

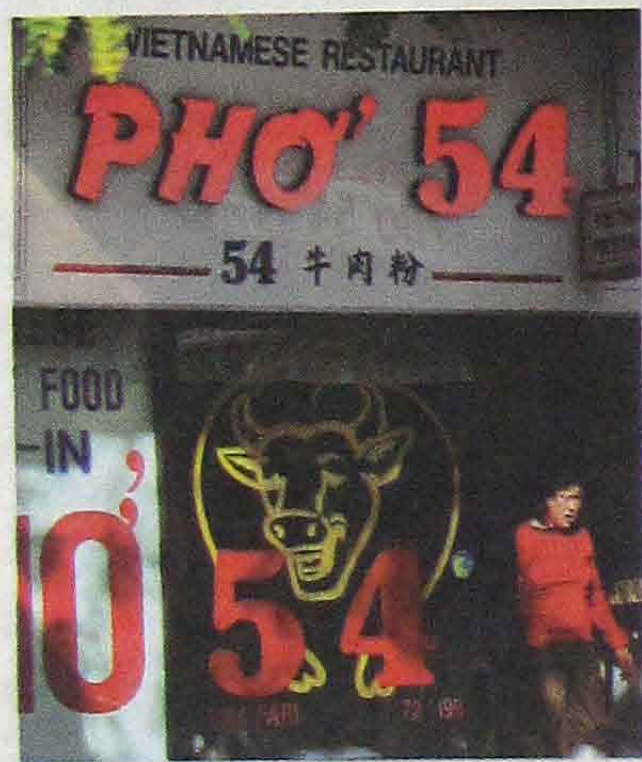
# Sydney by Sam Holmes

The brick bungalows along the streets in the Sydney suburb of Cabramatta wouldn't look out of place in many of the city's neighborhoods—except some are fronted by big statues of guardian lions. Welcome to Sydney's Little Saigon.

Today is Buddha's Birthday and the waft of joss sticks hangs close to a life-size brass representation of the deity underneath an ornate pagoda-like gate known as the Friendship Arch in the middle of the shopping area. It's dotted with kangaroos and koalas and the words Liberty and Democracy.

Crowds of shoppers, almost entirely Asian, shuffle casually around the worshippers paying their respects with incense and cash donations, earmarked for the construction of a Buddhist monastery.

Around the corner on John Street, the bustle is less deferential and the language of commerce laced with Vietnamese. Durians and live crustaceans spill onto the thoroughfare from arcades filled with wet markets. "We still go back there and buy produce for the restaurant, probably twice a week," Pauline Nguyen, who runs the popular Red Lantern restaurant in inner Sydney, says of this suburb where her father ran an ice-cream shop, a cafe and a video store after the family fled Vietnam in the late 1970s.



You'll be hard-pressed to go hungry in Cabramatta.

Sandwiched between shops selling fabrics, fresh bread and Vietnamese DVDs are eateries offering everything from *pho*, Vietnam's classic noodle-soup dish, to Vietnamese-style coffee, a serving of strong espresso lightened with a lashing of condensed milk.

Phong Van Nguyen opened his coffee shop, Café Nho, in a lane off John Street four years ago. The convivial atmosphere of locals gathered to enjoy a *ca phe sua da* (iced coffee) in the open air this morning belies Cabramatta's darker days as the nerve center of Sydney's Asian heroin trade.

"In 1991 there were a lot of gangsters...in that time, I wouldn't dare open a coffee shop—there would have been lots of trouble," says Mr. Nguyen, who survived a six-day boat voyage out of war-worn Vietnam without food or water in the early 1980s.

Like many of Australia's now nearly 200,000-strong Vietnamese-speaking community—measured by the number of people speaking Vietnamese at home—he spent time in a refugee camp before he was allowed to resettle in Australia. For Mr. Nguyen, it was a wait of 3½ years in a United Nations camp in Indonesia. He and his family first went to Adelaide and then Melbourne before he made his move to western Sydney in 1991.

