

The Best of Vietnam

Vietnam offers adventures and curiosities around every corner. Be ready for a wild ride in a colorful and chaotic land—along the way, you’ll discover tranquil places and opportunities to connect with local people. Below are the best Vietnam has to offer, from fine dining to off-the-beaten-track oddities.

1 The Best Vietnam Experiences

- **Eat on the Street:** “Real” Vietnamese food is best at street side or in small market areas, and, though it might be a little grungy or off-putting to some, dining alfresco in old Indochina offers the most authentic and delicious meals. Prepare yourself for some adventurous dining, or in Ho Chi Minh City, try Ngon Restaurant (p. 348) for a safe overview of Vietnamese fare. See “Where to Dine” sections in following chapters.
- **Get Lost in the Markets:** In Vietnam the market—spelled *Cho* and pronounced like the beginning of the word “could”—is the epicenter of culture and commerce. The best market for tourists is Ben Thanh Market (p. 351) in Saigon, which caters to foreign visitors with low-cost T-shirts, souvenirs, and local treats, but every town has a market: Dalat’s market, with its delicious strawberry preserves; Hoi An’s busy riverside fish market and wholesale silk market; Hanoi’s sprawling Dong Xuan Market (p. 146); and the hilltribe markets of Sapa and Bac Ha in the far north.
- **Visit Hilltribe Groups:** Vietnam’s remote mountain regions, the Central Highlands and the far north, are home to a patchwork of ethnic minorities. Ethnic hilltribe people still practice their own brands of animistic religion and wear colorful traditional clothing. Travelers among them in places like Sapa and Bac Ha in the far north, or near Buon Ma Thuot or Kontum in the Central Highlands, can even experience a “homestay” in some villages through certain ecotours and trekking companies. See chapters 5 and 9.
- **See the Water Puppets of Hanoi:** Okay, this is one for the tour buses, but the Thang Long Water Puppet Theater (p. 147) in Hanoi is magical. Intricate puppets emerge from the surface of a small watery stage as if by magic, telling tales of old Vietnam. Don’t miss it.
- **Take a Wild Ride:** Whether through Hanoi’s narrow alleyways and maze-like neighborhoods or on the broad boulevards of busy Ho Chi Minh, the traffic in Vietnam is a trip. Darwinian road rules mean that any ride by motorcycle, car, or bus is a test of faith, as drivers swerve and angle through some of the world’s craziest traffic. In Vietnam, “getting there” is an adventure in itself. See “Getting There” sections in following chapters for more information.

- **Celebrate the Tet Holiday:** This Lunar New Year celebration (p. 22) in early February is the most important event on the calendar. Should you be in Vietnam at this time of

year, the greatest gift you could get is an invite to a family's Tet celebration. Bring a little something to eat as a contribution, and enjoy some of the most unique hospitality in the world.

2 The Best Sites (According to UNESCO)

- **Halong Bay:** Just a short few hours from Hanoi, the bay at Halong, with its craggy limestone towers dotting the wide open bay all the way to the horizon, has long inspired Vietnamese poets and philosophers. A ride on the bay these days is a rather busy, crowded affair, but some luxury tours and a few ecotour operators can take you to the back of beyond, exploring little-known caves by kayak. See chapter 4.
- **Phong Nha—Ke Bang National Park:** These massive caves (more or less an off-the-track site popular with backpackers) are about halfway between Hue and Vinh. You have to arrange your own transport or go with a tour. See chapter 7.
- **Hoi An:** Tourism has exploded on the ancient streets of Hoi An. A hub of international craft and commerce since the 14th century, this is where Vietnamese, Chinese, and even

Japanese tradesmen made and sold their designer wares. Many shops are still operational wood, stone, and ceramic workshops, but now among them are fine-dining outlets, funky little hotels (as well as new resorts on the outlying beach area of Cua Dai), and lots of bespoke tailors. Shoppers swoon. See chapter 8.

- **My Son Sanctuary:** The Cham people, an Indonesian group who arrived by ship from the Malay Peninsula, held sway over most of central Vietnam and built arching hilltop towers. My Son is the finest example. See chapter 8.
- **Hue Monuments:** The Nguyen Kings—the last and perhaps the most glorious (or grandiose) of Vietnam's dynastic rulers—built grand monuments to themselves in and around the massive Hue Citadel. Hue's sights, particularly the elaborate kings' tombs, make for a very interesting visit. See chapter 8.

