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Plan Your Trip

Itineraries

From South to North

Making the most of Vietnam’s spectacular coastline, this route hugs the shore and is bookended by the country’s two greatest cities. You’ll have ample opportunity to indulge in some serious beach time, and be able to hit the cultural sights. Consider taking an internal flight or two to save time.

The adventure begins in the cauldron of commerce that is **Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC)**. Spend two days hitting the markets, browsing museums and eating some of the globe’s best cuisine. Take a daytrip to discover wartime history at the **Cu Chi Tunnels**.

Then it’s a plane, train or bus trip up the coast to the big brash resort of **Nha Trang** for a couple of days by the sea. Party people will love the city’s hedonistic bar scene, while spa lovers can indulge in a gooey, blissful session in one of the area’s three mud bath resorts. Nha Trang’s beach is a fine one, but for a less-developed base head up to the largely-undeveloped coastline to the north, where you’ll find **Doc Let Beach**, or south to the near-infinite sands of Bai Dai beach.
Cultured charmer and culinary mecca **Hoi An** is the next essential stop. This town certainly warrants three days, such is its allure. Spend a couple of days enjoying Hoi An’s unique ambience, touring the town’s temples, pagodas and museums, and feasting on delectable Central Vietnamese cuisine. Consider a motorbike trip around the town’s rural hinterland, or an excursion to the terrific Cham ruins of **My Son**. Then it’s on to the old imperial capital of **Hue** for a night to explore its citadel, tombs and pagodas. From here head up to the truly remarkable **Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park**, the world’s greatest caving region, with towering limestone mountains and cobalt jungle rivers.

Next it’s a long journey by road or train towards **Halong Bay**, with more than 2000 limestone outcrops dotting the ocean. Budget for at least a couple of days in **Hanoi** to sample its evocative Old Quarter and to view the city’s elegant architecture and memorable museums. Make the most of your last day, perhaps munching street food and sampling **bia hoi** (draught beer).
Northern Vietnam is a world unto itself: a land of brooding mountains, overwhelming beauty and a mosaic of ethnic minorities. It’s ideal terrain to cover on two wheels, with light traffic and breathtaking views, though, with a patient attitude, most of the region can be tackled by public transport.

Leaving Hanoi, head west to Mai Chau, home to the White Thai people, for your first two nights; it’s a perfect introduction to ethnic minority life. Northwest, where the road begins to climb into the Tonkinese Alps, a logical overnight stop is Son La.

Continue on for two nights at Dien Bien Phu, a name that resonates with history as it was here that the French colonial story ended in defeat. Tour the military sights and impressive new museum then continue north through stunning scenery up the Tram Ton Pass.

Sapa is the premier destination in the northwest, thanks to the infinite views (on a clear day!), and an amazing array of minority peoples. Explore the area on two feet or two wheels for around four days before heading to Bac Ha for three nights to experience the best of the region’s markets. Most colourful are the Flower Hmong people.

From Bac Ha, move east to Ha Giang province, taking it slowly through stunning scenery and towns including Yen Minh, Dong Van and Meo Vac. Explore remote destinations like the Lung Cu flag tower and the Vuong Palace from Dong Van. Onwards towards the vertiginous Mai Pi Leng Pass and Meo Vac, there’s no public transport (so you’ll need to hire a xe om (motorbike taxi) or car). The route then loops down to the riverside junction town of Bao Lac.

Local buses run from Bao Lac to Cao Bang and on to Ba Be National Park. Spend about three nights around Ba Be, staying at local Tay ethnic minority homestays, and exploring the park by trekking or kayaking. From Ba Be travel back to Cao Bang for the trip back south to Hanoi.
This itinerary takes in a lovely offshore island, the nation’s main watersport centre and a waterworld of floating villages. If tropical sunsets and white-sand beaches are high on your agenda it’s probably best not to plan this trip during the southern rainy season. There’s frequent public transport to virtually all the main centres.

After a couple of days enjoying the urban delights and compelling energy of HCMC, head into the Mekong Delta, stopping at Ben Tre to explore canal-side lanes by bike and islands by boat. Then hop on board a cargo ship for a slow, scenic journey to Tra Vinh and take in the town’s colourful pagodas. Next it’s a short trip to Can Tho where it’s worth lingering a couple of days to visit the bustling floating markets, the city museum and a temple or two. Further north, by the Cambodian border, Chau Doc is surrounded by beautiful countryside, begging for two-wheeled trips. Head to Phu Quoc Island for three days of well-earned beachtime on some of Vietnam’s best sandy shores.

