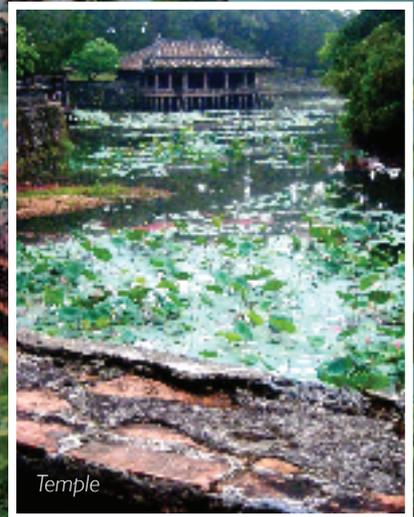


Views from Vietnam



Vietnam stretches 1,025 miles from north to south, making it close to twice the length of the UK (683 miles) and almost half the length of Australia (2,398 miles). This allows for a great deal of diversity and numerous reasons to visit.

Vietnam offers a beautiful coastline, steeply tiered rice paddies, dynamic cities and fantastic local and fusion cuisine. It is a nation on the move, with annual economic growth of nearly 10%. Bustling commercial cities sit alongside ancient capitals and deltas. Vietnam instituted a policy of economic reform, *doi moi*, in 1986 which has allowed rampant capitalism to fit jigsaw style with a communist government authority, a facet that is shaping the modern face of the country.

Visually dramatic vistas abound. Cruise the azure ocean, hike lush green mountain trails, explore tribal villages, laze on sandy beaches or paddle the backwaters where life is guided by the river. Experience the energy of the cities, from the stately, conservative bustle of the capital, Hanoi, to the hive of activity that is Ho Chi Minh City, a

booming city of contrasts. Women crinkled by a difficult life sell bowls of fruit on the pavements outside upmarket boutiques selling designer outfits, while around the corner cheap copies are sold road-side.

Large areas of poverty remain, largely outside the major centres, while urban Vietnam develops at an astonishing pace. It is a country of myriad influences. Indian and Hindu culture contributed temples and spicy regional cuisine, the French connection inspired crusty fresh baguettes and colonial architecture, Chinese religious traditions dominate daily life and globalisation is directing modern values and new forms of cultural expression.

This is a country worth exploring. There is just one problem. Transport. The road network in Vietnam covers

around 130,500 miles, split between 10,700 miles of national roads, 10,850 miles of provincial roads, 22,600 miles of district roads, and 4,350 miles of urban roads. The remaining 82,000 miles are rural roads. Of the national roads, 84% are paved and it goes downhill from there. The result is that travel between cities and towns is incredibly time consuming, on a limited road network that has often seen better days. The average bus speed rarely exceeds 30 miles per hour.

There is a train line that runs south to north with branches in the north but there are no super-fast bullet trains here. Think scenic journeys, rather than speed and luxury. If you want to maximise your time, three main airlines run domestic routes across the country – Vietnam Airlines, Jetstar and Air Mekong.

To tackle Vietnam, a policy of divide and conquer is most effective. Start in the north and save the south for a second visit. The north is, simply put, less demanding as the infrastructure is more developed. Slowing the pace of travel and focusing on half the country

will allow you to return from holidays feeling like a holiday has been had.

For a two to three week holiday, here are the highlights:

Hanoi

This is the optimal starting point for exploring the north. Be ready for an immediate attack on your senses. The sound of millions of motorbikes reverberating through the narrow streets of the Old Quarter assaults the ears, while the outdoor market and food culture assaults the nose. A feast of colours built of fresh produce, crisp white *ao dai* (Vietnamese traditional dress), ochre-coloured French colonial architecture, patterned polyester pant suits and green city parks contributes to the visual allure of this city, which celebrated its thousandth year in 2010.

Vietnam's capital boasts over six million residents amidst a treasure trove of French architecture in various states of disrepair: A stroll around Hoan Kiem Lake should be your first act, to absorb the full spectrum of Hanoians from old women doing sunrise tai chi to young couples shyly flirting. Stroll over the red bridge to the 17th century Ngoc Son Temple to learn the legend of the turtle in the lake.

Close by a myriad of alleys and lanes make up the Old Quarter, now a souvenir shopper's paradise. It is noisy and chaotic and haggling is essential but it is also infused with energy and



optimism. When this overwhelms, and it will, duck into an eatery for a *cafe sua da*, a coffee concoction consisting of a strong espresso shot on the rocks with a generous dollop of condensed milk.

