

Inspirational travel

Vietnam • Cambodia • Laos • Thailand

ABOUT VIETNAM

For a country that is only a little larger than Italy, Vietnam has immense geographic and cultural diversity. The country's varied climate and landscape range from four seasons in the mountainous north, to year-round tropical temperatures in the lush south.

Vietnam's cultural diversity stems from its intriguing history dating back more than 4,000 years. Its historical legacy includes a century of Chinese occupation, which has left a very strong foreign cultural influence, evident in the pagodas, local cuisine, and continuing practice of Confucianism. The French colonial legacy is also evident in many parts of Vietnam, as illustrated by the distinctive yellow pastel-colored architecture of its villas and administrative buildings, bakeries selling croissants and cafes serving excellent coffee (did you know Vietnam is the second biggest exporter of coffee in the world?)

Today most of the country remains relatively unchanged although in major cities you will discover modern infrastructure and technology. Visitors can choose to travel at various levels of comfort, staying in anything from budget to deluxe accommodations, using public or private transportation, and dining local style or in the finer Vietnamese and international restaurants.

1. HIGHLIGHTS

First time travelers usually start in Hanoi and travel south to Ho Chi Minh City, or vice versa. The key destinations on a first time trip to Vietnam usually include a selection of the following places:

Hanoi

The cultural heart of Vietnam and 'Paris of the Orient', where incense filled pagodas stand alongside art deco French colonial style villas.

Halong Bay

A UNESCO World Heritage listed region with thousands of limestone, jungle covered peaks rising out of the Bay. Overnight 'junk boat' cruises are very popular.

Sapa

An overnight train trip north west from Hanoi, into the mountains near the Chinese border. Cooler than the city, this former French hill station is perfect for hiking in pristine scenery and visiting ethnic minority villages where hill tribes wear intricately embroidered traditional clothing.

Mai Chau Valley

A less touristy version of Sapa only four hours' drive from Hanoi, home to various ethnic minorities and the perfect place for hiking and cycling as well as cultural immersion.

Hue

Vietnam's regal past can be revisited in the former capital city of Hue, where the Citadel and Royal Tombs represent an era of cultural renaissance.

Hoi An

A UNESCO World Heritage listed town and formerly on the Dutch spice traders route, Hoi An possesses beautifully preserved architecture, white sandy beaches, hundreds of tailor-shops, and fantastic restaurants and cooking schools. It is quiet, romantic and quaint - a must for any visitor!

Nha Trang

For travelers wanting a few days on the beach during their trip. Fishing, snorkeling and kayaking can also be arranged.

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Dalat

Situated in the Central Highlands, Dalat is a local destination for Vietnamese honeymooners, featuring cooler weather, flower farms, French colonial villas, hiking and biking, and world class golf courses.

Phan Thiet/Mui Ne

A coastal town around four hours drive from Ho Chi Minh City, with perfect conditions for kite boarding, windsurfing and sailing, as well as sand tobogganing on giant dunes.

Ho Chi Minh City

The cosmopolitan hub of Vietnam and gateway to the historic Cu Chi Tunnels system and Mekong Delta. Saigon's weather is sultry and warm year round.

Mekong Delta

This can be done as a one day or multi-day trip from Ho Chi Minh City, where visitors can take a traditional sampan boat to Cai Be or visit the floating produce markets of Can Tho. The overnight night 'Bassac' rice barge cruise is one of the best ways to experience the Mekong Delta in comfort and relaxation. Cycling trips and homestay accommodation can be arranged for the more adventurous. You can also take a speed boat from Chau Doc across the border to Cambodia's Phnom Penh.

Phu Quoc Island

A short flight from Ho Chi Minh City, the island offers nothing but peace and quiet, and perfect beach weather when the mainland coastal areas are experiencing typhoon season.

If you are in for a cultural exploration, picturesque landscapes, warm hospitality, or an adventure of a lifetime - Vietnam is your destination!

2. VISAS

Visitors must obtain visa approval prior to entry. Buffalo Tours can arrange visas at a reduced cost for visitors who book one of our tours. The procedure is as follows:

- Passport details, arrival and departure dates are faxed to Buffalo Tours no later than 14 days before passengers' departure to Vietnam.
- Buffalo Tours submits details to the Immigration Department.
- The Immigration Department notifies Buffalo Tours of visa approval and sends a fax/telex approval to the Embassy or Consulate in the country of visitors' residence.
- Buffalo Tours sends a fax copy of the approval to the travel agent or individual concerned.

