



Ho Chi Minh City

08 / POP 7.5 MILLION

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Best Places to Eat

- May (p326)
- Nha Hang Ngon (p323)
- Temple Club (p323)
- ...hum Vegetarian Cafe & Restaurant (p327)
- Baba's Kitchen (p327)

Best Places to Stay

- Madame Cuc 127 (p319)
- Giang Son (p319)
- Ma Maison Boutique Hotel (p323)
- Park Hyatt Saigon (p318)
- Blue River Hotel (p321)

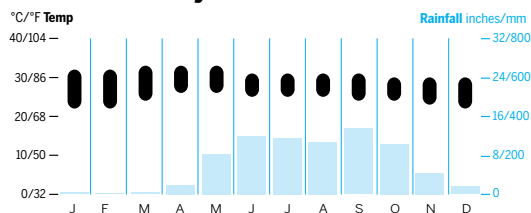
Why Go?

Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) is Vietnam at its most dizzying: a high-octane city of commerce and culture that has driven the whole country forward with its pulsating energy. A chaotic whirl, the city breathes life and vitality into all who settle here – visitors cannot help but be hauled along for the ride.

From the finest of hotels to the cheapest of guesthouses, the classiest of restaurants to the tastiest of street stalls, the choicest of boutiques to the scrum of the markets, HCMC is a city of contrasts. Wander through timeless alleys to incense-infused temples before catching up with the present in designer malls beneath sleek skyscrapers. The ghosts of the past live on in buildings that one generation ago witnessed a city in turmoil, but the real beauty of (erstwhile) Saigon's urban collage is the seamless blending of these two worlds into one thrilling, seething mass, while a host of new and exhilarating tours get you way off the beaten track.

When to Go

Ho Chi Minh City



Feb Hardly any rain, the least humidity and a city filled with blooms for the Tet celebrations.

Mar Also has low rain and humidity, plus the annual *cyclo* challenge.

Dec December is a whisper cooler than normal for HCMC and comparatively dry.

History

Saigon was originally part of the kingdom of Cambodia and, until the late 17th century, was a small port town known as Prey Nokor. As Vietnamese settlers moved south it was absorbed by Vietnam and became the base for the Nguyen Lords, who were the rulers of southern Vietnam from the 16th to the 18th centuries.

During the Tay Son rebellion in the 18th century, a group of Chinese refugees established a settlement nearby, which became known by their Vietnamese neighbours as Cholon (big market). After seeing off the rebels, Nguyen Anh constructed a large citadel here (roughly where the American and French embassies now stand).

Both Saigon and Cholon were captured by the French in 1859 (who destroyed the citadel in the process) and Saigon became the capital of Cochinchina a few years later. It wasn't until 1931, after the neighbouring cities had sprawled into each other, that they were officially combined to form Saigon-Cholon (the name Cholon was dropped in 1956).

The city served as the capital of the Republic of Vietnam from 1956 until 1975, when it fell to advancing North Vietnamese forces and was renamed Ho Chi Minh City.

Sights

With pockets of elegance and French colonial grandeur and a ceaseless hubbub on its chaotic streets, Ho Chi Minh City has rewarding sights for temple- and museum-

goers, market-hounds, history junkies, architecture fans, park lovers or simply anyone itching to see Vietnam's most economically vibrant city in action. Three days should be sufficient to get a handle on the main sights, but Ho Chi Minh's easygoing, friendly and enterprising personality snares many a traveller into longer stays.

In reality, HCMC is not so much a city as a small province stretching from the South China Sea almost to the Cambodian border. Rural regions constitute about 90% of the land area where around 25% of the municipality's population live; the other 75% is crammed into the remaining 10% of land – the urban centre.

HCMC is divided into 19 urban districts (*quan*, derived from the French *quartier*) and five rural districts (*huyen*, derived from the Chinese *xian*). The majority of places and sights converge in District 1, the district still known as Saigon (although many residents still refer to the whole city as Saigon, just to confuse things), which includes the tireless backpacker district of Pham Ngu Lao (PNL) and the more upmarket area of Dong Khoi. The city's neoclassical and international-style buildings, along with its tree-lined streets set with shops, cafes and restaurants, give neighbourhoods such as District 3 an attractive, almost French atmosphere.

Dong Khoi Area

This well-heeled area, immediately west of the Saigon River, packages the heart of

HO CHI MINH CITY IN...

One Day

Slurp up a steaming bowl of *pho* (rice-noodle soup) and then follow our **walking tour** (p310). After lunch at **Shri** (p327) head to the nearby **War Remnants Museum** (p303), tour the **Reunification Palace** (p304) and, if there's still time, the **HCMC Museum** (p298). In the evening, catch the sunset views from the **Alto Heli Bar** (p331), followed by a meal at **Nha Hang Ngon** (p323) or **Temple Club** (p323). Have a nightcap at **Vasco's** (p330) or one of the other bars in the courtyard of the former opium refinery.

Two Days

Spend the morning in **Cholon** (p307), wandering around the market and historic temples. Catch a taxi up to District 3 for a cheap traditional lunch at **Pho Hoa** (p326) or **Banh Xeo 46A** (p326) and then walk through Da Kao ward to the **Jade Emperor Pagoda** (p300) and **History Museum** (p303). It's your last night in HCMC, so make the most of it. Start your evening at another of the city's superb restaurants – perhaps **May** (p326), **Cuc Gach Quan** (p326) or **...hum Vegetarian Cafe & Restaurant** (p327) – and then catch a band at **Acoustic** (p332) or **Yoko** (p332). If you're ready for the evening to descend into a very Saigon state of messiness, continue on to **Cargo** (p332) or **Apocalypse Now** (p330).