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A SHORT HISTORY OF SAIGON

Like most metropolises, Ho Chi Minh City is littered with the good, the bad and the ugly. But it's only when you explore the city's more exceptional buildings, both present and past, that you really understand what makes this city tick. It's not just bricks and mortar you're seeing here, but the history of a 300-year-old city.

From the pagodas, museums and European architecture of the city's recent past to the growing number of skyscrapers looking a little lost among the predominately small-sized buildings, despite the aims of modern architecture Saigon is still determined to keep its charm of old.

So with the help of historian **Tim Doling** we take a step back in time and look at 50 buildings — 50 sites accessible to the general public that chart the development of Saigon into the conurbation it is today. Through this we can see that despite the rapid changes of the past decade, this is a city still hanging onto its soul.

Photos by **Charles Barnes, Alexandre Garel, SMM, Nick Ross** and **Francis Xavier**

THE BIRTH OF CHO LON

Minh Huong Gia Thanh, 380 Tran Hung Dao B, Q5

1 The 1683 arrival in Danang of hordes of asylum-seeking Chinese supporters of the deposed Ming dynasty could hardly have pleased the Nguyen lords. However, they turned the situation to their advantage by encouraging the refugees to head south to colonise new territories in Gia Dinh on their behalf. One group settled west of Prey Nokor where they established the Minh Huong commune, today's Cho Lon.

Skilled traders, they immediately became involved in shipping and rice trading, markets they would dominate for centuries. Built between 1789 and 1797, the Minh Huong Gia Thanh is their oldest surviving communal house. In addition to honouring the Minh Huong village deities it contains shrines to the famous Nguyen dynasty military commanders who protected them and to Minh Huong scholars Trinh Hoai Duc and Ngo Nhan Tinh.

BEFORE THE FRENCH



CHARLIE BARNES

3 MORNING ZEN

Giac Vien Pagoda, 161/35/20 Lac Long Quan, Q11

The early Minh Huong settlers also built pagodas and one of the best surviving examples is Giac Vien Pagoda, a Linji Zen Buddhist sanctuary which began life in 1789 as a wood store during the restoration of its more famous neighbour, Giac Lam Pagoda. In the mornings it's still one of the city's most peaceful spots, though sadly after lunch the peace is shattered by the loudspeakers of the adjacent Dam Sen Water Park.



ALEXANDRE GARREL

4 NAVAL HERO

Vo Di Nguy Mausoleum, 19 Co Giang, Phu Nhuan

Vietnamese history is replete with stories of heroic naval encounters. In his *Voyage to Cochinchina* (1824), British mariner John White commented of the Viet kingdom that "perhaps, of all the powers in Asia, is the best adapted to maritime adventure, the Annamese rivalling even the Chinese as sailors." Yet one of Vietnam's greatest naval commanders is now all but forgotten. After recapturing Gia Dinh from the Tay Son brothers in 1788, Lord Nguyen Phuc Anh set up the Chu Su (Ba Son) naval workshop and placed it under the control of Vo Di Nguy (1745 to 1801). After presiding over the construction of a powerful new fleet of modern warships, Nguy became one of Nguyen Phuc Anh's greatest admirals, but like his British contemporary Horatio Nelson, his most famous naval battle — the 1801 victory over the Tay Son fleet in the Thi Nai Estuary — was also his last. He was killed by cannon fire on Feb. 27, 1801. His mausoleum in Phu Nhuan is one of the city's faded architectural gems.



FRANCIS XAVIER

2 MAN OF HONOUR

Vo Tanh Mausoleum, Alley 19, Ho Van Hue, Phu Nhuan

Known in the neighbourhood as the clubhouse of the local martial arts club, no one seems to know who's buried here. Once celebrated as one of the "Three Gia Dinh Heroes," Vo Tanh was another of Lord Nguyen Phuc Anh's leading military commanders during the late 18th Century Tay Son war, who found himself besieged for 14 months at Binh Dinh Citadel. With the garrison facing starvation, one of his deputies suggested that it might be a good idea to surrender or escape. "We have our orders and we've sworn to live or die together here," Tanh replied defiantly. "If we abandon the citadel and flee like cowards, how can we ever face the Lord Nguyen again?" After securing the safe release of his soldiers, he packed straw, firewood and gunpowder beneath a wooden platform, strapped himself on top and ignited it, committing honourable suicide. It's said that his body was so badly burned that a wax effigy had to be commissioned for his funeral.



FRANCIS XAVIER

5 SCHOLARS AND REBELS

Chi Hoa Communal House, 475/77 Cach Mang Thang 8, Q10

Life was hard for the citizens of Gia Dinh during the long war (1774 to 1802) between Nguyen Phuc Anh and the Tay Son brothers. However, dedicated mandarin-scholars like Vo Truong Toan were determined to continue teaching their students. Finding a secluded communal house in Chi Hoa, Toan trained many future southern luminaries here, including Trinh Hoai Duc (1765 to 1825), Ngo Nhan Tinh (1761 to 1813) and Le Quang Dinh (1759 to 1813), later known for their considerable literary output as the *Gia Dinh Tam Gia* (The Gia Dinh Three). In addition to its connection with Vo Truong Toan, this ancient building was used as a covert military training centre by rebel Phan Xich Long between 1915 and 1917 and again by anti-French Young Pioneers after the August Revolution of 1945.



CHARLIE BARNES



6 ANGKORIAN OUTPOST

Chantarangsey Pagoda, 164/235 Tran Quoc Thao, Q3

The demise of Funan was followed by nearly a thousand years of Khmer rule. Being far removed from the centre of Khmer political power, the Delta remained relatively under-populated and unexploited — apart from ports like Prey Nokor, forerunner of Ho Chi Minh City. Today, ethnic Khmer people are still a sizeable minority in the city and their religious and cultural life is focused on the Chantarangsey ('Moonlight') Pagoda. Built on the banks of the Thi Nghe Canal between 1949 and 1953 by the Venerable Lam Em of Soc Trang, it is dedicated to the Shakyamuni Buddha. The walls of its ornate three-prang main sanctuary and adjacent *sala* are covered with brightly-coloured imagery depicting scenes from the Buddha's life.



