



THE GALLIVANTER'S GUIDE[®]



DEC 2013.VOL.23.No.12 **SETTING THE BENCHMARK FOR HIGH-END TRAVELLERS**

A journey through Vietnam.

Looking at the number of emails from you regarding future trips to Vietnam, we brought this issue forward to help you assess where your journey should take you. We concentrated on the south, where some of the most interesting properties are located. However, if you do venture north to Hanoi, The Metropole, now known as Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi, is easily the best choice, set as it is in the old French Quarter.



spend your entire stay here. Generally, Vietnam is safe if you stick to the resorts, whereas extremely organised pickpocketing is rampant in the cities, so best stay low profile and leave the jewellery at home. English and French are not spoken too well, so it is a good idea to learn a few key phrases. Despite all this, I urge you to go, for the landscapes are striking in parts and the light, super fresh cuisine, a delight.

Amano'i, Vinh Hy Bay.

This is early days for high-end tourism in Vietnam, with literally a handful of acceptable hotels in the entire country. To be honest, I would be more inclined to combine a taste of Vietnam with other destinations in Indochina, such as Luang Prabang in Laos and Siem Reap in Cambodia, rather than

Aman came softly to this place of peace, tiptoeing around the ancient boulders and trees that rise from the terracotta earth and tumble through the lush mountains of Vinh Thuan Province to the white sand Bay of Vinh Hy.



The unspoilt Bay of Vinh Hy, as seen from a Villa Residence at Amano'i.

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Shipwreck antiques merge with Jean-Michel Gathy's monolithic entrance to Amano'i.

As you fly into Cam Ranh airport in Nha Trang, the views of endless fish farms do not fill you with optimism; but as the plane turns, you glimpse a very different landscape of verdant mountains and deep red sand dunes and you think, if I were Adrian Zecha, this is where I would build; and indeed, that is exactly what he did. The area is the Nui Chua National Park; one of the country's largest conservation sites and yes, it definitely has Aman DNA.

You are, of course, greeted at the airport by the ubiquitously reassuring Aman staff

and thence transported in a white-cotton-clad four wheel drive along the new coastline road that winds through the National Park. When we stayed in October, the road was not entirely finished, so at one point, with nobody appearing to mind, we traversed a construction site that represented the final join in the new road. They say, by this month, that the road will be finished; cutting the two hours it took us to around seventy minutes.

Amano'i is unique in that it encompasses a truly massive footprint. The resort itself

covers around 103 acres, which then extends to a further 100 or so acres to encompass the Villa Residences; a project that is ongoing, but, as I write includes five stunning Villas; more of which later.

It is, however, the arrival that makes you realise that Amano'i is surprisingly glamorous. A sweeping staircase leads you to the mid-level Reception, and thence to the Bar and Restaurant. This area really showcases Jean-Michel Gathy's unusually (for Aman) sexy design elements. Indeed, I felt that there were echoes of One&Only Reethi Rah here. The Bar is, quite easily, the best that Aman have ever done; a really welcoming, residential space with a proper long bar and plenty of cushy seating; the backdrop a collage of black and white photographs and artworks, punctuated by one single whimsical colour portrait of Jean-Michel himself. The Restaurant, meanwhile, is set within an airconditioned glass cube and also in open terraced areas that take in the breezes. We found ourselves using the outdoor terraces for breakfast and lunch, whilst venturing inside for dinner.

Another surprise is the quality of the cuisine. Clever Executive Chef, Nicola van Heemsberg (ex Amanjena and Peninsula Bangkok) is joined by Pastry Chef, Arnaud Vodounou, who is ex-Kempinski Geneva and Paris Taillevent, so you can imagine



Susan Noonan, your host at Amano'i.



The Bar at Amano'i is the place to be, with its sunken cocktail bar and striking black and white artworks, plus one colour portrait of Jean-Michel Gathy.

All photography by David Maslin ©



Intimate, airconditioned indoor areas at The Restaurant at Amano'i, plus viewsome terrace dining on all sides.

how elegant the cuisine is here, from authentic Vietnamese to moreish breakfast choices, International staples and Parisian quality desserts. This, of course, was the right



Elegant cuisine at Amano'i.

way to go, as Amano'i is, like Amanpulo, somewhere you relax and stay put in.

