
LANDMARK HOTEL RETAINS MYSTIQUE OF COLONIAL VIETNAM

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"The first time Pyle met Phuong was again at the Continental, perhaps two months after his arrival. It was the early evening, in the momentary cool which came when the sun had just gone down, and the candles were lit on the stalls in the side streets. The dice rattled on the tables where the French were playing Quatre Cent Vingt-et-un and the girls in the white silk trousers bicycled home down the rue Catinat."

-- Graham Greene,
from "The Quiet American"

Saigon: It's a name redolent of mystique, of opium-puffing languor and the kind of decadence that once earned this city the nickname "Paris of the East." And few works of art have better captured this ambience than Graham Greene's "The Quiet American."

Even if you've never read Greene's 1955 novel about the last days of colonial Indochina, or seen the recent film adaptation starring Michael Caine, chances are you've heard of the Continental Hotel, the setting for much of the story's action and, in real life, a favorite haunt of foreign correspondents covering the French and American wars in Vietnam.

Many of the novel's other backdrops are gone -- or rather, renamed, like Saigon itself -- but the Continental lives on. A bit frayed at the cuffs, the hotel nevertheless preserves its old-world charm and a palpable sense of Vietnam's history. That, and its location in the city's heart, make the Continental an ideal base for exploring Ho Chi Minh City.

If you caught the 2002 film "The Quiet American," for which Caine received an Oscar nomination for best actor, you might be a bit confused when you arrive at the Continental. The opening scenes show Caine, as British journalist Thomas Fowler, having a drink on the Continental's outdoor terrace -- better known in its heyday by the nickname "the Continental Shelf."

But the real terrace bar was glassed in years ago and today is home to a rather uninspiring Italian restaurant. Nor does the Continental stand on the southeast side of the old Municipal Theatre, as it does in the movie.

What gives? Call it a bit of Hollywood magic. With its glass-faced Italian bistro and with high-rises looming behind it, the Continental simply doesn't look like it did in Greene's day. "From our research, the Hotel Continental was off-white or pale gray in all the photographs, and it's now painted an orangey/tanny/cream color," says the film's production designer, Roger Ford.

Cinematic tricks

So the filmmakers reconstructed the Continental's original facade across the street, in front of the 20-story Caravelle Hotel. It's just some of the sleight of hand used to resurrect the Saigon of 50 years ago; watch the film closely and you'll notice Caine and Brendan Fraser strolling past an awful lot of bamboo scaffolding, the better to camouflage modern restaurants and storefronts.

Renovations under way at the Continental reveal the arches and pillars of the original terrace. I asked a clerk if the hotel planned to bring back the Continental Shelf to capitalize on the buzz from the movie. She stared at me blankly, then explained the Italian restaurant is expanding. Apparently some people actually come to Vietnam to eat pasta.

The good news is, much of the hotel's original architecture is unchanged. Designed and built by the French in 1880, the Continental remains a trove of hardwood and high ceilings, complemented by such basic amenities as air conditioning and satellite TV.

There are a business center offering Internet access, a small fitness room and sauna and a tour desk to help you plan forays beyond the city. And though the terrace cafe is gone, you can still ease into a slice of colonial living at La Dolce Vita, the open-air bar in the Continental's orchid-laced inner courtyard. It's just the place to unwind with a good book.

Besides Greene, who stayed in Room 214, literati calling the Continental home have included French writer Andre Malraux and Britons Anthony Grey and Somerset Maugham. During World War II, and later in the 1960s, the Continental housed the Saigon bureaus of several Western news magazines and wire services, thanks to the fact that South Vietnam's National Assembly met in the old theater next door.

After the government fell to Communist forces in 1975, the hotel was closed for more than a decade. When it reopened in 1986, it was renamed the Dong Khoi ("Simultaneous Uprising," though nobody calls it that) and given a \$3 million face-lift that walled in the terrace and stripped away some of the character.

Like most of the city's big hotels, the Continental is owned by Saigon Tourist, a government-backed bureaucracy that still has a lot to learn about catering to Westerners. The hotel staff is friendly but, because of the language barrier, not especially helpful. When we e-mailed the reservation center in December, we were told the hotel was sold out during the March dates we planned to be in town. Fortunately, a Singapore-based

travel agency, AsiaTravel.com, was able to get us in, and at better rates than those offered by the hotel: \$52 per double, including tax and breakfast.