7 CITADEL

Former Caserne de l'infanterie, Ton Duc Thang / Dinh Tien Hoang intersection, Q1

This city has been home to two ancient citadels. Sadly there are now no traces of either, but surviving colonial buildings can help us pinpoint the location of the second one. In 1835, to discourage further dissent from followers of the late Marshal Le Van Duyet, King Minh Mang destroyed the 1790 Gia Dinh Citadel which Duyet had used as his headquarters. Then in 1837 he built the smaller 'Phoenix Citadel' in the area bordered by modern Nguyen Dinh Chieu, Nguyen Du, Mac Dinh Chi and Nguyen Binh Khiem streets. In 1859 the French razed it to the ground and in 1870 to 1873 they built in its place the main colonial infantry barracks for their new colonial capital of Saigon. The barracks survived until 1964, when Dinh Tien Hoang Street was driven through the site. If you look closely at old sepia postcards of the barracks, you'll recognise the buildings either side of the main gate as those which now frame the entrance to Dinh Tien Hoang.



8 THE GREAT EUNUCH

Le Van Duyet Mausoleum, 1 Vu Tung, Binh Thanh

Could this be the man who laid the foundations for the city's development into today's economic powerhouse? Known to posterity as the 'Great Eunuch' — though he's said to have been a hermaphrodite — Marshal Le Van Duyet (1763 to 1832) was Nguyen Phuc Anh's most senior commander during the Tay Son war. After his master took the throne as King Gia Long, Duyet became Viceroy of Gia Dinh, governing not only southern Vietnam but also Cambodia. Tolerant towards Christianity and open to dealings with the west, Duyet offered generous tax concessions to Chinese merchants and is widely credited for bringing prosperity to the south. However, he was distrusted by Gia Long's successor Minh Mang, who tried him posthumously for corruption and then demolished his tomb in 1835 after a failed revolt by his supporters. Revered throughout the south, Duyet was eventually rehabilitated by the court and in 1937 his mausoleum was rebuilt by the École Française d'Extrême-Orient.

9 FUNANESE FORBEARS

Vietnam History Museum, 2 Nguyen Binh Khiem, Q1

If you think the Vietnam History Museum has no exhibits on the history of the south, chances are you've never got as far as Room 7. Between the 1st and 7th centuries, the Mekong Delta formed part of the proto-Khmer kingdom of Funan and Room 7 in the museum's 1970 extension block is packed with Funanese artefacts, many of them unearthed from the ruins of the ancient port of Oc Eo in modern-day An Giang Province. Pride of place is given to a priceless collection of wooden Buddha images from Long An and Dong Thap provinces, believed to be the oldest surviving wooden statues in Southeast Asia.



10 DIOCESAN DWELLING

Tan Xa Palace, 180 Nguyen Dinh Chieu, Q3

Not quite a palace, but reputedly the oldest private residence in the city despite being dismantled and reassembled twice in different locations. Now hidden away in a corner next to the Archbishop's Residence, it's usually identified as the house which Lord Nguyen Phuc Anh (later King Gia Long) commissioned in 1790 for his French ally Bishop Pierre Pigneau de Béhaine, in gratitude for the prelate's

assistance in the war against the Tay Son. However, one historian has suggested that it might instead be the "large and beautiful house abandoned by an Annamite mandarin" on Rue Lefèbvre (now Nguyen Cong Tru in District 1), which was seized by the French in 1860 and given to Monsignor Dominique Lefèbvre to use as his first bishop's residence from 1861 to 1870. The jury's still out on that one.

THE BIRTH OF SAIGON

11 HOLY ORDER St Joseph's Seminary, 6 Ton Duc Thang, Q1

Those seeking a haven of tranquility in the heart of the city need look no further than the leafy grounds of St Joseph's Seminary, one of the oldest Roman Catholic institutions in the country. Having used the persecution of missionaries as one of the main pretexts for their conquest of 1859, the French entrusted Bishop Dominique Lefèbvre of the Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris with the task of setting up the religious infrastructure for their new colony. One of his first major projects, St Joseph's was opened in 1866 and expanded in the early 1890s to incorporate both a *grand* and *petit séminaire*. By arrangement, visitors can tour the original seminary building with its museum of religious artefacts, a Gothic Chapel and the ornate mausoleum of its first director, Monsignor Théodore Louis Wibaux.



CHARLIE BARNES

12 BIG CHURCH Notre Dame Cathedral, 1 Paris Commune Square, Q1

Built to a design by Georges l'Hermitte to replace the earlier wooden cathedral on Boulevard Charner (Nguyen Hue), Notre Dame was inaugurated on Apr. 11 1880 in the presence of Cochinchina Governor Charles Le Myre de Vilers and Bishop Isidore Colombert.



FRANÇOIS XAVIER

13 DRAGON HOUSE Nha Rong — Ho Chi Minh Museum, 1 Nguyen Tat Thanh, Q4

For most people, the mention of French colonial architecture conjures up images of grand neo-classical edifices designed to reflect the glories of the empire. Yet many of the earliest French public buildings in Saigon were surprisingly modest structures with designs strongly influenced by Vietnamese ethnic architecture. Built in 1862 to 1863 as the headquarters of the Compagnie des Messageries Maritimes, the Dragon House is a fine example of this early colonial style. Resembling a stilted house, it has a traditional roof decorated with dragons, the central pair gazing towards the moon in the *luong long chau nguyet* style found widely on Vietnamese pagodas and temples. Today it functions as the Ho Chi Minh Museum, referencing the fact that it was from this very spot that the young Ho Chi Minh set off for Europe in June 1911.



