

Tides of time

Vigilance is required to preserve the beauty of Ha Long Bay's karsts and the diversity of its ecosystems

Junks navigate among the limestone formations of Ha Long Bay, which is inscribed for its scenic and geological value on the World Heritage List.



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SPOTLIGHT | Ha Long Bay

So much fragile beauty, carved by the sea into limestone

Tourists come to Ha Long Bay to sail slowly past its strangely figured islands and gaze in wonderment. For here resides the largest single collection of unique limestone formations called karsts. Some take the shapes of birds or animals, others resemble fish, yet others are more peculiar, even surreal. Most are covered by thick jungle vegetation, and many are linked with local names or legends. More than 1,500 of these rock pillars, jutting out of the still sea with their odd silhouettes and numerous grottoes, are scattered across the Gulf of Tonkin, 165 kilometers (103 miles) east of Hanoi in northeastern Vietnam.

The site, which covers 150,000 hectares (580 square miles) near the Chinese border, is known worldwide and was inscribed, originally for its scenic values, on Unesco's World Heritage List in 1994. When the government of Vietnam presented a case for its universal geological value, the World Heritage Committee inscribed the site according to these criteria in 2000.

Its karst possesses a diversity of forms that provide data for the study of how limestone develops. What particularly distinguishes Ha Long Bay is how its jagged features reveal the sea's invasive power to carve and change. Though similar habitats appear elsewhere, for example in Thailand or Malaysia, Ha Long Bay tells the story of marine effects on limestone karst better

than any other, an evolution that has taken the tropical climate 20 million years to achieve.

Ha Long Bay is host to a diversity of ecosystems, including reefs, swamp forests, mangroves, freshwater lakes and sand beaches. These are home to hundreds of species of fish and mollusks. Antelope, monkeys and iguanas roam on some of the islands.

Though not inscribed as a mixed site, Ha Long Bay, or the Bay of the Descending Dragon, also has cultural value. Its waters have been the backdrop of historical naval battles with Chinese and Mongol invaders.

Evidence of human occupancy in the islands' grottoes, or karst caves, confirms that people have used the area for 10,000 years. Most of these caves have stalactites and stalagmites. Many are easily accessible; some can be reached only by rowboat. Others are big enough to hold hundreds of onlookers.

Anybody who visits for the first time is struck by its natural beauty, says Kishore Rao, deputy director of Unesco's World Heritage Centre.

"Especially when you view it in early morning, late in the evening with the setting sun, or shrouded in mist, it's a magical

place," he says. But what also is striking, he adds, is how close it lies to the huge urban sprawl of Ha Long City. "The difference and the contrast between the two are amazing."

Ha Long City is the entry point to Ha Long Bay, and it has mushroomed into an urban agglomeration that is creating a strain on Ha Long Bay's ecosystems.

The site has been heavily visited, notably since the end of the Vietnam war, both by tourists and locals seeking a water-borne holiday. A popular day trip from Hanoi, it has become a must-see, and today millions visit annually.

Junk boats and cruise ships run regularly through the bay, offering overnight stays. Tourism facilities exist on some of the islands, and the caves are well presented for the visitor.

Notes Rao: "Though bigger limestone grottoes can be found in other World Heritage sites, like Gunung Mulu National Park in Malaysia, these, which you can enter from the sea, are unique. The sheer numbers that come add a lot of pressure, and this requires proper management."

Karst formations are fragile, and their underground ecosystems are particularly so. This makes controlling the area's dense human attendance a considerable

challenge. Unesco intervenes whenever it senses management problems.

For example, when the local administration authorized use of speedboats and jet skis, the World Heritage Centre recommended they be banned, and they were. When construction projects were unveiled, Unesco's World Heritage Committee, in a 2007 decision, requested formally that the authorities "cancel plans to develop a tourism resort on Lam Bo island and major infrastructure in the Cua Van floating village." Recalls Rao: "To the credit of the Vietnamese government, they abandoned those ideas, too."

It is World Heritage Committee policy to persist in monitoring all sites. This is why a World Heritage Committee follow-up decision, two years later, noted "the need to continue to protect Lam Bo from tourism development, and to ensure that revised plans for ecotourism are not implemented unless supported by a thorough environmental assessment."

The 2009 document expressed "serious concern that the outstanding universal value of the property remains under pressure due to tourism, fishing and other activities within its boundaries and from development projects in surrounding areas." Unesco asked the government to ensure that "no development having impact on the outstanding universal value of the property takes place." What is more, the document requested that the Vietnamese government submit a "state of conservation" report on the property by Feb. 1, 2011.

Becoming part of World Heritage entails serious responsibilities for a host nation. Here, as at other sites, the World Heritage Committee's ongoing presence continues to make a difference.

"It is really a challenge to be able to administer this site for future generations," says Rao. "But that's what managing a World Heritage site is all about." JJ.

