

# BIG FIVE

TOURS & EXPEDITIONS

Enriching Lives Through Distinctive Journeys

## Socialist Republic of Vietnam

### Travel Guide



*The following general outline offers practical information, suggestions and answers to some frequently asked questions. It is not intended to be the definitive guide for your trip. Be sure to check the reading listing included here for more information.*



"Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us or we find it not."  
-Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (Formerly Saigon)												
Elevation: 62 feet				Latitude: 10 49N				Longitude: 106 40E				
Average Temperature												
°F	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
	80	82	84	86	86	84	83	83	83	82	81	80
Average Precipitation												
in.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
	0.6	0.1	0.4	2	8.4	12.2	11.6	10.7	13.5	10.3	4.7	1.8

## WEATHER

**Climate:** Vietnam is tropical in the south; has monsoons in the north with a hot, rainy season that runs from mid-May to mid-September; and a warm, dry season that lasts from mid-October to mid-March. Natural hazards include occasional typhoons (May to January) with extensive flooding.

**Tourist Seasons:** Vietnam is a country where tourists can visit in all four seasons. The country's tourism services offer a range of programs. In the North, the best tourist season lasts from November to April.

Springtime is especially pleasant because of the cooler, drier climate. This is also the time for many ritual ceremonies and folk festivals such as celebrations to commemorate national heroes and heroines, folk cultural festivals, and spring festivals as well as prayer ceremonies for good crops. Lunar New Year Festival remains one of the most interesting this time of year.

Warm clothes will be necessary when visiting Vietnam in that season. Temperatures in winter hover around 10-15 degrees Celsius (50-59 degrees F). But March and April are warmer.

Meanwhile in the South, the average temperature throughout the year is about 27 degrees Celsius (80 degrees F), so you need thin garments, sunglasses, and a hat.

## TIME ZONES/ TRAVELING TIME

Vietnam is seven hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT +7:00). Depending on season, Vietnam is 13 hours ahead of New York, and 16 hours ahead of Los Angeles. Vietnam does not observe Daylight Savings Time. Flight time to Hanoi is approximately 17 hours from Los Angeles and 20 hours from New York City.

## AIRPORT FORMALITIES

Most international carriers enter via Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) and / or Hanoi. All baggage is checked at passenger's risk.

**Airport Departure Tax:** International flights: US\$10, children under 2 exempt. Domestic flights: 20,000 VND and 15,000 VND. *Please note that these taxes are subject to change without notice. They must be paid directly, and is, therefore, not included in our charges.*

## PASSPORTS & VISAS

**Passports:** For international travel, a U.S. passport valid for at least six months from date of departure, containing **at least** two blank pages is necessary.

**Visas:** Many countries require that travelers obtain visas prior to arrival. Big Five Tours & Expeditions has appointed Zierer Visa Service (ZVS) to process required visas for our

passengers. The Visa Application Kit is included with your pre-trip confirmation packet. You can also download the necessary forms from the website: <http://www.zvs.com>. Click on the "members" section to log in. For user name, enter **bigfive**, and the password is **55509**. You will enter the visa section for Big Five Tours & Expeditions. Here you will find a list of country-specific forms. You will also discover useful hints such as how to obtain a passport, adding passport pages, and other tips.

**Important:** Please look at your passport before you submit it to ZVS to insure that:

- 1) Your passport is valid for at least six months after the date of travel.
- 2) You have sufficient blank pages for visa stamps that will be added as you travel in and out of various countries.

**Please note:** Pages reserved for amendments and endorsements cannot be used for visas.

## CUSTOMS

Procedures are always subject to change. Travelers are asked to fill out a form declaring cash, jewelry and other valuables. Customs will review, stamp, and keep one copy. Keep your copy -- you will be fined if you lose it.

**Duty-Free Items:** Luggage, personal possessions, and goods brought to Vietnam in amounts sufficient for personal use only, and not listed among noncommercial goods not to be imported, are exempt from tax. Travelers' luggage as declared at customs offices on arrival must be shown again at customs when leaving Vietnam, except for articles that have been consumed or given as gifts.

Tourists may bring in 400 cigarettes, 50 cigars, or 100 gm of tobacco duty free. They may also bring in 1.5 liters of alcoholic beverages or 3 liters of beer, and a reasonable quantity of perfume. Visitors may also bring in unlimited amounts of foreign currency, objects made of gold, silver, precious metals and gemstones or plated with silver or gold, but these must be declared in detail on customs' forms.

**Currency Exchange:** Travelers can exchange money for Vietnamese dong (VND) at banks, hotels and jewelry shops throughout the country. Foreign currency must be changed into Vietnamese dong for shopping. Travelers may take out of the country unlimited amounts of souvenirs, provided they have receipts, but cannot take out more cash than they brought in

**Prohibited Items:** All narcotics (hemp, opium, cocaine, morphine, heroin, etc.), firearms, and obscene literature, pictures or articles are prohibited. Like most Asian nations, penalties for drug trafficking are severe.

## U.S. CUSTOMS

Returning U.S. residents are allowed to bring back \$800 worth of merchandise duty-free. Regulations frequently change. Visit the homepage for Customs & Border Protection at [www.customs.gov/xp/cgov/home.xml](http://www.customs.gov/xp/cgov/home.xml). This site will give you a lot of useful current information. You can also contact your nearest Customs office or write the U.S. Customs Service, Box 7407, Washington, DC 20044 for more information.

## BANKING/ CURRENCY

The currency issued by the Vietnam State Bank is the dong (abbreviated "d" or VND) which is used uniformly throughout the country. Bank notes in domination of 100d; 200d; 500d; 1,000d; 2,000d; 5,000d; 10,000d; 20,000d and 50,000d are presently in circulation.

