



## 17 • LITTLE SAIGON

---

Little Saigon is an energetic island in the heart of Orange County, the world's largest Vietnamese community outside of Vietnam, just 15 minutes' drive from Disneyland. It is possible to spend an entire day here and not hear a word of English—unless you want to.

Little Saigon covers roughly 3 square miles of noodle shops, herbal medicine stores, Asian groceries, coffeehouses, bakeries, boutiques, jewelry marts, small plant shops bursting with purple orchids, and dozens of family-owned restaurants.

Dining is always a highlight of any visit to Little Saigon, and you'll find a wealth of places to enjoy. New restaurants and enterprises open constantly. This is the place to savor a big bowl of *pho*, the fresh, flavorful soup that is the best and most filling meal-time bargain you'll find anywhere. Or experience the *mélange* of Asian and French cuisines created during Vietnam's colonial past, and wash it down with thick, sweet Vietnamese coffee. Or there's barbecue, fresh seafood, delectable spring rolls in transparent rice paper—familiar dish-

es, all of them, but with a unique Vietnamese twist that favors leafy herbs and mints, seasoned vinegars instead of oils and heavy sauces, and plates piled high with crunchy fresh vegetables.

Little Saigon is all about tasting new things, visit after visit.

Three decades after the first handful of immigrants moved here from war-torn Southeast Asia, Little Saigon has transformed itself from a struggling refugee exile community into an American success story. The story begins in the late 1970s, after the Vietnam War ended and around the time a newly arrived refugee opened a pharmacy near the strawberry fields of Westminster. The drug store on Bolsa Avenue dispensed medicine and basic necessities to other newcomers. More importantly, the tiny shop helped establish a business foothold for the area's fledgling Vietnamese community, an enclave of boat people lured by sunny weather and glowing reports from families who already had settled here and in the nearby city of Garden Grove. Almost overnight, other Vietnamese-owned businesses, including a

community newspaper, joined the pharmacy and filled an entire strip mall on Bolsa Avenue.

"Under that brown-shingle roof, my father, on impulse, signed on to lease a room," recalls Anh Do, in her essay in *My California: Journeys by Great Writers*. "He had started the first Vietnamese-language newspaper in the United States, inking accent marks by hand and distributing the initial 2,000 copies door-to-door.

"Others needed space, too. Around us, florists, markets, travel agencies, and hair salons soon dotted what was once strawberry fields. Clinics sprung up after refugee doctors went back to school to earn U.S. degrees. Then came the first of Little Saigon's 80-something beef noodle restaurants, promising fulfillment for \$4.50 a bowl."

In 1988, former California Governor George Deukmejian came to town to officially christen Little Saigon, a modest neighborhood

of retail centers and tract homes bordered by Westminster Boulevard, Bolsa Avenue, Magnolia Street, and Euclid Street. And after much community debate, a "Little Saigon" sign appeared on the nearby 22 Freeway announcing Southern California's newest ethnic enclave.

Today you'll find more than 3,500 Vietnamese-owned businesses in Little Saigon, many of them clustered along Bolsa Avenue, a four-lane drag where the bus stops have red pagoda-styled shelters and businesses post signs in both Vietnamese and English. The area is the commercial and cultural hub for several hundred thousand Vietnamese scattered across Southern California. Its well-stocked groceries also draw many other Asian shoppers, in search of items not found in the aisles of the supermarket chains.

When you visit Little Saigon, you'll immediately find yourself immersed in a vibrant, distinctive



*A guardian of  
Little Saigon*

*Today Plaza*

**[ 144 ]** *Great Escapes: Southern California*

world. Bookstores, music stores, and video shops are crammed with Vietnamese-language selections. Many of the most established and popular businesses have bare-bones furnishings, unadorned and purposely utilitarian (so don't be too quick to judge a restaurant here by its metal chairs and well-worn tabletops). Even the humblest markets overflow with fresh greens, herbs, and fruits. Daily shopping here is like browsing a farmers' market filled with unique and fragrant produce.

Here are some stops to make during a day trip to Little Saigon:

1. **Asian Gardens Mall** (714-891-2122), 9200 Bolsa Ave. You'll do well to start your exploration at the mall, a 150,000-square-foot center that serves as a social and shopping hub for the Vietnamese community. Stone statues representing the gods of prosperity, longevity, and happiness welcome visitors. You'll browse boutiques, toy stores, restaurants, and curio shops; a Vietnamese food court dominates the center of the mall's first level. Up the escalator you'll find more stores and an expansive jewelry mart. Prices on gold, jade, and other treasures sometimes are negotiable. On weekends, the mall gets crowded and you may have to hunt for parking. After

you've finished shopping here, you can walk to explore more of Little Saigon.

2. **A. Dong Supermarket** (714-657-7456), 9221 Bolsa Ave. One of numerous Asian markets in Little Saigon, A. Dong is a large grocery store across the street from Asian Garden Mall. A good portion of the store is dedicated to a bounty of fruits, vegetables, greens, roots, and herbs of all description. You'll also find tanks filled with live Dungeness crab, lobster, and tilapia, and aisles crammed with an endless assortment of noodles and fish sauce (a common ingredient in many Vietnamese dishes). A few doors down from the market, **Van's Bakery** is a popular spot for birthday cakes and other goodies.

