

Welcome to Vietnam

Astonishingly exotic and utterly compelling, Vietnam is a country of breathtaking natural beauty with an incredible heritage that quickly becomes addictive.

Sensory Overload

Unforgettable experiences are everywhere in Vietnam. There's the sublime: gazing over a surreal seascape of limestone islands from the deck of a Chinese junk in Halong Bay. The ridiculous: taking 10 minutes just to cross the street through a tsunami of motorbikes in Hanoi. The inspirational: exploring the world's most spectacular cave systems in Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park. The comical: watching a moped loaded with oinking pigs weave a wobbly route along a country lane. And the contemplative: witnessing a solitary grave in a cemetery of tens of thousands of war victims.

A Culinary Superpower

The Thais may grumble, but in Southeast Asia nothing really comes close: Vietnamese food is *that* good. Incredibly subtle in its flavours and outstanding in its diversity, Vietnamese cooking is a fascinating draw for travellers – the dozens of cooking schools in Hoi An are testament to this. Geography plays a crucial role, with Chinese flavours influencing the soups of northern Vietnam, spices sparking up southern cuisine and myriad herbs and complex techniques typifying the central region, rightly renowned as Vietnam's epicurean epicentre.

Thrills & Chills

If you've got the bills, Vietnam's got the thrills and chills. Some activities require a little physical effort, like motorbiking switchback after switchback up the jaw-dropping Hai Van Pass in central Vietnam. Others require even more sweat: kitesurfing the tropical waters off Mui Ne or hiking the evergreen hills around Bac Ha or Sapa. And when you're done with all that adrenalin stuff, there's plenty of horizontal 'me time' to relish. Vietnam has outstanding spas – from marble temples of treatments, to simple family-run massage salons with backpacker-friendly rates.

Meet the Locals

Vietnamese people are energetic, direct, sharp in commerce and resilient by nature. The locals love a laugh and you'll have plenty of opportunities to socialise with them and hear their tales. Generally the rule is the more uncomfortable the (always tiny) seats in the bar or cafe, the more fun you'll have. Poor in parts but never squalid, Vietnam is developing at an astonishing pace and inevitably there are some issues to consider (including a few minor scams). However, on the whole this is an extremely safe (apart from the traffic!) and wonderfully rewarding country to explore.



Why I Love Vietnam

By Iain Stewart, Author

I know of few more driven, purposeful people on earth than the Vietnamese. Back in 1991 when I first arrived, the country was broke – one of the poorest on earth – but not broken. The streets were swept, the cuisine was outstanding and visitors (yes, even Americans) were welcomed. Over the years I've returned to enjoy the same simple pleasures: chatting with friends over a glass of *bia hoi* (draught beer), soaking up the street scenes in Hanoi's Old Quarter, biking lonely mountain roads, and marvelling at the locals' sheer lust for life. And then I start planning a return trip.

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