Plan to carry enough cash or travelers' checks to pay all your bills. It is possible to exchange traveler's checks at various banks, hotels, exchange bureaus and jewelry shops. Most major hotels in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi accept credit cards. The dollar is accepted many places; carry a small amount in small denominations for the few instances when you must convert to dong. When using U.S. dollars, the bills must be relatively new with no markings or tears.

## LUGGAGE

**Traveling light is always the first and best rule!** We recommend passengers limit their luggage to one medium-sized soft bag per person or two small duffle bags. In this security conscious era, airline luggage restrictions may change without notice. Also, luggage limits vary depending on ticket class, plane size, destinations, etc. It is always best to confirm with airlines for specific limitations.

Generally speaking, from the US, economy class passengers are allowed to check in two (2) normal size pieces of luggage (each piece measuring no more than about 62 linear inches, which means length plus width plus height), and not exceeding 70 pounds per bag.

Scheduled flights from other countries and within foreign countries generally limit luggage to 44 pounds total, plus one carry-on personal item. Further restrictions apply for charter flights. We will advise you of those restrictions in your final documents.

Most airlines now allow only one carry-on bag in addition to one personal item such as a laptop or handbag. Most bags within the 22 x 14 x 9 (or, a total of 45 linear inches) size restriction will be considered legal carry-on size by major domestic U.S. airlines. Many US airlines check-in desks have sizing boxes within which your bag must fit. Obviously, no knives or cutting instruments are allowed in carry-on baggage.

All luggage should have identification inside as well as secure baggage tags on the outside. Please note that the US National Transportation and Safety Board now suggests that you do not lock your checked luggage. If a screener has to open your bag, the locks may have to be broken. This applies to flights within the US and international flights originating in the US. This, however, does not address other international travel issues. We suggest that you lock your luggage and bring a couple of spare locks in the event one or more are cut off. But the choice is up to each individual traveler to make.

## COMMUNICATION

**Languages:** Vietnamese (official), Chinese, English, French, Khmer, tribal languages (Mon-Khmer and Malayo-Polynesian) Learning foreign languages such as English, French, Chinese is implemented widely and particularly in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Hue, and Da Nang. Tour guides speak English, French, Russian, Chinese, and Japanese.

**Telephones:** International calls can be made almost everywhere. If there is a post office in your hotel, make the calls there because it is cheaper. Faxing cost is less than \$7 a page whereas a phone call can run about \$4 to \$6 a minute. Collect calls are almost impossible. It's best to call home and leave a number where you can be reached.

## TRANSPORTATION

Please note that as a client of Big Five Tours, you will not use public transport under normal conditions. We provide the information below for informational purposes only.

**Hotel Cars:** In Ho Chi Minh, the ride from the airport is short, between 10 to 30 minutes at most. The cost of a car is between US\$10 - US\$25, depending on the hotel. In Hanoi, the trip from the airport to the city is quite a bit further, anywhere from 30 minutes to one hour depending where you are staying. The cost there is more: between US\$20 - US\$50.

**Taxis:** Those who should know recommend that from both airports it is best to avoid taxis and take the comfort, luxury and safety of one of the above-mentioned hotel cars. Within the cities, taxis are safe, and pretty much hassle-free. Meters run in most of them, although the starting rates vary a little from each taxi company.

**Alternative:** Bicycles can be rented out for around US\$1.50 per day. They are a bit wobbly, but good fun and a great way of traveling around.

## HEALTH REQUIREMENTS

Currently, there are no required vaccinations, except yellow fever certificates are required for those who are coming from an infected area. Please check the latest regulations with your local health office or National Center for Disease Control, Atlanta, GA (Tel: 404-332-4559).

**Medical Facilities:** Most tourist facilities are equipped with good medical facilities with the exception of remote areas.

**Note:** If you are on medication, be sure to bring enough for the duration of the trip. Also, ask your doctor for a note detailing the drugs you are taking.

## SAFETY

When visiting cities in Vietnam or any country, common sense should be the guiding principle. Be sure to watch your purse and wallet, and, in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), your eyeglasses. Take along a prescription of your glasses just in case. On outings, take only what's indispensable in your backpack or fanny pack. Do not take your passport, airline tickets, or all your money on day trips. Always leave these items and other valuables in a hotel safe. Take copies of your documents and only the amount of money you think you will need. Lost or stolen passports should be reported to the local police and the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi or the U.S. Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh City.

## **BUSINESS HOURS**

**Offices:** All Government offices are opened from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. (with a one-hour lunch break) from Monday to Saturday, and closed Sundays. In local regions, offices are opened from 7:00 am to 11:00 p.m. and from 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.

**Banks:** Banks are opened from 7:30 or 8:00 a.m. to 3:30p.m. Banks are closed on Saturday afternoons and Sundays. Private shops are opened from 8:00 or 8:30 a.m. to 9:00 or 10:00 p.m. Banks are generally open from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. Most offices open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday, except on public holidays.

**Shops:** Many are open 8:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., seven days a week. Department stores are generally open from 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 or 9:00 p.m.

## **CLOTHING**

**What To Wear:** Pack comfortable, light, loose-fitting, easy-to-wash clothes made of cotton, but not a lot of it. T-shirts and disposable raincoats are on sale everywhere. Sandals and sneakers are a good way of getting around. Bring whatever specialized clothing and shoes as may be necessary for the more adventurous excursions such as trekking and mountain climbing. A jacket or sweater may be necessary in the cool season, especially in mountainous areas.

**Proper Attire:** Please be sure to observe appropriate dress codes when visiting religious sanctuaries, buildings, sites, or palaces, where modesty is the rule. If you are inappropriately dressed, you may not be allowed to enter. Casual clothing is acceptable for tourists, but when visiting special places do not wear short shorts, halter-tops, or muscle shirts.

**Laundry Service:** Laundry service is available in most hotels and resorts. The service is inexpensive although the turn around time in many cases will depend upon the weather. No sun means it takes longer for the clothing to dry.

