PACK LIGHTLY

1,650 KM, NORTH TO SOUTH

Vietnam

What a day really costs, which sights are worth the queue, and what to book before you fly.



p. 32 The 8-path route picker: find your trip in one look

p. 40 What a day really costs, printed as a till receipt

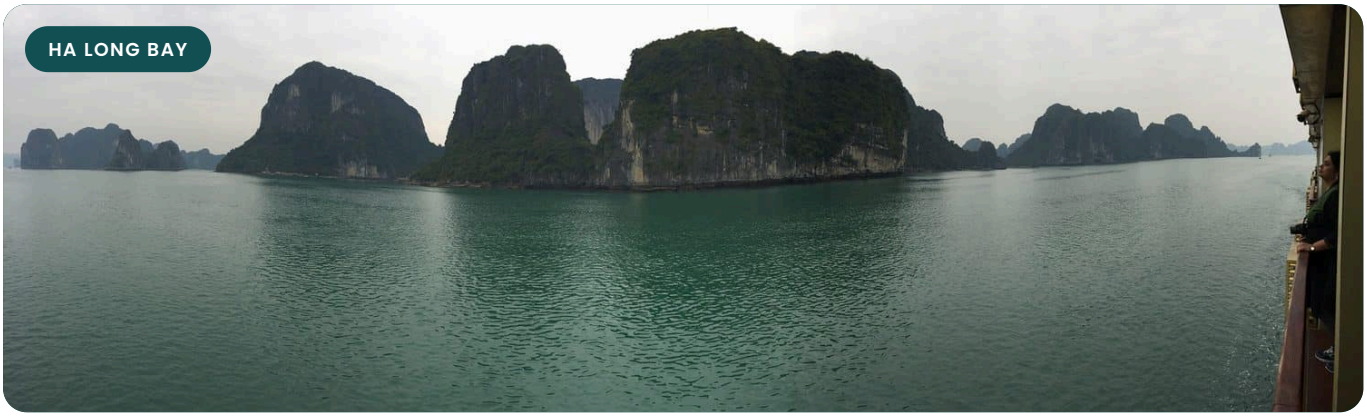
p. 47 The scams that still work, and the one real danger

55 PAGES · VND PRICES · 45-DAY VISA-FREE · EDITION 2026.06

photo: Wikimedia Commons

Start here

the shape of a Vietnam trip, what it costs, what to sort first



Vietnam runs as one long line from the northern mountains down to the Mekong delta, and most first trips work it top to bottom over two to three weeks. This guide is built around that line: what each stretch costs, which famous sights are worth the queue and which are a tourist tax, and the handful of things to lock in before you fly. All of it offline, in your pocket.

The shape of a trip

Almost everyone runs the same line, Hanoi south to Saigon, over two to three weeks. The north is limestone bays and mountains, the centre old towns and beaches, the south the delta and the big city. Fly the long legs, take the road for the short ones.

What a day costs

Backpacking runs about 25 USD a day, mid-range around 60, captured May 2026. The full receipt, bed to nightcap, is itemised on page 39.

Sort before you fly

45 days visa-free for most passports, an eSIM the moment you land, and dong in cash for the markets. Page 41 lists the four bookings that reward going early.





HOW THE LINKS WORK

Some booking links earn Pack Lightly a commission, at no extra cost to you. Full disclosure is on the last page.

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tap a line to jump straight there

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QUICK JUMPS

The 8-path route picker 32

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The scams, and the one real danger 47

Your trip on one page

14 days · 20 to 90 EUR/day · best Feb-Apr and Oct-Nov

If you read nothing else, this page is the trip. The country is a 1,650-kilometre strip from Hanoi in the north to the Mekong Delta in the south, and the classic loop works it top to bottom over two weeks with one or two internal flights. Budget from the bars below, not from resort rack rates. Book the three things at the bottom right before you fly; everything else is cheaper and easier to arrange once you are in the country.

THE ROUTE

Hanoi — day 1-4

3.5h + cruise

Ha Long — day 5-6

1.25h flight

Hoi An — day 7-10

1.25h flight

HCMC + Mekong — day 11-14

BUDGET PER DAY

Backpacker	20 EUR
Standard	50 EUR
Comfort	90 EUR

BOOK FIRST

01	International flights, 6 to 8 weeks out	Aviasales
02	Ha Long cruise and internal flights, 2 weeks out	12Go
03	eSIM, install before departure	Saily

BEST MONTHS

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
shoulder	best	best	best	shoulder	heaviest	heaviest	heaviest	shoulder	best	best	shoulder

best: country-wide window · shoulder: regional, mixed · heaviest rain, typhoon risk

Vietnam at a glance

scores 0-100 · pack-lightly country-comparison data

SCORECARD

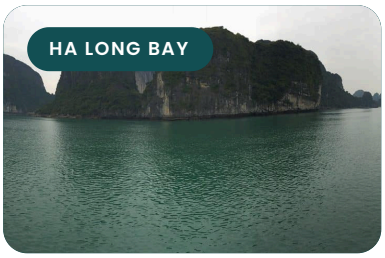
Tourist infrastructure	70
Safety	70
Budget friendly	90
Nature	85
Food and drinks	90
Culture	85

Budget travel	25 USD/day
Mid-range	60 USD/day
Luxury	150 USD/day

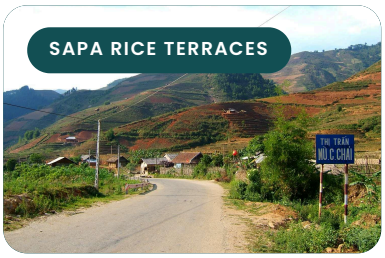
ADVENTURE · CULTURE · BEACH · NATURE · FOOD

source: country-comparison tool, 2026-06

SIX FRAMES OF THE TRIP













01

The country

What Vietnam is, what it is not, who goes, and the three regions you actually need to know before you pick dates.

IN THIS CHAPTER

One country, three regions, four readers 07

What Vietnam is

99M people · 3 regions · 1,650 km north to south

A single-party socialist republic of 99 million people running in a long S-curve down the eastern edge of the Indochina peninsula, bordered by China, Laos, and Cambodia. Hanoi is the capital in the north; Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) is the bigger commercial engine in the south. The country is the value pick of Southeast Asia: street food at a dollar a plate, comfortable buses and a coastal sleeper train, and three climate zones that mean somewhere is in season almost any month. Two things pull travellers here in particular: the landscapes, from the limestone bays of the north to the largest caves on earth in the centre, and the recent history, still legible from the old DMZ down to the tunnels under Saigon. The flip side is the geography itself. The distances are real, the centre runs a different weather calendar from both ends, and the traffic is the genuine hazard most travellers underestimate. This guide shows you the version that works in 2026.

CAPITAL
Hanoi
~8M people

POPULATION
99M
Buddhist + folk

CURRENCY
VND
1 USD = ~25,000 dong

BEST MONTHS
Feb-Apr
also Oct-Nov

THREE REGIONS, THREE CHARACTERS



North: Hanoi, Ha Long, Sapa

karst + mountains · cool winters

The cultural core. Hanoi as the hub, Ha Long and Ninh Binh by water, the rice terraces of Sapa and the Ha Giang Loop to the far north. Winter nights turn genuinely cold.



Centre: Hue, Hoi An, Da Nang

heritage coast · wettest Sep-Nov

Imperial Hue, lantern-lit Hoi An, beach-city Da Nang, and the cave country of Phong Nha. The wettest zone, with typhoon risk through autumn.



South: HCMC, Mekong, Dalat

tropical · dry Dec-Apr · wet May-Oct

Saigon energy, the river life of the Mekong Delta, cool highlands in Dalat, and the island finish at Phu Quoc. Hot and tropical year-round.



The far north: Ha Giang

mountain loop · 3-4 days

The country's best motorbike route, a high-altitude loop along the Chinese border. For second trips and riders, not first-timers on a scooter.

WHO THIS GUIDE IS WRITTEN FOR

First-time SE-Asia
14 days, mid-range, the Hanoi to Hoi An to Saigon north-south run.

Long-stay nomad
Da Nang or HCMC base, e-visa renewals, 1,000 to 1,400 USD a month all-in.

Solo backpacker
25 USD a day, hostels, 3 to 4 weeks on the way to Laos or Cambodia.

Couple or family
2-week trip. Hoi An plus Ha Long; Phu Quoc or Da Nang beach for kids.

photos: Wikimedia Commons

02

Where to go

Three regions, one long country. Pick your region before you pick your dates: the centre in October and the south in October are two different trips.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Hanoi 09

Ha Long Bay 10

Ninh Binh, Sapa and Ha Giang 11

Hoi An · the regions, mapped 13

Caves, temples, beaches 15

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The war and its sites 19

Hue and Da Nang 20

Ho Chi Minh City and Cu Chi 21

Mekong Delta and Dalat 22

Phu Quoc and the islands 23

Hanoi

capital · 2 nights minimum · cool Nov-Mar



Winter in Hanoi is genuinely cool: 15 to 18C in January, with grey drizzle. Pack a layer; this is not the tropics.

Train Street cafes get shut down in periodic crackdowns. Watch the timetable, stand well back, and do not pose on the tracks.

Hanoi is the older, denser, more buttoned-up sibling to Saigon, and the better introduction to the country. The Old Quarter is thirty-six trading streets that still half-organise by craft, a tangle of scooters, shophouse cafes, and pho counters where a stool on the pavement is the dining room. The lake at the centre, Hoan Kiem, is where the city walks at dawn.

Two nights makes it click. Spend the first morning on the Old Quarter and Hoan Kiem, the afternoon at the Temple of Literature and the Ho Chi Minh complex. Day two is the food: a bun cha lunch, an egg coffee in the afternoon, a bia hoi corner at dusk where the draft beer is thirty cents a glass. Train Street is worth one careful look, not a sit-down photo session on the rails.

