



VIETNAM

VIETNAM - THE COUNTRY

FAST FACTS



Vietnam, has finally won its last battle, to capture the imagination of the travelling public. Elegant Hanoi now vies with its dynamic sister, Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) for the attention of visitors drawn by the eclectic mix of old and new.

More modern than other Vietnamese cities, Ho Chi Minh City has also retained its French colonial influences. Its vibrancy is maintained by the ever-entrepreneurial Saigonese and the streets are jam-packed with mopeds and scooters, often carrying whole families. The markets are chaotically busy

Elsewhere, the scenes are timeless. Early morning on the Mekong Delta brings the daily floating markets where fruit and vegetables are peddled.

Everywhere the green patchwork of rice paddies stretches into the distance, broken only by the silhouette of water buffalo and farm workers wearing conical hats bending down to tend the young plants. The soaring mountains in the north of the country tower over tiny villages where life continues much as it has done for centuries, with traditional costumes still proudly worn. The old French hill stations have survived throughout the country offering a welcomed respite from the heat. And, in the South China Sea, the 3000 chalk islands in Ha Long Bay are not to be missed. The ancient former imperial capital, Hue, takes you back to a time of concubines and eunuchs.

The conquest of Vietnam by France began in 1858 and was completed by 1884. It became part of French Indochina in 1887. Vietnam declared independence after World War II, but France continued to rule until its 1954 defeat by Communist forces under Ho Chi Minh. Under the Geneva Accords of 1954, Vietnam was divided into the Communist North and Anti-Communist South. US economic and military aid to South Vietnam grew through the 1960's in an attempt to bolster the government, but US armed forces were withdrawn following a cease-fire agreement in 1973. Two years later, North Vietnamese forces overran the South reuniting the country under the Communist rule.

Despite the return of peace, for over a decade the country experienced little economic growth because of conservative leadership policies. However, since the enactment of Vietnam's "doi moi" (renovation) policy in 1986, Vietnamese authorities have committed to increased economic liberalization and enacted structural reforms needed to modernize the economy and to produce more competitive, export-driven industries which have resulted in rapid economic growth in the last decade.

The present constitution asserts the political supremacy of the Communist Party of Vietnam. In Jan 2011, the party chose a new Secretary General is Nguyen Phu Trong. Trong is one of the triumvirates that now govern Vietnam along with Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and President Truong Tan Sang.

VIETNAM HIGHLIGHTS

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SAPA

Located 1,500 metres above sea level in Vietnam's remote northwest mountains, Sapa is famous for its rugged scenery, luscious rice fields and rich cultural diversity. Close to China, this picturesque town is home to many ethnic minority hill tribes, who can be seen around the town in their colourful, traditional costumes.

HANOI

the capital city of Vietnam and one of the most beautiful cities in all of Asia. Hanoi is full of history; a maze of winding, narrow, wooded lanes full of shops, taverns, bicycles, cyclos and motorbikes. The city centre is an architectural museum piece, its blocks of ochre buildings retaining the air of a peaceful and austere provincial town, contrary to the fast-living and bustling air of Saigon. The city of Hanoi is a small part of now Greater Hanoi, which has a land area of 2,139 sq.km and a population of about 3,000,000. In the past, Hanoi was first chosen by King Ly Thai To as the capital of country and was named Thang Long (Ascending Dragon) in 1010. Through several successive dynasties, it remained as the country's capital city, the heart and soul of the whole nation, and has borne a variety of names, including Dong Kinh (Eastern capital), from which the Europeans derived the name they eventually applied to all of northern Vietnam, Tonkin. The city was finally named Hanoi (the city in a bend of the river) by Emperor Minh Mang (Nguyen Dynasty) in 1831. From 1902 to 1953, Hanoi served as the capital of French Indochina.

HAI PHONG

Hai Phong is a large port and the Chinese, Japanese, French, Spanish and Portuguese have been here to trade for centuries. Nowadays, it's still a commercial centre with an industrial city and an important transportation hub. Moreover, visitors can enjoy beautiful landscapes as well as interesting festivals celebrated on Cat Ba Island and Do Son Beach.

HALONG BAY

This UNESCO World Heritage Site is considered by many to be one of the Natural Wonders of the World, and for good reason. Over 2,000 magnificent limestone karsts rise from the clear, emerald waters of the Gulf of Tonkin, making for a truly picturesque scene. The limestone basin reveals stalactite caves, crescent beaches and odd-shaped formations. It is also famous for its varied ecological system housing thousands of fish species, along with hundreds of coral and other sea creatures.

NINH BINH

A short journey south of Hanoi brings you to the "Dry Halong Bay" known for its limestone hills and meandering river that takes you through three caves before unveiling a secluded valley. Your boatmen are locals who often employ their feet for rowing. As you make your way through the waterway on a sampan, keep an eye out for plunging Kingfishers or nimble-footed mountain goats silhouetted against the skyline and rough stone. Here, the river merges seamlessly into rich green rice fields, and farmer's dwellings can be seen, clinging to the cliffs tending to its rocky outcrops.

