



Travel Savvy
 PO Box 1933
 Linkhills 3652
 0317632686
 carly@travelsavvy.co.za

VIETNAM GUIDE

wordtravels



Verdant patchworks of rice paddies, pointed lampshade-style hats, a country ravaged by war, and economic repression - these are the international images of Vietnam, seen on worldwide television and read about in the newspapers. But there are other scenes to be found, ones of natural beauty, ethnic culture, and imperial history, of timeless traditional villages, idyllic sea resorts and dynamic cities.

Shaped like an elongated 'S', Vietnam stretches along the east coast of the Indochinese Peninsula and is likened by its people to a long bamboo pole hung with two baskets of rice, represented by the two fertile regions at either end of the country. Between the lush Red River Delta and the highlands in the north, known for their magnificent scenery and colourful hill tribes, and the agricultural plains and floating markets of the Mekong Delta in the south, lie miles of white sandy beaches, towering mountains, rivers and dense forests, and the thousands of bizarre rock and cave formations on the islands of Halong Bay.

The impact of Japanese and Chinese trade, French occupation and American intervention has left its stain on Vietnam, smeared over a period of more than two thousand years of recorded history. However, the country has also been left with a vivid legacy from different cultures evident in the character of its towns, as well as in the architecture and food. The quaint town of Hoi An, once a major trading port, boasts the perfectly preserved architectural influences of the Asian merchants from the north, while the broad leafy boulevards of the capital Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City are reminiscent of France. Menus offer Chinese variations of spring rolls, steamed dumplings and noodles. Hué is the old imperial capital of Vietnam with its royal palaces and palatial mausoleums, and nearby the battle sites of the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) are reminders of the brutality of war.

Ancient temples and colourful pagodas are scattered throughout the urban centres, while among them stand hotels of modern luxury, and the development of tourism infrastructure is a booming business. Vietnam is a perfect balance between ancient times and the here and now, a country that reveres its past heroes, a nation that has collectively put the woes of war behind it, and people who welcome visitors to their country with open arms and friendly smiles.

THE BASICS

TIME

Local time in Vietnam is GMT +7.

ELECTRICITY

Electrical current in Vietnam is 220 volts, 50Hz. Plugs are either the two flat-pin or the two round-pin type. Three rectangular blade plugs can be found in some of the newer hotels.

LANGUAGE

The official language in Vietnam is Vietnamese. Some Chinese, English and French are spoken. Tour guides can also speak Russian and Japanese. Numerous ethnic languages are also spoken in parts.

TRAVEL HEALTH

Health risks in Vietnam include Hepatitis A and E, typhoid, Japanese encephalitis, bilharzia, plague, cholera, diarrhoea and HIV/AIDS. Malaria prophylaxis is recommended for travel outside the main cities and towns, the Red River delta and north of Nha Trang.

There has been an increase in the amount of reported cases of dengue fever in recent years, and visitors should take care to protect themselves from mosquito bites during the day, especially just after dawn and just before dusk, particularly in the southern Mekong Delta region. Travellers should seek medical advice about vaccinations at least three weeks before leaving for Vietnam and ensure they have adequate insect protection. Typhoid can be a problem in the Mekong Delta. Those arriving from an infected area require a yellow fever vaccination certificate. Water is potable, but visitors usually prefer to drink bottled water.

Decent health care is available in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) with English-speaking doctors, and there is a surgical clinic in Da Nang, but more complicated treatment may require medical evacuation. Pharmacies throughout the country are adequate, but check expiry dates of medicines carefully, and be aware that some medicines are counterfeit. Health insurance is essential.

TIPPING

Most restaurants and hotels in Vietnam now add a five to ten percent service charge to their bills. In top hotels porters expect a small tip. Hired drivers and guides are usually tipped, and it is customary to round up the bill for taxi drivers in the cities. Tipping is not generally expected, but some small change for most services is appreciated.

SAFETY INFORMATION

Travel in Vietnam is generally safe and violent crime is uncommon. Pick-pocketing is rife, and in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) drive-by purse snatching is a common trick. When transferring from airports only use pre-arranged hotel pickups or licensed taxis to avoid theft from opportunists. It is best to leave valuables in a secure hotel safe and avoid obvious displays of wealth. During the monsoon season (usually between June and October) the country is prone to serious flooding and typhoons (until December), particularly the Mekong Delta and Central Region. In August and September 2008, Northern and Central Vietnam experienced torrential rain resulting in severe flooding, causing considerable damage to local infrastructure, including road and rail links.

