

Shaded Parks, Canal-Side Walks and Low-Cost Pampering

By Sharyn Nilsen

Life here in Ho Chi Minh City could never be described as boring...the colour...the noise...the vibrancy of the city in full swing... I love living here and so do many other expats who've been seduced by its broad appeal and the wealth of opportunities on offer.

However, I'm the first to admit that the pace of life here, as in any city, can be exhausting at times. So, if you're going to survive and prosper long term, you need to find a way to chill out and re-energise. Thankfully, that's not difficult. Havens of peace abound and there are plenty of ways to relax across the city...you just need to know where to look.

One thing you won't struggle to find is a beautiful park or garden to unwind in. They're to be found all across the city and are beautifully preserved and maintained. Simply step in off the street and the noise level drops to a faint buzz. Feel the temperature and your stress levels recede under the shade of gorgeous old trees. Find a bench or a seat in one of the park cafes and watch the world go by.

My favourite time to enjoy the parks is in the early mornings and evenings when the locals are at play. Brass bands practice, tango dancers trip the light fantastic and teenagers practice the latest hip-hop moves. Marvel at the grace of the Tai Chi classes, fan dancing, martial arts training and ballroom dancing. You won't believe the incredible hand-eye co-ordination skills of the friendly games of badminton, hacky sack and volleyball.

Another great spot to chill out and unwind in is on the banks of the Nhieu Loc–Thi Nghe canal that runs between several inner city suburbs. Head down in the evening for a long leisurely stroll on the pedestrianised paths. Watch the sun set over the water as people quietly fish and while away their time. People move slowly here, their smiles broad. A friendly nod of the head gives their approval that you've discovered one of the local secrets for escaping the hustle and bustle.

If you're in need of a pick-me-up, you'll find Vietnam's obsession with coffee played out in the thousands of coffee shops around the city. And, as befits a truly international city, there's something for everyone. I prefer to bypass stark, impersonal chains with blaring music and instead seek out my own little haven of peace for the day.

Duck into a doorway and climb curious stairs to find the latest quirky cafe. One day it's retro, faded elegance with Parisian shuttered windows looking out onto the busy streets, the next a secret garden equipped with waterfalls, a canopy of trees, misting water and shaded umbrellas. Meet up with friends or take your book or laptop to chill. Unlike Australia, no one here seems to mind if you spend all day over one drink and you'll usually find the WiFi will be fast and free.

Away from the tourist hotspots, Ho Chi Minh City has dozens of museums and galleries where you can visit in relative solitude and learn more about the history and culture of this fascinating city. Try the Fine Arts Museum in District 1 or one of the many galleries dotted along Don Khoi street.

None of these experiences will cost more than a few dollars, and even when I want to treat myself to a pampering session it comes at a fraction of the cost of back home. I can enjoy a pedicure, manicure, facial and 90-minute hot rock and oil massage at a reputable salon for less than a fifth of the price back in Australia. Feeling fabulous is achievable here on even the smallest budget.

When we first moved here some people questioned our wisdom in choosing a city with a reputation for being crowded, noisy and in-your-face. But we discovered it's also eclectic, welcoming, full of history and culture and pulsing with life. After experiencing the energy and optimism here the thought of living permanently anywhere else just seems boring. And, now that we've perfected our chill-out routine, we have the best of both worlds at a fraction of the cost.

Editor's Note: Vietnam is a bargain hotspot offering you a wealth of opportunities for freedom, fun and adventure. Just a short, easy flight from Australia, it's the ideal destination for a full- or part-time retirement

overseas. Discover all you need to know in ***Your New Home in Vietnam: How to Live Well On a Budget in Southeast Asia's Rising Star***. [Get it now](#) and you'll get a 30% discount. It's just one of the must-have resources on offer in the [International Living Australia Bookstore Sale](#). Check it out [right here](#).