HUE

Situated directly on the atmospheric Perfume River, Hue is without doubt one of Vietnam's most historic cities. This former Royal Capital is full of temples, pagodas, palaces, tombs and culture. Hue was Vietnam's feudal capital from 1802 to 1945 under the Nguyen Dynasty. It is widely known that for the magnificent architecture of its citadels, palaces, royal tombs, pagodas and temples set in a poetic background of greenery on the banks of the Perfume River. All were laid out in harmony with nature and in accordance with the principles of geomancy (feng shui). Besides monuments, Hue still retains much its past glory in daily routines and activities in religion, gastronomy, handicraft, music, the performing arts and traditional festivals. Hue became Vietnam's first World Cultural Heritage site recognised by UNESCO in 1993.

HAI VAN PASS

The Hai Van Pass means, in Vietnamese, "the pass of ocean clouds." It is located on Highway 1 between Danang and Hue, revealing a stretch of scenery where mountains appear to fall into the sea. The coastal drive rivals the views found in Turkey and California. In the past, the Hai Van Pass has been the site of a historic seesaw struggle between several nations in the region including the kingdoms of Champa, Vietnam and Laos.

DANANG

Vietnam's third largest city, and largest major port city, Danang is an ideal base to explore the nearby Old Town of Hoi An, or historic former royal capital of Hue. Located directly on the coast, Danang boasts some of Vietnam's most beautiful beaches and beach-side hotel resorts. The city's origin dates back to the ancient Champa Kingdom, established by Indonesian settlers in 192AD. At its peak, the Cham's sphere of influence stretched from Hue to Vung Tau. With the expansion of the Chinese, Vietnamese and Khmer, the ultimate fall of the Cham occurred by mid-15th century. By the 19th century, Danang had superseded Hoi An as the most important sea port in the central region. The presence of the French in the 19th and early 20th centuries and the Americans in the 1960s, has led to the continued growth of Danang, making it one of Vietnam's largest cities.

HOI AN

This quaint riverside town was once the principal port of the Cham Kingdom. Beautiful, steeped in history and culture, this UNESCO World Heritage Town is very popular with visitors to Vietnam, and for good reason. Just 30km south of Danang, Hoi An was one of the major trading centres of southeast Asia in the 16th century. Hoi An has retained a distinct Chinese atmosphere with low, tile-roofed houses and narrow streets. The original structure of some of these streets remains intact. All the houses were made of rare wood, decorated with lacquered boards and panels engraved with Chinese characters; pillars were also carved with ornamental designs. Tourists can visit the relics of the Sa Huynh and Cham cultures and enjoy sunset strolls along the romantic Hoi An River, Cua Dai Beach and Cham Island.

MY SON

Located 69km southwest of Danang, My Son was an imperial city during the Cham Dynasty between the 4th and 12th centuries. My Son Sanctuary is a large complex of religious relics that comprises more than 70 architectural works, including temples and towers that connect to each other with complicated red brick designs. The main component of the Cham architectural design in the tower, built to reflect the divinity of the king.

NHA TRANG

Beautiful white sandy beaches and clear blue waters make Nha Trang Vietnam's beach and scuba diving capital. Fresh seafood and gentle sea breezes have endeared the city to many Indochina travellers. You can spend time on the waters of the South China Sea by touring on a boat visiting island fishing villages. Whether eating on board or in villas that once belonged to emperor Bao Dai, do not miss the local seafood! Nha Trang's charms lie in its seaside surroundings, but you might like to take a bicycle ride along the beachfront boulevard to the city's market and onto the ancient Cham towers of Po Nagar with views extending out to the colourful fishing fleet in the sea. A vibrant night scene with a diverse range of bars and restaurants mean this town has something to suit all tastes.

DALAT

Located in the south central highlands of Vietnam, Dalat is a slice of Europe in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. It was originally the playground of the French who built villas in the clear mountain air to escape the heat and humidity of the coast and of Saigon. Dalat is still popular with locals and tourists alike for this reason, as well as the town's attractive landscape of colonial villas, gardens, lakes and rolling hills. Dalat's colourful market features locally-made specialities such as artichoke tea, candied fruits, coffee and the finest cool climate vegetables and flowers in Vietnam. Visit the former summer residence of Vietnam's last emperor, Bao Dai, and meet Dalat's famous artist monk Vien Thuc in his studio lined with thousands of his quirky compositions. The brilliantly coloured silk weavings of the K'hor tribes people are a popular purchase, as are finely detailed silk embroideries.

PHAN THIET / MUI NE

Often overlooked by travellers, Mui Ne is a charming beach town and a paradise for kite surfers! Centred along one main road are a vast array of international and local seafood restaurants, bars and beach clubs. Phan Thiet is located 200km from Saigon along Vietnam's southeastern coast; it is home to one of the best stretches of beach in the country. Phan Thiet is the classic example of a resort which has retained its fishing village culture. A collection of excellent resorts have opened up along the coast on the Mui Ne Peninsula. Well spaced and sensitively constructed, these resorts offer everything that a visitor could want from a beach destination. Golfers will enjoy Ocean Dunes, a classic links course in a stunning setting.

