

Mekong Delta



The 'rice bowl' of Vietnam, the Mekong Delta is an idyllic landscape carpeted in a dizzying variety of greens. It is a water world where boats, houses and even markets float upon the endless rivers, canals and streams that flow through like life-giving arteries. Battling with nature and the seasons, the people produce one of the most bountiful rice harvests on earth.

The delta, which alone yields enough rice to feed Vietnam with a healthy surplus, was formed by sediment deposited by the Mekong. The process continues today, with silt deposits extending the shoreline by as much as 80m per year, although the effects of climate change could see this growth reverse dramatically in coming decades. The river is so large that it has two daily tides. Lush with rice paddies, the delta plain also nourishes the cultivation of sugar cane, fruit and coconut. Although the area is primarily rural, it is one of the most densely populated regions in Vietnam and nearly every hectare is intensively farmed.

The uniquely southern charm with its welcoming introduction to life along the river is the real draw, and visitors can explore quaint riverside towns, sample fruits traded in the colourful floating markets or dine on home-cooked delicacies before overnighting as a homestay guest or on a traditional boat. There are also bird sanctuaries, rustic beach getaways like Hon Chong and impressive Khmer pagodas in the regions around Soc Trang and Tra Vinh.

Those seeking a tropical hideaway will find it on Phu Quoc, an island dotted with pretty beaches, freshwater springs and empty dirt roads, ideal for motorbike adventures. Good diving and powdery white-sand beaches have earned it the status of 'the next big thing', with a mix of cheap bungalows and five-star resorts lining the uncrowded coastline.

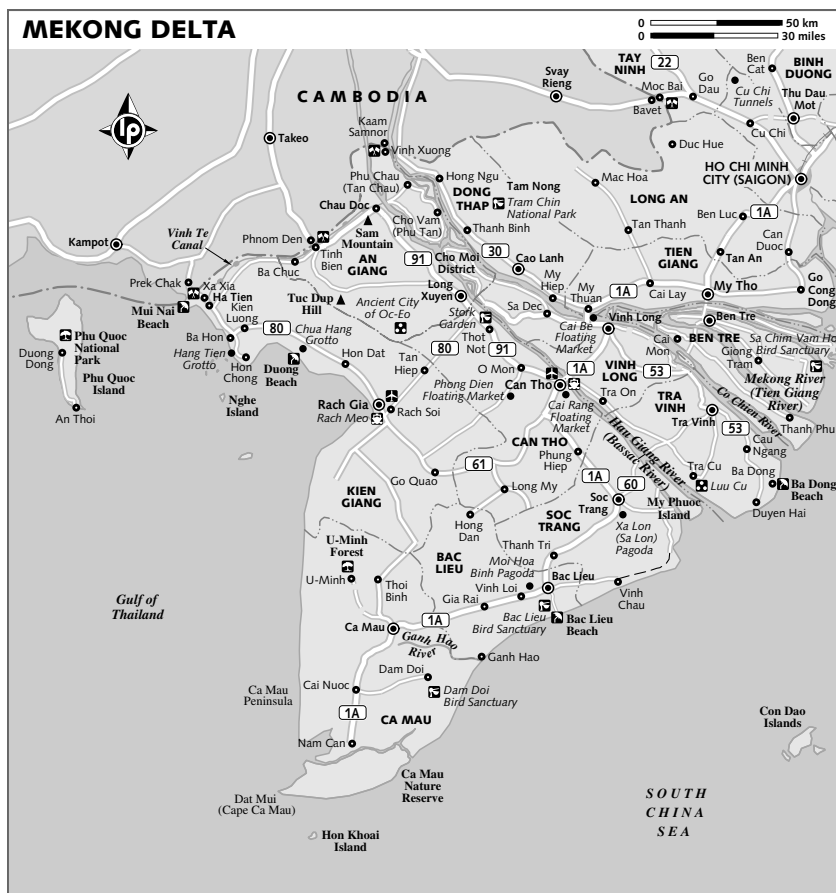
HIGHLIGHTS

- Experience life up close and personal at one of the many **homestays** (p425) around Vinh Long
- Meander along the canals between **My Tho** (p415) and **Ben Tre** (p420) then step ashore a lush river island to feast on fresh fish
- Seek out striking Khmer pagodas and learn about the Mekong's first inhabitants in **Tra Vinh** (p426)
- Explore floating fish farms and Cham villages around the traditional town of **Chau Doc** (p449)
- Leave your worries behind on the blissful beaches of idyllic **Phu Quoc Island** (p464)



■ ELEVATION: 0–3M

■ BEST TIME TO VISIT: NOV–MAR



History

The Mekong Delta was once part of the Khmer kingdom, and was the last region of modern-day Vietnam to be annexed and settled by the Vietnamese. Cambodians, mindful that they controlled the area until the 18th century, still call the delta Kampuchea Krom, or 'Lower Cambodia'. The Khmer Rouge attempted to claim the area once more by raiding Vietnamese villages and killing their inhabitants. This provoked the Vietnamese army into invading Cambodia on 25 December 1978 and ousting the Khmer Rouge from power. Most of the current inhabitants of the Mekong Delta are ethnic Vietnamese, but there are also significant populations of ethnic Chinese and Khmer,

as well as a few Chams. For more information on the story of the Khmer people and their place in the Mekong Delta region, see p431.

When the government introduced collective farming to the delta in 1975, production fell significantly and there were food shortages in Saigon, although farmers in the delta easily grew enough to feed themselves. The Saigonese would head down to the delta to buy sacks of black-market rice, but to prevent 'profiteering' the police set up checkpoints and confiscated rice from anyone carrying more than 10kg. All this ended in 1986 and farmers in this region have since propelled Vietnam to become one of the world's largest rice exporters.