LOCAL CUSTOMS

The wearing of shorts in Vietnam should be avoided away from the beaches if possible. Shoes must be removed on entering religious sites and a donation is expected when visiting a temple or pagoda. Photography is restricted at ports, harbours and airports, and it is polite to ask permission before taking photographs of people, especially of ethnic minorities. Never leave chopsticks sticking upright in a bowl of rice as it has strong death connotations.

BUSINESS

Business practices in Vietnam are conducted in a similar fashion to those of China, Japan and Korea rather than their Southeast Asian counterparts. Pride and tact are important to bear in mind, as practices tend to be formalised more so than in Western countries. Often it is best to be introduced rather than approach the person with whom business is intended for fear of suspicion. Negotiations and settlements may take longer as the Vietnamese like to examine contracts thoroughly. Formal dress is common but in summer months the dress tends to be more casual. It is important to be on time for business appointments as the Vietnamese consider lateness rude.

The person is always addressed as Mr., Mrs., and Ms., followed by their personal name (not family name), unless otherwise referred; it is worth finding out in advance. Shaking hands with both hands is the most respectful greeting although bowing is still popular among the older population, and meetings always begin with the exchange of business cards, which should be given and received with both hands; each person expects to receive one, so be sure to bring a vast supply. Business hours are typically 8am to 5pm Monday to Friday with an hour taken at lunch, and 8am to 11.30am on Saturdays.

COMMUNICATIONS

The international country code for Vietnam is +84. The outgoing code is 00, followed by the relevant country code (e.g. 001 for the United States or Canada). City/area codes are in use, e.g. Hanoi is (0)4 and Ho Chi Minh City is (0)8. GSM 900 mobile networks cover the major urban areas. Internet cafes are available in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and other major centres.

DUTY FREE

Travellers to Vietnam over 18 years do not have to pay duty on the following items: 400 cigarettes, 100 cigars or 500g tobacco; 1.5 litres alcohol with alcohol content higher than 22 percent and 2 litres below 22 percent; up to 5kg tea and 3kg coffee; perfume and items for personal consumption within reasonable amounts; other goods to the value of five million Vietnamese dong.

CLIMATE

The climate in Vietnam varies greatly from north to south. The north has a cool and dry season from November to April and a hot rainy season from May to October. The central coast north of Nha Trang has a similar climate with the winter monsoon bringing cool, wet weather between December and February. The south is hot and humid all year round, especially from February to May. The rainy season lasts from May to November. The central highlands have a similar climate to the south, but it is cooler and temperatures can be freezing in winter. The official peak season in Vietnam is from September to April.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS FOR SOUTH AFRICANS

South Africans must have a passport valid for 30 days beyond the period of intended stay, and a visa is required. Visas are not required for stays of up to 30 days for South African nationals arriving at Phu Quoc (PQC).

PASSPORT/VISA

Although officially Vietnam demands six months of validity on passports, passports valid for at least one month after expiry date of visa will be accepted. Nationals of a handful of countries only require three months of passport validity. All visitors must have sufficient funds for the duration of their stay, onward or return tickets, and all documents needed for next destination. Visitors should hold a spare passport photograph on arrival in Vietnam for use on the immigration form that must be filled out. You should retain the yellow portion of your immigration Arrival-Departure card on entry to Vietnam, as this is required for exit. Visitors coming from countries with no Vietnamese diplomatic representation will be issued a visa on arrival, provided the visitor is holding a letter from Vietnamese Immigration confirming this. It is highly recommended that passports have at least six months validity remaining after your intended date of departure from your travel destination. Immigration officials often apply different rules to those stated by travel agents and official sources.

MONEY

The official currency is the Vietnamese Dong (VND). Currency can be exchanged at banks, bureaux de change and larger hotels, though only US dollars are easily exchanged outside of major cities. Visa and MasterCard are becoming more widely acceptable, particularly in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City and all major tourist centres. US currency is accepted by many hotels in tourist centres and is useful as a back-up, but notes must be relatively new and unmarked. Up to two million Dong can be withdrawn from ATMs at a time, and most banks will have useful leaflets listing ATM locations throughout the country.

HANOI

Vietnam's small and pleasant capital lies at the heart of the northern Red River Delta, and is a city of lakes, leafy boulevards and open parks with a French colonial feel. Hanoi was founded in 1010, and became the centre of government for the Indochina Union under French rule in 1888. In 1954 it became the official capital of independent Vietnam.

Today ancient crumbling buildings dating from the 11th century lie scattered among grand French colonial residences, while shrines and monuments to Vietnam's first president, Ho Chi Minh, sit in the shadow of modern high-rise buildings. The streets of the Old Quarter preserve age-old customs, where trade takes one back half a century, and temples, pagodas and monuments reflect the historic character of Vietnam.

