



Planting for Peace

While its war with America may be long over, Vietnam is still dealing with unexploded ordnance at an all-too-high cost. Now, as **Veronica Inveen** discovers, there are safe ways any visitor can help out.

FROM LUXURY HOTEL openings on former prison island, Con Dao, to a growing man-made skyline in mountainous Sapa, Vietnam's development is unremitting. Buzzing with tourists and an energy equivalent to that of its vivacious street vendors, Vietnam has more than moved on from its tumultuous past. Still, in the less-roamed countryside of the nation's central provinces, the legacy of war is difficult to ignore.

Less than an hour's drive north of the imperial capital Hue is Quang Tri province, an agricultural region straddling the Demilitarized Zone that separated North and South Vietnam until 1975. It was here in Quang Tri, a mere 4,745 square kilometers in total, that more than 40 percent of all the 7.8 million

tonnes of ordnance used during the American War were dropped. Of that number, the best estimates have it that between 10 and 30 percent failed to detonate.

A drive through the province reveals little other than a land of great natural beauty with pristine beaches boasting powdery sand to the east, and misty, verdant peaks along the border with Laos to the west. Indeed, time has helped heal the region of its wounds, but even today, more than 40 years after the war's end, nearly 85 percent of the land in Quang Tri remains riddled with land mines, bombs, grenades and other unexploded ordnance (UXO). In the small province, it remains a grim fact of life: UXOs have resulted in more than 4,000



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Trained Peace Trees workers; once found, ordnance is carefully disposed of; planting trees not bombs.



casualties since the fighting stopped in 1975.

While the number of UXOs in the province is still strikingly high, fatalities in Quang Tri have been steadily declining with efforts by the Vietnamese government and international organizations to clear the area of ordnance.

Peace Trees, founded by the sister of an American veteran who died in combat in the war, is the first U.S. organization permitted to sponsor humanitarian demining efforts in Vietnam and is one of the groups making progress in not only returning the land to safe use but also cultivating a brighter future for families in Quang Tri. By educating children on how to recognize and avoid unexploded devices, offering direct assistance and resources to victims of land-mine accidents, planting trees in devastated areas, and building libraries and schools, they are slowly but surely restoring hope.

Join one of Peace Trees' clearance teams on a Friday morning, and the

core work of the organization becomes boomingly evident. At exactly 8 a.m., at two different sites in Quang Tri, between 60 and 300 UXOs that have been collected throughout the week and carefully transported to the demolition site are safely detonated.

The painstaking efforts have paid off: 2018 was the first year since 1975 that there were no accidents from explosive remnants of war in Quang Tri. While the dangerous clearance work is done by 102 Peace Trees-trained workers, ordinary volunteers are invited to take part by planting indigenous trees around the region. In Dong Ha, Quang Tri's capital city, travelers can see the work first-hand at their landmine education center or project sites. There may not be any luxury resorts, but helping a community unshackle from the horrors of the past and recultivate its natural beauty in a place still untouched by tourism is its own kind of five-star experience. peacetreestvietnam.org 📍



FROM TOP: Vietnamese children at a school near Dong Ha; the serious work of removing explosives; planting indigenous trees at a primary school in Quang Tri.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: VERONICA INVEEN (2); ROBERT PAETZ