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## ABOUT VIETNAM

Although many westerners might still view Vietnam through the lens of history and war, in reality the country is an oasis of harmony and peace; offering captivating natural beauty and tranquil villages. Its highlands and rainforests continue to yield new species and offer an abundance of exotic wildlife. The tropical islands and beaches are among the finest in the Asia-Pacific region. Decades have passed since Vietnam was officially united and during this time the country has done a remarkable job of healing its wounds. Today, this stunningly beautiful land is an outstanding travel destination that offers something for everyone – be it history, cultural heritage, or exploring the country’s abundant exotic fauna and flora.

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## FAST FACTS

### AIRPORTS

Most international travelers will arrive at Hanoi’s Noi Bai Airport, or Ho Chi Minh City’s Tan Son Nhat Airport. Vietnam Airlines operates a bus service into the downtown area of Hanoi; there is a public bus to Kim Ma Bus Station; and metered taxis are also available. Ho Chi Minh City’s Tan Son Nhat Airport is located around 7-km northwest of the city center. The air-conditioned 152 bus runs from the airport to Ben Thanh Market in the city centre daily. Metered taxis are available with an average 30-minute transfer time to the city center. Asian Trails Vietnam provides efficient airport transfers with a guide so that your arrival is totally stress free.

### ARRIVAL / DEPARTURE INFORMATION

Most visitors to Vietnam require a visa to enter the country and all travelers must have a passport valid for six months after their planned exit from Vietnam. The majority of citizens of Southeast Asian countries and ASEAN passport holders that signed visa exemption agreement with Vietnam are allowed to stay not more than 30 days. Citizens of some other Scandinavian countries as well as citizens from France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom are also in exempted list and allowed to stay for not more than 15 days. Please contact our Asian Trails team for visa arrangement if needed.

A tourist visa is a single entry visa, which requires that if you exit Vietnam – for example for a side trip to Cambodia – you will require a new visa to re-enter the country. Travelers intending to do this are advised to apply for a Multiple Entry Visa. The validity of a standard Tourist Visa is 30-days. Visas can be obtained by: making a visa application in your home country before departure; or applying for a pre-arranged visa on arrival at an International entry point, however this does not apply to river border points. To apply in your home country, apply directly at the Vietnamese embassy or consulate.

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The length of the process can vary. In order to accelerate the process, bring an “Approval letter” provided by Asian Trails, plus your passport, two recent passport-sized photos, and the required paperwork. A visa stamping fee is charged locally with fees vary on visa types (Single/Multiple).

Fees vary from one country to another. A visa requested as a multi-entry at embassies abroad is often issued as a single entry; it is recommended to double-check the visa stamp when collecting your passport. Multiple entry visas can also be arranged on arrival. For the Visa-On-Arrival (VOA) it is essential that Asian Trails obtains the pre-approval documentation from the authorities, otherwise it will NOT be granted. To obtain VOA pre-approval send Asian Trails your passport details (Full name as it appears in the passport, Date of birth DD/MM/YY, gender, passport number, issue date and expiry date of passport, place of issue, arrival date and flight number) and we will apply for pre-approval from Vietnam and send you the approval document when it is ready. Please bring the “Visa pick-up upon arrival approval letter” to the airline check-in counter. Without this letter, airlines may not allow you to board the flight. On arrival in Vietnam, proceed to the Visa on Arrival counter. You will be asked to fill in one more form, and provide two passport photos, and pay direct (in cash) for the stamping fee at Immigration counter.

Before departure, prepare some bank notes in US dollars to pay the visa stamp fee on arrival. The departure tax on all international flights from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City is included in the price of flight tickets so no extra fees are levied.

*All the above information may change without prior notice. It remains the traveler’s responsibility to check visa requirements before traveling.*

### **BUSINESS HOURS**

Offices are usually open from Monday to Friday from 7.30-am or 8-am until 5-pm or 6-pm and often close for lunch between 11.30-am and 1.30-pm. Some offices also open on Saturday mornings. Shops open from 8-am or 9-am and close any time between 6-pm and 10-pm. Most shops are open seven days a week and many are open later on weekends.

