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Craftily textured trips



The work of the hand is essential to Vietnamese culture and a special word exists to describe the creative work of the hand. 'Hoa Tay', literally translated as hand flower or flower hand, is used to describe the artistic and expressive hands of the 'dancer', the potter's hands that gives life and form to clay, or the sculptor's hands that impart soul and meaning to wood or stone.

From Arts and Handicrafts of Vietnam

Kate Armstrong

Art and craft tours focus on the fine arts including painting, sculpture, and drawing and the decorative arts such as ceramics, textiles, metalwork, and woodcarving. Whether quilters or ceramists, decorative art aficionados or weavers, practitioners and enthusiasts alike will experience colour and texture in tours that specialise in their craft.

Specialised and focussed, too, are the Australian and New Zealand tour leaders who work alongside local guides, university lecturers and artists to display, analyse and undertake handicraft and artistic endeavours of many kinds. The sizes of the groups are as varied as the crafts: quilting tours tend to have between 15 and 30 people, whereas textiles and pottery take around 12 to 15.

Most tour groups stay in comfortable (although not five-star) accommodation in various villages, towns and cities. You'll stay in

a place for a couple of days, so you don't have to constantly re-pack. Pack lightly in the first instance; a textile tour is bound to lead to a few surprise purchases.

Textiles

The literal fabric of society is its textiles: carpets, clothing and fabrics. From the Bayeux Tapestry to Turkish carpets, the traditions and designs of textiles reflect the religion, politics and history of the country. Textile tours tend to focus on those countries that continue their craft work as they have for centuries, in spite of technological advances and contemporary fashions and tastes. Turkey, Jordan and Syria have a strong tradition of carpet weaving using wool, cotton and silk, or a combination of all three. Some tours incorporate visits to carpet factories, where you can untangle the yarns of some of the more entertaining carpet salesmen, and buy a beautifully made product.

Vietnam, with its strong and flourishing tradition of fabric extending back several centuries, is another popular destination for craft tours. Today the traditional skills of Vietnam are as evident in weaving of the hill tribes as they are in the intricate silk embroidery of Da Lat.

With Australian leaders (usually experts in textiles) and local guides (students or museum curators), you can see a range of crafts. Each region you visit will focus on different fabrics and the methods for making and colouring them, using the indigo plant's blue in the north, and roots, leaves and mud to create different coloured dyes near Hanoi.

Throughout various regions, you'll see the different types of looms for weaving hemp, cotton, silk and reeds. You'll marvel at the primitive, but extremely effective mat-weaving technique: four posts in the ground and a warp and weft. Two people sit on the floor and in a smooth and coordinated action, one person beats the warp, while the other skilfully throws a piece of weft across. The reeds have been grown, harvested and dyed in the village and when woven, will be used for mats, blinds and screens. The looms vary as much as the type

of thread they're weaving. The clackety clack of wooden silk looms echo through villages, continuing the rhythm of centuries.

Tradition is intrinsic to Sapa, in the north of Vietnam, where people of the country's minority groups wear indigo-coloured clothing made of hemp. Growing wild on the hillside are the hemp plants. They undergo an extensive process: they are cut into short lengths, stripped to remove the fibrous thread which is twisted together into a continuous yarn before being woven on a simple wooden loom. The hemp fabric is soaked in the indigo liquid then removed to oxidise. This process is repeated up to 30 times to achieve the distinctive blue-black fabric. Lines of blue cloth hang over bamboo poles outside the wooden houses to dry. Similarly, elsewhere in the country, cotton and silk, are cultivated, processed, dyed and woven. Men and women then hand-sew the fabric, or manoeuvre it through the old treadle machines. The materials are then embroidered, batiked, beaded, pleated or appliquéd according to the local traditions. As you pass through the countryside, the country's patterns are revealed in the village craftwork: paper, drying incense sticks, rice paper sheets, conical hats (each hat is inserted with paper on to which a poem or painting has been drawn). In Hanoi, there is an area where streets are named after guilds that specialised in a craft, from paper making to silver smithing.

In Da Lat, the silk farmers and reelers show you the silk worms, feeding on mulberry leaves in baskets beside the houses. You will learn how the single silk thread is reeled from the cocoon, then taken north to the jacquard weavers who transform the thread into lustrous patterned fabric which is sold in Silk Street, Hanoi, or made up into sophisticated garments for export.

