

# Destination Vietnam

If there is one country in Southeast Asia that everyone has heard about long before they discover the region, it's Vietnam. Of course, such infamy wasn't always for the right reasons, but this is the new Vietnam and it's one of the most intoxicating places on earth. It's a kaleidoscope of vivid colours and subtle shades, of exotic sights and curious sounds, of compelling history and contrasting cultures.

Nature has blessed Vietnam with a bountiful harvest. From the soaring mountains of the far north to the carpet of emerald-green rice paddies in the south, Vietnam is little short of stunning. The curvaceous coastline is defined by endless beaches, lovely lagoons and hidden coves. Inland, peasant women in conical hats still tend to their fields, children ride buffalo along country paths, and minority people scratch out a living from impossible gradients.

If Vietnam has a soundtrack, it's the buzz of a million motorbikes, the cries of street hawkers plying their wares and the tinkle of pagodas drawing the faithful to prayer. Here, the modern and medieval collide. The big cities are strikingly sophisticated, with gourmet restaurants and designer boutiques, but turn a random corner and find yourself travelling back in time. Embrace the street life with a bowl of *pho* at a pint-sized plastic table.

For culinary crusaders, Vietnam is a treasure trove of more than 500 different dishes. It's a wonderful world of pungent herbs and secret spices. Dip delicate spring rolls in *nuoc mam*, a fish sauce that, for the Vietnamese, is as compulsory as ketchup. Or play 'down-in-one' with *ruou* (pronounced 'xeo'), the whisky of the mountains.

'Nam' to a generation, the sorrow of war weighs heavily on the consciousness of all who can remember it, and the Vietnamese side of the story is told at poignant sites across the country. Although fiercely protective of their independence and sovereignty, the Vietnamese are graciously welcoming of foreigners who come as guests not would-be conquerors. Of course, the country's history did not begin and end with the American War and the country is littered with vestiges of empires past and battles fought, all of which are elements in piecing together the story of Vietnam today.

Politically, Vietnam remains a perplexing place. Apparently, it's a communist country, but capitalism is no longer a four-letter word. The cities are awash with money, but not everyone is getting a share. Transparency International rated Vietnam 121st out of 179 countries surveyed for its corruption index, on a par with Nigeria. Some observers argue this is why Vietnam needs to embrace democracy, to hold the politicians accountable for their actions; others argue that a firm hand drives the country forward economically, creating a stable environment for investors. Either way, there is no doubt the latest Asian dragon has awoken from its slumber.

Tourism has had a huge impact on Vietnam in the past two decades, helping plug the Vietnamese back into the world. It has spread into areas that other businesses cannot reach, and empowered a new generation of young Viets to a better life. The Vietnamese people are dynamic in commerce and dedicated to their families. They love to share a joke, a story, and getting to know some Vietnamese beyond the tourism industry can be the highlight of a visit. The Vietnamese have a vitality as tangible as the traffic on the street.

Vietnam is in top gear. Try and catch it before it reinvents itself as another Malaysia or Thailand. For now, it remains one of the most enriching, enlivening and enticing countries on earth.

## FAST FACTS

Population: 86 million

Life expectancy: 68 for men, 74 for women

Infant mortality: 24 per 1000 births

GDP: US\$70.2 billion

Adult literacy rate: 94%

Annual rice production: 34.4 million tonnes

Tonnage of bombs dropped on Vietnam during the American War: 15 million

Number of motorbikes: 16 million and counting

Litres of *nuoc mam* (fish sauce) produced per year: 200 million plus

Members of Communist Party: 2 million

# Getting Started

Vietnam is the flavour of the month these days and it's not just down to the delectable cuisine. The country offers an intoxicating blend: vibrant yet traditional cities, unashamedly idyllic coastline, incredible scenery, pulsating history and culture, and a kaleidoscope of people. Vietnam has it all, but it's also raw in places, so pack some flexibility, humour and patience. Come expecting the unexpected, be ready for an adventure as much as a holiday, and Vietnam will deliver.

