



NO. 13

The historic city of Hoi An is steering into the future.

A luxe beachfront resort and an influx of creatives are bringing new life to one of Vietnam's most beautiful ports. **By Rachna Sachansinh**

An oceanside infinity pool at the new Four Seasons Resort the Nam Hai.

IN THE MIDDLE OF Hoi An is an area called Ancient Town, and the sobriquet fits. Commanding a prime location on Vietnam's central coast, where the Thu Bon River empties into the South China Sea, this city was a maritime heavyweight for much of its history. The region was settled more than 2,000 years ago, and it served as a strategic port until the mid 1800s for Chinese, Japanese, Indian, French, Dutch, and Portuguese seafarers and traders plying the spice route.

In 1999, Ancient Town, inland from the ocean, was named a UNESCO World Heritage site, which protected its pagodas, wooden bridges, and merchant houses, many built between the 15th and 19th centuries. Ever since, tourists have crowded this historic center, essentially a romantic (if somewhat kitschy) living museum. But now a newly revamped

beach resort is bringing attention back to Hoi An's oceanfront—and a lively renaissance is under way, with entrepreneurs from Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and beyond intent on steering Hoi An into the present.

Key to this resurgence is the **Four Seasons Resort the Nam Hai** (fourseasons.com; doubles from \$725), a recently renovated property on one of Asia's most picturesque beaches. Like Hoi An itself, the Nam Hai is an intriguing blend of old and new: each of the 100 villas reinterprets the garden courtyard house typical of this part of Vietnam, with marble and dark wood interiors, regal platform beds draped in luscious fabrics, and floor-to-ceiling windows that bathe the space in palm-diffused light. Private verandas encourage hours of blissful ocean-gazing, and sleek infinity pools offer views of the sea and

the Cham Islands beyond. The resort's spa, inspired by the teachings of the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, incorporates mindfulness training and spiritual wisdom into its treatments. At once luxurious and imbued with a deep awareness of its surroundings, the resort has consistently nabbed a spot on *Travel + Leisure's* World's Best Awards.

The Nam Hai's aesthetics are indicative of a broader trend, as new shops and restaurants bring a contemporary eye to the city's layered culture. One such innovator is Didier Corlou, who was among the first European chefs to work in postwar Vietnam, at Hanoi's iconic Metropole hotel. Now he is researching the influence of the sea and the spice trade on Hoi An's culinary practices, like the use of turmeric, cassia, and curry leaves. He serves dishes such as "ocean soup," a simple consommé with purple seaweed and ginger, and spring rolls stuffed with coriander-and-anise-marinated mackerel in the leafy courtyard of **Cô Mai** (comaihoian.com; entrées \$4–\$10), a repurposed 200-year-old merchant's house.

Cô Mai is just one of several new spots exploring Hoi An's unique culinary tapestry and the cross-cultural contact that informed its cuisine. **Tadioto Hoi An** (fb.com/tadiotohoian; sushi sets from \$11), owned by artist Nguyen Qui Duc, serves Japanese fare and shots of rare sake and whisky. Nguyen also has a Kyoto-style "eating street" in the works. Nearby, chef Nyugen Nhu Thinh blends traditions he picked

FROM TOP: KATHERINE WOLKOFF, COURTESY OF SUNDAY IN HOI AN



The lights of Hoi An's Ancient Town as seen from the Thu Bon River.

up in London and Tokyo at **Aubergine 49** (hoian-aubergine49.com; entrées \$14–\$31, tasting menus from \$40). Similar currents weave through the menu at the **Hill Station** (thehillstation.com; entrées \$7–\$10), which channels Indochinese cool with imaginative charcuterie and appetizers like Camembert roasted with pineapple-infused rice wine. And the drinks list at **T-Room Gin Bar** (fb.com/thetroomginbar), in a historic teahouse, includes gins infused with native vanilla, cardamom, and black pepper.

As a trading stop, Hoi An was historically a hub for textiles and leather—and these days, new boutiques are livening up the town's respected apparel and design scenes. Head to the French-Vietnamese atelier **Metiseko** (metiseko.com), with its understated prints and smart silhouettes, or **Chula** (chulafashion.com), where colorful patterns and architectural motifs are embroidered onto bohemian frocks. **Lam** (fb.com/lamboutiquehoian), near the central market, reimagines the traditions of Ancient Town with embroidered velvet slippers and silk slip dresses in the spirit of the ao dai, the customary women's dress of Vietnam. Tapping into the town's leisurely vibe, **Sunday in Hoi An** (sundayinhoian.com) has an atmospheric white-and-blue atelier filled with ceramics, bedding, and linens.

Even with all the new activity, Ancient Town's dreamy golden façades still evoke a bygone age. People start the morning by lighting argan wood incense, the musky scent perfuming the sepia-tinged lanes all day. Farmers peddle herbs, fishermen fillet catfish and eels, and hawkers advertise noodles and dumplings. Come nightfall, floating candle offerings flicker on the river. This colorful port city has matured gracefully—but a new golden era is just beginning.



Sunday in Hoi An, one of many new boutiques and concept stores in the central Vietnamese town.

COURTESY OF FOUR SEASONS RESORT THE NAM HAI