The Pavilions are to be found along snaking lanes that cut through the mega-diverse flora of this unique dry forest region, that



Extraordinary shipwreck antiques at Amano'i.

includes cacti, dracaena, casuarina and bonsai-style apricot trees; of which there is a whole forest in the Park itself. As you are sped along in one of the many buggies that

service the Pavilions, you feel as though you are in a greenhouse at Kew Gardens, counting some of the 1,265 plant varieties; all of which seem to have gathered here at Amano'i, along with a raft of exotic birds, and butterflies the size of saucers.

In sight is the Bay of Vinh Hy, which, bizarrely, reminds me of Montenegro, with its green baize mountains and fjord-like inlets. There is a fishing village across the bay, but that is it. Rarely has the word unspoilt been more meaningful.

The Beach Club is a buggy ride away and is a perfect destination in its own right. Tables are set for lunch, but the breeze has

come up and English Food & Beverage Director, Mungo Grant, darts between the tables, showing off the covetable custom-made china that was made by a local artisan; soft cream random-shaped plates and bowls, like a child's attempt at pastry shells. Happily, Amano'i can ship them for you, as I know you will want them.

The 42-metre-long pool twists to mirror the curve of the coastline; steps leading down to a perfect white sand bay. All I want to do is stare and stay forever. Do I really need to talk about the Hobi Cats, the display kitchen, the sheer perfection of it all?

The Pavilions are big, airy junior-suite



Sprawling bar and restaurant terraces suck in the views at Amano'i.



The private pool of 5-bedroom Residential Beach Villa, #18, at Amanoi, with views beyond of Vinh Hy Bay.

style spaces, hung with long, red Vietnamese lanterns. Every interior is identical, but the exterior decks, with or without pool, vary entirely, as each construction was, very carefully, built around the boulders and trees. This means that Ocean Pool Pavilion, #2, for instance has a smaller pool than Ocean Pool Pavilion, #6, where we stayed. I have been asked why Aman did not build pools into all 31 Pavilions. When you see the landscape you understand, as some locations simply do not have space between the boulders and trees. If you can, opt for an Ocean Pool Pavilion, although, to be honest, wherever you choose, the cool, modernist interiors are a delight. The bathrooms, separated from the main area by sliding doors, flanked by large bevelled mirrors, have central tubs set between van-

ities, and indoor showers that also open onto the exterior deck. Every suite has an Illy espresso machine and excellent mood lighting.

lake at the foot of the Spa. Even Lake View Pavilion, #25, which has no pool, has a delightful small deck overlooking the lake; the sense of peace and privacy palpable.



Lunch at the Beach Club at Amanoi, edged by a snaking pool, with Vinh Hy Bay beyond.

You may also like the Lake View Pavilions, such as #28, which has a very large pool and tranquil vistas of the lotus

However, if you are travelling en famille, then you have a real treat in store, as the five, 4-5 bedroom Villas (Amanoi sell these



The big airy interior of Ocean Pool Pavilion, #6, typifies the spacious simplicity of Amanoi.

as 3-bedrooms, too) which are all differently configured, are truly extraordinary. Villa #14 has 5 bedrooms set in individual pavilions, high up in the mountains with forest views. Then, when you descend to the full-sized pool, with a separate alfresco dining pavilion, you see Vinh Hy Bay below; the best of all worlds. Each Villa has its own housekeeper, chef and ancillary staff, like Amanpuri Villas in Phuket. We also loved the 4-bedroom Villa #9, which has breathtaking sea views; the entire footprint, massive, with a serious kitchen and pantry beneath the pool. However, if you prefer to be close to the beach, then 5-bedroom Beach Villa #18 is



Head Therapist, Bank, oversees the AmanSpa, which has a stunning Vietnamese painting in each suite.

a marvel; its pool overlooking the Beach Club below. Three of the bedroom Pavilions are set on high, so have striking views of the Bay.

As with the Pavilions, furniture is custom made by one of the Belgian owner's companies in Vietnam; modern, yet with tradi-



Large, windowed, airy bathrooms at Aman Hai.

tional details, including cathedral ceilings inset with individually cut reeds.

Although language can be a problem with staff, the management team, under caring Australian General Manager, Susan Noonan, who has spent many years in Vietnam, is seriously good. I was also thrilled to encounter Executive Assistant Manager, Ketut Bagiartha, known as Bagi, who has helped open no less than eight Amanresorts in Asia.

