

Catering to Expats in Hoi An, Vietnam

By Sarah Aldrich



“My neighbours are great people,” says Michele North of her new home in Hoi An, Vietnam. “I love the community connection. My children can go anywhere in this town, and everyone knows them.”

Located on Vietnam’s central coast, Hoi An is known for its well-preserved old town. A busy trading port until the river silted up in the 19th-century, the city’s melting-pot history is reflected in its architecture. You’ll see wooden Chinese shophouses and temples, pastel-painted French colonial buildings and ornate Vietnamese-style houses.

Michele and her husband, Gordon, planned only a three-month visit to Vietnam with their two children in 2010. But almost six years later they are still here, running their successful business, the Dingo Deli. A Hoi An institution, they cater to expats and the many travellers that visit the town.

Michele spent many years working in the hospitality industry, and striking out on her own “was always a dream that I never thought possible in the Western world.” Vietnam’s lower costs, both for upfront investments and to maintain a staff and space, have allowed her dream to become a reality.

Hoi An’s expat community is growing, with people coming from all over the world. And it is not surprising—Hoi An is close to white-sand beaches and its beguiling riverside locale makes for a laidback lifestyle.

“Expats are my bread and butter and tourists are my cream,” says Michele. “We fill the cravings of those who want a break from noodles and rice. You’re dreaming about what you’re missing from home, and I want you to come in and have exactly that: big, wholesome Western meals.”

If Michele is standing at the counter when you’re buying a can of pinto beans (that you haven’t been able to find anywhere else in town), she’ll ask you what you’re planning to cook. When you tell her tacos, she’ll ask if you want sour cream and go searching for it before you’ve given her an

answer—because she knows you can’t find sour cream anywhere else.

It’s clear that Michele and Gordon go above and beyond to foster a sense of community. “I’m the foodie, he’s the designer,” Michele explains. But it’s much more than food, beautiful tiles and comfy couches. Michele loves to give travel tips. After all, who wouldn’t buy a cup of coffee from a woman who tells you how to get the best deals in town, or what neighbourhoods to look at for a new long-term rental? Plus, they built an entire adventure playground behind the deli. “The children love it,” explains Michele.

“Every day is beautiful and fascinating.”

Their success is partly due to timing. Michele estimates that there were 150 restaurants in Hoi An when they opened five years ago. Now there are over 600. They were able to use their first three years to build their business and reputation before the market became competitive. Business opportunities still exist, however: there are now 600 hotels and homestays in the area, most of which have opened in the past couple of years. The key to success, as in all marketing, is being different.

“I was the first corner store,” Michele says. “But then other places opened up that were willing and able to make smaller margins. So I changed my business angle to make a lot of things from scratch.”

Whilst she’s had to recruit staff to handle the in-house cooking and baking, even her most skilled employees are happy with a wage far less than she’d pay in Australia. Yet, Michele warns that it’s important to understand cultural differences, and her anecdotes are full of times when her patience, perseverance and ingenuity have been tested.

“I found out quickly that it’s good to give my employees three days off for

Fresh ingredients can be gotten all over Vietnam at affordable prices.

the Tet holiday, and that Vietnamese staff don’t typically give notice,” Michele says. “Something that’s worked well for me is targeted monetary incentives—it can motivate the staff to self-manage.”

Many restaurants, bars, and shops choose to open in Hoi An’s Ancient Town, where tourist traffic—and therefore rent—is high. That wasn’t necessary for Dingo Deli—they’ve been able to locate out of town, where the expats live and where rent is more affordable. They’ve leased their space for six years. Lower business operating costs allow them to rent a three-storey family home with a pool. And Michele and Gordon can afford a cleaner, something that they never had in Australia.

Michele and Gordon’s children have benefited from the move also. “Teenagers are so innocent here,” she says. “I love that my children can’t hang out at shopping centres. They have complete confidence in themselves and have had the chance to figure out who they are. And they have developed such a love of learning.”

Michele, her husband and their teenage children are all dual citizens of Australia and Canada. The businesses are in Gordon’s name, so he has a temporary residence card that he pays to renew every three to five years. Visas and residence cards vary in price depending on a number of factors. It is advised to research options based on your particular circumstances. Michele and her children extend their visas in-country or head back to Australia or other parts of the world for renewals.

When she isn’t working, Michele enjoys riding her scooter out of town, and once did a six-day road trip with her niece up the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

“Vietnam is so cool because it’s still ancient in many ways,” says Michele. “Every day is different and beautiful and fascinating...I can’t see us leaving anytime soon.” ■