SAIGON / HO CHI MINH CITY

Vietnam's largest and most up-and-coming city, buzzing with activity 24 hours per day! French colonial buildings and historic landmarks and museums are highlights of this rapidly developing city. The city is crammed full of restaurants and bars ranging from simple pavement stalls where you can buy a bowl of noodles for a few cents to sophisticated restaurants serving fine European cuisine at a fraction of the price you would pay in Europe. Ho Chi Minh's nightlife has become very cosmopolitan in recent years and there are literally hundreds of bars, pubs, nightclubs and discotheques to pick from for a night on the town. It is also a real shopper's paradise with modern shopping centres and trendy boutiques rubbing shoulders with traditional street markets.



MEKONG DELTA

Floating villages, green fields and sleepy villages make up this region. Though the pace of life here is laidback, the region is full of life with luscious rice paddies and fish farms being cultivated by the river, as well as sugar cane, fruit, coconut and shrimp. It is one of Asia's most picturesque regions that offers travellers the opportunity to experience rural Vietnam and a way of life little changed over centuries. Travel by sampan along narrow canals to tropical fruit orchards and bonsai gardens; sample freshly-picked fruits and the local delicacy, fried elephant-ear fish; and navigate through the waterborne bustle of the area's famed floating markets.

Can Tho is located on the lower section of the Mekong River. In recent years, a series of modern tourism gardens of interest have appeared one very land and water route in the city. Chau Doc is just a scenic little town on the way. Here again you ply the river to explore life on the waters, visit floating fish farms and villages of the Cham people, before watching the sunset from Sam Mountain over the vast rice fields stretching over the border and on into Cambodia.

Another attraction to see while you are in the Mekong Delta are the Floating Markets of Cai Rang and Cai Be, being the biggest in the Mekong Delta. The shops and stalls at these markets are boats of different sizes. Usually Floating Markets are open all day but it is busiest from sunrise to about 9am. The many items sold there are farm products and local specialities.

VUNG TAU

Vung Tau province is popular for its beaches and, just 1.5 hours by hydrofoil, it is a quick getaway from Saigon. The Vina and Petro Express hydrofoils depart and return to the city every

couple of hours. When you arrive, visit Back Beach for nightlife and Mulberry beach for those in search of less Karaoke. Other attractions are large and small mountain circuits, the lighthouse and giant Jesus statue. Golfers can spend time enjoying an international standard 27-hole golf course open to non-members, except on Saturdays and Sundays.

PHU QUOC

Surely the most beautiful island in Vietnam, Phu Quoc is surrounded by picture-perfect white sand beaches and with dense, impenetrable jungle in the centre. Long Beach is refined, Ong Lan Beach romantic, and Bai Sao simply irresistible. It takes about 40 minutes by plane from Saigon to reach the main island that has a length of 50km, with sloping geography running from the south to the north. With 37,000 hectares of primeval forest, it is home to assorted rare plants and birds. Phu Quoc is called the “pearl island” because high quality, large pearls are harvested here by locals. You can enjoy both sun and steam baths, then climb to caves or take tours to forests where you can enjoy the nature and wildlife. The most famous local speciality dish is Phu Quoc shrimp sauce, with a unique aroma and high protein content made from white herring.

HISTORY & GOVERNMENT

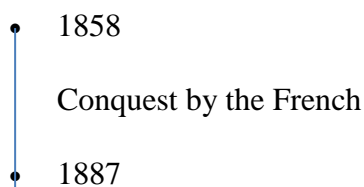
HISTORY

Under the Geneva Accords of 1954, Vietnam was divided into the Communist North and Anti-Communist South. US economic and military aid to South Vietnam grew through the 1960’s in an attempt to bolster the government, but US armed forces were withdrawn following a cease-fire agreement in 1973. Two years later, North Vietnamese forces overran the South reuniting the country under the Communist rule.

Despite the return of peace, for over a decade the country experienced little economic growth because of conservative leadership policies. However, since the enactment of Vietnam’s “doi moi” (renovation) policy in 1986, Vietnamese authorities have committed to increased economic liberalization and enacted structural reforms needed to modernize the economy and to produce more competitive, export-driven industries which have resulted in rapid economic growth in the last decade.

The present constitution asserts the political supremacy of the Communist Party of Vietnam. In April 2001, the party chose a new Secretary General in Nong Duc Manh. Nong is one of the triumvirates that now govern Vietnam along with Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and President Nguyen Minh Triet.

TIMELINE

- 
- 1858
 - 1887
- Conquest by the French

Vietnam became part of French Indochina

- 1954

Vietnam divides into Communist North & Anti-Communist South

- 1973

Withdrawal of US Armed Forces from Vietnam

- 1986

Vietnam Commits to increased economic liberation

GOVERNMENT

The present constitution, promulgated in 1992, asserts the political supremacy of the Communist Party of Vietnam. The 496-member National Assembly is responsible for legislation. The Assembly is elected every five years from candidates proposed by the CPV. Executive power is exercised by the Council of Ministers. The assembly elects a president, who acts as head of state and also appoints a prime minister from among the members of the Assembly. The prime minister leads the Council of Ministers, the members of which hold executive power. It is a Social Republic since 1980 and it gained independence from France in 1954.