Old Quarter

First-time base: thirty-six craft streets, pho counters, walkable to the lake.

Hoan Kiem Lake

The city's centre of gravity; walk it at dawn, weekend nights go car-free.

Ba Dinh

The Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum and Temple of Literature; quieter, leafier streets.

Tay Ho (West Lake)

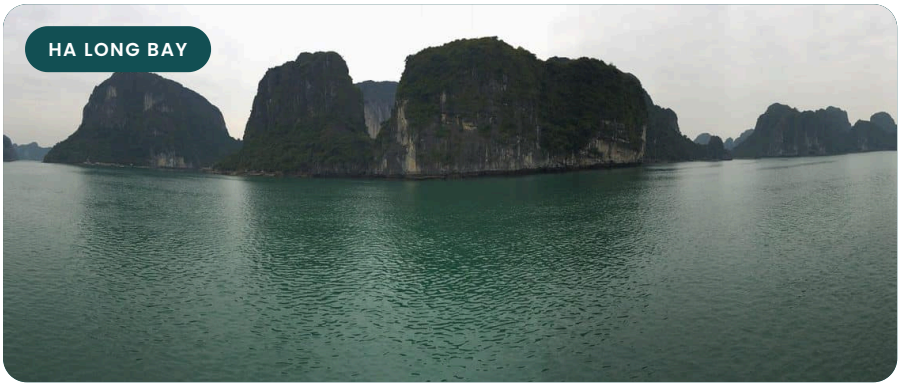
Expat cafes and lakeside bars, almost no tour crowds. The long-stay quarter.

GO DEEPER

The full Hanoi city guide ranks ten picks with quick tips, the lake itself in the Hoan Kiem page, and the rail-line ritual in the Train Street write-up.

Ha Long Bay

north · 2-3 day cruise · best Oct-Apr



Two thousand limestone islands out of jade water is the image that sells Vietnam, and it earns the queue. The catch is the crowding: the central bay runs hundreds of day-boats, and the cheapest tours stack four to a mooring. The fix is to sleep on the water. An overnight cruise gets you the dawn and the dusk when the day-trippers have gone, and the boat quality is the whole experience.

Spend on the cruise, not the cabin count. A reputable two-day, one-night boat with kayaking and a cave stop is the sweet spot. If you want the same karst with a fraction of the boats, route to neighbouring Lan Ha Bay off Cat Ba Island instead, or to Bai Tu Long to the northeast. Hanoi is three and a half hours away by road; most cruises bundle the transfer.

Read recent reviews on the exact boat, not the brand. Operators rotate vessels and the photos rarely match the cabin you get.

Cruises cancel in storms with little notice. Build a spare day into the north leg, especially in the autumn typhoon window.

Overnight cruise

The one that matters: one night on the water gets you the empty dawn bay.

Sung Sot Cave

The big show cave on most routes; go with the first boat to beat the crush.

Lan Ha Bay

Same karst off Cat Ba, far fewer boats. The contrarian's Ha Long.

Cat Ba Island

A national park and a base for kayaking; the budget alternative to a cruise.

READ ON Picks and timing in the Ha Long Bay write-up, the show cave in the Sung Sot page, and the quieter island in the Cat Ba breakdown.

Ninh Binh, Sapa and Ha Giang

the northern landscapes · 1 to 4 nights each



Ninh Binh: pick Trang An, not Tam Coc. Same scenery, quieter boats, better caves, and the rowers are paid fairly.

Do not ride the Ha Giang Loop yourself without real scooter experience and an IDP. Hire an easy-rider driver instead.

The north stacks three of the country's best landscapes within a long bus ride of Hanoi. Ninh Binh is the closest, two hours south: the same karst as Ha Long but rising out of rice paddies, toured by rowboat through flooded caves. Take the Trang An route over Tam Coc; it is quieter, the boats are calmer, and the caves are better.

Sapa, in the far northwest, is rice-terrace country and the base for valley treks among Hmong and Dao villages. Skip the over-built town and base in a valley homestay instead. For the serious version, the Ha Giang Loop further northeast is the best motorbike route in the country: three to four days of mountain passes along the Chinese border. Hire an "easy rider" driver if you cannot ride confidently yourself.

Trang An, Ninh Binh

The rowboat route through flooded caves and karst paddies. Day-trip or one night.

Mua Cave viewpoint

Five hundred steps over Tam Coc for the postcard panorama of the valley.

Sapa valleys

Base in a village homestay, trek the terraces, skip the concrete town itself.

Ha Giang Loop

Three to four days of border-mountain riding. Ma Pi Leng Pass is the headline.

MORE ON THE SITE The boat route in the Trang An grottoes page, the valley walks in the Sapa rundown, and the mountain ride in the Ha Giang breakdown.

Hoi An

centre · 2-3 nights · driest Feb-May



Hoi An is the prettiest town in the country and it knows it. A preserved trading port of yellow-ochre shophouses, the Japanese Covered Bridge, and a river that fills with paper lanterns after dark. The Ancient Town is car-free, walkable in an evening, and on the full moon the electric lights go off for a lantern festival that is the signature image of central Vietnam.

Two to three nights is right. Beyond the old town there is a beach (An Bang) ten minutes by bike, rice fields you can cycle through, and the best cluster of cooking classes in the country. The town is also tailor central: a custom suit or dress in a day, with the usual caveat to check the fabric and the seams before you pay. Day-trip to the My Son Cham ruins if temple history is your thing.

The Ancient Town runs a paper ticket for the heritage houses. Most lanes are free to wander; you only pay to enter the listed sites.

October and November are the wettest, with river flooding some years. The Feb-May window is the dry, comfortable one.

Ancient Town at dusk

Lanterns on the river, the Japanese Covered Bridge; go car-free in the evening.

Cooking class

Market tour plus a basket-boat ride; the best concentration in the country.

An Bang Beach

Ten minutes by bike; calm sand and beach bars without the resort wall.

My Son Sanctuary

Cham brick towers in the hills, an easy half-day; go early before the heat.

KEEP READING

Picks and timing in the Hoi An page, the bridge itself in the Covered Bridge write-up, and the Cham ruins in the My Son page.

Hue, the imperial capital

centre · day-trip or 1 night · driest Feb-Apr



Hue was the seat of the Nguyen emperors from 1802 until 1945, and what is left is the country's grandest history lesson: a walled citadel on the Perfume River, scarred by the 1968 fighting and slowly restored. The Imperial City inside takes a couple of hours to walk, and the royal tombs scattered in the hills south of town are the better half of the visit.

Hue earns a day, sometimes a night. The classic move is to ride or drive on to Hoi An over the Hai Van Pass, the coastal mountain road that gives you the best ocean views in central Vietnam in a single afternoon. The royal cuisine is its own draw: a refined, fiddly style built to please an emperor, plus the city's famous spicy bun bo Hue noodle soup.

The royal tombs are spread out and reward a half-day by car or scooter. Khai Dinh and Minh Mang are the two to prioritise.

← Do the Hai Van Pass transfer to Hoi An by private car with photo stops. It beats the train tunnel and the bus for the view.

The Imperial City

The walled citadel on the river; allow two hours, go before the midday heat.

Khai Dinh Tomb

The most ornate royal tomb, a mountainside of mosaic and concrete grandeur.

Thien Mu Pagoda

The seven-tier riverside pagoda, the symbol of the city. Best at golden hour.

Hai Van Pass

The coastal mountain road south to Da Nang and Hoi An; the transfer is the trip.

THE LONG VERSION Picks and timing in the Hue write-up, the citadel in the Imperial City page, and the riverside pagoda in the Thien Mu breakdown.

The regions, mapped to what you want

three regions plus the island finish · pick the column, read down

Vietnam is one long country with three weather calendars. The north runs cool winters and a green spring; the centre is wettest in autumn, with typhoon risk; the south is tropical and dry December to April. The matrix below replaces a page of prose: decide what you want from the trip, then read down the column. Each region also has its own hub city and bus or flight network.

REGION	HUB	BEACH	CULTURE	NATURE	BUDGET
North	Hanoi	●○○	●●●	●●●	●●●
Centre	Da Nang	●●○	●●●	●●○	●●○
South	HCMC	●●○	●●○	●●○	●●●
Phu Quoc	island	●●●	●○○	●●○	●○○

● filled dots = stronger fit (3 = built for it)

assessment: pack-lightly Vietnam cluster, 2026-06

Two weeks, first trip: run the whole country north to south with one or two internal flights. Three weeks: add Ha Giang or the Mekong in depth.

The beach window flips by region. The centre is best Feb to May, the south Dec to April, and the north has no real beach season at all.

ON THE WEBSITE The landscapes ranked north to south in the best places rundown; the rated coast in the beaches ranking.

Phong Nha and the caves worth a day

the world's biggest cave country · 2-3 nights, centre



Phong Nha-Ke Bang holds the largest caves on earth, carved through a limestone massif on the old border between north and south. Son Doong, the biggest cave in the world, has its own jungle and clouds inside; the multi-day expedition to reach it books a year out and costs thousands. The good news is that the accessible caves are spectacular and cheap: Paradise Cave is a kilometre of cathedral-scale formations on a boardwalk, and Phong Nha Cave is reached by river boat.

Base in Phong Nha village or nearby Dong Hoi, two to three nights. Beyond the show caves there is the Dark Cave with its mud bath and zip line, easy countryside cycling, and a war-history layer along the old Ho Chi Minh Trail. It slots neatly between Hue and the north on an overnight-train or sleeper-bus route.

Son Doong is a permit-limited, multi-day expedition booked far ahead. The accessible caves give you 90 percent of the awe for a fraction of the price.

Some caves shut in the wet season when river levels rise. Phong Nha is at its best in the spring dry window.

Paradise Cave

A kilometre of cathedral-scale formations on a boardwalk; the easy headline.

Phong Nha Cave

Reached by river boat through the cliff mouth; the original show cave.

