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# Vietnam's Le Cong Khieu Street,

a treasure trove of ephemera,  
trinkets and artefacts

Vietnam is fast becoming a favourite holiday destination and for the collector many delights await. As with all travel experiences it is best to be prepared, especially when visiting an exotic locale. In part one of this series Dennis Coleman's essential tips go a long way to making your experience stress free

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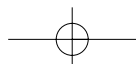
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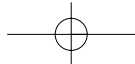


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Impressive bronzes, French Art Nouveau lampshades and timepieces, ancient Vietnamese and Chinese artefacts – if you're on the lookout for ornamental treasures or just a leisurely eye-candied stroll, then Le Cong Khieu Street in old Saigon (near the landmark Ben Thanh Market) off Pho Doc Chinh Street beckons. But this is where the drooling and fantasising needs to be tempered. As with any overseas excursion, when it comes to buying in unfamiliar surrounds *caveat emptor* needs to be the mantra.

The street itself is not overly long. It's your call whether you traverse it in ten minutes or whether you spend several hours rummaging through the extensive paraphernalia. Without being dismissive of the dealers, many of whom I have built up good working relationships with, my advice to the holiday maker is to enjoy browsing, much as you would enjoy unearthing the contents of your grandmother's attic. But unless you really know what you're looking at, confine your buying to low risk or low cost items.





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By following these few ground rules, exploring Le Cong Khieu Street will be a pleasant experience. Firstly, avoid shops which actively harangue you to enter and buy. Next, bypass those that have a massed display of similar objects as it is fair to assume these are mainly 'made-yesterday' items. Dealers with a demure and laid-back attitude are often more likely to carry some authentic items as well as a range of reproductions.

I suggest a visit to number 21 with the pink Vespa parked outside. Another shop that could be interesting is about ten doors down near the school. Look for the bronze cupids holding lamps over the doorway.

If your knowledge is limited, enlist the support of someone who can help and advise and preferably converse in Vietnamese. Taking along a Vietnamese friend or interpreter will not be of much use unless they have some appreciation and knowledge of the items in question.

Knowing the right questions to ask will also eliminate wasting time on new pieces. For example, any dealer who responds with 'some hundreds of years' to a question about the age of art deco styled statuary or glassware, is deemed worthy of a polite parting.

Likewise, referring to Zippo lighters as being from *the war*, should not be taken seriously. Sweeping statements about country of origin or objects being from shipwrecks are suspect. Look for dealers who differentiate between reproductions and originals, or who can give more complex responses in terms of origin and style.

Having determined where you want to focus your attention and

deciding the items are as described, the next step is price. But be aware that there are other considerations such as customs, or if wired whether the item conforms to Australian codes. To avoid disappointment consider exquisite oil lamps and candelabras fitted with original glass shades. Some are held aloft by a bronze cupid or other neo-classically inspired forms; others are cradled in ornate hanging ceiling arrangements.

Miraculously, many glass shades, be they of primrose pink, elegant green citrine or of opaque white Vaseline glass, have survived the ravages of war and even the rubbish tip, having been discarded because they are deemed old. Do check the items carefully as they may be a composite of old and new.

Then there are the challenges of cartage, fragility and customs. It is important to be well-prepared. Research before leaving home, so that if this is where your collecting interests lie and you are looking to buy items that do not fit into your hand luggage, there will be no unpleasant surprises or complications leaving you out-of-pocket.

Visit [www.travelbug.gov.au/](http://www.travelbug.gov.au/) to find out what can be brought into Australia. Items made of wood, other plant material or animal products must be declared and inspected by Quarantine. Be aware that lacquered wood could still harbour live insects able to bore through the item and escape. Look for signs of borer holes or other forms of insect damage.

Next issue: Part two – identifying French 19th-early 20th century glass, bronzes and collectable ephemera.



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1 Mixture of European neoclassical lamps together with traditional ornaments

2 Collection of artefacts from shipwrecks near Hoi An

3 Eclectic display

4 French 19th century mantle clock

5 Closing a deal

6 Signature pink Vespa outside 21 Le Cong Khieu Street

7 The approach to Le Cong Khieu Street

8 Unusual display companions – a Buddha cast in bronze with a candelabrum

9 Ornaments made by local craftsman showing a French influence

10 Imitation Gallé lamp

11 Figure of a nymph cast in bronze

