

Vietnam Revealed: **Royal Tombs of Hue**



Introduction

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Travel guidebooks for the ultra curious, Approach Guides reveal a destination's essence by exploring a compelling aspect of its cultural heritage: art, architecture, history, food or wine.

A fantastic collection of royal tombs sits solemnly along the banks of the Perfume river, upstream of Hue to the southwest. They were built by the Nguyen dynasty — which ruled over a unified Vietnam from 1802-1945 — to maintain their legacy for ages to come. Named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1993, the tombs inspire with their perfectly-integrated natural surroundings, captivating dragons in pursuit of pearls and ubiquitous ceramic tiles suggesting good luck and longevity. They are yours to discover.

What's in this guidebook

- **Context.** This guidebook begins by offering an introduction to the Nguyen dynasty and continues with a thorough review of what you are going to see on location, focusing on the three functional units that comprise every Nguyen tomb: temple, tomb and stela pavilion.
- **A tour that goes deeper.** Following our tradition of being the most valuable resource for culture-focused travelers, we provide a detailed tour of six of the seven extant tombs (in chronological order): Gia Long, Minh Mang, Thieu Tri, Tu Duc, Dong Khanh and Khai Dinh. For each, we provide information on its history, a detailed plan that highlights its most important architectural and artistic features and a discussion that ties it all together.
- **Advice for getting the best cultural experience.** This guidebook supplies logistical advice, maps and links to online resources. Further, to help plan and prioritize your touring itinerary, we rank sites based on the quality of their art and architecture and offer brief summaries of each tomb's highlights, so you can focus on what most interests you. Finally, we give our personal tips for getting the most from your experience on location.
- **Information the way you like it.** As with all of our guides, this book is optimized for intuitive, quick navigation; information is organized into bullet points to make absorption easy; and images are marked up with text that explains important features.

Contact us anytime

Our readers are our greatest inspiration. Email us at founders@approachguides.com to let us know about your experience with Approach Guides — many of our recent updates have been inspired by customers like you. We personally respond to every email.

We hope you enjoy this unique guide to one of Vietnam's premier collections of monuments.

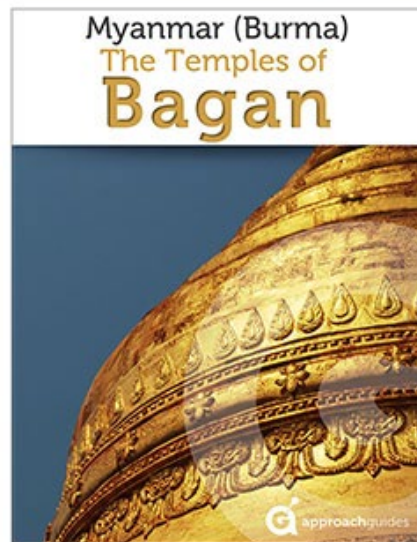
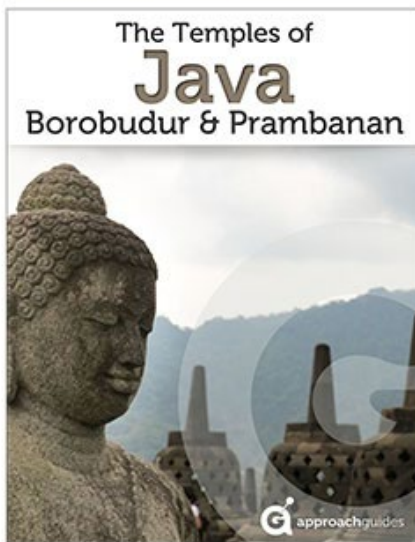
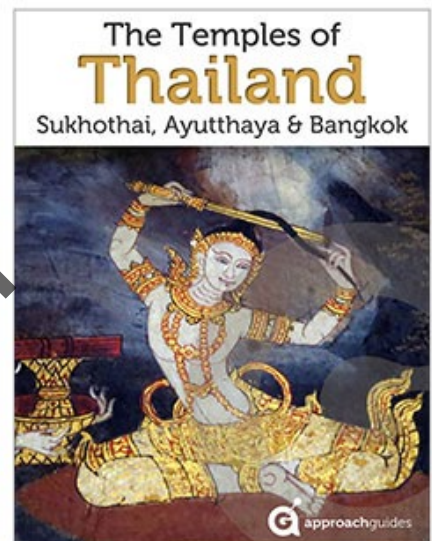
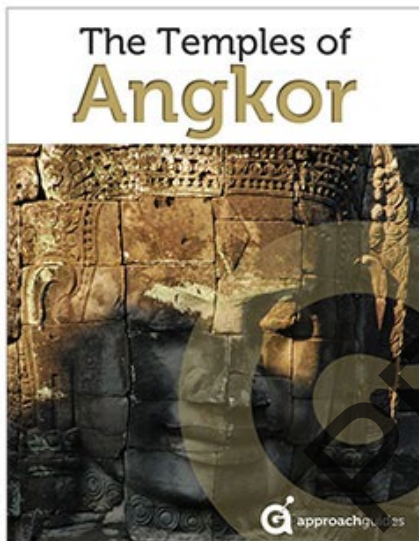
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David Raezer