Dark Cave

Zip line in, mud bath inside, swim out. The adventure-lite option for groups.

Cat Tien, far south

A rainforest park near Saigon for a night safari; gibbons and rare birds.

MORE DETAIL

Picks and timing in the Phong Nha write-up, the boardwalk cave in the Paradise Cave page, and the wider park list in the national parks rundown.

Temples and sacred sites that stay with you

three faiths, layered · these three stand outside the pattern



Vietnam layers three traditions: Mahayana Buddhism, folk and ancestor worship, and a French-era Catholic strand that left cathedrals in the cities. Most pagodas you pass will start to blur. Three sites stand outside the pattern, less for grandeur than for the story they hand you, and one of them is a religion that exists almost nowhere else.

Pair any visit with the dress rule, shoulders and knees covered, and remove your shoes where signs ask. Photograph people at worship only with a nod, and never pose with your back to an altar. Go early; the heat and the tour groups both arrive mid-morning.

The Cao Dai noon service at Tay Ninh is a half-day from Saigon and usually paired with the Cu Chi Tunnels in one tour.

Photography rule that matters: ask before shooting people mid-prayer, and never stand on or above an altar platform.

Cao Dai Great Temple, Tay Ninh

The home temple of a syncretic Vietnamese faith, all pastel dragons and a divine eye. The noon service is the show. Half-day from Saigon.

Bich Dong Pagoda, Ninh Binh

A three-tier cave pagoda built into a karst cliff above the rice paddies. Quiet, free, and a short detour from the Trang An boats.

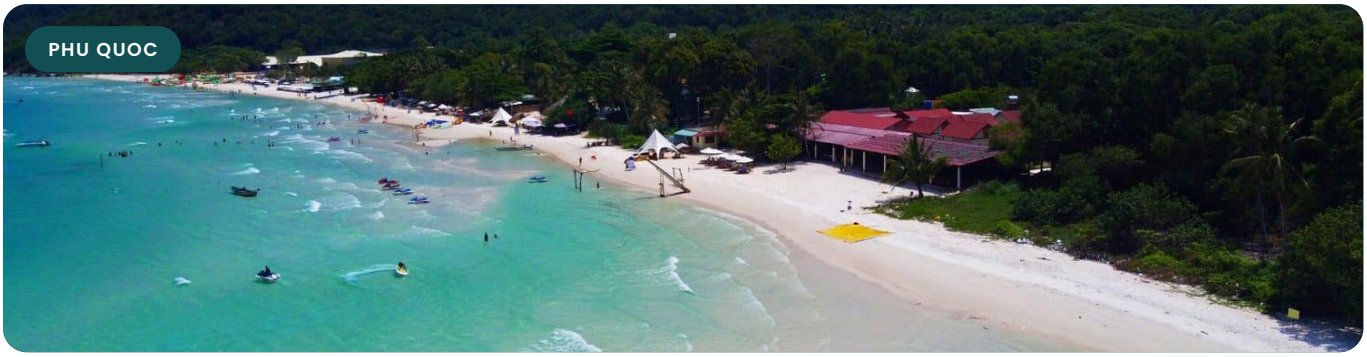
Yen Tu pagoda complex

The birthplace of Vietnamese Zen, a mountain pilgrimage of stupas reached on foot or by cable car. Northeast of Hanoi, almost no foreign tourists.

WORTH A READ All thirteen landmarks with visiting notes in the religious landmarks page, the syncretic temple in the Cao Dai write-up, and the Zen mountain in the Yen Tu page.

Beaches, by what you want from the day

four moods · the coast runs the length of the country



Vietnam is not a beach-first country the way its neighbours are, but the coast runs 3,000 kilometres and the right stretch beats anything in the brochure. What matters is what you want from the day: silence, clear water for snorkelling, a town with nightlife, or a calm shallow sea for kids. One pick per mood below, with the runner-up where the regions differ.

FOR SILENCE

Con Dao Islands

A former prison archipelago turned near-empty marine park, reached by short flight. Alternative: Doc Let, north of Nha Trang, on a weekday.

FOR SWIM AND SNORKEL

Phu Quoc, the south island

Clear water and reef trips off the An Thoi islets. Alternative: Nha Trang's bay islands for a cheaper, busier version.

FOR THE TOWN

Da Nang, My Khe Beach

A long city beach with cafes, surf in winter, and an airport ten minutes back. Alternative: Nha Trang for a louder, more built-up strip.

FOR FAMILY

An Bang, Hoi An

Calm shallow water, a bike ride from the old town, low-key beach bars. Mui Ne if you want dunes and a kite-surf scene instead.

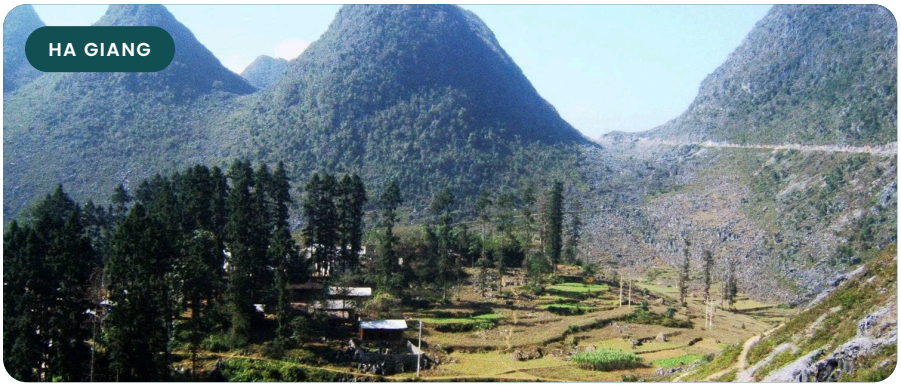
The beach season flips by region. The centre is best Feb to May, the south Dec to April; the two windows barely overlap.

Rip currents are real on the central coast in autumn. Swim between flags at Da Nang and Nha Trang, not on empty stretches.

SEE ALSO All twelve rated beaches in the beaches write-up, the offshore options in the islands rundown, and the clearest water by month in the snorkeling breakdown.

Off the beaten path

for trips of two weeks plus · one place no friend ever mentioned



If your trip is two weeks or longer, you have room for one place that no friend ever mentioned. These are not secret; locals know them, and so does the small slice of repeat visitors. They are the Vietnam most tourists never see, because the first trip runs the obvious north-south line.

The far north is the prize. The Ha Giang Loop and the Dong Van karst plateau hold the country's wildest mountain scenery, while Cao Bang to the east hides the thundering Ban Gioc waterfall on the Chinese border. Closer to Hanoi, Pu Luong and Mai Chau give you terraced valleys and stilt-house homestays without the Sapa crowds.

Far-north logistics: an overnight bus or sleeper to Ha Giang town, then a guided loop. Cao Bang links by bus, not rail.

The Ha Giang Loop is high, cold, and steep. Ride it only with real experience and an IDP, or hire an easy-rider driver.

Dong Van karst plateau

A UNESCO geopark of jagged limestone and Hmong markets at the top of the Ha Giang Loop.

Ban Gioc, Cao Bang

The country's biggest waterfall, straddling the Chinese border, with bamboo rafts to its base.

Pu Luong and Mai Chau

Terraced valleys and stilt-house homestays three hours from Hanoi, with none of the Sapa tour buses.

DIG IN

Five off-route picks with maps and timing in the off the beaten path rundown, and the border waterfall in the Ban Gioc breakdown.

The war, and the sites that tell it

north to south · the layer most first trips underrate



What Americans call the Vietnam War is the American War here, and it is the thing many travellers come to understand on the ground rather than from a documentary. The sites run the length of the country, most are cheap or free, and they are recent enough to be living memory: your guide's parents lived it. Treat them as memorials, not photo stops, and the day stays with you longer than any beach.

You do not need a dedicated history trip. Pick the sites in the regions you are already passing through: the museum and the tunnels in the south, the old front line in the centre, the prison and the mausoleum in the north. One serious half-day in each region is enough to change how you read the rest of the country.

Language matters. It is the American War here, and the telling is from the Vietnamese side. Read it as one perspective, powerfully told.

Cu Chi fills with tour buses by mid-morning. Take the first slot, or choose the quieter Ben Duoc section over Ben Dinh.

War Remnants Museum, Saigon

The single most affecting stop in the country. Confronting, essential, two hours.

Cu Chi Tunnels

The guerrilla tunnel network, a half-day from Saigon. Claustrophobic, and it stays with you.

The DMZ and Vinh Moc

The old north-south line, from Hue or Dong Ha. A whole village dug in underground.

Hoa Lo Prison, Hanoi

The "Hanoi Hilton" in the capital, paired with the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum nearby.

MORE DETAIL

The southern stops in the War Remnants Museum page and the Cu Chi tunnels guide, plus the capital's memorials at the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum.

Da Nang and the Marble Mountains

the centre's beach city · the Hoi An gateway



Da Nang is the centre's big modern city: a long beach, a famous river of light bridges, and the airport almost every central itinerary flies into. Most travellers use it as the gateway to Hoi An, thirty minutes south, but a night or two earns its keep. My Khe Beach is a genuine city beach, the seafood is excellent and cheap, and the Dragon Bridge breathes fire on weekend nights.

Just south sit the Marble Mountains, five limestone-and-marble hills riddled with caves and shrines you climb between for a panorama of the coast. Inland, the much-hyped Golden Bridge held in giant stone hands at Ba Na Hills is a theme-park set piece: go at opening or skip it, because by mid-morning the queue is the experience. Da Nang is also the start or end of the Hai Van Pass run to Hue.

⚠ Ba Na Hills and the Golden Bridge are kitsch and mobbed. Go for 7am opening or skip it; the photo lies about the crowd.

The Dragon Bridge breathes fire and water Saturday and Sunday at 9pm. Stand on the east bank for the view.

