

## **Welcome to Vietnam**

Vietnam is a country of breathtaking natural beauty with a unique heritage. Blessed with a stupendous coastline and towering mountains, historic sites and one of the world's best cuisines, the nation is a sensory overload.

Self-confident and fast-developing, Vietnam is a country going places. Economic progress is booming in the country's metropolises, where the pace of change is intoxicating. Here ancient, labyrinthine trading quarters of still-thriving craft industries are juxtaposed with grand colonial mansions from the French era, all overseen from the sky bars of 21st-century glass-and-steel high-rises.

Away from the urban centres, you'll find unforgettable experiences everywhere. There's the sublime: gazing over a surreal seascape of limestone islands from the deck of a traditional junk in Halong Bay. The inspirational: exploring the world's most spectacular cave systems in Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park. The comical: watching a moped loaded with honking pigs weave a wobbly route along a country lane. And the contemplative: witnessing a solitary grave in a cemetery of thousands of war victims.

Take time to savour Vietnam's incredibly subtle, flavoursome national cuisine on a street-food tour or attend a cooking class. Scoot around the rural back roads that fringe the historic old trading port of Hoi An or hike the evergreen hills of Sapa. And for horizontal 'me' time, you'll find outstanding spas – from marble temples of treatments, lotions and potions, to simple, inexpensive family-run massage salons.

...you'll find unforgettable experiences everywhere.

Ship sailing on Halong Bay (p66)



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Family Travel.





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Street vendor, Hoi An (p123)
MATT MUNRO/LONELY PLANET ®

## Phong Nha-Ke Bang **National Park**

## Caves on a simply staggering scale

With jagged hills shrouded in verdant rainforest. and mountain rivers coursing through impressive ravines, above ground the Phong Nha-Ke Bang region (p92) contains one of Vietnam's most spectacular national parks. Head underground for even more delights. A fortunate few can experience Hang Son Doong, the world's largest cave, but more accessible are the ziplining and kayaking thrills of Hang Toi (Dark Cave), and the ethereal beauty of aptly named Paradise Cave (pictured).

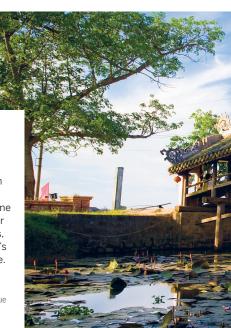




## Hue

## A majestic, fascinating former imperial capital

The capital of the nation for 150 years in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Hue (p102) is perhaps the easiest Vietnamese city to love and spend time in. Its situation on the banks of the Perfume River is sublime, its complex cuisine justifiably famous, and its streets are relatively traffic free. And that's without the majesty of the Hue Citadel to explore. On the city's fringes are some of Vietnam's most impressive pagodas and royal tombs, many in wonderful natural settings. Right: Thanh Toan Bridge, Hue





## Captivating capital steeped in history and culture

Ancient but dynamic, the nation's capital hurtles towards modernity. cautiously embracing visitors. Sample Hanoi's (p35) heady mix of history and ambition by wandering the streets of the Old Quarter (pictured), sipping drip-coffee and slurping on a hearty bowl of bun rieu cua. When you're done, check out the crumbling decadence of the French Quarter then zip up to cosmopolitan Tay Ho for finer dining and the low-down on Hanoi's burgeoning art scene.

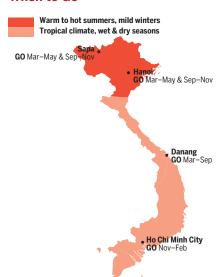


# **Plan Your Trip**

## **Need to Know**



#### When to Go



## **High Season** (Jul & Aug)

- Prices increase by up to 50% by the coast; book hotels well in advance.
- All Vietnam, except the far north, is hot and humid, with the summer monsoon bringing downpours.

## Shoulder (Dec-Mar)

- During the Tet festival the whole country is on the move and prices rise.
- North of Nha Trang can get cool weather. Expect cold conditions in the very far north.
- In the south, clear skies and sunshine are the norm.

## Low Season (Apr-Jun, Sep-Nov)

- Perhaps the best time to tour the whole nation.
- Typhoons can lash the central and northern coastline until November

### Currency

Dong (d)

### Language

Vietnamese

#### Visas

Complicated and fast-changing: some nationalities need a visa in advance for all visits, some don't (for 15-day stays).

### Money

ATMs can be found throughout the country, even in small towns, though charges for withdrawals can be quite steep. In general cash is king in Vietnam, though credit and debit cards can be used in many hotels.

#### **Mobile Phones**

To avoid roaming charges, local SIM cards can be used in most European, Asian and Australian (and many North American) phones.

#### Time

Vietnam is seven hours ahead of GMT/UTC.