David and Jennifer Raezer
Founders, Approach Guides
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Vietnam Revealed: Royal Tombs of Hue

Version 1.0

by [David Raezer](#) and [Jennifer Raezer](#)

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A hundred years – in this life span on earth
talent and destiny are apt to feud.
You must go through an event in which the sea becomes mulberry fields
and watch such things as make you sick at heart.
Is it strange that who is rich in this is poor in that?
Blue Heaven's wont to strike rosy cheeks from spite.

—

Opening passage from Nguyen Du's (1766-1820)
classic Vietnamese poem "[The Tale of Kieu](#)."

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Getting Started



Nestled in its natural surroundings: Gia Long, the first Nguyen tomb.

A fantastic collection of royal tombs sits solemnly along the banks of the Perfume river, upstream of Hue to the southwest. They were built by the Nguyen dynasty — which ruled over a unified Vietnam from 1802-1945 — to maintain their legacy for ages to come.

The Nguyen dynasty sits at a crossroads in Vietnamese history, a 143-year period that saw the country transition from independence to colonial control. And one of the things that makes the tombs so fascinating is that they tell this story, if you look closely — the story as told by the rulers who are watching the empire slip away.

Named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1993, the tombs inspire with their perfectly-integrated natural surroundings, captivating dragons in pursuit of pearls and ubiquitous ceramic tiles suggesting good luck and longevity. They are yours to discover.

How This Guidebook Is Organized

To help you get the most from your experience visiting the tombs, this guidebook is organized into

three parts.

- **Meet the builders.** It is important to understand the Nguyen dynasty's backstory — especially, who they were, how they came to power, what they deemed important and how they interacted with other challengers for control of the country — since the art and architecture of the tombs continually draws on it for inspiration and direction.
- **A Nguyen tomb complex.** Here we focus on the basics, drilling down into the three primary functional units of a tomb complex — temple, tomb and stela pavilion — so you can look with better eyes when touring.
- **Tour.** Finally, the tour itself. Our proposed itinerary follows chronological order so you can see how the tombs evolve over time. For each stop, we offer a detailed review of the site, pointing out the most distinctive features and why they are important.

***Author tip: use the table of contents.** We have broken the chapters down into small, easily-digestible parts so that you can jump around quickly using the table of contents in order to find exactly what you are looking for when you need it.*

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MEET THE BUILDERS

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Nguyen Dynasty: Origins, Agenda & Demise

You cannot fully understand the Nguyen dynasty until you know what came before. Here, we bring you quickly up to speed on the Nguyens' predecessors — the Le dynasty and the Tay Son — before summarizing the Nguyens' rise and fall.

The Le Dynasty

The Le dynasty (1428-1789) is Vietnam's longest-ruling monarchy. Based in Hanoi, the Le dynasty reached its peak under ruler Le Thanh Tong (ruled 1460-1497), who set the foundation for most of its entrenched policies, the most important of which were based on those of Song- and Ming-dynasty China (960-1279 and 1368-1662, respectively).

- **Confucianism.** Historically, Vietnamese politics operated on a syncretic system of beliefs drawn from both indigenous (animism and spirit cults) and external (Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism) sources. However, Le Thanh Tong favored Confucianism. By placing power in the hands of examination-tested scholars — men of noble character — at the expense of landed nobility, Confucianism was appealing since it eliminated the most visible threat to his authority. But another tenet of the Confucian belief system was key to securing popular support, which makes it particularly relevant for understanding the Nguyen royal tombs: the belief that the play of paired opposing forces — ying and yang — reveals the inevitable, rational nature of the universe and that harmony only results when humanity conforms with this natural order. And here is the key point: the first and foremost value for maintaining such harmony was **filial piety**, the obligation to obey, honor and repay an intrinsic moral debt to one's parents (and, by extension, one's emperor). Underlying this was the concept that individual desires or needs must give way to those of the community as a whole.
- **Chinese language.** Under the Le dynasty, Chinese was the official language and the only writing system. Social advancement lay in mastering the Chinese classics.