KYLE PHANFOY

14 PUBLISHING POWERHOUSE Tan Dinh Church, 289 Hai Ba Trung, Q3

The outrageous pink décor of Tan Dinh Church belies its historical importance. The first church was inaugurated in 1876 by Father Donatien Eveillard, who also established a religious publishing house here and invited the Sisters of Saint-Paul de Chartres to set up a school to train disadvantaged children for the publishing trade. Under its first director Jean-François-Marie Génibrel (1851 to 1914), the Imprimerie Tan-Dinh turned out a remarkable series of scholarly works, including the *Vocabulaire*

Français-Annamite (1898), the *Vocabulaire Annamite-Français* (1906) and the groundbreaking *Dictionnaire Annamite-Français* (1898), which took Génibrel 14 years of painstaking research. Génibrel was working on a *Dictionnaire Français-Annamite* when he died. The present church dates from 1896, when the original sanctuary was rebuilt in Romanesque style. The bell tower, the rear vestry and the sumptuous Italian marble high altar were added between 1928 and 1929.



15

FUELLING ADDICTION

Former Manufacture d'Opium gateway, 74 Hai Ba Trung, Q1

In 1860, seeing an opportunity to profit from growing levels of opioid dependency, the French began importing Indian opium resin, processing it into smokable chandoo and selling it to consumers through a network of licensed opium dens. At first the processing was entrusted to private refineries, but the opening of the Manufacture d'Opium de Saigon in 1881 brought the process under government control. Governor General Paul Doumer (1897 to 1902) sourced cheaper opium in Yunnan and improved efficiency by combining the five existing Indochina opium agencies into a single opium monopoly. Business boomed and in 1905 Saigon's Manufacture d'Opium was expanded to occupy the entire block. To encourage greater levels of consumption, it even developed a new fast-burning variety of chandoo. Today only the gateway remains as a monument to one of the more shameful aspects of colonial exploitation.



16

KEEPING IN TOUCH

Ho Chi Minh City Post Office, 2 Paris Commune Square, Q1

Designed by architects Alfred Foulhoux and Henri Vildieu, the Hôtel des Postes was constructed between 1886 and 1891 on the site of the original headquarters of the Commandant des troupes.



17

SCHOLAR PAR EXCELLENCE

Pétrus Ky Mausoleum and Memorial House, 520 Tran Hung Dao, Q5

Still a somewhat controversial figure due to his close ties with the colonial authorities, Pétrus Truong Vinh Ky (1837 to 1898) was a man of remarkable intellect, cited by *Encyclopédie Larousse* as one of 18 world-famous writers of the 19th century. Fluent in at least 10 different languages, he left more than 100 works of literature, history and geography, as well as dictionaries and translated works. In 1928, to commemorate his 30th death anniversary, the Société d'Enseignement Mutuel de la

Cochinchine built a classical-style mausoleum over his grave, next to his family home in Cho Quan village. Later the same year, a city street, a school and a tramway station were named in his honour. Unfortunately Ky's original house didn't survive, so in 1937, to celebrate the centenary of his birth, a replica was built to serve as his memorial house. Now home to Ky's descendants, it incorporates a small exhibition on his life and work.

18 THE CYCLO

Banned from an ever-increasing number of city streets, the cyclo seems to become an endangered species. But spare a moment to appreciate this much-maligned form of transport, which was invented in 1937 by Phnom-Penh-based French industrialist Pierre Coupeaud. Having succeeded in cornering the market in the Cambodian capital, Coupeaud turned his attention to Saigon and Cho Lon, where public transport was still monopolised by the *pousse-pousse* (rickshaw) and a covered horse-drawn cart known as the *boite d'allumettes* (the matchbox). In 1939, to demonstrate the effectiveness of his invention to the city authorities, he staged a *cyclo-pousse* relay race from Phnom Penh to Saigon. As a result, the first 20 cyclos were licenced for use in and around Cho Lon's Binh Tay Market and the rest, as they say, is history.



FRANÇOIS XAVIER

CHARLIE BARNES



20 GATEWAY TO NOWHERE

Dinh Tien Hoang / Phan Dang Luu intersection, Binh Thanh

Where else but Ho Chi Minh City could you find a door which leads nowhere? Now part of the outer wall of Truong Cong Dinh High School, the ancient gateway inscribed with the words "Gia Dinh" is known locally as the Gia Dinh Citadel Gate (*Cong Thanh Gia Dinh*), but since neither of Gia Dinh's two citadels were situated in this part of town, it was certainly never part of their walls. It's been suggested that it may once have been the entrance to a French guard post on the main road opposite the former Inspection de Gia-Dinh. Though how it ended up as part of a school wall is a complete mystery.

ALEXANDRE GAREL



21 YOU NAME IT, THEY PROBABLY BUILT IT

Former Brossard et Mopin Headquarters, 48 Nguyen Dinh Chieu, Q1

With a head office in Paris and branches in Saigon, Phnom Penh, Singapore and Tianjin, the Société d'Exploitation des Établissements Brossard et Mopin was in its day one of Asia's most successful engineering and construction companies. Awarded many major railway and port infrastructure projects in Indochina, its works in Saigon included the Halles Centrales (Ben Thanh Market, 1914), the Treasury (1925) and the Bank of Indochina (1928), as well as many apartment buildings. The dilapidated colonial mansion that once housed its Saigon branch office at 48 Rue Richaud (now Nguyen Dinh Chieu) in Da Kao currently provides office space for several agencies of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism.

22 WEDDING CAKE

People's Committee Building, 86 Le Thanh Ton, Q1

A victim of the rampant political infighting which paralysed the Saigon Municipal Council during the first half-century of colonial rule, the ostentatious Hôtel de Ville building was first conceived in 1872 but not completed until 1909.



23 MARKET LEADER

Ben Thanh Market, Quach Thi Trang Square, Q1

The third city market in colonial Saigon, this famous landmark was opened amid great festivities in March 1914 as the Halles Centrales.

