

# Vietnam 2006

## Hanoi

### Some international hospitals/clinics in Hanoi

1. Hanoi French Hospital  
1 Phuong Mai  
www.hfh.com.vn  
Tel: 577-1100, emergency 574-1111
2. Hanoi Family Medical Practice  
Unit 109-112, Van Phuc, Blog A1, Kim Ma  
Tel: 843-0748 (24 hours)
3. International SOS  
31 Hai Ba Trung  
tel: 934-0666, emergency 934-0555
4. Vietnam Korea Friendship Hospital  
12 Chu Van An  
Tel 843-7231

### List of Embassies in Hanoi

Australia – 8 Dao Tan st – 8317755  
New Zealand – F5, 63 Ly Thai To st – 8241481

Coung's bike shop is where its at. most people will confirm this is a very nice guy who knows his bikes!

Cuong's Adventure Biking  
New Shop @ 1 Luong Ngoc Quyen (in the heart of the Old Quarter of Hanoi); Tel.: 04.9261534; 0913518772  
(opening hours till 18.30)

1. Trieu Viet Vuong has a great set of cafes, IMHO nicer than Hang Hanh.
2. Hom Market (Cnr. Pho Hue and Tran Xuan Soan) is at least as good, if not better, than Dong Xuan.
3. Lenin Park is a great place to be either early in the morning or at dusk. Sitting by the shore of the lake, you won't be hassled as so often happens at Hoan Kiem. Same for the smaller lake on Quang Trung (sorry, foget name).
4. Hai Ba Trung memorial is a lovely temple, well worth seeing.

### Food

**Brother's Café** (26 Nguyen Thai Hoc) We went for the lunch buffet which is \$5.50 per person. The restaurant is beautiful in a wonderful courtyard. The food was also excellent. We would highly recommend a leisurely lunch or dinner here.

**Chả Cá Lã Vọng**, 14 Chả Cá St, serves Chả cá (grilled boneless fish cubes marinated in dill served with rice noodles and peanuts). This is brought on a charcoal brazier along with noodles to your table. The restaurant is on the 2nd floor in a weathered building. Nevertheless the restaurant has been written up by several noted travel magazines.

**Ilu Bar Lounge** - 8/9 floor, Ilu Building, 18 Duong Yen Phu, Hanoi.

A funky hang out on the 8th and 9th Floor of the Ilu Building. Looking out over West Lake and Truc Bach Lake, you can sit inside and lap up the air-con or relax outside on the large balcony area. Upstairs is groovy bar. Ilu Bar is a great place to meet friends, relax on the sofa's and basically just chill! Open all day, full menu and wi-fi (free).

**Culi Cafe** - 40 Luong Ngoc Quyen, Hanoi.

Located in Hanoi's Old Quarter, Culi Cafe has a relaxed and easy going atmosphere. Large comfy lounges, wi-fi (free) and air-con, you can enjoy great fruit shakes (and other beverages!), a full range of western/vietnamese food and get hassle free travel advice or book a tour at their travel desk. A great place to hang out with a good book or with friends!

**Amazon Bar** - 10 Bao Khanh, Hanoi

Small and cosy, the Amazon is a great place to relax with a cold beer or one of the many cocktails on offer. Sit at the bar or make yourself comfortable on one of the window lounges to people watch. Open till late, the Amazon is a great new hang out.

**Quan An Ngon** at 19 Phan Chu Trinh brings streetstalls in off the streets, dresses them up fancy, doubles the street price and hauls in punters by the hundredweight. The result is an illustration of the overwhelming appeal of street nosh. This place has around 400 seats and you'll be lucky to find one free at lunchtime or dinner. The owner, purportedly a savvy Viet Kieu (overseas Vietnamese), had a superb idea - Scour the streets, find the best dishes out there, the best street chefs cooking those dishes, offer them a gig at a new restaurant and a regular, reliable wage. Bingo, Quan An Ngon was born in 2001. The owner recruited 20 or more cooks this way and each serves their own speciality inside Quan An Ngon.