A falter that sets the stage

After a period of instability, the Le were overthrown in 1527. The usurpers did not last long (ruling until 1533), but the powerful noble families responsible for the dynasty's reinstatement were not ready to relinquish full control: the Trinh family in the north and the Nguyen in the south. From this point on the Le ruler acted as a figurehead, which sets the stage for the next turn of events.

Tay Son Rebellion

The impotent Le rulers presided over another 250-year period of instability, marked by infighting between the Trinh and Nguyen. An uprising against the status quo was led by three brothers from Tay Son, a village in central Vietnam. The Tay Son rebellion, as it has come to be known, succeeded in defeating the Nguyen (in 1776) and the Trinh (in 1786); and in 1789, the Le emperor was deposed, ending the dynasty for good. Not long after, one of the Tay Son brothers assumed the throne as em-

peror Quang Trung.

As you might expect, the Tay Son leaders rejected the primary organizing principles of the Le, replacing both Confucianism (with a religiously-tolerant system that favored Buddhism) and the Chinese language (with indigenous Nôm).



Fig. 1. The first Nguyen emperor, Gia Long.

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Introduction



Fig. 2. Architecture in harmony with nature: Tu Duc's tomb chamber.

Overview

- **General location: west and upstream.** The Nguyen royal tombs are situated southwest of Hue, farther upstream along the Perfume river. This location is particularly appropriate for two reasons: (a) since the ruler is symbolized by the sun, the tomb's placement in the position of its setting signals the end of his reign; and (b) since the ruler's legitimacy was cosmologically grounded in his supernatural ability to bring the life-giving rains required for successful rice harvests, it is appropriate that his tomb sit upstream of the city, as if perpetually fulfilling his water-bearing function. (For more on the ruler's associations with water and the agricultural cycle, see the section entitled "The Dragon and the Pearl.")
- **Orientation.** Rather than adhere to a rigid compass alignment, tomb complexes were laid out in relation to the landscape using feng shui principles. To show the range, here are facing orientations for the seven royal tombs: Gia Long (south-southwest), Minh Mang (east-southeast), Thieu Tri (north-northwest), Tu Duc (east-northeast), Duc Duc (northwest), Dong Khanh (east-southeast) and Khai Dinh (southwest).

- **Harmony with nature.** Although some are more successful than others, all Nguyen tombs strive for harmony between nature and architecture, symbolic of the ruler as bridge between the divine and human worlds. The built structures integrate tightly with natural features such as lakes, hills, rocks and trees (Fig. 2).
- **Design and construction.** With few exceptions, the Nguyen rulers were intimately involved in the design and construction of their tombs. In fact, once completed, they often functioned as palaces that were subsequently converted for funerary use upon the ruler's death.
- **Three functional units.** The tomb complex can be divided into three discrete functional units: temple, tomb and stela pavilion. While the organization of these functional units changes — at some tombs they are kept separate, while at others they are mixed and matched — they nevertheless are the basic building blocks. In the introductory sections that follow, we explore each in more detail, explaining what purpose it served, how it is arranged and what makes it unique.



LONGEVITY

GOOD FORTUNE

Fig. 3. Ubiquitous decoration: Chinese characters for longevity (left) and good fortune (right).

Recurring Features

- **Enclosure wall.** An enclosure wall typically surrounds the tomb complex, providing protection and marking off the sacred space of the interior.
- **Chinese-character inscriptions.** Inscriptions play a significant role in tomb decoration. Consistent with Nguyen preferences, they are all in the Chinese language. The most frequently-encountered inscriptions are single Chinese characters — longevity, good fortune, happiness,

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PRINCIPAL COLUMN STONE BASE TIE BEAM VERTICAL SUPPORTS PURLIN

Fig. 10. Structural components of front structure's truss, Thieu Tri.

Interior View: Crabshell Connector

- **The connector.** A crabshell ceiling hides the fusion of front and rear structures, providing a seamless transition (Fig. 11).
- **Shallow vault.** The vault is shallow, consisting of a small tie beam with a simple vertical system that braces the purlins (Fig. 11).

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Towers

A feature borrowed from Chinese prototypes, towers serve the practical purpose of marking the entrance into the funerary structure. Further, their strong verticality — bridging earth and sky — likely also carried symbolic weight, perhaps marking the spot in which the world of the heavenly spirits becomes accessible to humans on earth (Fig. 19).



