

Walking Tour in Hanoi, Vietnam : The Old Quarter

Start: North end of Hoan Kiem Lake (at the Ngoc Son Pagoda).

Finish: Return to the north end of Hoan Kiem Lake (to Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc Sq.).

Time: 1 1/2 hours without stops; up to 3 hours with exploring, coffee, and chatting.

Best Times: From early morning.

Worst Times: Middle of the day (too hot).

The best way to really experience Hanoi's Old Quarter is on foot. As you explore the route below, stop for coffee at a local cafe or a storefront geared to tourists in the backpacker area of the quarter. Stop for a chat; folks are busy but friendly if you take the time to connect. Photographers will want to set out early and catch the dynamic colors of the morning sun, which set off the rich yellowed plaster of older buildings and make the colors of produce in the markets more vibrant.

This route is a large clockwise circle through the Old Quarter. Walking times vary depending on your clip and your interest in the details, but generally, allow a few hours. **Note:** Try to study the map discreetly and know your next turn before arriving at an intersection. If you ask for directions, motorbike taxi drivers will just implore you to hire them for a ride and even try to confuse you. Learn to look for distinct rooflines. Just a short time in the Old Quarter will have you distinguishing a Chinese temple or community house from a tube house or more French-influenced construction.

1. Hoan Kiem Lake

Start with a visit to the **Ngoc Son** pagoda on the north end of the lake. Cross the red **Bridge of the Rising Sun** to reach the temple. From this most prominent point in the city, follow the northern edge of the lake heading west and cross over the busy traffic circle. This busy square is known as the **Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc Square (The Tonkin Free School Movement Sq.)**, named for the early-20th-century nationalist movement that would eventually spawn grassroots Communism in Vietnam.

West from the square is:

2. Hang Gai Street (Hemp St.)

This busy avenue marks the southern boundary of the Old Quarter. Hang Gai no longer supports hemp outlets as in days of old (the street would also host print shops and bookstores in the 19th c.) but is lined with boutique shopping, galleries, and silk tailors. Just a few hundred meters west of the traffic circle (on the left) you'll find a large **banyan tree** out in front of what was once a prominent communal house at no. 85 Hang Gai. The tree is one of the finest specimens of an old banyan in the city, a perfect example of nature's adaptability as heavy roots cleave large stones and masons have built around the old tree for centuries. The sight is like a small temple, with sticks of incense wedged between knobs of the tree and offerings of rice whiskey lining the base of the tree.

Turn right off of Hang Gai and look for a small street sign pointing to:

3. Tam Thuong Alley

Follow a few crooks in this quiet little alley and you come to the **Yen Thai Communal House**, a classic low tile roof over a wooden entry that gives way to a quiet courtyard. Just across the street are a few guesthouses popular with French backpackers. Tam Thuong terminates at **Yen Thai Street** where you'll make a left and, in the morning, walk through a small open-air market with great morning light for photography.

Turn right at the end of Yen Thai Street onto Hang Da Street:

4. Hang Da Market and Hang Dieu Street

At the intersection of Yen Thai and Hang Da is the **Hang Da Market**, which is a large, local dry-goods and clothing market. After a quick look, head north on Hang Da -- don't miss the large **bird shop** with a wall of bamboo cages on the northern corner of the Hang Da Market.

Continuing north, Hang Da becomes Hang Dieu Street. Hang Dieu was traditionally the area for tobacco and pipe sellers; keep an eye out for the filigreed colonial edifices at no. 66 and no. 77 Hang Dieu (you'll have to look up to distinguish these from the concrete clutter).

5. Take a Break

Bun Bo Nam Bo, at 67 Hang Dieu St. (tel. **04/923-0701**), serves one of Hanoi's most popular one-dish noodle specialties.

Turn right off of Hang Dieu onto:

6. Bat Dan Street

This street once housed sellers of clay bowls that were brought to the city from riverside workshops along the Red River. No. 33 Bat Dan is a very ornate and colorful communal house.

Turn left (go north) on Thuoc Bac Street, once an area for traditional medicines. Then turn left (west) on:

7. Hang Phen Street

At the corner of Hang Phen and Bat Su, look for a preserved traditional house, characterized by its low tile roofline, at **no. 52 Bat Su** (also note the cozy little coffee shop on the corner, good for a rest and to watch the busy street life).