**Le Tonkin, 14 Pho Ngo Van So street, Hanoi**

"The menu is solidly Vietnamese, but the garden feels vaguely French, like Southeast Asia viewed through the eyes of a Catherine Deneuve film. Le Tonkin's quiet elegance sets it apart, and it also boasts cheaper prices than its gourmet Vietnamese restaurant counterparts, like Emperor and Nam Phuong. Whether it is the dimmed lighting or falling flowers or the creatively accented food, Le Tonkin's virtuoso touches are in the details. Starting with the appetizers, the goi cuon tom thit, or fresh spring rolls (VND32,000), were well-done standard fare, and the muc chien gion sot man, or fried calamari (VND64,000) were crisp and excellently complemented by the plum dipping sauce. But the goi du du tom thit, papaya salad with shrimp and pork (VND32,000), was the star of the large selection of appetizers. With an expertly crafted nutty sweetness, cold and absolutely lovely, it was as diaphanously summery as a gauzy white sun dress, and equally elegant

### **Green Lotus, 40 Trieu Viet Vuong street, Hanoi**

"The amiable waiting staff looks gorgeous in their green and gold traditional Vietnamese dress and offer helpful tips on how to wade through a comprehensive menu of over 100 items. It sounds like an overwhelming amount of choice, but the menu follows a logical dining order that categorises all selections under clear headings with pictures of numerous dishes. The seafood selection is broken down into tiger prawn, squid, crab, Mat quy (devil's face) fish, grouper, eel, scallops, cordy shell and clam dishes that are served up in various styles, including: Beijing, Thai, Chinese, Xichuan, Hong Kong and, of course, Hanoi

### **Ocean Star, 13 Ly Thuong Kiet St, Hanoi**

"With a flood of new restaurants opening in Ha Noi on a seemingly daily basis, it is often hard to choose which one to try next. Ocean Star Restaurant, located at 13 Ly Thuong Kiet Street, has been open now for only for seven months and specialises in sea food, as do many other places in Ha Noi. Owner Sam Tran said his mother is Chinese and his father Vietnamese and he wanted to blend these two cultures into a menu that offers "very cheap, very good food". He also lived in California for 10 years before coming back to Viet Nam, which explains the Western influence on the wide array of cuisine offerings

### **Clothes etc**

You can get cheap (in both senses of the word) at the markets - **Dong Xuan and Cho Hom**. Also the little street running south of Cho Hom is packed with fabric shops. If you know quality - you should be OK.

In Dong Xuan market you can get a better quality of blouse silk made in Hai Phong or Danang I believe for export. The shops are on the second floor between the escalator and the stairs. They have nice colours and patters.

I'd suggest you take an item to copy to the tailor. There are a number of them on **Hang Bong**. I've used **Tuyet** on the west side of **Hang Bai** (maybe 42?) for 6 years now with no problems. She copies beautifully. No English though. She doesn't pretend to do the 'overnight' sewing thing. Expect a few of days.

## **Cao Bang Area**

Ba Be/Cao Bang/Lang Son region, definitely worth a look, better scenery than Sapa and NO tourists.

**Bac Hà** and its nearby **Flower H'mong**, **Red Dao**, **Black Dao**, **Tay**, **Nung**, **La Chi**, and **Phu La** markets are another, blessedly less-touristed alternative. West of Hà Noi, **Mai Chau** and its **White Thài** community offer opportunities to overnight in traditional stilt houses. In the far north, nine minority communities coexist in the vicinity of **Cao Bang**; best of all, the area is virtually barren of tourists, save you.

Northern Vietnam and the Northwest (or Tonkin) Highlands are among the most beautiful but least-visited regions of Vietnam. Their infrastructure is poor: roads are spotty, communications are dicey, and most of the towns are motley collections of dirty, fading buildings. But the natural splendor of the region is unbelievable, and its people are friendlier and more welcoming than anywhere else in the country. Let the odyssey begin in **Cao Bang**, a town of Chinese temples and delicious food; the sacred stillness of nearby **Thang Sen Lake** is punctuated only by your falling off one of the humorously minimalist rafts available to visitors. **Ba Be National Park**, to the southwest, provides more lakeside serenity. Before returning to **Hà Nội**, stop off in **Thái Nguyên** to absorb more of that relaxed northern feel—and don't forget to pay a visit to **Lake Núi Coc**, site of a truly wonderful theme park. Once in **Hà Nội**, take the train to **Yên Bái** and **Thác Bà Lake**, or skip both via the magical **VIP car** all the way to **Lào Cai**. From there, it's a short 2-4 hr. ride to **Bac Ha**, where the Sunday market attracts tourists in droves. Try going during the week instead.