Your best bet for first-class service might be the five-star Caravelle, which has undergone extensive renovations in recent years and is co-managed by a Hong Kong resort company. Where the Continental beats its pricier cousin is in intimacy: It has only four stories and 86 rooms, making it easier to pretend you've slipped a few decades back in time.

And no place in Ho Chi Minh City tops the Continental's location. It's just 20 horn-honking minutes from Tan Son Nhat International Airport, and a 10 minute stroll from most of the city's premier sights.

Saigon has lost a lot of its colonial charm in the half-century since the French left; much of "The Quiet American" was filmed in the north of the country, in places such as Hanoi and Hoi An, where the slower pace of life has spared many old buildings. But most of what remains from that part of Saigon's past can be found on Dong Khoi Street, which runs along the Continental's northwest side.

During the war with the United States, Dong Khoi was known as Tu Do Street; and the French called it rue Catinat, the melodic moniker that threads throughout Greene's novel. By any other name, the boulevard is one of downtown Saigon's most important byways, wending from the river to old Notre Dame Cathedral.

Built in the late 1800s, the red brick cathedral is still an active house of worship. The service that I caught on our last visit was delivered in a mix of Vietnamese and English.

Across from the cathedral is another 19th-century landmark, the ornate post office. It's as much a place for gawking as for sending mail, with its vaulted ceilings, looming portrait of Ho Chi Minh and displays of revolution-themed stamps -- most of which, we were sad to learn, aren't for sale.

Remnants rehabilitated

A brief walk from the post office takes you to Reunification Hall, the former Presidential Palace of South Vietnam. You'll probably recognize the building from the famous footage of Communist tanks bashing through the front gates; today, it's a museum that's well worth visiting. Another architectural remnant from the last days of the war, the former U.S. Embassy, used to stand just a quarter mile up broad Le Duan Boulevard. But don't bother looking for it -- after Vietnam and the United States normalized relations in the mid-1990s, the old embassy and its bad karma were bulldozed away to make room for a bland modern consulate.

Back in front of the Continental, Dong Khoi intersects downtown's major east-west axis, Le Loi Boulevard, to form Lam Son Square. The square is dominated by the recently

spruced-up Municipal Theatre, which used to be the South Vietnamese assembly -- and, before that, the French opera house. *Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose* -- the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Cater-cornered from the theater and Continental sits the venerable Givral Cafe, the "milk bar" Phuong frequents in the novel. Now run by the government, it's still a great spot for ice cream. Head northeast on Le Loi and you hit a warren of small streets whose biggest tourist draw is the gin-joint Apocalypse Now. In recent years, it has grown up from a backpacker's bar to an upscale club that wouldn't seem out of place in San Francisco's SoMa, with booming hip-hop music and an Armani-suited bouncer.

Heading southwest from the square, Le Loi takes you past the Hotel de Ville, the ornate city hall built between 1901 and 1908. The hulking structure now houses the Headquarters of the People's Committee; plopped incongruously in front of the yellow gingerbread manse is a striking black statue of Uncle Ho.

Next to city hall is the Rex Hotel, another wartime institution. Its rooftop garden was the gathering place for U.S. military brass and jaded journalists to while away the evenings. Today, it's still the perfect spot to unwind with a cold "333" beer and watch the city zoom by below.

Just a few minutes farther on is Ben Thanh Market, the great covered bazaar proffering everything from fruit and fowl to hardware and hand-stitched tablecloths. Pick up something to nosh, then wander back to Lam Son Square. As the sun goes down, the plaza in front of the Continental comes to life with an armada of motorbikes bearing the city's younger generation, cruising and making the scene. It's a visible reminder that more than half of Vietnam's population is under 25 years old, and that the U.S. war -- and Graham Greene -- are ancient history.

The fact is, life wasn't so hot for most Vietnamese during Greene's day, when French colonizers took the choice real estate and American spooks played dirty tricks after dark.

Take a break from the musty echoes of empire to notice families cooking prawns on street-side grills after a hard day's work. The Continental may be Vietnam's past, but the hip young hordes streaming by on their motorbikes are the country's future.

Caption: PHOTO: KIM DELEVETT

The Continental is being renovated, temporarily revealing the arches and pillars of the original terrace.

