



Welcome to Vietnam

The sailors "took such an affection to that country of Vietnam that not a man of them would go away; so that the Captain of the Ship was forced to drive them abroad with many blows and cuts..."

Vietnam has an abundance of sublime scenery. From the jungle-clad mountain peaks of the north that descend into lush rice paddies by the Chinese border via the pristine beaches that hug the central coast to the verdant south where the iconic Mekong River meets the sea, Vietnam is startlingly beautiful. Beyond this there is the country's historical and cultural dimension, whether in its visible Imperial and French colonial influence or the tragedy of the Vietnam War, the friendliness of its people and its adventurous yet delicious cuisine.

Whether relaxing in a boat in Ha Long Bay or trying to keep up with the frenetic pace of life in Saigon, Vietnam offers something unforgettable for everyone.

Know your History

Pre-history & Chinese rule

Recent archaeological finds suggest that the earliest human settlements in North Vietnam were about 500,000 years ago. Out of the Neolithic and primitive agricultural cultures that roamed the region emerged the Dong Son around 2000 B.C. Most famous for their ornate bronze drums, the Dong Son were perhaps the most important Vietnamese prehistoric culture. It was not until the Hong Bang Dynasty that the first recognisable Vietnamese state was created. However its collapse in 257 B.C. ultimately led to the Chinese invading and consolidating Vietnam into its empire. Despite a few briefly successful independence movements, over the next thousand years Vietnam was mostly under Chinese rule.

Vietnamese Dynasties

In 938 A.D., following the collapse of the ruling dynasty in China, the Vietnamese launched a revolt against the Chinese rule. At Bach Dang River the Chinese forces were defeated by Ngo Quyen and the nation of Vietnam regained its independence once more. Over the course of almost the next thousand years Vietnam was ruled by various Dynasties. The most notable of these were the Ly and Tran Dynasties, under whose rule Vietnam entered a golden era in the 11th to 13th Centuries, repelling Mongol invasions and allowing Buddhism to flourish and become the state religion. However towards the end of the dynastic era civil unrest had engulfed much of Vietnam, with power had been divided between the Trinh Lords in the north and the Nguyen Lords in the south. These clans were engaged in a civil war for total control of Vietnam for over four decades in the mid 17th Century. Having been defeated, the Nguyen Lords bided their time before they enlisted the help of

French mercenaries and invaded the north, capturing Hanoi, and uniting Vietnam for the first time in two centuries in 1802.

French control

Once French interest had been aroused in Vietnam it launched a series of military conquests, beginning with the seizure of Saigon in 1859, that eroded away at Vietnam's independence. Following the death of the Emperor in 1883, the French attacked Hue and by 1887 the entire country had become part of French Indochina. The French colonial powers imposed a Western-style plantation economy and instigated an ambitious public works scheme but ignored Vietnamese calls for self-government and civil rights and brutally repressed many Vietnamese.

The French maintained control of their new colony until World War Two, when the Japanese invaded as part of their war in the Pacific. Under Japanese rule, the Viet Minh – a communist and nationalist liberation movement – emerged, led by Ho Chi Minh, seeking independence from both France and Japan. As World War Two drew to a close in 1945, a massive famine in the north along with the collapse of the Japanese Empire in Vietnam allowed the Viet Minh to occupy much of the region, including Hanoi, proclaiming a provisional government.

However the French were not going to give up their colony easily and sent an Expeditionary Corps to restore French rule. An uneasy peace reigned until the massacre of hundreds of civilians in the French shelling of Haiphong in November 1946 led the Viet Minh to engage the French forces, starting the First Indochina War. In the face of determined Vietnamese nationalism, the conflict lasted eight years until the surrender of French troops at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954. The defeat ended France's colonial ambitions in Indochina and in the post-war resolutions Vietnam was temporarily divided up in order to separate the forces of the former French supporters and the communist nationalists into the south and north respectively, with a Demilitarised Zone between them, until free elections could be held.