GEOGRAPHY

Vietnam borders the Gulf of Thailand, Gulf of Tonkin and the South China Sea.



Vietnam borders the Gulf of Thailand, Gulf of Tonkin and the South China Sea. The country shares borders to the north with the People’s Republic of China and to the west with Laos and Cambodia. The land is principally agricultural with a central tropical rainforest. Extending 1,650km from north to south, Vietnam is only 50km across at its narrowest point.

	Population 83.6 million
	Time GMT + 7
	Cordinates 16.00°N,106.00°E
	Population Density 253.9 per sq km
	Area 329,247 sq km

CULTURE

Vietnam has its own characteristics, quite different from its neighbours, including China. Vietnamese like to think they are very unique... that’s because they are! Please

accept the fact that you are a guest in Vietnam and always will be. You will experience what it feels...

As such, you'll enjoy special status but also have special responsibilities. Do try to learn as much as you can about the culture before you depart, and be considerate of the cultural differences you will experience.

The Vietnamese will highly appreciate your efforts to understand them, their culture, and their language. If you are up for a culture shock then Vietnam is the place to be.

Do realize that the Vietnamese have a very different perspective on social, political and business organizations, most of which are modelled on the extended family concept. It would be difficult in fact to overestimate the importance of family and the extent to which the family model is present at all levels and in all social and professional structures. **Don't be offended if newly made friends poke into every detail of your personal life.** They are in fact helping you become part of a Vietnamese group. Understand that family matters are paramount and unexpected family responsibilities will take precedence over appointments and activities scheduled previously. In general, don't judge what you cannot understand. As always, respect is the key word here.

You should show respect in general, as it will usually be shown by most Vietnamese in most situations. Don't lose your temper; it is first seen as a lack of respect for yourself and a strong sign of disrespect for your counterparts. Nevertheless, although in many ways a very polite and courteous lot, **you may sometimes find people in Vietnam to be quite rude by your own standards.** For example, in Vietnam queuing is pointless, queues and orderly lines simply don't happen. Also, don't be offended by personal questions and remarks, people will often ask nosy questions like: how old are you? Where are you going? Why are you late?

Humour can be valuable tool in Vietnam. The Vietnamese truly love to have a laugh about almost anything, and someone who can crack a joke will be appreciated and even be taken more seriously by any locals. Do joke about things as a polite way of dodging the many questions you may not want to answer. Realize that Vietnamese people also laugh when they are sad, angry, embarrassed, puzzled, uneasy, shy and grieving. Overall, it's a Vietnamese trait, and people will smile at you wherever you go. The Vietnamese are very tolerant of bad driving, noise, interruptions, invasion (or absence of personal space, discomfort (primitive living and working conditions, being squeezed into a crowded bus for hours) and the sharing of everything.

They are not very tolerant of insubordination, criticism of Vietnamese culture and homosexuality for example, though obviously present. Lying is not really seen as a sin in Vietnam. This does not mean that the country is crawling with malicious fibbers, but rather that truth may be yet another relative concept from that prevalent in your own culture. The most important thing in a Vietnamese context is to say the right thing. **People will often tell you what they think you want to hear.**

HINTS

1. Accept the fact that you are a guest in Vietnam and always will be.
2. The Vietnamese will highly appreciate your efforts to understand them, their culture, and their language.
3. Don't be offended if newly made friends poke into every detail of your personal life.
4. Respect is the key word here
5. You may sometimes find people in Vietnam to be quite rude by your own standards.
6. Don't be offended by personal questions and remarks
7. Humour can be valuable tool in Vietnam.
8. People will often tell you what they think you want to hear

DOS & DON'TS

1. Handshaking and a vocal greeting are normal.
2. Clothing should be kept simple, informal and discreet.
3. Avoid shorts if possible when outside of the major cities, as they are usually only worn by children.
4. Don't go naked or topless on the beaches or in the water: culturally, this is a big no-no and would be asking for trouble.
5. Footwear should be removed when entering Buddhist pagodas or people's houses.
6. Vietnamese people should not be touched on the head or shown the soles of your feet.

RELIGION

Vietnam's traditional religious background is based on three great philosophies and religions. These are Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism that coexist with a more ancient but still thriving mother worship cult, ancestor worship, popular beliefs, superstitions and ancient Vietnamese animism.

It is rich and finely balanced amalgam that permeates not only the spiritual side of Vietnamese life (most will say they are Buddhists) and their understanding of the universe (taken from Taoist philosophy) but also regulates family and civic duties (which is the main focus of Confucianism).

Although religious identification is not such a clear-cut matter, statistics tell us that about **70% of the population are Buddhist, 10% Catholic, 3% Cao Daist, 2% Hao Hao** and the rest of various other religious groups such as Protestantism, Islam, Hinduism and the specific beliefs of some minority ethnic groups. As far as individual beliefs are concerned, especially those of foreigners, **Vietnam has to be one of the most tolerant societies.** Actually, most Vietnamese couldn't care less if you believe or what you believe in and will not try to convert you to their own sets of beliefs.



