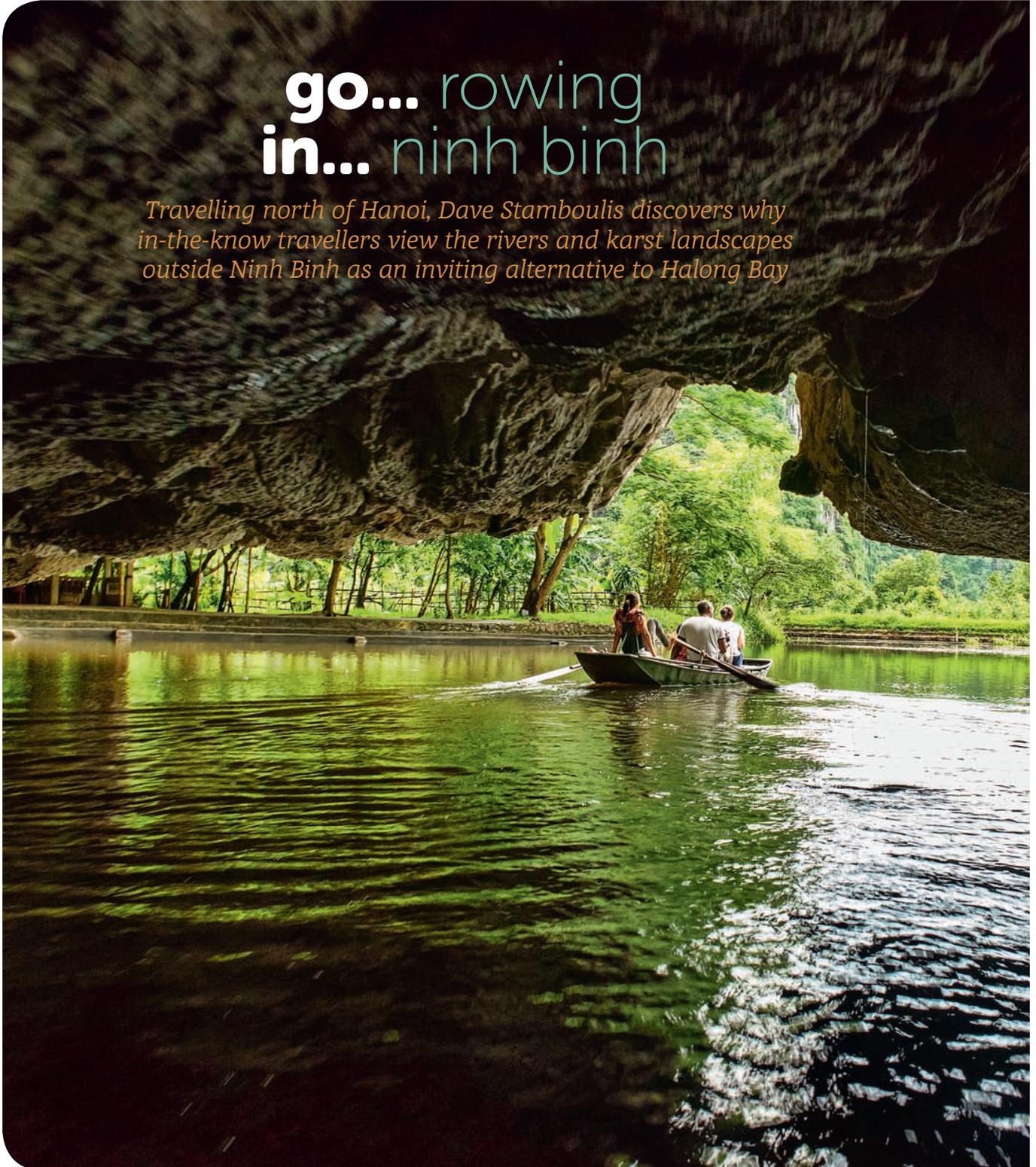


go... rowing in... ninh binh

Travelling north of Hanoi, Dave Stamboulis discovers why in-the-know travellers view the rivers and karst landscapes outside Ninh Binh as an inviting alternative to Halong Bay





A boat ride offers majestic views of North Vietnam's lesser-known city



Most visitors to Hanoi make a beeline for Halong Bay – the popular UNESCO World Heritage Site – to spend the night aboard a houseboat gazing at the seascape of limestone karsts. But ask any local from the North where their top domestic travel choice is and they'll tell you about Ninh Binh, popularly referred to as the "Halong Bay of the Mountains".