My Khe Beach

A long city beach with cafes and winter surf, ten minutes from the centre.

Marble Mountains

Five marble hills of caves and shrines with a coastal panorama; go early.

Son Tra Peninsula

A green headland of viewpoints and rare langurs, best on a rented scooter.

THE FULL PICTURE

Picks and timing in the Da Nang page, the marble caves in the Marble Mountains write-up, and the fire bridge in the Dragon Bridge breakdown.

photo: Wikimedia Commons

Ho Chi Minh City and Cu Chi

the southern engine · 2 nights plus a half-day tunnel run



Saigon, officially Ho Chi Minh City, is the loud, fast, money-making south. District 1 holds the colonial-era set pieces, the rooftop bars, and the backpacker churn of Bui Vien street. The history is the reason to slow down: the War Remnants Museum is unflinching, and the Independence Palace is frozen at the moment the tanks arrived in 1975. Two nights is plenty in the city itself.

The half-day everyone takes is the Cu Chi Tunnels, the Viet Cong network an hour northwest where you can crawl a widened section underground. It is usually bundled with the Cao Dai temple at Tay Ninh. The street food here is sweeter and bolder than the north: com tam broken-rice plates, banh xeo crepes, and the best iced coffee in the country.

Bag-snatch by scooter is the real District 1 risk. Keep your phone in hand away from the road, bag strapped across your body.

Two Cu Chi sites exist. Ben Dinh is closer and busier; Ben Duoc is further out and quieter. Most tours go to Ben Dinh.

War Remnants Museum

The unflinching account of the war; allow two hours and a clear head.

Cu Chi Tunnels

Crawl a section of the Viet Cong network; a half-day, often paired with Tay Ninh.

Ben Thanh and District 1

The central market, the colonial core, and a street-food scooter tour after dark.

GO DEEPER Picks and timing in the Ho Chi Minh City rundown, the tunnels in the Cu Chi tour page, and the museum in the War Remnants write-up.

Mekong Delta and Dalat

the river south and the cool highlands · day-trip or overnight





The Mekong Delta is the rice bowl and the river-life south of Saigon: floating markets, fruit orchards, and a tangle of canals worked from boats. Skip the rushed one-day tour from the city, which spends more time on the bus than the water. Base a night in Can Tho instead, and take a dawn boat to the Cai Rang floating market before the day-trippers arrive.

Dalat runs the opposite register: a cool-climate hill town in the southern highlands, full of French-era villas, pine forest, coffee farms, and the kitsch fun of the Crazy House. It is the honeymoon and weekend-escape town for Vietnamese, reached by a scenic motorbike road from Nha Trang or Mui Ne. Both make a one or two-night detour from the standard southern loop.

← Sleep in Can Tho, not on a Saigon day tour. A 6am boat reaches the Cai Rang market before the tour fleet.

Cai Rang floating market

The big morning market at Can Tho; go at dawn by boat to beat the tour fleet.

Can Tho homestay

A night on the river beats a day tour; orchards, canals, and a quiet evening.

Dalat highlands

Cool pine country, coffee farms, the Crazy House, and easy-rider motorbike roads.

READ ON

Picks and timing in the Mekong Delta rundown, the dawn market in the Cai Rang page, and the hill town in the Dalat breakdown.

Phu Quoc and the islands

the island finish · Phu Quoc, Con Dao, Cat Ba



Phu Quoc splits in two. Base in the quiet forested north or on Ong Lang beach, not the resort-and-theme-park south, unless that is the point.

Con Dao is reached by short flight and stays empty. The water is the clearest in the country; the history is the reason to read first.

Phu Quoc is the country's resort island, a short flight off the southern tip in the Gulf of Thailand. The north end stays forested and quiet, the south has gone heavy on resorts and a giant theme park, and the An Thoi islets off the coast are the snorkel and dive trip. It is the easy beach finish to a long overland trip, dry from November through April.

For something rawer, Con Dao is the contrarian pick: a former prison archipelago turned near-empty marine park, with the country's clearest water and a heavy, moving history. Up north, Cat Ba sits beside the Ha Long karst and doubles as a budget base for Lan Ha Bay. The three islands cover the full range, from polished resort to barely-developed.

Phu Quoc

The resort island and the easy beach finish; snorkel the An Thoi islets in the south.

Con Dao

A near-empty marine park and former prison island; the clearest water in Vietnam.

Cat Ba

A national park island next to Ha Long, and the budget base for Lan Ha Bay.

MORE ON THE SITE

Picks and beaches in the Phu Quoc write-up and the Con Dao breakdown, or compare them all in the islands rundown.

03

What to do

Activities ranked by signal per dong: motorbike tours, food, caves, markets. Plus where to sleep in each region and which tours are worth paying for.

IN THIS CHAPTER

What Vietnam asks of your days 25

The coast and the water 26

Food, the calibration dishes 27

Markets, coffee, water puppets 28

Stay: Hanoi and the north 29

Stay: the centre and the south 30

What Vietnam asks you to do with your days

food first · the road north · one threshold activity per trip



A guided street-food tour on the back of a scooter is the single best first night in any Vietnamese city. Cheap, safe, and it teaches you what to order all week.

A water puppet show in Hanoi is touristy but genuinely local theatre, an hour and worth one evening.

Vietnam arranges its days around food and movement. Almost everywhere there is a street-food tour and a cooking class worth taking; the country runs on the back of a scooter, so a guided motorbike day is the activity that defines most trips. The north adds treks and the Ha Giang Loop, the centre adds caves and a heritage town, the south adds the river and the war history.

If one activity crosses a threshold, it is usually the one on two wheels: an easy-rider day through the countryside, or a few days riding the far-north mountains. A cooking class that ends with you understanding fish sauce comes a close second. The rest of the calendar is glue between those moments.

Cooking class, Hoi An

Market tour, basket-boat ride, six hours from about 31 USD. Book a Tra Que cooking class.

Motorbike tour, Hanoi

A guided ride through the city and countryside, about 57 USD. Book a Hanoi highlights ride.

Easy-rider day, Dalat

A guide rides, you ride pillion through waterfalls and coffee farms. From about 9 USD for a half-day. Book a waterfall trek.

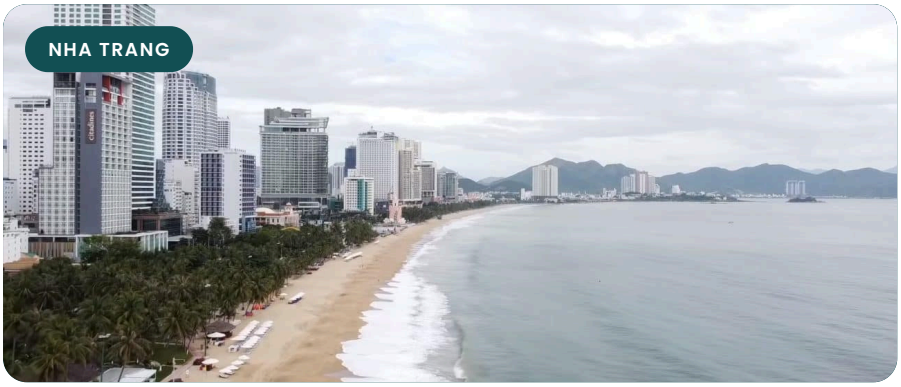
Egg coffee, Hanoi

Ca phe trung: a whipped egg-yolk cream over strong coffee, about a dollar, an Old Quarter ritual.

KEEP READING Etiquette and the cultural calendar in the culture page, the puppet theatre in the water puppet page, and wildlife in the wildlife breakdown.

The coast and the water

Nha Trang for diving · the south islands for clear water



No flying for 18 to 24 hours after your last dive. Plan it before an internal flight, not the morning of one.

Check your travel insurance covers diving to 18 metres before the course, not after the incident.

Vietnam is not a world dive destination the way Thailand or the Philippines is, but the water earns a day or two if you are passing the coast. Nha Trang is the home of beginner diving: a sheltered bay, cheap operators, and a try-dive or a guided reef dive for well under 100 USD. Book a Nha Trang Bay dive if you want the slot locked before you arrive.

Already certified? The clearest water is in the south: the An Thoi islets off Phu Quoc and the near-empty marine park at Con Dao reward a trip. For mask-only days, the bay islands at Nha Trang and the reefs off Phu Quoc cover most of the snorkelling worth doing. Visibility is best in the dry months and falls off fast in the wet.

Nha Trang Bay

The beginner-diving hub: sheltered water, cheap operators, and try-dives for under 100 USD.

An Thoi, Phu Quoc

The southern islets, the clearest reef snorkel and dive trip in the country.

Con Dao

A protected marine park with the best visibility and almost no other boats.

THE LONG VERSION

Ten dive sites by level in the diving write-up, the clearest water by month in the snorkeling breakdown, and the offshore options in the islands rundown.

Food: the four calibration dishes

street economy · plastic stools · 1 to 4 USD a plate

Vietnamese food is built on balance and freshness rather than heat: herbs, fish sauce, lime, and a clean broth instead of a heavy curry. It changes as you go south, from the subtle pho and bun cha of the north to the sweeter, bolder plates of Saigon. The tourist mistake is eating in places that look like restaurants. Locals eat where the stools are knee-high plastic and the kitchen is a single pot on the pavement. Order these four early; they are your bar for everything after.



Pho pho

USD 1.50-3 · everywhere

The national bowl: a clear beef or chicken broth simmered for hours, flat rice noodles, herbs added at the table. A breakfast dish first. If the broth is cloudy or sweet, walk on.



Banh mi banh mi

USD 0.80-1.60 · everywhere

The colonial leftover turned national: an airy baguette, pate, pickled carrot and daikon, coriander, chilli. The best ones come from a cart, not a cafe. Lunch on the move.