## WHEN TO GO

When it comes to weather, it's a tough call, as Vietnam's climate is so diverse. Think frosts and occasional snow in the mountains of the north, and temperatures soaring to 40°C in the south during the dry season.

Vietnam's weather is dictated by two monsoons, meaning double trouble on the rain front. The winter monsoon comes from the northeast between October and March, bringing damp and chilly winters to all areas north of Nha Trang, and dry and warm temperatures to the south. From April or May to October, the summer monsoon brings hot, humid weather to the whole country except for those areas sheltered by mountains. For the best balance, we'd vote for the months of April, May or October. For those sticking to the south, November to February is dry and a touch cooler. From July to November, violent and unpredictable typhoons hit central and northern Vietnam, which can dampen the spirits of even the most enthusiastic traveller.

It gets pretty crowded from November to March and in July and August during high season. Domestic tourists are a major force now and they tend to travel in numbers during July and August as well. Prices peak over the Christmas and New Year period, and if you don't fancy sharing the sites with the masses, try to avoid this busy time. May, June and September are usually the quietest months.

Some travellers like to time a visit with Tet (Vietnamese New Year; see p54), the biggest festival in the calendar, which falls in late January or early February. It's a nice idea in principle, but not in practice, as the whole country is on the move and prices rise dramatically. Transport is crammed in the run-up and aftermath, the Reunification Express shuts down during festivities, and most shops and businesses are closed for the best part of a week.

See Climate Charts (p480) for more information.

## DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

Bring as little as possible, as Vietnam has pretty much anything you can find back home but at lower prices. All the soaps and smellies are cheap and plentiful, and clothing, shoes and backpacks are all manufactured in Vietnam and available at a snip. Tampons are available in all major towns and cities, but not in very remote areas.

A Swiss army knife or equivalent comes in handy, but you don't need 27 separate functions, just one blade and an opener. A torch (flashlight) and compass are also useful.

Other handy things to bring are business cards, as Vietnamese deal them out like a deck of cards; ear plugs to block the ever-present soundtrack that is Vietnam; a universal plug adaptor; a rain cover for the backpack; a sweater for the highlands and air-con bus trips; and mosquito repellent to keep the bugs at bay.

Finally, the secret of successful packing: plastic bags, as not only do they keep things separate and clean, but also dry. That means a lot at the end of a long, wet day.

## COSTS & MONEY

The cost of travel in Vietnam varies from bargain basement to sky high, depending on taste and comfort. Ascetics could just about get by on US\$15 a day, while a conventional budget traveller can live it up from US\$25 to US\$35. Midrange travellers can have a ball from US\$50 to US\$150 a day, staying comfortably, eating well and travelling flexibly. At the top end, spending US\$250 or more a day, anything is possible. Vietnam is not quite as cheap as it used to be thanks to rampant inflation, but it is still a great deal compared with many parts of the world.

The official currency is the Vietnam dong (d), but the US dollar is pretty widely accepted. In tourist centres, most hotels will accept either, while other businesses may prefer dong. As you venture off the trail, make sure you are packing plenty of local currency. Rooms start from as little as US\$5 in busy tourist centres. Spending US\$10 to US\$30 will boost the comforts quickly, and rooms will generally include air-con, satellite TV, fridge and hot water. Make the step up to US\$50 and three-star frills are available. At US\$100 and above, it's five-star territory in many destinations, although Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) tend to be more expensive than the provinces. Don't be afraid to negotiate for a discount if it is low season or if numbers are down.

### HOW MUCH?

Restaurant meal US\$3-10

Hotel room with air-con  
US\$10-30

Internet access  
US\$0.20-0.50 per hour

Short *cyclo* ride US\$0.50

Two-kilometre taxi ride  
US\$1-2

Dining out is where Vietnam comes into its own. Surfing the street stalls and markets, meals can be found for US\$1 or less. Local restaurants are more comfortable and you can eat well for between US\$2 and US\$5. Then there are the Vietnamese gourmet restaurants, where you can still only spend around US\$15 with drinks; with the right wines you could easily spend US\$50.

