

Socialist Republic of Việt Nam (Việt Nam)

Location: Asia

Status: UN Member Country

Capital City: Hanoi

Main Cities: Ho Chi Minh (Saigon), Hai Phong, Da Nang

Population: 90,000,000

Area: 331,690 km²

Currency: Đồng (VND)

Languages: Vietnamese, Chinese

Religions: Buddhist, Roman Catholic

Calling code: +84

Drive on the right



Vietnam is a small majestic country, offering travellers an exciting mix of adventure and culture. The country's captivating natural wonders span from the mountainous north and the fertile plains of the Mekong Delta, to the spectacular coastline of central Vietnam and the imperious Halong Bay. With an intriguing history spanning back over 4,000 years, including occupations from both the Chinese and French, strong cultural influences can be found in the architecture and cuisine.

Best time to go

Generally, the best time to visit Vietnam is November through April with May through August being hot and humid. September and October are generally the rainy season.

General Information

Passport and visa

Passports should be valid for six months from the date of entry into Vietnam. We recommend you make a photocopy of your passport and keep it somewhere separate, or scan it and keep it in an accessible email account. Visitors must have a visa before entering Vietnam. A visa on arrival can only be obtained with a letter of approval.

Money

The official currency in Vietnam is the Dong (VND) which is a non-convertible currency. American dollars are widely accepted in larger stores and supermarkets. Visa and MasterCard are becoming more accepted in hotels, restaurants and large stores, especially in the bigger cities. ATM's are widely available throughout the country, and there are a number of international banks in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

Post and telecommunications

The Vietnamese postal services reliable and there are also courier services widely available. Do not put postcards into letter boxes; give them to your hotel to post or go to a post office. Telephone connections to the rest of the world are widely available, however they aren't cheap. A Vietnamese SIM card is a less expensive way of calling other countries, however your phone will need to be unlocked in order for it to work. Internet access is available in all major tourist places and you will find WiFi in most cafes in built up areas.

Transportation

The traffic in Vietnam is busy, but slow. It may look like chaos but don't be frightened to cross the road. Simply make your way shaking your whole hand at waist height. You'll soon see other people doing the same. Taxis are a popular way of getting around Hanoi but make sure you use a reputable company such as Mai Linh or Capital Taxis. A typical 10 minute journey should cost around 50,000 VND but prices tend to increase at night. If you are in a built up area, a cyclo is a fun form of transport and should cost no more than 100,000 VND per journey.

Motorbike taxis: Travel by motorbike is not safe and under no circumstances is this sanctioned or recommended. Please note that this form of transport is not usually covered by insurance. Please check the fine print of your travel insurance policy to be sure of your coverage.

Health and Safety

Climate

Vietnam has a diverse climate that varies significantly from region to region:

The North (Hanoi to Sapa)

April to October: temperatures between 30-35°C with occasional bursts of heavy rain.

December to March: temperatures between 10-15°C. February and March can be damp with drizzle and overcast skies.

The Centre (Hue to Nha Trang)

Nha Trang: sunshine all year round apart from November and December when the area has heavy rain.

Dalat: cooler than the coastal area, particularly from November to March.

Da Nang and Hue: typhoons from mid October to mid December

The South (Ho Chi Minh City to Phan Thiet)

May to October: hot and wet

November to April: hot and humid

Health and wellbeing

Please be aware that your health can be at risk in Vietnam due to poor sanitation and lack of effective medical facilities. Rural areas may not have pharmacies and hospitals so make sure you travel with a full supply of any prescribed medicine you take. If you need medical assistance, we suggest The Family Medical Practice in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Every traveller is responsible for his or her own health. First and foremost, make sure that you have travel insurance for your trip. You should also consult your doctor or local travel clinic for the latest information and advice on travelling to Vietnam before departure.

If you have a medical condition or allergy which requires particular attention, carry a doctor's letter with you that describes the nature of the condition and treatment needed. We also recommend you pack a medical kit, including paracetamol and a diarrhoea remedy.

Vaccinations

Before travelling, please ensure you have adequate protection against disease. Contact your doctor for the latest medical advice on the vaccinations you need, no less than two months before your departure. Be aware that there is a malaria risk in rural parts of Vietnam.

Travel insurance (compulsory)

We do everything possible to ensure a safe and enjoyable trip. However, travel inevitably involves some risk and this should be recognised by holiday-makers. Travel insurance is a cost effective way of protecting yourself and your equipment should any problems occur such as cancelled trips, delays, medical emergencies, baggage loss or damage. It also gives you peace of mind. Please also make sure your travel insurance covers all activities planned on your trip.

Culture & Customs

Etiquette and cultural differences

Experiencing different cultures is one of the joys of travelling, and it is important that these differences are respected. Knowing a few important customs of the Vietnamese people will help make your visit more enjoyable:

Try not to get angry. Showing any frustrations or annoyances by shouting or becoming abusive is extremely impolite and unlikely to achieve a positive outcome.

Pointing your finger is seen as offensive. Try to gesture using your whole hand instead.

Refrain from public displays of affection, they are considered offensive. It is extremely rare to see couples holding hands.

Wear shorts to the knees and cover your shoulders, particularly at religious sites.

Always remove your shoes when entering a temple or somebody's home.

Nude sunbathing is considered completely inappropriate, even on beaches.

Remove your hat when entering a religious site, addressing the elderly or encountering esteemed people such as monks.

It is improper to pat children on the head.

When using a toothpick, it is polite to cover your open mouth.

Don't leave chopsticks sitting vertically in a rice bowl as it looks very similar to incense sticks that are burned for the dead.

When passing something to another person, use both your hands together or just your right hand. Never use just your left hand.

Food and drink

Vietnamese food is fragrant, exciting and healthy. Around the country, you will find a delicious variety on offer, influenced from France, Thailand and even India.

The most popular dish is called Pho and is often referred to as the "soul of the nation". It's quite simply a noodle soup dish eaten every day, predominantly for breakfast. It is served in most Vietnamese restaurants and street food vendors. Don't be afraid to try the street food, there are plenty of options, including:

Nem Ran or Cha Gio (fried spring roll)

Banh Chung (sticky rice cake)

GioLua (lean pork pie)

BanhCuon (rice flour steamed rolls)

Banh My (pate and egg rolls)

Mivoithitbo/ga (noodles with beef/chicken)

Water

It is not advisable to drink tap water in Vietnam. Bottled water is cheap and widely available.

Public holidays

TET (Vietnamese New Year): generally takes place at the end of January or early February and lasts for three days.

Liberation of Saigon: 30 April

International Worker's Day: 1 May

Hung King's memorial day: 10 March (lunar calendar)

Vietnamese National Day: 2 September

Pre-departure checklist

Travel insurance

Passport with at least six months validity from date of entry

Photocopy of passport

Visa

Vaccinations

Foreign currency (US\$) and/or ATM card

All relevant tickets

Reconfirmed flights

Light weight clothing (summer months and the south)

Warm clothing (mountainous regions and Hanoi in winter)

Appropriate shoes for trekking, cycling or walking

Insect repellent

Medication

First aid kit

Adaptor – 220V, 50Hz; 2 pin plugs

Small daypack (for day and overnight trips)

Water bottle and helmet (for cycling trips)

Please note: *Domestic airlines do impose restrictions on baggage at approx 20kg maximum, so travel lightly where possible. Train cabins around the country, and boat cabins –in Halong Bay have limited space so consider this when packing.*