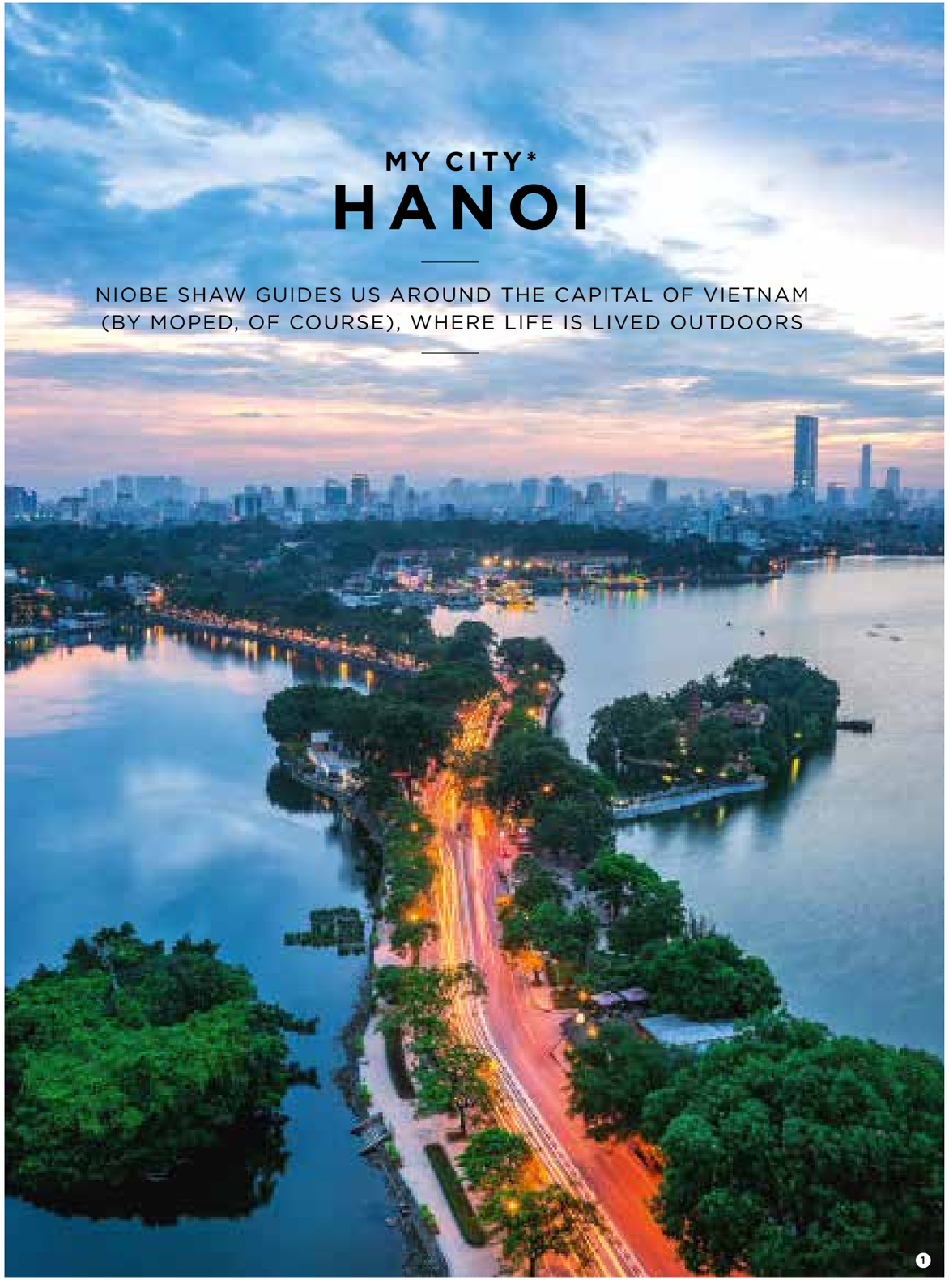
MY CITY*
HANOI

NIOBE SHAW GUIDES US AROUND THE CAPITAL OF VIETNAM (BY MOPED, OF COURSE), WHERE LIFE IS LIVED OUTDOORS



PHOTOGRAPHY: NIOBE SHAW; ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

There's no better way to get to the heart of a city than through the people who live there. Every month we ask someone, clearly in love with their city, to take us on a personal tour and tell us what makes it so special. You may feel inspired to visit one day, but for now just sit back, relax and enjoy some armchair travel.