Domestic flights are quite good value for longer journeys, particularly with lowcost carrier Jetstar Pacific on the scene. A one-way ticket from Hanoi to HCMC is around US\$100, although Jetstar can be cheaper. Trains are great value and overnight sleepers are a good way to cover long distances like Hanoi to Hue or HCMC to Nha Trang.

Bus travel is a bargain by Western standards, as long as you manage to pay the local price. Public buses between major destinations have fixed fares, but for bus travel in remote areas, overcharging is the rule. For maximum flexibility, many travellers prefer to rent a car or 4WD and go exploring with a guide. Costs run from about US\$30 around town to US\$100 or more a day up-country (including the driver's food and lodging). A guide costs from US\$15 to US\$50, depending on the destination.

Foreigners are sometimes overcharged, particularly when buying souvenirs and occasionally in restaurants. Transport prices are sometimes bumped up to several times the Vietnamese price. However, don't assume that everyone is trying to rip you off. Despite widespread poverty, many Vietnamese will only ask the local price for many goods and services.

## TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

Since our inception in 1973, Lonely Planet has encouraged readers to tread lightly, travel responsibly and experience the magic of independent travel. International travel is growing at a jaw-dropping rate, and we still firmly believe in the benefits it can bring – but, as always, we encourage you to consider the impact your visit will have on both the global environment and the local economies, cultures and ecosystems.

Staying longer, travelling further and spreading the wealth is obvious advice, but even for those on a short stay, it is possible to engage with locals in markets and spend money in restaurants and outlets that assist disadvantaged Vietnamese in places like Hanoi, HCMC and Hoi An.

# TOP 10

Thailand

VIETNAM

## TOP EATS, TOP DRINKS

Vietnam's cuisine is full of sensual flavours, subtle aromas and super-fresh ingredients. *Bia hoi* (beer) is the new tea, but in the mountains it is all about *ruou* (rice wine; pronounced 'xeo').

- 1 *Bia hoi* – The world's cheapest draught beer keeps on flowing
- 2 *Ca phe* – Caffeine cravers unite: Vietnam's coffee has a real kick
- 3 *Cao lau* – Hoi An's answer to fried noodles, made with water from a well
- 4 *Nem* – Spring rolls are the country's most famous export, fried or fresh
- 5 *Nuoc mam* – Fermented fish sauce, the pungent secret of Vietnamese cuisine
- 6 *Pho bo* – Rice-noodle soup with beef, the meal that built a nation
- 7 *Rau muong* – Just the thing on a glorious morning, with a dash of garlic and chilli
- 8 *Thit cho* – Dog lover has a whole different meaning in this part of the world
- 9 333 – *Ba ba ba*, learn to count with the leading local beer in the south
- 10 *Ruou* – The local firewater, particularly potent is the 'five times a night' variety

## MUST-SEE MOVIES

Film-makers have found a rich vein of material in the tales of Vietnamese history. There are a whole host of films dealing with the American experience in Vietnam, and some that deal with both Americans and Vietnamese coming to terms with life after so much death.

- 1 *Apocalypse Now* (1979) Director: Francis Ford Coppola
- 2 *Cyclo* (1995) Director: Anh Hung Tran
- 3 *The Deer Hunter* (1978) Director: Michael Cimino
- 4 *The Lover* (1992) Director: Jean-Jacques Annaud
- 5 *Platoon* (1986) Director: Oliver Stone
- 6 *The Quiet American* (2002) Director: Phillip Noyce
- 7 *The Rebel* (2007) Director: Charlie Nguyen
- 8 *Rescue Dawn* (2007) Director: Werner Herzog
- 9 *The Scent of Green Papaya* (1992) Director: Anh Hung Tran
- 10 *We Were Soldiers* (2002) Director: Randall Wallace

## VIETNAM EXPERIENCES

Travel is not just about visiting, it's about experiencing. Try to get beneath the skin of the country: this can take many shapes or forms. It might be a culinary adventure or a walk on the wild side. It could be a cultural encounter or perhaps spiritual enlightenment.

