

Visions of a coast that's changing fast

Luxury hotels are taking hold in this communist corner of South-east Asia, reveals **Laura Holt**

Nowhere is the current pace of Vietnam more palpable than on Route 1A, the transnational highway that races from the Chinese border in the north to the lowlands of the Mekong Delta. Traffic rattles past on all sides. Horns blare. Motorcycles hurtle by, carrying three generations of one family on the back seat. This is a country that's going places. Fast.

Having opened its doors to mass tourism only in the 1980s, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is making up for lost time. Last year, 6.8 million foreigners visited this communist country – nearly three times as many as a decade earlier, helped no doubt by direct flights from Gatwick to the capital, Hanoi, and the largest metropolis, Ho Chi Minh City. Now, in the central band of this S-shaped nation, where South-east Asia kicks out into the South China Sea, luxury hotels are getting in on the act too. International groups have earmarked much of the coastline for five-star resorts and a new terminal at Danang airport is ready to greet the rush.

The biggest of these new resorts has recently opened near Lang Co, a remote area of fishing villages and jungle, midway down the central coast. The development is called Laguna Lang Co and the Singaporean hotel group, Banyan Tree, is behind it. The group started work in 2010 having agreed a 50-year lease of the land from the local government in return for a \$200m investment.

The result is one all-villa Banyan Tree, aimed at those who are willing to pay a premium for privacy; a Nick Faldo-designed golf course; two spas; and a more contemporary hotel under the group's Angsana brand.

The drive into the resort tells of the transformation that's taken place. Emerald-green paddy fields unfurl for miles, flecked by conical bamboo hats shielding farmers from the midday sun. As you draw closer, the Truong Son Mountains cut a jagged backbone along the coast, rising from mighty granite boulders up to mist-covered heights. Then, wham! You hit new Tarmac, its smooth ebony surface attesting to the freshness of it all. The road, like the resort it leads to, didn't exist five years ago. Banyan Tree had to build new infrastructure to make it happen.

The group is no novice at taking an uncharted patch of coastal land and turning it into something enticing. Twenty-five years ago, the brand was established on the Thai island of Phuket and today, the Laguna resort there comprises



seven integrated hotels with attendant bars, boutiques and restaurants set in 1,000 acres of tropical parkland. It's being used as a blueprint for the Lang Co project in Vietnam.

The resort is located at the axis of three Unesco World Heritage sites in Vietnam's "cultural triangle". The old imperial capital of Hue, with its wealth of tombs, temples and pagodas, either side of the Perfume River, is a 90-minute drive north. The atmospheric old merchants' town of Hoi An is an hour south and the Hindu temple site of My Son is tucked away inland. But while it's relatively close to all of them, it's actually not near anything. Day trips are required to reach all three sites, and some might prefer to waste away a week in unscheduled idleness instead.

That's where the villas come in. Slumped beside my private infinity pool, dragonflies darting overhead, I could certainly see the appeal. There are 17 of these beach-view villas and another 32 that face a man-made lagoon, which twists and turns throughout the resort. They all have sloped pagoda-style roofs modelled on the traditional houses of Hue, a plunge pool and courtyard bedded with tropical plants – though the lagoon options are actually grander, with views up to the mountains.

There are three restaurants too: Saffron, a hilltop Thai eatery that gives you a bird's-eye view of the twinkling resort at night; Azura, a Mediterranean-style beachside bar; and The Watercourt, a breakfast room which doubles up



'The beach runs between dense jungle and wild, churning waves'

Balancing act: a basket boat at Laguna Lang Co, above; lanterns in Hoi An, top right; a nearby temple, far right

for all-day dining. Limited menus and a lack of atmosphere sadly mean none of them really excels, which is problematic, considering you can't just pop out for a bite to eat – the nearest village being 10 miles away. However, the adjoining restaurants at Angsana hadn't opened yet during my stay, so perhaps the Spanish-style Moomba, Asian-themed Rice and Bowl or Indochinese Market Place will spice things up.

On the upside, the Banyan Tree spa is excellent: all gongs and green tea, foot soaks and firm pressure, set against a somnambulant soundtrack of bullfrogs croaking in the lagoon. The beach, too, is noteworthy. Not because it's scenic, or pretty, or in any way picturesque. But because it's a defiant stretch of terracotta-stained sand that runs between dense jungle and wild, churning waves – making Lang Co a beach resort with a difference.

The local government is at pains to protect this peculiar patch – agreeing to lease the land only if Banyan Tree committed to employing 70 per cent of its workforce from the immediate area. This is because the resort falls within the Chan May-Lang Co Economic Zone, created in



2007 to maximise tourism potential in the region and bring investment to this poor rural area.

On a trip to the village of Cu Du, one of many excursions offered at the resort's activity centre, I attempted to steer a circular basket boat around a lagoon, much to the delight of the locals standing on the shore. After handing over to

Infinity and beyond: one of the private villas with pools

Travel Essentials

Getting there

Vietnam Airlines (020-3263 2062; vietnamairlines.com) offers the only direct flights from Gatwick to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, with returns starting at £533.

Staying there

Banyan Tree Lang Co (00 84 54 3695 888; banyantree.com) offers villas sleeping two people from US\$849 (£566). Angsana (00 84 54 3695 800; angšana.com) has doubles from US\$324 (£216). Both include breakfast. Western & Oriental (020-3504 2328; wandotravel.com) offers packages with four nights at Angsana and three at Banyan Tree from £1,529 per person, with breakfast, transfers and flights.

Red tape

British travellers require a visa to visit Vietnam. A 30-day, single-entry permit costs £54 from the embassy in London (020-7937 1912; vietnamembassy.org.uk).

More information
vietnamtourism.com



derprivileged kids in seven restaurants across the country, to open an eighth outlet in Hoi An called Seedlings. The partnership will see promising trainees employed in the Laguna Lang Co resort.

The company is also working with one of the country's new wave of female entrepreneurs: Phuong Nguyen, a well-dressed French-Vietnamese woman in her twenties. When I meet her in Danang, the modern face of Vietnam, she explains how her family was forced to emigrate to France in the Eighties to find work in the aftermath of the "American War". A generation later, she has returned to set up a chocolate factory in the house where she was born. She hopes to establish a cocoa plantation in the Lang Co area – a crop which currently doesn't exist at all in central Vietnam. "We have 10 local women working for us at present," she says, as she shows me where a chocolate café is planned in the courtyard. "None of them had a background in the industry, but if the crop works, we hope to train more."

Banyan Tree is just the start: there is room for a further six hotels in the Laguna Lang Co development, and elsewhere things are changing rapidly too. Driving along the coastal road south of Danang, I lost count of the new resorts lining up on My Khe Beach, a prime stretch of real estate that runs for 20 miles down to Hoi An. Hyatt and InterContinental have arrived recently and shiny billboards signal more to come. This is definitely a country that's going places. I hope it's not moving too fast.