How long have you lived in the city?
I've lived in Hanoi for two years, having moved here in August 2018 with my boyfriend.

Where are you from originally and why this city?
My partner and I are both primary school teachers from Nottinghamshire. We love to travel and fancied a change, so decided to apply to international schools in the city. Neither of us had ever been to Asia, so it was quite a leap, but we wanted somewhere different.

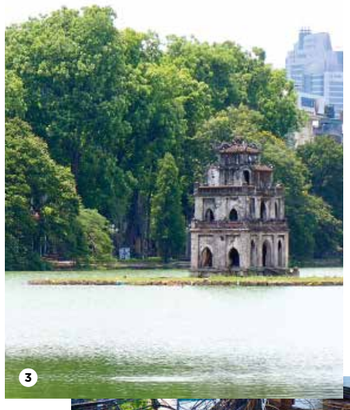
Tell us what makes your city unique
Hanoi is a city full of juxtapositions. The people are laid back and friendly, yet there's constant hustle and bustle on every corner. It's a city that's developing rapidly – there's construction everywhere – but Hanoi holds on to its roots. It isn't just shopping malls and tall towers, there's plenty of authenticity, quirks and culture, too. It's clear from the architecture that there have been many influences throughout Vietnam's history, yet the city still has its own sense of identity.

What's it like in autumn?
Hanoi is far enough north to have distinct seasons, unlike the south of the country. Autumn is my favourite – these balmy days are the best time to enjoy the city. The summers are stifling and humid with electrical storms most nights. But by late September, temperatures have cooled and the rains are infrequent. Blue skies are common and there's a real buzz in the air as people gather by the lakes and in outdoor bars and restaurants, pleased to be outside after spending the summer inside trying to keep cool.

What time of day do you most enjoy?
I was surprised by how early the sun sets, but we see some beautifully vivid skies from 5pm to 7pm. Sitting out with a refreshing drink and watching the clouds roll over the varied hues of the sky – everything reflected in the lake – is a wonderful end to the day.

What's the nature like?
The city is full of water: there are more than 100 lakes, the largest of which is West Lake (Ho Tay). Hoan Kiem »







