

Central Highlands



The beauty of the central highlands is that there's plenty of space to disappear into. The undulating landscape that once sheltered VC soldiers down the Ho Chi Minh Trail now offers an intriguing refuge for travellers. There's a rugged charm to its villages and valleys, waterfalls and winding roads, and except at the former French hill station of Dalat, foreigners are still quite a rarity.

Most people come here to visit Montagnard (hill-tribe) villages; the further off the beaten track you travel, the more unspoiled an existence you'll find. Likewise the natural attractions in the vicinity are simple, rustic affairs. Most don't rate as must-sees, just pleasant pit stops if you're roving about on your own.

In 2001 and 2004 protests erupted in Buon Ma Thuot, Pleiku and other parts of the highlands, objecting to the government's resettlement and land policies and alleged discrimination against Montagnards. While things seem quiet now, international human-rights groups continue to report instances of ill-treatment of ethnic minorities. As for the natural landscape, it's beautiful but in some places marred – first by Agent Orange in the American War, then by slash-and-burn agriculture, now by expanding farms and dams.

Despite its fraught history, the central highlands are safe and easy to travel. Dalat is perfect for a weekend's respite from the heat, the rest of the highlands for a week-long immersion in a life far from the madding crowd.

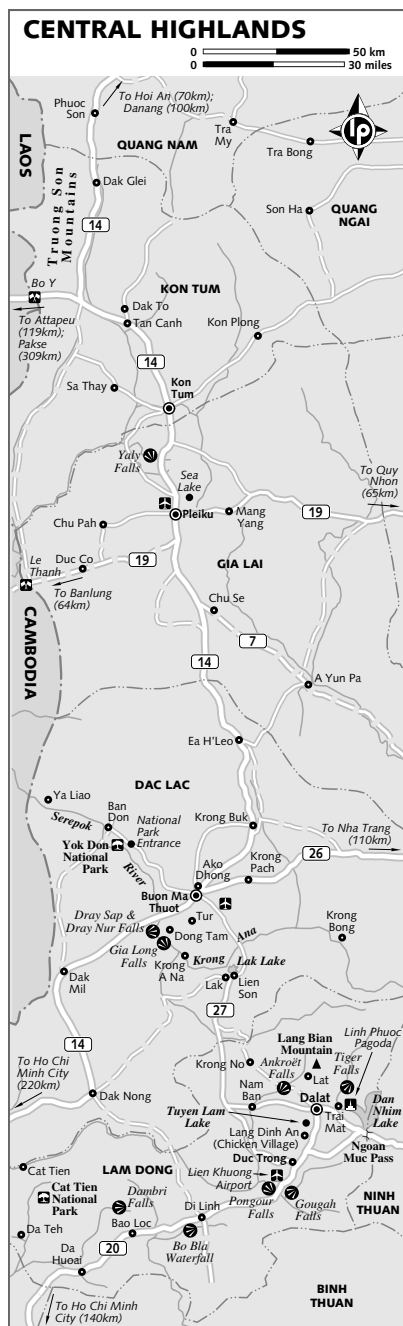
HIGHLIGHTS

- Learn about the Montagnard way of life in the villages around **Kon Tum** (p339)
- Enjoy the fresh air and French flair of **Dalat** (opposite), Vietnam's mountain resort
- Hop on a motorbike and hit the twists and turns of the **Ho Chi Minh Trail** (p334)
- Challenge your heart rate with an adventure trip in the hills **around Dalat** (p320)
- Get foggy as you approach the thundering **Dray Sap and Dray Nur Falls** (p333)



■ ELEVATION: 200–2598M

■ BEST TIME TO VISIT: NOV–MAR



Getting There & Away

The region has airports at Dalat, Buon Ma Thuot and Pleiku; all have flights from HCMC, Hanoi and Danang. There are no trains servicing this region.

By road you can access Dalat via Hwy 20 from HCMC or Phan Rang. Hwy 14 is the main north-south route, passing through Buon Ma Thuot, Pleiku and Kon Tum. Pleiku is connected to the coast by Hwy 19, which hits Hwy 1A near Quy Nhon. Similarly, Buon Ma Thuot can be reached from Ninh Hoa, just north of Nha Trang, by Hwy 26. There are frequent buses on all these routes, but only Dalat is served by open-tour buses.

DALAT

☎ 063 / pop 189,523 / elev 1475m

You could call Dalat Bizarro Vietnam – it's spring-like cool instead of tropical hot, the town is dotted with elegant French-colonial villas instead of squat socialist architecture, and the farms around are thick with strawberries and flowers, not rice. As a highland resort it's been welcoming tourists for a century, and it has all the attractions – natural and tricked-out – to prove it.

The French came first, fleeing the heat of Saigon. They left behind not only their holiday homes but also the vibe of a European town and the local bohemian artists' predilection for swanning around in berets. The Vietnamese couldn't resist adding little touches to, shall we say, enhance Dalat's natural beauty. Whether it's the Eiffel Tower-shaped radio tower, the horse-drawn carriages or the zealously colourful heart-shaped cut-outs at the Valley of Love, this is a town that takes romance very seriously – yea, unto the full extent of kitsch.

But don't let the Disneyfied feel stop you from enjoying the very pretty scenery and utterly charming town. This used to be hunting territory too, described in the 1950s as 'abounding in deer, roe, peacocks, pheasants, wild boar, black bear, wild caws, panthers, tigers, gaurs and elephants'. Unfortunately hunters were so efficient that only taxidermied specimens remain, in the local museum.

Dalat is a big draw for domestic tourists – it's Le Petit Paris, the honeymoon capital and the City of Eternal Spring (daily temperatures hover between 15°C and 24°C) all rolled into one. They tend to come in summer, while the dry season (December to March) is the best