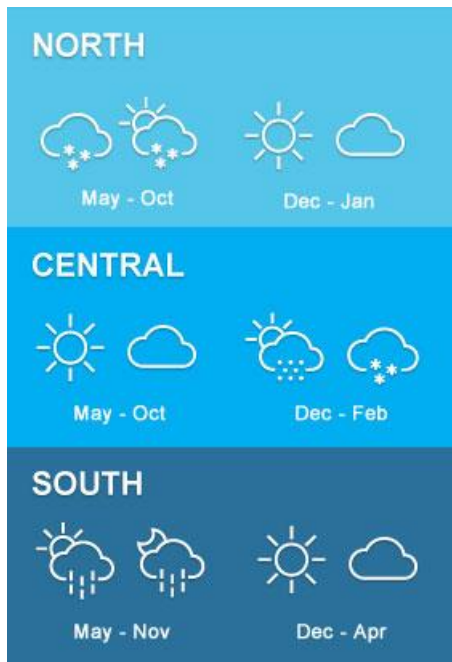
CLIMATE

There are no good or bad seasons to visit Vietnam. When one region is wet, cold or boiling hot, there is always somewhere else that is sunny and pleasant. Because of its geography, stretching 1,650km from north to south and from sea level to mountain...

The south has a wet season from May to November, the wettest months being from June to August, and the dry season from December to April. The wet is characterized by high humidity levels and a refreshing afternoon downpour. Humidity in the South during the months of June and July ranges between 75% and 85%. The hottest months are from March to May, with temperatures well over 30 degrees Celsius.

The central coast is dry from May to October and wet from December to February. The highland areas are significantly cooler than the lowlands, and temperatures can get down to freezing in winter. The North has cool, damp winters from November to April and hot summers from May to October. The months of December and January can be particularly cool with temperatures as low as 8 degrees Celsius. Temperatures can drop to 0 degrees Celsius in Sapa in winter, and there is sometimes snowfall.

There is the possibility of seeing typhoons between July and November, affecting the north and central areas.



PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Useful, practical information regarding money, credit cards, ATMs, health & safety, food & drink, transportation, communication, and much more...

MONEY

Currency

Dông (VND). Notes are in denominations of **VND 500,000, 200,000, 100,000, 50,000, 20,000, 10,000, 5000, 2000, 1000, 500, 200** and **100**. Coins are in denominations of **VND5000, 2000, 1000, 500** and 200.

Currency Exchange

The US Dollar is the most favoured foreign currency. Australian, British, Japanese, Singaporean and Thai currency, as well as the Euro, can easily be changed in the larger cities; great difficulty may be encountered in trying to exchange any other currencies. Hotels generally change major foreign currencies at the prevailing bank rate. Do not change any money on the streets, there is no advantage for doing so. Do change them at a jeweller (one that sells gold); shop around and you'll get a better rate than at the state-controlled bank.

Credit / Debit Cards and ATMs

An increasing number of outlets accept MasterCard and Visa. Amex representations are growing rapidly. Most outlets that accept credit cards will charge you an extra 3% per transaction. Outside main centres, it is wise to carry cash even though ATMs are becoming more common.

The withdrawal limit is 2 Million VND (US\$100) per transaction and the usual cost for each is around VND20,000 (1 Euro).

Travellers Cheque Advice

These are widely accepted in hotels and banks. Travellers are advised to take traveller's checks in US Dollars or Euros.

Currency Restrictions

Import and export of foreign currency over US\$7000 is subject to declaration. Proof of all expenses should be kept.

Banking Hours

Monday to Friday from 0730/0800 to 1130 and 1300 to 1600. Do take your passport with you or a good copy as this is necessary for all dealings.

Approximate exchange rates (01/01/2007)

1USD = 21,000 dong

1AUD = 19,000 dong

1CAD = 19,000 dong

1GBP = 35,000 dong

1EUR = 28,000 dong

For up-to-date exchange rates, please visit e.g. www.oanda.com

Hints on tipping & Bargaining

1. **Tipping is not customary, but is becoming more usual and expected in tourist areas, especially in the south.**
2. Keep your tip within the VND20,000-50,000 limit. Upscale restaurants and hotels may add a service charge to the bill.
3. Taxi drivers should not expect to be tipped but this is changing fast also.
4. Don't feel awkward or rude about bargaining, everyone bargains in Vietnam and you'll look like a green tourist if you don't.