## **MEASURES & ELECTRICITY**

Electric current is 220 Volts

1 inch = 25.417 millimeters; 1 foot = 0.305 meters; 1 mile = 1.609 kilometers; 1 acre = 0.405 hectare. 1 gallon = 4.546 liters; 1 pound = 454 grams.

Sometimes, it is easier to remember the reverse in the case of kilometers and kilograms: a kilometer is a bit over 1/2 mile (.62 miles), and a kilogram equals 2.2 pounds.

## **PHOTOGRAPHY**

**Equipment:** Bring cameras and lenses you are comfortable using. Also, new equipment may be subject to duty fees. If you get new equipment before you go, do so as far in advance as possible. Shoot and develop at least a dozen rolls before departure to work out any problems.

**Lenses:** A combination of fixed and/or zoom lenses with focal lengths from 28 mm to 200 mm are good for general travel photography, although you can take excellent photographs with only a 50 mm lens. A zoom lens in the 70 to 200 mm range will help you capture the sights. A macro lens is helpful for shooting close-ups, but a good set of extension tubes will work very well. A 2x converter is also a handy. Bring a small cleaning kit and blower brush to keep equipment clean.

**Film:** You will undoubtedly shoot more pictures than you planned. Even those not all that interested in photography will probably shoot one 36 exposure roll of film per day, and enthusiastic shooters will double or triple that amount. Be sure film is fresh and, when possible, keep it refrigerated. A film speed of ASA/ISO 64 is an excellent choice for color slide film. When possible, try to use this speed rather than higher speed films. There is a noticeable difference in quality that it is worth the extra effort to keep your camera steady at a somewhat slower shutter speed than you would otherwise use. For color prints, there are several good choices, including Kodak and Fuji films (ASA/ISO 100 & 200), for bright light photography, ASA/ISO 400 & 1000 for lower light situations.

**Batteries:** Put fresh photo-quality batteries in your camera and other electric equipment before you leave and bring at least two sets of spare batteries with you. Your camera will be useless without them and batteries tend to be expensive.

## **FOOD & DRINK**

Tap water in urban areas in Vietnam is heavily chlorinated, but it is strongly recommended that all water should be boiled before drinking. Better yet, drink bottled water when available. Be wary of ice. Milk should also be boiled. All food should be thoroughly cooked and fruit peeled.

**Local Cuisine:** Having said that, realize that traditional Vietnamese cuisine is excellent, and boasts 500 specialties ranging from spring rolls to tamarind crab. Vietnamese foods share familial ties with both Thai and Chinese variations while retaining distinctive differences.

For vegetarians, Vietnam offers unique Buddhist-style dishes prepared with a vast array of legumes and tofu as well as an abundant selection of tropical fruits such as dragon fruit, longans, and rambutans.

In the past several years, people in urban centers have begun to go out for lunch at food stalls on the street. Consequently there has been a proliferation of temporary food stalls along many sidewalks and public spaces in cities. Some stalls are open until late in the morning to cater to regular customers. Around noon, owners can be seen arranging tables and benches along the pavement to form makeshift shop floors. After two or three hours, when there are no more customers, they begin to remove all of their wooden furniture, so that the place resumes its former appearance. As long as food is cooked freshly before your eyes, you can have a great meal for very little money.

An average meal may consist of boiled rice and mon an kho (meal without soup), which includes pork, fish, shrimp, and vegetable stirred in fat as well as pickles, etc. Or, mon canh (meal with soup), which involves a soup made with pork or spare-ribs, crabmeat, and fish.

To the Vietnamese, com, grilled rice, is used for the main meals of the day (lunch and dinner). It is served mostly in the fall. After collecting the rice from the fields, several steps have to be performed to obtain com. After removing the grains from their hulks, the rice is wrapped in lotus leaves to keep it from drying and to allow it to absorb the lotus flavor. We find grilled rice everywhere in Vietnam, but the best is found in Vong village, 5 km from Hanoi. In this village, they still use traditional secret recipes. People eat grilled rice with eggs, bananas, or sapodillas. Typically fragrant rice is used, such as Tam Thom and Nang Huong.

Bang chung, sticky rice cakes, are available at any time of the year, although they are a Vietnamese traditional

dish that must be part of Tet meals. As a matter of fact, every Vietnamese family must have these rice cakes among offerings placed on the altar to their ancestors. The cakes are made of glutinous rice, pork meat, and green beans paste wrapped in a square of bamboo leaves, giving the rice a green color after boiling. According to the legend, under the reign of the Hung Kings, Prince Lang Lieu created sticky rice cakes and presented them to his father. Bang chung won such high praise from the King that he awarded the prince his throne.

Making sticky rice cakes is a meticulous job. Rice soaks in water for an entire day. Pork meat must include skin and fat, green beans must be of the same size, and bamboo leaves must be fresh. Squaring off and tying cakes with bamboo strings requires skillful hands.

Lean pork pie, Gio lua, is available in Vietnam only and is called differently in the north and south. Foreigners as well as Vietnamese are fond of lean pork pie. Gio lua consists of pork meat wrapped in fresh banana leaves. The little bundles are then boiled. The top layer is most delicious because it absorbs the banana leaves aroma.

Pho, grated rice noodle, is one of the most popular foods. People commonly eat it for breakfast, although many also have it for lunch or dinner. Anyone feeling hungry in the small hours of the morning can also enjoy a bowl of hot and spicy pho to fill their empty stomachs. Preparations vary but the best variety is made using fragrant rice called Gao Te. Soup for Pho Bo (pho with beef) is made by stewing the bones of cows and pigs for a long time in a large pot. Pieces of fillet mignon together with several slices of ginger are reserved for Pho Bo Tai (rare fillet). Slices of well-done meat are offered to those less keen on eating rare fillets. *(From Vietnam National Administration of Tourism)*

**Note:** If you have food allergies or are on a special/restricted diet, please notify your travel agent or our office in advance, so that we may try to comply with your needs. Also, please advise your travel agent or our office if you have any mobility restrictions, so that we may inform our representatives accordingly. They will always strive to accommodate you to the best of their ability.