3 The Best Temples & Archaeological Sites

- **The Cao Dai Holy See:** The spiritual home base of the Cao Dai religion, a unique contemporary faith, the Holy See (p. 236) is a fantasyland of colored mosaics and elaborate painting. Followers are dressed in white turbans during the picturesque daily procession.
- **Tomb of Khai Dinh:** The egotistical, eccentric emperor Khai Dinh left behind a tomb that is a gaudy mix of Gothic, baroque, and classical Chinese architecture. Quite unique. See p. 222.

- **The Tunnels of Vinh Moc and Cu Chi:** Faced with devastating air raids, both of these sites supported large groups of soldiers and civilians who used the tunnels as supply lines, escape routes, and as bases for waging a devastating guerilla campaign against U.S. forces. Day trips to either site are memorable. See p. 227 and p. 358.
- **Hoa Lo Prison (aka Hanoi Hilton):** Home to U.S. pilots—including John McCain—who were shot down during the Vietnamese war with the

U.S., Hoa Lo Prison (p. 134) is now a small museum (most of it was demolished for a high-rise). A good glimpse into Vietnam's grisly past.

- **Reunification Palace:** In 1975 tanks rolled over the gates of the prime minister's palace, signaling an end to the Vietnam War. You can see the actual tanks on-site. See p. 353.

4 The Best Museums

- **War Remnants Museum:** Formerly called the Museum of American War Crimes, this ever-evolving collection is the face of Vietnam's war past. Exhibits are insightful and certainly rife with rhetoric, but a unique glimpse at propaganda from "the other side," and a yin to the heavy yang of Western reporting and documentation of the war years. A unique perspective and a must-see in Ho Chi Minh City. See p. 355.
- **The Cham Museum:** This open-air colonial structure houses the largest collection of Cham sculpture in the

world. Many of the 300-plus Hindu-inspired carvings are captivating. See p. 236.

- **Vietnam National Museum of Fine Arts:** This large colonial structure houses a fine collection of new works, historical lacquer and silk paintings, woodblocks, and folk and expressive works in oil. See p. 132.
- **Ho Chi Minh Museum** (in Hanoi): Like the War Remnants Museum, the Ho Chi Minh Museum is a battleground of ideology. Located adjacent to his very tomb, the museum tells the tale of the evolutionary from cradle to grave, the best of the country's many (every town has one). See p. 132.

5 The Best Beaches

- **Nha Trang:** Vietnam's Ocean City is very crowded in the summertime with domestic tourists, but it's a great escape. The city has a few worthy sights—otherwise a cluttered market town—but there are some great new resorts and the best seafood going. See p. 296.
- **Mui Ne Beach, Phan Thiet:** Just a few hours from Saigon, Phan Thiet is the latest getaway for Saigon expats. There's a golf course designed by

Nick Faldo, the seafood is good, and there are some great day trips to remote sand dunes and smaller fishing villages. See p. 314.

- **Phu Quoc Island:** Phu Quoc boasts vast tracts of interior forestland and far-flung beaches great for exploring by motorbike. For now there's just a small clutch of mid- to low-end resorts, but the times they are a-changin' and development is on the way. Get here fast. See p. 390.

6 The Best of the Outdoors

- **Kayaking in Halong Bay:** Often in conjunction with luxury cruises, kayaking in Halong Bay means going through low caves at low tide to get to the collapsed center of huge limestone and volcanic rings, where walls of jungle vegetation tower hundreds of feet

overhead and crawl with monkeys, snakes, and rare animals. Kayaks are the only way to get up close. See chapter 4.

- **Multisports in the Central Highlands:** Opportunities abound for trekking, climbing, and mountain

biking. Just contact one of the many small outfitters in Dalat (all are a copy of Phat Tire, a Vietnam pioneer). See chapter 9.