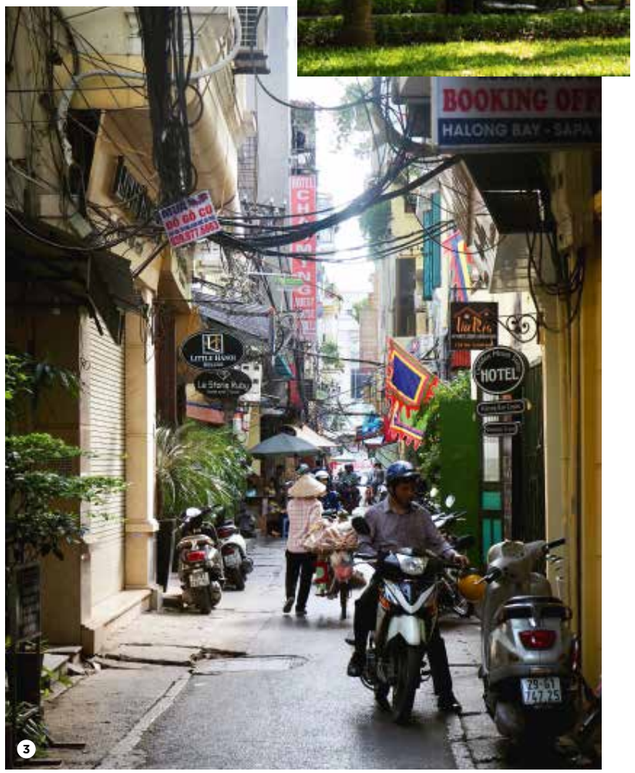


1 Sunsets over Hanoi's 100-plus lakes are the stuff of legend.
2 Coffee shops, a Hanoi institution.
3 Turtle Tower on Hoan Kiem Lake commemorates 15th century Vietnamese warrior Le Loi.
4 Two wheels are best in busy Hanoi, where street sellers make the most of their bikes.
5 The electrics may look terrifying, but it's all part of the city's unique charm


1

"It's a noisy place, but much of this noise comes from people laughing, cheering or celebrating together"


2



3

Lake (or Lake of the Returned Sword) lies in the heart of the Old Quarter and attracts tourists and locals. The Red River runs through the city, too, with several bridges crossing over it, including the historic Long Bien Bridge. On clear days, you can see the mountains of Ba Vi National Park, which lies 48km from Hanoi.

Where's your favourite outdoor space?
Hanoi is known for its hectic streets, but at the weekends the roads surrounding Hoan Kiem Lake are pedestrianised. Music booms as dance classes take place, Hanoi's youngest citizens practise their driving skills in toy cars, which have free rein around the street, and the ice cream parlours are full. I love the hustle and bustle every time I wander around this area.

Tell us about the light and the colours of your city.
Hanoi is a vibrant city, with yellows, reds and greens standing out in particular. Many important buildings are painted ochre and proudly fly the red and yellow Vietnamese flag. From my apartment, I can see red and green corrugated iron roofs jutting out at all angles.

Tell us about the people who live in your city.
Life is all about being outside. People gather together to play games and cook outside, perching on plastic stools. Drivers stop for a quick snooze atop their motorbikes. There's a buzz of community: strangers help each other; they share and laugh together. Many suffered during the war, but people are proud of their country and work hard to build lives they're proud of.

Where are your favourite places to go with friends?
Hanoi has a thriving coffee-shop culture. These serve specialities like *ca phe trung* (egg coffee) and *caa phe sua da* (Vietnamese iced coffee), as well as Western favourites. I love meeting friends in cafés all over the city and use them to explore different neighbourhoods.

Tell us about eating in your city.
You can find cuisines from almost every culture here, and eateries range from street sellers to swanky, upmarket restaurants. Authentic Vietnamese food can be found on every corner: *banh mi* (sandwiches), *pho* (noodle soup) and *bun* (noodles with grilled meat, fish or tofu) are served from food carts, hole-in-the-wall kitchens and proper restaurants. I'm vegetarian and, while it's harder to find street food without meat, it is possible, and growing in popularity.

What's your favourite way to get about the city?
There's nothing better than sitting on the back of a motorbike, driving past West Lake, with the wind blowing on my face and blue skies overhead.

What's the shopping like?
Although the number of shopping malls here is growing, most shops are small, independent and family-run. Traditionally, traders came to Hanoi and built homes together, from which they sold their goods. These streets were named after the items sold. *Hang Vai* sells bamboo poles and ladders, *Hang Bac* is full of silverware, and vibrant *Hang Ma* sells seasonal goods for celebrations and festivals. There are also a huge number of tailors dotted around the city, who make, repair or replicate any item of clothing.

Where do you like to escape to?
My favourite day trip from Hanoi is to Tam Coc, in Ninh Binh Province, which is part of a UNESCO World Heritage site. Taking a trip on a rowing boat through lush rice paddies, surrounded by large limestone karst cliffs, is a wonderful way to reconnect with nature.

What's been your best discovery about your city?
Wandering down any of the narrow alleys will take you to a whole other world. They've led me to beautiful street art, hidden bookshops and quirky cafés that I would never have found without taking that turn.

What do you miss most if you've been away?
I miss the atmosphere and the good vibes of the city. It's a noisy place, but much of this noise comes from people laughing, cheering or celebrating together. There's always a real buzz and it's great to be part of it.