Although a city of historical importance, and the social and cultural centre of Vietnam, it is a surprisingly modest and charming place, far slower and less developed than Ho Chi Minh City in the south. Hanoi has retained its appealing sense of the old world, despite the onset of a brisk tourism trade in 1993, absorbing the boom of hotels, travellers' hangouts and Internet cafes, and the gradual infiltration of western-style food and fashions into the once inaccessible city.

As the early morning mist rises from the serene Hoan Kiem Lake, tracksuit-clad elders perform the slow movements of tai chi, like park statues coming to life. Streets fill with activity, mopeds and bicycles weave among pedestrians, while cyclo drivers (three-wheeled bicycle taxis) clamour for attention, and postcard vendors cluster around tourists like bees sensing an open honey pot.

Hanoi is fast becoming one of the most enticing and interesting cities in Asia. As a cultural centre there are traditional water puppet shows, and music and dance performances. It is also a good base for excursions to the beautiful Halong Bay, or into the Hoang Lien Mountains inhabited by several hill tribes.

ATTRACTIONS IN HANOI

Old Quarter



The ancient meandering streets of the Old Quarter are each named after the crafts and speciality trades traditionally practised by the original artisan's guilds in the 13th century. Each guild was grouped around a temple, or dinh, dedicated to the particular beliefs of the village from where the guild originated, and many of these temples are open to the public today.

The early merchant's quarter affords an intriguing glimpse into life centuries ago with covered markets, and the ancient narrow buildings that still line the streets, known as tube or tunnel houses that contained shops.

Businesses were taxed according to the width of their storefront and resulted in shops only seven foot (2m) wide with a series of storerooms, workshops and living quarters extending behind to a length of up to 197ft (60m). Many streets are still devoted to a predominant trade such as silks, religious objects or textiles, silver jewellery, antiques, and there are numerous art galleries and craft stores, as well as cafes and pavement restaurants lining the streets.

Traffic within the Old Quarter is a chaotic mix of bicycles, motorbikes and pedestrians passing noisily down the narrow streets and shady alleyways.

Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum



Ba Dinh Square was where, in 1945, Ho Chi Minh read out the Declaration of Independence and is the site of annual national celebrations today. Dominating the west side is the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum where the embalmed body of the 'father of the modern state', 'liberator of the Vietnamese people' and beloved public figure is displayed.

The body of Ho Chi Minh is enclosed in a glass case, the traditional way to honour famous communist leaders. Security is tight, there is a strict dress code and it is imperative to maintain a respectful demeanour while inside; this also means no photographs. Nearby is the Ho Chi Minh Museum that commemorates his life, housing a collection of military orders, correspondence, manifestos and photographs that illustrates the crucial role he had in the country's history.

One Pillar Pagoda



One Pillar Pagoda was constructed to celebrate the tale of the heirless Emperor Ly Thai Tong, who dreamt about receiving a son from the Buddhist goddess of mercy and compassion, seated on a lotus flower. He married shortly after and bore a son, and the pagoda was built to honour the event.

It is the most interesting of the city's numerous pagodas, and beneath the ornate curved roof people come to pray for fertility and well-being, with allegedly miraculous effects. The unique wooden structure was designed to resemble a lotus flower, the Buddhist representation of enlightenment, emerging out of the water, with the single stone pillar its symbolic stalk. It was destroyed by the French during the first Indochina War and was subsequently rebuilt.

Temple of Literature (Van Mieu)



The Temple of Literature is Vietnam's historical seat of learning and is the most sacred place for the disciples of Confucius. It is one of the few remaining buildings from the original city founded by Emperor Ly Thanh Tong in the 11th century and is a well-preserved example of Vietnamese architecture.

It became the site of the country's first university in 1076. Consisting of a complex of small buildings and five walled courtyards, it was an exclusive establishment teaching the principles of Confucius. In the third courtyard is a

pond, the Well of Heavenly Clarity, and beside it are 82 stone stelae, mounted on tortoises and engraved with the names of successful graduates.

Over a period of 900 years thousands of Vietnamese scholars graduated from the university. In honour of their teachers legacy, there is also a temple dedicated to Confucius where an altar stands, a place where the king and his mandarins would make sacrifices.

Halong Bay



The natural wonder of Halong Bay, renowned for its spectacular scenery and limestone grottoes and caves, has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The bay is peppered with over 1,600 inlets and tiny islands emerging almost mystically out of the pea green waters of the Gulf of Tonkin, scoured by wind and wave erosion to form dramatic rock shapes, many of which contain caves filled with stalagmites and stalactites.

Many of the islands have been named for their astonishing resemblance to their namesakes, such as Dragon, Incense Burner, Pair of Roosters and Man's Head Islands. The weird protuberances have been at the source of several local legends, particularly about a dragon whose thrashing tail created the bay and its islands. The name Vinh Ha Long means 'where the dragon descended into the sea'.