Carry on along Hang Phen until it becomes **Cua Dong Street**, which brings you to the eastern edge and wall of the Hanoi Citadel built by the Nguyen dynasty in the 1800s. Cua Dong Street terminates at the wall of the Hanoi Citadel.

Turn right off of Cua Dong onto:

8. Phung Hung Street

Running along the wall of the city's old citadel, what marks the western edge of the Old Quarter, Phung Hung Street is a notable sight among Vietnamese tourists for the publication offices of an important Communist paper at **no. 105 Phung Hung**. There's a plaque that notes this spot as a historical vestige, but if you spend too much time studying the shuttered colonial edifice, local folks might get edgy, thinking you're a spy of sorts.

Turn right off of Phung Hung onto:

9. Hang Vai

Translated as "Cloth Street," Hang Vai is the **bamboo district**. The busy exteriors of small warehouses are lined with stands of cut bamboo poles, some more than two stories in height. This is the raw material for those wonderful Doctor Seuss scaffoldings you see on construction sites. The shops also sell bamboo tobacco pipes of the "bong" variety, some quite elaborate. At the corner of Hang Vai and north-south Hang Ga, keep an eye out for the **communal house** at no. 44 Hang Ga St.: A corner door cut into the white plaster and flanked by Chinese script ushers you into a small courtyard area with banyan trees and a small temple to Bach Ma, the White Horse, a god associated with Hanoi. Carrying on east on Hang Vai, look for the entrance to the **communal house** at **no.**

7 Hang Vai.

Heading east, Hang Vai becomes:

10. Lan Ong Street

One of the most interesting parts of the Old Quarter, Lan Ong Street is still home to a large enclave of ethnic Chinese who sell the herbs and medicines of old from small storefronts that date back to the origins of the quarter. The best shops are on the right side as you head east. Here you'll find picturesque little interiors with walls lined in massive dark wood cabinets with tiny drawers and buckets and bins all around with the most curious assortment of dried goods you'll ever see. This is the kind of place where, sadly, you might be able to buy a bear's gall bladder or a monkey's paw. The buildings all along this short stretch are originals dating back as far as the 17th century. Look for the busy elementary school at **no. 42 Lan Ong**, which was once the **communal house** of the area's Chinese population. Just across from the converted communal house and all along the length of the street, look for low roofs and narrow entries, especially those with tile roofs covered in moss, as these are original Chinese homes.

A quick left (north) turn brings you to:

11. Cha Ca Street

Following Lan Ong Street, heading east, cross the famous **Cha Ca Street (Fish St.)**. Make a left (north) and look for the **Cha Ca La Vong restaurant**, which serves one of Hanoi's most famed dishes.

12. Take a Break

Just across from Cha Ca La Vong restaurant, you'll find the **Hoa Sua Cafe** (11B Cha Ca St.; tel. **04/923-1500**), a combination school and restaurant (they now have a number of locations throughout the city), where young students serve good coffee and cakes.

Returning to eastbound Lan Ong, turn left (north) onto Hang Duong.

13. Hang Duong Street

Hang Duong Street (Sugar St.) is lined with traditional constructions, foremost of which is the **communal house** on the left as you go north at **no. 38 Hang Duong St.** It has a stunning banyan tree in the courtyard and a dark, alluring charm to its smoky interior. *Note:* Hang Duong is a **pedestrian area** on weekend nights and becomes a busy little market for tourist trinkets and local goods.

A short detour off of Hang Duong is the 13th-century **Thanh Ha Communal House**, just a short walk east on **Ngo Gach Street** (Brick St.).

Continue north on Hang Duong, then turn right on:

14. Hang Chieu

Follow **Hang Chieu** east across the northern end of the Old Quarter to **Quan Chuong Gate**, the only remaining gate of the city's once-formidable fortifications. From here, go right (south) onto **Dao Duy Tu Street** and look for the small entrance to the **Huong Nghia Communal House** on the left side near the corner of Cho Gao Street. The communal house has an entrance open to visitors who bring offerings and light incense.

15. Take a Break

Tired? Thirsty? On the corner adjacent to the communal house on Hang Chieu is a popular **bia hoi stand** and restaurant where you can get a mug of local brew and get out of the heat for just 1,500 VND (10¢/£0.05). Turn right onto Nguyen Sieu.