- 1 Cross the road in a busy city like a local, one step at a time
- 2 Delve into the bustling markets, the life-blood of every community
- 3 Get the measure of a tailor, the only time you want to be stitched up in Vietnam
- 4 Hagggle with a *cyclo* driver about the price before enjoying the ride
- 5 Meet the minorities, a multicoloured mosaic of mountain people
- 6 Play *tram phan tram* (100%) or bottoms up with the locals in a backstreet bar
- 7 See the sunrise over the South China Sea from a beautiful beach
- 8 Take some time out in a temple, the spiritual sanctuary of the Vietnamese
- 9 Turn down the volume and meander down the Mekong by sampan
- 10 Wander through the emerald-green paddy fields to discover rural Vietnam

For more on sustainable tourism and some tips on responsible travel while still having the trip of a lifetime, try the following websites:

**Responsible Travel** ([www.responsible-travel.org](http://www.responsible-travel.org)) A no-nonsense website with common sense advice on how to travel with a conscience.

**Stay Another Day** ([www.stay-another-day.org](http://www.stay-another-day.org)) A great website dedicated to tempting tourists into staying longer in Vietnam. It's packed with ideas on day trips, project visits and alternative things to see and do.

## TRAVEL LITERATURE

*Vietnam: A Traveller's Literary Companion* (1996), edited by Qui Doc Nguyen, is a good way to learn more about the culture of the country. It has an engaging collection of stories by various Vietnamese writers, ranging from folklore and the tragedy of war to love and family ties, all set against evocative backdrops from Hanoi to Dalat.

*Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind and Spirit* (2003), edited by Van Huy Nguyen, is a beautifully shot photographic journey that travels to the heart of Vietnam. It's put together by locals and residents of Vietnam and offers an intimate portrait of the country.

*Fragrant Palm Leaves* (1998) is a remarkable, poetic collection of journal entries by Zen monk and peace crusader Nhat Hanh Thich, written in Vietnam and the USA during the 1960s. As the American War in Vietnam rages on, he tries to make sense of it all, and there are some vivid scenes from South Vietnam.

Written by writers who know and love their countries, *To Asia with Love: A Connoisseur's Guide to Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam* (2004), an anthology edited by Kim Fay, is a delightful introduction to Vietnam and the Mekong region for those looking for some inspiration and adventure. A new *To Vietnam with Love* (2008) has just come out brimming with stories.

*The Indochina Chronicles* (2005) by Phil Karber is a lively travelogue taking in adventures and misadventures in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

*Sparring with Charlie: Motorbiking down the Ho Chi Minh Trail* (1996), by Christopher Hunt, is a light-hearted travelogue about modern Vietnam that takes you off the tourist trail and into some less-travelled parts of the country.

*Derailed in Uncle Ho's Victory Garden* (1995) by Tim Page is the story of the author's quest to erect a war memorial in the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) to honour the fallen war correspondents on all sides.

*A Dragon Apparent* (1952) is Norman Lewis' fascinating account of his journeys through Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in 1950, and is an eloquent insight into the last days of colonial rule.

Karin Muller's *Hitchhiking Vietnam* (1998) is a travelogue detailing one woman's tumultuous seven-month journey through Vietnam.

Part memoir and part travel narrative, *Catfish and Mandala* (1999) is Vietnamese-American Andrew X Pham's fascinating account of his escape from the war-torn Vietnam of 1977 and his subsequent return two decades later, equipped with a bicycle and a need to work out his mixed-up cultural identity.