- **Cycling the Mekong Delta:** The best part about cycling in Vietnam is that, with some exceptions, the routes are quite flat. Adventure-tour outfitters out of both Ho Chi Minh City (p. 326) and Hanoi (p. 88) can make any arrangements for a tour of any length, even providing a support van, and going by bike gives you a close-up view of it all. See chapter 12.
- **The Central Highlands or the Far North by Motorbike:** The rural roads of Vietnam beg to be explored, and going by motorbike, though dangerous, is a great way to do it. From Dalat in the Central Highlands, arrange a ride with an Easy Rider (p. 264), motorcycle guides who can take you up the Ho Chi Minh Trail (now a highway) and as far as Danang and Hoi An. In the far north, the Russian Minsk motorbike is the workhorse of the hills, and you can rent your own bike or go with a guide out of Hanoi and visit some incredible terrain. See chapter 9.
- **Taking On Fansipan or Trekking the Far North:** The very top of Vietnam, **Mount Fansipan** (p. 154) is a multiday adventure and only for the

hearty, but the views afforded and the experience itself is amazing. There are lots of outfitters in the popular tourist town of Sapa, and you can arrange any number of treks to ethnic hilltribe villages, even overnights and homestays. See chapter 5.

- **Sail or Kite-Surf on the South China Sea:** Opportunities for watersports and sailing are many as you travel along Vietnam's coast. Most resorts have boats for rent, and Nha Trang is a good bet, as is the area off Mui Ne Beach near Phan Thiet, which is becoming a very popular wind- and kite-surfing spot. See chapter 10.
- **Cuc Phuong National Park:** A great little overnight from Hanoi for nature lovers, Cuc Phuong (p. 152) hosts a unique primate-research center, has good basic accommodations, and offers lots of hiking trails. Good guides are on hand to assist or hire for the day.
- **Cat Tien National Park:** Bird-watcher heaven, little Cat Tien is halfway between Saigon and Dalat and an overnight stay includes night spotting, rustic accommodations, and a morning hike. The place is crawling with jungle animals, birds, and lots of naturalists and ornithologists chasing after them with binoculars. See p. 378.

7 The Best Luxury Accommodations

- **Caravelle** (☎ 08/823-4999; www.caravellehotel.com): The best location and the best standard right at the vortex of Ho Chi Minh, on Dong Khoi at Lam Son Square. The town's top business address. See p. 332.
- **New World Hotel** (☎ 08/822-8888; www.newworldvietnam.com): The first and still the largest, the New World Hotel stacks up with the likes of Caravelle and Sheraton, and with recent upgrades, it stands stalwart at

the top of the business and high-end tour market in the city. Great dining choices and excellent amenities. See p. 334.

- **Sheraton Saigon** (☎ 08/827-2828; www.sheraton.com/saigon): New and chic, the Sheraton pits itself against the likes of the Caravelle and New World for the title of Saigon's top dog. It's quite a race, and the Sheraton is the newest and most glitzy. See p. 335.

- **Sofitel Dalat Palace** (☎ 063/825-444; www.accorhotels.com/asia): There's nothing like it anywhere really, this converted palace of the last emperor of Vietnam, Bao Dai. Giant rooms are done in a cool retro-style with fireplaces and diva beds, claw-foot tubs, and great original artworks. Great fine dining and a high standard of service are offered. One of those special finds in the world. See p. 266.
- **Hanoi Daewoo** (☎ 04/831-5000; www.hanoi-daewoohotel.com): For acreage alone, the Daewoo tips the scales, a behemoth of luxury and style if far from the city center. See p. 98.
- **Sofitel Metropole Hanoi** (☎ 04/826-6919; sofmet@netnam.org.vn): The best hotel in Vietnam for luxury, service, style, and a connection to the history of Hanoi. See p. 102.
- **Victoria Hoi An Resort** (☎ 0510/927-041; www.victoriahotels-asia.com): This place has great views of

the beach, a spectacular central pool, and even its own in-house elephant who gives basket rides along the beach. See p. 245.

- **Ana Mandara Resort** (☎ 058/829-829; www.sixsenses.com): By far the best beachside resort going in Vietnam: a high standard of style, comfort, and very warm and genuine service. See p. 299.
- **Evason Hideaway Resort** (☎ 058/728-222; www.sixsenses.com): This is the Ana Mandara done to perfection but set on a far-flung beach with the country's most high-end pool villas. Raises the bar. See p. 300.
- **Furama Resort** (☎ 0511/847-333; www.furamavietnam.com): One of the most "kid-friendly" resorts in Vietnam, this place has lots of outdoor activities and watersports, as well as luxury spa facilities. See p. 234.

