

A Retreat Outside of Hanoi



Justin Mott for The New York Times

Looking for a retreat in the mountains outside Hanoi, the American writer Nguyen Qui Duc bought a 500-square-meter (5,400-square-foot) plot of land in 2007. He designed an loft-style home and had it built by local artisans. [More Photos >](#)

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TAM DAO, Vietnam — At the turn of the last century, Vietnam's colonial rulers chose the lush hilltop town of Tam Dao to build their summer homes and resorts. When Hanoi's temperatures soared, the French came here to enjoy the cool mountain air, walk in the pine forests and gaze at the dramatic vistas.

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Inside, Duc has a living area of about 100 square meters (1,075 square feet) and just outside, an infinity pool. [More Photos](#)

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The American writer Nguyen Qui Duc has settled in Tam Dao for many of the same reasons. "I get a sense like I did when I was 8 years old, before the fighting got bad," Duc said, referring to the war in Vietnam. "I come here and the memories of that terrible time are all gone."

Duc is one of a growing number of returning Vietnamese-Americans. He was a teenager when he fled the country as Communist forces swept into Saigon. (It would be 16 years until he was reunited with his father, who was imprisoned.)

Eventually he made his way to the United States but began coming to Vietnam as a reporter in the late 1980s, when the country began to open up to Westerners again.

Then, in 2006, he quit his job as the host of the public radio program "Pacific Time," packed up his San Francisco apartment, sold his car and moved to Hanoi. He opened a café and art gallery there.

Like the French, Duc longed to find a peaceful retreat outside the steamy capital. Today's expatriates usually head for the beach but he wanted something more authentic, somewhere more like the Vietnam he grew up in. He made an intensive search and, in the summer of 2007, he bought a 500-square meter, or 5,400- square-foot, parcel in the mist-filled mountains of Tam Dao, a two-hour drive from Hanoi.

When planning the house, Duc decided to work mostly with glass and stone, easily available materials that local workers were familiar with. Yet rather than following his neighbors' lead by building several stories high to squeeze more living space onto the narrow plot, he anchored the single-story modernist structure into the cliff. From town, all that is visible is a stone wall on the edge of the mountain.

"The locals ask me all the time," Duc said with a grin, "when are you going to finish building your house?"

The neighbors' confusion doesn't end there. The house has no front door, at least not in the traditional sense.

Steps from the main road into town lead to a traditional wooden Vietnamese house, used as a guest room, and Duc's fishponds. From there, paths of stone and wooden planks diverge. One dead-ends in a sunken Japanese rock garden; another seems to lead across a foundation wall with an unforgiving edge. Once across it, the visitor can see that a glass pyramid-shaped skylight is really a sliding trap door, leading into an open living space of about 100 square meters.

Duc is quick to concede that he is no architect. A pyramid just seemed the most interesting way to climb down into the house, he said.

He did get professional advice but, in the end, the design □ a New York City loft cantilevered over the jungle □ was largely his.

"All I wanted was to capture the view," Duc said, watching the mist turn and twist up the side of the mountain. "I wanted to feel I was floating in the clouds."

It was a challenge to install the soaring eight-meter, or 25-foot, floor- to-ceiling windows to capture this feeling. "I wanted to use local craftsman but build a Western design," he said. And, as he fought to budge the sliding glass door that leads to an infinity pool, Duc concedes that his design ideas weren't always successful.

Later, as rain lashed the house, he shrugged as water trickled down the entryway stairs into the sunken living room and out a well-placed drain. "It's a work in progress," he said.

Duc, who came up on weekends from Hanoi to oversee the work, conceded that he wasn't always able to communicate what he wanted. But it wasn't a language problem. "I went out and found these beautiful old tiles and I came back to find that someone scrubbed them clean," Duc moaned. Nor did the workers think much of his rustic, open-plan kitchen. When he was away they put up a wall and hung faux French cornices. He had them all taken down.

Watching the house take shape, oddities and all, has been part of the adventure, he said.

"The day they were to pour the concrete, the chicken was boiled, I did the prayers and then they started drinking, and it was only seven in the morning!" said Duc, referring to the ceremony that asks the local gods for their blessing to build. "It's a difficult house to maneuver around. Especially if you are drunk."

Rooftop walkways and steep drop-offs into a stone courtyard are not the only things Duc has to navigate deftly.

Vietnam does not permit most foreigners to own private property, though exceptions recently were made for long-term expatriates and returning Vietnamese. Duc knows that the laws could change again and he could lose the \$100,000 that he spent to buy the land and build the house.

He said he believed that the land has doubled in value since he bought it, noting that adjacent lots are on the market for \$220 a square meter. It is hard to quantify values in Vietnam as houses tend to be handed down within a family, even the three-story, concrete-block structures in Duc's neighborhood, and land sales comparisons are not readily available.

Duc says he has enough confidence in the future that he plans to add an extra bedroom to the house. He envisions the property as a meeting place for Vietnamese and American artists. Eventually he hopes to offer the house to writers who need a quiet place to work.

But above all, it is his retreat. For much of his life, he was unable to return to Vietnam. Now, having just turned 50, he says he is finally home.

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