24 SITE FOR SORE EYES

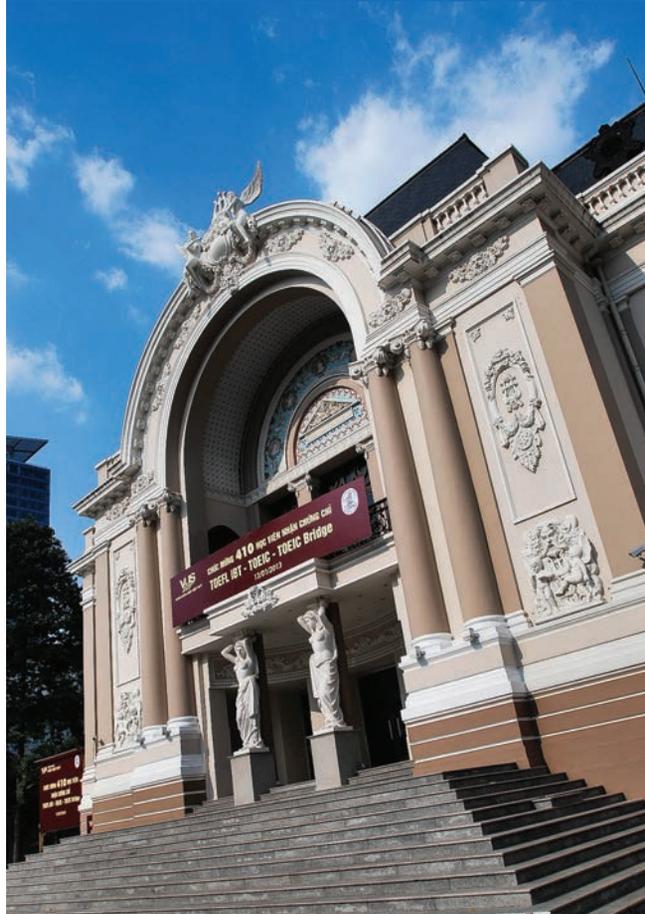
Former Clinique Saint-Paul, Ho Chi Minh City Eye Hospital, 280 Dien Bien Phu, Q3

For those condemned to a daily commute along this busiest of city arteries, the clean, elegant lines of the former Clinique Saint-Paul offer a refreshing contrast to the surrounding urban clutter. Funded by the Sisters of Saint-Paul de Chartres, the Clinique was built in 1936 to 1937 by the Société Indochinoise d'Études et de Constructions (SIDEC) to a design by its in-house architect Louis Chauchon, whose other major works include the Psah Thmey Central Market (1937) and the Palais du Commissariat de France (1938) in Phnom Penh and the Pavillon de la Cité Universitaire in Hanoi (1942). Functional yet elegant, it is noteworthy for its stylish fusion of art deco curves and traditional four-panel roofs.

25 STAGE RIGHT

Ho Chi Minh City Municipal Theatre, 7 Lam Son Square, Q1

Built to replace an earlier playhouse located on the site of today's Caravelle Hotel, the Théâtre de Saigon was inaugurated on Jan. 15, 1900 in the presence of Prince Waldemar of Denmark and Saigon mayor Paul Blanchy.



26 A FAMOUS RESIDENT

Nguyen Tat Thanh House, 5 Chau Van Liem, Q5

Relatively few people know that before leaving the country in 1911, Nguyen Tat Thanh (Ho Chi Minh) lived in Cho Lon for nine months, travelling back and forwards to Saigon to study at the École des Mécaniciens Asiatiques (now the Cao Thang Technical College) and supporting himself by selling newspapers in the Saigon port area. The future president's home during this period was a small upstairs room in the Cho Lon offices of the Société de Lien-Thanh, a fish sauce company founded in 1906 by a group of patriotic Phan Thiet businessmen. One of the company's three former houses at 1-3 Quai Testard — now 5 Chau Van Liem — is a small exhibition centre which introduces the Société de Lien-Thanh and Nguyen Tat Thanh's life in Saigon-Cho Lon in 1910 to 1911.

27 DIVINE DESIGN

Huyen Sy Church, 1 Ton That Tung, Q1

An ornate Gothic edifice built between 1902 and 1905 through the beneficence of wealthy businessman Huyen Sy (1841 to 1900), who was laid to rest with his wife in an elaborately carved mausoleum behind the main altar.





28

IN MEMORIAM

*Tran Phu Memorial Site, Cho Quan Hospital,
766 Vo Van Kiet, Q5*

As opposition to French rule intensified during the last few decades of colonial rule, the Saigon prison system became increasingly overcrowded, forcing the authorities to convert other public buildings into jails. One such building was the secure psychiatric ward at Cho Quan Hospital, which was used after 1930 to incarcerate political prisoners. Its most famous inmate was Tran Phu (1904 to 1931), first Secretary General of the Indochina

Communist Party, who was captured by French police and detained in several different locations before being brought here on Aug. 26, 1931. He died of tuberculosis in one of its cells on Sep. 6, 1931, aged just 27. His final words to colleagues were: "Remain determined to fight." The old secure psychiatric ward has been preserved in period style as a museum dedicated to Tran Phu.