Note:

- Visitors cannot get a visa on arrival at the airport unless they have a visa approval letter.
- Your passport must have a validity of at least 6 months.
- You must bring the approval letter and two recent passport photos to have your visa stamped at any international airport in Vietnam.
- You will be required to pay a stamping fee of US\$25 (cash only) on arrival, submitted directly to the Immigration office at the airport.

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3. MAP



4. ARRIVALS

All visitors must complete an arrival card. This should be submitted together with passport and visa to the Immigration Department officials, as well as the Customs officers. The Exit portion will be torn off and returned to the visitor. It is very important to retain this for presentation upon departure. If you have not arranged a Buffalo Tours representative to meet you at the airport, here is what you should do:

In Saigon:

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Tan Son Nhat airport is about 7km northwest of the city center. The best way to get into the city is to take a taxi. Pick a metered taxi outside the terminal. The journey should cost between US\$10 and US\$15.

In Hanoi:

Hanoi's Noi Bai airport is approximately 35km north of the city (minimum 45 minute drive). A taxi into the city center is usually around US\$16 (VND280,000). There is a clearly marked taxi rank outside the airport with representatives (Noi Bai taxi is one of our recommendations). Signs state the fixed price structures so no meter is necessary. Do agree to the price before setting foot inside the taxi. Avoid anyone who approaches you directly for a taxi, inside or outside the airport. Go straight to the taxi rank.

5. MONEY

The official currency is Dong. The Dong is non-convertible and at the time of writing trades at approximately 19500 to US\$1.

The US dollar, preferably crisp clean bills, is widely accepted among major shops and restaurants. Travelers checks can be cashed at authorized foreign exchange outlets and banks and require presentation of passport. There is normally a 2 to 5 percent transaction fee for cashing Travelers checks. Visa and Master card are becoming more accepted in many of the bigger hotels and restaurants, especially in the larger cities. Make sure that the Vietnamese notes you receive are not torn, or many shops and restaurants will not accept them. Also try not to change too much money at one time, as you will end up with a large wad of notes. The largest denomination is currently 500,000 dong. The government introduced new 500,000 and 50,000 notes made from plastic (like Australian dollars), rather than the regular paper notes. In 2004 Vietnam introduced coins for smaller transactions. These are in the form of 200; 1,000 and 5,000 Dong. Other paper denominations include 2,000; 5,000; 10,000 20,000 and 100,000. Most are clearly identifiable by color.

There are a number of international banks operating in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City with 24hour cash withdrawal facilities, including ANZ Bank and HSBC. Here cash can be withdrawn on Visa and Master cards as well as other cards such as Cirrus, but smaller towns may not have them so it's best to take cash in advance. Please note that the Vietnamese Dong is non-convertible outside Vietnam.

6. TIPPING

Tips for guides and drivers are completely at your discretion, but here are some guidelines in USD:

Meals (restaurants): the average amount is \$1;

Tips for guides and drivers: \$1.50 to \$3 per day per person for guides (depending on group size), \$1 per day per person for drivers;

Bellboy: average amount is \$1

Housekeeper/maid: average amount is \$1 per day

For larger groups and adventure trips you may want to increase this, however please remember that it's totally up to you, these are guidelines only.

Tips for cruise staff (eg. Halong Bay) and 'all-inclusive' lodges are generally pooled - one "pot" for the staff excluding private guides - \$10 per day (based on 2 - 4 people).

Bellboy: average amount is US\$0.5/bag or luggage.

Housekeeper/maid: average amount is US\$ 1.0/day.

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7. CLIMATE

Vietnam's elongated shape includes tropical and subtropical zone and is responsible for the varied climate in the country. Generally speaking the best time to travel in Vietnam is when there is a reduced chance of rain; that is during April/May and October/November. Note that high season is November to March and low season is April to October.

The South: Ho Chi Minh City to Phan Thiet/Mui Ne

The south is hot year round and has two seasons: one wet the other dry. The wet season lasts from May to October and you can expect daily downpours. These are usually brief and easy to predict. The dry season from November to April is generally sunny and humid.