A half hour walk or a ten minute cyclo ride away, Long Bien Bridge was designed by French architect Gustave Eiffel of Eiffel Tower fame. Completed in 1902 it is closed to car traffic but you may still be mowed down by a bicycle. The bridge provides stunning views of the Red River as it wends its way through the city.

The must see site is the Temple of Literature, Vietnam's first university. The oldest sections date from 1070, but only four of the interlocking courtyards survived French bombing. These courtyards house numerous stone tablets inscribed with the names of graduates, mounted on the backs of turtles. While it is no longer a university, the turtles are omens of luck, and are well-rubbed by visiting students seeking fortune.

Ho Chi Minh City may have his name, but only Hanoi has the man himself, entombed against his wishes in the fashion of Chairman Mao. There is a strict protocol for visits - no talking, no revealing clothing, no photos, no baggage and no disrespect. Note that the mausoleum is closed for a month

or two towards the end of the year, when the body is shipped abroad for maintenance; a somewhat disturbing thought.

Finally, for some cultural insight, head to the water puppet theatre. Live musicians accompany folk legends from Vietnamese history told through wooden puppets, dancing and splashing on the face of a pond. The narratives are sung in Vietnamese, but the gist of the short stories is evident through the puppetry, leaving only an occasional baffled tourist.

Halong Bay

Pretty as a picture Halong Bay is a UNESCO World Heritage Site featuring thousands of limestone karsts and isles dotted with caves and grottoes. In its entirety Halong Bay encompasses 965 square miles, and includes 1,960 islets. Apart from its status as a natural wonder the bay has also been the setting of two James Bond films with the expected thrilling chase sequences and distressed damsels.

The easiest way to experience Halong Bay is on an organised tour from Hanoi. The tours start at 2 days, with the overnight usually on a boat. You can do it independently by making your way to Cat Ba Island and chartering a boat but it is complicated and time consuming for all but residents.

TOP LEFT Halong Bay TOP RIGHT Bac Ha on market day LEFT Red Dzao lady

Sapa

Sapa, an overnight train ride from Hanoi, is a small mountain town perched on the rim of a valley. Lofty mountains encapsulate the town which acts as a gateway to the northern minority cultures. The surrounding scenery is simply spectacular. Cascading rice terraces spill down the mountains like patchwork quilts, and hazy figures work in the fields wearing the conical hats that have come to represent Vietnam. The mountains are often shrouded in mist that rolls along the ridges adding a mysterious air.

Tourism reigns supreme here but on weekdays you may find a more relaxed scene. The nearby villages are home to hill-tribe minorities who come to town to buy, sell and trade. While persistent, the women show a genuine interest in every visitor, making it hard to walk away without a hand-woven bag. The largest ethnic groups are the H'mong and Dzao people. The latter can be identified by the billowing red headdresses of the Red Dzao tribe, while the Black H'mong wear darker colours and often have indigo-dyed hands. To see the colourful Flower H'mong in an authentic setting visit the Sunday market at nearby Bac Ha, where minorities gather to trade all manner of household necessities, from textiles to water buffalo.



Trekking is one of the main activities in the area and home stays in minority households can be easily arranged. Be aware though that unlike lowland Vietnam, Sapa experiences a cold, damp winter. Pack the wet weather gear and be prepared for muddy boots.

Hue

Hue, closer to central Vietnam, is a fabulous collage of culture, history, natural beauty and modern luxury. This ancient regal city combines imperial charm with contemporary culture and fabulous regional cuisine developed for the palates of royalty. History is the main attraction here, with the highlight being The Citadel, a palatial residence built for Emperor Gia Long. Amongst the crumbling ruins, the 120 foot flag tower provides a sweeping view of the area.

For the macabre at heart, there are a number of famous tombs and mausoleums dotted around the city, offering a lesson in classic architecture and regal furnishings. Traditional dynastic environs rub elbows here with French influenced opulence to somehow create a distinctly Vietnamese air.

Hoi An

Hoi An, again in central Vietnam, largely escaped the destruction of successive wars which explains its old world charm. It retains the feel of a traditional riverside village, despite its tourist orientation, although hotels, restaurants, bars, tailors and souvenir shops now dominate the charming old centre. The Old Town is closed to cars, making it both pedestrian and cycle friendly, although not in the rainy season. Every year Hoi An has problems with flooding so it is best avoided in the monsoon. At all other times do visit, and indulge your inner fashion designer by having shoes custom made while you are there.

Facts about Vietnam:

- Border countries:**
Cambodia, Laos, China
- Currency:**
Vietnamese dong
- Population:**
86 million
- Number of motorbikes:**
16 million and counting

LEFT Sapa rice paddies TOP RIGHT Map of Vietnam