Fig. 20. Stone-carved mandarins, Minh Mang.

Mandarins

- **Two types.** There are two types of mandarin officials (Fig. 20): civil (holds a tablet) and military (holds a sword).
- **Personalized facial features.** All have distinct facial features, as if based on real-life individuals (Fig. 20).

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Cosmology: The Dragon and the Pearl



Fig. 27. Dragon, temple roof crest, Tu Duc.

The dragon and the pearl is perhaps the Nguyen tombs' most striking decorative motif, and since it is tied so closely with the role of the ruler, we have dedicated this section to exploring it in more detail.

The Dragon

- **Chinese origins.** Like so many motifs in the Nguyen tomb complex, the dragon is pulled from Chinese prototypes.
- **Symbolism.** The dragon represents the emperor and his supernatural power — as bridge between the divine and human worlds — to bring the rains required for successful rice harvests. This association derives from longstanding belief that the dragon is a water-bearing creature that moves cyclically between the sea and sky: from the fall through the winter, it hibernates on the sea floor, building up a vast water reserve; and in the spring, it ascends to the sky, releasing the stored water in the form of life-giving rain. And by extension, since the rains

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TOUR ITINERARY & MAP

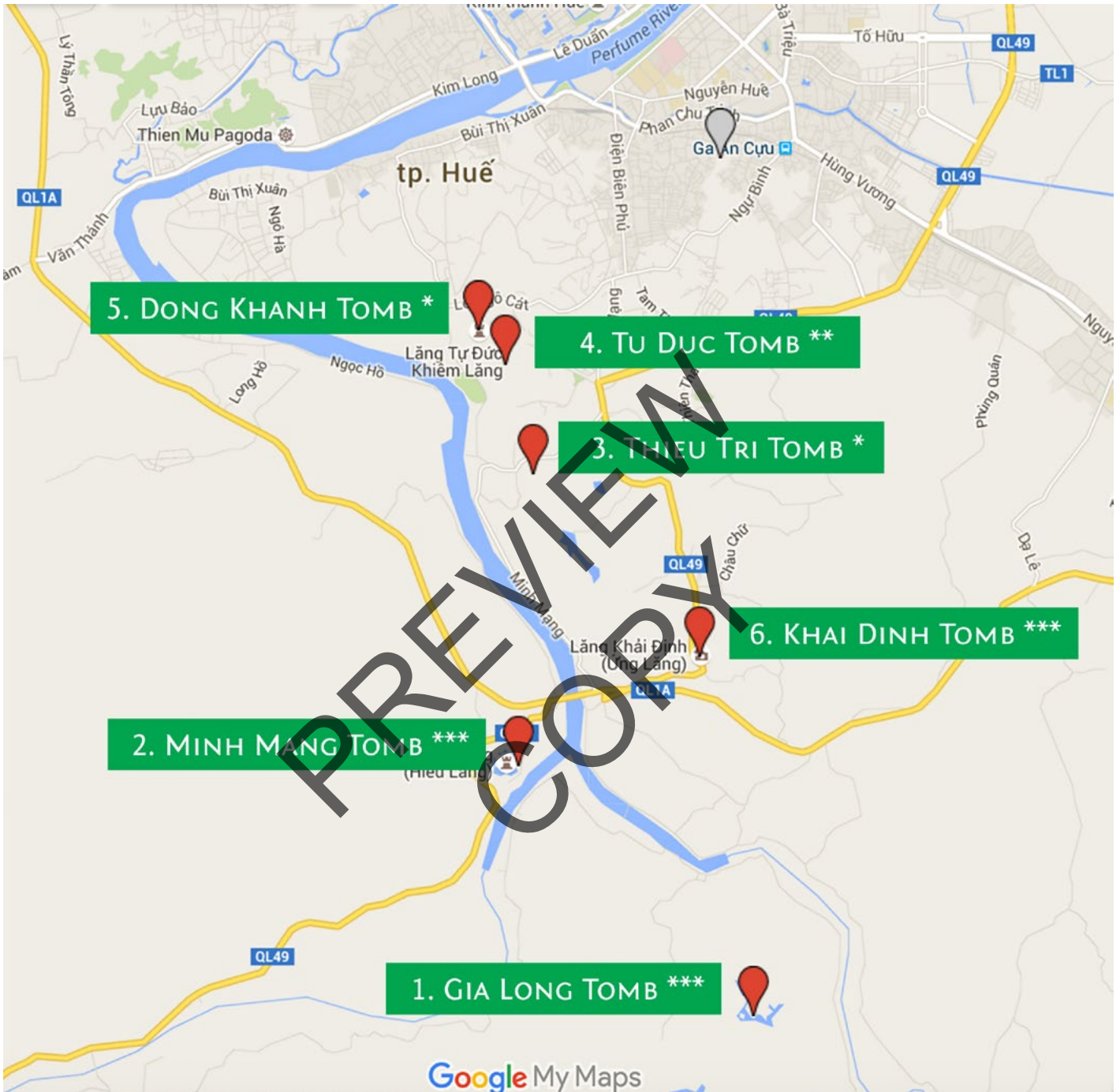


Fig. 30. Nguyen tomb tour itinerary, Hue.
Click the link to see the detailed itinerary in our [Google Map](#).

Our tour of the Nguyen royal tombs follows chronological order so as to make the architectural and artistic transformation easier to recognize (Fig. 30). Also, to help prioritize your touring itinerary if you have limited time, we have assigned each tomb a rating on a 3-point scale.

1. **Gia Long** *** (built 1814-20)

2. **Minh Mang** *** (built 1841-1843)
3. **Thieu Tri** * (built 1848)
4. **Tu Duc** ** (built 1864-1867)
5. **Dong Khanh** * (built 1888-89 and 1916-1923)
6. **Khai Dinh** *** (built 1920-1931)