The ultimate spoof guidebook, *Phaic Tan: Sunstroke on a Shoestring* (2004) makes fun of us all. No one is spared, not the locals, not the travellers, not even hallowed guidebook authors. An absolute must for anyone travelling through Vietnam and the region beyond.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

**Jewels of the Mekong Delta** ([www.travelmedia.com/mekong](http://www.travelmedia.com/mekong)) Features travel information and news about countries along the Mekong River.

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**Living in Vietnam** ([www.livinginvietnam.com](http://www.livinginvietnam.com)) One of the most popular expat websites on Vietnam and a good source of information on settling down here, including job adverts.

**Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) Provides summaries on travelling to Vietnam, the Thorn Tree forum travel news and loads of links to other useful travel resources.

**Things Asian** ([www.thingsasian.com](http://www.thingsasian.com)) Bubbling with information on the culture of Vietnam, this site has everything, including architecture, literature and fashion.

**Vietnam Adventures Online** ([www.vietnamadventures.com](http://www.vietnamadventures.com)) Another fine site full of practical travel information that features monthly adventures and special travel deals.

**Vietnam Online** ([www.vietnamonline.com](http://www.vietnamonline.com)) Loaded with useful travel lore and handy coverage of employment and business opportunities in Vietnam.

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### THE GREAT OCEAN ROAD

Three to Four Weeks / Hanoi to HCMC

Acclimatise in the capital, **Hanoi** (p82); see the sights, wine and dine, and prepare for the long ride south. Head to nearby **Ninh Binh** (p192), gateway to the striking scenery of **Tam Coc** (p193) and **Hoa Lu** (p195), and the funky gibbons of **Cuc Phuong National Park** (p196).

Experience **Hue** (p215), imperial capital of old, then head up and over (or under) the mighty Hai Van Pass to **Danang** (p235), gateway to charming **Hoi An** (p245), the perfect place for some time out – sightseeing, shopping and sunning yourself on the beach.

Head to the golden sands of **Quy Nhon** (p275) for some relaxation. Enter **Nha Trang** (p280), the biggest and brashest beach resort in Vietnam, and try a hedonistic boat trip to nearby islands. If it's all too much, carry on south to **Mui Ne Beach** (p308), a tropical idyll with smart resorts, blissed-out budget options, towering dunes and crazy kitesurfing.

Finish up in **Ho Chi Minh City** (HCMC; p342), where you can indulge in sophisticated shopping, delectable dining and the liveliest night scene in the country.

Many tour companies offer this trip in a two-week timeframe, but this barely allows enough time to unpack your bags in each place. Train, bus or opt for a car and driver for this 1710km epic.



## THE WORKS

### One Month or More / HCMC to Sapa

Run this one in reverse, and start out in the cauldron of commerce that is **Ho Chi Minh City** (p342). Hit the markets, browse a couple of museums and go underground into the alternate world that is the **Cu Chi Tunnels** (p390). Carry on to **Tay Ninh** (p393), headquarters of the Cao Dai sect, and its fairy-tale temple for a morning service.

Dip into the Mekong Delta for a day or two. Stay at **Can Tho** (p434), the social and commercial heart of the region, and take to the water to cruise through the watery world of the floating markets.

Head up into the central highlands to the romantic hill station of **Dalat** (p317). Back down on the coast, take in the stops from the Great Ocean Road itinerary (see opposite), including the beach resort of **Nha Trang** (p280), the cultured charmer that is **Hoi An** (p245) and the old imperial capital of **Hue** (p215). North of Hue is the former Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) that divided North and South Vietnam. All around this area are famous sites from the American War, including **Khe Sanh Combat Base** (p212) and the **Vinh Moc Tunnels** (p209). All aboard the night train to **Hanoi** (p82), gateway to the north, or cruise up the coast checking out the up-and-coming beach destination of **Dong Hoi** (p203), with a side trip to the **Phong Nha Cave** (p202), a World Heritage Site, and a run up the stunning Ho Chi Minh Highway to the capital.

