

A Tête-à-Tête about Tết

How can an expat get past the initial impressions of Tết to understand the traditions behind all the rituals? The first step is to understand why Tết is important to the Vietnamese. The Lunar New Year is the most vital holiday celebrated across Asia. It could be compared to Christmas, New Years, the Day of the Dead and Easter rolled up into one momentous occasion. Families will be reunited, the deceased will be honored, the coming of spring will be celebrated and Asia will inherit a new sacred animal. In 2018, the Dog will guide our luck and destinies.



Tết by nature is a homey holiday. All over Vietnam, family members will find ways to return to their hometowns, gathering to cook, converse and celebrate. The kitchen takes on a special significance because this is where the Kitchen God resides, watching over each household. Families can send a wish for the New Year to the Jade Emperor on the 23rd of December (Lunar Calendar), when the Kitchen God ascends to the heavens to report back on the family's activities. It is

in the sacred space of the kitchen that the traditional bánh chưng cake is crafted from sticky rice, pork and green bean paste. It is boiled for 8 hours, during which time the family can sit around the stove recounting the tales of their bygone year, and strengthening their bonds. Another important aspect of the holiday is the appreciation of community. People will visit extended family, neighbors, teachers, and colleagues to share tea and sweets and to “Chúc Tết.” Chúc Tết is an exchange of well-wishes for the coming year. Children in particular enjoy this ritual because after greeting their elders with a New Year's wish they receive in return a red envelope filled with “lucky money.”

The division of the population in Ho Chi Minh City is especially visible during the week of Tết. Locals not originally from Saigon will depart to spend the holiday with their families. Expats will often head to the beaches to escape the city, as it goes into shutdown holiday mode. What will be left will be the small percentage of people with family in Saigon, tourists, and expats, who enjoy the strangely empty Tết-time city. The fact that most celebrations happen in private homes can make Tết hard



to ingress for foreigners who don't have a link to a Vietnamese family through blood or marriage. However, everyone can enjoy the jubilant spirit of the Lunar New Year. Walk down Nguyen Hue, otherwise known as Flower Street, to buy branches of sunny apricot blossoms to fill your home with the promise of spring. Let the vibrations of drums draw you out to witness a lion dance. Go to a tailor to touch meters of silk ready to be fashioned into ao dai. Go to a pagoda to light an incense stick and say a prayer for a successful year and above all wish everyone you meet a Happy New Year. Because who among us, no matter what continent, country or religion we come from, doesn't need extra familial warmth, a lot more joy, and a little extra luck? Chúc Mừng Năm Mới!