

# Understand Vietnam

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The Vietnamese economy continues to grow, while the nation grapples with a changing tourism scene and uneasy relations with its neighbours.

## **HISTORY .....436**

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

## **PEOPLE & CULTURE .....454**

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

## **ARTS & ARCHITECTURE .....460**

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

## **FOOD & DRINK .....464**

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

## **ENVIRONMENT .....470**

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

# Vietnam Today

A period of rising, sustained growth has transformed Vietnam. Change is most apparent in the big cities, where steel-and-glass highrises define skylines and a burgeoning middle class now has the spending power to enjoy air-conditioned living and overseas travel. Yet, in rural areas the nation's new-found prosperity is less evident, and up the highlands, life remains a day-to-day struggle for millions of minority people.

## 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, highly insightful assessment of the nation.

**Catfish & Mandala** (Andrew X Pham) Beautifully written and thought-provoking 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, Oliver Stone, it follows idealistic volunteer Charlie Sheen to 'Nam.

**Cyclo** (Chich Lo; 1995) Visually stunning masterpiece that cuts to the core of HCMC's underworld.

**The Quiet American** (2002) Atmospherically set in Saigon during the French colonial period, with rebellion in the air.

## The Big Picture

Forty years since the end of the American War, Vietnam has made giant strides. A victorious, though bankrupt, nation has worked around the clock, slogging its way forward, overcoming a series of formidable hurdles (including a 19-year US trade embargo). Per-capita income has grown from US\$98 in 1993 to over US\$2000 by 2015, and today Vietnam is one of the 10 fastest-growing economies in the world, boosted by strong manufacturing. Start-up business numbers are booming. And yet this rapid development is disjointed. The state sector remains huge, controlling around two-fifths of the economy – 100 of the 200 biggest Vietnamese companies are state owned (including oil production, shipbuilding, cement and coal).

The spectre of corruption casts a shadow over development every step of the way. Transparency International ranked Vietnam the lowest of all the Asia-Pacific countries it measured in 2014. Corruption scandals emerge on a daily basis, such as the nine Vinashin shipbuilding execs jailed following the company's near collapse under US\$4.5 billion of debt. For most Vietnamese people corruption is simply a part of day-to-day life, as they have to pay backhanders for everything from securing a civil service job to an internet connection.

## Tourism Woes: a Blip or a Trend?

In mid-2015, the Vietnamese government did what its tourism industry had been urging them to do for years – it (partially) relaxed visa regulations, allowing easier access to the country for several European nationalities. After years of exponential growth, tourist arrivals were on the slide, with a knock-on effect for the nation's important service sector. Further visa reforms may or may not boost tourism. The reasons for the downturn, and whether it's a blip or a long-term trend, are