<http://www.virtourist.com/asia/vietnam/northeast/index.html>

The accommodation offer in North Vietnam is limited. There are many hotels, but most of them belong to a similar category. I could only find one good hotel in Cao Bang. If you come on an organized tour, you do not have to worry. The guide will look for a hotel. If you do not have a guide, you will easily find a place to sleep. Prices are low. You should bargain a little before accepting the room. Air conditioned may not be necessary, but a mosquito nets are

### *The Northeastern Zone (Viet Bac)*

This zone stretches from the Red River Valley to the Gulf of Tonkin. The mountainous area of Viet Bac is scattered with famous sights: Dong Nhat Grotto, Dong Nhi Grotto, and Tam Thanh Grotto in Lang Son Province; Pac Bo Grotto and Ban Gioc Waterfall in Cao Bang; Ba Be Lake in Bac Kan; Yen Tu Mountain and Halong Bay in Quang Ninh; and Tay Con Linh, the highest mountain peak in the region reaching 2,341 meters above sea level.

Bac Ha is 350 km NorthWest of Hanoi, BacHa - a small town built on a desolated highland plain NorthWest of Lao Cai, is well-known for the century-old colorful market of the real mountainous people including the Dzao and the Flower-H'Mong. They and the mountains seem to fall in a sleep and time stands still until Sunday mornings when the Bac Ha market occurs. All the young boys and girls wear their most beautiful clothes and go to the market.

Couples prepare forestry products or wine or hand-crafts, etc... and take to the market with bamboo buckets on their backs, not minding the long hard way, so do the elders. There, it is chance and time for them to spend money and enjoy their time. Men drink until being drunk. Women are busy at selling what they take and buying, cloths and supplies for a week. Young boys dance in their Khens' tones and girls sing with sweet voice to express their deep love. The elderly people drink Bac Ha traditional special strong wine without leaving their eyes away from the young and remind and think and talk about their youth having gone far away. And in the afternoon, it is not surprising to see happy wives back home with their hang-out husbands on their horses' backs. That is not all to see when Bac Ha dresses in white

plum's flowers or green or yellow of rice in four seasons. It is wise to enjoy the moments of time standing still and flying.

## Lang Son

If you're coming from Hanoi, minibuses depart regularly from Hanoi's Gia Lam station; alternatively, private air-con minibuses (\$6) can be arranged through the *Real Darling Café*.

When it comes to **accommodation**, budget travellers should head for *Hoà Phương Guest House*, 92 Tran Dang Ninh (tel 025/871233; \$5–10), where there are basic air-con or fan rooms. However, if you have the cash, it's worth paying a little more for the clean, spacious and friendly accommodation a few hundred metres north at the *Hoà Bình Guest House*, opposite the market entrance at 127 Tran Dang Ninh (tel 025/870127; \$10–15). Rooms at the top afford great views over a nearby lake and there's a rooftop terrace.

For **food**, try the street kitchens on Tran Dang Ninh – no. 28 is recommended, opposite the junction with Tam Thanh – or head for *Bình Đan* restaurant, opposite the bus station at 13 Ngo Quyen, which serves tasty and cheap rice dishes.

## Tam Coc and Bich Dong

The film *Indochine* put the **Tam Coc region**, 9km southwest of Ninh Binh, firmly on the map for French tour groups and it's hard not to be won over by the mystical, watery beauty of the area, which is a miniature landlocked version of Ha Long Bay. The three-hour sampan-ride through the flooded landscape is a definite highlight, and journey's end is **Tam Coc**, three long, dark tunnel-caves eroded through the limestone hills with barely sufficient clearance for the sampan in places. **Boats** leave the dock in Van Lam village – the starting point for all boat trips to Tam Coc – between 6.30am and 5pm (go early or late to avoid the crowds), and cost \$3.70 per person, which includes entry to Bich Dong Pagoda.

