

# welcome to Vietnam



## The Vietnamese Experience

Vietnam is a nation going places. Fast. Its people are energetic, direct, sharp in commerce and resilient by nature. This is an outrageously fun country to explore, the locals love a laugh (and a drink) and you'll have plenty of opportunities to socialise with them and hear their tales. The American War is over, and yet its impact endures – you'll find reminders of that cataclysmic conflict everywhere you travel. That said, the country was never broken and emerged with its pride intact. Poor in parts but never squalid, Vietnam is developing at an astonishing pace. For travellers, there are issues to consider (including minor

scams), but little real danger – on the whole it's a safe, wonderfully rewarding and incredibly varied country to explore.

## A Cultural Smorgasbord

This is a country of myriad influences and reference points. In the south, Indian and Hindu culture had a lasting influence in the Cham temples and spicy regional cuisine, spiked with chilli and tempered with coconut. Head north and Chinese connections are far more apparent. Between these two competing cultures, you'll find a quintessential Vietnam in the central provinces: the graceful historic old port of Hoi An, and the royal tombs, pagodas and imperial cuisine of Hue. Oh, and there's



*Blessed with a ravishing coastline, emerald-green mountains, breathtaking national parks, dynamic cities, outstanding cultural interest and one of the world's best cuisines, Vietnam has it all.*

(left) Women sitting by the beach near moored fishing boats, Mui Ne  
(below) Woman burning incense at Thien Hau Pagoda, Ho Chi Minh City



more, far more. Factor in an enduring French colonial legacy, which is evident in Hanoi's graceful boulevards, in Ho Chi Minh City's stately museums and in the crispy baguettes and coffee culture you'll find on every street corner. Add the American interlude, more than 50 hill tribes, and of course the proud (battle-tested and victorious) ruling Communist Party ideology and you've got Vietnam: heady, intoxicating and unique.

## **Big Nature, Booming Cities**

If you want visual dramatics, Vietnam delivers. Cruise an azure ocean pierced by surreal-looking limestone islands in Halong Bay,

slalom through the majestic inland karst mountains of Cao Bang. Hike mountain tracks and explore tribal villages near Sapa and Bac Ha. Then witness the spectacular sandy bays of the central coastline and explore the reefs and coves of the Cham and Con Dao Islands. Highway 1 is near-relentlessly urban, so get off it at regular intervals to see the astonishing cave systems of Phong Nha, national parks like Cat Tien, and the bewitching backwaters of the Mekong Delta. Finally, no visit would be complete without experiencing the energy of big-city life in Vietnam's capital Hanoi, the grand old lady of the Orient, and Ho Chi Minh City, the engine room of the economy and the nation.