In the 16 years after Saigon fell to the Communists in 1975, Australia took in about 122,000 people from Vietnam, mostly so-called boat people who fled by sea, or arrivals under the Australian government's family-reunion program. Of the four industrialized nations that took in the most Vietnamese refugees, the U.S., France, Australia and Canada, Australia's intake was by far the largest rela-

tive to its population, says James Jupp, director of the Centre for Immigration and Multicultural Studies at the Australian National University in Canberra.

Many settled in migrant-friendly Cabramatta ("cabra" is an aboriginal name for a tasty freshwater grub; "matta" is a point of land). For much of the 20th century, the suburb had been home to waves of immigrants including Italians and Eastern Europeans, and it became the hub for Sydney's Vietnamese community.

In 1994, Cabramatta made headlines as the scene of Australia's only political assassination when New South Wales state politician John Newman, a crusader against the district's gang crime, was gunned down one morning in his driveway in front of his fiancée. (Phuong Ngo, a local politician and Vietnamese community leader, was convicted in 2001 of ordering the murder.)

It marked a turning point. A concerted police sweep in the mid-to-late 1990s and the Australian-Vietnamese community's campaigns against gangsterism have since brought an end to the in-your-face menace that once prevailed. Now, the area is much more accessible to visitors. Many come on organized food tours. A sign on the road into the suburb reads "Cabramatta—A Taste Of Asia," part of the local government's efforts to mine the area's tourist potential.

For a do-it-yourself taste of Cabramatta, start your day at Café Nho in Belvedere Arcade off John Street for one of Mr. Nguyen's caffeinated potions or an Asian-style fruit shake, taking your pick from ingredients such as avocado and durian, sour apple and strawberry, pennywort and basil seed. In Cabramatta's many bakeries, you'll find traditional European pastries such as croissants

and pies as well as Vietnamese creations like *banh mi*, a crusty French baguette with Asian fillings such as pork slices with chili and coriander.

The always-packed Bau Truong restaurant, also on John Street, is known throughout Sydney for its grilled meats and spring rolls. Head down through the Friendship Arch in Freedom Plaza to BKK Shopping Center where you'll find places to pick up fruit shakes or coconut cakes and sticky rice for a sweet end to it all.

## Trip planner

To get the most out of Cabramatta, it's best to visit during the middle of the day (especially on weekends). Despite its frenetic Asian pulse during the daylight hours, the suburb is yet to develop a vibrant nightlife and many restaurants are closed by 9 p.m.

The CityRail commuter network provides frequent rail services from the Wynyard, Town Hall and Central stations downtown to Cabramatta, about 30 kilometers southwest of downtown Sydney on the green south line. The journey takes about 50 minutes. It's slightly faster to drive (outside rush hours). From the city, head west along the Hume Highway and turn right onto Cabramatta Road.

### Gourmet Safaris conducts walking culinary tours of Cabramatta

Web: [www.gourmetsafaris.com.au](http://www.gourmetsafaris.com.au)  
☎61-2-9960-5675.

As I end my own tour and make my way back to Cabramatta railway station, an old man plays a slow tune on his *pipa*, a Chinese lute-like instrument.

The haunting sound conjures up visions of Guilin mists or mountainscapes in an Asian children's picture book. But then it strikes me—the tune he's playing is "Click Go The Shears," a traditional Australian bush ballad. He smiles my way, a friendly reminder in this curious enclave that he hasn't forgotten where he is.

**Café Nho**  
Belvedere Arcade, 7/66-68 John St.  
Serves European and Vietnamese-style coffee as well as a range of Asian fruit shakes.

**Bau Truong Restaurant**  
42 John St.  
Popular eatery, with a wide-ranging menu, that is famous for its barbecued meats and spring rolls.

**Viet Hoa Bakery**  
4/105 John St.  
A 24-hour hot bread shop

**BKK Shopping Center**  
53 Park Rd.  
Great place to pick up fruit shakes, bubble tea, coconut cakes or sticky rice or sago pudding.



Above, the Friendship Arch in Cabramatta's main shopping area; right, Café Nho in a laneway off John Street serves typical Vietnamese coffee; below, a baker in a shopping arcade with her fresh pastries



Adam Hellingworth for The Wall Street Journal

