

Understand Vietnam

VIETNAM TODAY 416

From broke socialist economy, through *doi moi* and the tiger years, Vietnam now has a state-controlled capitalist market.

HISTORY 419

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

PEOPLE & CULTURE 437

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

ARTS & ARCHITECTURE 443

A fascinating heritage, drawing on influences from China, India and France, forms something uniquely Vietnamese.

FOOD & DRINK 448

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

ENVIRONMENT 460

Vietnam is endowed with stunning landscapes, but environmental awareness is in its infancy.

Vietnam Today

Vietnam's had a good couple of decades; a period of rising, sustained growth has benefited most. The standard of living has risen markedly, as cities have been transformed, education and health care have improved and the tourism sector continues to thrive. Yet a growing disconnection between a heavy-handed state and its people is evident, with widespread resentment regarding rampant corruption and evidence of growing, if limited, political dissent.

Best in Print

The Quiet American (Graham Greene) Classic novel set in the 1950s as the French empire is collapsing.

The Sorrow of War (Bao Ninh) The North Vietnamese perspective, retold in novel form via flashbacks.

Vietnam: Rising Dragon (Bill Hayton) A candid assessment of the nation that's one of the most up-to-date sources available.

Catfish & Mandala (Andrew X Pham) Beautifully written biographical tale of a Vietnamese-American who returns to his homeland.

Best on Film

Apocalypse Now (1979) The American War depicted as an epic 'heart of darkness' adventure.

The Deer Hunter (1978) Examines the emotional breakdown suffered by small-town servicemen.

Platoon (1986) Based on the first-hand experiences of the director, it follows idealistic volunteer Charlie Sheen to 'Nam.

Cyclo (Chich Lo; 1995) Visually stunning masterpiece that cuts to the core of Ho Chi Minh City's underworld.

The Quiet American (2002) Starring Michael Caine, it's atmospherically set in Saigon during the French colonial period, with rebellion in the air.

A Death in the Family

It seemed the entire nation paused for a little self analysis on 13 October 2013. The collective grief was palpable, as a united country buried its legendary war hero, General Vo Nguyen Giap, commander-in-chief of campaigns against the French, Japanese and Americans. He was 102. Charismatic, honest and brave, this wiry, determined, clean-living man – a freedom fighter with a popular touch – had devoted his life to his country.

For many Vietnamese the contrast between leaders like Giap and today's political and business elite was acute. Giap lived a simple life, dedicated to achieving the independence of his people, whereas many members of the latter are tainted by allegations of corruption, nepotism and paranoia. Most Vietnamese people have to pay backhanders for everything from getting an internet connection to securing a hospital appointment, while corrupt politicians demand millions of dollars to facilitate infrastructure projects. And when complaints are raised? Well, dissent is quickly silenced.

The Political & Economic

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 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.