FRANCIS XAVIER



29

EARLY REFORMER

*Phan Chau Trinh
Mausoleum, 9 Phan
Thuc Duyen, Tan Binh*

A much-loved figure in colonial Cochinchina, Confucian scholar and pioneer nationalist Phan Chau Trinh (1872 to 1926) resigned his position at court to become an outspoken critic of the monarchy. He was a strong advocate of mass education and one of his greatest achievements was the setting up of the patriotic Tonkin Free School in Hanoi in 1907. Exiled to France in 1911 for suspected

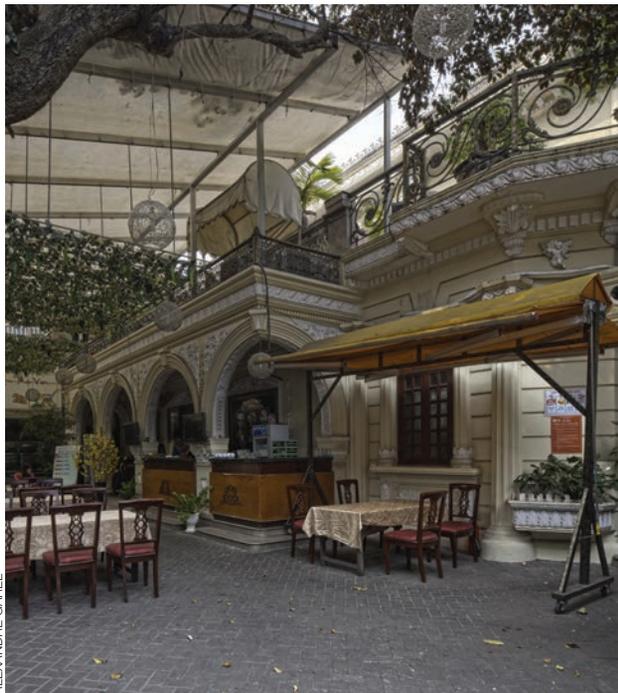
involvement in a peasant tax revolt, he joined Nguyen Ai Quoc (Ho Chi Minh) in presenting a list of demands to the French at Versailles in 1919. Trinh returned home in 1925 and when he died the following year, his funeral famously became the spark for nationwide protests against colonialism. A memorial house preserves books, documents and photographs depicting his life and achievements.

CHARLIE BARNES

30 AFTER THE AFFAIR

Marguerite Duras House,
141 Vo Van Tan, Q3

The relationship between high school student Marguerite Donnadiou (Duras) and rich Chinese Léo Huynh Thuy Le, which inspired her 1984 *Prix Goncourt*-winning novel *l'Amant* (The Lover), took place between 1929 and 1931 during Marguerite's first two years of study at the Lycée Chasseloup-Laubat (now the Le Quy Don Secondary School). After the affair ended, the Donnadiou family went back to France, but they returned the following year so that Marguerite could complete her studies at the *lycée*. The villa at 141 Rue Testard (Vo Van Tan) was their home from 1932 until the family finally left Indochina in 1933.



ALEXANDRE GAREL

31 POSTCARD KING

Fernand Nadal Mansion,
86 Vo Van Tan, Q3

Vietnamese historians owe a debt of gratitude to Fernand Nadal, the Algerian photographer whose high-quality sepia postcards captured so much of the hustle and bustle of daily life in colonial Saigon. In the 1920s and early 1930s, when Nadal wasn't working in his studio at 118-120 Rue Catinat (Dong Khoi) or tending his plantations in Bien Hoa and Thu Dau Mot, he would probably have been found relaxing in style at 86 Rue Testard (Vo Van Tan), the ornate mansion he called home. Today it's still privately owned but the ground floor is leased to a seafood restaurant.

