

# Cool Runnings

You need to do a visa run again. So, where should you go? Words by **Diane Lee**

Every three months, or sometimes less, there are any number of expats at airports across Vietnam jetting off to Asian neighbours for a day or so to do that trip of necessity; the visa run. Even those with 12-month business visas — or with visa exemptions — are still required to leave the country every few months. Generally, the destination of choice is Bangkok. It's cheap and close, and expats can stock up on items they often have difficulty locating in Vietnam. But what are the cool spots — other than Bangkok — that a visa-running expat can visit?

## Cambodia

*Siem Reap*

*Flying time: Hanoi — 1h 45min; HCMC — 1h 5min*

*Return flights: From VND3.4 million*

The gateway to the temples of Angkor Wat, Siem Reap is not just about the Khmer Empire. The city is also a major tourist hub in the northwest of Cambodia. It's chic and modern, and caters for those on a backpacker budget to those who are happy to spend a few extra dollars on a couple of days of shopping, pampering and great dining. And of course, there's Angkor Wat.

## China

*Hong Kong*

*Flying time: Hanoi — 2h; HCMC — 2h 40min*

*Return flights: From VND2.6 million*

This former British colony in southeast China is a thriving, modern metropolis that proudly displays its Chinese heritage. A major shipping and financial hub, Hong Kong also lays claim to having the most skyscrapers in one city. A little on the expensive side for the average visa runner, Hong Kong is worth a visit or three because it has so much to offer; fabulous markets and shopping, five-star restaurants and cultural, historical and architectural sightseeing.

## Taiwan

*Taipei*

*Flying time: Hanoi — 2h 50min; HCMC — 3h 25min*

*Return flights: From VND4.3 million*

Taipei is home to regenerative thermal hot springs and spas. During the occupation of Taiwan by the Japanese, the Beitou spa

region was turned into a resort destination — complete with inns, teahouses, parks and private and public baths — that is still popular today. Easily accessed by train from Taipei, this might be the perfect destination for the overworked visa runner looking for some rest and relaxation.

## Indonesia

*Bali*

*Flying time: Hanoi — 8h 20 min; HCMC — 8h 30min*

*Return flights: From VND6.4 million*

Bali is not called the Island of the Gods for nothing; iconic religious sites and temples can be found all over the island. The more active visa runners can do a dawn volcano hike, mountain bike through picturesque villages, jet-ski in Nusa Dua, and swim with dolphins in Lovina. For those wanting a more relaxed experience, there are yoga and meditation retreats in Ubud, and the beaches of Sanur or Candidasa are quiet and relatively non-touristy. If you are after a more lively stay with a myriad of shopping, dining and nightlife options, Seminyak, Legian and Kuta are for you.

## South Korea

*Seoul*

*Flying time: Hanoi — 4h 10min; HCMC — 5h 15min*

*Return flights: From VND6.8 million*

Capital of the Republic of South Korea, Seoul is the 16th largest city in the world. It blends uber modernity — towering skyscrapers, high-tech subways and pop culture — with palaces, street markets and traditional Buddhist temples. Although on the pricey side, Seoul is a popular destination for foodies. From streetfood to multi-course banquets and everything else in between, visa runners who love indulging their tastebuds can't go wrong with a trip to South Korea's capital.

## Laos

*Luang Prabang*

*Flying time: Hanoi — 1h 20min; HCMC — 5h 30min*

*Return flights: From VND5.7 million*

A UNESCO heritage site, Luang Prabang is an ideal spot for those who want to enjoy some relaxation of the spiritual kind. Located in the north of Laos, this old French town presents the jaded visa runner

with stunning mountainous landscape, waterfalls, the Mekong, French cuisine and a sleepy feel.

## Malaysia

*Kuala Lumpur*

*Flying time: Hanoi — 3h 20min; HCMC — 1h 55min*

*Return flights: From VND1.7 million*

A popular getaway for visa runners, Kuala Lumpur is a humming, vibrant city chock full of interesting things to see and do. Gleaming skyscrapers, colonial architecture and shopping malls sit comfortably alongside Malay, Chinese and Indian communities with their streetfood and flea markets. And if you need a break from the city, head to Malacca, just three hours away by bus. This former Portuguese-built, Chinese-influenced port town has a historic vibe all of its own.

## Singapore

*Flying time: Hanoi — 3h 15min; HCMC — 2h*

*Return flights: From VND2.7 million*

As a major transport hub in Southeast Asia, travellers don't often stop in Singapore, and instead choose to transit through. They shouldn't. Although on the expensive side — particularly for accommodation — Singapore is a clean, modern city worth exploring. With high-end shopping on Orchard Road, it is also home to awesome street food. Little China and Little Arabia are worth exploring, and a night visit to the zoo is a must. This is also the home of Underwater World and Universal Studios Theme Park, perfect if you want a taste of something more associated with the west.

## Thailand

*Chiang Mai*

*Flying time with stopovers: Hanoi — 5h 30min; HCMC — 4h 20min*

*Return flights: From VND4.9 million*

One of the preferred locations for digital nomads, Chiang Mai is another option for those who like the ease of travelling to Thailand, but want to go somewhere other than Bangkok. Feeling more like a sleepy town rather than a capital city, Chiang Mai mixes monks and monasteries, beautiful temples, stunning mountain scenery, a fascinating history with wonderful food and shopping. 