To the east of the capital lies **Halong Bay** (p139), with more than 2000 limestone outcrops dotting the scenic bay. Cruise through the bay to the rugged, foreboding **Cat Ba Island** (p146) before looping back to the capital through **Haiphong** (p135), for the feel of old Hanoi.

Take a night train to **Sapa** (p176), unofficial capital of the northwest hill-tribe region and a beautiful base for hiking and biking.



**Trains and buses stop at most destinations, but to cover this huge distance of more than 3000km, a Hue–Hanoi flight could save time. Travel by boat around the Halong Bay area – the only way to get a good look at the crazy karsts.**



## ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

### MINORITY REPORT

One to Three Weeks / Hanoi to Cao Bang

Northern Vietnam is a world unto itself, a land of brooding mountains, a mosaic of ethnic minorities, a region of overwhelming beauty. Hit the road by 4WD or motorbike more for an adventure than a holiday.

Leaving Hanoi, head west to the villages of **Mai Chau** (p167), which are home to the White Thai people and a perfect introduction to the life of the minorities. Northwest of here, where the road begins to climb into the Hoang Lien Mountains (Tonkin Alps), a logical stop is **Son La** (p169).

**Dien Bien Phu** (p171) is a name that resonates with history; it was here that the French colonial story ended with their overwhelming defeat at the hands of the Viet Minh in one of the most celebrated military victories in Vietnamese history.

Climb over the mighty **Tram Ton Pass** (p179) to **Sapa** (p176). This is the premier destination in the northwest, thanks to the infinite views (on a clear day!), an amazing array of minority peoples and some of the region's most colourful markets. Head by train to **Lao Cai** (p183), or continue further east to **Bac Ha** (p184), home to the Flower H'mong. Adventurers can continue on to **Ha Giang** (p187), a realm of mythical landscapes and uncharted territory. From here head to the lovely lakes of **Ba Be National Park** (p162) before journeying northeast to **Cao Bang** (p158), a province peppered with karsts, caves and beautiful waterfalls.

The snaking roads on this journey are some of the most treacherous in Vietnam, and landslides and floods are common. The motorbiking here is pure heaven for seasoned two-wheelers, but for the majority a 4WD is the sanest way to tackle this 1000km trip through the mountains.



## MEKONG MEANDERS

Two Weeks / Ben Tre to Phu Quoc Island

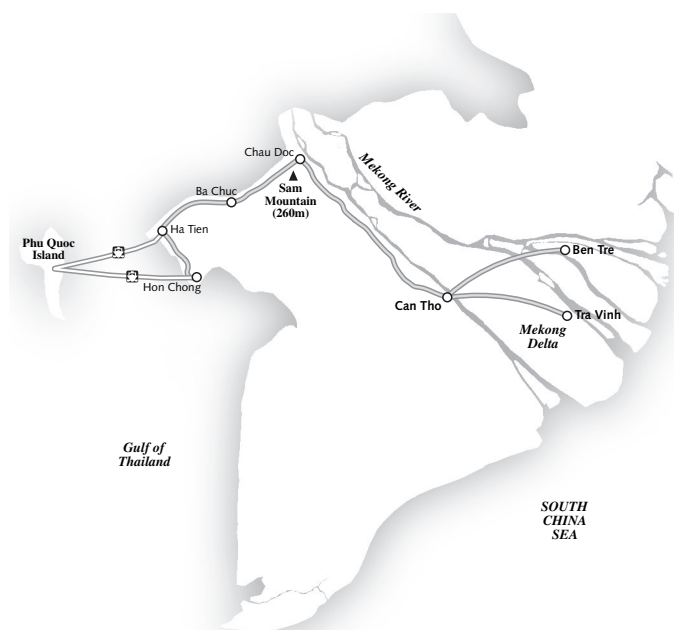
With their own wheels, travellers can tear up the three-day tourist trail through the Mekong byways and delve deeper into the delta to be rewarded with its rhythms, fragrances and colours.