## **CUSTOMS IN VIETNAM**

**Tippling:** Tippling is not customary in Vietnam; however, it is becoming more common in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), Hanoi and other cities frequented by tourists. Many upscale restaurants and hotels add a service charge to their bills, ranging from 5-10%. Unfortunately this money doesn't always find its way to the service staff. Deciding whether to tip or not takes some sensitivity. The Vietnamese are a very proud people and a tip can easily offend the recipient.

Generally in HCMC, a tip of 5-10% of a restaurant bill is sufficient if service is good. Sometimes, just leaving the change is sufficient. In other cities, particularly at small, Vietnamese restaurants, tipping is not expected.

Tipping taxi drivers is neither customary nor expected, although it's wise to have change since some drivers never seem to carry any. Guides and drivers should be tipped at the end of your trip. Cigarettes, liquor, or a book are also appreciated. In small hotels, particularly for stays of more than a few days, it is appropriate to tip the maid and desk staff at the end of your stay, or buy them a small gift.

Remember that most service people earn very little so a few thousand dong is enormously appreciated. But there are times when it can be taken the wrong way. At small hotels, the staff frequently goes out of their way to answer

questions, reconfirm plane reservations, and look up addresses and the like. You may even be invited to join the staff for a meal. This is a great honor and their way of saying they consider you a friend. And, friends don't tip friends. A tip, no matter how well intentioned, will invariably be taken as an insult, or worse a proposition. Your best bet in this situation is offer small gifts such as pens, writing paper or hair clips for women and cigarettes for men. If you must give money, give it to every member of the staff and only when you depart.

**Gift Giving:** Gift giving is not reserved for special occasions. In fact, the Vietnamese will use any occasion from meeting new friends to quitting a job to give a gift. It is common practice in both social and business settings. Virtually any public holiday is an occasion to exchange gifts. Gifts need not be elaborate -- book, pen, food, tea, wine and liquor are common gifts. Fruit, pastry, even pizza are always a big hit. Remember, while these items are readily available to us, they are beyond the means of most Vietnamese.

**Showing Respect:** Remember to show respect when touring religious sites. For example, each image of Buddha, large or small, ruined or not, is regarded as a sacred object. Never climb onto one to take a photograph or do anything that might indicate lack of respect. Also, please note that Buddhist monks are forbidden to touch or be touched by a woman, or to accept anything from a woman's hand. If a woman must give anything to a monk, she first hands it to a man, who then presents it to the monk.

- You may wear shoes when walking around the compound of a Buddhist temple, but not inside the chapel where the principal Buddha image is kept.
- In a Muslim mosque, men should wear hats and women should be well covered with slacks or a long skirt, a long-sleeved blouse buttoned to the neck, and a scarf over the hair. All should remove their shoes before entering the mosque and should not be present if there is a religious gathering.
- Out of politeness, always ask permission before taking photos of people. The same rule of thumb also applies to photos taken in places of worship. Permission will almost always be granted.
- A gentle handshake is the most appropriate manner of greeting.
- Never point to anything, even casually, with your foot; use your finger instead. When standing or seated, never angle your foot in such a way that it is conspicuous or that the sole is visible. This is very rude.

## **THE CUSTOM OF CHEWING BETEL & ARECA NUTS**

According to legend, this custom was popularized during the Hung Vuong Era, and follows a famous fairy tale, "*Story of the Betel and Areca Nut*". A quid of betel consists of four materials: an areca leaf (sweet taste), betel bark (hot taste), a chay root (bitter taste), and hydrated lime (pungent taste). The custom of chewing betel nut is unique to Vietnam. Old health books claim that "chewing betel and areca nut makes the mouth fragrant, decreases bad tempers, and makes digesting food easy". A quid of betel makes people become closer and more openhearted. At any wedding ceremony, there must be a dish of betel and areca nut, which people can share as they enjoy the special occasion.

Sharing a quid of betel with an old friend is like expressing gratitude for the relationship. A quid of betel and areca nut makes people feel warm on cold winters days, and during funerals it relieves sadness. Betel and areca nuts are also used in offerings. When Vietnamese people worship their ancestors, betel and areca nut must be present at the altar. Today, the custom of chewing betel remains popular in some Vietnamese villages and among the old.

## TEA - AN INDISPENSABLE DRINK

As you walk along the streets, somewhere near a lamp post, under the shade of a tree, or next to a door, there is a low table with glass pots containing different kinds of candies, roasted ground nuts, and sugar coated cakes. Next to these treats is a humble tea cozy with a tray of cups. Around the table are several small wooden stools. This is traditionally a complete description of a make-shift tea shop, which is a very popular part of street life in Vietnam.

A customer will utter, "One cup of tea, please". The owner skillfully lifts the cap of the tea cozy, takes out the tea pot, and then pours the hot tea into a small cup. The owner then hands the cup of steaming tea to the customer. This drink is considered indispensable to every inhabitant of the city. Tea is drunk every day from the early morning until late at night. People drink tea at their homes, at their work places, and even in tea shops on their way to and from work.

Whenever the Vietnamese feel thirsty, they are likely to look for this drink. It is drunk in both the summer and the winter months. In the winter, a sip of hot tea makes you feel warm inside and better able to cope with the cold temperatures outside. People in the south like to drink their tea cold, adding ice cubes.

If you pay attention to the surroundings of the average tea table in northern Vietnam, you will probably notice a very old-looking bamboo pipe leaning against the edge of a table or kept inside a wooden box. The pipe is called dieu cay (tobacco water pipe), and it is said to be one of the typical traits of the lifestyle in northern Vietnam.