### **BANKS**

Banks are open Monday to Friday, from 8-am to 5-pm, and some are open on Saturday morning. In the major cities, there are many exchange offices in areas frequented by tourists. ATMs are widespread in many major towns, but not as widespread in rural areas. Travelers' cheques are accepted in banks, money changers and some hotels although most travelers now use debit cards because of the increased frequency of ATMs. A commission charge applies. Most hotels will change major currencies such as US Dollars and Euros at very reasonable rates. An increasing number of outlets accept MasterCard and Visa; however, outside main towns and cities, it is wise to carry cash. The US Dollar is the most favored foreign currency. Australian, British, Japanese, Singaporean and Thai currency notes can usually be changed in the larger cities. Very few shops, hotels or restaurants accept Travelers Checks.

### **CLOTHING**

As with other regional tropical countries, lightweight cotton clothing is the most comfortable clothing in Vietnam. A lightweight raincoat is a good idea in the rainy season. It is advisable to cover arms and legs in the evenings outside to protect against mosquito bites. An umbrella is also a good idea in both the hot and rainy seasons as it will offer protective shade from both the strong sun and the tropical downpours. Evenings in the north and the central regions can be quite chilly so bring a sweater and a good jacket especially from November to February. Visitors should not wear shorts, short skirts, singlet, or vest tops, or similar clothing when visiting pagodas and monasteries and shoes should be removed before entering a religious building or a private home.

Be mindful that temperatures in the northern part of Vietnam (Sapa) during January – February can drop as low as 0C Celsius. It is strongly recommended to bring warm clothes with you during these months.

### **CURRENCY**

The currency in Vietnam is the Vietnamese Dong. Vietnamese Dongs come in the following forms: bank notes: 500; 1,000; 2,000; 5,000; 10,000; 20,000; 50,000; 100,000; 200,000; 500,000. There are no more coins in circulation.

### **CUSTOM ALLOWANCES**

The following goods may be imported into Vietnam without incurring a customs duty:

- 400 cigarettes, or 100 cigars, or 500 grams of tobacco;
- 1.5 liters of alcohol over 22 per cent in volume, two liters of alcohol under 22 per cent in volume;
- A reasonable quantity of perfume and personal belongings.

### **VIETNAM (Do's and Don'ts)**

#### **Dos in Vietnam**

Dress conservatively. Never wear shorts, dresses or skirts, or tops with low-neck lines and bare shoulders in temples.

- Avoid public displays of affection. Anything beyond holding hands may be frowned upon in a conservative society.
- Take your shoes off at the entrance to a Vietnamese home.
- When venturing out from your hotel, make sure you take a hotel business card with you. This will make your return in a taxi much easier.
- Dress conservatively. Never wear shorts, dresses or skirts, or tops with low-neck lines and bare shoulders in temples.
- When venturing out from your hotel, make sure you take a hotel business card with you. This will make your return in a taxi much easier.
- Always leave your excess cash, airline tickets, passports and valuables in the hotel's safety deposit box.

#### **Don'ts in Vietnam**

- Do not sit with your feet pointing towards people. When visiting someone's house, do not sit with the soles of your feet pointing towards the family altar.
- Do not sit until you are shown where to sit. The oldest person always sits down first.
- Do not show off; keep a low profile and a cool head, remain polite. Losing your temper in Vietnam means a "loss of face".
- Avoid behavior that causes embarrassment to another party, and hold back behavior that can be misconstrued as aggressive.
- Do not take video cameras into the ethnic minority villages. They are considered too intrusive by the local people.
- Do not take a photo of somebody without asking for their permission. Do not take pictures of anything to do with the military, which is considered a breach of national security.
- Do not give sweets to local children when trekking through ethnic minority villages. Many of these people do not have access to dental care.

**ELECTRICITY**

The standard household (hotel) electrical supply in Vietnam is 220 volt, 50 Hertz. Both flat and round two-pin outlets are used throughout the country. It is recommended to bring a universal plug adaptor.