The most impressive cave is the Hang Dau Go (Grotto of the Wooden Stakes), an extensive grotto with rock formations presenting various eerie images in the mysterious light. It was named from the Battle of 1288 when General Tran Hung Dao prepared hundreds of stakes to be planted in the riverbed of the largest chamber to counter a boat attack. Nearby the beautiful Hang Thien Cung cave is famous for its sparkling stalagmites and stalactites.

HUE

Former capital of the emperors of the Nguyen Dynasty, the royal city of Hué is situated on the country's central coast, midway between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. It is a serene place, a small city of canals boasting splendid historical sights, and is dominated by its massive Citadel, and the former Forbidden Purple City. Most of its beautiful imperial architecture was destroyed during the 1968 Tet Offensive, when the North Vietnamese launched an attack on the south, yet despite a tumultuous history it retains much of its cultural identity and has been recognised as a Cultural World Heritage Site.

Hué is also an important centre for Buddhism and hundreds of temples and pagodas exist around the city, such as the Thien Mu Pagoda, one of the most famous structures in the country. The Perfume River lies between the city and the remains of the mighty Citadel with many attractions along its banks. Sampan boat trips on the river offer an enchanting way to see the main sights in and around Hué, including the splendid tombs of the Nguyen emperors a few miles south of the city.

Along with its historical sights, Hué is also the main starting point for day tours to the DMZ (Demilitarised Zone), a historical area spanning both sides of the former border between North and South Vietnam, and the Vinh Moc underground tunnels.

ATTRACTIONS IN HUE

The Citadel



Constructed by Emperor Gia Long in 1804 for the private use of the emperor and his household, the enormous moated Citadel is comprised of three separate walled enclosures. The outer citadel, surrounded by a six-mile (10km) perimeter wall punctuated by 10 gates, frames the Imperial Enclosure used for official business.

At the very centre is the Forbidden Purple City, the restricted residence of the emperor and his concubines. This once magnificent Imperial City originally included many magnificent features, with tombs, pagodas and temples, lakes and lavishly gilded pavilions.

Today remnants of the palaces contain ornate ceremonial halls and throne rooms, mosaics adorn roofs and pillars, and beautiful landscaped gardens surround the remaining buildings. Sadly much was destroyed during the Vietnamese War, and a fire further damaged the Forbidden Purple City, but it is still possible to see evidence of its past glory.

The main entrance is through the Ngo Mon Gate (Noon Gate), a stunning example of Nguyen architecture, with separate entrances for the emperor, his mandarins and the royal elephants. A soaring multi-roofed pavilion used for important royal proclamations, sits elegantly on top.

Royal Tombs



South of Hué are eight splendid royal tombs of the Nguyen emperors, situated among the hills on the banks of the Perfume River. Often designed while the emperor was still alive, each mausoleum was built to serve as a palace for the afterlife. In this vein the tombs were built as vast complexes, each with traditional functions.

These complexes include paved courtyards lined with mandarin statues, a stone stele inscribed with details of his reign, a main temple dedicated to the worship of the deceased and containing personal effects, and the tomb itself. Surrounding the complex were artificial ponds in a garden-like setting. The Tomb of Tu Duc, with its lotus-filled lake and central pavilion, the remarkable mosaics of Minh Mang's Tomb, and the simple and serene Tomb of Khai Dinh are the most interesting.

The Perfume River



A boat trip on the Perfume River is one of the highlights of a visit to Hué and includes stops to visit some of the city's main attractions. Passing other sampans (traditional rowing boats) on their way to market, houseboats and dragon boats, a typical trip will take visitors to the Thien Mu Pagoda, Hon Chen Temple and the Royal Tombs.

The Thien Mu Pagoda is one of the oldest and most attractive religious structures in Vietnam, dating back to 1601. Its most striking feature is the seven-tiered tower, representing the seven steps to enlightenment. Another way to experience the Perfume River is on an evening boat trip hosting a traditional folksong performance. This long-standing tradition goes back to the rule of the emperors when artists would play music and recite poetry from a rowing boat on the river.

DMZ (Demilitarised Zone) and Vinh Moc



Under the Geneva Accords of 1954, Vietnam was split into North and South along the 17th parallel. The Ben Hai River was selected as the temporary demarcation line. A three-mile (5km) strip of no-man's land on either side of the border was known as the DMZ or Demilitarised Zone.