A Vietnamese friend in Hanoi had promised me that Ninh Binh was the "real" Vietnam – more beautiful than Halong Bay, with similar mountain scenery (minus the salt water, of course) and just a fraction of the number of visitors.

I was sceptical but it turned out that she was right. While the city of Ninh Binh is just a noisy pit stop for long-distance buses and trucks plying the busy Highway 1, jagged limestone mountains rise from a pastoral setting just 10km away. Locals here make their living growing rice, raising ducks and rowing boats with their feet. Yes, that's right, rowing boats with their feet. »



encounters



Once you've captured the views from the water, hit the road on a bike and observe locals at work

The Ngo Dong River weaves through the mountains here, offering postcard perfect scenery. A boat ride is an exciting way to enjoy the landscape as you travel through pitch-black caves and grottoes. The locals have learned to navigate the small rowboats with their feet, a stunt that leaves their hands free for eating and drinking while drifting along.

Vinh, a wise-cracking boatman who has been taking me around for several days, says that

rowing is a new job among men here due to growing domestic and foreign tourism. He says that he misses farming although he earns good money as a boatman.

"My wife doesn't bother me anymore when I want to relax with a drink," he tells us with a wink. As we drift into one of the river's eerie dark cave complexes, he pulls out a bottle of local rice whiskey and several shot glasses and proceeds to pour us a drink as he rows the boat in his unique style.

Back on land, you can rent a bicycle and pedal past rice paddies to the rarely visited Hang Mua Temple, named after a cave located in the mountain. The pagoda can be reached by climbing some 500 steep steps. Pilgrims come here during festival times but otherwise the place is deserted. A lone caretaker stands by the entrance to collect the entrance fee from the few tourists who make it here. »



encounters



The ascent to the pagoda is hot and sweaty, but you'll be rewarded with one of the best views in Ninh Binh. From one side, there's a view of rice paddies with limestone needles and pinnacles rising from the ground while the other gives you a scenery of the Tam Coc, farmland and grottoes.

The small village surrounding the pier at Tam Coc is fairly nondescript, with a tiny outdoor market full of vendors selling food and produce to the locals, a ticket counter and a few simple restaurants and bars. Linger is de rigueur here, as it takes some time for the cooks to whip up a plate of *thit dê*, a local speciality of goat's meat barbecued with lemongrass and ginger.

Reflecting on the day's events, it hits me that a leisurely riverboat trip followed by a mountain workout and a delectable plate of goat is far better than tackling the tourist hordes at Halong Bay. 

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TRAVEL TIPS:

Ninh Binh can be reached in 2.5 hours by public buses from Hanoi's Giap Bat bus station or more conveniently by tourist minibuses via Open Tours (sinhcafe.com) from Hanoi's Old Quarter. The caves and rivers of Tam Coc are 7km from the city and an overnight stay is recommended. Stay at Chez Loan (tel: +84 (0)94 8577322, chezloantamcoc.com), a comfortable, home-style guesthouse in the middle of the rice paddies just minutes from the pier; it's peaceful and quiet. Try the goat dish here – the owner of Chez Loan is a gourmet chef who also runs cooking classes.

The Ngo Dong River trip is the main tour, but the nearby Trang An Grottoes are also an excellent boating option, with more caves for you to explore. It's well worth climbing the hundreds of steps at the Hang Mua Temple, 5km from Tam Coc, for the stupendous views. Within striking distance of Ninh Binh is Kenh Ga, a floating village with hot springs.

Local hotels and guesthouses can arrange tours and transportation for the day, and they also rent out bicycles if you'd like to explore the area on your own.