NB: We have excluded one of the seven extant royal tomb complexes, **Duc Duc** (temple built 1891; tomb 1899), since it was under renovation at the time of writing.

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2. Minh Mang ***

Quick Profile

- **Constructed:** 1841-1843.
- **Builder:** Design overseen by Minh Mang (ruled 1820-1841; see [Fig. 46](#)), constructed by son and successor Thieu Tri.
- **Crowd-level rating:** Medium.
- **Location:** Not far (4 kilometers) from his father Gia Long's tomb, precisely at the convergence of the Ta Trach and Huu Trach rivers at Bang Lang fork, where they merge to form the Perfume river. See #2 in [Google Maps](#).
- **Orientation:** Faces east-southeast.
- **Entrance fee:** VND 100K per person.

Historical Context & The French Threat

With the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) complete, France began to direct its attention toward building a commercial presence in southeast Asia. Emperor Minh Mang rebuffed all French efforts at establishing a relationship, taking a hard-line isolationist position. While this approach worked for Minh Mang, it would not for his successors.

At home, he advanced his father's conservative Confucian policies, improved the country's infrastructure and fought (successfully) against Thailand to maintain control over the country's hard-won territories in Cambodia.

Highlights

- **Unified linear arrangement.** In a total break with the design of his father's tomb, all three functional units — temple, tomb and stela pavilion — are organized in a single linear arrangement.
- **Luduan.** Excellent sculptures of the mythical beast stand before the imperial entrance (outside the enclosure wall) and the lines of mandarins.
- **Mandarins.** The entrance courtyard's highly-naturalistic mandarins are in a high state of preservation.
- **Stunning bridge crossings.** The bridge crossings over the man-made lake are unrivalled in their sheer beauty and integration with nature, each signaling the transition to a more sacred zone.
- **New take on the tomb chamber.** This was the first earthen-mound-type tomb chamber.



Fig. 46. Emperor Minh Mang.

