

INSIDER HCMC

A View from a Bridge

At night couples, friends and families find places to hang out to escape the heat and have fun. One such place that has attracted the hordes is Thu Thiem Bridge. But who exactly are the people that go there? **Thomas Barrett** finds out. Photos by **Olga Rozenbajgier**



I live in Binh Thanh, close to Thu Thiem Bridge — with its spectacular view of the ever-changing Saigon skyline. Almost every night as I drive past the bridge, I see couples hanging out, vendors with pushcarts selling snacks, and people young and old, shooting the breeze and admiring the view.

There are guitarists, card players, lovers and groups of friends, and there's always something electric about this place, but its electricity is made not just by the space itself, but by the people who go there. I decided to find out a bit more about them.

Work and Exams

Hoang, 30, is here with his friend Tu, 34, and Thu Thiem Bridge offers a valuable open space and respite from their busy careers in marketing and journalism.

"There are some places in District 2 for us to go but there should be more [open spaces]. Each time we come we see new buildings. Maybe in 20 years it will be like Hong Kong," says Hoang.

"In the city there are a lot of bars, and

places to go to party but no place where you can be peaceful. It's a place for us to not always be in the busy hectic lifestyle."

Unlike many cities around the world, Saigon has the luxury of being warm in the evening all year round. So why aren't there more places for non-drinkers, or those who shudder at the thought of coffee at 9pm?

Computing student, Tri, 19, is here hanging out with his younger sister.

"It's the first time I've come here," he says. "I live in Tan Phu District which is quite far. It's a half-hour drive but we came to see the skyline. It's beautiful and we feel comfortable. The air is good here, there's less pollution than where we live."

If you take a right past Thu Thiem bridge on one of the new roads that doesn't even have a name yet on Google maps, young people are lined up down the side of the wide roads, as young lads take turns to race each other, drag-race style, like a Saigon *Fast and the Furious*.

Back at the bridge, I meet four 17-year-old schoolgirls, Thai Ha, Minh Thuy, Khanh Vy and Truc Anh. They are all here after a long

day of exams.

"We come here to get rid of stress. It's been a hard day at school. We had exams today in literature," says Minh Thuy, who has dreams of studying in Australia.

"We like to look at the skyline. I am very proud of my city because Saigon now has something other countries have."

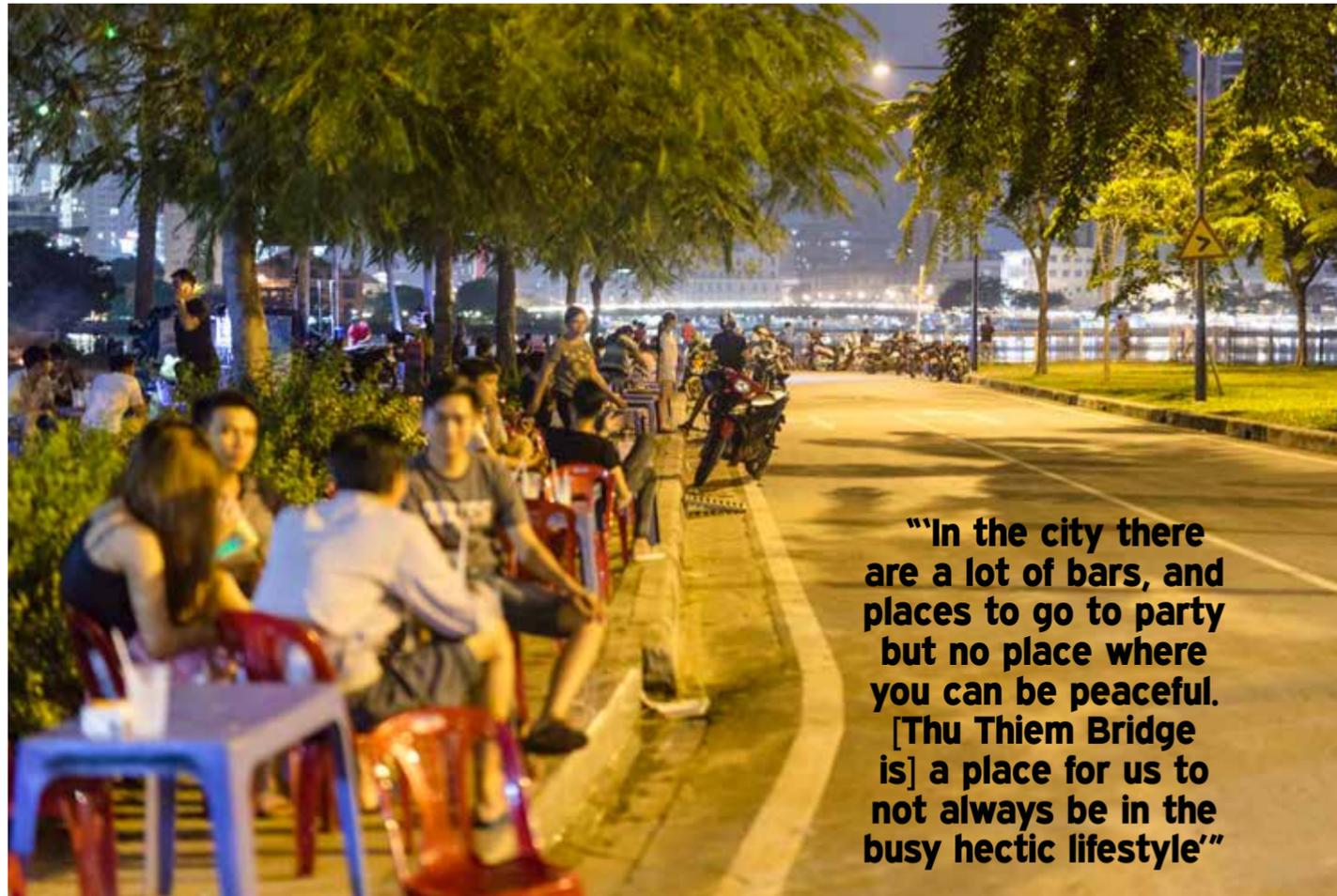
The Saigon skyline still has some way to go before it can match the likes of Sydney, but it's already a badge of pride for these young citizens of the world.

