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Colors of Hanoi

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Introduction

Step off the train at Long Bien Station, or slip into the city through the misty air of dawn—either way, Hanoi greets you as a swirl of sensation: the aroma of simmering pho, the clang of a street vendor’s bell, the hum of engines, and the crunch of footsteps on centuries-old flagstone. For many, Hanoi is a rush, a tangle of motorbikes and neon, ancient pagodas shading fragrant markets, or a single golden sunrise mirrored in the lake. But for those who linger, who take the time to look past the surface, the city reveals a deeper, more textured soul—its very spirit woven from a living tapestry of art, architecture, and daily rituals.

The premise of this book is simple: to invite readers beyond the tourist’s quick glance, and into Hanoi’s true heart. Within these pages, you will encounter the city’s astonishing range—a place where history is not confined to museums but walks in the shadows of narrow alleys, where art flourishes in both grand theatres and hidden workshops, and where even the most humble meal is layered with meaning and memory. With each chapter, we’ll peel back layers: from legendary beginnings and dynastic grandeur to the microhistories found in crafts, food, and the stories of everyday lives.

Hanoi’s identity is inseparable from its architecture—a cityscape blending the ochre of colonial-era mansions, mossy temple walls, and the audacious chrome of modern high-rises. Yet as we wander its neighborhoods, we’ll see not just the physical structures, but the conversations between old and new, the controversies and triumphs of preservation, and the lively, ongoing debates that animate the urban present. The streets themselves, with their painted shop shutters, ancient banyans, and splashes of spontaneous graffiti, become open-air galleries for creativity and resilience.

But Hanoi is perhaps most alive in its fleeting, everyday moments—the rhythm of a market at dawn, the hiss of rain on a lake, the laughter echoing from sidewalk cafés. These are the rituals and spaces where past and present mix naturally, informing a sense of belonging that is both local and universal. Through interviews, authentic anecdotes, and cultural notes, you’ll meet the citizens who animate the city: artists restoring lost crafts, historians wrestling with memory, chefs and street vendors who are as much storytellers as cooks.

As you read, you’ll explore themes of adaptation and identity—how Hanoi’s people respond to the pressures of modernization, how youthful energy and ancient wisdom coexist, and how the metropolis balances the drive for progress with a reverence for heritage. Each chapter concludes with a unique snapshot: a folk tale, an artist’s voice, or a lived tradition, offering ways to carry a piece of Hanoi’s color into your own life,

wherever you may be.

Let this book be your invitation to look again, to linger in the shade of a temple gate or the bustle of a night market. Whether you are planning your first journey, returning home in memory, or simply seeking to understand Southeast Asia's complex urban spirit, "Colors of Hanoi" offers a guided immersion into a city where every shade tells a story—and every story is, at heart, a celebration of life's enduring vibrancy.

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CHAPTER ONE: Beginnings Beside the Red River

Hanoi, Vietnam's enduring capital, is a city built on more than just solid ground; it's founded on a millennium of history, shaped by the ebb and flow of the Red River, and infused with the spirit of mythical dragons. To truly understand its vibrant present, one must journey back to its ancient origins, to a time when it was not yet "Hanoi" but the legendary Thăng Long, the "Ascending Dragon." This deep historical root, stretching back over a thousand years, has cultivated a distinctive character that continues to define the city's art, architecture, and daily rhythms.

The story of Hanoi as a significant urban center truly begins in 1010 CE. Before this pivotal moment, the region had seen various settlements and even served as a political hub under Chinese protectorate. For instance, in the middle of the 5th century AD, the site of present-day Hanoi housed a small town named Tong Binh. Around 545, a leader named Ly Bon led a popular uprising and constructed a wooden citadel, also building the Khai Quoc Pagoda, now known as Tran Quoc Pagoda.

However, the definitive establishment of Hanoi as a capital is credited to Emperor Lý Thái Tổ, the founder of the Lý dynasty. In 1010, the emperor made the momentous decision to move the capital from Hoa Lu, located almost 100 kilometers to the south, to the site along the Red River. Legend has it that he saw a dragon ascend above the river, a powerful omen that inspired him to name the new capital Thăng Long, meaning "Ascending Dragon." This mythical encounter underscores the deeply spiritual and symbolic connection the Vietnamese people have with their land and its origins.