3. Lunchtime. When you get hungry, you can take your pick of *pho* houses, mom-and-pop eateries, coffeehouses, ornate banquet restaurants, and bakeries serving *bahn mi thit*, sandwiches with meat and crunchy vegetables. Most of Little Saigon's restaurants are no-frills dining spots, though you will find some fancier places, such as the **Grand Garden** (714-893-1200; 8894 Bolsa Ave., Westminster), a venerable special-occasion restaurant with potted orchids, linen tablecloths, and upholstered chairs that serves an array

of seafood dishes (appetizers, \$4.50–8.95; entrées, \$8.95–24.95). Another choice spot is **Quan Hy** (714-775-7175; 9727 Bolsa Ave.), a sleek and modern restaurant with beautifully prepared plates, such as *banh beo*, steamed rice cakes topped with shredded shrimp and served in eight tiny dishes on a wooden tray (appetizers, \$5–10; entrées, including vegetarian selections, \$5–8.75; desserts, \$2.50–3).

For basic fare, try a Vietnamese staple: *pho*. You'll see *pho* restaurants throughout Little Saigon and the surrounding areas. These humble restaurants serve giant, delicious bowls of noodle soup. You can order chicken, beef, or other varieties of *pho*, and your soup comes with a heaping plate of fresh lime, mint, bean sprouts, jalapenos, and other goodies to crumble, tear, and drop into your bowl of broth. Soup is the main course, not just an appetizer. One of Little Saigon's oldest, favorite soup spots is **Pho 79** in the Asian Garden Mall. This spacious restaurant is a perfect place to try *Pho Ga*, rice noodle soup with chicken (\$5.25). If you're famished, order the largest bowl (\$6.95). And bring cash; Pho 79 doesn't accept credit cards.

Another tasty dining choice is the mall's **Food Court**, which is far better than the usual mall

fare. Here you can work your way from counter to counter, sampling a delectable and often inexpensive array of Vietnamese small plates: rice-paper spring rolls; crispy hunks of cooked sweet potatoes; heaping bowls of fragrant vermicelli with shrimp; sandwiches on just-baked bread; chunks of fresh pineapple; and flower-shaped cookies and countless other sweets. Be sure to try the Vietnamese coffee; it's strong and flavored with sweetened condensed milk.

4. **Catinat Plaza** (9741 Bolsa Ave., Westminster). If you're still in the mood for more browsing, head several blocks east along Bolsa Avenue until you reach this new and modern shopping center. Catinat Plaza offers still more shops and restaurants—and a taste of the younger generation of merchants setting up shop in Little Saigon. Stop by **Vinarrafts**, a Vietnamese arts shop selling ceramic, porcelain, and antique reproductions, and **LH Hand and Foot Massage**, which offers herbal soaks and vigorous foot massages for \$20. You'll also find **Wyndow Café**, a hip little spot with bowl-shaped bamboo chairs, rustic stone floors, and a large flat-screen TV tuned to CNN during the day. Patrons here tap away on laptops and sip strong dark coffee (\$3.50 a cup) and

**[ 146 ]** *Great Escapes: Southern California*

fresh-squeezed orange juice served in tall cocktail glasses (\$3.99). The café offers free Wi-Fi, a new addition in Little Saigon, and the staff of young employees enthusiastically greets each new customer. From Catinat Plaza, you can stroll to the adjacent **Today Plaza**, home of the **Quan Hy** restaurant (mentioned above) and **TEK Food Market**, a large Vietnamese grocery with a nice selection of china pieces and tea sets and a bountiful fresh-produce section.

**■■■■ GETTING THERE**

The hub of Little Saigon is the Orange County city of Westminster, about 30 miles south of Los Angeles International Airport; the area's Vietnamese community also extends into the neighboring cities of Garden Grove, Santa Ana, and Fountain Valley. You can reach the Little Saigon business district by taking the Magnolia Street exit off the 22 or 405 Freeways, heading toward Westminster. The intersection of Bolsa Avenue and Magnolia Street is a good place to start your exploration.

**■■■■ READING**

*The Little Saigon Cookbook* by Ann Le. The author grew up in Little Saigon, after her family fled Vietnam, and her book is equal

parts local travelogue and culinary tour. "There is a history and rich culture to Little Saigon," Le says. "And it's the cuisine that ties it all together." Another good choice: Ahn Do's essay "My Little Saigon" in the anthology *My California: Journeys by Great Writers*.

**■■■■ LANDMARK**

**The Vietnam War Memorial**, Sid Goldstein Freedom Park, 14180 All American Way, Westminster. Built in 2003 close to the city's civic center, the memorial's centerpiece is a statue of an American soldier and a South Vietnamese soldier side by side on the battlefield. The Vietnamese community raised a large portion of the money to build the monument, which cost more than \$1 million.

**■■■■ SPECIAL EVENTS**

*February:* **Tet Festival**, commemorates the Vietnamese New Year ([www.tetfestival.org](http://www.tetfestival.org))

*September:* **Taste of Little Saigon** ([westminsterchamber.org](http://westminsterchamber.org))

**■■■■ RESOURCE**

**Nguoi Viet newspaper** ([www.nguoi-viet.com/nv2\\_default.asp](http://www.nguoi-viet.com/nv2_default.asp)). Check out the English version of *Nguoi Viet Daily News*, the oldest and largest Vietnamese-language newspaper in the United States.