From Phu Quoc, fly (or bus it) back to HCMC, then head north into the Southcentral Highlands via a night in Cat Tien National Park, home to gibbons, crocodiles and bountiful bird-life. Next up it’s the romantic hill station of Dalat for a tour of its quirky sights, and the opportunity to get stuck into some adventure sports like canyoning, mountain biking or kayaking.

The road trip from Dalat down to Mui Ne is one of the nation’s finest, negotiating highland ridges and plunging through valleys and pine forests; it’s ideally done on the back of a motorbike (consider hiring an Easy Rider). You can then rest up by the beach in Mui Ne for two or three days, a tropical idyll with towering sand dunes and a laid-back vibe – or for those with the stamina, get stuck into some crazy kitesurfing or a sailing course.

Round the trip off in style with a night in HCMC, perhaps with an ale or two at the Paster Street Brewing Company and dining out somewhere really special like the Racha Room.
Use this sleepy Ha Giang town as a hub for trekking, visiting local markets and exploring remote attractions such as Lung Cu and the Vuong Palace. (p150)

Travel by motorbike to the remote mountain village of Sinho, or unravel the intricacies of public transport in northwestern Vietnam. (p135)

Take part in a homestay in this beautifully situated fishing village in the Cham Islands, just a short boat ride from the tourist mecca of Hoi An. (p223)

Visit this spectacular cave deep inside Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park on a park ranger-led hiking and camping trip. (p163)

ENJOY THE SERENITY IN TINY TAM HAI, HOME TO FINE BEACHES, CHAM RUINS AND A WHALE CEMETERY (p235)
**KE GA LIGHTHOUSE**
Charter a fishing boat for the ride out to this imposing, 40m-high island lighthouse, which dates from the French era. (p273)

**GANH DA DIA**
Marvel at Ganh Da Dia’s fascinating volcanic rock formations, located on a stunning slice of coastline with good beaches and swimming. (p241)

**JUNGLE BEACH**
Unwind at this slice of bohemian paradise – bungalows on the beach of your dreams – just an hour or so north of Nha Trang. (p246)

**XEO QUYT FOREST**
Hop on a boat through silent swamps and enjoy an almost primordial calm among the trees, one of the last natural forests of the region. (p415)

**PHU THUAN**
Enjoy the magnificent oceanic coastline and lack of development at Phu Thuan, which has two great places to stay. (p191)
Map Legend

Sights
- Beach
- Bird Sanctuary
- Buddhist
- Castle/Palace
- Christian
- Confucian
- Hindu
- Islamic
- Jain
- Jewish
- Monument
- Museum/Gallery/Historic Building
- Ruin
- Shinto
- Sikh
- Taoist
- Winery/Vineyard
- Zoo/Wildlife Sanctuary
- Other Sight

Activities, Courses & Tours
- Bodysurfing
- Diving
- Canoeing/Kayaking
- Course/Tour
- Sento Hot Baths/Onsen
- Skiing
- Snorkelling
- Surfing
- Swimming/Pool
- Walking
- Windsurfing
- Other Activity

Sleeping
- Sleeping
- Camping

Eating
- Eating

Drinking & Nightlife
- Drinking & Nightlife
- Cafe

Entertainment
- Entertainment

Shopping
- Shopping

Information
- Bank
- Embassy/Consulate
- Hospital/Medical
- Internet
- Police
- Post Office
- Telephone
- Toilet
- Tourist Information
- Other Information

Geographic
- Beach
- Gate
- Hut/Shelter
- Lighthouse
- Lookout
- Mountain/Volcano
- Oasis
- Park
- Pass
- Picnic Area
- Waterfall

Population
- Capital (National)
- Capital (State/Province)
- City/Large Town
- Town/Village

Transport
- Airport
- Border crossing
- Bus
- Cable car/Funicular
- Cycling
- Ferry
- Metro/MRT/MTR station
- Monorail
- Parking
- Petrol station
- Skytrain/Subway station
- Taxi
- Train station/Railway
- Tram
- Underground station
- Other Transport