HEALTH & SAFETY

Health care

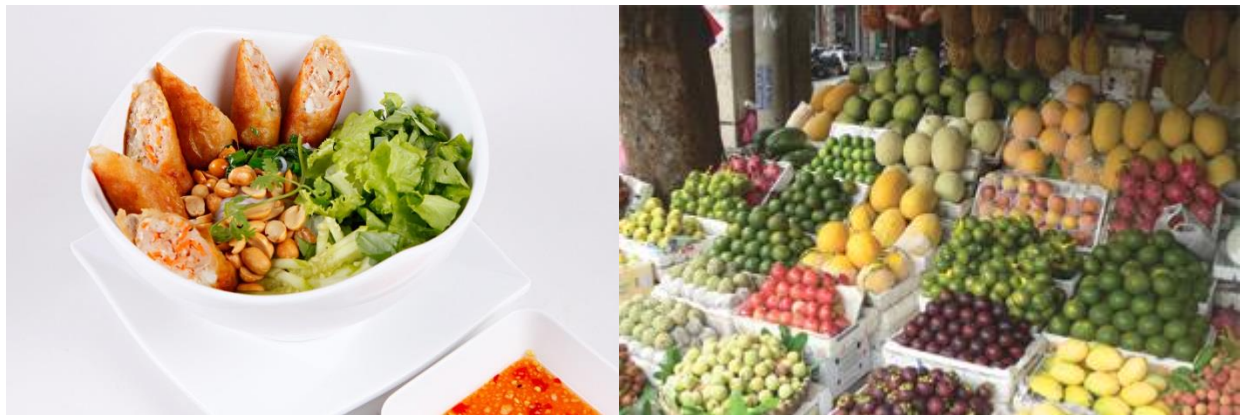
There are international standard hospitals in major towns and cities. Health care centres can be found in all provinces, but facilities are limited and there is a lack of medicine. Health insurance is essential and should include coverage for emergency repatriation by air. Immediate cash payment is expected for medical services.

Vaccinations

Special precautions and a vaccinations certificate may be required. Malaria regulations can change at short notice. Please take medical advice in case of doubt. A yellow fever vaccination certificate is required from travellers arriving from infected areas. A cholera vaccination certificate is not an official condition of entry to Vietnam. However, cholera is a serious risk in the country. Malaria risk exists, predominantly in the falciparum form, throughout the year everywhere except urban areas, the Red River delta and the coastal plains of Central Vietnam. The recommended prophylaxis is mefloquine, doxycycline or atovaquone/proguanil, depending on the specific area visited.

Food & Drink

All water should be regarded as being potentially contaminated. Water used for drinking, brushing teeth or making ice should have first been boiled or otherwise sterilized. Milk is not pasteurized and should be boiled. Avoid dairy products that are likely to have been made from un-boiled milk. Only eat well-cooked meat and fish, preferably served hot. Vegetables should be cooked and fruit peeled.



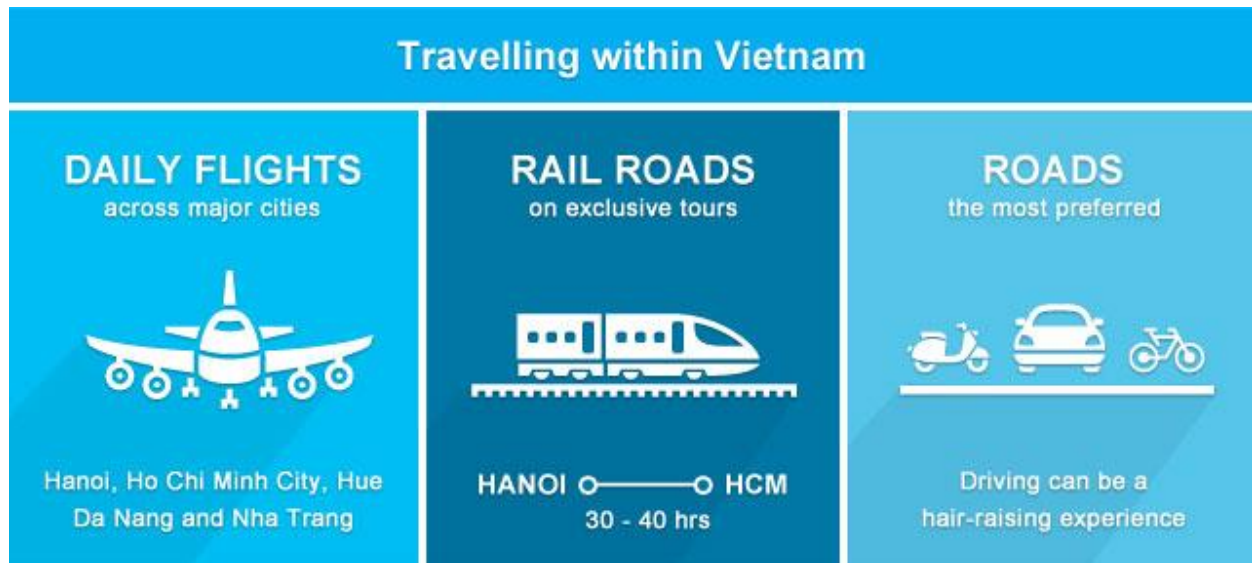
Safety

Vietnam is a relatively safe country to visit. As a global rule, we recommend you never leave your belongings unattended and always maintain eye contact or a firm grip on cameras and shoulder bags. Valuables should be stored in the safety box in your room, if available, or at the reception. Avoid mopeds late at night and choose reliable metered taxi companies.

Natural Hazards

Occasional typhoons can happen from May to January with extensive flooding, especially in the centre and northern area.

TRANSPORTATION



Getting around by air

Vietnam Airlines operates daily flights between Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Hue, Da Nang and Nha Trang. Regular services are also provided between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to Buon Ma Thuot, Dalat, Na San, Phu Quoc, Pleiku, Qui Nhon and Vinh. Do reconfirm any flight, as this is not a superfluous precaution in Vietnam. Don't arrive at airport just in time for a domestic flight: your seat may well have been resold to someone else by then.