It was bombed into a desolate wasteland, riddled with land mines and surrounded by barbed wire during the war. The area surrounding the DMZ and the land in between was the worst affected, and the amount of explosives, napalm and chemicals used, including Agent Orange, has left the once heavily forested land with stunted growth and infertile soil. Historical sites and landmarks include the Hien Luong Bridge spanning the river, entry to the Ho Chi Minh Trail that bypassed the border, the American firebase at Con Thien, U.S Marine base at Khe San, and the Truong Son War Martyr Cemetery dedicated to the thousands who died on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. A guided tour is strongly recommended as there are no signs and the area still contains unexploded landmines.

Vinh Moc is known for the extraordinary complex of tunnels constructed by the villagers as an underground village in which to shelter from the American bombardments. Faced with the total destruction of their village in 1965, they dug an underground network consisting of three layers starting at a depth of 33ft (10m) with room for 300 people, including wells, a school, clinics, storerooms, observation posts, ventilation shafts and a maternity room where 17 babies were delivered during the war. A section has been restored and is open to visitors and there is a small museum at the entrance.

HO CHI MINH CITY

Ho Chi Minh City, better known by its former name of Saigon, is a brazen, industrious and dense metropolis, the largest city in Vietnam and the business capital of the country. With a population of five million, it is crowded, noisy and dirty, yet it is also exciting and historic, the essence of the nation.

Located on the Saigon River on the edge of the Mekong Delta, Saigon became the capital of the Republic of South Vietnam and was the American headquarters during the Vietnam War. Two years later the Communist north took control of the country, the city's name was changed to Ho Chi Minh City, and recession and poverty ensued.

Today Ho Chi Minh City has a cosmopolitan and energetic atmosphere, and having actively welcomed capitalism its citizens are clearly business-minded. Although relatively modern, it has still managed to hold onto its historical character, and fine restaurants, smart hotels and chic bars line the sidewalks crammed with noodle stands, markets and shoeshine boys. The buzzing of motorbikes and scooters merges with the cries of street vendors and the urgent business of stall owners, selling barbecued dog, writhing snakes and tropical fruits. The sight of a family of four balanced precariously on a scooter, a squealing pig strapped onto the back of a bicycle, bowed heads topped by pointed lampshade-style hats and orange-clothed monks are just some of the vibrant images the city has to offer.

Although overshadowed by modern and Asiatic influences, a little of Ho Chi Minh City's French colonial charm still remains, evident in the graceful architecture, wide boulevards, and a sidewalk cafe society. It is not for the attractions that one visits Ho Chi Minh City however, but for the vibrancy of its street life, and its proximity to the Mekong Delta.

ATTRACTIONS IN HO CHI MINH CITY

War Remnants Museum



The disturbing War Remnants Museum highlights the horrors of modern combat, and especially portrays the suffering inflicted on the Vietnamese people during the Vietnam War. Its former name, the Museum of American War Crimes, was altered so as not to cause offence to American visitors, but its displays still give an anti-American perspective.

The museum houses a collection of weapons, machinery, artefacts and horrific photographs illustrating the devastating affects of napalm, Agent Orange and other weapons of mass destruction.

One room is dedicated to biological warfare, including the effects of the defoliant sprays that were dumped over the country. Another room looks at worldwide demonstrations for peace and international opposition to the war. In the courtyard there are tanks, helicopters, planes and bombs on display.

Cholon



Cholon, the Chinese district of Saigon, is comprised of a dense network of vibrant streets and alleyways. It was first settled by the Chinese Hoa merchants at the end of the 18th century, and is now the home of Vietnam's biggest ethnic minority community. There is no Hollywood style Chinatown main street here and in fact, Cholon's size sets it apart from the concept almost altogether.

The difference in environment is immediately noticeable. The cluster of Madarin signposts lead into a fascinating labyrinth of temples, restaurants, exotic stores, medicine shops and markets. The best place to experience the bustle of trade is at the crowded Binh Tay Market where the corridors are filled with stalls offering a variety of exotic produce, from live tethered ducks to nuts and seeds, as well as other household items.

There are several temples of interest in Cholon, including the colourful Jade Emperor Pagoda, the Quan Am Pagoda with its ornate exterior, Phuoc An Hoi Quan Temple, its roof exquisitely ornamented with dragons and sea monsters, and the Thien Hau Pagoda dedicated to the goddess of the sea.

Cu Chi Tunnels



The Cu Chi Tunnels system is an underground network of tunnels dug in the 1940s by the Vietnamese as a place to hide during the fight against the French. The network was later expanded and used in the American War. Today the system is more than 150 miles (250km) long.

It is comprised of winding tunnels and unlit offshoots, secret trap doors connecting narrow routes to hidden shelters, local rivers and tunnels reaching to the Cambodian border. It was once a sprawling city of improvised hospitals, living quarters, kitchens and fresh water wells, with some tunnels barely large enough to wriggle through. The plan was to launch surprise assaults on the enemy, and then disappear; this strategy was so successful that the superior firepower of the French and American armies was insufficient in the face of continuous ambushes in which the assailants seemed to vanish into fresh air.