Bun cha bun cha

USD 2-3.50 · Hanoi

Hanoi's signature lunch: smoky grilled pork in a bowl of sweet-sour fish-sauce broth, with cold rice noodles and herbs to dip. Eaten at midday, never at night.



Goi cuon goi cuon

USD 1-3 · everywhere

Fresh, not fried: rice paper around prawn, pork, herbs and vermicelli, dipped in peanut or fish sauce. The light counterpoint to a heavy day; ask for the cha gio if you want them fried.

Coffee is its own meal here: ca phe sua da (iced, with condensed milk) by day, egg coffee in Hanoi, and bia hoi corners for thirty-cent draft beer at dusk.

A busy unmarked stall is a safe stall: high turnover is the food-safety system. The empty place with laminated photos is the risk.

ON THE WEBSITE

The regional dishes and drinks in the food and drinks rundown; what the same plate costs at street and restaurant level in the budget breakdown.

photos: Wikimedia Commons

Markets, coffee, and local nights

three threads that round out the chapter



Markets here run on the water and the dawn. The floating markets of the Mekong Delta and the highland Sunday markets at Bac Ha and Dong Van are the ones worth the early alarm. In the cities, Hanoi's Dong Xuan and Saigon's Ben Thanh are tourist-priced but useful for a first orientation; negotiate hard at the stalls, never at the food counters.

Coffee is the daily ritual, not a side note. Vietnam is the world's second-largest grower, and the local style is strong and sweet: ca phe sua da over ice, egg coffee in Hanoi, coconut coffee in Saigon. An evening out is cheaper still on a bia hoi corner, where fresh draft beer runs thirty to sixty cents a glass and the plastic stools spill onto the pavement.

Negotiate at market stalls, never at food counters or fixed-price cafes. Half the first asking price is a fair opening.

The Thang Long water puppet show in Hanoi runs several times daily. Book the early evening slot and sit near the front.

Markets

Cai Rang floating market at dawn, the Bac Ha and Dong Van Sunday markets in the hills.

Coffee culture

Ca phe sua da, Hanoi egg coffee, Saigon coconut coffee; a class teaches all five styles.

Culture as event

The Hanoi water puppet theatre, a bia hoi corner at dusk, a Hoi An lantern night.

MORE DETAIL The traditions and calendar in the culture page, the dawn market in the Cai Rang page, and the puppet theatre in the water puppet write-up.

Where to stay: Hanoi and the north

prices per night, double room · book 2 nights, decide the rest there

Two rules cover most of Vietnam. First: book only your first two nights ahead, then decide on the ground; walk-in rates often beat online ones outside peak weeks. Second: location beats stars. In Hanoi sleep in or just off the Old Quarter, and in Sapa skip the concrete town for a valley homestay near the trailheads.

Hanoi (Old Quarter)

hostel 8 USD mid 25 USD comfort 60 USD

The Old Quarter for the food and the walkable centre, Tay Ho if you want lake-side quiet for a longer stay. Check what a room costs around the Old Quarter before you commit; the dorm crowd sleeps cheap through Hostelworld.

Sapa (valley homestay)

hostel 7 USD mid 22 USD comfort 55 USD

Base in a Ta Van or Lao Chai valley homestay for the terraces and the quiet, not in Sapa town itself. Trekking guides are arranged through your host. Backpackers run the dorm scene on Hostelworld; for a room with a view, see what the valley is charging tonight.

Mid-range and up across the north, with free cancellation while your plans are still moving.

Find Stays on Booking.com

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Hanoi coffee class: five Vietnamese coffees

from 24 USD
5.0 (177 reviews)
2 hours

Ninh Binh full-day tour from Hanoi (Trang An, Hoa Lu)

from 80 USD
5.0 (293 reviews)
11 hours

Sapa full-day rural trek

from 43 USD
5.0 (79 reviews)
6 hours

Live Viator tours, prices captured June 2026, ratings from verified bookings. Tap a card to book.

Where to stay: the centre and the south

prices per night, double room · location beats stars

The same two rules apply down the country. In Hoi An sleep near the Ancient Town or out toward An Bang beach, both a short bike ride from the centre. In Ho Chi Minh City, District 1 puts you on the action but trades quiet for noise; the side streets a block back are calmer for the same money.

Hoi An

hostel 8 USD **mid 28 USD** **comfort 70 USD**

Near the Ancient Town for the lanterns on foot, or out by An Bang beach for the quiet and a bike commute in. Rates swing with the season, so pull up live Hoi An prices before you lock anything in. Dorms cluster on Hostelworld.

Ho Chi Minh City (District 1)

hostel 9 USD **mid 30 USD** **comfort 80 USD**

District 1 keeps the sights, the rooftop bars, and the airport link close; a side street off Bui Vien buys you sleep for the same rate. Still need a bed? The live map around District 1 and Hostelworld fill the gaps.

Hotels and resorts across the centre and the south, cancellable until a few days before check-in.

Find Stays on Booking.com

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Hoi An cooking class with market and basket boat

from 31 USD
5.0 (180 reviews)
6 hours

Saigon street-food scooter tour

from 35 USD
5.0 (280 reviews)
4 hours

Da Nang home cooking class

from 36 USD
5.0 (362 reviews)
2.5 hours

Live Viator tours, prices captured June 2026, ratings from verified bookings. Tap a card to book.

04

Routes

Eight paths through the country, the two-week north-to-south run worth flying for, and the line drawn as a transit map.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Pick your trip, 8 paths 32

14 days, day by day 33

The line as a transit map 35

For who most guides ignore 36

Pick your trip

three dimensions, eight paths · find yours, jump to the matching itinerary

Who you travel with, how long you have, and what you spend per night decide the route before any list of sights does. The country is long, so almost every path uses at least one internal flight. Find your row below; the two-week run on the next spread covers paths two and three in full.

SOLO · 7D · BACKPACKER

Hanoi, Ha Long, Ninh Binh

USD 340 · hostels + 1 cruise

- Hanoi 3n: Old Quarter + food
- Ha Long 2n: overnight cruise
- Ninh Binh 2n: Trang An

SOLO · 14D · BACKPACKER

North to south, the full line

USD 650 · 2 internal flights

- Hanoi 3 · Sapa 3 · Ha Long 2
- Fly to Hoi An: 3n
- Fly HCMC + Mekong: 3n

COUPLE · 14D · MID

Hanoi, Ha Long, Hoi An, HCMC

USD 2,000 for 2 · 3-star hotels

- Hanoi 3 + Ninh Binh day
- Ha Long 2 · Hoi An 4
- HCMC 3 + Mekong day

COUPLE · 7D · COMFORT

Hoi An and Phu Quoc, 4-star

USD 2,300 for 2 · resorts

- Hoi An 3: heritage + beach
- Fly to Phu Quoc 4
- Reef trip + spa days

FAMILY · 14D · MID

Hanoi, Hoi An, Phu Quoc

USD 4,000 · family of 4

- Hanoi 3 + Ha Long day cruise
- Fly Da Nang/Hoi An 5
- Fly Phu Quoc 5: calm beach

FAMILY · 7D · COMFORT

Da Nang and Hoi An, no long legs

USD 3,000 · family of 4

- Da Nang 3: beach + base
- Hoi An 4: lanterns, bikes, pool

NOMAD · 30D · MID

Da Nang base + weekend hops

USD 1,100 a month all-in

- Da Nang 24: beach + coworking
- Hoi An weekend · Hue weekend

RIDER · 4D · ADVENTURE

The Ha Giang Loop

USD 300 · guided easy-rider

- Night bus from Hanoi
- 4-day border-mountain loop
- Dong Van + Ma Pi Leng Pass

WORTH A READ

Full day-by-day versions online: the 7-day route, the 14-day route, the 21-day route, and the 28-day route.

14 days, the route worth flying for

days 1-7 · Hanoi and the north

The full north-to-south line, refined. Built for first-timers, valid for repeat visitors. Book the Ha Long cruise (day 5) and the internal flights through 12Go a couple of weeks ahead; everything else can be decided on the day.

1	**Arrive Hanoi** HAN · day zero	Land. Grab to the Old Quarter. Walk the lake, dinner at a pho counter you can see from the door. Sleep early.
2	**Hanoi old town** HAN · on foot	Temple of Literature and the Ho Chi Minh complex in the morning, Old Quarter and an egg coffee in the afternoon.
3	**Ninh Binh day-trip** 2h each way	Day tour to Trang An: a rowboat through the karst caves, then the Mua Cave viewpoint. Back in Hanoi for dinner.
4	**Transfer to Ha Long** HAN to bay · 3.5h	Mid-morning transfer, board the cruise by lunch. Kayak in the afternoon, dinner on the water as the day-boats leave.
5	**Ha Long dawn + back** cave + return	Sunrise on the empty bay, a cave stop, then the transfer back to Hanoi for the evening flight south.
6	**Hoi An ancient town** fly to DAD	Land Da Nang, transfer to Hoi An. Settle in, then the lantern-lit Ancient Town after dark.
7	**Cooking class + beach** Hoi An · slow day	Morning market and cooking class, afternoon cycling to An Bang beach. A tailor fitting if you ordered one.

The Hanoi to Da Nang flight is about 40 USD and 75 minutes against a 15-hour train. On a two-week trip, fly the long legs.

Build a spare half-day around the Ha Long cruise. Storms cancel boats, and you do not want the only buffer to be your flight.

14 days, the south half

days 8-14 · Hoi An to the Mekong

The second week works down the centre and into the south. Two short flights, a pass, and the rest is city and river logistics. Keep the last day light: leave the long museum or the Mekong day-trip with a buffer before your flight home.

