

ONLY A DECADE AGO, VIETNAM'S THIRD CITY WAS A FEATURELESS STOPOVER FOR TOURISTS VISITING HOI AN AND HUE, BUT ITS RADICAL MAKEOVER SINCE SUGGESTS IT MAY BECOME THE COUNTRY'S ANSWER TO SINGAPORE OR HONG KONG. **JONATHAN EVANS** SIZES UP THE ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN BREAKTHROUGHS THAT ARE RESHAPING BANGKOK AIRWAYS' NEW SOUTH CHINA SEA HUB

PHOTOGRAPHY **AARON JOEL SANTOS**



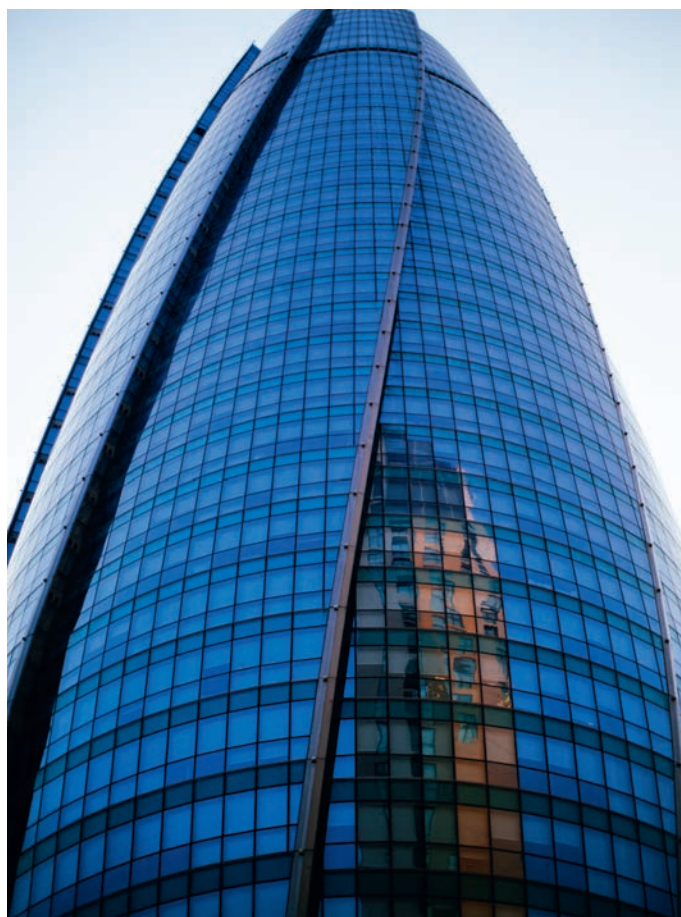
It was unseasonably cool and blustery as I arrived in central Danang, but if the weather was disappointing, the views were already making up for it. From my riverside hotel rooftop I was directly aligned with the city's best-known landmark, Cau Rong (also known as Dragon Bridge) – a gargantuan feat of engineering that connects the contrasting sides of a city bisected by the Han River. On the eastern side lie condos in the throes of construction, the beguiling Son Tra Peninsula perched over the South China Sea, and two much-vaunted beaches – one of which, My Khe, is already dotted with a string of luxury resorts and golf courses. On this grittier western side is a flourishing town centre that's markedly different to the anonymous conurbation I passed through only four years ago en route to the UNESCO World Heritage-listed city of Hoi An.

Back then, Danang was better known as a gateway – and the target of other countries' interloping – than as a city in its own right. This is where the French first landed in 1858 on their quest to control the chunk of South-East Asia they later called Indochina. Danang grew to become the pivotal base for commerce and shipping in the region. From the mid-1960s, it was a major US airbase during “the American War”, as it's known here – as well as the site of huge stockpiles of the disfiguring, dioxin-laced herbicide known as Agent Orange. But over the last decade, in tandem with a parallel cosmetic transformation in Ho Chi Minh City (still widely referred to as Saigon), rapid change has been afoot in Danang. Architect extraordinaire Bill Bensley spent six years re-imagining the InterContinental in Son Tra into a magnificent design destination, unveiled in 2012; the Dragon Bridge opened to traffic in 2013; in 2014, Sky36, Vietnam's tallest rooftop bar, was completed atop the Novotel. Just last year a new wharf development, DHC Marina, lit up the riverside, its 7.5m-tall carp statue standing guard over a “Love Bridge” in apparent homage to its Singaporean lookalike, the Merlion. By night, the Han now more closely resembles Hong Kong's Victoria Harbour than anything we'd normally associate with Vietnam.

