



Saigon 101

Simon N. Ostheimer uncovers the secrets of Vietnam's commercial capital

IT MAY NOT BE AS DEVELOPED as other regional centres such as Bangkok, Singapore and KL, but Vietnam's largest city is catching up fast, with an emerging arts scene, a raft of cool new bars, amazingly chic bistros and stylish, contemporary fashion houses. Whisper it quietly, but Saigon is on the cusp of becoming Southeast Asia's new capital of cool.



DINE

Saigon's dining scene is divided by the river that forms a natural boundary between the two main districts. District 1 includes the

charming French colonial quarter, and is where most tourists spend their time. However, away from the seething mass of touts at the Ben Thanh Market or the "cyclo" drivers trying to take you for a ride outside the Opera House, you discover unique places like **L'Usine** (70B Le Loi Street; lusinespace.com), a hybrid cafe, shop and café where the city's hipsters hang out, dining on spinach and feta filo pie, *salade niçoise* and *croque monsieur*. After you finish, browse the fashion downstairs and pick up a souvenir bar of locally made **Marou** chocolate (marouchocolate.com). For a taste of something simpler, head to **Pizza 4P's** (8/15 Le Thanh



Bia Craft

Ton; pizza4ps.com), where the Japanese owner serves the best slices in Saigon, including standards like the prosciutto margherita and the less-common Flower Pizza,

made from pumpkin, leek and daylily flowers, with mozzarella handmade at their cheese factory in the highland city of Dalat. Across the water to the east is District 2,

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home to a large expat population fed by an array of restaurants, including **Mekong Merchant** (23 Thao Dien; mekongmerchant.com), where hungry locals chow down on seafood tapas washed down with their selection of fine wine, and **The Snap Café** (32 Tran Ngoc Dien Street; facebook.com/TheSnapCafe), a sprawling venue popular with families for its huge outdoor playground, and even bigger burgers.



DRINK

Once you've had your fill of food, it's time to **Chill** (Level 26 AB Tower,

76A Le Lai Street; chillsaigon.com). Vietnam's first sky bar opened in 2011, and has rapidly become a place to be seen, while also admiring the view. After sundowners, the beautiful people usually move on to **Lush** (2 Ly Tu Tron; lush.vn), probably Saigon's preeminent club, where local and international DJs pump out the tunes on a variety of theme nights. Alternatively, at **Saigon Ranger** (5/7 Nguyen Sieu; saigonrangerbar.com), rock out to an eclectic selection of live music, including acoustic, funk, soul, indie, and even comedy nights. If, however, you're in the mood for a more down-to-earth experience, then get over to **Bia Craft** (90 Xuân Thủy; biacraft.com) in District 2, where they've tapped into the growing global craft beer trend and come up with their own brews like "Lun Ma Lao" (short but arrogant) blonde ale, and Saigon Saison

farmhouse ale by the locally-based Pasteur Street Brewing Co.

DISCOVER
When it comes to two wheels, there's nothing more stylish than a Vespa, so what better way to see Saigon than with **Vespa Adventures** (vespaadventures.com), which has been giving tourists the ride of their life since 2007. Although these days the company has grown to offer tours of Siem Reap and Hoi An, the best and most popular tour remains "Saigon After Dark" (USD89, inclusive of all food and drink). The evening starts with drinks at the Vespa-themed Cafe Zoom, and then you head out on the town to sample the city's best street food, traditional drip coffee, and end the night at a local bar. Don't worry if you're not a confident driver: you spend the entire tour

riding pillion behind one of their experienced guides, leaving you free to take in one of Southeast Asia's most exciting cities under cover of darkness. For a rather different sightseeing experience, uncover the secrets of Saigon's Chinatown with **Urban Tales** (urban-tales.com). Part tour, part role play, the concept sees you travelling by a vintage Citroën or Peugeot car to the city's Cholon district, and then using a map to uncover clues while exploring backstreets, temples and traditional shops.



GETTING THERE

AirAsia (airasia.com) flies direct from Kuala Lumpur to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) for RM370 and up, while **Malaysia Airlines** (malaysiaairlines.com) has flights from RM505.



L'Usine



L'Usine



Vietnam Vespa Adventures



L'Usine