Follow the road another 2km beyond the boat dock to visit the cave-pagoda of **Bich Dong** (\$2.60), where stone-cut steps, entangled by the thick roots of banyan trees, lead up a cliff face peppered with shrines to the cave entrance. Three Buddhas sit unperturbed on their lotus thrones beside a head-shaped rock, which bestows longevity if touched. A second entrance opens out higher up the cliff, from where steps continue to a viewpoint

The easiest and most enjoyable way to reach Tam Coc is to rent a **bicycle** (8000–10,000d per day) or **motorbike** (\$5–6) from a Ninh Binh guesthouse; the turning, signed to "Bich Dong", is 4km south of the Lim Bridge on Highway 1, before the cement factory. A **xe om** from Ninh Binh will cost about \$4–7 all-in. If your next stop is Hoa Lu, you could take a roughish back road for a spectacular ten-kilometre ride through rice fields and karst scenery. To pick up the road, heading back from Tam Coc towards the Highway, look out for the left turn after about 2km, opposite a banyan tree, which leads through a small village.

## Mong Cai

Since the border reopened for trade in 1992, **MONG CAI** has been booming and its markets are stuffed with Chinese goods. **Hydrofoils** from Ha Long and Haiphong arrive 16km outside town, from where a complimentary shuttle bus brings you to the centre. Highway 18 enters the town from the west across a bridge and then peters out in a large, open area, with the public **minibus station** straight ahead and the post office on the south side. A rooftop clock identifies Mong Cai's focal point, the covered market. The **Chinese border** is just 1km away to the north; walk from the bridge through the goods-only bus stand and then follow the river, past the bank, to reach the border gate (daily summer 7am–4.30pm; winter 7.30am–4pm). Mong Cai's **hotels** are located around the covered market area, and all offer air-con, hot water and TV. The new *Tuan Thanh* mini-hotel, opposite the post office at 4 Nguyen Du (tel 033/881481; \$15–20), is the best of the bunch, with clean, comfortable rooms, some with balcony. Nearby, opposite the main bus station on Hung Vuong, the *Dong A* (tel 033/881156; \$15–20) has spotless though somewhat clinical rooms. Last resort is the drab, overpriced old-block *Huu Nghi* (tel 033/881408; \$15–20), next to the post office on Nguyen Du. Streets near the covered market turn into open-air food stalls in the evening. For **money exchange**, Vietcombank has a branch on Van Don, towards the border crossing.

**Hydrofoil** tickets to Bai Chay (3 daily; 3hr; \$12) can be purchased at the main ticket office at 1 Tran Phu (tel 033/883988) near the covered market, or from the *Thang Long Hotel*, 1 Van Don (tel 033/881695), opposite the bank. Hydrofoil tickets for **Haiphong** are available from the Greenlines office, 43 Tran Phu (1 daily; 4hr; \$15; tel 033/881214). All boats offer a complimentary shuttle bus to the boat terminal (16km), from where a small boat ferries passengers out mid-sea, transferring over to an awaiting hydrofoil. During bad weather however, this operation for arriving and departing boats can be particularly precarious.

## Ninh Binh

Ninh Binh used to be Vietnam's capital before Hanoi, it means, before 1010. The country area is so beautiful that it's called "Ha Long Bay inland". In Ninh Binh, you can visit Hoa Lu pagoda, Tam Coc (cruise through 3 caves), Bich Dong cave (cruise in a dark cave with a torch on your hand), Phat Diem stone church (built in the 19 century, mixed architecture between western and asian style), Cuc Phuong national park, Kenh Ga, Hang Te floating villages etc.

To get to Ninh Binh, you can take a slow train from Hanoi or from Hue, rent a car, or take tourist bus.

This is a report made by Thien, an overseas Vietnamese, who visited Ninh Binh on a 2 day trip. At that time he could rent a car at cheap price. He visited Hoa Lu, Tam Coc, Bich Dong, Phat Diem. If you plan to visit Cuc Phuong, Kenh Ga, Hang Te, you should skip one of them.

The town of Ninh Binh is basically wraps around the main highway, nothing to see.