Beginning in **Ben Tre** (p420), take a boat trip to the islands around Vinh Long and overnight in a bungalow set in a small longan orchard. Take the road down to **Tra Vinh** (p426), one of the most charming towns in the Mekong Delta, with graceful tree-lined boulevards and a sizeable Cambodian community and their wonderful *wats* (temples). From Tra Vinh, a trek to **Can Tho** (p434) takes you to the home of the famous Ho Chi Minh 'Tin Man' statue and the delta's most cosmopolitan and commercial city.

Drift by boat through the local floating markets before moving on to charming **Chau Doc** (p449), a border-crossing town for those pushing westward into Cambodia via river or road. Check out the views of the pancake delta from the heights of **Sam Mountain** (p453).

Leave behind the roads more travelled once again, heading southwest to **Ba Chuc** (p455) and its bone pagoda, and then through **Ha Tien** (p456), another border town with a beach to boot. Even more bucolic a beach can be found at **Hon Chong** (p460), where the sunset meets the sea and the rocky coastal geography contrasts sharply with the sandy beaches east of Ho Chi Minh City.

Fast boat connections are available from both Ha Tien and Hon Chong to the serene **Phu Quoc Island** (p464). Phu Quoc affords rest and relaxation, *nuoc mam* (fish sauce) and forest reserves – a spectacular end to the Mekong Delta experience.



Down to Chau Doc, public transport is a breeze; after that, it's sparse and requires flexibility. Flights from Phu Quoc Island to HCMC run daily; if flying back to HCMC, book return flights well before hitting the delta to guarantee a quick getaway and avoid the 500km return trip.

## TAILORED TRIPS

### NATURAL HIGHS

For adrenalin junkies or nature lovers, Vietnam has plenty to offer. Start out with a visit to **Halong Bay** (p139) for some sea kayaking among the karsts. Experienced climbers with their own gear might leave the water far below, as these limestone outcrops offer some excellent ascents, plus there is organised climbing around **Cat Ba Island** (p146).

Further northeast in **Bai Tu Long Bay** (p153), take to the water by local boat to see the 'new' Halong Bay without the tourists. Boating, kayaking, even surfing are possibilities here and there are some beautiful beaches on Quan Lan's east coast.

Heading south to central Vietnam, **Bach Ma National Park** (p232) is well geared up for walkers and has a series of lush trails to secluded waterfalls. Down on the coast below Bach Ma is **China Beach** (p243), a base for serious surfers.

Or go under the waves at **Nha Trang** (p280), dive capital of Vietnam, before heading up towards the hills of the central highlands. Wind up, or down, in **Dalat** (p317), a base for abseiling, cycling or rock climbing. Don't forget two of Vietnam's best-known national parks: the birding hot spot of **Cat Tien** (p406), with a population of rare Javan rhinos, and **Yok Don** (p332), home to elephants, elephants and more elephants.



### CHAM CHARM, BEACH BLISS

Start in **Mui Ne Beach** (p308), one of the prettiest of Vietnam's beach resorts. Windsurf, sandboard, kitesurf or just chill out before heading up the Cham coast of culture. Veer off the trail to the atmospheric Cham tower of **Po Ro Me** (p305), a home to bats on an isolated hill. Continue north to Thap Cham to visit the famous **Po Klong Garai Cham Towers** (p304) from the 13th century.

Further up the coast is **Nha Trang** (p280), Vietnam's honky-tonk beach capital, but you can also dose up on culture at the **Po Nagar Cham Towers** (p284). Continuing up the coast are Cham towers and beaches in abundance. Keep up with the Chams at **Tuy Hoa** (p278), **Quy Nhon** (p270) and **Chien Dan** (p265). Break for the beach at **Doc Let** (p279), **Whale Island** (p279) or **My Khe** (p269).