"It's also a good place to get away from parents," she adds.

Making a Buck

Thu Thiem Bridge and the surrounding freshly laid roads is arable land for *keo keo* and *bo bia* seller Duan, 42. He's been pounding the pavement selling his food in the city for over 20 years, and where there's new space, there's opportunity.

"It's free here, and has fresher air," he says. "There's more freedom for us compared with District 1. There they control where I stand, where I park and they want



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my money. Here there's lots of space and I can go wherever I want. I work 12-hour days but I'm not the kind of person who can stay alone, so I like to meet other vendors."

He's looking forward to the end of the rainy season.

"For me, when it rains I don't feel good, I worry about my children and if I will be able to feed them. Rich people don't care about if it's raining or sunny. For us when it rains it's hard to be happy."

He adds: "In 20 years Vietnam has developed so quickly. Before in this area there were just fishermen and no tall buildings, now it's very different. Before I used to make VND100,000 or VND200,000 per day; now I make VND300,000 or VND400,000. So it's good for me."

Further down, past the Thu Thiem Parish Church, a pack of four stray dogs baring their teeth surprise us, and chase our motorbike down the dusty and pothole-ridden path, before they retreat empty-mouthed into the overgrowth.

Back up towards the tunnel is Binh, 29. He has been selling sausages above the entrance of Saigon Tunnel for a few years.

"It's actually less busy since I started working here, as the walking street in District 1 has cost us business," he says.

"This place has fresh air and the price is good, and our food is not too expensive.

With all the buildings they are building now here it's going to change, and I'm not sure how it will affect my business." He points to a nearby apartment block that is almost completed. "We'd all really like to live here but a small apartment like that one there is a few billion."

Next to Binh, is Nhung, 20. She's been working here for a couple of years, and jokes around as she sells her iced tea and fizzy drinks. It's clear the relaxed and free atmosphere of the area extends to those who work here.

"It's fun here. I know everyone here and these are all my friends. My family and grandparents used to live here but 10 years ago we were forced to move. We had to move to District 9," she says.

"District 9 is a place to live. I live in an apartment block, there's no space to sell my drinks."

It's not all fun and games. On the way back towards Thu Thiem Bridge, a crowd has gathered around a young man who is laid out on the pavement, unconscious. Perhaps with its roads that don't all have working street lamps yet, it's also a place to settle scores.

Young Love

Above all the area is a place for lovers, with couples dotted all down the bridge and

surrounding areas.

Phuong, 28 and Ha, 31, have decided to come to the bridge after a date at the cinema.

"There are not enough places to go to relax. That's why we come here. It's very important. This city is so crowded," says Ha.