MAGIC OF FILM EVOKES SAIGON OF 50 YEARS AGO

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Director Phillip Noyce's screen adaptation of "The Quiet American" was hailed as the first Hollywood movie shot in Vietnam since the war, but the \$30 million picture feels more like an art-house film than a blockbuster. Still, the movie's deceptively minimalist appearance belies a small fortune's worth of modern technology.

Production designer Roger Ford, who received an Oscar nomination for "Babe," took a moment to talk by phone from Australia's Gold Coast to share the secrets of how his team resurrected the Saigon of 50 years ago.

Q: You re-created the facade of the Continental Hotel, where much of the film is set, across the street instead of in the actual hotel. Why?

A: It was Phillip Noyce's choice to do that. We always had the problem of the Caravelle Hotel, which is a huge black box in the position of where we wanted to shoot. The other problem was that the Continental, even though we took down most of the neon signs and covered up all the air conditioning units on every balcony, still was the wrong color.

That gave us a chance to start completely fresh with the Continental and to make it into a more accurate representation of the 1950s. With the help of computer graphics, we built the first floor, or rather the footpath level of the hotel, around the front of the Caravelle. Then we put a layer of blue screen above the set, and the computer guys took out the Caravelle and built up the additional three or four stories and roof of the Continental Hotel and put the signage on it as it was in those days. And then they cleared out most of the buildings behind it and put in the river in the distance. An awful lot of work went into that hotel.

Q: How long did it take to build the ground floor, where the hotel bar is?

A: It's a big set. There was a really long stretch of the Caravelle that we covered up, right back to the entrance. Then because we obviously couldn't go into the bar, we had to re-create the footpath in the studio in Sydney, with the courtyard and bar behind. Half the scenes were shot looking out into the square, and half the scenes were shot in the studio, looking into the hotel, so you could see people behind in the windows.

Q: So you were shooting one half of the conversations on one continent, and the other half on another? That's quite a continuity challenge.

A: That's right. We intended to shoot in the courtyard of the real Continental. We took all their furniture out, we fixed up the bar, which is a bit modern, and it sat there for several days ready to film, and then for one reason or another they ran out of time in Saigon. It was all proving a little too difficult, and we said, "We'll have to build this in Sydney as a set."

Q: How did that work?

A: We did the modeling on the computer and in three-dimensional mock-up. These days you can have someone with a digital camera take a picture of the mock-up and e-mail it to Phillip in Saigon. We did a lot of work by e-mail.

Q: Were there other challenges?

A: There aren't many cities in the world where you get permission to shut down the main square for a week. Ho Chi Minh City is a really crowded city, and people constantly want to get from A to B. We were trying to control the crowds, some of whom wouldn't even know we were filming until they got past the barrier and walked into the shot.

We re-dressed something like 60 shops around the square back to a sort of period look. We paid them for their time, but a lot of them wanted to continue trading. Just when you thought you'd got it back to the period, you'd find a rack of T-shirts being pushed back on to the footpath.

Q: How much did all that cost?

A: I don't know what we paid for those locations in Vietnam. I do know that you pay quite a lot of money in Sydney if you want to put a camera on the street; you pay \$1,000 to the local council just to do that. And if you want to go into someone's house, you might pay up to \$2,000 or \$3,000 or \$5,000 a day, Australian dollars. But in Vietnam, of course everything costs a lot less. I remember we got to a school in the scene where Michael [Caine] and Brendan [Fraser] were in a kind of bunker. I was there with the local Vietnamese art director, explaining that we wanted to bring in rubble to make it look like a bomb had hit it. And they said, "Oh, we can demolish the classrooms." I said, "This would be unheard of in my country. How much is it going to cost?" He said, "Oh, about \$1,500 U.S." -- which is so cheap. They said, "Sure, knock 'em down, we'll rebuild it when you're done." We bulldozed a row of classrooms.

Q: So with all this demolishing and rebuilding, why film the movie in Vietnam at all?

A: The key location was the square in Saigon. For Phillip, I think the key was to be in the place where it happened, to be faithful to the story in that sense. And it was very important to him that we should film the bombs going off in the square.

Q: It's kind of ironic that in the quest for authenticity, you relocated the Continental to the other side of the square.

A: We wouldn't have got the atmosphere of that square and the scale anywhere else. We looked in Cambodia. We looked in Hanoi. But in the end we kept going back to Saigon because there's nothing quite like it.

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