The choice of Thăng Long as the capital was not merely symbolic; it was a strategic masterstroke. Situated in the fertile Red River delta, the location offered rich agricultural lands, access to waterways for trade and defense, and a central position within the emerging Vietnamese kingdom. This new capital quickly blossomed into a center of political power, economic activity, and cultural development.

Under the Lý dynasty (1009-1225), Thăng Long began to solidify its identity as an intellectual and spiritual heartland. It was during this period that many significant monuments were erected, some of which, despite numerous restorations and displacements, continue to stand today. One of the most prominent examples is the Temple of Literature (Văn Miếu), founded in 1070. This wasn't just a place of worship; it was Vietnam's first national university, a testament to the Lý dynasty's commitment to education and scholarly pursuits. Here, scholars studied Confucian philosophy, and the complex served as an examination center for mandarins, the highly educated officials who served the imperial court.

The establishment of such institutions laid the groundwork for a robust intellectual tradition that would characterize Hanoi for centuries. The stone tablets mounted on giant tortoises within the Temple of Literature, recording the names of successful doctoral candidates dating back to 1484, serve as enduring symbols of this rich heritage. This dedication to learning helped to strengthen the country and foster a distinct Vietnamese identity.

The Lý dynasty was followed by the Trần dynasty, under which Thăng Long continued to prosper. The city faced challenges, however, including multiple invasions by foreign powers. Over the centuries, it was invaded on several occasions by Chinese forces and Mongols. Despite these external pressures, Thăng Long demonstrated remarkable resilience, often rebuilding and embellishing its monuments after periods of conflict. For instance, after repelling Minh troops in 1428, King Lê Lợi, a national hero, oversaw the reconstruction and beautification of many city monuments that are still visible.

While Thăng Long remained the main capital for much of its early history, its name underwent occasional changes. One notable renaming occurred in 1831, when the Nguyen dynasty, which had shifted the national capital to Huế in 1802, officially bestowed the name "Hanoi" upon the city. Meaning "city between the rivers," this name fittingly describes its geographical location on the banks of the Red River and its tributaries. This new name, which endures to this day, reflected Hanoi's continued strategic importance as a regional hub for administration and culture, even as it temporarily lost its status as the primary political capital.

Despite the shift of the national capital to Huế, Hanoi remained a vital economic and cultural center. The Nguyen administration initiated infrastructure projects, including strengthening flood defenses, which further shaped the city's landscape. This period also saw the gradual increase of Western influence, with European traders and missionaries beginning to establish a presence, foreshadowing the profound changes that would come with the colonial era.

The distinct character of Hanoi's Old Quarter also began to take shape during these early centuries. Centered around the "36 Old Streets," this area, which started developing as a center for handicraft and commerce in the 13th century, remains a well-preserved part of the ancient city. A unique feature of these streets is their traditional specialization, with each street historically dedicated to selling specific goods—a tradition that, to some extent, continues today. Names like Silver Street (Hàng Bạc) for silver ornaments or Silk Street (Hàng Gai) for silk products tell the story of generations of artisans and traders who contributed to the city's economic vibrancy.

This intricate network of narrow, maze-like streets, flanked by traditional shops and residential houses, offers a tangible link to Hanoi's ancient past. Even with modern skyscrapers occasionally interspersed, the Old Quarter maintains a unique atmosphere

that immediately captivates visitors. It is in these very streets that the echoes of Hanoi's thousand-year history are most palpable, where every turn reveals another layer of the city's deep cultural foundations.

Cultural Note: The white horse legend associated with Bạch Mã Temple (White Horse Temple) further illustrates the deep connection between Hanoi's founding and local folklore. When Emperor Lý Thái Tổ was struggling to decide on the location for the city walls, a white horse appeared and guided him, leading to the construction of this temple, which is one of the oldest existing Buddhist temples in Hanoi.

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