The Center: Nha Trang to Hue

For most of the year Nha Trang is bathed in beautiful sunshine but between November and December the area has heavy rain. Dalat, at an altitude of 1,500m is cooler than the coastal area, particularly from November through to March. Danang (Hoi An) and Hue both experience typhoon activity from mid October to mid December when the climate becomes cooler, more overcast and wet.

The North: Hanoi to Sapa

Summer in the north lasts from May to October where temperatures range between 30-35 degrees Celsius with the occasional burst of heavy rain. The temperature varies from 10-15 degrees in winter (December to March). February and March can be damp with drizzle and overcast skies

8. SAFETY

Vietnam was recently voted one of the safest destinations in the world. Women and independent travelers have found it relatively hassle-free and easy to travel throughout the country. Incidents of petty theft and bag snatching are more widespread in Ho Chi Minh City and to a lesser extent Hanoi.

9. CUISINE

A typical Vietnamese meal consists of rice or noodles with soup, a stir-fry, and another main dish, and is eaten on a communal basis. The dishes are usually not spicy and are accompanied with chili sauce, fish sauce and soy sauce.

The traditional Vietnamese breakfast is Pho - a large bowl of rice noodles flavored with sliced beef or chicken, a fragrant broth and garnished with fresh coriander and bean sprouts.

The countries 3 main regions, the North, the Center and the South each have distinct cuisine. Generally the North is best known for its noodle soups, meat and seafood stir-fries.

The central region (especially around Hue) has some of the most elaborate dishes.

In the south, where there is a greater abundance of spices, the food tends to be a little hotter. With over 3,000km of coastline the seafood here is both delicious and varied. Crabs, prawns, crayfish and squid are in plentiful supply, not to mention hundreds of varieties of fish.

10. CLOTHING

Light, comfortable, easy to launder clothing is recommended. The temperature during winter months in Hanoi and the rainy season in the central region can be cool; a sweater or light jacket can be handy. Good walking

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shoes and sandals that can be easily removed are recommended, especially when entering temples and people's homes.

11. PEOPLE

The majority of the population is comprised of the Viet or Kinh (85%); people who speak the tonal Vietnamese language. The minority population is made up of over 50 ethnic hill tribe people who mainly live in the central and northern mountainous areas of the country. The best-known hill tribes are the Tay, Hmong, Zao, White and Black Thai (both mainly from the north), and the Hoa. Each hill tribe has its own unique customs and dialect, although local schools teach in Vietnamese.

12. LANGUAGE

Vietnamese is a tonal language that can be compared to Cambodia's official language, Khmer. With each syllable, there are six different tones that can be used, which change the definition and it often makes it difficult for foreigners to pick up the language. There are other languages spoken as well such as Chinese, Khmer, Cham and other languages spoken by tribes inhabiting the mountainous regions. Although there are some similarities to Southeast Asian languages, such as Chinese, Vietnamese is thought to be a separate language group, although a member of the Austro-Asiatic language family.

In written form, Vietnamese uses the Roman alphabet and accent marks to show tones. This system of writing called Quoc Ngu, was created by Catholic missionaries in the 17th century to translate the scriptures. Eventually this system, particularly after World War I, replaced one using Chinese characters (chu nom), which had been the unofficial written form used for centuries.

13. PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

The most important and widely celebrated public holiday of the year is Tet, the Lunar New Year, which coincides with the cycle of the moon. This public holiday usually takes place in late January or early/mid February and lasts officially for three days, although many businesses are closed the entire week. Other important public holidays include the Liberation of Saigon (April 30), International Worker's Day (May 1), Ho Chi Minh's birthday (May 19), and Vietnamese National Day (September 2).

Tet Travel Recommendation

Buffalo Tours discourages travel over the Tet period (usually one week on either side of the holiday). Although the country is vibrant and colorful during this time, trains, buses and flights are often booked out or expensive, restaurants, shops, tailors and some key tourist sites are closed, and the floating markets of the Mekong do not operate for one week after Tet.

If you have to travel during this time, then please be aware that services may not match what you would receive at other times of the year.