**ENTERTAINMENT AND NIGHTLIFE**

Ho Chi Minh City has an abundance of bars and clubs ranging from simple beer bars to more sophisticated up-market nightclubs. Most of the nightlife is concentrated in District One. Hanoi's nightlife is much quieter in comparison and is concentrated in the Old Quarter and the Hoan Kiem Lake areas. Live music is mainly restricted to international hotels and a few bars hosting jazz and rock bands. For visitors seeking something more cultural, a visit to the water puppet theater at both main cities is a good choice. The bia hoi (draught beer pavement pubs) offer a down to earth, fun experience and the opportunity to mix with local people.

**FOOD**

One of the greatest delights in Vietnam is dining out and enjoying a cuisine that is rapidly gaining recognition on a global scale. Profoundly influenced by the national cuisines of France, China, and Thailand, Vietnamese cooking is highly innovative and makes extensive use of fresh herbs, including basil, coriander, lemon grass, parsley and lime. The national condiment is nuoc mam, a piquant fermented fish sauce that is served with every meal. Try a hearty and inexpensive bowl of steaming pho – a fragrant soup served with chicken or beef, noodles and crunchy bean sprouts. French colonial influence means superb crusty baguettes and sweet pastries as good as those served in France at a fraction of the price! Western food is widely available in the major tourism destinations.

**HEALTH**

Generally no vaccinations are required except for yellow fever if you are traveling from an area where the disease is present. However visitors should be inoculated against typhoid, cholera, hepatitis A and B, tetanus and polio. Malaria and Dengue Fever are present and it is advisable to take precautions especially if traveling off the established tourist trail. If you plan to take anti-malarial tablets, you usually need to start the course of tablets one week before arrival. Prior to travel we recommend seeking a qualified medical practitioner's advice about vaccinations and up to date precautionary medicine. All travelers should take out comprehensive travel insurance prior to travel that will cover any overseas medical costs, including medical evacuation. If you require a particular medication, ensure that you take an adequate supply as it may not be available locally.

**HOTELS**

The standards of accommodation are excellent with categories to fit all budgets. The larger hotels offer a wide variety of restaurants, bars, swimming pools and other recreational facilities. Most of the staff at key positions (front office, reception, restaurants etc.,) speak excellent English but please be patient and show patience if you do not get what you want right away. During check-in you will be asked to complete a registration card. The hotel will also ask for an imprint of your credit card as a guarantee for extra services such as meals, drinks, etc. Ask the cashier to return this slip upon checkout. Please check that you receive meal coupons (where applicable) when given the room key. General check-in is from 2pm and check out time is 12.00 noon. If you require a late check-out (extra costs may apply) check with reception beforehand.

**INSURANCE**

It is advisable to take out a medical insurance policy before traveling as treatment will not be administered without proof of payment, or evidence of a comprehensive travel insurance policy. Do be careful if you hire a car or a motorbike and make sure the rental is covered by the appropriate motor insurance.

**INTERNET**

Major hotels throughout the country offer both Wi-Fi access and business centers with timed computer use. With an increasing amount of public places, bars, restaurants and cafes providing Wi-Fi, there are hardly any more internet cafes available as you can buy pre-paid international phone cards to make international calls.

**LANGUAGE**

The national language is Vietnamese. The Vietnamese language has six different tones and is a difficult language for most foreigners to speak despite the fact that the Roman alphabet is used. For example, one word can have six different meanings depending on the tone used to pronounce it. In the big cities and major tourism destinations, English is widely spoken.

**PEOPLE**

The population of Vietnam was 90 million, according to a recent survey. Some elements considered to be characteristic of the Vietnamese people include a deep respect for community, family values, and a devotion to study. As in most regional countries, they are welcoming to foreign visitors and keen to share their knowledge of their homeland.

**PUBLIC HOLIDAYS**

Closure of tourist sites can occur at short notice on public holidays and our Asian Trails guides will give guests advice about this situation. The dates of national holidays may change every year in Vietnam so please check various online sites, offering a complete overview of the public holidays.

**PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION**

It is a good idea to fly the longer hops along Vietnam's long mainland, such as from Hanoi to Hue; from Danang to Nha Trang; and from Nha Trang to Ho Chi Minh City. The Reunification Express runs the entire length of Vietnam's coast – from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh – and takes more than 30 hours. Improved road travel is making the train less popular in most parts, except for the mountainous far north. There are a number of classes, from third-class hard seat; to air-conditioned cushioned seat; to sleeper. It is important to book train tickets a few weeks in advance, especially for weekend travel and in the summer. Asian Trails can help with arrangements. Taxis to get around the cities are plentiful and cheap. They can be flagged down on the street or arranged through hotels or restaurants.

**RELIGION**

Buddhism is the dominant religion in Vietnam usually combined with elements of Confucianism and Taoism. About 10 per cent of the country's population is Catholic and there are also communities of Protestants and Muslims. Vietnam is also home to a unique religion called Cao Dai – a religious cocktail of all the world's major faiths.

**SAFETY**

Serious or violent crimes against foreigners in Vietnam are rare, but travelers should remain vigilant for petty theft, especially in larger cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City and when travelling by bus or train. As a global rule, never leave belongings unattended and always maintain a firm grip on cameras and shoulder bags. In some tourist sites you may encounter some insistent souvenir sellers. A polite “No, thank you” usually will suffice. Leave your expensive valuables at home and always use hotel safety deposits boxes or in-room safes for valuables.

**SHOPPING**

The big cities Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi have the best choice when it comes to shopping. The best local buys include lacquerware, silk, conical hats, wood carvings, hill tribe fabrics and handicrafts, embroidery, silver jewelry, wooden water puppets with ingenious mechanisms and ceramics. Clothes are particularly good value and tailors can make up items within 24 hours in many places. Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City have seen the arrival of up-market shopping malls that stock leading international and domestic brands.

**STREET STALLS**

Most towns and cities have one or more markets and these are always worth visiting for a cultural retail experience. Some bargaining is essential in most tourist transactions. Remember that in Asia “saving face” is important, so bargaining should be good-natured. In some cases you will be able to get a 50 per cent discount or more.

**TELEPHONE**

Most hotels have IDD phones but for a more inexpensive option use one of the many Wi-Fi hotspots in hotels and public areas for cheaper phone rates and the sale of pre-paid international calling cards. It is best to buy a local SIM card to avoid expensive roaming charges.

**TIME ZONE**

Vietnam is GMT + 7 and does not operate a daylight-savings system.

**TIPPING**

Tipping for good service is not expected but is always appreciated. Tipping the guide and driver on your transfers and tours should depend on how satisfied you are with the excursion. Hotel porters should be tipped for carrying bags to the room. In other cases, it is totally up to the individual when and how much to tip.

**WATER**

It is not advisable to drink tap water but bottled mineral water is safe and available everywhere. All hotels provide a complimentary bottle of local mineral water, per person, in the room. Ice is generally okay in good standard hotels and restaurants but it is best to avoid them at street stalls or in upcountry areas. Some minor stomach problems are always possible when travelling in exotic countries. Bring a supply of your usual anti-diarrhea medicine.

**WEATHER**

Because of its geographical shape (Vietnam stretches over 2,000 km from North to South) the climate varies greatly, with three distinct climatic zones. Tropical monsoons occur from October to April in the central region and from May to September in the north and south. It is almost totally dry throughout the rest of the year. It can get exceptionally hot, all year round, but the north has a cooler time between October and April. Temperatures around the country can reach up to 40C in the pinnacle of the hot and rainy season (May to September), but the northern highlands and the capital Hanoi can often seem cold in the winter months.

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The high season runs from September to March. Unless you intend to visit friends or relatives, we do not recommend visiting Vietnam during the Lunar New Year, Tet holidays (the Vietnamese New Year that falls between late January and February). The Tet holiday is the most important period of the year for Vietnamese people who take time off to visit their families in the countryside or take a vacation. All hotels, buses, trains and flights tend to get booked-up.

#### **EMERGENCY CONTACT NUMBERS**

Police dial (area code) + 113; Emergency Medical Services dial (area code) + 115; Fire service dial (area code) + 114.

#### **DISCLAIMER**

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