



A time and a place

Vietnamese fishing communities are being moved away from their traditional homes to make way for tourist development. But the determined explorer can still unearth the old way of life, writes David Evans.

A family of four, perched precariously on their moped, buzzes along the water's edge on a beach in Vietnam. A farmer ushers his herd of water buffalo onto the sand; the beasts crunch shells under hoof as they amble to fresh pastures.

As the sun begins to set and the heat of the day subsides, families with young children hunt for crabs in the shallows. The fishermen lay their nets out to dry on the sand or slap another layer of waterproof on the coracle they use to reach their boats moored off shore.

About 90 minute's drive north along the highway from the central coastal city of Nha Trang, a side road leads through the salt marches to Doc Let Beach. Here, the 4km stretch of sand offers a glimpse of a disappearing way of life.

In many Southeast Asian tourist hotspots, families who have made their living from fishing for generations have sold up and shipped out to make way for luxury resorts and holiday homes. Villagers have either decamped to towns in search of a new livelihood or been shunted off by powerful developers to a less hospitable bit of coastline.

While the suntan-lotion set has arrived at sleepy Doc Let Beach, the ocean still sustains a thriving community here.

I am staying at Paradise Resort, a collection of beach bungalows owned by a gregarious 80-year-old Frenchman. To say he owns this resort is only 49 per cent true. Under the country's property laws, foreigners can buy land only if a Vietnamese national is the majority owner after the transaction. Our host solved that problem by marrying

his then 25-year-old girlfriend in 1995. Today, he manages his large Vietnamese household (including his two young sons) through much good-natured shouting and waving of arms in a cacophony of French, Vietnamese and English. Meanwhile, he says, interest from developers is pushing up the price of the surrounding land.

The beauty of Doc Let Beach is not just its natural setting of sand-dunes and coconut palms, overlooking the clear waters of the South China Sea, but the bustle of the fishing village and the absence of large-scale development. Besides Paradise, there are few places to stay, especially when the weekend invasion of locals occurs. Come Monday morning, the beach is littered with the shells of mussels, crabs and oysters, all sold from small kitchens in a makeshift mess-hall that materialises for the Saturday and Sunday traffic.

The village, at the north end of the beach, is a haphazard collection of single-storey dwellings packed tightly together as it extends inland from the sand. Piped freshwater is fed into large wells in each yard. During the day, the men and women sit on the steps of their homes mending nets and smoking while children play in the dust. Everyone is eager to pose for photographs.

Down on the beach are two boat-builders with vessels in various stages of construction, from skeletal framed beginnings to brightly painted finish. One late afternoon, about 20 men shift a boat from the water's edge to dry ground for crucial repairs. Like pyramid builders moving a colossal stone block into place, they heave the vessel across the sand using a series of logs and planks. It



Pictures: Michelle Carrupt

Main picture: fishermen and their families mend their nets on Doc Let Beach. Above: a brightly painted boat – evidence that this is one of Vietnam's few remaining traditional fishing villages.

takes more than an hour of cursing and sweating. In the end, at some preordained spot, they drift off in various directions. There are no payment demands or handouts from the owner of the boat – whoever he may be. In this community, mucking in to help your neighbour is expected.

Doc Let is worth witnessing at first-hand, especially given the community could well be gone within 10 years. It's both relaxing and challenging; beautiful yet grubby. It's an imperfect destination but that's real life.

Getting there: Vietnam Airlines offers daily flights between Hong Kong to Ho Chi Minh City. Visit www.vietnamairlines.com. For Paradise Resort at Doc Let Beach, call 84 058 670480 or visit www.vngold.com/doclet/paradise/. Prices start at US\$12 per person, including three meals.