The main attractions around Ninh Binh is Hoa Lu (5 km), Tam Coc (15 km), Bich Dong (20 km), Phat Diem (40 km). To visit all of the above would take you around 2 days with a car or motorbike and 3-4 days via other means from Ha Noi. After reviewing my choices, I took the car option since it offers the most freedom and safety. I could have done it by taking a motorbike but the vision of being flattened by trucks wasn't pretty. With a car, I can leave a place when I wanted and rearrange the trip as I see fit. My total cost for the car and personal driver was \$45 for two full days from and back to Ha Noi. I arranged the trip with the hotel that I was staying in.

Hoa Lu is about 5km before you reach the town of Ninh Binh with another 4 km of winding paths through the rice fields from the high way. The temple would take at most 1 hour. It is not that big. If you want a true vista then climbs the steps of the mountain in front of the temple. It is about 300 steps and take some time to climb and a bit of physical strenght. The vista view is another strenous climb on to the limestones some are quite sharp so you have to watch out. It's not overly difficult but requires some dexterity.

When you arrive at Tam Coc, you would have to buy a ticket at the entrance both for the boats at Tam Coc and entrance fee Bich Dong. The ticket for foreigners seems to be 40,000VND while the locals pays 10,000VND (or 15,000 I can't remember which). There is a ticketmaster at the boat quay that will take your ticket and tells you which boat to get on. The boat all carries a number and regulated as a roundrobin, in high tourist season, a round takes 2 weeks, in a low season 1-2 months. The typical round trip tour is around 1 hour but there is an extended water way that you can ask if the normal route is not enough for you. You will have to negotiate and pay the boat rower directly for that portion of the trip.

The route from Tam Coc to Bich Dong is very beautiful, don't miss it. Bich Dong have a nice vista at the pagoda at the top of the mountain and yet another climb about only half as bad as the one at Hoa Lu.

Phat Diem is the core of Catholicism in VN. Its main attraction is the Phat Diem cathedral, it's unique in the sense that it has more vietnamese architectural elements than the usual western-style churches that you find in VN. In fact, it looks more like a pagoda than a church.

What I did was to visit Hoa Lu in the morning and Phat Diem in the afternoon of the first day and see Tam Coc and Bich Dong on the second day

If you do go to Ninh Binh stay at the Xuan hotel. A great hotel and an excellent host and full of advice and info and he serves a mean Ninh Binh water. The owners wife is one fabulous cook and I doubt you will taste food ,any better, anywhere in Vietnam.

**HOI AN:**

## Food

Brothers' Café - 27 Phan Boi Chau St - Set in a complex of impressive French colonial buildings, there are several eating areas. You can eat relatively cheaply here, though if you go for the full banquet as we did, complete with French wines etc, it will be expensive by VN standards, though I considered it cheap for what we got - superb food, wine and service in a beautiful environment. We ate in a beautiful courtyard right next to the Thu Bon River, in a moon and candle-lit setting. We had some excellent meals in VN, but this was the best.

**Café 96** - 96 Bach Dang St - it's along the riverfront, along with several other restaurants. I have seen this recommended several times since, though we just wandered in here on our first night in Hoi An, and had a beautifully cooked banquet - for around \$3/head. This was the second best meal we had in Hoi An (and the food in Hoi An is on average of a very high standard). Travelfish.org has this review: *"Bubbly owner Bup is a third generation Hoianese and while his shopfront may not look like too much, his Mum dishes out great bowls of Cao Lau -- which we vote as being the best in town -- and super White Rose. He also runs very reasonably-priced cooking classes, but don't expect the secret behind Mum's White Rose. It's a family secret."*

## Clothes

Before arriving in Hoi An, I'd read lots of information on TT about tailors, so I thought I'd give something back! My girlfriend and I, having never been to a tailor, spent 5 days in Hoi An, and had a total of 4 suits, 3 shirts, 1 dress and a pair of shoes made. On the specific shops:

\* **Yaly** (47 Nguyen Thai Hoc)

We had the 4 suits and dress made here and, like many people on this board, I can thoroughly recommend this shop. First of all, they didn't ask for a deposit - we only paid when we were happy with the clothes. The staff were always very attentive and helpful, and happy to make the alterations we asked for. We went for five separate fittings, and our clothes were altered innumerable times, often while we waited. Even when I was being picky about the seams on my trousers, there wasn't a hint of eye-rolling from the assistants. In fact, whenever we had a fitting, the girls would be discussing the clothes, checking and suggesting things before we even had a chance to say anything.