8	**My Son + Hoi An** half-day ruins	Early run out to the My Son Cham towers, back for a slow afternoon and a last lantern evening in town.
9	**Hai Van Pass to Hue** car · 3h with stops	Private car over the Hai Van Pass with photo stops. Afternoon at the Imperial City in Hue.
10	**Hue tombs, fly south** HUI to SGN	Royal tombs by scooter or car in the morning, evening flight to Ho Chi Minh City.
11	**Saigon history** District 1 · on foot	War Remnants Museum and the Independence Palace, then a street-food scooter tour after dark.
12	**Cu Chi Tunnels** half-day out	Morning at the tunnels an hour northwest. Afternoon free for Ben Thanh market and a rooftop bar.
13	**Mekong Delta** Can Tho overnight	Drive to Can Tho, settle into a riverside homestay for the dawn floating market the next morning.
14	**Cai Rang + home** boat, then fly via SGN	Dawn boat to the Cai Rang market, back to Saigon by afternoon, long-haul home overnight.

Swap days 13-14 for a Phu Quoc beach finish if you would rather end on sand than on the river. A short flight from Saigon covers it.

Three weeks? Add Phong Nha between Hoi An and Hue, and a 3-day Ha Giang Loop before you leave the north.

The north-south line, as a transit map

short hops by road and water, the long legs by air

One main line runs the length of the country. The short northern hops go by road and boat: cheap, scenic, easy to arrange. The long jumps down the coast go by air, with the Reunification Express sleeper train as a slower, scenic alternative. Book the Ha Long cruise and the internal flights a couple of weeks ahead through 12Go; everything else can be bought on the day.



road / boat · bus / sleeper · flight · island flight

Plan the legs on 12Go

WHAT EACH LEG COSTS

Hanoi to Ninh Binh train or van · 2h ~5 USD	**Hanoi to Ha Long** cruise transfer · 3.5h incl. cruise	**Hanoi to Sapa** sleeper bus or train · 6h ~18 USD
Hanoi to Da Nang flight · 1h15 ~40 USD	**Da Nang to HCMC** flight · 1h15 ~40 USD	**HCMC to Phu Quoc** flight · 1h ~35 USD

fares: 12Go snapshot, 2026 · indicative one-way per person

Solo, nomad, LGBTQ+, and vegan in Vietnam

the specifics that change the days, one card each

The eight paths assume a generic traveller. If you fit one of these four, a handful of details change the trip, and they fit on one card each.

FOR SOLO TRAVELERS

Solo, especially female-solo

Vietnam is a comfortable solo trip, with the traffic the main daily hazard.

- **Safe bases** Hanoi Old Quarter, Hoi An, Da Nang beachfront
- **Hostels** the social chains run female dorms in every hub
- **Watch** bag-snatch by scooter in HCMC; cross roads slowly and steadily
- **Apps** Grab or Xanh SM for verified drivers and a fixed fare

FOR NOMADS

Digital nomads and long-stay

Da Nang and Saigon are the bases; the cost of living is the draw.

- **Base** Da Nang beachfront, HCMC Thao Dien, Hanoi Tay Ho
- **Coworking** serious cafe and coworking density in all three
- **Visa** 90-day e-visa, with border or extension runs to renew
- **Internet** fast and cheap fibre; 50-150 Mbps is the norm

FOR LGBTQ+ TRAVELERS

LGBTQ+

Same-sex relationships are legal and the cities are relaxed and welcoming.

- **Scene** Saigon and Hanoi have open bars and a small Pride
- **Norm** attitudes are easy-going; public affection is low-key for all couples
- **Stays** hotels rarely question a shared double, cities or coast
- **Rural** more conservative, but trouble is very rare

FOR VEGANS

Vegan and vegetarian

Vietnam has a strong Buddhist vegetarian tradition (an chay).

- **Phrase** "an chay" means strictly plant-based
- **Cities** Hue and Saigon lead on dedicated chay kitchens
- **Watch** fish sauce and shrimp paste hide in almost everything; say it twice
- **Timing** many places cook chay on the 1st and 15th lunar days

SEE ALSO Safety specifics in the safety page, visa routes in the visa write-up, and hospital quality in the hospitals and pharmacies page.

05

When to go

Three climate zones, two country-wide windows, one stubborn caveat. Plus the festival calendar that spikes hotel prices and what a day actually costs.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Weather, crowds, price 38

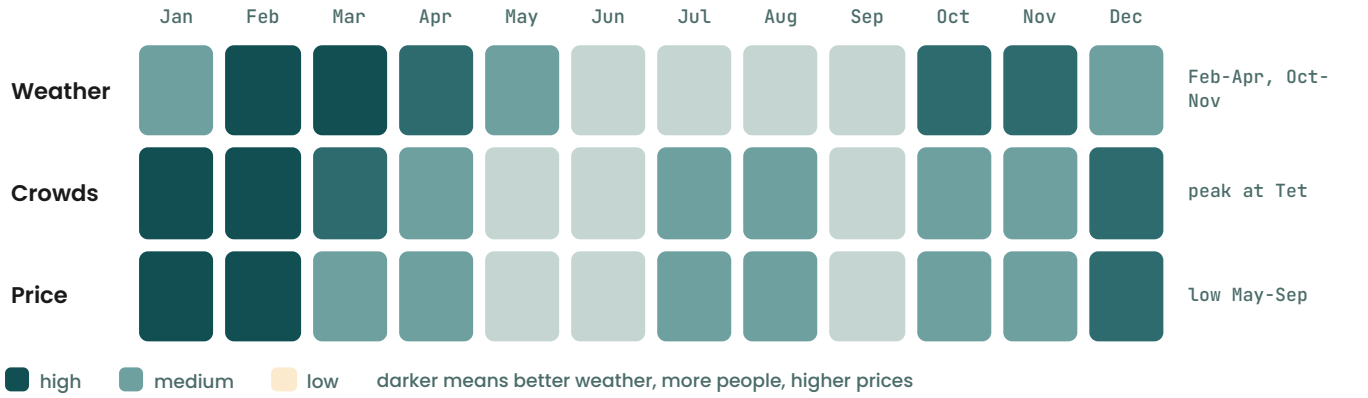
Festivals worth planning around 39

What a day costs 40

Weather, crowds, price

12-month calendar · the two country-wide windows

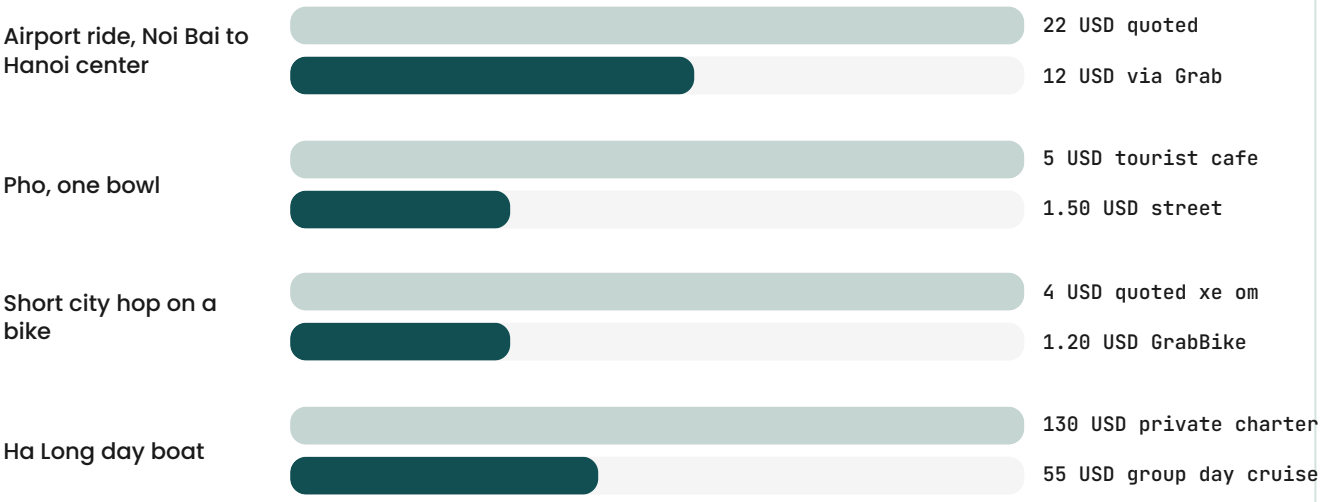
Vietnam has no single season, because the three regions run different calendars. The two windows that work country-wide are February through April and October through November. June to August brings the heaviest rain, and the centre carries a real typhoon risk from September into November. The heatmap below averages the three zones; for a single region, check its page. Crowds and prices spike hardest around Tet, the Lunar New Year in late January or early February.



source: best-travel-time dataset · captured 2026-05-17

WHAT THINGS COST: QUOTED VS PAID

SAMPLE DATA



pack-lightly.com

Festivals worth planning around

three to chase, three to plan around

Festivals in Vietnam work in both directions: the top row is worth building a trip around, the bottom row mostly raises your hotel bill or shuts the shops. Either way, know the dates before you book, because the lunar ones move every year.

MONTHLY FULL MOON

Hoi An Lantern Night

The Ancient Town cuts its electric lights for candlelit lanterns on the river. The signature image of central Vietnam, and it runs every lunar full moon.

SEP / OCT

Mid-Autumn Festival

Mooncakes, lion dances, and lantern parades for children. Hoi An runs the biggest version; worth timing a centre visit around it.

EVEN YEARS, APR/JUN

Hue Festival

A biennial culture festival in the old imperial capital, with royal-court performances inside the citadel. Check whether your year is a festival year.

~EARLY FEB

Tet (Lunar New Year)

The biggest holiday. Shops shut for the first three days, transport books out, and prices spike. Travel just before or after, not during.

APR 30 TO MAY 1

Reunification Day

A national holiday that, with Labour Day, spikes domestic travel and hotel prices on the coast. Book beach stays well ahead.

SEP 2

National Day

Independence Day fills domestic resorts and pushes up rooms for the long weekend. Great atmosphere in Hanoi, expensive everywhere else.

Lunar festivals move every year. Verify the exact Tet and Mid-Autumn dates for your travel year before locking hotels.