US involvement

In the south a coup d'état by the Prime Minister, Ngo Dinh Diem, led to him declaring himself the President of the Republic of Vietnam and refusing to hold the promised elections, prompting the Vietcong (Vietnamese Communists) in the north to begin a guerrilla campaign to overthrow Diem's government. As Diem's regime became more tyrannical it resulted in a coup in 1963 that saw him killed. With this instability, the communists in the north started a campaign to "liberate" the South, and the north's army, the National Liberation Front, invaded South Vietnam. In a show of support for the South, the US began to send military advisors as part of its anti-communist foreign policy. However the incompetence of the South Vietnamese forces resulted in the US engagement in combat operations in 1965.

The US forces fared no better, most notably in the 1968 Tet Offensive, and with casualties mounting as well as opposition to the war at home and international condemnation of US behaviour, especially after the My Lai massacre, the US began to transfer combat roles back to the South Vietnamese army. While the war continued, peace talks went on in Paris and finally, in January 1973, a peace accord was signed by all parties providing a ceasefire and the total withdraw of US troops. Sporadic fighting continued and in the Spring of 1975 the North invaded the South once again and Saigon fell in April. A provisional government was established in the South until the formal reunification of Vietnam in 1976.

Reunification & Doi Moi

Following reunification, Vietnam became diplomatically isolated and could only turn to the USSR for aid. After a series of attacks on Vietnamese border towns by the Khmer Rouge, Vietnam invaded Cambodia and while they deposed the ruling Khmer Rouge regime, it was an expensive exercise and in the mid 1980s they withdrew. As Soviet Communism began a new phase of openness so too did Vietnam and its policy of Doi Moi (renovation) enabled limited market freedom, resulting in rapid growth for Vietnam and a bright future for the country.

Money Talks

Vietnam is one of Asia's most open economies; around 160% of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) is thanks to two-way trade, four times the ratio for India and more than twice that of China. Deep poverty has declined over the past few years, but Vietnam is still considered one of the poorer countries – annual GDP was US\$ 256.584 billion at Purchasing Power Parity in 2009, translating to around US\$ 3,300 per capita in purchasing power. Forecasters, including Goldman-Sachs in 2005 and the PricewaterhouseCoopers in 2008, the Vietnamese economy could grow to the 17th largest in the world, and push its potential growth rate of 10% per annum to 70% of the size of UK economy by 2050.

Exports

Historically, Vietnam has relied on wet rice cultivation. When the Vietnam War destroyed most of the country's economy, the new government created a "planned economy". Land reform measures has meant that Vietnam is the largest producer of cashew nuts, providing around one third of world demand. It is also the largest producer of black pepper (one third of the world's market) and second in rice exportation only to Thailand. Other key exports include coffee, tea, rubber and fishery products. However, agriculture has fallen from 42% of GDP in 1989 to 20% in 2006, leaving other sectors in the economy to fill the space.

Money

Vietnam's currency is the Dong (derived from "ng tin", meaning "money"), and is related to the Chinese *tóng qián*. The Dong is divided into 10 *hào*, but this has since become so worthless that it is no longer issued. ATMs are available in most big towns and cities, and it's best to change traveller's cheques on arrival at the airport. Smaller towns and villages will not necessarily have any means to attaining money, so always carry enough cash to cover visits.

Get Culture Savvy

Arts & Crafts

Traditional Vietnamese art has its roots in the elaborate Dong Son drums but was strongly influenced by Chinese Buddhist art, as well as philosophies such as Taoism and Confucianism, and in more recent years by the art of the Champa kingdom and the French. These influences are seen in Vietnamese pottery and ceramics, calligraphy, and traditional architecture. The most obvious Chinese influence was in calligraphy when on special occasions, such as the Lunar New Year, people would go to the village teacher or scholar to make them a calligraphy hanging (often poetry, folk sayings or even single words). People who could not read or write also often commissioned scholars to write prayers which they would burn at temple shrines.

Water Puppetry

Water Puppetry is a distinct Vietnamese art with its origins in the 10th Century. In Water Puppetry a split-bamboo screen obscures puppets which stand in water, and are manipulated using long poles hidden beneath the water. Epic storylines are played out with many different puppets, often using traditional scenes of Vietnamese life. The puppets are made from quality wood, and are carefully carved, and then painted with numerous layers of paint for protection. Despite nearly dying out in the 20th Century, Water Puppetry has been recognised by the Vietnamese government as an important part of Vietnam's cultural heritage and is commonly performed by professional puppeteers, many of whom learn the art from village elders in rural areas of Vietnam.