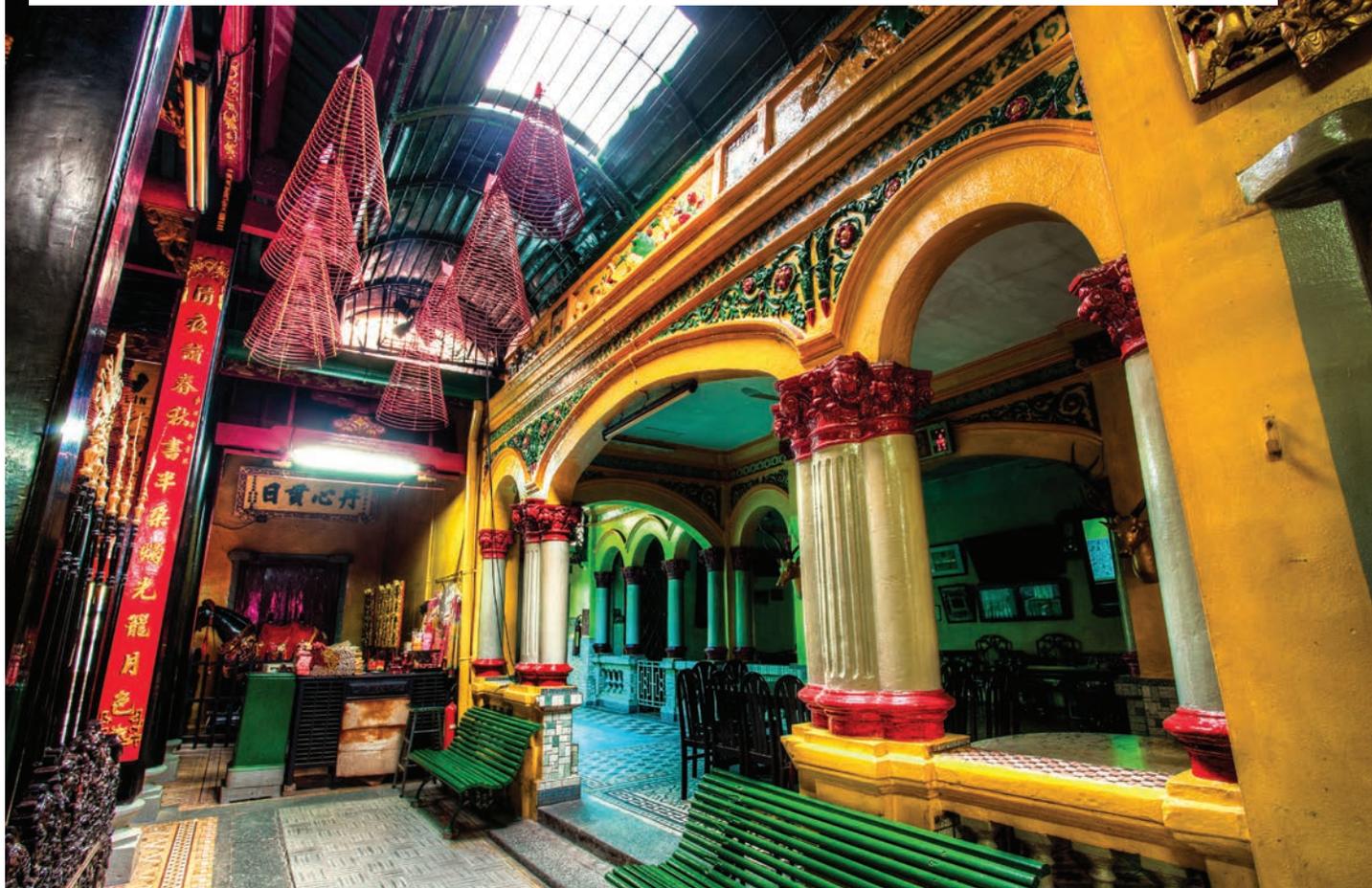
32 MINH HUONG PAGODA

Minh Huong Pagoda, 184 Hong Bang, Q5

A monument to the prosperity, prestige and confidence of colonial Cho Lon, the Phuoc An Assembly Hall (popularly known as the Minh Huong Pagoda) was built right next to Cho Lon Railway Station in the late 19th century by Minh Huong Chinese whose ancestors hailed from Guangdong, Fujian and Zhejiang provinces. Originally established to worship

Quan Thanh De Quan (the famous Chinese general Guan Yu), it later acquired secondary shrines to the Fujianese deity Ong Bon and the Ngu Hanh goddesses of the five elements. Plaques commemorate official visits by Lieutenant Governor of Cochinchina Dr. Maurice Cognacq on Mar. 4, 1921 and Governor General of Indochina Henri Martial Merlin on Sep. 15, 1924.

CHARLIE BARNES





33

THREE STEPS TO HEAVEN

Tam Tong Temple, 82 Cao Thang, Q3

Acupuncture, magnetism therapy and the use of a contraption known as the *corbeille-à-bec* (beaked basket) to spell out messages from beyond the grave were some of the original rites practised by followers of Minh Ly, one of five syncretic religious movements based on the Chinese Ming Shi Dao which appeared in colonial Saigon. Established in 1924, Minh Ly was a crucial influence on the development of

later Cao Dai doctrine. Its Tam Tong Mieu or Temple of Three Philosophies (Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism) was opened in August, 1926 and rebuilt on a grander scale in 1957. The main sanctuary is soberly decorated with carved archways, calligraphic boards and parallel sentences and its architecture displays a preoccupation with numeric patterns.

34

HOUSE OF HORRORS

Bot Day Thép, Khu Pho 2, Le Van Viet, Q9

It surely can't be long before the "Steel Wire Police Station" near Thu Duc is added to the roster of Indochina's most infamous places of torture, alongside Hoa Lo, the Maison Centrale Saigon, Poulo Condore and Tuol Sleng. Originally built in the 1920s as a radio communications centre, it was converted into a police station in 1946 and placed under the command of French Lieutenant Pirolet and his psychopathic deputy Ac Rau ('Evil Beard'), who proceeded to torture and kill over 700 Vietnamese political prisoners here during

the period from 1946 to 1947. Although we've never learned Evil Beard's real name, we're told in graphic detail about the horrors inflicted by this 20th-century Torquemada, which included pouring soapy water into prisoners' noses and mouths, burning their bodies with red hot pokers and hanging them upside down in suffocating holes in the ground. He's also said to have decapitated prisoners and placed the heads on poles, forcing other detainees to eat their ears and drink their blood. A national historic monument, Bot Day Thép has been restored as a museum.

35

SCARY MANSION

Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts Museum, 97A Pho Duc Chinh, Q1

Long rumoured to be haunted by the ghost of a young woman, 'Uncle Hoa's Mansion' — now home to the Fine Arts Museum — was one of three buildings constructed in 1929 to 1934 as the Saigon headquarters of the successful Chinese property business, the Société Immobilière Hui Bon Hoa.

36

MEDICINE MAN

Comptoir Nguyen-Van-Hao Saïgonnais, Ky Con / Yersin / Tran Hung Dao intersection, Q1

FRANÇOIS XAVIER

One of several faded architectural jewels in District 1, the Comptoir Nguyen-Van-Hao Saïgonnais flatiron building dates from 1934 and once provided both offices and residential accommodation for the family of Nguyen Van Hao, patriarch of the Comptoir Saïgonnais company. Hao himself was a Doctor of Pharmacy and his Grande Pharmacie Nguyen-Van-Hao at 120-124 Boulevard Bonard (Le Loi) was one of the city's largest. The company was also active in other areas and sold automobile accessories from shop space on the ground floor. Although now in poor condition, the flatiron building is still fully occupied by tenants, including on the top floor descendants of Nguyen Van Hao.



37

EAST-WEST FUSION

Francis Xavier Church, 25 Hoc Lac, Q5

Over the years, many architectural atrocities have been committed in the name of 'east meets west' — but somehow this early hybrid succeeds where others have failed. Built between 1900 and 1902, it was conceived in European Gothic style but decorated with Oriental features such as *yin-yang* roof tiles, ceramic roof ridge decoration and lacquered calligraphic boards. These days the church is more often remembered for its connection with the military coup of November, 1963. Having fled the palace the previous day, President Ngo Dinh Diem and his younger brother Ngo Dinh Nhu came here early on the morning of Nov. 2 to pray (a commemorative plaque in the rear stalls indicates exactly where they sat), but as they left the church they were arrested, bundled into an armoured car and subsequently shot by members of the coup forces.

38

BIG MARKET

Binh Tay Market, 57A Thap Muoi, Q6

Cho Lon's massive temple to colonial consumerism was built between 1928 and 1930 with funds from wealthy Cantonese merchant Quach Dam after the previous Cho Lon Market was destroyed by fire.