Hoi An is known as the town of dressmakers and tailors and is a fabric shopper's paradise. You can buy reams of the hand-dyed silk cloth, or for very little more, have it made up to a design of your choice. Many tourists take their own clothes to be copied. Or, you can leaf through the latest Vogue pattern books and fashion magazines, pick out a style, be measured and come back the next day to pick up your new wardrobe. There is fierce competition, and although women will befriend you on the street and take you to their stall in the market, you can choose from a wealth of shops. Silk-covered

sandals are a new booming local industry and your dressmaker will always have an uncle, brother or cousin who can make sandals to match your new outfit.

Threads, too, link visitors with the local Vietnamese. The locals are enthusiastic about showing you their processes when they learn of your common interest. Not only will you return with a suitcase of hemp, silk and cotton fabrics, but with an understanding and appreciation of what people do in their daily lives: the processes they use, and the precious and traditional craft skills that they continue to pass from one generation to another.

Ceramics and decorative arts

There's no chance of glazing over on a ceramics tour. Many tours encompass other decorative arts—antiques, furniture and homewares. And, as with the other art and textile-based tours, inherent to the decorative items are the social, political, religious and historical influences of the time. These tours tend to blend in a mix of cultural experiences, including visits to markets, museums and temples.

The Six Old Kilns of Japan in Tokonmae, Echizen, Bizen, Shigaraki, Tamba and Seto accommodate many kilns of all sizes. The sites assumed importance from the 15th century for the production of their aesthetically appealing, high-fired, unglazed functional wares. You will learn about the distinguishing characteristics between ceramics of the regions, such as why there are fire marks on Bizen ceramics. You will learn, too, of the relevance of cultural practices, such as how there are small shrines constructed adjacent to a kiln and offerings to the kiln gods to ensure successful firings. Along the way, you will meet potters who carry on traditional methods, as well as those who push the potential of clay in exciting new dimensions. You will enjoy the way the Japanese passion for ceramics is reflected in the way they incorporate their pottery into every day life: serving dishes, drinking vessels, vases for flower arrangements, and incense holders. You may encounter retaining walls or paths made from wares which did not meet quality controls and mosaics of broken pottery

pieces. There is even the possibility of the delightful surprise of fresh flowers decorating the public toilets.

Tours to Japan incorporate planned visits to museums and spontaneous invitations to tea ceremonies and other culturally-enriching activities. Some tours offer the added bonus of practical participation. Workshops at Tokoname afford the opportunity to produce works inspired by contact with historic and contemporary examples. Demonstrations by practitioners using techniques not widely-known extend the richness of this experience.

Turkish tiles are a feature of this colourful country. Tours generally factor in visits to tile and ceramics centres throughout the country, as well as to markets, mosques and minarets, and rugs and carpet shops. Most tours to Turkey visit Istanbul's Blue Mosque, renowned for its 20,000 handmade blue tiles all decorated with floral motifs, many of them from Iznik, or Nicea as it was known in Biblical times. Some tours to Turkey factor in visits to the Iznik Tile and Ceramic Research Centre, where tour members attend a lecture on the centre's glaze and firing research work. The research by students into the classical approach to the production of tiles has resulted in ceramic pieces that rival historic examples. (To avoid fraud, new tiles are made slightly differently from historic examples.) Participants also visit ceramic experts and ceramic artists in their private studios. Some potters have kilns incorporated into their homes, as is the case Karacasu, near Kusadasi. This small enclave is still operating as it has for over 1000 years. The potters prepare their own clay, and fire their work in their kilns which are incorporated into their red clay houses. Production is unashamedly practical yet has a distinctive charm. This community warmly welcomes other ceramic enthusiasts, but is in grave danger of being swallowed up in the relentless push of urban development.

Tours in Greece are focussed on museum visits; a necessary prerequisite to appreciate the glories of Greek ceramic history. Extraordinary examples are housed in archaeological museums throughout Greece, but some tours will take you to the Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens which displays some exceptional examples. Maroussi, on the outskirts of Athens, is home to the Association of Greek Potters. Although their current production reflects the

commercial demands, you can see echoes of historic elements in their work. Some tours will take the really dedicated potters to Crete where they can witness traditional making of *pithoi*, the large functional storage jars, spotted in Antipodean garden centres as ornamental accessories. You can compare and contrast current production with examples in the ruins at Knossos or in the museums at Heraklion. In Hania, the craft village of Eriginthos sponsors a group of contemporary artists, collectively making and selling their crafts, and forging a reputation as one of the finest facilities in Greece for craft artists.

