

2/12/05
PUB: STL 21-JAN-2007 ED: 1 SE3 4 Drop
STL 21-JAN-2007 SE
20 20 CMYK 2 5 6 7 8 15 25 50 75 98
PROOF OK CORRECTION SIGNATURE: ED
AD

Jackets, jewels and jaunts in Vietnam

There are fashion bargains galore on a tailor-made tour of historic Hoi An. **Sue Bennett** stitches up a deal.



Only as the plane is 32,000ft above the Timor Sea do I take a close read of the holiday itinerary. It wasn't the smartest idea. Savvier members of the group have done their homework. They have worked out the airline allows economy passengers 30kg of luggage and, inside their half-empty suitcases, there are dress patterns, magazine cuttings and a favourite business suit or two.

They know we are heading to the tailoring capital of Vietnam where made-to-measure clothes are created overnight and in hand-picked fabrics. Frantically making up for lost time, I scan Vogue where I fall for a loose-fitting Bolero-style jacket by Lanvin with a \$3500 price tag. I rip out the page. Four days later, I have my own evening-wear version in gold silk with embossed tiny flowers. It's a perfect fit and the price... \$40.

The tailors at Yaly Couture in Hoi An are skilled at taking scraps of paper and translating them into fabulous garments. I also had a much-loved shirt copied, a pair of trousers and summer dress made. When the Visa bill hits home, the four items cost \$138 in total. To say it's a bargain would be an insult to the word.

But it's more than that because the whole exercise is lots of fun — and that's from someone who prefers to garden than frock shop.

After the initial selection of style, pattern and fabrics, there are daily fittings as the clothes take shape... and it's all done with a group of new girlfriends on a holiday that's unashamedly hedonistic. The Gorgeous Safari has two main aims: to shop and take spa treatments. Bliss. Oh, bliss.

We cast opinions on fabrics, fit and fashionability. We bump into each other shopping then go our own ways meeting for girlie talks by the pool and each night to share dinner and more than a few show-and-tell sessions. In between times, I'm flat out like a lizard drinking, having massages and manicures and lying by the pool.

The women, from across Australia, are aged from their 20s to 70s. They include three mothers and daughters plus two sets of sisters. Oh, and



Real gems: Time for meditation on Bai Dai beach, Viet Lac jewellery on display (left) and spa at Life Resort, Quy Nhon (below)

there's one man — but more of him later.

It's easy to feel like a millionaire in Vietnam. The exchange rate buys one million Vietnamese dong for \$80 and that sort of money goes a long way. Five pieces of laundry cost \$4, a sunhat costs me \$3 and a Martini cocktail is \$5.

The streetside display cabinet at the Viet Lac handcrafted jewellery store tells much. Copies of Gucci and Georg Jensen pieces are on show.

Inside, there are catalogues from the world's major jewellery designers. A Tiffany-style silver heart, on a chain, costs \$18. I take four.

Like the clothes, everything is made to order, and they will have a go at copying anything. There are also leather shops that make shoes and handbags in the same way.

It helps to have a guide. The dusty streets are lined with tailoring shops full of dull, identical-looking dresses on swinging hangers, so which one to choose?

Annie Fitzpatrick is our leader, and she knows which have whiz-bang seamstresses behind the scenes and where to find the skilled silver and goldsmiths. Not that you'd be risking a fortune if you got it wrong. Annie is the lovely, gregarious ambassador for celebrated foodie Maeve O'Meara, who runs the Gorgeous Safaris.

But this girl can only take so much time in a changing room: Hoi An is too special to miss.

One of Vietnam's four world heritage sites, it stands on the Thu Bon River and has remained virtually intact since the 17th century. It was a major trading port and is a fascinating mix of traditional Vietnamese life, Chinese architecture and Japanese influences.

Cars are banned from the centre so, to get around, the choice is a cyclo rickshaw, pillion on a motorbike or walking.

It's only a stroll from the

manicured lawns of the riverside Life Heritage Resort to the bustling village, and strolling permits a privileged peek into locals' lives, from children going to school to the daily fresh food market.

A beautiful massage eases away the sore feet, but spa treatments really come into their own when the group moves south to the Life Wellness Resort at Quy Nhon on the beautiful Bai Dai Beach to the south. There are no distractions here beyond a beautiful view.

Days are spent reading, relaxing and negotiating the rainforest steps to the spa. In a thatched, open-sided bungalow high above the water, the warm breeze of the South China Sea gently wafts over me as Mr Minh and Miss Khanh give me a lemongrass and lavender-scented four-hands Vietnamese massage. It goes for 50 minutes and I feel 10 fingers have played a Beethoven piano sonata all over my body.

Finally, there's our token male — make-up miracle man Kenneth Higgins who gives individual sessions on how to apply eyeliner, mascara and eye shadow like a pro.

What more could a girl want? A week of spa treatments, frock, jewellery and shoe-buying?

On the flight back to Sydney, our plane is delayed for 30 minutes at Ho Chi Minh City. We later learn it was so heavy, the pilot had to wait to use the longest runway. Ah, all that shopping...

The writer was a guest of Gorgeous Safaris.

FACT FILE

GETTING THERE: Vietnam Airlines has direct flights to Ho Chi Minh City. Hoi An is reached by a domestic flight to nearby Danang.

LOCATION: Gorgeous Safaris stays at Life Resorts in Hoi An and beachside resort of Quy Nhon.

THE DEAL: Six days of spa treatments, most meals, beauty and body treatments. The next Gorgeous Safari leaves Sydney on March 4 and costs \$3995, including air fares.

TAKE: Pictures and patterns of garments and jewellery you would like made.

COST: \$3995 includes air fare, accommodation and most meals. This year, there are Gorgeous Safaris from March 4 to 11 and April 15 to 22, as well as dates during September and October.

DETAILS: Gourmet Safaris, (02) 9960 5675, or log on to www.gourmetsafaris.com.au