ALEXANDRE GAREL

AFTER THE FRENCH



FRANCIS XAVIER

39 A NARROW ESCAPE

Nguyen Van Troi Heroic Martyr Memorial, opposite Vinh Nghiem Pagoda, Nam Ky Khoi Nghia, Q3

In May, 1964, an audacious plot was hatched to kill US Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara by blowing up the Cong Ly Bridge as his motorcade passed over it. However, the plot was discovered and the man responsible for laying mines under the bridge, 17-year-old apprentice electrician Nguyen Van Troi, was arrested and sentenced to death. Events took an unexpected turn when Venezuelan revolutionary organisation FALN kidnapped US Air Force officer Lieutenant Colonel Michael Smolen in Caracas, threatening to kill him if Troi was harmed. After four months of negotiations, Smolen was released, but despite assurances, Troi was shot by a firing squad. After 1975, Cong Ly Bridge, the road to the airport and a nearby market were all named after Troi. The current memorial was inaugurated on Oct. 15, 2009, the 45th anniversary of his execution, in the presence of his widow and the Venezuelan ambassador.

ALEXANDRE GAREL



40

SACRED RELICS

Xa Loi Pagoda, 89B Ba Huyen Thanh Quan, Q3

As its monks are at pains to point out, Xa Loi Pagoda was one of the city's most sacred Buddhist sanctuaries before its name became indelibly linked with the anti-Diem government protests of 1963. Noteworthy for its clean contemporary design by architects Tran Van Duong and Do Ba Vinh, the pagoda was built between 1956 and 1958 to house *sarira* (in Vietnamese *xa loi*) relics of the Shakyamuni Buddha presented to the Buddhist Association by the Venerable Narada Maha Thera of Sri Lanka during his visit of 1953. The main sanctuary, decorated with paintings of the Buddha's journey from birth until Nirvana, houses a statue of the Shakyamuni Buddha in a space resembling a theatre stage. Above it, at the top of the "proscenium arch," is a red compartment containing the holy relics.



41 DINH DUC LAP

Unification Palace, 135 Nam Ky Khoi Nghia, Q1

The former presidential palace of South Vietnam was built between 1962 and 1966 to a contemporary design by award-winning architect Ngo Viet Thu to replace the original French Norodom Palace of 1873, which had suffered serious damage during a coup attempt.



44 OVER THERE

First US Embassy, 39 Ham Nghi, Q1

Immortalised by Graham Greene as the 'American Legation' where title character Alden Pyle worked in his 1955 novel *The Quiet American*, the large yellow building on the Ham Nghi / Ho Tung Mau intersection (now a branch of the Ho Chi Minh City Banking University) was the first American Embassy in Saigon. Inaugurated in 1950 following the closure of the last US Consulate at nearby 4 Rue Guynemer (Ho Tung Mau), it became the target for a car bomb attack Mar. 30, 1965. Because of its vulnerability, it was replaced in 1967 by the more secure embassy compound at 4 Thong Nhat (Le Duan), though it remained an embassy annex until 1975.



42 HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

Pho Binh, 7 Ly Chinh Thang, Q3

The pho at Pho Binh is tasty enough, but the real focus of interest here is this café's crucial wartime role as "Subdivision 6 Forward Headquarters of the Saigon-Gia Dinh Special Forces Region." From 1967 onwards, owner Ngo Van Toai and his team served hungry customers downstairs, while NLF Special Forces operatives met in the room above to mastermind the attacks of Tet 1968. In their aftermath, the café was stormed on Feb. 3, 1968 and 13 were arrested. Two later died in police custody and Mr. Toai himself was imprisoned on Con Dao Island. After regaining his freedom in 1975, he reopened his noodle shop. Since his death in 2007, Pho Binh has been run by his children, who maintain the 2nd floor room where the Tet 1968 attacks were planned as a museum and family shrine.

43 THE FINAL CURTAIN

Artists' Pagoda, 116/6 Thong Nhat, Go Vap

You don't have to be an aficionado of *cai luong* (reformed opera) to enjoy a visit to the Artists' Pagoda — though it helps. This unique building and adjacent cemetery was the initiative of people's artist Phung Ha (1911 to 2009), who purchased the land and built the pagoda in 1958 to provide a resting place for deceased *cai luong* artists. In the early days she even bought tombstones for artists from poor families. The pagoda has

over 500 columbaria and nearly 350 graves, including those of performers Nam Chau, Ba Van, Thanh Nga, Ut Tra On, Hoang Giang, Bay Cao and Duc Loi, and composers Hoa Phuong, Ha Trieu and Thu An. Phung Ha herself is buried in a special tomb outside the main cemetery. The only non-stage artist buried here is movie actor Le Cong Tuan Anh, whose tragic death in 1996 at the age of just 29 shocked Vietnamese cinemagoers.





45 WEAPONS STASH

Secret Weapons Hiding Place Museum, 287/70 Nguyen Dinh Chieu, Q3

This unassuming house conceals a fascinating secret — a cellar dug by owner Tran Van Lai in early 1967 to conceal weapons and explosives for the 1968 attack on the Independence Palace. From mid-1967 onwards, pistols, rifles, grenades and over 350kg of TNT were brought here from Cu Chi and other remote bases in vans or ox carts, ingeniously hidden in hollowed-out wooden panels, plant pots and wickerwork baskets. Today the house is preserved as a museum and visitors can descend through a trap door into the weapons cellar, which is realistically dressed with boxes of replica armaments to show how it once looked. Upstairs an exhibition explains the planning and implementation of the mission, while a memorial honours the 15-strong NLF Special Forces Team 5, all of whom lost their lives during the attack.