Tet is the one to plan around hard. Around the new year itself, intercity transport sells out and many family-run places close.

DIG IN Exact dates per year in the public holidays calendar, and the monthly weather logic in the best time to visit breakdown.

What a day costs

three travel styles · printed the way the day spends it

Daily budgets hide in averages, so here is the day itemized instead: a bed, three meals, getting around, one thing worth doing, and the drink at the end. Three real versions of the same Tuesday, in US dollars.

A DAY IN VIETNAM

* backpacker *

hostel dorm	7.00
banh mi breakfast	1.20
pho lunch	2.00
street dinner	3.00
GrabBike + walk	2.00
museum entry	2.00
bia hoi x3	1.50
iced coffee + water	2.30
TOTAL / DAY	**~25 USD**

budget-calculator data · 2026-05-17

A DAY IN VIETNAM

* standard *

3-star double, half	22.00
cafe breakfast	4.00
local restaurant lunch	5.00
dinner with drinks	11.00
Grab rides	6.00
group day-tour, split	7.00
coffee + bar	5.00
TOTAL / DAY	**~60 USD**

budget-calculator data · 2026-05-17

A DAY IN VIETNAM

* comfort *

4-star double, half	80.00
hotel breakfast	incl.
restaurant lunch	12.00
dinner, good table	22.00
private driver, half day	20.00
spa or private tour	incl. above
cocktails x2	14.00
TOTAL / DAY	**~150 USD**

budget-calculator data · 2026-05-17

Run the same numbers for your own dates, group size and currency in the free budget calculator on pack-lightly.com.

Open the Budget Calculator

The gap between tiers is the room, not the food. Eating well costs roughly the same at every level; the bed is where the budget triples.

Cash covers the small lines: markets, bikes, museum entry. Carry around 700,000 dong a day in 50k and 100k notes, and always pick VND at the ATM.

06

Practical

Visa, money, transport, eSIM, health, packing, hotels. The boring parts you only read once. Done right, you never think about them again.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Book in this order 42

Money and transport 43

Bed, bag, signal 44

Health basics 45

Book in this order

four things before you fly · everything else on the ground

Vietnam punishes over-planning: most hotels, buses and tours are cheaper and easier in the country. Only four things genuinely reward booking ahead, and they have a natural order. Many Western passports get 45 days visa-free since 2023, so for them the visa step is a five-minute check rather than an application.

8 wk before

International flights

Fares to Hanoi or Saigon bottom out six to eight weeks ahead for high season. Midweek departures shave another 10 percent.

Compare fares on Aviasales

4 wk before

Insurance + visa check

Buy travel insurance with strong medical and evacuation cover, and scooter riding included if you plan to ride. Then confirm your entry rule. Many Western passports get 45 days visa-free; others apply for the 25 USD e-visa on the official portal, valid up to 90 days. Check your nationality before you fly.

Check entry rules per passport

2 wk before

First nights + long legs

Book your first two hotel nights, the Ha Long cruise, and the internal flights down the coast. The rest of the beds can wait until you are there.

Book the legs on 12Go

1 wk before

eSIM

Install before departure, activate on the plane. The welcome text lands before your luggage does. 10 to 15 GB covers two weeks of maps and uploads.

Set up a Saily eSIM

Passport rule: six months validity beyond arrival. Check it now; renewals run slow in peak season.

Tell your bank the dates or bring a second card, and always choose to be charged in dong, not your home currency, at the ATM.

Money and transport

cash-heavy · flights for the distance, sleeper for the story

Cash runs the street economy; cards work at upscale hotels and supermarkets. The dong has a lot of zeros, so count carefully: a 500,000 note and a 20,000 note look alike at a glance. Use bank ATMs (Vietcombank, Techcombank, Sacombank), always pick VND over your home currency, and carry around 700,000 dong a day in 50k and 100k notes.

ITEM	BACKPACKER	MID	COMFORT
Hostel dorm / private 3-star	USD 7	USD 22	USD 80
Street meal / restaurant	USD 2	USD 11	USD 30
Bia hoi / craft beer	USD 0.50	USD 2	USD 6
Ca phe sua da	USD 0.80	USD 1.50	USD 4
Grab across town	USD 2	USD 4	USD 8

verified 2026-05-14 · per-category numbers in the budget guide

TRANSPORT: WHAT BEATS WHAT

Flights for the distance, the sleeper train for the experience, buses for the budget, Grab for the city, easy-rider drivers for the mountain loops. The country is long, so the smart split is to fly the big jumps (Hanoi to Da Nang, Da Nang to Saigon) and travel the short hops by road. Book combined tickets through 12Go. The Reunification Express sleeper is the scenic alternative on the coastal stretch. Inside cities, Grab and Xanh SM settled the metered-taxi argument; if you take a street taxi, use Vinasun or Mai Linh. Do not rent a scooter without real experience and a 1968-Vienna IDP, photograph the bike at pickup, and never surrender your passport as deposit.

Always pay in dong when a card terminal offers "your" currency; the dynamic-conversion rate costs 4 to 7 percent.

Airlines are named without links in this guide where no partner relation exists; book them direct or through 12Go.

THE FULL PICTURE

The notes and exchange traps in the currency rundown, the full cost model in the budget breakdown, and cheap legs in the domestic flights write-up.

Bed, bag, signal

hotels · packing · eSIM, the three solved problems

BED

For mid-range and above, Booking.com wins on free-cancellation policy and inventory depth. For dorms and social hostels, Hostelworld has the deeper review pool. For family-run guesthouses and homestays in Hoi An or the Sapa valleys, message the host directly; small places often pass back a 5 to 10 percent saving on a direct booking.

BAG: THE TWO-WEEK CARRY-ON LIST

- [ ] Two quick-dry tops, one long-sleeve (temples + cold north)
- [ ] A warm layer if you go to Hanoi, Sapa or Dalat in winter
- [ ] Sandals plus one closed shoe
- [ ] Starter med-kit: loperamide, paracetamol, electrolytes
- [ ] 30% DEET and SPF 50
- [ ] Type A/C plug adapter
- [ ] 20,000 mAh power bank
- [ ] Two payment cards in separate pockets
- [ ] Passport copies in three places: phone, print, email
- [ ] Light rain shell and a dry bag for cruise and cave days

Signal. Buy the eSIM the day before you fly and activate it on the plane. A 5 GB plan covers a week (from ~3 USD); 10 to 15 GB covers two working weeks. Stays over a month are cheaper on a local Viettel or Vinaphone SIM, sold with your passport at the airport.

Set up a Saily eSIM

06

GO DEEPER The season-by-season list with women-specific overlays in the packing list, what to wear where in the dress code page, and data plans compared in the eSIM write-up.

Health basics

six weeks out · most of this list is reassurance

Vietnam is a low-drama health destination: cities and the deltas are malaria-free, pharmacies are everywhere and competent, and the international hospitals in Hanoi, Da Nang and Saigon handle most travel problems. The list below is everything that actually needs doing, in order.

THE SIX-STEP LIST

- [ ] **Six weeks before:** travel-clinic visit. Confirm routine vaccines (MMR, DPT, flu) are current.
- [ ] **Recommended:** Hepatitis A and typhoid for street-food trips. Hep A is a two-shot series; start early.
- [ ] **Risk-based only:** Japanese Encephalitis for long rural stays; rabies pre-exposure only if you will handle animals.
- [ ] **Skip:** malaria pills for the standard route. Malaria is limited to a few rural border provinces, not the cities or deltas.
- [ ] **Pack:** the med-kit from page 43. Pharmacies restock all of it, brands rotate.
- [ ] **Insurance:** strong medical cover with evacuation, scooter riding included, direct-billing hospitals listed.

IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG

Private beats public for travelers: the international hospitals and clinics in Hanoi, Da Nang and Ho Chi Minh City are English-speaking and used to insurance paperwork. For small stuff, any pharmacy handles stomach issues, infected insect bites and minor wounds over the counter. Dial 115 for an ambulance, 113 for the police, 114 for fire. Hanoi and HCMC also run a tourist police line.

Tap water: no, drink bottled or filtered. Ice in busy places is made commercially and is fine; that is what locals drink too.

Dengue is present, mostly in the wet season and the cities. Daytime DEET is the whole protocol; there is no pill to skip.

READ ON The shot-by-shot schedule in the vaccinations breakdown, hospital picks in the hospitals page, and cover compared in the travel insurance rundown.

07

Safe and smart

The scams worth knowing, the one real danger on the road, the etiquette that is load-bearing, and the language minimum that changes how locals respond.

IN THIS CHAPTER

The scams, and the one real danger 47

Etiquette: do and do not 48

Emergency numbers + phrases 49

The scams, and the one real danger

petty grifts in tourist zones, traffic everywhere

Vietnam is safer than the news cycle suggests and more scammy than the brochures admit. Violent crime against tourists is rare. What is constant is a small set of grifts in the tourist zones, plus one genuine hazard the brochures never mention: the traffic. Knowing these protects you from most of the money, and most of the harm, tourists actually meet.

DANGER 01

The traffic, the real risk

Millions of scooters, few gaps, and right-of-way by nerve. This is the thing most likely to actually hurt you, not any scam.

The fix: cross slowly and steadily so riders can read you and flow around you; never bolt or freeze. Do not rent a scooter without real experience and an IDP.

SCAM 02

The scooter damage shakedown

On return, the rental "finds" pre-existing scratches and demands cash. They hold your passport as deposit, which is the whole trick.

The fix: video every panel at pickup with the operator in frame. Never leave the original passport; offer a photocopy plus a cash deposit, or use another shop.

SCAM 03

The bag-snatch by motorbike

In HCMC District 1 and the Bui Vien area, a passing rider grabs a phone or bag held near the road. It is over in a second.

The fix: keep your phone in hand away from the kerb, bag strapped across your body on the building side. Do not text on the pavement edge.

