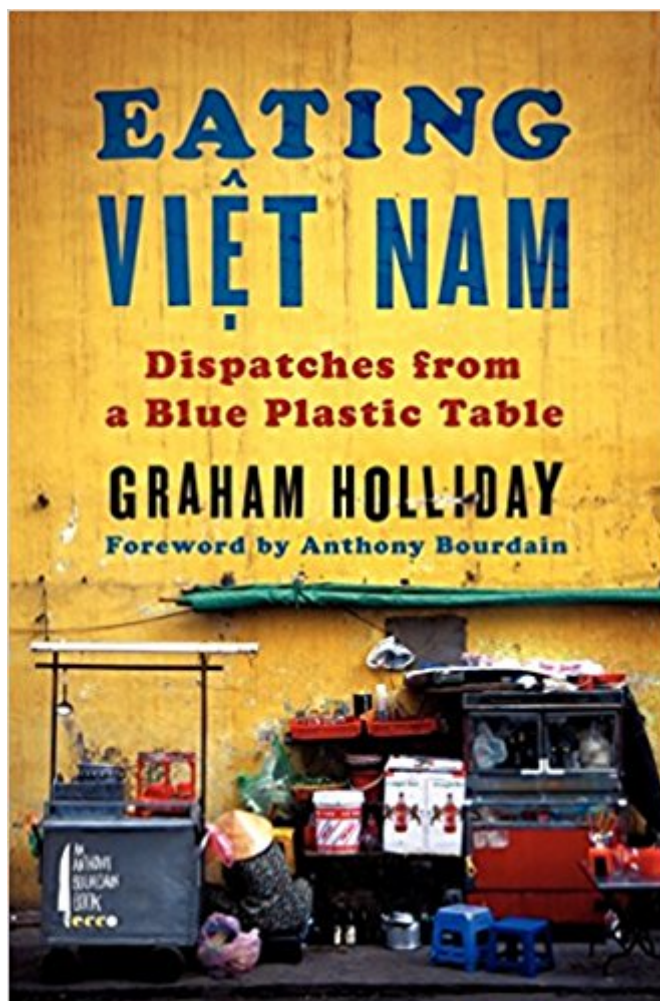


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Eating Viet Nam: Dispatches From A Blue Plastic Table



Synopsis

A journalist and blogger takes us on a colorful and spicy gastronomic tour through Viet Nam in this entertaining, offbeat travel memoir, with a foreword by Anthony Bourdain. Growing up in a small town in northern England, Graham Holliday wasn't keen on travel. But in his early twenties, a picture of Hanoi sparked a curiosity that propelled him halfway across the globe. Graham didn't want to be a tourist in an alien land, though; he was determined to live it. An ordinary guy who liked trying interesting food, he moved to the capital city and embarked on a quest to find real Vietnamese food. In *Eating Viet Nam*, he chronicles his odyssey in this strange, enticing land infused with sublime smells and tastes. Traveling through the back alleys and across the boulevards of Hanoi where home cooks set up grills and stripped-down stands serving sumptuous fare on blue plastic furniture he risked dysentery, giardia, and diarrhea to discover a culinary treasure-load that was truly foreign and unique. Holliday shares every bite of the extraordinary fresh dishes, pungent and bursting with flavor, which he came to love in Hanoi, Saigon, and the countryside. Here, too, are the remarkable people who became a part of his new life, including his wife, Sophie. A feast for the senses, funny, charming, and always delicious, *Eating Viet Nam* will inspire armchair travelers, curious palates, and everyone itching for a taste of adventure.

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Customer Reviews

"Holliday writes with exhilaration [his] loving, laddish descriptions will make gonzo gourmands salivate." (The New York Times Book Review)

“Graham Holliday is one of the great gastronomists, a charming and intrepid try-anything explorer who makes the rest of us food writers feel hopelessly inadequate (and woefully underfed). You’d be a fool to delve into Vietnam’s spectacular cuisine without him as your guide.” Peter J. Lindberg, editor at large, Travel & Leisure A journalist takes us on a colorful and spicy gastronomic tour through Vietnam in this entertaining, offbeat travel memoir. Growing up in a small town in central England, Graham Holliday wasn’t keen on travel. But in his early twenties, he saw a picture of Hanoi that sparked his curiosity and propelled him halfway across the globe. An ordinary guy who liked trying interesting food, he moved to the capital city and embarked on a quest to find real Vietnamese food. In *Eating Vietnam*, he chronicles his odyssey in this enticing, unfamiliar land infused with sublime smells and tastes. Funny, charming, and always delicious, *Eating Vietnam* will inspire armchair travelers, those with curious palates, and everyone itching for a taste of adventure.