The heart of Aman Hai is, most decidedly, its striking Spa, set above the lotus lake, where a sublime yoga pavilion seems to float on the water. Here, the hugely accomplished Thai Head Therapist, Bank, oversees a talented team that delivers the usual Aman mix of energy work, local therapies and top notch massages and facials using Aman's custom chemical-free skincare. Five double treatment suites, all with double tubs, dressing rooms, loos and showers are complemented by two hydrotherapy suites, hand and foot therapy rooms and a hair and pedi-manicure salon, making this a destination spa in its own right. There is also the customary Aman gym, filled with

light, plus a signature Pilates Studio.

Also on property, you will find two tennis courts, a Cliff top pool near the Restaurant, with striking views and an elegant Aman boutique, set to feature Milo's silks, local handicrafts and Eres swimwear.

The coral reefs of the East Sea are perfect for snorkelling and diving and provide a very different underwater experience for those of you who embrace the depths.

Very much the Amanpulo of Vietnam, Aman Hai is, without doubt, an ideal choice for the Holidays and yet another perfect Aman in their growing portfolio of world class resorts. There is nothing remotely

comparable in Vietnam. Do go.

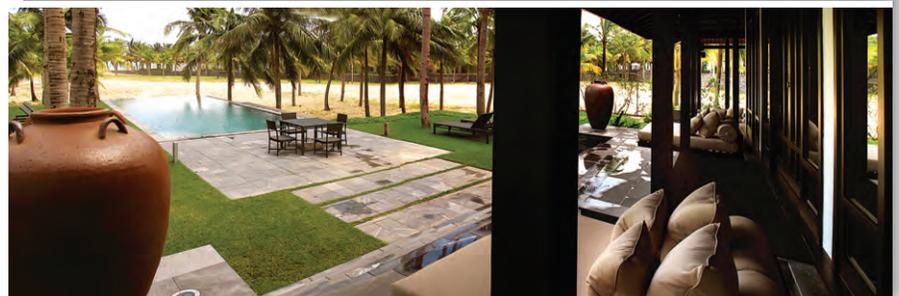
www.amanresorts.com

Gallivanter's Rating: ★★★★★

The Nam Hai, Hoi An.

100 1-5 bedroom Villas on 86 acres sounds rather wonderful, doesn't it, and indeed, when you first glimpse this sprawling resort, with its long sandy beach in the distance, lapped by surf, you feel rather smug to have chosen it.

The Nam Hai opened in December 2006, so it has had plenty of time to iron out any snags. Unfortunately, its main problem is that it is probably the most guest-hazardous resort I have encountered; an endlessly unfolding series of steps and sheer drops, punctuated by water features. Now, I can handle the landscaped areas and steps, but the Villas themselves left me speechless, for the central unit in every Villa consists of a raised platform that contains the bed, a sunken bath tub and a desk, with a sheer drop for your feet. The classic injury, I was told, is bruised shins, caused by guests falling down the desk well; but for me, the most dangerous aspect was the two-foot drop from my side of the bed to the steps, that then lead upward to the bathroom be-



From top: Classic Nam Hai sleeping platform, with inset tub and desk. Private pool of Villa #2080.



Indoor area of The Restaurant at The Nam Hai, where the cuisine is very acceptable indeed.

yond. They have added motion sensor lights on the steps, but the problem with these is that they flick on at the slightest movement, so turning over in bed, or doing anything else for that matter, is not a happy option.

The interiors are by Jaya Ibrahim, who, frankly, should know better. After seven years, they look very dated indeed; the dark wood bath tubs and vanities not at all appealing, and although staff say that couples love the romantic white drapes that enclose the platform at night, I wonder how much they enjoy the motion sensor lights and the bruises.

The brochure shows the Villas from the reverse, so all you see is the step-down sitting area and the curtained bed, which looks very tempting. The reality is quite different. Apparently, platform beds are traditional in Vietnam, but I doubt if they normally include sunken desks and bath tubs.

If you look beyond the design hazards of this resort, you will discover some rather good things. The 1-5 bedroom Pool Villas, for instance, include return airport transfers, daily breakfast, Butler service, laundry and food presentations, mini-bar contents and other Club benefits. The 13 1-bedroom Pool Villas, such as #2080, where we stayed, have a separate sitting/dining pavilion and

a good sized outdoor pool. The 60 entry-level Villas are less appealing, as they do not have private pools or beach views, save for 16 of them. Otherwise, they are identical in configuration.