## SHOPPING ~ ARTS & CRAFTS

Vietnamese artisans create thousands of types of handicraft products, some of which have gained international reputations such as lacquer ware. While lacquer artists produce a limited number of paintings and sculptures, lacquer crafts have been part of Vietnamese life under many forms: vases, boxes, interior decorating items, jewelry articles, and office products.

Other items include woven tapestries and woven "tho cam" handbags, unique works by skillful women in northwestern regions such as Cao Bang. Embroidered and silk products from the regions of Ha Dong, Nam Ha, Thai Binh and Hue are internationally recognized, as are wool tapestries from Ha Noi and Hai Phong. Jute tapestries from Hung Yen, Hai Phong, Ha Noi and Thai Binh, are also much sought after.

Ceramic and porcelain items have been produced in Vietnam for a long time. Ceramic and porcelain products glazed by traditional methods into beautiful arts are well known in Bat Trang (Ha Noi), Quang Ninh, and Hai Phong. Talented coppersmiths in Nam Ha, Ngu Xa (Ha Noi), Dong Son (Thanh Hoa), and Long fabricate copperware Tho.

Jewelry products and metalwork are concentrated in Ha Noi, Thai Binh and Hai Hung, while stonework is mainly produced in Da Nang. Wood products and woodcarvings can

usually be found in Phu Xuyen (Ha Tay), Hai Phong, and Hue.

With about 2,000 years of history, Vietnamese lacquer ware and other products, made by a community of handicraft artists, have established a firm and growing position in the domestic and international markets.

## INTRODUCTION TO VIETNAM

France occupied all of Vietnam by 1884. Independence was declared after World War II, but the French continued to rule until 1954 when they were defeated by Communist forces under Ho Chi MINH, who took control of the north. US economic and military aid to South Vietnam grew through the 1960s 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. Economic reconstruction of the reunited country has proven difficult as aging Communist Party leaders have only grudgingly initiated reforms necessary for a free market.

**Current Population:** 81,098,416

## GEOGRAPHY AT A GLANCE

**Location:** Southeastern Asia, bordering the Gulf of Thailand, Gulf of Tonkin, and South China Sea, alongside China, Laos, and Cambodia

**Geographic coordinates:** 16 00 N, 106 00 E

**Map references:** Southeast Asia

**Climate:** tropical in south; monsoonal in north with hot, rainy season (mid-May to mid-September) and warm, dry season (mid-October to mid-March)

**Terrain:** low, flat delta in south and north; central highlands; hilly, mountainous in far north and northwest

**Elevation extremes:** lowest point: South China Sea 0 m; highest point: Fan Si Pan 3,144 m

**Natural resources:** phosphates, coal, manganese, bauxite, chromate, offshore oil and gas deposits, forests, hydropower

**Natural hazards:** occasional typhoons (May to January) with extensive flooding, especially in the Mekong River delta

## ECONOMY

Vietnam is a poor, densely populated country that has had to recover from the ravages of war, the loss of financial support from the old Soviet Bloc, and the rigidities of a centrally planned economy. Substantial progress was achieved from 1986 to 1996 in moving forward from an extremely low starting point - growth averaged around 9% per year from 1993 to 1997. The 1997 Asian financial crisis highlighted the problems in the Vietnamese economy but, rather than prompting reform, reaffirmed the government's belief that shifting to a market oriented economy leads to disaster. GDP growth of 8.5% in 1997 fell to 6% in 1998 and 5% in 1999. Growth then rose to 6.8% in 2000 and dropped back to 4.7% in 2001 against the background of global recession. These numbers mask some major difficulties in economic performance. Many domestic industries, including coal, cement, steel, and paper, have reported large stockpiles of inventory and tough competition from more efficient foreign producers.

Meanwhile, Vietnamese authorities have moved slowly in implementing the structural reforms needed to revitalize the economy and produce more competitive, export-driven industries. The US-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement

entered into force near the end of 2001 and is expected to significantly increase Vietnam's exports to the US. The US is assisting Vietnam with implementing the legal and structural reforms called for in the agreement.

## **GOVERNMENT**

**Government type:** Communist state

**Administrative divisions:** 58 provinces (tinh, singular and plural), and 3 municipalities\* (thu do, singular and plural); An Giang, Bac Giang, Bac Kan, Bac Lieu, Bac Ninh, Ba Ria-Vung Tau, Ben Tre, Binh Dinh, Binh Duong, Binh Phuoc, Binh Thuan, Ca Mau, Can Tho, Cao Bang, Dac Lak, Da Nang, Dong Nai, Dong Thap, Gia Lai, Ha Giang, Hai Duong, Hai Phong\*, Ha Nam, Ha Noi\*, Ha Tay, Ha Tinh, Hoa Binh, Ho Chi Minh\*, Hung Yen, Khanh Hoa, Kien Giang, Kon Tum, Lai Chau, Lam Dong, Lang Son, Lao Cai, Long An, Nam Dinh, Nghe An, Ninh Binh, Ninh Thuan, Phu Tho, Phu Yen, Quang Binh, Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, Quang Ninh, Quang Tri, Soc Trang, Son La, Tay Ninh, Thai Binh, Thai Nguyen, Thanh Hoa, Thua Thien-Hue, Tien Giang, Tra Vinh, Tuyen Quang, Vinh Long, Vinh Phuc, Yen Bai

**Independence:** 2 September 1945 (from France)

**National holiday:** Independence Day, Sept 2

**Constitution:** 15 April 1992

**Legal system:** based on communist legal theory and French civil law system

**Suffrage:** 18 years of age; universal

**Executive branch:** *chief of state:* President Tran Duc LUONG (since 24 September 1997) *elections:* president elected by the National Assembly from among its members for a five-year term; election last held 24 September 1997 (next to be held when National Assembly meets following legislative elections in May 2002); prime minister appointed by the president from among the members of the National Assembly; deputy prime ministers appointed by the prime minister *head of government:* Prime Minister Phan Van KHAI (since 25 September 1997); First Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Tan DUNG (since 29 September 1997); Deputy Prime Ministers Vu KHOAN (since NA) and Pham Gia KHIEM (since Sept 29 1997) *cabinet:* Cabinet appointed by the president on the proposal of the prime minister and ratification of the *National Assembly election results:* Tran Duc LUONG elected president; percent of National Assembly vote - NA%