Getting around in the City

You can try using local bus services in Saigon and in Hanoi but remember that it is often a quite complicated matter for most foreigners. When travelling by taxi, it is advisable to note down the driver's registration number, displayed on rear side of taxi for security reasons. Furthermore, do check that the driver starts the meter, unless you agree to a price before you move off and then stick to it. If you use taxis or motorbikes, it's best to always make sure you have some small notes on you. Motorbikes are a very popular and practical way of getting around. You'll find them on every street corner in the country or else they'll find you. It is the fastest way to get around in the cities, but do fix a price before you hop on. Normally, for travel in the city, the maximum price is VND20,000 per kilometre.

Getting around on foot

Nobody walks anywhere in Vietnam if they don't have to. Don't expect to be able to walk down street pavements in most towns and cities; these are generally employed for parking cars, motorbikes and bicycles.

Getting around by train

Visitors may use the rail transport system independently or as part of a rail tour. Long-distance trains are more expensive but are faster, more reliable and more comfortable. Although a few carriages now have air conditioning, most facilities are still short of international standards. This is not the case for the newly opened five star Express Train from Saigon to Nha Trang and the Victoria Wagons from Hanoi to Sapa that are exclusively reserved for Victoria Hotels & Resorts clients. The main rail route connects Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City and the journey can take between 30 and 40 hours.

Getting around by road

Most traffic drives on the right side of the road but you may often encounter surprises. Roads, especially in the north, are often in a bad state. Driving can be a hair-raising experience as the normal rules are rarely followed by the majority of drivers. There is a highway from Hanoi to Saigon. Bus services are often poor and overcrowded, although long-distance buses tend to be more modern and air-conditioned. It is possible to hire chauffeur-driven cars. Self-drive car hire is non-existent.



TIPS FOR SURVIVING THE TRAFFIC

Don't spend hours waiting to cross the streets on foot; the constant tide of traffic won't stop until late at night. So do as the Vietnamese do, take the plunge and inch slowly across. Don't make any sudden or unpredictable movements: freeze if you have to, but never lunge.



Vietnamese visas are now valid for all international border crossings by air at Noi Bai (Hanoi), Danang & Tan Son Nhat airport (HCM).

Getting There by Air

The national airline is Vietnam Airlines (VN). The most common routes to Vietnam are from Bangkok, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Manila, Paris, Singapore and Taipei. Most Asian carriers have flights to Vietnam, as do Air France, Qantas, Lufthansa and Aeroflot. Charters are now opening new routes to Vietnam, please check with you operator or travel agencies for further information.

Main Airports

Noi Bai International Airport (HAN) at Noi Bai is 45km (28 miles) north of Hanoi. Tan Son Nhat International Airport (SGN) is 7km (4.5 miles) from Ho Chi Minh City. Danang International Airport (DAD) is located 2km (1.3 miles) from the city centre.

Departure tax

Departure tax is included in your plane ticket cost.



VISA DETAILS

Visas are valid for all international border crossings by land:

1. In the north at Huu Nghi border in Lang Son province and at Lao Cai border in Lao Cai province
2. In the Center at Cau Treo border in Nghe An province, Lao Bao border in Quang Tri province and at Bo Y border in Kon Tum province
3. In the South at Moc Bai border in Tay Ninh province and in Vinh Xuong border in An Giang province

COMMUNICATION

Telephone

Most hotels now have IDD phones in rooms and it is possible to send faxes from hotels and post offices. Be aware that most hotels charge considerable amounts for these services; please check with the hotel prior to arrival. It may not always be possible to make international calls in remote areas. If you have worldwide coverage, you can bring your own mobile phone and use it to make domestic or international calls. Check with your mobile phone provider for the costs prior to using it abroad.

The **1088 number** is a rather unusual telephone service available in Vietnam. An army of operators, some of whom speak English, are trained to answer questions from the public, from meteorology to tourist information, historical and scientific queries.



Internet

Major hotels have Business Centres with PCs connected to the Internet. Some of them have wireless broadband access in rooms or public areas. Cyber cafes are becoming popular and are easily found in major towns and cities. Prices are reasonable, usually below US\$1 per hour. In many internet cafes, you can buy pre-paid phone cards to dial from a computer to a landline or mobile phone worldwide.

If Internet connections at hotels are vital for you during your visit to Vietnam, please advise your Focus Asia travel consultant. If you have your own laptop or smart phone, you will easily find a free wi-fi spot at one of the many coffee shops and restaurants in the cities.

Mail

The postal system is quite good in Vietnam. Postcards are sold at all main tourist sites and stamps are available from post offices and some hotel reception desks. Sending a postcard to Europe costs VND9,000 and takes up to two weeks to reach the destination. Don't seal a parcel before you take it to the post office. You will be required to show its contents before you can have it weighed and priced.

HOLIDAYS & EVENTS

Do note that flights into, out of, and inside the country will most probably be fully booked months in advance to the Têt period.