We looked at 2-bedroom Pool Villa, #1090, which has a larger sitting/dining pavilion and bigger pool. What I found most interesting was that the second bedroom here was sensibly designed on one level, with no romantic turndown curtains, but less chance of accidents. Instead of an

ard-free configuration; #1030 and #1040. Their views of Ha My Beach are less good, but the safety aspect is 100% improved.

In terms of comfort, the beds throughout are excellent, with soft natural linen sheets and duvets. Indeed, but for the ridiculous design, The Nam Hai is a well run resort, with extremely personable staff, under General Manager, Anthony Gill. However, you do wonder about the endless turnover of senior management here. Something like 6 GMs in 7 years tends to suggest that,



A tiered pool takes you down to the beach at The Nam Hai.

outdoor shower, which is common to all Villas, this had been replaced by a proper indoor tub. I discovered that there were two further 1-bedroom Villas that enjoy this haz-

operationaly, this is not an easy job.

In terms of activities, there is the historic town of Hoi An nearby, with complimentary shuttles for Pool Villa guests, but otherwise, the resort offers a good range of on-site activities, from tennis and basketball, to swimming in one of the resort's three swimming pools, shopping in the delightful Boutique or spending time in, what has to be, the resort's most successful feature; its spa and fitness facility.

The Spa at The Nam Hai comprises a reception pavilion with stunning vistas of a lotus pond, on which are set eight Spa Villas; four doubles and four singles. Each Villa is made up of two distinct areas, linked by a short bridge. The first area is a tranquil arrival/relaxation pavilion, whilst



Two-stage spa Villas float on a lotus pond at The Nam Hai.

the villa that sits over the lotus pond is where the treatments are performed. Each Villa is very well equipped with a changing area, steam shower, bath tub and loo; the treatment commencing with a soothing foot scrub.

There is also an excellent Health Club, set by the tennis and basketball courts, with sauna and steam and a good range of the latest equipment. Also near the tennis courts is a charmingly original Kid's Club, which resembles an old Vietnamese house, and a very large and impressive organic garden, which provides the resort's kitchens with much of their fresh produce and herbs.

The cuisine at the Nam Hai is rather good. Unfortunately, the Beach Restaurant was closed for refurbishment during our



The very original Kid's Club at The Nam Hai.

stay, but we found The Restaurant, both indoor and outdoor, to be very acceptable indeed; Executive Sous Chef, Florian Eberhardt, happy to cope with any food intolerances. We enjoyed the traditional Vietnamese cuisine, fresh seafood, grills and International fare, although I thought that the buffet breakfast was a bit too 'package tour' for my liking. Above The Restaurant is a very pleasant Bar, with great views from indoors and out, together with a good snack and canapé menu.

6 minutes from The Nam Hai is Montgomery Links Vietnam Golf Course and, a little further away is The Dunes at The Danang Golf Club. It is, indeed, a well equipped resort, but until the bedroom platforms are dispensed with, I cannot honestly say that I would return.

www.ghmhotels.com

Gallivanter's Rating: ✓✓✓

Park Hyatt Saigon.

Park Hyatt Saigon opened in the summer of 2005 in what is now known as Ho Chi Minh City and is about to commence a major refurbishment and redesign of just about everything, from its gardens to its



Italian all-day-dining restaurant, Opera, at Park Hyatt Saigon.

Xuan Spa. It is, therefore, not very helpful for me to describe the decor of the rooms and suites, or indeed the outdoor pool area and garden, as these will all be redone in French Colonial style early next year. I would, however, suggest that you take a suite here, at the very least, as even the Park Kings are a tad too cosy for my liking, although the third floor Deluxe Kings, which



Exterior of Park Hyatt Saigon.

have small terraces that lead to the garden and pool, do feel more spacious. A Park King Suite, such as #401, is a better choice, or an Executive Suite, such as #731, which has a mini kitchen and can also connect. The Presidential, #901, which will be expanded during the refurbishment, is already very pleasant and residential, with a great bathroom.

This is, however, not the best Park Hyatt I have ever stayed in; but then, Ho Chi Minh is not the most appealing city, either. There are language problems with the staff, and the cuisine, despite being set in traditionally buzzy Hyatt display kitchens, is so-so, but not too subtle.

Opera, the hotel's Italian themed all-day-dining restaurant, did not inspire; the calamari very chewy indeed, whilst Square One; an Asian-cum-grill restaurant, was marginally better, but still somewhat heavy handed, in my view.

