



# Understand Vietnam

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From broke socialist economy to capitalist market model, Vietnam's transformation has been swift. What's the state of play today?

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Vietnam's history has been a near-endless task of taking on and repelling invaders from the east and west.

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Perhaps the most diverse country in Southeast Asia, Vietnam is home to an incredible blend of people and cultures.

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Highland cultures, traditions, beliefs and landscapes are a world away from lowland Vietnamese ways.

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From crunchy spring rolls to fresh beer, you'll never go hungry or thirsty in Vietnam.

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The land is compelling in its beauty, but pollution and wildlife trading are constant threats.



## population per sq km



# Vietnam Today

Few places on earth have changed as much as Vietnam in the past few decades. One of the poorest, war-wounded corners of the globe has transformed itself into a stable, prospering nation through industriousness, ingenuity and ambition. The overall standard of living has risen incredibly, and education and healthcare have greatly improved. Blue-chip finance has flooded into a red-flag Communist society. Comrades have become entrepreneurs. It's been a breathtaking, and largely successful transformation.

And yet, take a peek beneath those headline-grabbing growth figures and there are concerns. Double-digit growth has faltered as the economy has cooled. Corruption remains systemic. Vietnamese people have to pay backhanders for everything from getting an internet connection to securing a hospital appointment. At the highest level, corrupt politicians have been caught demanding millions of dollars to facilitate infrastructure projects.

## The Political Landscape

Vietnam's political system could not be simpler: the Communist Party is the sole source of power. Officially, according to the Vietnamese constitution, the National Assembly (or parliament) is the country's supreme authority, but in practice it's a tool of the Party and carefully controlled elections ensure 90% of delegates are Communist Party members.

Officially, communism is still king, but there can be few party hacks who really believe Vietnam is a Marxist utopia. Market-oriented socialism is the new mantra. Capitalism thrives like never before, the dynamic private sector driving the economy. On the street, everyone seems to be out to make a fast buck.

The reality is that the state still controls a vast swathe of the economy. More than 100 of the 200 biggest companies in Vietnam are state-owned

- » Population: 90.5 million
- » Life expectancy: 69 for men, 75 for women
- » Infant mortality: 21 per 1000 births
- » GDP: US\$104.6 billion
- » Adult literacy rate: 94%

## Top Books

- » **The Quiet American** (Graham Greene) Classic novel set in the 1950s.
- » **The Sorrow of War** (Bao Ninh) The North Vietnamese perspective.
- » **Vietnam: Rising Dragon** (Bill Hayton) A candid assessment of the nation today.
- » **Catfish & Mandala** (Andrew X Pham) Biographical tale of a Vietnamese-American.

## Best Films

- » **Apocalypse Now** (1979)  
Director: Francis Ford Coppola
- » **Cyclo** (*Xích Lô*; 1995)  
Director: Anh Hung Tran
- » **The Deer Hunter** (1978)  
Director: Michael Cimino