

Diane Lee and Julie Vola head south out of Hanoi to Ha Thai, a village known for its lacquer products



Ha Thai, famous for its lacquer products, is located around 17km southeast of Hanoi. Riding into the village through a busy market, I am struck by the serenity of the countryside. Never-ending roads stretch into the horizon, picture perfect. Streets are swept clean. Villas, in pastel colours of mint and terracotta and pink, sit comfortably alongside ancient gates and walls, the limestone washed black with age.

Temple and Tea

If you stay in Asia for any length of time, you see any number of temples and pagodas. It takes a lot for one to stand out. Chua Ha Thai, with its heavy Chinese influence does, primarily because it is so well-maintained.

I wander round the grounds, feeling like I have stepped back in time. Fat lily pads float in small ponds. A marble Buddha oversees the courtyard from a simple altar, painted grey and white. Trees and shrubs, reminiscent of bonsai, dot the area.

As we stroll around the courtyard, a youngish woman ushers us over to a plain wooden table under a plastic tarpaulin. I balance on a tiny plastic stool while she pours tea into a small cup from a green and white teapot. It is freshly brewed and delicious — smooth and buttery — with no hint of bitterness that often accompanies green tea. As a thank-you, we each place a donation in the red box on the next table.

Centuries-Old Techniques

We park the motorcycle and amble through

the village, peering through open gates and doorways, keen for any sighting of lacquer. The heady aroma of polyurethane indicates we are heading in the right direction, and we are rewarded almost immediately.

The village production cycle means that work is carried out in the home. The villagers don't seem to mind as we wander in and watch, fascinated by the mastery of centuries-old techniques, upgraded with modern twists; plastic to smooth paint and polyurethane to lacquer. In minimal light and rudimentary working conditions, the workers craft beautiful vases, bowls, plates and trays in jewel colours of silver, gold, olive and cherry. These are then shipped to showrooms in the village and around the country.

One workshop, which manufactures base products for lacquering, has, by Western standards, a noticeable lack of safety, but the workers are among the happiest I have encountered. In my halting Vietnamese, I exchange compliments with them about our respective ages before they return to work, and we return to our mission.

Simply Delicious

Hungry, and having recently discovered the simple deliciousness of *bun dau mam tom*, I am thrilled to see a sign for *bun dau* next to the showroom. I order mine without meat — I'm vegetarianish — but protest when it is served; there appears to be cooked flesh in my soup. I am assured it is fish, and it is. The tofu, noodles and

greens are served in a delicious broth, a variation on what I have eaten in Hanoi.

The overcast sky that had threatened rain earlier makes good on its promise. We take the drizzle as a sign that it is time to head back to the hustle and bustle of Hanoi, swapping serenity for the noise of the city. [W](#)

Getting There

Head to Le Duan and keep driving south for around 12km. Turn left at Tiem Toc Thu Hoa onto Highway 16 and then right at DCT Phap Van. Continue until you cross the river, then turn left. Ha Thai will be on your right via one of the access roads.