**Legislative branch:** unicameral National Assembly or Quoc-Hoi (498 seats; members elected by popular vote to serve five-year terms) *elections:* last held 19 May 2002 (next to be held 2007) *election results:* percent of vote by party - CPV 90%, other 10% (the 10% are not CPV members but are approved by the CPV to stand for election); *seats by party* - CPV 447, CPV-approved 51

**Judicial branch:** Supreme People's Court (chief justice is elected for a five-year term by the National Assembly on the recommendation of the president)

**Political parties and leaders:** only party - Communist Party of Vietnam or CPV [Nong Duc MANH, general secretary]

**Political pressure groups and leaders:** none

**International organization participation:** ACCT, APEC, ARF, AsDB, ASEAN, CCC, ESCAP, FAO, G-77, IAEA, IBRD, ICAO, ICRM, IDA, IFAD, IFC, IFRCS, ILO, IMF, IMO, Interpol, IOC, IOM (observer), ISO, ITU, NAM, OPCW, UN, UNCTAD, UNESCO, UNIDO, UPU, WCL, WFTU, WHO, WIPO, WMO, WTO, WTrO (observer)

## **Diplomatic representation in the US:**

*chief of mission:* Ambassador Nguyen Tam Chien, *consulate(s) general:* San Francisco, *Fax:* [1] (202) 861-0917 *telephone:* [1] (202) 861-0737, *chancery:* 1233 20th Street NW, Suite 400, Washington, DC 20036

## **Diplomatic representation from the US:**

*chief of mission:* Ambassador Raymond F. Burghardt, *embassy:* 7 Lang Ha Road, Ba Dinh District, Hanoi, *mailing address:* PSC 461, Box 400, FPO AP 96521-0002, *telephone:* [84] (4) 772-1500, *Fax:* [84] (4) 772-1510, *consulate(s) general:* Ho Chi Minh City

**Flag description:** red with a large yellow five-pointed star in the center

(2002 estimates from CIA- *The World Factbook*)

## **HISTORY**

"The Vietnamese are descendants of nomadic Mongols from China and migrants from Indonesia. According to mythology, the first ruler of Vietnam was Hung Vuong, who founded the nation in 2879 BC. From 111 BC, China ruled the nation then known as Nam Viet as a vassal state until the 15th century, an era of nationalistic expansion, when Cambodians were pushed out of the southern area of what is now Vietnam.

A century later, the Portuguese were the first Europeans to enter the area. France established its influence early in the 19th century and within 80 years conquered the three regions into which the country was then divided—Cochin-China in the south, Annam in the central region, and Tonkin in the north.

France first unified Vietnam in 1887, when a single governor-generalship was created, followed by the first physical links between north and south—a rail and road system. Even at the beginning of World War II, however, there were internal differences among the three regions. Japan took over military bases in Vietnam in 1940 and a pro-Vichy French administration remained until 1945. Veteran Communist leader Ho Chi Minh organized an independence movement known as the Vietminh to exploit the confusion surrounding France's weakened influence in the region. At the end of the war, Ho's followers seized Hanoi and declared a short-lived republic, which ended with the arrival of French forces in 1946.

Paris proposed a unified government within the French Union under the former Annamite emperor, Bao Dai. Cochin-China and Annam accepted the proposal, and Bao Dai was proclaimed emperor of all Vietnam in 1949. Ho and the Vietminh withheld support, and the revolution in China gave them the outside help needed for a war of resistance against French and Vietnamese troops armed largely by a United States worried about cold war Communist expansion.

A bitter defeat at Dien Bien Phu in northwest Vietnam on May 5, 1954, broke the French military campaign and resulted in the division of Vietnam. In the new South, Ngo Dinh Diem, premier under Bao Dai, deposed the monarch in 1955 and made himself president. Diem used strong U.S. backing to create an authoritarian regime that suppressed all opposition but could not eradicate the Northern-supplied Communist Viet Cong. Skirmishing grew into a full-scale war, with escalating U.S. involvement.

By April 9, 1975, Hanoi's troops marched within 40 miles of Saigon, the South's capital. South Vietnam's president Thieu resigned on April 21 and fled. Gen. Duong Van Minh, the new president, surrendered Saigon on April 30, ending a war that claimed the lives of 1.3 million Vietnamese and 58,000 Americans." (*Excerpts from Infoplease.com*)

## **U.S. - VIETNAM RELATIONS TODAY**

President Clinton announced the normalization of diplomatic relations with Vietnam on July 11, 1995. This followed the establishment of Liaison Offices in Hanoi and Washington, DC in January 1995 and the lifting of the U.S. trade embargo on Vietnam in February 1994. The Liaison Offices were upgraded to Embassies in August 1995. In 1997, the U.S. opened a Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh City, and Vietnam opened its own Consulate in San Francisco.

President Clinton granted a Jackson-Vanik waiver to Vietnam in March 1998, which he extended for additional one-year periods in June of 1998 and 1999. (A Jackson-Vanik waiver is required along with congressional approval of a bilateral trade agreement in order to grant Vietnam normal trading rights. This waiver must be renewed annually.) In July, the U.S. reached agreement in principle with Vietnam on a Bilateral Trade Agreement. When completed, the Bilateral Trade Agreement will fundamentally change Vietnam's trade regime and contribute to a broader liberalization of its domestic economy.

American companies have entered the Vietnamese market and the U.S. is now the 8th largest foreign investor in Vietnam with over \$530 million committed in 34 projects as of June 1995.