What would surprise a newcomer to your city?
The traffic. Newcomers will either be positively surprised by the order or amazed by the chaos of the roads. Motorbikes – sometimes carrying four or more people – seamlessly weave around buses and cars.

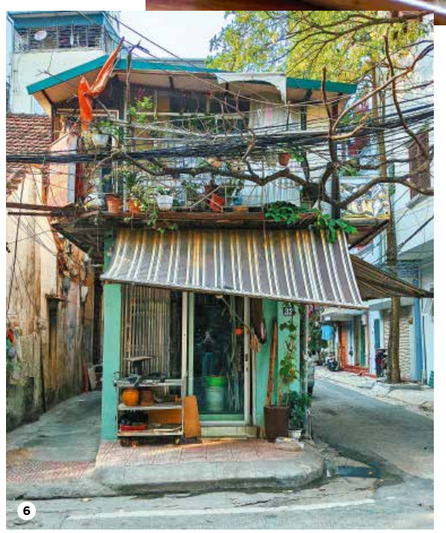
What would you change about the city if you could?
The pollution. There are days when Hanoi has topped the world's most polluted Air Quality Rankings.

Where would you recommend somebody to stay?
The Old Quarter – here, the link between past and present is truly apparent, with street traders and ancient temples tucked into streets, so hidden away that they're easy to miss.

What keeps you in your city and where would you like to live if you couldn't live here?
Hanoi has a real charm about it. I'll often see or do something that makes me smile and realise how much I love the city. I recently holidayed in New Zealand and I'd love to live there for a while. I'm not sure I could have picked two places more opposite! »


4


5


6

❶ Long Bien Bridge is open to trains, pedestrians and two wheels only.
❷ A motorbike doubles up as a handy mobile bed.
❸ A day spent exploring the Old Quarter's alleyways is never wasted.
❹ Blooms by bike at the flower market.
❺ Woof! Buns at Bao Wow are no dog's dinner.
❻ Still standing: the Vietnamese and their buildings are known for their resilience



NIOBE is a primary school teacher who spends much of her spare time writing, reading and illustrating in coffee shops while day-dreaming about her next adventure. She blogs at niobeetc.com or follow her on Instagram @niobeetc.







1 Collective Memory, a brilliant place to pick up local crafts.
2 Colourful Hanoi is home to the world's longest mosaic wall, which runs for more than 6km.
3 A fabulous oasis in the city heat: the luxurious Metropole hotel.
4 Veggie fans flock to Labonté café

NIOBE'S PERSONAL TOUR

Favourite shop

COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Full of beautiful curios from some of Hanoi's best artists and small businesses. collectivememory.vn

Favourite gallery

THE CITY'S STREET ART

Hanoi is home to the world's largest ceramic mosaic wall, which runs for 6.5km from the Old Quarter to West Lake. Local artists also decorate pavement electrical boxes with beautiful floral paintings and environmental messages.

Favourite café

LABONTE

A vegetarian café, it's my favourite place to write, eat or to gather with friends. Instagram: @labonte.vn

Favourite bar

UNICORN PUB

Serves cocktails with a Vietnamese twist. Award-winning mixologists have created the surprisingly delicious *pho* cocktail. the-unicorn-pub.business.site

Favourite restaurant

BAO WOW

Serves fresh, delicious and creative *baos* in a cool, al fresco dining experience. baowowhanoi.com

Favourite market

QUANG BA FLOWER MARKET

It's a sensory experience with myriad colours and scents. Peak hours are 1–2am, but you can still buy after sunrise. chohoaquangan.com

Favourite hotel

THE METROPOLE

Combining 5-star service with French colonial architecture, the Metropole is a calm oasis. sofitel-legend-metropole-hanoi.com

Favourite way to spend an hour

WANDERING THE STREETS

I love strolling around this city. You never know what you might find. When it gets too hot, I'll dive into a café and watch the world go by.

The one thing you have to see

TRAIN STREET

These famous tracks are tucked between houses and shops, with barely enough room for trains to pass through. S