The clothes mostly turned out very well, but the jacket for one of my girlfriend's suits was cut too small in the first place, and despite many tries it just wasn't right. We simply didn't pay for the jacket, and the apologetic sales assistants made no fuss AT ALL (they offered it at half price, but we declined). We paid US\$490 for two men's suits (plus an extra pair of trousers), one woman's suit with trousers and skirt, another skirt and pair of woman's trousers and one dress.

Also one of the girls said that the shop has been open for 13 years, and that all the tailoring is done in-house so they can ensure the quality. From our experience, she was telling the truth.

\* **Dong Duong Indochine** (17 Nhi Trung, formerly Dao Nguyen Ky Ky)

I had 3 shirts made here, and it was a very different experience from Yaly. I chose my designs and material in the afternoon, paid my deposit and came back in the evening for fitting. Of the two smart shirts, one didn't hang from my back correctly and the other was just baggy; and the casual shirt was too tight around one armpit, with a twisted sleeve. This in itself isn't a big deal, but the fact that she tried to fob me off with "they're supposed to be like that" annoyed me. It just seemed like she couldn't be bothered. She did sort out *most* of the problems, but even to my untrained eye the quality wasn't all that.

I paid US\$25 for the 3 shirts.

**Kan** (8 Nhi Trung)

I had one pair of shoes made here. The woman was friendly, and took my measurements, taking into account differences in the shoes because I wear orthopedic insoles. Unfortunately, when I came back to try them the next day, she'd forgotten to tell her father (who makes the shoes) to make the heel higher on one shoe, so it didn't fit. But I returned the next day to find that they fit perfectly.

I paid \$23 for one pair of smart, leather shoes.

**Now some general advice!** It's been written that you should know *exactly* what you want before you go to Hoi An's tailors. In a perfect world that's great, but I don't think it's absolutely necessary (and in my case it simply wasn't possible, having been on the road for 7 months - I simply chose designs from their catalogues). But it helps if you think about what you like in your clothes: fitted around certain places, but loose around others? colours? Just think about your favourite clothes and why you like them, and don't be afraid to be a tart about it! And make sure you and your tailor understand each other (and I'm not talking about your respective "childhood traumas").

I say both these things, because the girl at Yaly asked if I wanted my jackets to be a bit "fitted", and I said yes. But at my first fitting they almost looked like women's jackets! If I'd just clarified what she meant and thought about how I like my suits, this wouldn't have happened. It's fine somewhere like Yaly, but if the tailor can't be bothered, you could end up wasting your money.

After shopping around, I decided to make shirts from 3 different shops – A Dong Silk, Phuoc An and Mr Xe. My comments and recommendations are below, based on 4 factors: (a) Quality/Workmanship, (b) Variety of materials, (c) Service, and (d) Price.

Mr Xe (71 Nguyen Thai Hoc) –

This was a classic case of "pay peanuts, get monkey". I gave this shop a try based the fact that it was recommended in guidebooks and online. But after my experience, I honestly can't imagine why. The price was low – US\$10 per shirt – but I wouldn't recommend them to anyone. Firstly, the shirts fit poorly. Secondly, when I went for the first fitting, I found the shirts too broad for my liking and asked for the sides to be tapered for a slimmer silhouette. They did as requested...but they didn't bother to trim off the excess material! Thirdly, they handed me the shirts with all the coloured chalk markings still showing, when they should have washed off the markings.

Instead, they told ME to do the washing when I got home. What the \$%&\*!  
Obviously, they don't take much pride in their work. Fourthly, the seams are not double-stitched (i.e. two parallel tracks of stitching to strengthen the seam), something you would expect from any off-the-shelf shirt these days. Fifthly, the range of materials was limited and uninteresting. So, two words in summary: "Don't bother."