History of World Heritage

The World Heritage Convention came about through the merging of two separate movements that sought to preserve both cultural and natural sites. Unesco launched a campaign to save Abu Simbel and Philae, two cultural treasures of ancient Egypt, in 1959, after the decision to build the Aswan dam, which would have submerged them. Fifty countries united to dismantle and move the temples, then reassemble them on dry ground. With the world's attention now engaged, a 1965 conference in Washington, D.C. called for a "World Heritage Trust" to combine conservation of natural and cultural sites. The Convention Concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage, its full title, was adopted in November 1972. JJ.

EXPLORING | Getting into the water

Energetic or leisurely boating around the bay

Ha Long Bay is one of those rare places where the name could not be more apropos. "Descending Dragon" is the English translation, a reference to the serrated cliffs and ridges that frame Vietnam's most fabled coast. It doesn't take much to imagine how the bay area got that tag: the bizarre, deeply eroded topography often resembles a giant dragon caving in the Gulf of Tonkin.

All told, the bay boasts more than 1,600 limestone islands, islets and sea stacks, some of them barely big enough for a single person to stand on and others twice the size of Manhattan. Millions of years of wind and wave action have carved them into myriad shapes and sizes — both above and below ground.

About three hours by road from Hanoi

and one hour via hydrofoil from Hai Phong, the waterfront area of Bai Chay, part of Ha Long City on the bay's northern fringe, is the jumping-off point for most bay area adventures.

Bai Chay has numerous hotels and a dock area from which the majority of Ha Long Bay trips depart.

The high-rise Novotel, with its dreamy bay views, is generally considered the town's best digs.

Nearly everyone who ventures to the area gets out onto the water somehow, most of them on the ubiquitous junks that feature on nearly every Ha Long Bay postcard, but an ever-growing number on kayaks, too.

The Hanoi branch of Active Travel Asia organizes three- and four-day guided kayak

expeditions on Ha Long Bay, and a five-day trip that combines kayaking with jungle trekking in Cat Ba National Park on the large eponymous island on the bay's southern side. Overnights and most meals are on-board a junk anchored somewhere inside or near the World Heritage Site.

"We are able to explore the open sea and many hidden lagoons and stalagmite caves that are difficult to access by any other means," says Jenny Nguyen of ATA. "Kayak experience would be appreciated. However, if you are a beginner, our guide can customize the route to meet your ability."

At the other end of the bay area, one can board sumptuous junks, like the Halong Violet, for two- or three-day cruises. The vessel is outfitted in "Indochine" style, with reproduction 1930s décor. Activities include kayaking, cave exploration, visiting secluded beaches and on-board tai chi sessions.

Diving is also possible, but not yet well developed compared to farther south in Vietnam. Underwater visibility generally runs up to seven to nine meters (23-30 feet), and during the main scuba season (April-December), water temperatures average 26 to 29 degrees Celsius (79-84 Fahrenheit).

For those more terrestrially inclined, there is plenty to do on land: hiking, rock climbing, wildlife watching and caving.

Hang Dau Go is the most famous cavern, an underground wonderland of copious stalagmites, stalactites and other geological oddities. Hang Sung Sot, on another bay island, has an enormous — 30-meter-high — main chamber.

Cua Van is the largest of four floating villages anchored around the bay. The 600 inhabitants make their living from fishing, aquaculture and showing visitors around their unusual maritime homes.

"It's possible to visit Ha Long Bay at any time of year," says Nguyen. "But the best time is from October through April. Although during the winter months, the weather can be cool and overcast with low visibility. During the summer months, temperatures rise and storms are more likely."

J.R.Y.

New chapter begins for an iconic timepiece

Created in 1931 for polo players, Jaeger-LeCoultre's Reverso had a unique characteristic: its revolving case allowed sportsmen to flip the dial around, exposing the metal back. This protected the crystal from shocks during matches.

The Reverso also brought another innovation: this case backing could be engraved to the wearer's personal specifications.

The archives at the Swiss manufacture house hundreds of Reversos that have been hand-engraved to their owners' desires. Throughout the years, Reversos have been hand-engraved with initials, family coats-of-arms or portraits in miniature.

Jaeger-LeCoultre's virtuoso craftsmen engraved the family crest on the Reverso belonging to King Edward VIII of England and set the itinerary of Amelia Earhart's first flight from Mexico to New York on hers.

This involves hundreds of hours of exceptionally close work, but it is performed routinely by the skilled artisans at Jaeger-LeCoultre.

The resulting personal relationships with a unique timepiece have made the Reverso an icon.

In 2011, for its 80th birthday, the Swiss manufacture will roll out new versions of the iconic timepiece, all of which update the original technology and aesthetics while remaining true to their roots.

For its new line, these master jewelers, engravers and enamellers — all truly decorative artists — will offer an even wider range of personalization possibilities, guaranteeing that each Reverso remains an exclusive, one-of-a-kind timepiece, writing the next chapter in its legend.

Experience the legend of the Reverso in a virtual exhibition on the Jaeger-LeCoultre Web site at www.jaeger-lecoultre.com. JJ.

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Visit the Tides of Time Web site for videos, interviews and more information on World Heritage marine sites: whc.unesco.org/tidesoftime/

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