

# All Aboard the Cyclo

A RIDE THROUGH HANOI'S OLD QUARTER AND A TRIP BACK IN TIME BY HEMA NARAYANAN



Introduced by the French in the late 1930s, brightly coloured cyclos are as intrinsic to Hanoi's Old Quarter as its lively markets.

dating back to the 13th century, located close to Hoan Kiem Lake (Lake of the Restored Sword). About seven hundred years ago it was the city's economic centre, and its 36 streets were run by different guilds. Hanoi's biggest market, Dong Xuan, is still located here. Some may find its chaos overwhelming, but remembering my evening rickshaw rides through Mylapore market, I was thrilled. My seat on the cyclo afforded me a ringside view of Hanoi's old-world charm, especially on streets too narrow for cars to squeeze through. I felt at the centre of a whirlwind of movement with a cacophony of horns and two-wheelers abruptly zigzagging past.

Local shoppers, wearing conical hats, purchased all kinds of goods from salt to silver at stalls festooned with Vietnamese signs and decorative lanterns. People gathered in front of shops to smoke pipe tobacco, or relish snacks like grilled corn on the cob. Even as I shot photographs of the old city, I tried to commit to memory the wafting smells of spices and the melody of Vietnamese music that my camera could not capture. The lanes near Hoan Kiem Lake were perfumed with the fragrance of pink lotuses and violet banana flowers that bloom in June. The city revealed itself in these scenes and scents of daily life.

For locals, the cyclo is just a means of transport, but for me it was a chance to relive a childhood fascination while immersing myself in a new culture. ●

**T**hough I grew up in the little town of Davangere in central Karnataka, I spent every childhood summer at my grandmother's house in the crowded market of Mylapore in Chennai. I looked forward to the evenings, when we would take a cycle-rickshaw ride and enjoy the bustle and chaos of the narrow streets from a safe perch. On my recent trip to Hanoi in Vietnam, I was surprised to see similar rickshaws, called cyclos, or even trishaws or *wichlos*. They are as essential a mode of transport as the rickshaws of Mylapore. The main difference between

them is that a cyclo is pedalled by a driver who sits behind the passenger. The simple design tweak ensures that passengers get an unhindered view. Cyclos can accommodate two passengers, and their owners usually personalise them with bright colours.

Deciding to dive into the soul of Hanoi on a cyclo, I hopped aboard one owned by Tung, a lanky young man in a blue shirt. He greeted me with a bright "Xin chào", and indicated a latched box where I could secure my camera bag. Then, we set out to explore Hanoi's Old Quarter, a warren of streets