Site Map

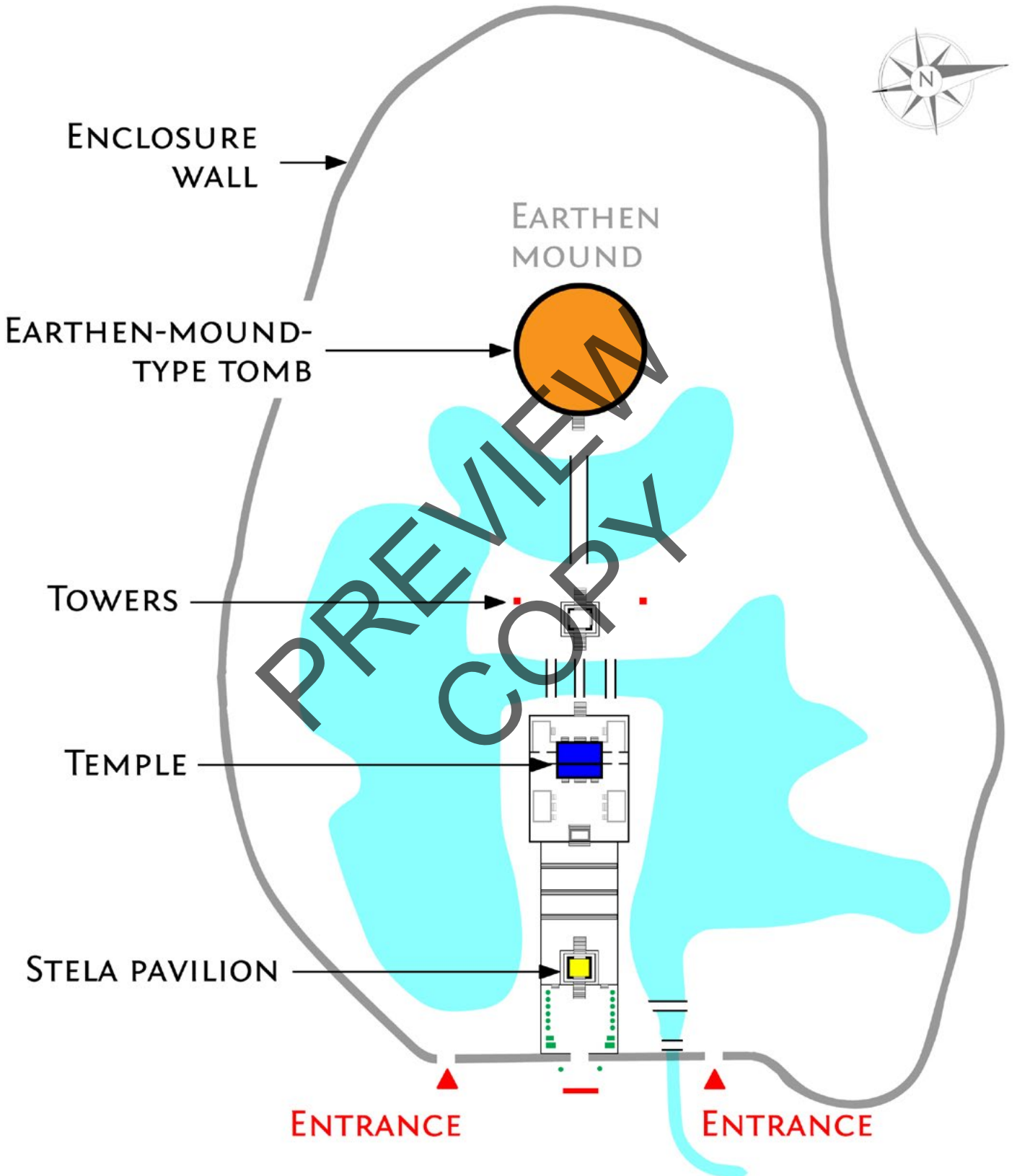


Fig. 47. Layout, Minh Mang.

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- **Single bridge across a crescent-shaped lake.** Finally, a single bridge — perhaps signaling exclusivity or that this was a route that only the ruler could take — crosses a crescent-shaped lake to the absolute most sacred zone that holds the tomb chamber (Fig. 53). We will see this “defensive” lake shape — employed first here symbolically wrapping around the front of the tomb mound — in subsequent tombs (Thieu Tri and Tu Duc).
- **Earthen-mound-type tomb chamber.** Minh Mang breaks from the paved-courtyard model set by Gia Long, pioneering the second major type of tomb chamber: a round earthen-mound enclosure (orange highlights in Fig. 53).



CERAMIC TILES W/ CHARACTERS FOR
LONGEVITY & GOOD FORTUNE

TOWER HIDDEN BY TREES

TWO-LEVEL PAVILION

Fig. 54. Three bridges crossing lake to pavilion.

Triple Bridge to Pavilion

Author tip: *The view looking down on the three bridges from the courtyard in the rear of the temple is the best in Minh Mang.*

- **Harmony with nature.** At the crossings of the man-made lake, Minh Mang communicates, perhaps better than any other Nguyen tomb, the harmonious integration of nature and the

built environment. As mentioned earlier, it is an engineered approach, orchestrated to achieve maximum impact.

