Northeast Vietnam’s top ticket is Halong Bay, and a boat trip through the sublime World Heritage site is undoubtedly an enchanting experience. But the region also has some of Vietnam’s most impressive and rugged highland scenery, defined by craggy limestone peaks and extensive tropical forests, as well as a smattering of interesting historic sights, caves and waterfalls.

Bizarre but beautiful, Halong Bay is geology gone wild, with thousands of limestone pinacles protruding from the waters. Fringing the southern part of the bay is Cat Ba, a verdant island that’s fast emerging as an important travellers’ base for its hiking, biking, sailing and world-class rock climbing. East of Halong Bay is the less-visited Bai Tu Long Bay, where nature’s spectacular show continues all the way to the Chinese border.

Looming above the coast, the brooding mountains of the northeast are another world entirely. The karst connection continues into Cao Bang province, and the surreal scenery is some of the most stunning in all Vietnam. With northwest Vietnam well and truly on the map, this is the region to head for if you really want to explore remote backroads. In a week you can take in the lakes of Ba Be National Park and the waterfalls and scenery around Cao Bang and loop back down via Lang Son to Halong City.

This area is also a popular route for travelling overland between China and Vietnam and there are two important border crossings at Mong Cai and Dong Dang.
History

Dominated by the Red River basin and the sea, the fertile northeast is the cradle of Vietnamese civilisation. Much of Vietnamese history (and not all of it happy) was made here. Until very recently, Vietnam has had less than cordial relations with the Chinese, who occupied the country in the 2nd century BC and stuck around for about 1000 years. They were vanquished in the 10th century; see p141.

Any time the Chinese wanted to advance upon Vietnam’s affairs, they did so through the northeast. The last time such an advancement occurred was in 1979, in an attempt to punish the Vietnamese for their occupation of Cambodia (p156). Thousands of ethnic Chinese also fled through this region in the 1970s and 1980s in search of a better life.

Today things have settled down considerably. Border trade is surging ahead and Chinese tourists now flock to the region in their thousands during the summer months.

National Parks

The beautiful national parks of the northeast all involve a certain amount of water-based activity. Cat Ba National Park, near Halong Bay, is a rugged island jutting out of the sea, liberally cloaked in lush jungle. This park also includes the 300 or so limestone islands of Lan Ha Bay, and dozens of deserted beaches.

Further northeast, Halong Bay becomes Bai Tu Long National Park, a stunning scene of