Routes
- Tollway
- Freeway
- Primary
- Secondary
- Tertiary
- Lane
- Unsealed road
- Road under construction
- Plaza/Mall
- Steps
- Tunnel
- Pedestrian overpass
- Walking Tour
- Walking Tour detour
- Path/Walking Trail

Boundaries
- International
- State/Province
- Disputed
- Regional/Suburb
- Marine Park
- Cliff
- Wall

Hydrography
- River, Creek
- Intermittent River
- Canal
- Water
- Dry/Salt/Intermittent Lake
- Reef

Areas
- Airport/Runway
- Beach/Desert
- Cemetery (Christian)
- Cemetery (Other)
- Glacier
- Mudflat
- Park/Forest
- Sight (Building)
- Sportsground
- Swamp/Mangrove

Note: Not all symbols displayed above appear on the maps in this book.
Nick Ray
Siem Reap & the Temples of Angkor  A Londoner of sorts, Nick comes from Watford, the sort of town that makes you want to travel. He lives in Phnom Penh with his wife Kulikar and children, Julian and Belle. He has written for countless guidebooks on the Mekong region, including Lonely Planet’s Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam books, as well as Southeast Asia on a Shoestring. When not writing, he is often out exploring the remote parts of Cambodia as a location scout and manager for the world of television and film, including everything from Tomb Raider to Top Gear. Motorbikes are a part-time passion and he has travelled through most of Indochina on two wheels.

Read more about Nick at:  http://auth.lonelyplanet.com/profiles/nickjray

Benedict Walker
Hanoi  Currently hanging by the beach near his Mum, in hometown Newcastle (Australia), Ben is living his dreams, travelling the world for LP. So far, Ben has contributed to Lonely Planet’s Japan, Canada, Florida, Australia and Germany guidebooks. This is his first time writing for the Vietnam team. Otherwise, he’s written and directed a play, toured Australia managing travel for rock stars and is an avid photographer toying with his original craft of filmmaking. He’s an advocate of following your dreams – they can come true. For updates, see www.wordsandjourneys.com.

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OUR WRITERS

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Coordinating Writer, Southeast Coast
Iain Stewart has been visiting Vietnam since 1991 and has explored virtually every province in the country over the years. This is the fourth edition of Lonely Planet Vietnam he’s contributed to and the third as co-ordinating writer. Travelling the highway between Vung Tau and Tam Hai was some road (and rail) trip, taking in the full spectrum of Vietnam’s stunning coastal scenery and numerous memorable meals. Iain also wrote the Plan and Understand chapters, Survival Guide and the Scenes of Vietnam colour section.

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Brett Atkinson
Central Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City
For more than 20 years, Brett has been exploring one of his favourite countries, and his latest Vietnam sojourn spanned street food and history in Hue and Hoi An, the thrilling cave systems of Phong Nha, and the irresistible urban buzz of Ho Chi Minh City. Brett is based in Auckland, New Zealand and has covered more than 50 countries as a guidebook author and travel and food writer. See www.brett-atkinson.net for his most recent work and upcoming travels. Brett also wrote the Eat & Drink Like a Local and the Food & Drink chapters.

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Anna Kaminski
Southwest Highlands, Mekong Delta
A big fan of two-wheeled travel, Anna fell hard for the picturesque lanes of the Mekong Delta and the hills of the Southwest Highlands in years past and remains smitten. Given the food, the friendly locals, and ample indigenous culture, there’s little surprise that southern Vietnam remains one of her favourite destinations. Having previously lived in and backpacked all over Southeast Asia, on this occasion Anna explored the Delta’s forgotten corners and motorbiked part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Anna tweets at @ACKaminski.

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Jessica Lee
Northern Vietnam
Jessica first came to Vietnam in the late 90’s and has visited several times since then. This trip saw her road-tripping the winding highways of the northwest, up into the mountains of Ha Giang province, and then down to the bustle of Halong Bay – along the way, drinking more caphe sua da than is probably recommended. When she’s not travelling, Jess lives in the Middle East, and has also contributed to Lonely Planet’s guidebooks to Turkey, Egypt and Cambodia.

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