Dance

Vietnam has 54 different ethnic groups, each with its own traditional dance. Within the ethnic majority, there are several traditional dances performed widely at festivals and other special occasions, such as the lion dance. In the Imperial Court there also developed over the centuries a series of complex and highly skilled court dances. Some of the more widely known are the imperial lantern dance, the fan dance, and the platter dance.

Religion

Historically, religion in Vietnam has been defined by the East Asian mix of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism the so-called Tam Giáo, or triple religion. Vietnamese Buddhism has typically been the most popular.

Besides the "triple religion", Vietnamese life was also profoundly influenced by the practice of ancestor worship as well as native animism. Most Vietnamese people, regardless of religious denomination, practise ancestor worship and have an ancestor altar at their home or business, a testament to the emphasis Vietnamese culture places on filial duty.

Superstition

Superstition plays more than a passing role in Vietnamese society. By the time a boy is old enough to marry, for example, he may not be able to wed the girl he loves because she was born in the wrong year or the hoot of an owl is regarded as a bad omen announcing death or illness. A large number of fortune tellers, astrologers and palm readers owe their living to Vietnamese superstition and often make a small fortune from their clients. Even the poor save money for occasional visits to well known soothsayers.

Food

Vietnamese cuisine is extremely diverse, often divided into three main categories pertaining to Vietnam's three main regions (North, Central and South). Its characteristic sweet and sour flavours are combined with hot spices and herbs and always accompanied by nuoc mam, a fish sauce that can be added to any meal.

Vietnam also has a large variety of noodles and noodle soups. Different regions invented different types of noodles, varying in shapes, tastes and colours. One of the nation's most famous type of noodles is pho (pronounced "fuh") which originated in North Vietnam. Pho consists of rice noodles and beef soup with several other ingredients including bean sprouts and spring onions and is often eaten for breakfast. Other delicacies include bi cuon, where you roll your own spring rolls, bang

chung, a sticky rice dish, and banh mi, the Vietnamese version of the sandwich.

No visit to Vietnam is complete with trying its indigenous fruit, most famously the Durian fruit whose pungent odour is worth suffering for its delectable taste.

Learn the Lingo

The national and official language of Vietnam is Vietnamese, being the mother tongue of 86% of the population and often the second language of the ethnic minorities in Vietnam. It is part of the Austro-Asiatic family of languages and more people speak Vietnamese than all the other Austro-Asiatic languages combined. Some words have been borrowed from Chinese and at one time Vietnamese employed a modernised Chinese writing system, although the present day Vietnamese writing system uses a modernised Latin system.

Variations of the language can be found across different dialect regions – the North, Central and South divide. Differences include pronunciation, basic and non-basic words and grammar. Here are some words to get you started:

ENGLISH	VIETNAMESE	ENGLISH	VIETNAMESE
Greetings		Numbers	
Hello	Chào anh (m) Chào ch (f) Á-lô! (on phone)	1	mt
Good morning	Chào buổi sáng	2	hai
Good afternoon	Xin chào	3	ba
Good evening	Chào buổi tối	4	bn
Goodnight	Chúc ngủ ngon	5	nm
Goodbye	Chào anh (m) Chào ch (f) Tạm biệt	6	sáu
Pleased to meet you	Hân hạnh gặp ông	7	by
8	tám		
About Yourself		9	chín
How are you?	(Anh/Ch) khỏe không?	10	mi
I'm fine thanks, and you?	Khỏe, cảm ơn. Bạn thì sao?	20	hai mươi
What's your name?	Bạn tên gì?	50	năm mươi
My name is...	Tôi tên là...	100	một trăm
Where are you from?	Ông từ đâu?	1000	một ngàn/ngàn
I'm from...	Tôi từ...	1 million	một triệu
Speaking the Language		Useful Phrases	
I don't understand	Tôi không hiểu	thank you	Cảm ơn
Please speak more slowly	Làm ơn nói chậm hơn	Sorry	Xin lỗi
How do you say... in Vietnamese?	Bạn nói ... thế nào trong tiếng Việt?	Yes	Vâng
No	Không		
You're welcome	Không có chi (không có gì)		

bathroom	pho`ng ve^ sinh (fonh veah sin)
Good	tot
Bad	Khong tot
How much	Bao nhieu
Too expensive	Mac qua
Hot	Nong
Cold	Lanh
Coffee	Ca phe
Tea	Tra

