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Four Seasons Hoi An

Zen Escapes

Embracing a sense of ease along the Vietnam coast

By **Jocelyn C. Zuckerman**

We stood with our feet hip-width apart, legs slightly bent at the knees. “Look at the monkey,” our young Vietnamese guide instructed, slowly easing her right hand toward her eyes as if to shade them from a blinding sun. “Hold the baby,” she exhorted a little while later, cradling both arms to her chest. At one point, she stomped her foot and violently thrashed an open-palmed hand toward the floor. “Now,” she said, “smash the mirror!”

My teenaged daughters and I didn’t have a clue what qi gong even was when we signed up for the session at Amanoi, an elegantly spare resort on a remote coastal strip of Vietnam’s Ninh Thuan Province. Dating back some 4,000 years, the practice is a relative of tai chi; its fluid, slow-motion movements are said to open the muscles and joints, thereby

enabling energy to better circulate through the body. The three of us screwed up repeatedly as we attempted to fashion our legs and arms into the various poses—forget trying to remember their proper order—but the gentle stretching, combined with the morning air and the timeless view from the over-lake pavilion, left us with a lingering sense of ease.

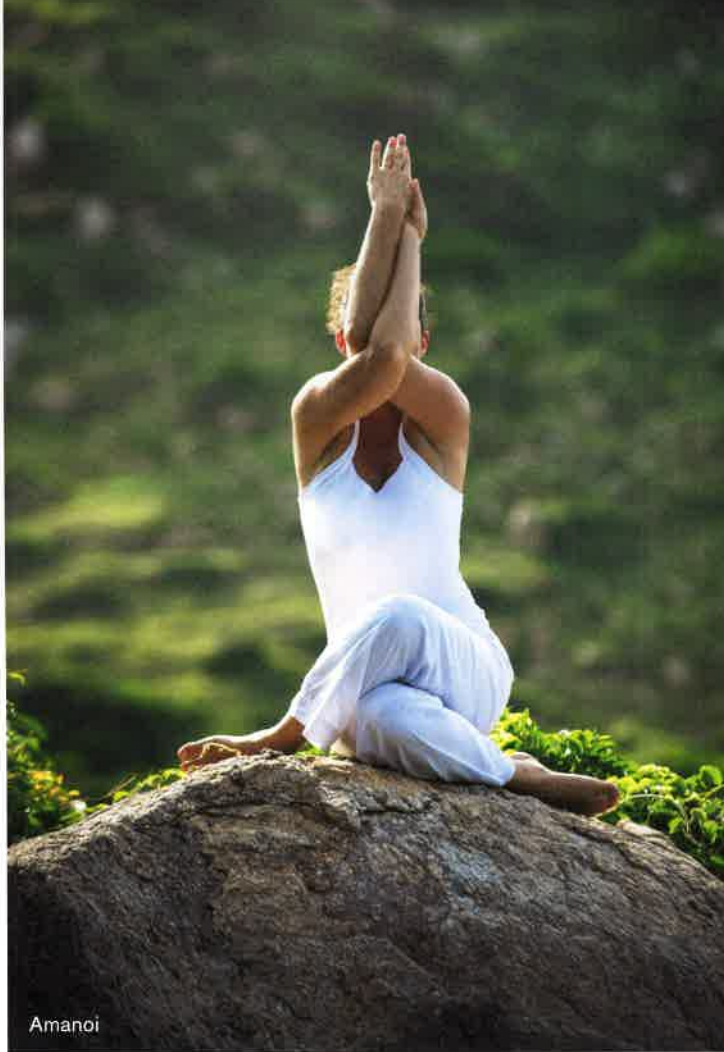
It was a feeling that returned throughout our stay on the Vietnamese coast. Despite being the site of some of the bloodiest fighting that wracked this Southeast Asian nation over two decades, the countryside, with its lime-green rice paddies, cerulean sea and lumbering water buffaloes, imparts a sort of serenity by default. Factor in the light, vibrant food—zingy with fish sauce and ginger—and it’s hard not to feel at one with the universe here. (At least amid the clean air of the coast; back in



Amanoi



Amanoi



Amanoi

Saigon, where the motorbikes, intense fumes and ubiquitous surgical masks conjured a sort of futuristic dystopia, “healthful” wasn’t the first word that sprang to mind.)

About 90 minutes from the airport, several harrowing twists and stunning views later, we’d eyed the resort’s pagoda roofs peeking through the distant greenery. (Amanoi is surrounded by a national park.) We climbed the regal staircase that serves as entry to the resort and entered the hushed lobby and restaurant area, all clean lines, muted creams and dark stone figurines. Framed black-and-white photographs of Vietnamese beauties lend the place a contemporary glamour. The ocean spread out below, with tiny red-and-turquoise-painted fishermen’s boats making their way back to the safety of a nearby sheltered village.

We read novels by the infinity pool and lunched on a minty watermelon and feta salad that I’m still re-creating at home. The girls out-windsurfed us at the beach and out-hiked us on the guided climb into the hills. We limited our spa indulgences to jasmine-and-lemongrass-scented massages (and smashing those mirrors), but visitors looking to truly restart things will have come to the right place. The spa is heavy in mind-body offerings like guided meditation, Reiki, craniosacral therapy and acupressure (there’s kickboxing, circuit training and boot camp for those intent on sweating it out), and the Amanoi just opened two private Spa Houses, each sleeping four and including treatment rooms with hammam or

banya (a giant sauna), Jacuzzi, plunge pool and outdoor deck. I wanted to take home the cobalt-blue ceramics, white orchids and Gauguin-like murals, by artist Bui Huu Hung.

We spent a similarly zen three days at the Four Seasons Hoi An, a sprawling beachfront property farther up the coast. Transport between the open-air restaurants, pools, fitness center and cooking school is by bicycles with rattan baskets, and the ubiquitous attendants in pointed straw hats ensure the grounds are meticulously manicured.

Our cooking class began with an early-morning tour of Hoi An’s oldest market, frantic with gleaming fish, techno-color flowers, prehistoric-looking vegetables and mounds of spices; segued to a banh mi and ginger-beer lunch at a (now-famous) hole in the wall; and finished with hands-on tips for achieving the perfect sweet-salty-sour balance.

Among other highlights was a magical evening wandering the narrow streets amid canals and pastel-colored lanterns in Hoi An, succumbing to the requisite \$5 foot massages and admiring the handiwork of the town’s scores of tailors and leatherworkers. You could show up for the usual yoga, tai chi or Pilates at the Four Seasons, but in order to truly feel the pulse of this place, a bike ride through the rice paddies is really the way to go.

For recipes for the Four Seasons Hoi An Green Mango Salad (Goi Xòai) and Amanoi Watermelon and Feta Salad see ospa.me/amanoi-salads.