BONUS

The rigged taxi and the swapped note

A meter that runs fast, a "broken" card machine, or change handed back as a 20,000 note that looks like the 500,000 you paid with.

The fix: use Grab or Xanh SM for a fixed fare, or Vinasun and Mai Linh for street taxis. Count change in the light; the big notes are similar colours.

07

MORE ON THE SITE

The full safety picture plus what to do if you got hit in the safety breakdown, and the road rules and IDP details in the traffic page.

Etiquette: the short list

first four are load-bearing · last four save you face

Eight things that matter. The first four cause real offense, or real trouble, if you ignore them; the last four mostly cost you face or money. Everything else is atmosphere.

DO NOT

Criticise the Party or Ho Chi Minh

Publicly knocking the government, the Party, or Ho Chi Minh is a criminal matter, social posts in-country included. Keep politics private.

DO NOT

Photograph military sites

Bases, checkpoints, and some border zones are off-limits to cameras. If there are guards, put the phone away.

DO

Cover shoulders and knees in temples

A scarf or a light layer covers it; some pagodas also ask you to remove your shoes at the door.

DO NOT

Touch anyone's head

The head is the most respected part of the body. Ruffling a child's hair is a real faux pas.

DO

Give and receive with two hands

Money, cards, gifts: two hands, or the right hand with the left touching the wrist. A small thing that reads as respect.

DO NOT

Lose your temper to win

Raising your voice loses the room. Calm and smiling gets you a better price and a faster fix every time.

DO

Bargain at markets, not at counters

Market stalls yes, food counters no. Half the first asking price is a fair opening, done with a smile.

DO NOT

Hand over your passport as deposit

For a scooter or a bike, a photocopy plus cash is the norm. Surrendering the original is how the damage shakedown starts.

Anger loses every argument in Vietnam. The person who raises their voice has already lost the room.

Tipping is not expected; rounding up or leaving small change at a restaurant or for a guide reads as warm, not required.

07

KEEP READING Religion, traditions and the full etiquette context in the culture write-up, and what to wear where in the dress code page.

Emergency numbers and eight phrases

save the numbers now · the phrases change how locals respond

POLICE
113
nationwide

AMBULANCE
115
nationwide

FIRE
114
nationwide

TOURIST POLICE
Hanoi + HCMC
ask hotel for local line

US EMBASSY HANOI
+84 24 3850 5000
citizen services

US CONSULATE HCMC
+84 28 3520 4200
the south

EIGHT PHRASES THAT CHANGE HOW LOCALS RESPOND

ENGLISH	VIETNAMESE (PHONETIC)	NOTES
Hello	xin chao (sin chow)	works any time of day
Thank you	cam on (gam un)	add "nhieu" for "very much"
Yes / No	co / khong	"khong" is the universal no
How much?	bao nhieu? (bao nyew)	essential for markets and bikes
No fish sauce / meat	khong nuoc mam / an chay	"an chay" = vegetarian
Where is the toilet?	nha ve sinh o dau?	point and ask
Sorry / excuse me	xin loi (sin loy)	universal apology
Help!	cuu toi! (kuu toy)	emergencies only

Save 115 and your hotel's name and address in Vietnamese in your phone before the first night out.

These same phrases print as a wallet card on page 45; cut it out and keep it with your room key.

07

08

Tools and reference

The live tools this guide was built from, the cut-out cards for your wallet, and the sources behind every number.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Take the live tools with you 51

Print cards: cut, fold, take 52

Sources and methodology 53

A note on the links 54

Take the live tools with you

scan to open · data updates after this PDF was printed

This guide is a snapshot; the tools behind it keep updating. Scan a code or type the short URL. Each one is preloaded with the same Vietnam data this guide was built from.



Trip Budget Calculator

Vietnam: 20 EUR/day backpacker, 90 EUR/day comfort.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/budget-calculator/



Country Map

Vietnam spots mapped, from Ha Giang to Phu Quoc.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/country-map/



Best Time to Travel

Best: Feb-Apr and Oct-Nov. Month-by-month for 140+ countries.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/



What to Eat and Drink

Pho from 1.50 USD, plus the rest of the menu with prices.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/local-food-and-drinks/

Print cards: cut, fold, take

print at 100% scale · credit-card size, 85 x 54 mm

Print this page on A4 or US Letter at 100 percent (no fit-to-page), cut along the dashed lines, and the two cards live in your wallet for the trip. The form fields are interactive in Acrobat and iOS Preview if you would rather type than write.

VIETNAMESE · ESSENTIALS

Hello	xin chao
Thank you	cam on
Yes / No	co / khong
How much?	bao nhieu?
Vegetarian	an chay
Where is toilet?	nha ve sinh o dau?
Help!	cuu toi!
Sorry	xin loi

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EMERGENCY · VIETNAM

Police	113
Ambulance	115
Fire	114
US Embassy (Hanoi)	+84 24 3850 5000
US Consulate (HCMC)	+84 28 3520 4200

My hotel: _____

Address: _____

Insurance #: _____

Left card front, right card back: print double-sided on the short edge and they fold into one.

Lost the guide, kept the card? The QR opens the live Vietnam hub with every page this guide links to, plus updates published after this edition went to print.

pack-lightly.com/vietnam/

Photograph both cards before you cut. A phone copy of the emergency card still works when the wallet is back at the hotel.

Ask reception to write your hotel name and address in Vietnamese on the back. Grab and taxi drivers read it in one glance.

Sources and methodology

every number traces to a dated source



WRITTEN BY

Wouter van Kemenade

Founder of Pack Lightly. Twenty-plus countries on the ground, with time spent across Vietnam from the northern mountains to the Mekong Delta. Performance-marketing background, data-led travel writing. Every number in this guide is verified against a source listed below; if a price moves more than 15 percent, the next edition flags it.

SOURCES USED IN THIS EDITION

1. Hostel and hotel pricing: Booking and Hostelworld snapshot 2026-05-14, across Hanoi, Hoi An and Ho Chi Minh City.
2. Currency rates: ECB reference rates, 2026-05-25.
3. Visa policy: Vietnam's official e-visa portal (evisa.xuatnhapcanh.gov.vn) and the 2023 visa-free update, retrieved 2026-05-15.
4. Community pricing checks: archived r/VietNam threads, 2026-Q1.
5. Travel advisories: FCDO and US State Department, last update 2026-04-30.
6. Climate: Open-Meteo 10-year averages across the three regions, captured 2026-05-17.
7. Pack Lightly Vietnam cluster pages, retrieved 2026-06-10: visa · budget · safety · best travel time · eSIM

Methodology. Pack Lightly's country scores aggregate eleven dimensions into the 0-100 scorecard on page 5, re-scored every six months; the last full re-score ran February 2026. Budget figures come from the live budget-calculator dataset, climate verdicts from the best-travel-time dataset, both stamped with their capture date where they appear.

What changed in edition 2026.06: first release on the v2 design standard. Next planned update: December 2026. Not covered here: a diving deep-dive (it has its own guide), medical tourism, and the full Ha Giang riding logistics.

Photo credits. Every photograph is sourced from Wikimedia Commons under a Creative Commons or public-domain license. The full per-image list, with each photographer and license, is on the next page. The cover shows Ha Long Bay. Tour data and prices come from the Viator Partner API, captured June 2026.

Image credits

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3. **Bun cha Hanoi grilled pork**. stuart_spivack, CC BY 2.0.
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5. **Com tam broken rice plate grilled**. Christopher Crouzet, CC BY-SA 4.0.
6. **Cu Chi Tunnels entrance sign welcome**. Lars Curfs (Grashoofd), CC BY-SA 3.0 nl.
7. **Goi cuon fresh spring rolls translucent**. pelican from Tokyo, Japan, CC BY-SA 2.0.
8. **Golden Bridge**. DvTor8303, CC0.
9. **Ha Giang Dong Van Karst Plateau**. BacLuong at Vietnamese Wikipedia, Public domain.
10. **Ha Long Bay limestone karsts rising**. Taewangkorea, CC BY-SA 4.0.
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16. **Hue Imperial City Ngo Mon gate**. NguyenThanhBac123, CC0.
17. **Marble Mountains Da Nang aerial panoramic**. Kuroczynski, CC BY-SA 4.0.
18. **Mu Cang Chai rice terraces near**. Viethavvh, Public domain.
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20. **Pho Vietnamese noodle soup bowl**. Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY 4.0.
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23. **Vietnamese egg coffee cup**. travel oriented, CC BY-SA 2.0.
24. **Vietnamese rice paddy worker in conical**. larouche.sebastien, CC BY-SA 2.0.
25. **View of Hanoi**. Gary Todd from Xinzheng, China, CC0.
26. **Xuan Huong Lake Da Lat the**. Diane Selwyn, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Tour data and prices: Viator Partner API, captured June 2026. Author portrait and brand marks: Pack Lightly.

A note on the links in this guide

disclosure · why this guide is free

This guide is free because some of the booking links inside it are affiliate links. When a reader books a stay, a transport leg, or an eSIM through one of those links, the merchant pays Pack Lightly. The reader pays the same price either way.

The pick comes before the partner. A hotel area or a transport platform is chosen for the trip it makes, and where a partner link exists for it that link is used; where none does, the plain link still points there. An overrated sight is still called overrated, and a cheaper option that beats the famous one keeps the slot. The commission funds the guide, it does not choose for it.

Questions, corrections, or a place you tested that belongs in the next edition: write to hello@pack-lightly.com.

Partners linked in this edition: **Aviasales** · **Booking.com** · **12Go Asia** · **Saily** · **Hostelworld** · **Stay22** · **Viator** · via **Travelpayouts**

Links can outlive a print run. If one stops working, the live version of every page in this guide sits under pack-lightly.com/vietnam.

This file is versioned; the edition is on the cover. The next planned update lands December 2026 and replaces this file at the same download.