- **Railings.** The railings of the three bridges (and the pavilion's platform) hold ceramic panels glazed in green and yellow that feature Chinese characters for longevity and good fortune (Fig. 54).
- **Two-level pavilion.** Sitting atop two platforms, the pavilion — five bays wide and consisting of two levels — is of especially large scale, perhaps to block any possible view of the tomb mound behind it (Fig. 54).
- **Towers.** From the approach, the towers are partly obfuscated by dense trees, somewhat weakening their symbolic value in marking the start of the tomb zone (Fig. 54). However, they were certainly much more visible at the time of the tomb's construction.



Fig. 55. Single bridge leading to tomb mound.

Tomb

- **Tomb structure.** The massive round enclosure wall encircling the tomb mound is clearly visible on the approach from the bridge (Fig. 55).
- **No access.** Visitors are not allowed inside the walled tomb enclosure. However, it is worth

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Mandarin Court

Further developing what we saw at Thieu Tri, Tu Duc's mandarins champion a new aesthetic, breaking from the naturalism of earlier versions.

- **Loss of naturalism.** The mandarins have lost their plastic forms — the figures reveal especially flat chests and faces, apparently designed for head-on viewing only (Fig. 69).
- **... but covered with magnificent carved details.** They feature intricate surface patterning, the bodies serving chiefly as a surface for design (Fig. 69). Get up close to inspect the intricate carved details on the figures' clothing.



TILES W/ CHINESE CHARACTER
FOR GOOD FORTUNE

WESTERN PILASTERS
AND ARCH

ALL-CEMENT
CONSTRUCTION

Fig. 70. Stela pavilion, Tu Duc.

Stela Pavilion

- **The pavilion.** The pavilion breaks with all prior building tradition (Fig. 70): instead of re-

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Fig. 91. Front row, military mandarin.

Mandarin Court

- **Greatest number.** The arrangement has the standard elephant and horse. However, unlike all other tombs, there are two rows of mandarins: 4 in the front and 6 in the rear. This compares with the single row of 4-5 mandarins at other tombs.
- **Two sizes.** The military and civil mandarins — positioned in the front row — are larger than average. In fact, they are the largest mandarins of all the Nguyen tombs. Smaller mandarins

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Nguyen Ruler Chronology

Rulers with tombs in **bold**.

1. **Gia Long** (ruled 1802-1820).
2. **Minh Mang** (ruled 1820-1841). Son of Gia Long.
3. **Thieu Tri** (ruled 1841-1847). Son of Minh Mang.
4. **Tu Duc** (ruled 1847-1883). Son of Thieu Tri.

French Protectorate (won control of southern provinces in 1862; full country by 1887)

5. **Duc Duc** (ruled 1883). Nephew of Tu Duc.
6. Hiep Hoa (ruled 1883). Son of Thieu Tri.
7. Kien Phuc (ruled 1883-1884). Son of Hiep Hoa's brother.
8. Ham Nghi (ruled 1884-1885). Older brother of Kien Phuc.
9. **Dong Khanh** (ruled 1885-1889). Older brother of Ham Nghi.
10. Thanh Thai (ruled 1889-1907). Son of Duc Duc.
11. Duy Tan (ruled 1907-1916). Son of Thanh Thai.
12. **Khai Dinh** (ruled 1916-1925). Son of Dong Khanh.
13. Bao Dai (ruled 1926-1945). Son of Khai Dinh.

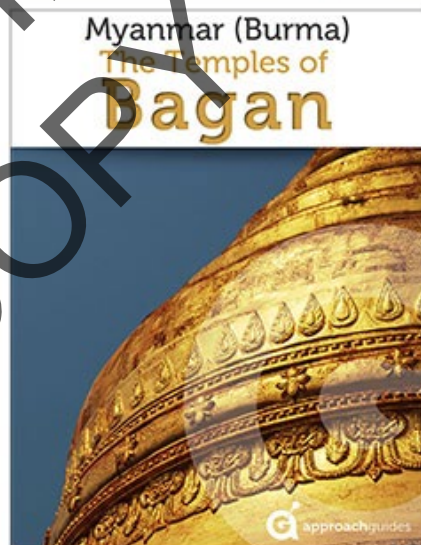
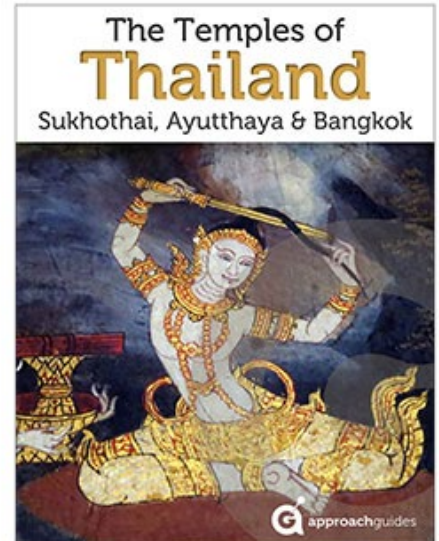
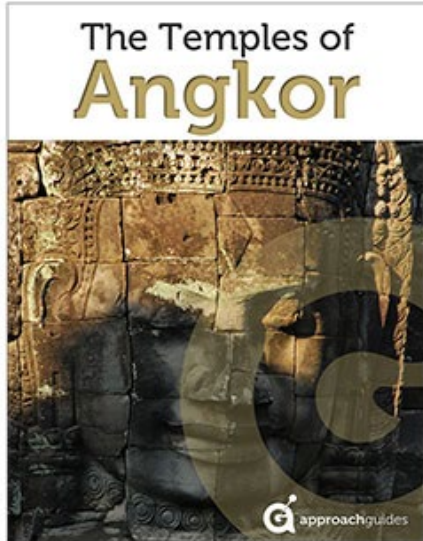
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Vietnam Reading List