Of course, no visit to Greece would be complete without a sojourn to the islands. Santorini has excavations at Akrotiri, with pottery from the site housed in a new museum at Thia. On Paros, local potter Katerina Photopoulos pushes the boundaries by working in porcelain, but using a *raku* technique to fire her works.

Vietnam, too, has a rich and flourishing tradition of pottery and ceramics, from the terracotta traditions of the low-fired pieces of the south, to the white clay and high-fired stoneware of the north. Mosaics, plant pots, lamp bases, tea pots and other domestic, table and decorative ware have been produced for centuries in the predominant blue and white, or the pale green or honey-coloured celadon, with its crackle glazes.

A tour will take you to both small workshops and large factories, where ceramic products are made for export. You will visit the old and dimly lit merchant houses of Hoi An, where huge wooden cabinets display the small blue and white ceramics. There is also a thriving industry in reproductions. Don't be put off by the word 'reproduction'. In art schools, learning how to reproduce ancient works is considered a high art form. Out the back, you'll witness pallets piled high with crates for export. In other, smaller family concerns, the children will sit wrapping bowls in paper in the backyard.

Quilting and embroidery

Those who do quilting and embroidery are *not* the archetypal bespectacled old women who bend over pieces of fabric with needles and thread. Quilters and embroiders include textile artists who exhibit

their fabric-based creations on gallery walls, and practitioners who tend to their craft for domestic enhancement. Anyone who appreciates the finer points of these skills can travel the world, particularly to the US, home of quilting, to be inspired by and learn from the productions of others.

Like a painting, a quilt's properties—its design, pattern, texture and colour—represents a pattern of political, social and religious thinking of both past and present. Evidence of appliqué, pieced or patchwork, and quilted materials were found in the clothing of the people in the early civilisations of Babylonia, China, Egypt, India, Palestine and Syria. The early American quilts were made by the pioneer women who, to protect themselves and family against the cold, joined together pieces of salvaged fabric from old clothes, and sewed these into designs.

The meaning behind the creations are as layered as the quilts themselves. Women made quilts to mark many occasions: births, marriages, coming of age, love, loss, friendship, war, colonisation, and celebration. They were made from treasured fabrics, with love and hours of care and devotion, as well as with threads of memories, hopes, dreams, and artistic aspirations. The friendship (or album) quilt is composed of signed or inscribed blocks sewn by different people and joined together to form a single piece; the Scripture quilt has blocks featuring embroidered quotes from the Bible, the freedom quilt was made for American boys in colonial times for their twenty-first birthdays. (As young women came to congratulate the young man, they presented him with a quilt made of scraps from their own gowns or specially made blocks. She who married him would keep the quilts.) The colours and the shapes of quilts (squares, triangles and diamonds) were chosen with care, to complement and match a range of blues, greens, reds, yellows, oranges and mauves.

Tour itineraries, too, are colourful and varied. Generally departing once a year, most trips go to the US. They generally encompass a visit to the major world Annual Quilt Fair in Houston or the mid-western town of Paducah, Ohio.

As the world's largest quilting exhibitions, the Paducah's American Society of Quilters Annual Quilt Fair and the Houston

International Quilt Festival, both house over 900 exhibitors displaying the latest quilting techniques, machines, fabrics, and quilts from all over the world. Several days enables you to browse through the stalls, view the exhibition and take classes (at an extra charge) on everything from creative machine embroidery to design and stitching.

On some trips, you also have a chance to visit the Amish communities of Pennsylvania, and famous textile and quilt museums, such as the Shelbourne Museum in Vermont. In New York, the only stitching you'll need to do is to your purse, especially once you're let loose to purchase items in the garment district, home to streets of retailers with fabrics, buttons and craft items.

Tips

- If you're having clothes made in Hoi An, Vietnam, don't forget that quality can and does vary. Lower those expectations and be prepared for a fitting and alterations to be made. Politely insist on cotton sewing thread and zip the same colour as the fabric and ask for seams to be finished on the inside.
- Pack light casual clothes and few extras! Hotels all provide cheap laundry facilities. You will come back with a suitcase full of items, but keep in mind the customs regulations. Many places will freight your goods for an extra charge.
- Be realistic about what you can buy. Pack fragile items in your hand luggage as things can and do, break. You don't want to ruin your holiday by worrying that your antique pot might meet a fractured end.