8 The Best Midrange Accommodations

- **Victoria Sapa** (☎ 020/871-522): In the hills above Sapa, this one's the best in town. Arrive by the hotel's luxury train, and enjoy a ski-lodge kind of ease and hospitality. See p. 161.
- **Victoria Chau Doc and Can Tho**: These two riverside classics are worth the trip. Chau Doc is a renovated old administration building, and Can Tho is a new but retrofitted grande dame. Take great day trips and enjoy slow, riverside living. See p. 389 and p. 386.
- **Zephyr Hotel** (☎ 04/934-1256): A very cozy new hotel in the center of Hanoi, just south of Hoan Kiem, with a compact set-up but a high standard. An affordable boutique downtown. See p. 104.
- **Church Hotel** (☎ 04/928-8118): On the low end of this category, the new Church Hotel sets a new standard for renovated budget minihotels, the "boutique mini." And the location is great, right on Church Street. See p. 105.
- **Bong Sen Hotel Annex** (☎ 08/823-5818): Basic, affordable, and in the heart of downtown, a good bet in Saigon. See p. 338.
- **Coco Beach Resort** (☎ 62/847-111): The first, and still the best, on the long stretch of white-sand Mui Ne Beach. Rustic but comfortable wooden bungalows on stilts overlook the sea from a peaceful garden area. Great dining, too. See p. 316.
- **Life Resort Hoi An and Quy Nhon**: Whether at the more isolated beachside resort in Quy Nhon or at the fine, in-town resort in Hoi An (the very closest resort to town), Life Resort is a fine new standard. See p. 239 and p. 291.

9 The Best Dining

- **Emperor** (☎ 04/826-8801): Set in a luxurious, candlelit courtyard of an old-style timber-frame home, Emperor sets the standard for Vietnamese fine dining. See p. 111.
- **Vine** (☎ 04/719-8001): This chic little bistro north of central Hanoi (on West Lake) is a find. The atmosphere is hip San Francisco–style, and the food is a cunning assortment of the familiar, from good pizzas to great fusion. See p. 114.
- **Restaurant Bobby Chin** (☎ 04/934-8577): Atmosphere and location—like a performance-art space on the south end of central Hoan Kiem Lake—Bobby’s is the place to see and be seen in Hanoi. See p. 117.
- **Cha Ca La Vong** (☎ 04/825-3929): A Vietnamese institution and a tourist right of passage, really. A meal here is a memorable, do-it-yourself affair on the beat-up second floor of a restaurant as old as the hills (and it looks like it has never been painted). The food does all the talking: a unique dish of white fish flash-fried in lots of peanut oil with dill and turmeric. See p. 112.
- **Mango Rooms** (☎ 0510/910-839): The atmosphere is fast and furious as hip young owner Duc slings a unique brand of Asian-fusion fare, heavy on grilled items and delicious light ingredients. See p. 248.
- **Le Rabelais** (☎ 063/825-444): Fine French cuisine served with real panache at one of Vietnam’s most luxurious rural hotels. See p. 269.
- **Ngon Restaurant** (☎ 08/829-9449): Its popularity has spawned a number of small offshoots, including a specialty restaurant focused on northern rice dishes and another new outlet for buffet dinners, but the original restaurant near the Reunification Palace is the best. A virtual survey course of authentic Vietnamese cuisine from every region of the country, this restaurant is the town’s most atmospheric, friendly, and busy. See p. 348.

10 The Best Shopping

- **Ben Thanh Market:** Ben Thanh (p. 351) is a city landmark and a great place to pick up cheap, ready-made clothing, souvenirs, and an authentic Vietnamese lunch.
- **Hoi An:** This is Vietnam’s shopping mecca. Get clothes made to order for peanuts—some travelers even bring their own patterns—or browse galleries and chic little boutiques. The town is an ancient mercantile center, and community collectives still practice wood and stone carving. See p. 237.
- **Dong Khoi Street:** Once the cultural heart of colonial Cochin China, and later the busy R&R street of war-weary U.S. troops, Dong Khoi is still the cultural pulse of urban Vietnam but now pays homage to style. Trendy boutiques, chic cafes, and fine dining line the busy road. See p. 321.
- **Hoan Kiem Area:** Throw a rock and chances are you’ll hit a gallery or shop in the busy city center of Hanoi. Shopping is chockablock and prices are as good as you can haggle them down to. See p. 134.