The U.S. maintains ongoing full cooperation with Vietnam on the issue of Americans missing from the war in Vietnam. It has been U.S. policy since the early 1980s that normalization of relations with Vietnam be based on continued cooperation on the prisoner of war/missing in action (POW/MIA) issue and other humanitarian concerns.

## **DEALING WITH JET LAG**

With the joys and adventures of international travel come certain unavoidable inconveniences such as occasional lost luggage or bouts of jet lag. In fact, studies reveal that as much as 90% of long distance travelers experience a degree of jet lag.

Jet lag describes that out-of-sorts feeling associated with long flights, particularly those across time zones. Symptoms and severity vary but may include drowsiness, fatigue, irritability, difficulty concentrating, headaches, insomnia, and swelling of the extremities.

The number of time zones crossed affects the severity of jet lag. The internal body clock follows circadian rhythm, which is controlled by the hypothalamus that processes nerve signals. That clock is designed for regular cycles of light and darkness. Depending on the number of time zones crossed, it may take several days for that rhythm to be restored.

But that is not the only influence. Other factors include cabin pressure, stale air, lack of humidity, and your overall physical condition at the beginning of your trip.

Although jet lag can not be completely avoided, there are some simple things you can do to help minimize its affects.

### ***Consider the following for your next scheduled trip.***

- Start your trip well rested with a good night's sleep prior to departure. Getting adequate rest before starting on your journey will help minimize the amount of catching up you'll have to do when you arrive at the destination. Once home, try to schedule a day of rest before returning to work.
- Drink plenty of fluids -- water and juices will help you to stay well hydrated. Seasoned travelers recommend that you carry a bottle of drinking water with you and drink eight ounces every hour.
- Avoid alcohol and caffeine just before and during flights. Both possess diuretic properties that promote dehydration. Alcohol also causes drowsiness and contributes to feeling sluggish.
- Once settled onboard, reset your watch to the time zone to which you are traveling. This small act helps you begin adjusting to your destination's local time.
- As much as possible, create a dark environment during flight. Studies have shown that bright lights strongly affect individuals' body clocks. If necessary, try eye shades and earplugs to help block distractions and convince your body that it is nighttime. Closing window shades and turning off overhead lights may also help. Sleep on the plane if your flight has an early morning arrival time.
- Wear loose-fitting clothing and comfortable shoes that will help in the event you experience mild swelling. Experienced travelers often bring lightweight slippers to wear during flights.
- Although not always feasible, look for opportunities to walk around while in flight. Do simple isometric exercises (contracting and relaxing as many muscle groups as possible) in your seat. These will improve circulation, help promote increased alertness, and reduce chances of swelling.
- If you arrive in the morning, plan to stay awake. If possible, wait until the local bedtime to sleep. Many people swear that this is key in determining how quickly they adapt to local conditions. You will sleep better and will be less likely to suffer insomnia than if you nap upon arrival.
- During extended stopovers, showers are sometimes available. If you have the opportunity, shower. Trans-Pacific pilots report that taking a shower in Hawaii helps them recover more quickly from the general effects of jet lag after the flight.

## SELECTED READING LIST

*In addition to the many comprehensive and readily available guides produced by Lonely Planet, Fodor, Insight, The Rough Guide, and others, there have been countless books published on the Vietnam experience as well as history and background of the country. These books may be obtained through most bookstores or online. Here are a few titles that might interest you.*

### **PASSAGE TO VIETNAM: THROUGH THE EYES OF SEVENTY PHOTOGRAPHERS**

**Rick Smolan, Jennifer Erwit**

Synopsis ~ "In the spring of 1994, Rick Smolan . . . led a group of 70 photographers to whom the Vietnamese government granted complete access to all regions of the country. This group of photojournalists from fourteen countries, several of whom are Vietnamese, shot 200,000 photographs over a period of seven days. The finished product is a large format book, edited down to 200 images. . . . {Among the prose pieces included in the book is an} introductory essay entitled 'Dreams of a Gentle Land,' {by Pico Iyer}." (San Francisco Rev Books)The creators of the phenomenal Day in the Life series now present an elegant collection of photographs--the work of 70 photojournalists from 23 nations--that offers an intimate look at the people of Vietnam as their nation launches into a new era. 200 photos, many in color. Touring photographic exhibition

### **VIETNAM, CAMBODIA AND LAOS HANDBOOK**

**Michael Buckley**

Both new and repeat travelers to this area of Asia will welcome Buckley's detailed guide, which draws from his vast, personal knowledge of the region. An overview of the region is provided, including information on history, geography, and culture, as well as practical information such as how to handle health considerations and visas. Details on all routes by air and land are provided. Photos & line drawings. 75 maps.

### **PLEASURES OF THE VIETNAMESE TABLE: RECIPES AND REMINISCENCES FROM VIETNAM'S BEST MARKET KITCHENS, STREET CAFES, AND HOME COOKS**

**Mai Pham**

A land of vibrant cultures and vivid contrasts, Vietnam is also home to some of the most delicious and intriguing food in the world. While its cooking traditions have been influenced by those of China, France, and even India, Vietnam has created a cuisine with a spirit and a flavor all its own.

Chef and restaurateur Mai Pham brings to life this diverse and exciting cooking in Pleasures of the Vietnamese Table. Born and raised in Saigon before immigrating to the United States, Mai has often returned to her native land to learn the secrets of authentic Vietnamese cooking, from family, friends, home cooks, street vendors, and master chefs. Traveling from region to region, she has gathered the simple, classic recipes that define Vietnamese food today: Green Mango Salad with Grilled Beef, Stir-Fried Chicken with Lemongrass and Chilies, Caramelized Garlic Shrimp, and especially pho, the country's beloved beef-and-noodle soup. With more than 100 recipes in all, Pleasures of the Vietnamese Table offers home cooks the chance to create and savor the traditional flavors of Vietnam in their own kitchen.