About Tet

Tet Nguyen Dan is the most important festival of the year for Vietnam's Kinh ethnic majority. Since the first day of lunar year is thought to set tone for the next 12 month, everyone strives to plan the perfect Tet. In Hanoi, the narrow lanes of the Old Quarter buzz with activity. Everyone is in a rush to get a haircut, buy new clothes, spruce up their homes, visit friends, settle outstanding debts, and stock up on traditional Tet delicacies. Businesses hang festive red banners which read "Chuc mung nam moi"(Happy New Year) and city streets are festooned with colored light. Stalls spring up all over town to sell nothing but cone-shaped kumquat bushes. Others sell flowering peach trees, symbols of life and good fortune which people bring in to their homes to celebrate the coming of spring. As vendors pour into the city with peach trees strapped to their bicycles, the streets look like moving pink forests.

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In the south, people bring yellow mai (apricot) branches into their homes and place a coconut, a papaya, a mango and a custard apple on the family altar. Spoken in the southern dialect, the names of these fruit form a prayer for success and fulfillment.

Three crucial meetings are said to take place on Tet. The first meeting is between three family deities: Tien su, the deity responsible for introducing the family to its traditional career; Tho Cong, who oversees the land where the family lives; and Tao Quan, the Kitchen God, who cares for the family's food. The second meeting takes place between the dead and the living. People place offerings of food and drinks on their ancestral altars, light incense, and invite their ancestors to join the family's Tet celebrations. The third meeting involves the immediate family. On New Year's Eve, family members gather for a dinner of traditional food like banh chung (a square cake made of sticky rice stuffed with beans and pork), mang (a soup of boiled bamboo shoots and fried pork) and xoi gac (orange sticky rice). This is followed by a visit to the local pagoda and perhaps an outing to see the town's fireworks.

14. PHONE AND INTERNET

Post: The Vietnamese postal system offers you most telecommunications services, such as EMS (Express Mail Service), DHL Worldwide Express, UPS, and Freight Forwarders.

Email & Internet: Thanks to the technology, E-mail and Internet services are available in most hotels and posts in Vietnam. Other places where you could find the same services are in the Internet Cafes (-95% are using ADSL) located in many streets of the major cities. Normally the post will charge you from 3000 VND to 6000 VND per hour for internet service (about 0.19 to 0.38USD) but it could be more in the hotels. Many cafes advertise free WIFI, so it is easy to travel with a laptop.

Telephone Booth & Telephone Cards: Using a telephone booth is an easy way for you to call home. You can find telephone booths at post offices or in the street of major cities. Telephone cards are on sale in shops, restaurants, and book stores. However, it is getting more popular and cheaper to make phone calls over the Internet. These days many Internet Cafes offer you this option.

International calls: Costs for direct dialed international calls are still high. However, you can make a phone call to talk with your relatives in your country with half of the cost with 178 or 171 services. With these services, cost is about 0.60USD per minute to most of countries in the world. How to dial it? Very easy: Dial 171 (or 178) + 00 + country code + city code + number

Kindly note if you use this service from your hotel's telephone, the charge might be a little higher as the hotel will put some service charges over it. Again, making international phone calls by Internet is another relatively cheap option.

Mobile Phones: In Vietnam, GMS (Global Mobilephone System) is presently operated by three main suppliers: VINAPHONE, MOBIFONE and Viettel. Your mobile phone could be used here by roaming service, but it is not always reliable. These suppliers offer also VINA and MOBI Pre-Paid Card services. The best way for you to use a mobile phone in the country is to buy a pre-paid SIM card for your mobile phone. You can also rent a mobile phone at your hotel or at a Mobile Phone Service Center in the street.

Time Difference: Vietnam lies in the same time zone with Thailand, meaning seven hours ahead of GMT/UTC. So close to the equator, Vietnam has no daylight saving time (summer time).

15. BUSINESS HOURS

Most Vietnamese are early risers, so businesses and shops open early. Government offices are open from Monday through Friday from 7:30am to 4:30pm. Most businesses are open Monday through Saturday from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm.

Banks are open Monday to Friday from 8:00 am to 3:30 pm and on Saturdays from 8:00 am to 1:00 pm. Lunch time is usually between 11:30 am to 1:30 pm.

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Many businesses, shops, and all government offices are closed during this lunch period. Shops are open from about 8:00 am to 9:00 pm, with some open longer.

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