Generally speaking, special prayers are held at Vietnamese and Chinese pagodas on days when the moon is either full or the merest sliver. Some of the major religious festivals follow the lunar calendar. The new lunar year; Wandering Souls Day (Trung Nguyen), held on the fifteenth day of the seventh moon (August), is the second-largest festival of the year, when offerings of food and gifts are given to the wandering souls of the forgotten dead; Tiet Doan Ngo (Summer Solstice Day) in June sees the burning of human effigies to satisfy the need for souls to serve in the God of Death's army; and Holiday of the Dead (Thanh Minh) in April commemorates deceased relatives



PUBLIC HOLIDAYS IN VIETNAM

- **January 1**
New Year's Day
- **Late January or early February**
Tết – first day of first month of Lunar New Year
- **March 10**
Anniversary of Hung King's Death
- **April 30**
Victory Day/Liberation of Saigon
- **May 1**
May Day/ International Labour Day
- **September 2**
National Day

SHOPPING

Don't miss the markets, they are among the most atmospheric in Southeast Asia and still the hub of commercial activity everywhere in Vietnam.

The idea of a fixed pricing system is still quite novel, which means that good-natured haggling is an important habit to develop. Anywhere outside of supermarkets, restaurants and anything controlled by the state, bargaining is probably possible and usually essential.

Local specialties include lacquer painting, carvings (stone & wood), reed mats, embroidery, tailor-made ao dais (female national costume), ceramics painting, and mother-of-pearl inlay on ornaments and furniture, not to mention the ubiquitous conical hat. Hoi An and Saigon are some of the best places in Vietnam to shop for souvenirs at bargain prices including clothes, shoes, silk, precious or semi-precious stones (Jade), jewellery, handicrafts, antiques and paintings. Very good copies can be found, particularly items such as clothes, sports equipment and luggage. Souvenir shops in Hanoi & Saigon offer an incredible collection of genuine imitations of Zippo lighters with war logos, dog tag

Do be advised that there is no trading standards authority in Vietnam, so check the quality of what you're buying very carefully, especially if there are safety concerns involved. Don't expect to get your money back if you change your mind after making a purchase, or even if you realize that the goods you have been sold are not as advertised. Check everything yourself before handing over your money.



Tips to savvy shopping

1. **Always ask around to get an idea of basic prices** for common necessities. For more important purchases, try and get a local friend to go along with you, or better still, let them do the buying without you.
2. **Don't feel awkward or rude about bargaining**, everyone bargains in Vietnam and you'll look like a green tourist if you don't
3. **Don't look happy or resigned to paying what you're asked**, always begin by showing your gentle disapproval or saying something like Dat Qua (too expensive)
4. **Don't hesitate to walk away** if you cannot agree on a price: either they'll come after you or you'll find the same thing on sale somewhere else
5. **Do buy ethnic minority products directly from ethnic minority people** if at all possible, rather than from shops run by ethnic majority merchants, who often exploit their suppliers

FOOD & DRINK

Our own preference goes to the central cuisine, with its subtle sophisticated flavours. Northern dishes can be a little on the bland side, while the southern recipes are a bit heavy on sugary tastes. National specialties include rice or noodles that usually provide the basis of a meal.

Breakfast is generally noodle soup (known as Pho). Baguettes are available throughout Vietnam. Nems are common and Banh Chung the glutinous rice, pork and onion snacks wrapped in leaves are to be eaten at any time. Nuoc Mam (fish sauce) or Mam Tom (shrimp sauce) is served with most dishes.



If it's a **unique culinary experience** you're looking for, don't hesitate to try some of these: **Dog meat, duck's blood soup, semi incubated duck's eggs, aromatic juice squeezed from cockroach-like insects, beating snake's heart in rice wine, roasted chicken feet after a night out.** It's best to avoid endangered species such as bear meet, sea horse, turtles, shark fins and shark fin soup, tiger, pangolin, wild snake and wild dogs.

National drinks are green tea and strong coffee, it is available everywhere. Bia Hoi, a local draught beer is available at street stalls in Hanoi. It is not only cheap, but free of additives. Rice wine is also a favourite.

Tipping is not customary, but is becoming more usual and expected in tourist areas, especially in the south. Keep your tip within the VND20,000-50,000 limit. Upscale restaurants and hotels may add a service charge to the bill. Taxi drivers should not expect to be tipped but this is changing fast also.

HINTS

1. Vietnamese food is a mixture of Vietnamese, Chinese and French traditions.
2. Unique culinary experience such as; Dog meat, duck's blood soup, semi incubated duck's eggs, aromatic juice squeezed from cockroach-like insects, beating snake's heart in rice wine, roasted chicken feet.
3. National drinks are green tea and strong coffee.

VISA INFORMATION

All nationalities, with exception of some nationals, must have a visa to enter Vietnam. You can apply for a visa through a Vietnamese embassy or consulate in your country. Check with the embassy or consulate regarding the latest requirements.

If you do not want to send off your passport or need your passport for your current travel, Focus Asia can assist you in obtaining a visa-on-arrival if you are arriving to Vietnam by air (available at Ho Chi Minh City, Danang and Hanoi airports only). For all land and river borders, a visa must be obtained in advance.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

1. Your passport must be valid for at least 6 months from the date of departure from your country.
2. Make sure you have at least 3 blank pages in your passport for visas and stamps.