Certainly, sandwiched as it is between two world-famous heritage destinations – the former imperial capital of Hue and Hoi An – the city's embrace of modernity seems surprising. There are almost no museums, and just a handful of galleries. Cultural cachet resides mostly in pockets of colonial architecture behind Bach Dang, the lively riverfront thoroughfare, in street food such as the localised noodle specialities *my quang* and *cao lau*, and in old markets – the biggest of which, 70-year-old Cho Han, is a two-storey, 28,000m² assault on the senses. Government restoration projects in place for 2016 are focused on nearby towns in Quang Nam province and further north; in Danang, the smooth-running airport is being upgraded with a US\$158 million international terminal.

Like much of modern Vietnam – Communist by name, capitalist by nature – rampant commercialism has taken hold in Danang, but what's most striking in 2016 is how private enterprise is rebranding the city's 21st-century image along the lines of Saigon's hippest quarters, such as Pasteur and Hai Ba Trung. Such gentrification fits neatly into this relatively small city of 1 million residents, with its manageable traffic and unusually well-observed pedestrian crossings. It's a consumer reinvention manifested in monochrome fashion boutiques, raucous bars and European-style restaurants – but most notably, in the almost unbelievable number of cafés lining the long, central streets of Bach Dang, Tran Phu and Phan Chu Trinh.

I have never – not even Melbourne – seen so many coffee shops per square mile as in Danang. And in many ways these chilled-out boltholes compensate for the lack of art elsewhere, in some cases relying on tropes





Above: The Love Bridge on the Han River; (below) wall detail from the InterContinental Danang Sun Peninsula Resort in Son Tra; (opposite, above) hillside villas at the InterContinental; (below) the recently opened Danang Administration Centre

STATS **DANANG**

Population: 1,007,400
Demonym: Dananger
Weather: Tropical – very hot and humid from June to August; wet and stormy through October and November
Area: 1,255km²





From top: Lose yourself in Le Jardin des Secrets; nature-sympathetic design at Naman Retreat's "no wall" Pure Spa; a sea view across My Khe Beach; (opposite) Naman's curved-roof beachside suites

familiar to any modern city dweller – vintage bicycles, pot plants, Mason jars, teak furniture, chillwave soundtrack – but in others assembling far more creative design projects. Aquarium Coffee is built around a series of fish tanks; Moc Mien is a delightful semi-alfresco garden café; while the outdoor space at Bien Bao reveals an unusual fetish for road signs. With few live-music stages here many, like Bien Bao, also double as venues for acoustic performances or exhibitions.

As with their Western counterparts, nostalgia – a superficial re-creation of comforting iconography from a simpler, pre-digital world – is a central theme. Daisy, near Danang Cathedral, is an impossibly cute confection dolled up in feminine pastel hues with bared brickwork, old vinyl, vintage TVs and sewing machines. But the granddaddy of all these retro cafés is Cong Caphe, a mini-chain that aims for Communist “military chic” with its dark-green and scuffed-grey interiors, Vietnam War trinkets and wall art, five-pointed star atop your latte and “interrogation room” (undercut slightly, on my visit, by a soundtrack of Barbra Streisand and Backstreet Boys). I didn’t see a cat café, but surely it’s only a matter of time.

Though they share visual characteristics, no two cafés feel quite the same, while franchises like Starbucks are conspicuous by their absence. I chatted with a student, Anh Van Phuong, who told me: “Here in Danang, it’s hard to find art, like [you see] in museums or galleries, but cafés work as a showcase of the artistic talent of local people.” There could be no more accurate description of the prevailing creative culture. And by the look of hotels like Sanouva, which began operations in a heritage building in June 2014, it’s an aesthetic that’s starting to seep into the city’s hospitality sector. Here the lobby dazzles with its geometric floor tiles, mid-century armchairs set around golden butterfly murals and arched windows, suspended birdcages, vintage photos, mopeds and crimson lanterns dangling from minimalist chandeliers, all framed against the imposing balustrades of a grand, curvilinear staircase.

It had taken a turn for the sunnier by day two, so after a hearty *bo bit tet* – beefsteak with pâté, fried egg, sweetcorn, fries and *banh mi* baguette – I took a 40-minute taxi ride out to BaNa Hills Mountain Resort. Though far greater cultural riches await in Hoi An, there is something here for everybody – not least in the world’s longest and highest single-track gondola ride, opened in 2013, which takes 30 minutes to travel over 5km and rises almost 1,500m over breathtaking sylvan scenery and waterfalls. In a shroud of mist I was finally dropped at Gare l’Indochine into a Disneyland-like pastiche of a French town that harks back to the hill sanctuary’s origins 100 years ago as a collection of colonial villas. Here a selfie-stick army congregated to photograph themselves in front of a small replica cathedral, as five Russian men in waistcoats inexplicably bashed out a big-band version of Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit”.