47 EVACUATION

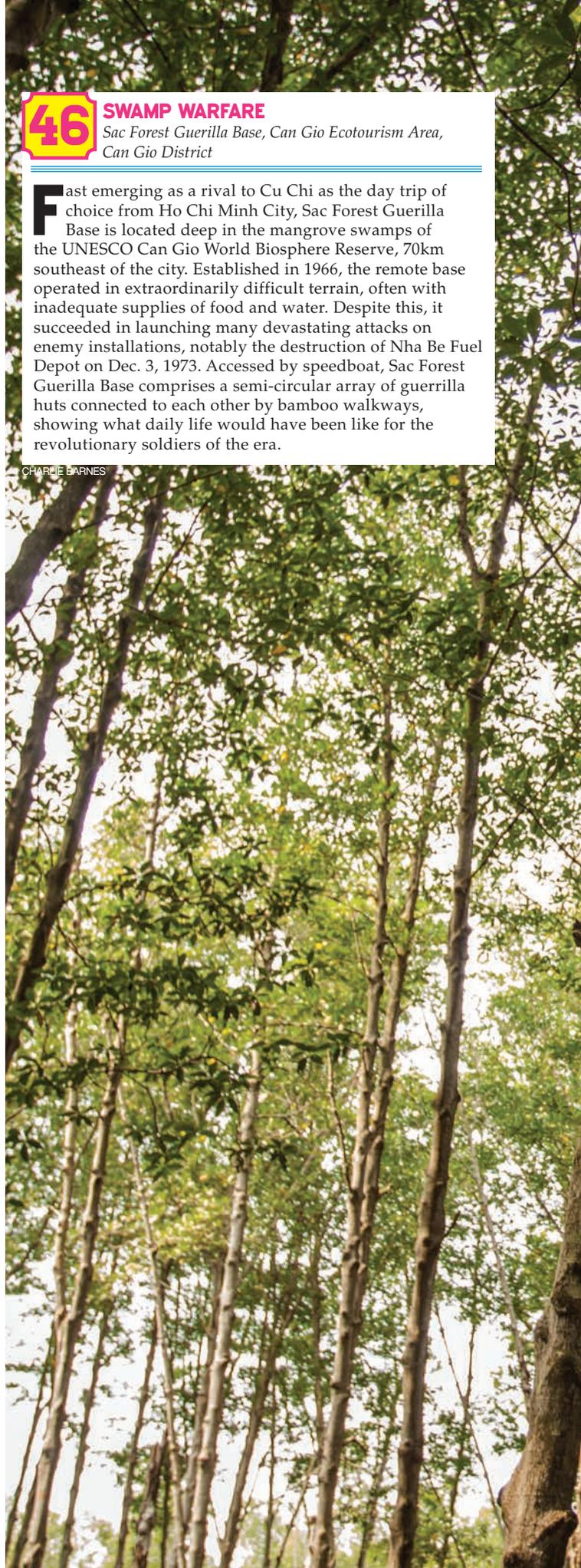
The Roof of 22 Ly Tu Trong, Q1

In the final days of the American War, when the order was given to evacuate the city, the roof of the CIA building at 22 Gia Long (now Ly Tu Trong) became one of several designated landing sites for so-called 'Freedom Birds', helicopters conveying people to US ships bound for Guam or the Philippines. On Apr. 29, 1975, the day before Saigon fell, the little hut on the roof at 22 Gia Long was captured in Dutch press photographer Hubert van Es's famous image of people scrambling up a ladder to a waiting Bell UH-1 'Huey' helicopter. Best viewed from a bench in Chi Lang Park.

46 SWAMP WARFARE

Sac Forest Guerilla Base, Can Gio Ecotourism Area, Can Gio District

Fast emerging as a rival to Cu Chi as the day trip of choice from Ho Chi Minh City, Sac Forest Guerilla Base is located deep in the mangrove swamps of the UNESCO Can Gio World Biosphere Reserve, 70km southeast of the city. Established in 1966, the remote base operated in extraordinarily difficult terrain, often with inadequate supplies of food and water. Despite this, it succeeded in launching many devastating attacks on enemy installations, notably the destruction of Nha Be Fuel Depot on Dec. 3, 1973. Accessed by speedboat, Sac Forest Guerilla Base comprises a semi-circular array of guerrilla huts connected to each other by bamboo walkways, showing what daily life would have been like for the revolutionary soldiers of the era.





HO CHI MINH CITY



ALEXANDRE GAREL

48

GROUNDED

Boeing 707, Hong Ha, Tan Binh

How many of us have done a double-take when suddenly becoming aware of the old Boeing 707 parked in a field next to Hong Ha street, some distance from Tan Son Nhat International Airport? Aviation enthusiasts have identified the aircraft as B707-344, originally delivered to South African Airways in 1960, which was acquired by Vietnam Airlines in 1977 and flown under its last registration VN-A304 until 1985.

It was then grounded and somehow relocated here for training purposes — though how they got it here is a complete mystery, as old maps indicate that this area has never been linked to the airport runways. In the 1990s the old plane became a popular café, but that's now closed and the word on the street is that this unusual landmark may soon be taken away for scrap.

49

STREET CRIES

An essential soundtrack to the history of this bustling metropolis, the cries of Saigon's street vendors have long invigorated daily life in every neighbourhood — whether food vendors selling pork rib congee (*chao suon day*), rice cakes (*banh gio*, *banh chung day*) and hot bread (*banh mi nong hoi vua thoi vua an day*) or recyclers on the lookout for everything from bottles (*Ai co ve chai ban khong?*) to larger items (*Ai co ti vi, tu lanh, may giat, dong ho, tui, ban ghe ban khong?*).



CHARLIE BARNES

50

SIMPLY MONUMENTAL

Hoa Binh Theatre, 240-242 Ba Thang Hai, Q10

In contrast to Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City has relatively little to offer fans of post-reunification Soviet-style architecture. But there's one noteworthy exception — Vietnam's largest performing arts venue, the magnificent Hoa Binh Theatre. Built in 1985 with Soviet aid to a monumental design by Huynh Tan Phat, it incorporates a 2,300-seat main auditorium with revolving stage and a 300-seat cinema.



BITEXCO FINANCIAL TOWER

SMM



EDEN MALL / VINCOM A

NICK ROSS