As a Vietnamese living abroad, I am always curious about others’ experience and perception of Vietnamese culture. I have to say, I enjoyed reading Mr. Holliday’s book very much. His observation of street food culture in Vietnam is both accurate and hilarious. I thoroughly enjoyed the chapter about the cultural differences between North and South. My parents were from the North, but I was born and raised in the South, and the difference between North and South Vietnamese cooking philosophy permeated in every home cooked meal. They would diligently explain how the same dish was cooked differently in each region. Street food was an important part of any Vietnamese growing up. Reading Mr. Holliday’s book brought back a lot of happy memories of the olden days. Although, I would say that this book is strictly about street food. Most of the dishes that the author held dear to his heart are not easily replicable at home (both for the economical and taste reasons). Two important parts of Vietnamese cuisine that Mr. Holliday didn’t explore are the Hue cuisine (imperial cuisine as well as street food), and Vietnamese home cooking. He readily admitted that in his book. Vietnamese home cooking is rich in varieties and taste. Hue’s cuisine is more complicated and time consuming in the preparation process, which, in my experience, makes it hard to find a decent restaurant outside of Vietnam that can recreate the taste. I am sad that Mr. Holliday left Vietnam before he could explore these parts of our cuisine. His curiosity, coupled with the journalistic due diligence he did in learning about the food sources and culture transpire in this book. He delivers a fair and accurate view of a part of our culture that a native Vietnamese like me can appreciate. I would recommend this book to anyone who wants to learn more about Vietnam.

I read this book in two days, despite work and at the expense of sleep. There are flaws: it sometimes feels disconnected, and there's no real narrative arc as it's the chronicle of someone chasing their white whale over a period of ten years. Still, it is the only Vietnam travel book that I have read that treated the place with real respect, a lack of pseudo-mysticism, and also managed to teach me about new dishes I haven't tried. My wife's reaction: "Oh? Yeah, I guess you really haven't tried that. It's a HÃfÂ NÃfÂjÃ Â»Ã â„çi dish." I don't understand the criticisms of the author in some reviews on Goodreads, saying that he treated the Vietnamese "paternalistically" or that he fits the stereotype of the "white traveler." It does disappoint me that he didn't learn more of the language during his time there--at one point he said that he didn't learn what "mang" meant in mang Ãfâ Ã â î vÃfÂjÃ Â»Ã Â•--but it seems a bit silly to criticize him as though he is simply a tourist with no connection to the place.

As a Vietnam visitor beginning in 1996, and a former semi-expat there, I have huge respect for Graham's work and for his former blog Noodlepie. What a great thing he's done in uncovering the culinary delights of Vietnamese food and in particular, the "street food" of the (formerly) ubiquitous carts and streetside sellers of Saigon. (As an aside, in my early trips there, I always ate from the street sellers and sat on their teeny plastic stools without hesitation, and like Graham I was normally the only Westerner at any given cart or hole-in-the-wall restaurant. But in no way did I do this with the focus and determination that Graham did with Noodlepie.) In any case, this book is a departure from those excellent exploratory missions. It's more of a story about how Graham came to develop the Noodlepie blog, and why. For me - a reader of the blog for years - it's an interesting background story and it may also be very interesting to those not familiar with Noodlepie. It's very well written, engaging, and provides a lot of insight into the cuisine of Vietnam, particularly what makes it so unique and so great. Unfortunately - and as Graham anticipates in the book - most of the streetside food sellers of downtown Saigon have been pushed off the streets and sidewalks and into storefronts or restaurants if they're to be found anywhere at all. That's a shame - although Vietnamese of my acquaintance think it's a good thing and that ridding the downtown streets of Ma and Pa food carts makes the city more advanced and "sophisticated". Still, on a very recent trip I very much missed the early morning pho carts at the back of the Hotel Rex, and I couldn't find a decent streetside bahn mi anywhere in District 1. Truly disappointing, and something that Graham discusses in this book. But all is not lost, and there's a good book or blog to be written yet again. Because outside of Saigon's District 1, and venturing further into the ex-urban and rural streets of

Southern Vietnam, there remains a thriving and ubiquitous street food market that offers everything and anything formerly offered in Saigon, and much that is not. I kind of wish that Graham had ventured 20 kilometers outside of Saigon to write about those places, which as before are ubiquitous, awesomely good, and cheap. There is little question that the people of Vietnam still love excellent and tasty cuisine. I wish Graham had written a little more about those places.

Whether it is your first time in Viet Nam or your next time, this is a guide that can unlock some of the mysteries of Vietnamese street food. Entertaining, informative and passionate, the author does a wonderful job of boldly going down the alleyways and peeking under the pot lids that many are too intimidated to do themselves. I have traveled to Viet Nam and have been lucky enough to have patient and informative local guides to show me the good, the bad and the quintessential dishes of this vibrant culture. This book brought back amazing tastes, warm encounters and funny faux pas I have experienced over the years. For better and for worse, I am richer for the experiences and flavors of my travels in Viet Nam. I feel the same about this book. Thank you Mr. Holliday! I am going to Viet Nam this Fall with my wife and a niece who have never been there and I am re-reading the book to take notes on specific foods and locations in Hanoi. The places might change but I share the authors wish that the menu will be eternal. Chuc suc khoe!

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