



## Beyond Bat Trang

*Tired of pottery, Diana Bocco heads to Hanoi's lesser-known craft villages to see what else is out there. Photos by Francois Carlet-Soulages/Noi Pictures.*

OF THE OVER 1,000 CRAFT VILLAGES alongside the Red River Delta, at least half are within a fifty-kilometre radius of Hanoi. Some of these villages are organised in clusters, usually comprising a single craft or a combination of tasks that results in a single product or item. Others stand on their own and have become a geographical icon, such as in the case of Bat Trang, a ceramics village part of many popular day tours departing from Hanoi.

Large-scale companies have set up shop in some of the villages, bringing along machinery, modern tools and lower production costs. This has allowed some villages to remain alive and able to keep up with the high demand Hanoi imposes on artisans.

Other villages, however, have maintained their craftsmanship at a more pure level. In those towns, businesses are still family-based and very much at the heart of village life.

### ○ Pure at Heart

In Dai Bai, Gia Binh District, there are no signs to guide you. At least no signs a tourist could follow without speaking fluent Vietnamese. There are also no organised tours or public transportation to get you there. You find the village by following landmarks: an ornate gate, brick kilns, a pagoda in the distance. Once you're close enough, however, there's no mistaking it.

From half a kilometre away, you can hear the rhythmic, non-stop pounding of metal. You've just arrived at a metal beating village.

While you can probably find a map if you dig around online, it's hard to get lost in Dai Bai. The village's main hamlet, Xom Son, is located near a centuries-old pagoda, and is accessed through a blink-and-you-miss-it alleyway on the left side of the road. It's here, along the paved roads, that the true Dai Bai comes alive.

Metal beaters mostly work on their own patios or just outside their front doors. The gates, which are usually open, reveal several generations hitting metal together at a steady rhythm. Kids as young as ten are handed a hammer, while the older members of the family work on the melting and molding of the products. While Dai Bai is best known for its production of religious objects and kitchen items (particularly kettles and pots), the village is also a major producer of copper gongs. Foreigners are still a rarity here, and you are sure to get dozens of smiles (and a few offers to sit down to have tea) as you make your way along the narrow roads.

The lack of development does have a dark side: the green movement has not reached the village. This means that pollution in Dai Bai is high, as acids and trace minerals are washed into the local waters, making their way to the surrounding countryside. Fumes from the smelting metals are also a cause for concern, as is the constant high level





#### Ancient Arts (Left to Right)

Metal workers shape bowls and pots in the metal beating village; Artisans carve puppets and other religious features in the wood carving village.

of noise pollution. There's little awareness of the situation among locals, and chronic respiratory infections and disease are commonplace in the area.

#### Master Puppeteer

Another village that has stood the test of time is Du Du, in Thanh Oai District. As you drive into it, you'll see a series of modern-looking storefronts and workshops that have been open for less than a decade. To find the real Du Du, you need to resist the temptation of a shopping spree and instead continue into the first alleyway you see on the left.

Here too, it is sound that will guide you through the narrow labyrinth of brick alleys.


Traditionally, Du Du artisans specialised in religious art (carvings of Buddhas, mythical animals and a number of Chinese deities), but more modern requests (like wooden bead car seat covers) have now taken precedent and constitute a large part of the market.

Still, artistry is very much alive. Mr.

Nguyen Van Huy, a master puppeteer, is a sought-after craftsman who calls the village home. Now retired from his job at the water puppet theater, he still produces most of the dolls in use back in the city theatres. Behind the Chinese-inscribed gates and walls, many other artisans in Du Du still carve their statues entirely by hand.

The two villages have more in common than the sounds filling their streets. They are two of the few villages left that still

do most of their work by hand. Industrialisation is reaching in and trying hard to impose their mark on the locals, mostly on the younger generations who look for a way to produce more in less time. The vast majority of the villagers remain

tied to their roots, however, and can still be found pounding away to create some of the most astonishing works of art you can find in Vietnam. As one of the villagers said when I walked into Dai Bai, each item crafted here has its own story, its own spirit. And it's that spirit that is keeping the craft and the mystery of these villages alive. 

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