Phuoc An (6 Le Loi) -

This small shop had a small but decent range of nice materials. Their shirts are priced at US\$15 each but I bargained it down to US\$14. After 1 round of alteration, the shirts fitted pretty well. The only 2 peeves I have with this shop are -- (a) like with Mr Xe, the seams are not double-stitched for strength, (b) the salesgirls try their best to avoid having to alter the shirts. When I told them that the French cuffs were too soft and floppy, and needed some padding up, they were quick to respond that the cuffs looked better as they were. And when I told them that the collar was too tight around the neck, they were insisted that it looked fine. They only relented when I insisted on the changes.

Yaly -

You've probably heard everything about them already. Huge shop, wide range of textiles. Their shirts fit well, and are double-stitched. Although it did take 3 rounds of alterations for them to get it right... And they don't seem very interested in your business unless you look like you're planning to cart away truckloads. I have to give it to them for one thing though - they ask you for precise specifications (e.g. single or French cuffs, slim-cut or straight-cut, pleats or no pleats, placket or no placket, breast pocket or none, etc.) so you don't have to worry that you forgot to specify and end up with something else. But at \$18...a little overpriced.

A Dong Silk (62 Tran Hung Dao) -

I had the best overall experience here. It's a very large shop that houses its own workshop in the basement. The variety of materials available was very wide. The shirt I made (US\$15) fits well, and was double-stitched. I was also pleasantly surprised when they asked if I was looking to make casual or business shirts, something that none of the other shops did. All this showed that they know their stuff. The salesgirls readily agreed to make alterations at my request. Given the quality, price and service, I would choose them over Yaly or Thu Thuy unless you can't find the materials that you want. Just remember to give your specifications.

Hope this helps!

However, I've been to Yaly twice over the last couple of years for shirts and received excellent service, and shirts. I always take a shirt with me for them to copy, the same shirt on both occasions actually, and Hien even recognised it a year later! Same with a pair of cargo pants I get them to copy, which she also remembered.

The copies were exact, and of high quality, and were priced at US\$16 to US\$18 depending on fabric, which was pure cotton (the manageress did all the burn testing, even rejecting some fabrics that she reckoned contained 10 poly - I'm allergic to synthetics), and I consider to be a bargain. The shirt they were copying cost me about US\$120 in Aus, but then it was made in Aus so I would expect it to be expensive.

What I have found though, is that the zips they use in trousers are pretty crappy, so the second time I went I took 3 heavy duty jeans zips that I bought in Aus and they used those. They did admire the zips (as tailors do I suppose!), but said that they could not get hold of anything as good! So, take your own zips.

My girlfriend had one shirt made at Huong Ly (25 Nguyen Thai Hoc) which was great, and they were very friendly and hungry for the business.

So how can you test to see if your silk fabric/fiber is actually silk?

1. Burn it!

Make sure to use all safety precautions associated with an open flame - goggles, tongs, and a way to put out the fire in case it gets out of control..

Take a piece of the silk - if you're testing fabric take a sample thread of both the warp AND the weft. Hold near the flame till it starts to burn - I don't set it on fire, but burn it until I get a good ash. (Silk will stop burning when pulled from the flame). Silk always burns to a hard black ball. After it's cool, crush it between your fingers - a silk ball always crushes totally to a black powder.

Synthetics burn to hard uncrushable balls, and often drip and will spatter easily so be careful. Rayon burns to a very fine ash, usually light grey and there isn't any ball present. Most often "silk" will be one of these two if it's not silk!

A lot of people swear by the smell of burning - I trust the ash more than what I smell. But if you're a smell kinda person and are burning enough to get a good smell, then silk smells like burning protein, like your hair on fire.

synthetics will melt and leave a hard black bubble where burnt  
naturals will smell like burning hair and leave ashes  
silks has black ashes cottons and linen have beige like color ashes  
rayons will smell of wood

Saigon

These shops sell lacquerware stuff in Saigon. Give'em a ring and tell'em what exactly you're after. Good luck.

AM Lacquerwares  
185 Pham Ngu Lao, D1 Tel: 836 8651

Loan Anh  
26B Le Loi, D1 Tel: 829 4067

Quyen Thanh  
212 De Tham, D1 Tel: 836 8570

Hongkers

<http://chaskemp.googlepages.com/hongkongguide>

<http://webserv2.discoverhongkong.com/australia/index.jsp>