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After Hours: Ho Chi Minh City

Vietnam's commercial capital changes character at night

By SAMANTHA COOMBER

During the Vietnam War, Saigon, South Vietnam's capital and the nerve center of U.S. military operations, was also the venue for GI's R&R revelry.

The city has never quite recaptured the legendary wildness of that era. Still, while it may be business-obsessed -- Vietnam's artistic and cultural hub is Hanoi -- nightlife remains a main attraction of Saigon, now officially Ho Chi Minh City but widely called by its former name.

Indeed, the city really comes into its element after dark, when it seems the entire population comes out into the cooler air to play, eat and relax. Enjoying boom times, Saigon offers a new generation of stylish bars, clubs and restaurants, fueled by international visitors -- including overseas Vietnamese -- and expats, plus local nouveau riche. Saigon can be fickle, though, with venues gaining or losing favor suddenly, and dominated by sporadic events like party nights and international guest DJ spots.

Though the city is Vietnam's largest, with eight million inhabitants, most clubs, bars and restaurants are thankfully concentrated downtown in District One. Many are easily walkable; if not, taxis are readily available and inexpensive. Epicenter and point of reference is Lam Son Square, halfway along the main shopping street Dong Khoi.

Sundowners kick off the evening's proceedings: By 5:30 p.m., make sure you're in prime sunset position, especially in the dry season (November to May). It's all about location, location, location. While several of Saigon's downtown rooftop bars may seem promising, economic development is shifting the cityscape toward glitzy high-rises, which can restrict the view.

One solution is a stroll south down Dong Khoi; just before you reach the Saigon River you'll come to the Hotel Majestic. Built in 1925, one of Southeast Asia's classic colonial hotels, it still radiates Indochina elegance. For sensational river vistas, take the vintage elevator to the eighth floor and the rooftop M Bar. To your right you'll see Vietnam's largest port, from which a young Ho Chi Minh set sail in 1911 for 30 years of global roaming. The sunset show over, you could stay on for cocktails in the refined lobby Catinat Lounge.

Back up on Lam Son Square, the five-star Caravelle hotel dominates; the 10th-floor rooftop bar in the original wing was "center of operations" for war correspondents. The outdoor terrace of this legendary watering hole, now called the Saigon Saigon Bar, offers wide-angle views and cozy verandas (superb for viewing the sun's dying rays or twinkling skyline), along with multinational beers and cocktails strong enough to obliterate any historical interest. With a fiesta mentality -- in part driven by the resident Cuban band (Tuesday to Sunday) -- that lasts into the wee hours, the old bar strikes some as cheesy, but who cares?

The Caravelle's newer wing towers over the neoclassical Opera House, French-built in 1899. Take advantage if you have a chance to catch a classical musical performance, a rare cultural treat in this city -- and ridiculously inexpensive. The grand interior is a bonus.

Restaurants generally down tools at 10 or 11, so don't put off dinner too long. Eating is Saigon's most popular pastime; the city is Vietnam's culinary capital, and though prices are rising, it's still relatively inexpensive.

The country boasts some of the world's finest street food, but not everyone can stomach dining "local." A great compromise is Quan An Ngon, four blocks north of Lam Son Square. Mock open-air street stalls cook up Southern specialties like *banh xeo* (crispy pancakes stuffed with pork, bean sprouts and shrimps). The recipe of airy colonial villa and authentic fare at great prices (about \$2 a dish) draws a huge crowd ranging from ambassadors to locals.

For fine dining, a taxi ride four blocks south brings you to the Temple Club. Once past the lantern-lit entrance, you're in Indochina-era Saigon -- this colonial villa, once a guesthouse for Hindu pilgrims, evokes the era with a beautifully preserved interior and vintage objects, the atmosphere underlined by 1950s Chinese love songs. The menu offers refined Vietnamese dishes, like stuffed snails with lemongrass. The Oriental-inspired lounge is de rigueur for predinner tipples.

A five-minute stroll eastward, Warda succeeds in evoking an entirely different atmosphere, with a dazzling Arabian-nights interior, infectious Arabic tunes and a tasty Gulf-Levantine menu that includes the likes of fish and pear tagine. Can this can really be Saigon? Relax pre-dinner under the Bedouin-style canopy out front, sipping a Jelab (date and incense) Martini and even puffing on a *shisha*, or water pipe.

The cocktail set dines at Xu, uber-hip and cooler than your freezer. First, sample divine contemporary Vietnamese cuisine, like seared scallops with green mango-noodle salad, in the sleek lounge-restaurant, then head downstairs to the informal cafe-bar. Upstairs or down, the cocktails are innovative and the Martini olives are stuffed with blue cheese.

With stomachs well-lined, the night's drinking officially begins. Other than Xu, lounge lizards congregate at the nearby Amber Room; this ultra-glam lounge-bar has barely enough room to swing a cat, but sophisticated Basil Martinis and Champagne Cocktails feature big. Comfy sofas and funky vibes encourage unravelling for the city's yuppies. A brief taxi ride eastward along the Saigon River is another chill-out venue: Cage, a stylishly converted warehouse near the waterfront. Cage has morphed into a popular electro club with nightly DJ spots and party nights, but it still manages to attract a slightly more mature (well, over 25) international and local crowd. It's closed Mondays.

You may need your earplugs at Bounce, where guest DJs blast out the latest sounds for young, rich and beautiful locals. This glittery club, just up from Lam Son Square, is a sea of intimate tables surrounding a microscopic dance floor. Ordering expensive bottles of whiskey is the norm.

As the night progresses, it's not just the tropical temperatures heating up. There's also the action at eternally glamorous Q Bar, one of Saigon's longest-running, spilling onto the square from its spot below the Opera House. Q Bar outdoes Madonna at keeping up with music trends, with international DJ nights (especially Fridays and Saturdays) and in-house Euro sounds. The loungey, cavernous interiors fill up fast with a cosmopolitan ensemble seeking dancing, conversation and fiendishly sublime cocktails like the Passion Fruit Martini.

And if you aren't ready to call it a night yet, head for the hottest club in town, Lush, a few blocks east. An eclectic mix of locals and foreigners, aided by electro and hip-hop sounds from the DJ crew, lends a party vibe. There's a balcony for those who want to survey the scene (or pose) and a bistro-style eatery out front.

The club Apocalypse Now, two blocks west (or by this stage, a cop-out taxi ride) is almost an institution (and like all good institutions, difficult to escape). It's best in the early-morning hours, jam-packed with a diverse but lively crowd; those seeking a quieter scene can repair to the cramped upstairs bar.

An official midnight curfew for downtown bars and clubs has mellowed somewhat, resulting in variable closing times. Most of the above usually rage on until around 2:30 a.m.; for continued partying, one must head west by taxi to the "backpacker quarter."

There, the spot of choice is grungy GO2: The buzzy pavement bar, pulsating DJ floor and reasonably priced drinks pack 'em in, but "open 24 hours" is the real magnet. A similar but more-ambitious formula is found opposite at Crazy Buffalo -- a three-level party zone with a dedicated hip-hop room. Substantial munchies are served throughout the night; at sunrise, fresh staff start dishing up omelets and other breakfast staples.

For a change of scenery, take a taxi back downtown. Cafes, a French legacy, are a huge part of the city's culture, and the homegrown coffee is excellent. At 7:30 a.m., the charming cafe-deli Au Parc starts serving "Serious English Brekkies," or healthier Swiss and Turkish versions. That coupled with a robust latte or two should give you just enough fuel to get you back to your hotel.

—Samantha Coomber is a writer based in Saigon.

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