The 2 Lam Son Bar, designed more recently by Super Potato, is lively and great fun, with private booths on the upper level. One hopes that this style and quality will spread to the rest of the property.

With 223 rooms and 21 suites, Park Hyatt is in a terrific location, overlooking the Opera House and within easy walking distance of some good shopping; but you do have to watch for pickpockets in this city, which can rather take the edge off the experience.

Ho Chi Minh is the best entry point for those of you flying on to Amano'i or The Nam Hai, but whether you should break your journey here is debatable. Park Hyatt is the city's only high-end option and I am sure it works extremely well for a business stay, but as a leisure option, I am less convinced.

www.parkhyattsaiagon.com

Gallivanter's Rating: ✓✓+



Square One, Park Hyatt's Asian-cum-grill restaurant.

GALLIVANTER'S Gossip



I DO WONDER WHAT IS GOING ON IN CHIANG MAI. After the shock of Mandarin Oriental walking away from Dhara Dhevi, the latest news is that GHM's **Chedi Chiang Mai** has been wrestled from them and will become Anantara Chiang Mai Resort & Spa.

LAST MINUTE PLANS for New Year? COMO Hotels' **Point Yamu** opened last month in Phuket, so if you cannot get into Trisara or Amanpuri, then this could be worth a try. www.comohotels.com/pointyamu

NEXT YEAR SEES SOME VERY EXCITING OPTIONS with Amanresorts. Ian White is opening GM at Aman's Jordan property, **Amanbadu**, in the forest of Dibeen, near the Roman city of Jerash, whilst rumour has it that Jean Pierre Baratin may be project managing **Aman Cavtat** in Croatia, very near to Dubrovnik, which could open as early as Spring 2014; a wonderful partner property for Aman Sveti Stefan, which is now fully operational, with a brand new Spa on the mainland and a signature Restaurant and second pool on the island. There is no news as yet on opening dates for Jean-Michel Gathy's 23-suite **Amanoca** in Brazil, or **Amandayan** in Lijiang, China, but I hear that both of Dolphin Capital's projects, **Aman Playa Grande** in the Dominican Republic and **Amankea** on the Greek island of Kea, are well under construction (John Heah is architect for both). Let us hope that 2014 will see **Amanduna** open in Comporta, Portugal; but frankly, whatever Aman does these days, it is sure to be a joy, although I am less enamoured by the rumours that Aman will open a property in Rwanda in 2015; a country that requires a Yellow Fever vaccine for entry.

SAD NEWS THAT **Henry and Char Gray** are leaving Amanzo'e and, indeed, Aman, as they head for the UK for a brand new project. Meanwhile, In Bangkok, **The Siam** has just appointed Jane-Therese Mulry as Executive Chef. Previously, she worked with The Siam's GM, Jason Friedman, at Qualia, Australia. The **Café Royal** in London finally hired a replacement for GM, Louis Sailer. Anthony Lee, who spent over 30 years at The Connaught and was, most recently, at The Mayfair London, takes over. Interesting choice. **Cliveden House** in Berkshire is slowly being brought back to life under its new management (Chewton Glen's MD, Andrew Stembridge also oversees Cliveden) and has just hired Michelin-starred chef, André Garrett. After 10 years, GM, Peter Egli leaves **Whatley Manor**, Wiltshire to manage Suvretta House in St Moritz, Switzerland. He is replaced by ex-Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons, Gurval Durand.

DRIVING ALONG Highway 1 on California's Big Sur coastline is one of those things that everyone should do. Now, my favourite Big Sur hideaway, **Post Ranch Inn**, tucked away on a high bluff overlooking the ocean, has opened a new Private House called South Coast House; a very Californian 2-bedroom retreat with a serious kitchen, private hot tub on the deck and, of course, those amazing views. Expect organic mattresses and beds, stargazing and really good spa treatments. www.postranchinn.com

NOW OPEN IN NORTH WEST ARGENTINA is **Grace Cafayate**, which is set in the pristine Calchaquí Valley, within a 1,360 acre residential and sporting estate. The resort features fine dining by Jonathan Cartwright, a wine and cigar bar, pool and spa. www.gracehotels.com/cafayate

THANK YOU TO ALL OUR LOYAL SUBSCRIBERS throughout the world for your wonderful support and your excellent feedback this year. **Happy Holidays** to you all from David and me!

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