



# From coffee house to **café** culture

■ Sarah Gray

Coffee houses have been a fixture in Vietnamese society for hundreds of years. The potent elixir was first introduced by the French in the mid 1800s, and the Vietnamese fully embraced the activity of chatting over a cup, now evident by the large number of small coffee houses dotting the streets of Vietnam's big cities.

The modern Western notion of a café, however, as a place to while away the hours surfing on a laptop, listening to some live music or meeting for lunch, is relatively new in Hanoi. And with traditional Vietnamese coffee served either black and bitter or syrupy sweet, many foreigners find themselves looking for a cup and a place that complements their tastes from home.

This has not gone unnoticed in Vietnam's capital, and cafes are sprouting up to meet the demands of these foreigners, and a younger generation of Vietnamese, intrigued by the more artsy and open vibe of a new breed of cafes.

## The Old

Puku Café & Bar has been around longer than most in Hanoi. According to Daragh Halpen, first a longtime regular of Puku and now a Co-Owner, Puku started

in 2001 as an "attractive little café tucked away in the back that developed a cult following" amongst expats in Hanoi.

Back then, Puku was one of the few places serving Western food in the Old Quarter. It has now grown into a café and bar serving food, drinks and all manner of entertainment and culture around the clock.

Perhaps the only café in Hanoi open 24/7, Puku hosts a range of cultural events, which Halpen says is all part of 'creating a homey feel and being open to the community.'

During any given week, Puku can be hosting live acoustic music, the Hanoi Writers' group, a group devoted to learning Vietnamese, and 'Toastmasters', which helps people improve their public speaking skills. Halpen explained that soon they will get satellite TV and start screening football matches upstairs.

When asked if perhaps Puku was wearing too many hats, Halpen said that as long as the café has the space to be open to the community, it will offer it. It's all part of the 'neighbourhood feel' the owners aim to create and maintain.

'We serve some of the best coffee in town', Halpen said. 'But at the end of the day, Puku is a café - not just a coffee house.'