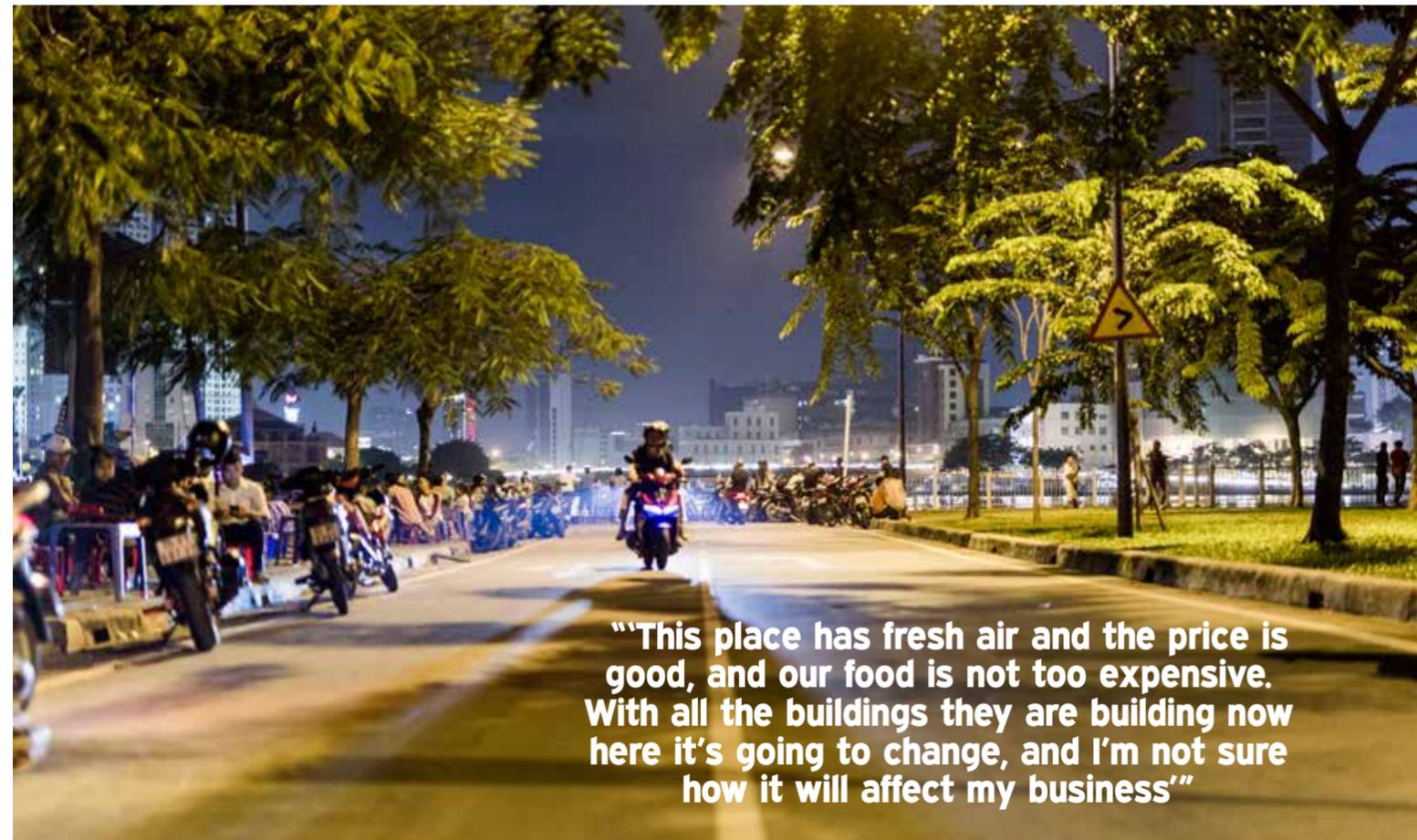
"It's romantic to the people who come here," she continues. "For us, we feel it is. For other people they come to relax, meet friends or something. This is a good side to look at the city. I'm feeling happy because I'm with him. Obviously he feels the same — he can't say no."

Minh Thuy, in her 20s, is here with her partner. It's a favourite spot of hers.

"I often come here with a guy if it's our first date," she says.

"I come here jogging as well as relaxing. It used to be really dirty here because people were not very conscious about throwing trash away, but recently it's really improved. The atmosphere is now much better than before. The light on the water with the skyline is very romantic. Sometimes we can even see the stars out here."

Stars over Saigon? A cynical mind might be suspicious, but this bridge is for the optimists. And as the evening draws to a close, the motorcycles begin to disperse and the music from Duan's moving stall grows fainter as he drives home back into the city. 



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