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Here are just a few of our Vietnam recommendations ([see the complete list](#)):

- **Article: “Some Things Poetry Can Tell Us about the Process of Social Change in Vietnam.”** An exceptionally insightful article on how Vietnamese poetry produces effective social commentary using ambiguity and, more generally, how the nature of the Vietnamese language makes it conducive to word-play and multiple interpretations. *By Neil L Jamieson.*
- **Video: Vietnamese Pho Bo.** A great on-location review of the unmissable Hanoi dish.
- **Just for kids! Inside Out and Back Again.** Inspired by the author’s childhood experience of fleeing Vietnam after the Fall of Saigon and immigrating to Alabama, this coming-of-age novel offers a touching child’s-eye view of family and immigration. *By Thanhha Lai.*

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Los Angeles Times

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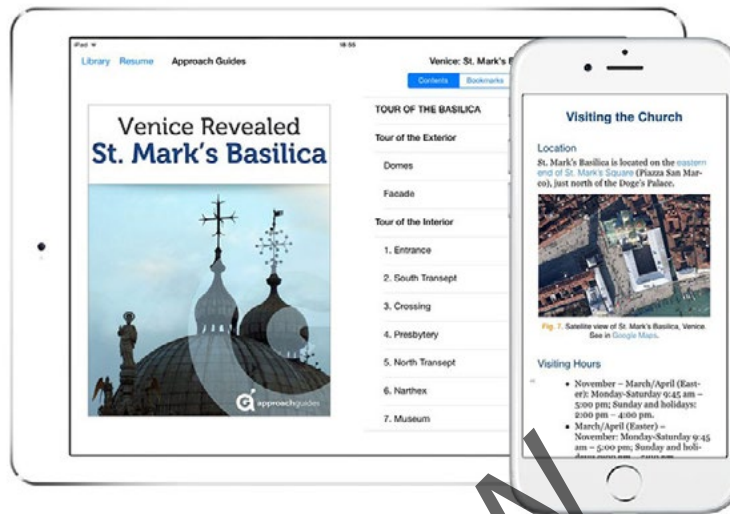
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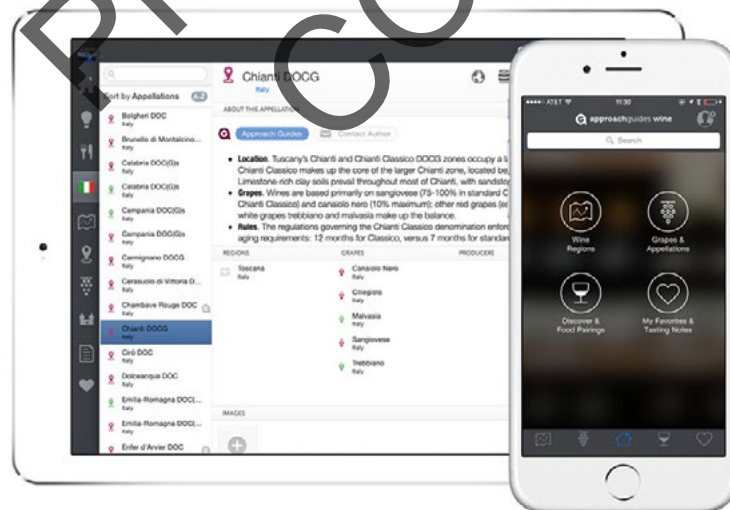
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