Filled with enchanting stories and stirring black-and-white photos of life in Vietnam, Pleasures of the Vietnamese

Table provides a captivating taste of an enduring culture and its irresistible cuisine.

### **SHADOWS AND WIND: A VIEW OF MODERN VIETNAM**

**Robert Templer**

A powerful and vivid account of Vietnam, one of the most beautiful, ravaged, and misunderstood countries in the world.

In *Shadows and Wind*, Robert Templer paints a fascinating and fresh picture of a country usually viewed with hazy nostalgia or deep suspicion. Here is Hanoi, an increasingly tense and troubled city approaching its millennium but uncertain of its direction. Here are people emerging from a long wilderness of malnutrition, discovering a new lifestyle of leisure and luxury. And everywhere are the anomalies that burst the bubble of optimism: a vastly expensive luxury hotel sitting empty in an unknown town six hours from an international airport; museums crammed with fake exhibits. And there remains the one-party Communist state, still wrapped in secrecy and corruption, and making for an uneasy bedfellow with the rapacious capitalism it now encourages.

Drawing on hundreds of interviews in Vietnam and years of research, Robert Templer has produced the first in-depth examination of the problems facing modern Vietnam. *Shadows and Wind* is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the Vietnam that now has emerged from a century of conflict with both foreign powers and with itself.

"Groundbreaking. . . . In a convincing blend of colorful reportage and trenchant analysis, Robert Templer blows away the myths that have misinformed the world about this deeply troubled country."

--Jeremy Grant, *The Financial Times*

### **VIETNAM: A VISUAL ENCYCLOPEDIA**

**Philip Gutzman**

The Vietnam War produced a quarter century of violence in faraway swamps and home-front streets, and it still haunts America's view of the world. Take a look back at every aspect of that turbulent era in a visual encyclopedia of over 500 extraordinary photos and alphabetized entries. The breadth of content and size of this massive illustrated volume will stun you with its completeness. The bloodiest battles and the most complex campaigns, the deadliest weapons of air, land, and sea, the heroes and villains, the military leaders and political powers from both sides, receive an A-to-Z treatment from all the experts and the world's best photographers. You'll once again see the angry protesters and patriotic commentators who fueled passions on both sides. Coverage starts in 1950 with post-World War II upheavals, and ends in 1975 with Hanoi's final takeover. Special feature: a blow-by-blow chronology chart of all major military and political events. Photos range from documenting of personnel, tanks, planes, and ships displaying their special insignias to graphic, award-winning scenes of horrific agonies suffered by combatants and innocents alike.

## CLOTHING / PACKING CHECKLIST

Check the items below to be taken with you on your trip. Additional items may be added in the blank spaces provided. This is not intended as an all-inclusive list, but only as a suggested packing guide.

### CLOTHING - WOMEN

- Comfortable outfit for air travel
- Sandals or casual shoes
- Walking shoes or tennis shoes
- Rubber thongs (shower)
- Hat
- Windbreaker or jacket
- Pullover sweater or sweatshirt
- Long pants \*
- Shorts \*
- Socks
- Short sleeve shirts \*
- Long sleeve shirts \*
- T-shirts
- Pajamas
- Light-weight robe/cover-up
- Swim-suit/cover-up
- Casual slacks/skirt
- Blouses
- Belt(s)
- Underwear
- Scarves
- Costume Jewelry

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### CLOTHING - MEN

- Comfortable outfit for air travel
- Sandals or casual shoes
- Walking shoes or tennis shoes
- Rubber thongs (showers)
- Hat
- Windbreaker or jacket
- Pullover sweater or sweatshirt
- Long pants \*
- Shorts \*
- Socks
- Short sleeve shirts \*
- Long sleeve shirts \*
- T-Shirts
- Pajamas
- Light weight robe/cover-up
- Swim trunks
- Casual slacks
- Shirts
- Belt(s)
- Underwear

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### TOILETRIES

- Anti-malarial pills
- Vitamins
- Aspirin/Tylenol
- Motion sickness pills
- Short-acting sleeping pills
- Decongestant
- Antibiotic
- Lomotil / Pepto-Bismol
- Antacid
- Antibiotic ointment
- Insect repellent
- Sun screen/Sun block
- Lip balm
- Shampoo & Conditioner
- Prescription medications
- Band-Aids
- Deodorant
- Toothpaste & toothbrush
- Feminine Hygiene supplies
- Dental floss
- Mouthwash
- Hairbrush/comb
- Razor
- Q-Tips/cotton balls
- Nail clippers
- Nail file
- Tweezers
- Make-up
- Hand lotion

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### CAMERA EQUIPMENT

- Camera/Lenses
- Plenty of film
- Lead Protective Film Bags
- Camera bag
- Lens filters
- Cleaning Fluid/Tissues
- Lens Brush/Puffer
- Extra Batteries/Charger
- Flash & Flash batteries
- Zip-lock bags
- Camera instruction book
- Stick-on labels for film
- Video Camera/Charger

### SUNDRIES

- Passport
- International Certificate
- Vaccinations-Health Card
- Airline tickets/vouchers
- Money Pouch
- Credit Cards
- Travelers Checks
- Small calculator
- Sunglasses
- Prescription glasses
- Eyeglass case
- Small Alarm Clock
- Converter/plug set
- Binoculars
- Small flashlight
- Sewing kit
- Small scissors
- Kleenex
- Handi-wipes
- Zip-lock bags
- Travel clothes line
- Pillowcase for dirty clothes
- Small notebook or journal
- Pen
- Deck of cards
- Books/Magazines
- Address book for postcards
- Photocopy of passport and airline tickets
- Hard candy
- Bandana
- Extra small, collapsible bag
- Neck pillow for airline travel

### OTHER

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**\*Clothing should be comfortable**

# **NOTES**