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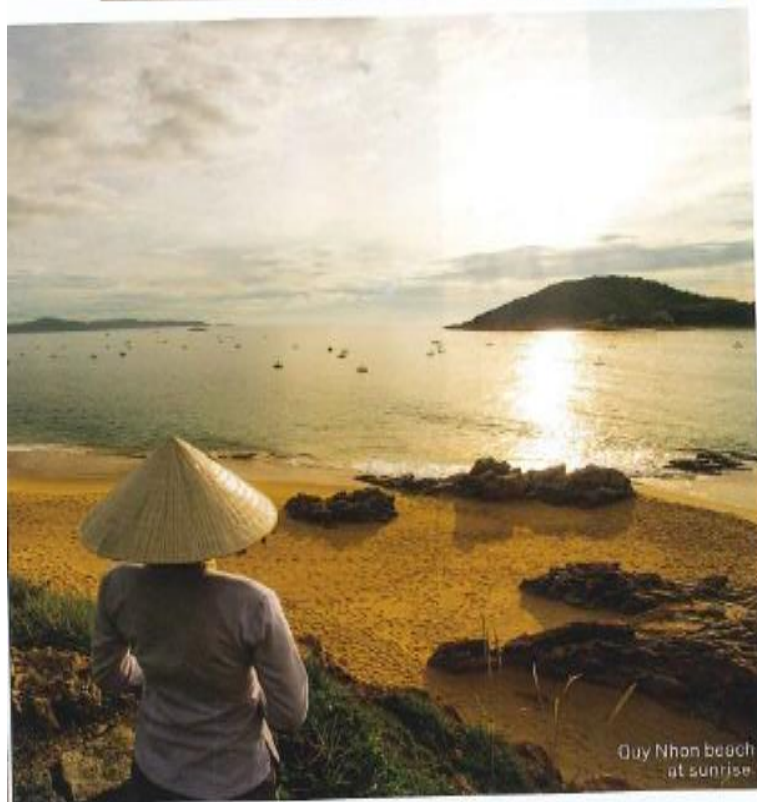
EMERGING

History in these Sands

The less-visited shores of Quy Nhon, Vietnam, are a pristine launch point to explore 1,500 years of the region's haunting past. BY JENINNE LEE-ST. JOHN



A Deluxe room at the Avani.



Quy Nhon beach at sunrise.

IN EARLY 1975, Van Pham, originally from outside of Danang, was working as an interpreter for the U.S. government as Vietnam's southern cities started falling like dominoes. After taking his hometown, the North Vietnamese Army bore down on the city where he was stationed, Quy Nhon—a place that had been a symbol of patriotic struggle since Nguyen Hue waged an uprising there in 1788 that created a unified, independent Vietnam. The city was in chaos. So, as Van and the American officers he worked with were evacuating to Saigon from Phu Cat, he says, a swarm of civilians clamored on the tarmac, clinging to the plane and chasing it down the runway, hoping to make it out too.

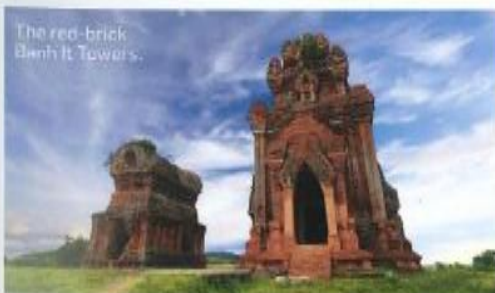
Today, Phu Cat is the commercial airport serving Quy Nhon (pronounced *hwee nyon*). In line with other former American armament airports that became quaint little domestic terminals, it's embarking on a VND500 billion modernization to attract tourists to its under-the-radar sites—the star being the city's buttermilk-sands. This broad Cheshire grin of a coastline serves as a peaceful, clean and as-yet-undeveloped foil to the equally parabolic but unfortunately over-trafficked shoreline down in Nha Trang. In fact, I had been to Quy Nhon before I met Van, purely to bliss out on this beach-not-visited—until a few years ago, it still had a U.S. army tank submerged in its sands—and stuff myself with its famous seafood. But after I met him for a fact-filled, film-plot-worthy tour around war sites and Cham ruins near Danang, which is famous for both, I realized I needed to get back to see their counterparts in Quy Nhon.

Binh Dinh Province was the heart of the Champa society that controlled this central swathe of the country for a millennium. The area is a trove of their ruins, Indic in origin and Muslim by devotion, with a dash of influence from the Khmer, with whom the Champa warred for centuries. You'll pass the prime example of this immediately on your drive in from the airport, where a trio of red-brick **Banh It Towers** (Phuoc Hiep, Tuy Phuoc District; 7-11 a.m. and 1:30-4:30 p.m.; free) keep watch over the highway. Take a quick detour up the hill; these 12th-century remnants have undergone ample restoration, but there are plenty of original carvings, including a huge toothy face, to marvel at. That'll get you warmed up for Quy Nhon's pièce de résistance, the **Thap Dol Towers** (Tran Hung Dao and Thap Doi; 8-11 a.m. and 1-6 p.m.;

admission VND10,000), sitting smack in the center of the city nearly unfazed by the march of time. Unusual for being a pair and pyramidal—as opposed to the more typical odd-numbered groupings of terraced turrets—they invite you to pay your respects to the garudas outside, climb the steep stairs and gaze up at the sky through their open-roofed, cool, dark caverns.

Get a better look up-close-and-personal at a slew of excavated Cham sculptures in the **Binh Dinh Museum** (28 Nguyen Hue; 7-11 a.m. and 2-5 p.m. April-September; 7:30-11 a.m. and 1:30-4:30 p.m. October-March; free). This informative spot also has galleries devoted to Vietnamese history, Uncle Ho's life, and the wars against the French and the Americans. Another surprise: the draw of the **Quy Hoa Leprosy Hospital** (southern end of the city's main beach road; 8 a.m.-4 p.m.; admission VND12,000), a colorful, thriving community full of blooming gardens on Queen's Beach, which provides a view up the length of the coastline. No wonder famous Vietnamese poet Han Mac Tu waxed so lyrically about it before he passed away here in 1940. (Seared-wood carvings of his verses make unusual souvenirs.) Pop by the **Long Khanh Pagoda** (243 Tran Cao Van), with its 17-meter-tall image of Buddha, and then retire down the south side of the bay to the rebranded **Avani Quy Nhon** (avanihotels.com; doubles from VND3,405,000), a sweet patch of serenity with ocean-view rooms, from which the showers, of all places, spurt lovely sunrise vistas. The resort has a round infinity pool overlooking its wide beach and a hilltop spa whose open-air treatment rooms envelop you in birdsong and sea breezes.

To get your culture on, book a basket-boat excursion. Local fishermen will take you out in one of their round, nest-shaped vessels, steering with a single straight oar towards the open sea. They can drop you off for a picnic lunch on a private island, or snorkel with you in the corals off the headland. Either way, you'll know that when you're sitting on your hotel balcony at night watching their twinkling lights way off on the dark horizon, you made a personal connection with men whose traditions help keep them as independent as centuries of their forefathers. ☺



The red-brick
Binh It Towers.



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