Today many of the tunnels have been enlarged to allow visitors the dirty and claustrophobic experience of crawling through a portion of the underground network, past secret trapdoors and booby traps laid against invasion. The two main sites, Ben Dinh and Ben Duoc, are different in that one was constructed specifically for tourists (Ben Dinh) and the other was actually used in war (Ben Duoc). Once full of war traps, their popularity with visitors has turned the area into a tourist trap, with hard-sell vendors a constant hassle among the touring throngs.

Mekong Delta



The delta is a vast network of waterways formed by the Mekong River. It is surrounded by a fertile patchwork of endless green rice paddies, orchards and swamplands is where most of the country's rice is grown. Not only does the Mekong River irrigate what is known as 'the rice bowl of Vietnam', but it also serves as a vital form of transport.

A unique way of life has evolved among the villagers that have lived on or beside the river for centuries. The best way to experience the delta is by boat, joining the rowing boats and fishermen, rickety houseboats, ferries and traditional sampans on the brown water. On the banks are small villages, vegetable gardens, fish farms and stilted houses. Trading is carried out between boats at floating markets, where whole sections of the river are covered by bobbing merchants who publicize their wares hung from the top of a long bamboo pole.

There are several towns in the region from where visitors can arrange boat trips if not already on an organised tour. Try to avoid the rainy season as the tides may be too high for canal travel. Local food dishes are a speciality and besides seafood there are opportunities for the adventurous to sample such delights as snake, eels and bats.

Pham Ngu Lau



This area of Saigon, located in District One, stretching along the streets of De Tham, Pham Ngu Lau and Bui Vien is host to most of the budget travellers in South Vietnam. Often compared to the more famous Khao San road of Bangkok, this district, similarly, is an amalgamation of bars, guesthouses, restaurants, souvenir shops and small travel agencies.

Known also to be an expat playground, these bars stay open later than most in the city. The prominent Go2 Bar is the most popular among tourists but dozens dot the area. Day trips to the Mekong Delta or the Cu Chi tunnels are easily organised in any of the travel agencies as well as transport to most of Vietnam. Although prices vary the trips usually are the same despite the agency.

HOI AN

The quaint riverside town of Hoi An was an important port town and one of the major trading centres in South East Asia during the 16th and 17th centuries. The cultural influences of the Japanese and Chinese merchants are still evident today in the town's architecture, with the famous Japanese Covered Bridge and the distinctly Chinese atmosphere of the Old Quarter forming part of its unique character.

Lining the narrow streets are two-storey Chinese shops, with charming wooden facades and tiled roofs, merchants' homes, Assembly Halls and temples that preserve an ancient character. On the 15th day of every lunar month, the ancient character of this sleepy town takes on fairytale proportions, as porches, streets and windows are lit by the glow of coloured lanterns; a practice reminiscent of the old days and aimed at retaining the spirit of the past.

Hoi An is becoming an increasingly popular tourist destination, not only for its attractive old-world atmosphere and genuine friendliness, but also for its quaint restaurants, serving delicious Hoi An specialities, and tailor-made clothes. Rows of little tailor shops with rolls of fine silk offer the chance to have beautiful garments made up within hours; however, the insistence of the tailors can be annoying.

Two miles (4km) to the east of Hoi An is the beach of Cua Dai, considered to be one of the most beautiful beaches in Central Vietnam, with its long white sandy stretch. From Hoi An, visitors can make trips to the large marble rock formations 'The Marble Mountains', which are closer to Da Nang, or take a short river cruise. Travellers going north or south can make this a great stop, if only to step back for a while into Vietnamese history.

NHA TRANG

The capital of Khanh Hoa province, and located on Vietnam's southeastern coastline, Nha Trang is a popular tourist destination and a great stop on any backpacking trail. With a reputation as a glamorous 'party city' - it has hosted the Miss Universe pageant in 2008, the Miss World pageant in 2010, and is due to host the 2016 Asian Beach Games - Nha Trang boasts fabulous, pristine white-sand beaches, and awesome scuba-diving and snorkelling.

The beautiful bay on the shores of the South China Sea is dotted with islands you can access and explore, and is home to the five-star Vinpearl holiday resort, an opulent, Disneyworld-like structure that caters for the well-heeled. One of those wonderful coastal destinations that is as popular with locals as with foreigners, and as popular with backpackers as with more affluent travellers, Nha Trang also features some interesting cultural fare that the more discerning traveller will enjoy seeking out.