It takes another cable car from Gare de Morin, and a funicular ride to Gare d’Amour, before you reach Le Jardin d’Amour. As tacky as it might sound, it’s a remarkable collection of gardens. Tucked away here is the world’s largest vertical garden, Le Jardin des Secrets, designed by Saigon-based sustainable-project specialists TA Landscape Architecture, and shortlisted for the 2014 World Architecture Festival



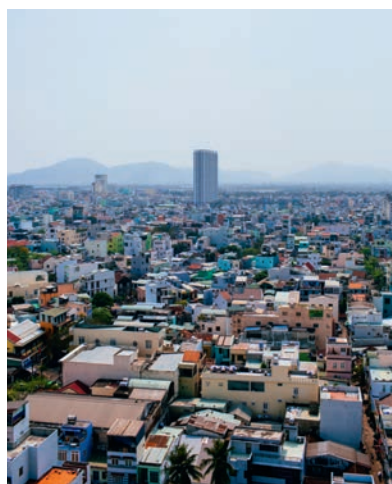
Awards. Horticulturalists will marvel at the scientific complexity – each of the 44,800 plants was selected and positioned to accommodate its individual sunlight and water requirements.

But what's equally ingenious is the playful layout: the garden doubles as a full-scale, maddeningly effective labyrinth. As you make your way through tall rows of philodendrons, pandanus and caladiums, with only the giant head of a 24m-high Buddha visible overhead, it's common to see fellow visitors laughing, cussing and mildly panicking as they try to make their way back out. The inevitable relief on emerging at the exit is accompanied by delight at the sight of the Love Garden, all heart-shaped topiary and splendid curlicued flowerbeds, overseen by two courting swans. By contrast, the top level of this multi-tiered attraction, Nha Tinh Tam (The Meditation Place), is built from remnants of pillars and archways from the villas originally built here, intertwined with lilac, white and blue hydrangeas. The dreaminess of the setting is matched only by the *Avatar*-like scenes on the descent to ground level – it's a day trip where the journey almost trumps the destination.

Back on terra firma, it's a 20-minute ride from the city centre to My Khe Beach – the coracle-spattered Non Nuoc (“China”) Beach on the left, serious construction in progress to the right – and the grandest showcase yet for the artistry of Saigon's architects. Naman Retreat opened in February 2015 with an emphasis on enhancing spiritual wellbeing and sensual pleasure using the gifts of nature. It's an ethos that runs right through the five-star resort – from the Sitini infinity pool, metres from the white sand, and the undulating grass roofs of the UFO-like beachside villas, to the pond of surrealist sculptures, magnificent Hay Hay restaurant and “no wall” spa. Hay Hay in particular (a canny double meaning: the roof is made of thatched straw, while *hay!* in Vietnamese means “oh, so intriguing!”) is a design lover's wonderland. Dreamt up by the award-winning Vo Trong Nghia practice, its 29 trumpet-like canopies of *tam vong* and *luong* bamboo – bent by fire,



From top: Cau Rong is known even to some locals as Dragon Bridge; the scene from Non Nuoc Beach; the urban sprawl from high above Danang; (below right) new riverside development DHC Marina



Good to know

Landmarks

BaNa Hills Mountain Resort

An Son-Hoa Ninh, Hoa Vang; banahills.com.vn/en

Danang Administration Centre

24 Tran Phu

DHC Marina

Tran Hung Dao; dhcmarina.vn

Asia Park

1 Phan Dang Luu; asia-park.vn

Cho Han

119 Tran Phu

Hotels & resorts

InterContinental Danang Resort

Bai Bac, Son Tra Peninsula; danang.intercontinental.com

Sanouva Hotel

68 Phan Chu Trinh; sanouvadanang.com

Novotel Danang/Sky36

36 Bach Dang; novotel-danang-premier.com

Naman Retreat

Truong Sa; namanretreat.com

Vanda Hotel

3 Nguyen Van Linh; vandahotel.vn



soaked in water and fumigated – soar up to a ceiling dominated by two extraordinary domes, one with a giant skylight. The team now plans to build three bamboo-covered towers linked by aerial bridges, outside Ho Chi Minh City – a blueprint strikingly similar to Singapore’s now-iconic Marina Bay Sands hotel. “I think bamboo and laminated bamboo – or engineered bamboo – will replace other materials and become the ‘green steel’ of the 21st century,” noted the architect. “It’s a very low-cost material in Vietnam. I hope many architects realise its potential.”

