

Ho Chi Minh City



Fasten your seatbelts as Ho Chi Minh City is a metropolis on the move – and we're not just talking about the motorbikes that throng the streets. Saigon, as it's known to all but city officials, is Vietnam at its most dizzying: a high-octane city of commerce and culture that has driven the whole country forward with its limitless energy. It is a living organism that breathes life and vitality into all who settle here, and visitors cannot help but be hauled along for the ride.

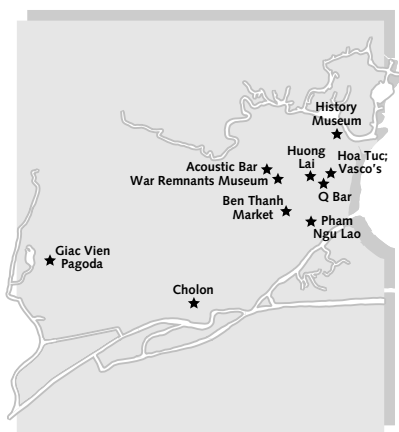
Saigon is a name so evocative that it conjures up a thousand jumbled images. Wander through timeless alleys to ancient pagodas or teeming markets, past ramshackle wooden shops selling silk, spices and baskets, before fast-forwarding into the future beneath sleek skyscrapers or at designer malls, gourmet restaurants and minimalist bars. The ghosts of the past live on in the churches, temples, former GI hotels and government buildings that one generation ago witnessed a city in turmoil, but the real beauty of Saigon's urban collage is that these two worlds blend so seamlessly into one.

Whether you want the finest hotels or the cheapest guesthouses, the classiest restaurants or the most humble street stalls, the designer boutiques or the scrum of the markets, Saigon has it all. The Saigon experience is about so many things – memorable conversations, tantalising tastes and moments of frustration – yet it will not evoke apathy. Stick around this conundrum of a city long enough and you may just unravel its mysteries.

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Step back into the turbulent past at the **History Museum** (p355) and the **War Remnants Museum** (p354)
- Experience the Chinese pagodas of colourful **Cholon** (p359), before heading to the atmospheric **Giac Vien Pagoda** (p364)
- Discover the secrets of Vietnamese cuisine at one of the city's many gourmet restaurants, like **Huong Lai** (p374) or **Hoa Tuc** (p374)
- Hit the town for a big night out Saigon style by trawling leading bars such as hip **Vasco's** (p379), classy **Q Bar** (p379) or, for live music, **Acoustic Bar** (p379), before washing up in **Pham Ngu Lao** (p380)
- Unearth some trinkets or chow down on local delicacies in **Ben Thanh Market** (p384)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 08

■ POPULATION: 7 MILLION+

■ BEST TIME TO VISIT: NOV-FEB

HISTORY

Saigon was originally part of the kingdom of Cambodia and, until the 17th century, was a small port town known as Prey Nokor. As more and more settlers moved south it was absorbed by Vietnam and became the base for the Nguyen Lords.

Saigon was captured by the French in 1859, and named the capital of Cochinchina a few years later. 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 by the Hanoi government.

The official government census only counts those who have official residence permits, and, today, as many as one-third of the population could be living here illegally. Some of these illegal residents lived in the city before 1975, but their residence permits were transferred to rural re-education camps after reunification. Many have simply sneaked back into the city, although without a residence permit they cannot own property or a business.

Explosive growth is evident in a slew of satellite suburbs beyond the centre and a glut of high-rise buildings, joint-venture hotels and colourful shops downtown. Downsides include the sharp increase in traffic, pollution and other urban ills, but a more open-

minded new generation may infuse HCMC's chaotic growth with a more globally conscious attitude.

ORIENTATION

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 make up about 90% of the land area of HCMC and hold around 25% of the municipality's population; the other 75% is crammed into the remaining 10% of land, which constitutes the urban centre.

HCMC is divided into 16 urban districts (*quan*, derived from the French *quartier*) and five rural districts (*huyen*). It is city growing fast, with many new developments underway in up-and-coming residential areas such as An Phu in District 2, or Saigon South, also known as District 7.

The majority of places and sights described in this chapter are located in District 1, the district still officially known as Saigon (although many residents still refer to the whole city as Saigon just to confuse things), which includes the backpacker district of Pham Ngu Lao, and the more upmarket area of Dong Khoi, host to the city's best assortment of restaurants, bars and boutiques. The city's neoclassical and international-style buildings,

HO CHI MINH CITY IN...

One Day

Start your morning with a steaming bowl of *pho* (rice-noodle soup), the soup that built a nation, before strolling among the shops and galleries lining Ð Dong Khoi. Make your way to the **Museum of Ho Chi Minh City** (p355), then have lunch at nearby **Quan An Ngon** (p373), the place to sample a wide variety of Vietnamese delicacies. Continue your journey into the past at the **Reunification Palace** (p353) and the **War Remnants Museum** (p354). In the evening, catch the sunset and stunning views from the rooftop bar of the **Sheraton Saigon** (p372), followed by an elegant meal at **Huong Lai** (p374), a restaurant that helps disadvantaged children and former street kids. Have a nightcap at one of the many bars around the centre of town. Ð Dong Du, Ð Le Thanh Ton and Ð Pasteur are all good hunting grounds.

Two Days

Kick off the day at bustling **Ben Thanh Market** (p384), where you can grab a bite while loading up on knick-knacks, sweets and conical hats. Then take a taxi to **Cholon** (p359) for a visit to the historic pagodas of HCMC's Chinatown. Have lunch in a local diner, then pay a final pagoda visit to **Giac Lam** (p363), HCMC's oldest and arguably most impressive pagoda. As the afternoon wanes, treat yourself to a massage or spa treatment at **L'Apothiquaire** (p366), a welcome reward for tired limbs. Suitably reinvigorated, start the fun all over again with a decadent meal at one of the many superb international restaurants in the Dong Khoi area. End the night at one of HCMC's most happening night spots, such as **Acoustic Bar** (p379) or **Apocalypse Now** (p381).