16. Nguyen Sieu Street

Nguyen Sieu is a street named for a noted 18th-century scholar and lined with colonial buildings (your architecture-spotting muscles must be strong by now). On the right, keep an eye out for the small alley entrance to the **Co Luong Communal House**, a colorful temple surrounded by modern relief sculptures, some of quite fanciful *Alice in Wonderland* mushrooms and frightening demons.

Turn left (south) on **Hang Giay Street**. Go straight 1 block. Then turn left on **Hang Buom Street**. Immediately on your left is the important:

17. Bach Ma Temple (The White Horse Temple)

Located at no. 76 Hang Buom St., the Bach Ma Temple is open from 7:30 to 11:30am and 1:30 to 6pm daily (until 9pm on holidays). Built in A.D. 1010, the temple is dedicated to the White Horse of legend, which, it is said, helped the early king of the Viet people, Ly, decide where and how to defend his city. The temple interior is a grand courtyard of massive red pillars and large Buddhist statuary and altars.

Continue east along:

18. Hang Buom Street

From the Bach Ma Temple, continue east on Hang Buom (Sail St.). Once adjacent to a small tributary of the To Lich River, which brought goods to the city, Hang Buom was where local merchant vessels came to refit their ships. Look for the many colonial buildings and traditional Vietnamese houses, as well as a communal house at **no. 22 Hang Buom**.

As Hang Buom curves to the right (south), it becomes:

19. Ma May Street

Ma May is the beginning of the busiest budget tourist areas of the Old Quarter. In and among Internet cafes and tourist restaurants (often one and the same), you'll find good examples of traditional and colonial buildings. The **Huong Tuong Communal House** is at **no. 64 Ma May**, and one of the most interesting sights in the city can be found at **no. 87 Ma May**, a refurbished and restored traditional house. Here, for a fee of just 20,000 VND (\$1.30/£0.70), a young docent dressed in a traditional flowing *ao dai* gown will take you on an informative tour of the building and can explain important details about life in the Old Quarter in centuries past. With the careful renovations done by a UNESCO-funded, French- and Canadian-backed organization, this classic home offers a unique opportunity to have a close look at the interior detail of a traditional Old Quarter home. Also see the similarly renovated property at no. 38 Hang Dao St. .

Ma May also houses some fine services, such as Tamarind Café, where you can grab something to eat, check your e-mail, and shop for trinkets.

Heading south on Ma May, turn right at its terminus with:

20. Hang Bac Street

Heading west on Hang Bac, you're in the heart of the backpacker area. Here you're sure to be assailed on all sides by touts and hucksters and have your pick of budget tours from the many storefronts that line this busy street. Hang Bac means Silver Street and the silver these days is mostly the stuff coming from your pocket and falling into tour operators' hands, though you still can find some silver (and gold) jewelry makers and sellers. As you approach the intersection of Dinh Liet Street, look right and you'll see the large **Chuong Vang Theater** at **no. 72 Hang Bac**, which was the stronghold of troops who laid siege to the French after the August Revolution in 1945.

You'll find good shopping and lots of goods and services in this area. You can finish the tour here, or check out one more sight worth seeing.

Head west on Hang Bac. Turn left (south) on:

21. Hang Dao

Immediately on your right, don't miss another fine example of a **restored traditional Old Quarter house**, much like the one on Ma May (and run by the same folks). **No. 38 Hang Dao** is a two-story home that was once owned by silk merchants. Quite spacious and elaborate (silk merchants were wealthy), you'll see how an Old Quarter house was set up, including where the worship area was set (now an office), as well as where the family lived, cooked, and worked. Helpful docents guide you through for a fee of 20,000 VND (\$1.30/£0.70) (or for free if you've got your ticket from Ma May St.).

Hang Dao continues south and ends at Hang Gai and the **Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc Square (The Tonkin Free School Movement Sq.)**. Look for the large ocean-liner-shaped building that overlooks the square and Hoan Kiem Lake to the south.

22. Take a Break

On the fourth floor of the most prominent building on Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc Square, find the popular **Highland's Coffee**, a good place to meet up after your walk or to rest your bones after completing the circle.

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