Hay Hay’s design is inspiring enough already, but then there’s the fabulous food: my watercress salad with chilled beef was the freshest, most flavourful Vietnamese dish I’d ever tasted. Meanwhile, as I sat facing the sea, mind-bending tableaux played out before me. Directly ahead of the pool’s sunken seating areas, the disembodied torsos of the Sitini bar’s conical hat-wearing wait-staff glided, seemingly legless, across the infinity pool in a *trompe l’oeil* effect only enhanced by the waves churning across the distant sea.

A few metres away stands Pure Spa by MIA Design Studio, led by Nguyen Hoang Manh – another homegrown practice with a passion for modernist architecture, integrating interior and exterior spaces, and incurring minimal environmental impact. All three elements are on display as you step past the fragmented white lattice screens and banks of trailing plants into the courtyard, where a jungle-like atrium stands amid an asymmetrical pond, sofas and tall sculpted waterbirds. You have to pinch yourself to remember you’re indoors. Upstairs, the treatment rooms, gym, and meditation and yoga studios nestle between lush gardens of heliotropium, pluchea and plumeria, creating the sensation of a complete lack of confinement. The local understanding of climate, ecology and vernacular architecture has been paramount in creating optimal lighting, ventilation and a feeling of harmony with nature.

Back in town before sunset, I zoomed up to Sky36, which in the last two years has become the city’s undisputed number-one party den. It’s



My Quang, a regional noodle speciality, served in style at the Sanouva Danang Hotel



Left: Nostalgic comforts at Cong Caphe; (above) soy-glazed pork and salmon delights at Waterfront restaurant; (right) a coconut-laced java jolt at Cong Caphe

Good to know

Cafés

Aquarium Coffee

69 Nguyen Chi Thanh;
facebook.com/aquariumcoffee

Moc Mien Garden Café

34 Duong 2 Thang
9; facebook.com/mocmiengardencafe

Bien Bao

Lo 21-22E1 Tran Nhan
Tong; facebook.com/CafeStudioBienBao

Ca Phe Daisy

75 Yen Bai

Cong Caphe

96-98 Bach Dang;
congaphe.com

Restaurants

Limoncello

18 Tran Phu;
limoncellovn.com

Fatfish Restaurant

439 Tran Hung Dao;
fatfishdanang.com

Waterfront

150 Bach Dang;
waterfrontdanang.com

Bars

Bamboo2 Bar

216 Bach Dang;
bamboo2bar.com

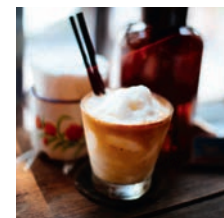
Boutiques

Gent Collection

16 Phan Chu Trinh;
facebook.com/gentcollectiondn

Yumera

79 Trung Nu Vuong;
facebook.com/yumerahomedecor

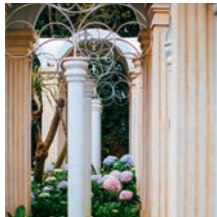




a three-floor affair reached via a dramatic glass-elevator ascent up the Novotel's exterior: arriving at the 35th floor, you're plunged into a *Blade Runner*-like penumbra courtesy of luxe-interiors supremos AA Corporation. With its neon splashes, DJ platform, sofas and sharp fittings, it resembles the upscale Saigon club Chill Skybar, but its style, just on the right side of flashy, gives it the edge: at the bar, illuminated by a plectrum-shaped cabinet, I ordered a Vietnamese Home-Spiced Mule and took it to the rooftop to survey the spectacle.

The sweeping panorama below amply demonstrated not just how Danang has transformed in the last decade, but how it's learnt to have fun. In the shadow of Cau Rong, party cruisers meandered gently down the Han, while at the riverfront promenade middle-aged couples enjoyed a Latin dancing session, spotlighted by lasers from a nearby night-spot. To the left stood the unmissable, 34-storey Danang Administration Centre, a parsnip-shaped skyscraper with a swirling mirror-window effect that's set the bar for innovative corporate architects. A five-minute cab ride over the bridge whisked me to Fatfish, a buzzing, split-level European restaurant fetchingly decked out in a soft primary-colour palette, where I grazed on seafood teriyaki on focaccia. The water-spewing carp statue and fire-breathing dragon stood directly in my line of view. If this is how far a city can get in a decade, I thought, then I can't wait to see what it looks like in 2026. ●

