



Hoi An – or more accurately H?i An – is a quite charming place. Two places, in fact. The original is a small city on the coast of Vietnam, a UNESCO World Heritage site as a well-preserved example of a Southeast Asian trading port of the 15th to 19th centuries that is becoming a tourist destination and has long been an established stopover for backpackers.

And then there's the Vietnamese restaurant in the Shangri-La, also quite modest in scale and also well worth a return visit.

It's quite a small room; none of the Shangri-La's specialised restaurants are huge, and commendably it's not a crowded space, but the hard walls do reflect quite a lot of sound if the place is full. Or if there's one unusually noisy table, as we discovered on one visit...

It is however stylishly decorated with Vietnamese artefacts of probable authenticity (the collection of faded family photos is particularly sweet, though no-one seemed to know whose family they were) and some of the obligatory ornamental ceiling fans (the Shangri-La's air-con is perfectly up to the job, of course).

The first impressions are excellent, with some lovely smiles from the staff – most of whom are Vietnamese and apparently espouse the country's traditions of hospitality. Everyone looked genuinely happy to see us. It's the kind of thing that makes you like a restaurant (or a job interview, or a bus journey, or indeed a date) even before you get stuck into the business end. The maitre d' isn't Vietnamese, as it happens, but he was equally amiable and professionally knowledgeable. We invited him to recommend the meal, to find out what the restaurant thinks it does well, and he came up trumps.

The amuse bouche didn't, as it happens – a sushi-ish roll with a nubbin of sea urchin that wasn't especially tasty but it was all uphill from there. A mixed starter really got the juices going: a kind of rice-paper spring roll with vegetables and prawn and a surprising hint of mint, a crunchy lobster ravioli, beef satay with a nice chilli hit, and a totally triumphant crab cake that tasted as though there was twice as much crab in it.

Then came a hot and sour prawn soup, traditionally a very wet experience with all the taste in the broth. Not this time: there was one giant prawn and several slightly smaller siblings, competing with a forest of bok choy and other vegetables in an almost buttery soup. If you think that sounds like a tasty meal in itself, you'd be right.

After the interesting though rather sweet intercourse palate-cleanser – a jackfruit sorbet (and you never thought of using jackfruit in a sorbet, did you?) the main course was steamed sea bass wrapped in a banana leaf. This is an authentic Pacific-rim way to cook fish, and it's definitely one of the best methods. Sea bass is not a fish that takes well to too much messing around, and this simple approach was spot on. True, the angel-hair noodles included in the package didn't add too much, and the flavourings included slightly woody lemongrass and

perhaps too little chilli; but the sea bass was firm, moist and very tasty. We finished with a signature dessert, mango soup (a runny purée) with coconut ice cream and a pistachio wafer. A bit sweet for this reviewer's tastes, but a surprisingly good combination. So, the food was good: but it's the welcome that keeps us coming back to this restaurant. Sometimes attentive service can feel slightly institutional, where the guests aren't allowed to do anything for themselves in case they accidentally stab a fork into their eye or drown in their Perrier. At Hoi An the service is conscientious and courteous, but it's all done with a smile and good grace: you feel it's because they'd like to treat you as a friend. It's top-end Asian with prices to match; but somehow it all seems worth it.

What? Hoi An

Where? Shangri-La

How much? AED 350 per person

Why? Good food, great welcome

Why not? More chilli next time please

Rated: 8/10

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