

One can visit Hanoi's attractions by discovering them himself or herself (read our suggested itinerary for walking tour and [Vietnam visa](#)) or with a pre-booked guided Hanoi city tour. Although not at its geographical center, after the expansion of Hanoi into a major metropolitan area in 2009, little Hoan Kiem Lake remains the very heart of life in Hanoi. According to a 15th Century legend, a giant turtle presented Emperor Le Loi with a magic sword with which to defeat Chinese invaders. In accordance with their pact, the Emperor returned the sword to the turtle after a glorious victory in battle. Thus, the lake was named Hoan Kiem, or "restored sword."

The lake itself is like a living thing with a personality that changes continuously with the hour and the season. Some of your most vivid memories of Hanoi might come from the 45-minute walks you take around Hoan Kiem at sunrise, at midday, and again after dark. Shortly after dawn, hundreds of people take their daily exercise on the footpath that circles the lake. If you arrive around six you will see a dozen badminton games, scores of old people practicing Tai Chi, and many shirtless young men jogging or stretching.

During the day the lake belongs to tourists and to workers from surrounding government offices. Tour buses and taxis park at the North end of the lake, near the gates and foot bridge which lead to the Ngoc Son Pagoda. Scores of young people sell post cards, maps, and paperback books here. Others shine shoes or offer to memorialize your visit with photos taken with must surely be war-era 35mm cameras. Although persistent, they are seldom rude. Many speak wonderful English and are well worth having a conversation with and you can easily book a room at any [hotels in Hanoi Old Quarter](#) to stay.

Ngoc Son Temple

Ngoc Son Pagoda sits on an islet at the North end of the lake. The oldest structures in the complex dated back to 1225, though most of what you see was either built or reconstructed in the 19th century. In addition to the two beautifully ornate Confucianist sanctuaries dedicated to various long-dead humans, a huge stuffed turtle (which most certainly never swam in this lake) resides in a glass display case. The spot is lovely, not only for the ostentatious architecture, but for interesting people who take refuge from the city here. Your camera may capture old men playing checkers in the Pavilion of the Stelae, someone fishing quietly among the willows which practically obscure the island from view, a couple posing for their wedding photo with the Tortoise Pagoda in the background, or the young photographers who always gather on the red wooden bridge. Practically across the street from the bridge is the water puppetry theater. Scenes from Vietnamese lore and history (including ancient battles) are elaborately performed by colorful lacquered puppets in an indoor pond, accompanied by traditional Vietnamese folk music. It sounds awfully corny, but missing this Hanoi attraction is like going to Paris and skipping the Eiffel Tower. Tickets for the evening performances are cheap and sell out early in the day. Avoid seats closest to the water or you may get splashed.

The Old Quarter

Some of the 36 streets that make up the Ancient Quarter still offer only a single commodity. One of the best is Hang Quat, where shops sell an incredible array of lacquered wood candle sticks, bowls, picture frames, religious shrines, and decorative pieces. Practically every single item is painted in some combination of

red, white and gold. Many of the things are elaborate to the point of being garish. Since prices are staggeringly low, buy what you can. Like folk art in other developing nations, these uniquely Northern Vietnamese handicrafts will begin to die out along with the present generation of artisans creating them. The shelves of shops in Ho Chi Minh city are already filled with factory made schlock. Sadly, this will happen in Hanoi soon enough.

Vietnamese silk is among the world's finest. Hang Gai (thread street) has for centuries been home to some of Hanoi's best silk shops.

Hanoi Culture. Hanoians are proud people; they take pride in their cuisines, their etiquettes, their rich tradition and about their own love for the city not only to international tourists but also to people from other provinces in Vietnam. Hanoi food is listed among things you should try before leaving to another world. (read our top 5 must-try foods in Hanoi). Adding to that, Hanoi is packed with museums, monuments, cafes, restaurants, discos, handicraft stores and almost anything that make your stay both convenient and entertaining. Most travelers spend about 2-5 days to tour the city but should you fall in love with Hanoi, you can always stay longer!