

Some destinations evoke mental images the moment their names are mentioned, and Vietnam is one of them. A frenetic and fascinating country, it calls to mind conical-hatted street vendors, water buffalo plodding across rice fields, mopeds buzzing through cities and floating markets on the Mekong River. The days when Vietnam was best known for its conflict with America are long gone. From the temples of Hanoi and the islands of Halong Bay to the beaches of Nha Trang and the palaces of Hue, it is a country now firmly etched in the travel psyche.

At times, Vietnam is an assault on the senses. Life in its feverish cities is conducted largely on the streets, among chattering bia hois (pavement pubs) and steaming pho (noodle soup) stands. The country's two main cities – Hanoi in the north, Ho Chi Minh in the south – are different in many ways, but they share an intoxicating energy. Ancient pagodas and colonial houses jostle for space with new-build skyscrapers, while labyrinthine back-alleys hum with life. These narrow streets are atmospheric places to spend time, day or night.

The country's long, thin shape, sometimes compared to two rice baskets at either end of a pole, means these two cities form natural start and end points to an itinerary. The highlights along the way, meanwhile, are as well packed as the spring rolls which adorn market stalls: nature-lovers, history buffs, beach bums and foodies are all catered for in singularly Vietnamese style.

Those heading into the countryside can expect not only glorious scenery, but a rich cultural web of different ethnic groups. The US wartime legacy can still be readily explored – perhaps most notably at the Cu Chi Tunnels near Ho Chi Minh – but this is a country to enjoy for what it is today, whether you're here for a few days or a month.

Travel Advice

The travel advice summary below is provided by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in the UK. 'We' refers to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. For their full travel services when you travel to Vietnam, visit www.hotels-in-vietnam.com

Crime

- Most visits to Vietnam are trouble free but you should take sensible precautions to protect yourself and your belongings. Carry a photocopy of the pages from your passport with your personal details and [Vietnam visa](#) for ID, and leave the original document in a safe place.
- There has been a reported increase in incidents of personal belongings and bags being snatched, including from people travelling on motorbikes. Thieves cut the straps or bottoms of bags. Some thieves have resorted to physical violence, though this is not common. You should remain alert and take care of your belongings, particularly in crowded areas and places visited by tourists where pick pockets and bag snatchers operate.
- Sexual assaults are rare, but you should take sensible precautions and travel with friends when possible.
- There have been reports of arguments over hotel, restaurant or taxi bills turning violent or abusive. It is well worth researching places to stay before you arrive. To avoid potential disputes, make sure you are clear about the level of service you can expect to receive and any associated charges.

- There have been reports of scams targeting tourists, involving fake charities, gambling and taxis.

Local travel

- Travel is restricted near military installations and some areas of Vietnam are fairly inaccessible. If you wish to visit a village, commune or ward that is close to the border you may need to get permission from the provincial police department. Contact the relevant local authority for more information.
- Don't stray off main routes in rural areas and check with your tour operator before setting off. There have been mountain climbing accidents in the north of Vietnam. You should follow safety guidelines and procedures and make sure you are supervised by a reputable guide.
- Undertake any leisure activities which include firearms at your own risk and make sure you are supervised by a reputable guide. There have been reports of hearing loss from those close to these activities.
- Unexploded mines and ordnance are a continuing hazard in former battlefields, particularly in central Vietnam and along the Laos Border, formerly traversed by the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Mined areas are often unmarked.

Road travel

- With effect from 1 October 2015, International Driving Permits (IDPs) are accepted in Vietnam. The type of vehicle you'll be able to drive is limited to the categories for which your permit is valid. You'll need to show both the IDP and your UK driving license to the authorities when required.
- If you don't have an IDP to drive a car or motorcycle you'll need to get a Vietnamese driving license from the Hanoi Department of Public Works and Transportation (telephone: +84 24 3843 5325) or the Ho Chi Minh City Department of Public Works and Transportation (telephone: +84 28 3829 0451 or 0452).
- The standard of driving and vehicle maintenance is poor. There are frequent accidents and fatal crashes. Accidents can result in costly medical bills and you may not be covered by your insurance. It's illegal to be on a motorbike without a helmet. Helmet safety standards vary.
- Traffic accidents tend to attract a large crowd. If you are involved in a traffic accident you could face criminal charges and you may need to pay compensation to the injured person even if the injuries are minor. You will be given a receipt for any official fine. If you are subject to an investigation, offer the police your full co-operation and inform the British Embassy in Hanoi or Consulate General in Hoi Chi Minh City.
- Don't use your passport as a deposit for hiring vehicles or in place of a fine in the event of a traffic offence.
- Metered taxis from larger firms are generally reliable. There are many taxi operators and meters are set at different prices. The meter should start at around 8,000 to 20,000 VND. Where possible get hotels or restaurants to book you a reputable taxi.
- There have been reports of overcharging for taxi journeys from airports. Check the published fares near the taxi stands before starting your journey.
- Bus and coach crashes are not unusual. Vehicles are often poorly maintained. The risk of death or injury on the road increases if you travel at night. When travelling by bus be vigilant against petty theft. Don't accept offers of free

transfers to hotels unless organized in advance, as these are likely to be bogus.

- Rail travel in Vietnam is generally safe. Be vigilant against petty theft. There have been numerous reports of personal belongings being stolen while people are asleep on the train between Hanoi and Sapa.

Sea travel

- There have been a number of fatal boat accidents in Vietnam, some involving foreign nationals in Halong Bay, including a major incident in October 2012. Safety regulations and standards vary greatly and are not at the same level as the United Kingdom. Check with your tour guide about the safety record and registration of boats, and the certification of personnel before setting off. Make sure you receive a full safety briefing when joining any boat. Consider safety standards carefully before taking an overnight boat trip on Halong Bay as some boats have sunk quickly and without warning.
- Piracy has been known to occur in coastal areas off Vietnam. Mariners should be vigilant, reduce opportunities for attacks, establish secure areas onboard and report all incidents to the coastal and flag state authorities.

Political situation

Vietnam has a single party-political system, which does not welcome dissent. Internal conflict is rare. Some protests in May turned violent. You should avoid all protests.

Consular assistance

Providing prompt consular assistance is difficult outside Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City because of poorly developed infrastructure. Some places are a flight away with only 1 daily flight.