

Art Across the Red River

On October 10th and 11th, Hanoi's historic Long Bien Bridge will be closed to vehicle traffic and turned over to hundreds of artists and performers. Đỗ Thị Thắm reports on the upcoming Long Bien Festival of Arts

Built in 1898, Hanoi's Long Bien Bridge was bombed during two wars. Spanning the Red River, it stands as a symbol of Vietnam's courageous fight for liberty. During this era of peace and development, the bridge serves as a connection between Hanoi's past and the present.

On October 10th and 11th, the Long Bien Festival of Arts will take place on the bridge, an event marking the 55th anniversary of Hanoi's liberation, and 2009 as the year of "Cultural Diplomacy". The staging of an annual arts festival centered on and around this bridge will help to affirm Hanoi's place as an artistic capital.

Memories of Long Bien Bridge will be expressed through a variety of artistic mediums including paintings, photos, sculptures, music, film, and food. For 48 hours the bridge and its neighbourhoods will be exclusively pedestrian. People can stroll and explore the city's history and arts. Hundreds of artistic works by Vietnamese and foreign artists will be on display.

Two large stages will stand on either end of the bridge. The bridge at the Hanoi side will be devoted to 19th century musical styles, such as Ca trù, Quan họ, đàn Tranh, đàn Tỳ Bà, Hát Chèo, and Tuồng. The Gia Lam side will feature contemporary styles like pop, rock, and hip hop. To launch the festival a vintage steam engine will carry artists and VIP guests from Gia Lam Station to Long Bien Station in Hanoi. The inauguration of the festival will take place at the end of the bridge on the Hanoi side. For two days, the bridge will be closed to motorized and bicycle traffic. Rail traffic will be regular but at a slower pace, allowing train passengers to enjoy the festive atmosphere during their crossing of the bridge.

One side of the 1,682m-long bridge will feature photos dating from the 12 decades since the bridge's construction and 100 paintings of the bridge. The other side will feature more photos and 100 flute-kites that have been decorated by different artists. These traditional kites will also be flown from the sandbank in the middle of the Red River.

A number of activities are scheduled to take place during the festival, including a walk on the theme of "Green Hanoi, Peaceful Hanoi" to mark the tenth anniversary of UNESCO's

designation of Hanoi as a “City of Peace”. Silk calligraphy will be hung on the bridge. Documentaries about the bridge will be aired. And a parade of Vietnam’s 54 ethnic groups will celebrate their colorful fashions, dances and songs. Local artisans will be able to showcase and sell their handicrafts. Offerings will include ceramics, bamboo wares, silk, Dong Ho folk paintings, fans, handmade paper, medicinal herbs and conical hats. The festival will close with a mass for all those killed in warfare and the release of 999 candle-lit lanterns onto the Red River.

Initiated by Ms. Nguyen Nga, the Vietnamese- French director of Maison des Arts, the festival has received support from many foreign and local artists. This festival promises to be a memorable event in Hanoi’s arts calendar. Further information can be found at: www.longbienfestival.com

Designed by Gustave Eiffel, the Long Bien Bridge was built in 1898 by the Daydé and Pillé Company, and inaugurated in 1903. At that time it was the longest bridge in Indochina and one of the four longest bridges in the world. In the 19th century, the bridge was called the Doumer Bridge – the name of the Governor General of Indochina. The Long Bien Bridge enabled the railway to cross the Red River towards Lào Cai and then on to China. With a length of 1,682m including 19 steel spans, the bridge is a fine example of the engineering concepts, metal work and architecture also featured in Paris’ Eiffel Tower.

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