

COFFEE CULTURE ROBUST & STRONG

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From street-side cafes to artisanal shops, finding quality caffeine in Vietnam is no tall order. By Katie Lockhart.

THE MINGLED SCENT of cigarette smoke and coffee beans fills the air. A group of older men huddle around a game of dominoes. Next to them, two women take selfies while sipping cà phê sữa đá. Enjoying a coffee is Vietnam's daily social ritual, a simple and affordable way to partake in one of life's little pleasures.

Vietnam grows over 30 million bags per year, with the number continuously rising, and the country's coffee production is second only to Brazil. Besides growing a huge number of beans per year, both countries

were also colonised by France at one point in their histories. Vietnam's love of coffee can be traced back to France's occupation in the mid- to late 1800s. While the French prefer to drink a café au lait, aka coffee with fresh milk, that wasn't an option in Vietnam. So, instead, they imported condensed milk to the country and today, a cà phê sữa đá, or an iced coffee with a thick layer of sweetened condensed milk, is the drink of choice for many – depending on which part of the country you're in, of course.

Sorting coffee beans



In the south of Vietnam, Saigon-style coffee is served in a tall glass with plenty of ice to combat the sweltering hot temperatures. In the centre and north of the country, it's served in a smaller glass and often hot, an antidote to the occasional chilly, rainy weather.

One of Hanoi's coffee claims to fame is a cà phê trứng (egg coffee). Egg coffee is strong black coffee topped with a thick layer of super sweet, whipped egg foam. And throughout the country, coffee drinkers can find cà phê cốt dừa (coconut coffee). This icy coffee frappe is made differently depending on the cafe but typically contains coconut cream or coconut milk and sweetened condensed milk.

While it may be tempting to try all the delicious, flavourful varieties one after the other, don't drink too many. Vietnamese coffee is known to get the heart racing and the forehead sweating – in other words, it's

strong. In fact, 95% of all coffee grown in Vietnam is robusta, and the other 5% is arabica. Many believe that the stronger the coffee, the better the beans.

Coffee connoisseurs who take their beans seriously source their robusta from the Central Highlands. At Sũa Cafe in Hoi An, manager Thanh Huynh gets arabica from Cầu Đất Farm in Da Lat and robusta from Kon Tum in the Central Highlands. He then roasts the dried beans on the premises before grinding them and putting them straight into a steel or aluminiumphin.

A phin is a uniquely Vietnamese way of brewing coffee. 'The phin consists of two main components – the brewing

chamber and the press filter, which is used to 'tamp' or keep the coffee grounds down,' explains Trung Phan, owner of the Espresso Station in Hoi An. 'After water is added, the brewing chamber acts as an immersion chamber where most of the coffee extraction happens. As water moves through the brewing chamber, coffee is extracted. Fresh coffee drips into your cup from the bottom.'

When jet lag kicks in, there's no need to be picky. While wandering the tree-lined streets of Hanoi's old town or the lantern-strewn alleys of Hoi An, you'll notice a theme: fantastic coffee shops are everywhere. From narrow, hole-in-the-wall pit stops that open at 4am to nomad-cluttered co-working spaces open late into the night, there's no shortage of places to get a caffeine fix. Artisanal, photo-worthy cafes are popping up on every motorbike-laden street corner, and cafes staffed by people with disabilities are also becoming more common including at Sũa Cafe in Hoi An.

And if the slow-drip phin brewing process is any indication, Vietnamese coffee is meant to be savoured. When ordering, don't bother asking for a to-go cup. It's the antithesis of Vietnam's cherished laid-back cafe culture. Plus, you'll miss out on the frenetic beauty of daily life as it passes by the cafe windows.

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Dalat cafe



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