Head into **Hoi An** (p245), a charming old port town and a base for the Cham finale. Make a day trip to the former Cham capital of **My Son** (p262), spectacularly situated under the shadow of Cat's Tooth Mountain. Finally, romp into Danang to put it all into perspective at the **Museum of Cham Sculpture** (p237), home to the world's finest collection of Cham sculpture.

Oh, and by the way, central Vietnam has a 30km-long beach running from Danang to Hoi An. Call it **My Khe** (p243) to the north, **Cua Dai Beach** (p260) to the south – either way it's paradise. For the perfect end to this Cham-themed trip, cross to **Cham Island** (p261) and chill out on the quiet beaches.



# The Authors



## NICK RAY

**Coordinating Author, South-Central Coast,  
Ho Chi Minh City, Around Ho Chi Minh City, Mekong Delta**

A Londoner of sorts, Nick comes from Watford, the sort of town that makes you want to travel. He has been visiting Vietnam for about 15 years, first as a traveller and later as a tour leader for adventure-travel companies. Living in nearby Phnom Penh, Vietnam is his backyard of sorts and he has co-authored *Cycling Vietnam, Laos & Cambodia*, as well as the *Cambodia* book, for Lonely Planet. Nick has been to almost every province from Ha Giang in the north to Ca Mau in the south. He stayed south for this edition of the book and was glad to finally make it to the beautiful islands of Phu Quoc and Con Dao.



## YU-MEI BALASINGAMCHOW

**North-Central Vietnam,  
Central Vietnam, Central Highlands**

Yu-Mei first visited Vietnam in 2002, when she went kayaking in Halong Bay in the middle of winter and was almost cast out to sea by the currents. Subsequent (less harrowing) visits to the country have revolved around getting her fill of street food and *ca phe sua da*, and being mistaken as Vietnamese. She lives in Singapore and, in between other writing on travel, history, culture and the arts, has co-authored a popular history of Singapore. This is her first guidebook for Lonely Planet.



## IAIN STEWART

**Hanoi, Northeast Vietnam,  
Northwest Vietnam**

Iain Stewart first visited Vietnam in 1991 when he was part of the first wave of travellers to explore the country after the American War. At that time all foreigners were called *Ling Xo* (Soviets) by the locals, who only had contact with nationalities from the communist bloc. Times have changed but Vietnam remains as fascinating as ever. Iain's been a travel writer since 1997, writing guidebooks for several publishers and covering terrain as diverse as Ibiza and Indonesia, but this was his first gig in Vietnam. For this guide Iain rode a motorbike around the northwest, climbed karst cliffs in Cat Ba and even survived Vietnam's toughest challenge – crossing the street in Hanoi.

### LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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## CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

**Dr Trish Batchelor** wrote the Health chapter (p510). Trish is a general practitioner and travel-medicine specialist who works at the CIWEC Clinic in Kathmandu, Nepal, as well as being a medical advisor to the Travel Doctor New Zealand clinics.

**Robyn Eckhardt** wrote the Food & Drink chapter (p61), and the foodie itinerary on p130. Kuala Lumpur-based Robyn has been living and eating in Asia for 14 years. She's food editor for *Time Out Kuala Lumpur*, and also writes for *Wall Street Journal Asia* and *Travel + Leisure*. Having once called Saigon home, she returns often for fixes of *banh mi* and *bun*.

**David Lukas** wrote the Environment chapter (p74). David is a naturalist who lives on the edge of Yosemite National Park, but he developed a strong love for Southeast Asia on a year-long rainforest ecology study in Borneo. He has contributed environment and wildlife chapters to nearly 30 Lonely Planet guides including *Vietnam*, *Cambodia*, *Laos & the Greater Mekong*; *Thailand's Islands & Beaches*; *Thailand*; *Bangkok*; and *Borneo*.

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