

HALONG DAYS

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COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

Climbing the steps to the face of a grotto on a steamy summer day it is tempting joke about which flavours of ice-cream will be waiting for you at the top. Do not be surprised, however, when there really is an ice-cream vendor waiting for you.

But pause first to enjoy the view below of Junks milling around the cove and the never-ending contours of limestone hills fading into the horizon. There are few sights in Vietnam more iconic than Junks with raised-sails on Halong Bay.

The name literally means Descending Dragons, in reference to the legendary family of dragons set to earth to defend the forefathers of Vietnam. Each island is said to have been created from jewels thrown into the sea by the dragons, forming a natural defence from invaders.

The scenic image of sailing the bay is repeated on every 10,000 Dong note in the country, although today the Junks mainly motor and the traditional cargo of fish is usually replaced with eager tourists spending a day and a night away from Hanoi.

There is ample comfort aboard every Junk to make an overnight stay on the bay essential – a single day trip is just not enough. Three days is perhaps ideal, allowing enough time to journey away from the crowds and immerse yourself in the scenery.

Getting out to the islands is an adventure in itself. Arriving at the Halong City jetty you step into a scene from the last century, with Junks and ferries dipping their bows in and out of the landing steps to let passengers on and off.

Once aboard your vessel the organised chaos seems less imposing and as the Junk slips away from the shore you can feel the sense of relaxation settle within.

A few minutes under motor and the limestone islands are up close; steep hills that tower above the calm waters of the Gulf of Tonkin. While the islands themselves are largely uninhabited the coves and natural harbours are dotted with floating villages where the main income is fishing.

When your house floats on the sea it's a simple modification to install a fishing-net in the basement and store your catch alive. Passing Junks are greeted by impressive displays of catfish, mantis and crabs. Seafood doesn't get any fresher than this.

Aboard the Junk you can enjoy plenty of the same fresh seafood, and each meal is nothing short of a banquet. Most Junks operate a substantial crew, but the cook is revered above all others.

When you're not climbing through grottoes, swimming off a secluded island or feasting on another seafood dinner it's worth getting into a kayak to explore under your own steam. For an extra \$15 you can have a two-person kayak ready and waiting – no previous experience necessary.

The skipper of any Junk will know the best places for a paddle, but the sea-lake near Hang Sung Sot is one of the most popular.

Even at high tide you can easily slip through the limestone cave that connects the bay to the sheltered pool, and once inside you are encircled by a turquoise water garden lined with steep limestone cliffs draped with ferns and vines.

The most gentle of whispers echo off the walls and there is no sound at all other than the ripple of your own oar in the water.

Heading back out across the cove you can expect some company from young girls keen to sell you food and drink. They load up little wooden boats with almost enough soft-drink, beer and snacks to sink it, and then they row out to meet you on the water.

Their prices are actually very reasonable, given how hard they work to catch you in the first place, but they don't like 'No' for an answer.

I catch a glimpse of a pagoda, resting on the peak of a nearby island, a delicate reminder that even here in the remote reaches of Halong Bay there are Buddhist temples to be explored. In some cases a small beach provides access to the island and you can park the kayak easily while you make the climb up the hill.

Unlike the better visited grottoes of Sung Sot, Thein Cung and Dau Go, these more peaceful settings do not feature an ice-cream stall when you reach the top.

By the time you return from the kayaking your Junk will most likely be joined by another ten nearby, all patiently waiting for dusk to fall. Their companionship is of a quiet variety; too far to hear their presence but close enough to include the charm of the old Junks in your photos of the sunset.

As the orange and red sky disappears into the horizon the fairy-lights of the neighbouring boats add a festive feel to the evening. Dinner is enjoyed with chilled wine and beer and the boats lay motionless on a still sea throughout the night.

The steamy conditions in Halong Bay are lovely when the breeze rolls in, but once darkness falls the humid night-air can make sleeping a little tricky. That's why the better boats include air-conditioning in the cabins, and believe me it's worth the few extra dollars to awake the next day feeling fresh.

With the morning light our quiet bay looks even more peaceful. A few of the other boats have headed off, some continuing on to seek out the beaches of Cat Ba Island and others charting a course for Halong City.

The hazy light is eerily yellow as another junk slips past us with its sails hoisted high. You can tell the engine must be running because there is no wind to speak of.

Our journey back to port is a gradual process. There's always time for a swim in the lee of a small island, a final chance to float in the warm salty water. None of us are quite ready to give up our little Junk and we ask for one more chance to dive into the bay.

Cruising past the floating villages again there are increasingly more small-boats to be seen, mostly fishermen and traders. Things are busy in the cool of the morning.

As the mainland becomes visible the limestone hills fade back into the haze, and soon enough the Junk has rejoined the throng of vessels trying to swap passengers and cargo.

One of the great features of Halong Bay is its relative proximity and stunning contrast to the thriving pace of Hanoi.

Short excursions are easily arranged when staying in Hanoi. They include the three hour drive to Halong City and a variety of options on the water. Package tours that cover northern Vietnam usually include the Halong Bay experience, with the bonus of new friends and the luxury of a private Junk.

The price of admission to the national park and grottoes is usually included, but you may have to buy your own ice-cream when you reach the top of the climb.