Must-see tourist attractions include the Po Nagar Cham Towers (a beautiful collection of ruins dating from the 9th century); the Long Son Pagoda; the Alexander Yersin Museum (constructed in honour of the French-Swiss bacteriologist who spent 50 years living in Nha Trang); Nui Hon Chong beach; and the Lanterns Cooking Class, offered by one of the best restaurants in downtown Nha Trang.

While in Nha Trang, be sure to try the local specialities, which include fresh seafood and barbecued pork rolled in rice paper. The best time to visit the area is between March and June, when daytime temperatures are bearable, and it is not as windy. However, Nha Trang is fortunate in that it is spared the worst effects of monsoon season, meaning one could visit it all year round.

DA LAT

Capital of Lam Dong Province, located in Vietnam's central highlands region, Da Lat is a popular tourist destination, offering sun-burned travellers an Alpine haven, ideal for rest and recuperation. Full of beautiful French Colonial architecture, the city's natural surrounds are also staggeringly picturesque - attested to by the fact that in Vietnamese, 'Da Lat' means 'city of thousands of pine trees'.

There is much to see and to explore in the city's misty surrounding valleys, including Truc Lam, a working Buddhist monastery in a pristine pine forest setting; Lang Bian, a nearby mountain with spectacular scenery, that you can hike up in three hours; the Da Lat Flower Park, where the area's famous orchids and roses take centre-stage; and Elephant Falls, a picture-perfect collection of waterfalls that is guaranteed to thrill the most jaded of travellers.

Boasting a wonderfully temperate year-round climate - it is nicknamed 'the city of eternal Spring' - Da Lat, much like Darjeeling in India, is often used by travellers as a restful place to stop and catch their breaths. The best time to visit Da Lat is in the dry season, which lasts from November to April.

PHU QUOC

Located in the Gulf of Siam, Phu Quoc is Vietnam's largest island, and is fast becoming a heavyweight tourist destination. The densely-forested, mountainous island is ringed by some of the most beautiful, unspoilt beaches in the whole of southeast Asia - in fact, in February 2008, ABC News declared that Phu Quoc possessed 'the most beautiful and cleanest beaches in the world'. Accessible by sea or air, Phu Quoc is the ideal place to spend a week or two.

There will be more than enough to entertain visitors between relaxing on the beach, sampling some of the famous seafood, shopping for pearls in the fishing village of Ham Ninh, or heading off to Phu Quoc National Park to hike and swim in a tranquil mountain pool. The island is famous for its fish sauce (*nuoc mam*) - an essential ingredient of all southeast Asian cooking, and a wonderful gift for friends and family back home.

For those looking to be active on the island, Rainbow Divers offer excellent opportunities for snorkelling and scuba-diving; and it is highly recommended that you rent a scooter or moped for your time on Phu Quoc, as it has to be the coolest, easiest way to zip around the place.

The best time to visit the island is in the dry season, which lasts from December to May. Make sure you see Phu Quoc while it is still so underdeveloped and paradisaical - Phuket used to be the same way, apparently.

DA NANG

Located on the south central coast of Vietnam, at the mouth of the Han River, Da Nang is a modern, bustling port city, boasting the highest urbanisation ratio of any centrally-governed city in the country. Central Vietnam's commercial and educational heartland, Da Nang is also an important tourist destination, attracting about 1.3 million local and international visitors every year.

Popular tourist attractions in and around Da Nang include the Museum of Cham Sculpture; the Montgomerie Links golf course, roundly considered the best in Vietnam; the Marble Mountains, a cluster of five marble and limestone hills, famous for their caves, tunnels, carvings and sculptures; and the My Son ruins, an unmissable UNESCO World Heritage Site, consisting of Hindu temples first built in the 4th century.

Da Nang is a popular stop-over point for travellers looking to access the even more bewitching, close-lying areas of Hoi An and the imperial city of Hue; and also features a few slightly more resort-style areas, such as Non Nuoc Beach - a white-sand beach renowned for both its spectacular beauty, and for its history as an 'R&R' destination for American troops during the Vietnam War - and the Ba Na Hills, a mountain resort with a 3 mile-long (5km) cable car system.

Easily accessible by train, bus, plane or boat, Da Nang is a worthwhile stop for those looking to dip into Vietnam's fascinating and varied cultural trove. Go between February and May, when it'll be dry, and daytime temperatures will be bearable.

AIRPORTS

DA NANG INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT (DAD)

LOCATION

The airport is located one mile (2km) from Da Nang's centre.

GETTING TO THE CITY

Taxis and motorbike taxis are available on the arrivals level. The nearest bus stop to the airport is at the Han Market in Bach Dang Street, from which travellers can make connections to the central bus station.