Lay of the Land

There are four distinct geographical regions in Vietnam, ranging from rugged mountains to marshy fertile flatlands. Vietnam's "S" shape takes it from China in the north to the Gulf of Thailand in the south. In the north there are mountains that extend up to 3,143 m at Fan Si Pan, the highest point in Vietnam, while the east and southeast consist of the Red River Delta, an alluvial plain. South of this Delta is the Truong Son, the Annam Highlands, which are considered to be the backbone of Vietnam. A plateau, the Central Highlands, also occupies this area and can be found between Cambodia and the South China sea. The Mekong Delta is located in the southernmost region of Vietnam and makes up a fertile, marshy flatland extending from the Central Highlands south to the mangrove swamps of the Ca Mau peninsula.

What's the Weather like?

Vietnam's climate is amazingly varied due to the vast range of latitudes and altitudes in the country. The average annual temperature is generally higher in the plains than the mountains and in the south rather than the north. Temperatures in the southern plains, Ho Chi Minh City and the Mekong Delta vary less, ranging from 21°C to 28°C. The seasons in the mountains and in the North are much more dramatic and temperatures vary from 5°C in January to 37°C in July and August.

Biodiversity

Vietnam is one of 25 countries considered to possess a high level of biodiversity, including 16% of the world's species. In Vietnam 15,986 species of flora have been identified, of which 10% are endemic. Studies have shown that there are 260 species of reptiles, 120 amphibian species, 840 bird species and 310 species of mammals, of which 100 birds and 78 mammals are endemic as well as thousands of species of insects and marine life. In recent years there have been 13 genera, 222 species, and 30 taxa of flora newly described, and 6 mammals have also been discovered, including the Saola, Giant Muntjac, Edwards's Pheasant, Tonkin Snub-nosed Langur, Livistona Halongensis, and the Geothelphusa Vietnamica.

Vietnam is home to elephants, bears, tigers, and leopards as well as some animals such as monkeys, squirrels and otters and the hot, moist climate allows this diverse flora and fauna to flourish. Reptiles such as crocodiles, snakes and lizards can be found in Vietnam. The forests are usually dense and home to the large mammals and have a variety of evergreens in them, in addition to vegetation indigenous to rainforests. Although the Vietnam War cleared many areas of vegetation,

plant life has begun to recover.

Good Books

- Passage to Vietnam. Rick Smolan, Jennifer Er Witt & Thomas K. Walker. Against All Odds Productions & Melcher Media, 1994. ISBN 9781885559005
- Mekong: A Journey on the Mother of Waters. Michael Yamashita. Takarajima Books, 1995. ISBN 9781883489090
- The Peasant, The Buffalo and The Tiger: Vietnamese Legends and Tales. Hoa Mai Huu Ngoc. The Gioi Publishers, Hanoi, Vietnam, 1997
- About Face. Col. David H. Hackworth, USA (Ret.) & Julie Sherman. Simon & Schuster, New York, 1990. ISBN 9780671695347
- Vietnamese Phrasebook. Lonely Planet, 1996. ISBN 9781740592413
- Vietnam – A travel survival kit. Robert Storey. 3rd Edition, Lonely Planet, 1995. ISBN 9780864423160
- Vietnam Laos & Cambodia Handbook. Joshua Eliot, Jane Bickersteth & John Colet. Passport Books, Lincolnwood, Illinois, 1995. ISBN 9780844289809

CONTACT INFORMATION

Call us on 020 7613 2422 (UK) / 1 949 336 8178 (US)

Mail us on info@frontier.ac.uk

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