Above: The misty cable-car trek to BaNa Hills is the world's longest single-track gondola ride; (below) the tranquil Nha Tinh Tam, or the Meditation Place



เมืองดานัง รู้จักกันมานานในฐานะประตูเวียดนามและกลายเป็นเมืองท่าที่สำคัญของภูมิภาค ดานังมีความสำคัญทางประวัติศาสตร์ตั้งแต่ยุคอาณานิคมที่ฝรั่งเศสเข้ามาแผ่อำนาจแถบอินโดจีน มาจนถึงสมัยสงครามเวียดนามที่กองทัพสหรัฐมาใช้เป็นฐานทัพอากาศ และเป็นจุดผลิตฝิ่นหลั่ง

แต่ในทศวรรษที่ผ่านมา เมืองดานังเปลี่ยนรูปร่างไปอย่างสิ้นเชิง มีการปรับปรุงสถาปัตยกรรมครั้งใหญ่ ทั้งการเปิดตัวโรงแรมใหม่ของโรงแรมอินเตอร์คอนติเนนทัล ที่ออกแบบโดยสถาปนิกชื่อดัง คุณบิล เบนสลีย์ การเปิดตัวสะพานมังกรแลนด์มาร์คแห่งใหม่ และการเปิดบาร์ชั้นรูฟท็อปที่สูงที่สุดในประเทศ “สกาย36” ของโรงแรมโมโนเทล ริมแม่น้ำห่านมีการตกแต่งไฟสวยงาม และรูปปั้นปลาการ์ฟหัวมังกร ที่ดูเพี้ยนๆ เหมือนเมอร์ไลออน ของสิงคโปร์ บรรยากาศคึกคักแลดูคล้าย ภูเก็ตหรือ ฮาร์เบอร์ของฮ่องกง

แม้ว่าเมืองข้างๆ อย่างเว้ และฮอยอันจะเป็นเมืองท่องเที่ยวทางประวัติศาสตร์ ดานังเองโดดเด่นเรื่องสถาปัตยกรรมสไตล์โคโลเนียล และอาหารท้องถิ่นริมแม่น้ำ รัฐบาลเวียดนามวางแผนพัฒนาสนามบิน และส่งเสริมการท่องเที่ยวให้เมืองมากขึ้น ดานังกลายเป็นเมืองยุคใหม่ มีบรรยากาศคึกคัก ขวักไขว่ ภาคเอกชนก็ปรับตัวให้เข้ากับภาพลักษณ์นี้ ทั้งร้านแฟชันบูติก ร้านขนมน่ารักๆ ร้านอาหารยุโรป แต่ที่ดูจะชัดเจนที่สุดคือร้านกาแฟ ที่มีจำนวนมากเสียกว่าที่ใดในโลกแตกต่างเพียงคอนเซ็ปต์ของร้าน นักศึกษาที่นั่นเล่าให้เราฟังว่ายากที่จะหางานศิลปะในพิพิธภัณฑ์ดานัง แต่ผลงานในคาเฟ่ต่างหากเป็นตัวแสดงพรสวรรค์ทางศิลปะของชาวดานัง

เราได้ไปเที่ยวตามสถานที่ต่างๆ มากมาย ทั้งแผนทาสติก ซิตี้ ชื่นเคเบิลคาร์ที่ยาวที่สุดในโลก ไปชมทิวทัศน์เมืองและวัดก๊วกแวกดูสวนสนุกบนเขา เดินชมสวนแนวตั้งขนาดใหญ่ที่สุดในโลก กลับมาที่พื้นราบ เราไปต่อกันริมทะเล ดานังมีรีสอร์ตหรูขึ้นมากมาย ออกแบบสวยงามเหมาะให้นักท่องเที่ยวถ่ายภาพ อัฟโฟลตรูปลัทธิอินสตาแกรม และช่วงก่อนพระอาทิตย์ตก เรามาแวะดูวิวที่บาร์สกาย 36 ชมวิวพาโนรามาของเมืองที่เปลี่ยนแปลงไปพร้อมผู้คนที่รู้จักหาความสุขใส่ตัวริมแม่น้ำ และหากว่านี่คือรูปแบบที่เปลี่ยนแปลงไปเพียงลิบๆ เราแทบรอไม่ไหวที่จะเห็นภาพของ ดานังในอีกสิบปีข้างหน้า

Left to right: Moc Mien Garden Café is a horticultural haven in the heart of the city; Danang Cathedral