TIME

Local time is GMT +7.

CONTACTS

CAR RENTAL

Car rental is available at the airport, but cars must normally be hired with drivers, since travellers without a Vietnamese drivers licence may not drive rental cars.

AIRPORT TAXIS

Taxis from several companies are available on the arrivals level. Travellers should confirm a fixed or metered rate with a taxi representative.

FACILITIES

Airport facilities include a waiting area, restaurants, a bar and sales offices.

DEPARTURE TAX

WEBSITE

www.danangairportonline.com

NOI BAI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT (HAN)

LOCATION

The airport is situated 28 miles (45km) north of Hanoi.

GETTING TO THE CITY

City bus Routes 7 and 17 run to Hanoi from the airport, stopping on the right side of the terminal exit. Buses run every 15 to 20 minutes between 5am and 10pm, and the journey takes approximately one hour. Route 7 goes to the Kim Ma Bus Station, while Route 17 connects to the Long Bien Station. The bus fare is about VDN 5,000. Airport minibuses offer direct transportation to hotels.

TIME

Local time is GMT +7.

CONTACTS

Tel: +84 (0)4 827 1513, (0)4 826 8522, or (0)4 886 5060.

CAR RENTAL

Car rental agencies at the airport include Avis, Budget, Hertz, Europcar and Sixt. Cars must normally be hired with drivers, since travellers without a Vietnamese drivers licence may not drive rental cars.

AIRPORT TAXIS

Taxis are available outside the terminal; rides to the city centre take approximately 30 minutes, and costs about VDN 320,000.

TRANSFER BETWEEN TERMINALS

Passengers can use a shuttle bus, which is free of charge for transit passengers, to commute between Terminal 1 and Terminal 2. The shuttle operates from 6am to midnight and departs every 10 to 15 minutes.

FACILITIES

The airport has currency exchange and ATMs, a VIP lounge, massage services, shops and restaurants.

DEPARTURE TAX**WEBSITE**

www.hanoiairportonline.com

TAN SON NHAT INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT (SGN)**LOCATION**

The airport is situated four miles (6km) from Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon).

GETTING TO THE CITY

Minibuses and metered taxis are available for transport to the city centre. Make sure the driver is wearing an official name badge and that the meter is on. Most hotels can arrange transport for arriving passengers, but visitors should organise this in advance.

TIME

Local time is GMT +7.

CONTACTS

Tel: +84 (0)8 3 848 5383.

CAR RENTAL

Car hire companies at the airport include Avis, Budget, Europcar, Hertz and Sixt but cars must normally be hired with drivers, since travellers without a Vietnamese drivers licence may not drive rental cars.

AIRPORT TAXIS

The main taxi queue is on the ground floor. Mai Linh taxi company is authorised by the airport.

TRANSFER BETWEEN TERMINALS

The terminals are in walking distance of each other, taking 10 minutes at most.

FACILITIES

The airport is small, but the facilities are perfectly adequate. Facilities include tourist information desks, children's play area, foreign exchange kiosks, a post office, VIP lounges, and a selection of restaurants and snack bars.

DEPARTURE TAX**WEBSITE**

www.hochiminhcityairport.com

PHU BAI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT (HUI)**LOCATION**

The airport is located 11 miles (18km) from Hue city centre.

GETTING TO THE CITY

The airport offers a bus service for passengers to get to Hue city. A more convenient (but more expensive) option is to catch a taxi or motor taxi outside of the terminal.

TIME

Local time is GMT +7.

CONTACTS**CAR RENTAL**

Car rental is available in Hue itself, but travellers will need to get there via public transport.

AIRPORT TAXIS

Taxi or motor taxi services are available outside of the terminal and cost anything between VND 120,000 and VND 250,000 to get into the city.

FACILITIES

The airport has only basic facilities.

DEPARTURE TAX**CAM RANH INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT (CXR)****LOCATION**

The airport is located 19 miles (31km) from Nha Trang city centre.

GETTING TO THE CITY

An airport bus runs to central Nha Trang; schedules are based on flights. Taxis are also available to transport passengers to their required destination.

TIME

Local time is GMT +7.

CONTACTS**CAR RENTAL**

Car rental is available, but cars must normally be hired with drivers, since travellers without a Vietnamese drivers licence may not drive rental cars.

AIRPORT TAXIS

Taxis are available at the airport and are located right in front of the terminal building, in the parking lot. There are several taxi companies offering a fixed fare rate to Nha Trang; rates are displayed at the taxi stand.

FACILITIES

The airport terminal provides various services, including a shop, currency exchange, ATMs, snack bars and a coffee shop.

DEPARTURE TAX

WEBSITE

www.nhatrangairport.com

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