

VIETNAM

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

A stunning country rich in culture and natural wonders, Vietnam is the ideal travel destination – whether you're planning a relaxing beach escape, are searching for adventure, or want to immerse yourself in the country's extensive history. Khiri Travel is pleased to offer useful tips and practical information on traveling in Vietnam.



COUNTRY PROFILE

Official Name

Socialist Republic of Vietnam

Population

99 million

Capital City

Hanoi

Area

331,210 km²

People

Kinh (Viet – 85.7%) minorities include Tay, Thai, Muong, Khmer, Mong and Nung

Religion

Buddhism (Mahayana)

Language

Vietnamese

Currency

Dong

Time Zone

GMT +7 hours

International dialling code

+84

Electricity

220V AC 50 Hz

Driving

Right hand side

BOARDER CROSSINGS

Vietnam shares borders with Cambodia, China and Laos. Here you find a list of the borders that connect Vietnam with its surrounding countries.

CAMBODIA

Moc Bai Border in Tay Ninh Province

Moc Bai Border Gate is located about 70km northwest of Ho Chi Minh City. There are direct buses from Ho Chi Minh City to Go Dau Townlet in Tay Ninh Province, along the highway 22A, across Moc Bai Border Gate to Cambodia.

Vinh Xuong Border in An Giang Province

Vinh Xuong Waterway Border Gate is 30km north of Chau Doc Town, An Giang Province. It takes 40 minutes on the Tien River from the wharf at Victoria Chau Doc Hotel to Vinh Xuong Border Gate by motorboat. After this, customs and the immigration procedure should be completed to go to Phnom Penh.

LAOS

Na Meo Border in Thanh Hoa Province

To Laos you can travel from Vinh Loc to Thanh Hoa Province, along highway 217, across Na Meo Border Gate (Na Meo Commune, Quan Son Highland district, Thanh Hoa Province) to Laos.

Lao Bao Border in Quang Tri Province

Buses go from Hue City (Thua Thien, Hue Province) to Dong Ha (Quang Tri Province), along highway 9, across the Lao Bao Border Gate, directly to Savanna-khet in Laos.

Tay Trang Border in Dien Bien Province

You can travel from Dien Bien Phun City along highway 279, for about 31km, across the Tay Trang Border Gate to the Phong Xa Ly district in Laos.

CHINA

Lao Cai Border in Lao Cai Province

The Lao Cai Border Gate is in the north of Lao Cai City. From Lao Cai City, you cross the Ho Kieu Bridge, which links the Vietnamese Lao Cai Province with the Chinese Yunnan Province.

Mong Cai Border in Quang Ninh Province

The Mong Cai Border Gate is in the northeast of Quang Ninh Province; 176 km from Halong City and 327 km from Hanoi. From Halong City, you take highway 18 to Mong Cai Town and then you can cross the Mong Cai Border Gate into China.



PASSPORTS & VISAS

Most foreigners visiting Vietnam are required to have a visa unless they qualify for a visa exemption:

- Citizens of most ASEAN countries: No visa is required if the visitor plans to stay less than 30 days.
- Citizens of South Korea, Japan, Russia, Germany, Spain, Italy, United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Belarus: No visa is required if the visitor plans to stay less than 45 days (both for tourist and business).
- Citizens of other countries are required to get an entry visa for Vietnam prior to departure, eVisa online or an approval letter for a Visa on Arrival (issued on arrival at Vietnam International Airports)

For the latest information, we recommend you read the instructions on the official website of the Immigration department or contact the Vietnam Embassy or General Consulate in your country.

What is an eVisa?

This is the easiest way to obtain your visa and can be done online with payment prior to departure and no need to visit the Visa on Arrival desk at the airport. Once complete the eVisa can be printed prior to departure (you will need to show your airline when checking in) and shown to immigration staff for entry to Vietnam. More information on how to apply for an evisa or the required information can be found online at <https://e-services.mps.gov.vn/bocongan/bothutuc/tthc?mat=26277> . Khiri Travel can help you apply for the evisa with simpler requirements, please contact us for more information.

What is a 'Visa on Arrival'?

This is an easy way to obtain your visa without having to chase down embassies, consulates and the like prior to your trip. The entry Vietnam visa will be stamped on your passport at the Visa on Arrival Desk at the International Airport in Vietnam. After this, you can pass through the Immigration checking point. With this type of visa, you can only enter the country by air. This service is available for both tourist and business purposes.

How to get a Visa on Arrival?

Khiri Travel Vietnam will help you to get a Visa on Arrival Approval letter from the Vietnam Immigration Department. After obtaining the approval letter, we will forward you a copy by email. Copies of the same document will be forwarded on your behalf to Vietnam Immigration checkpoints at International Airports only, so when you arrive in Vietnam, the Immigration officers will have those documents on hand and will be able to issue your entry visa at once. Please remember to bring at least 2 photos of passport regulation size (2in x 2in or 4cm x 6cm) and cash (US dollars) for the stamping fees.

TRAVEL INSURANCE

Khiri Travel will do everything possible to ensure visitors a safe and enjoyable trip. However, travelling always brings certain possible risks and visitors should recognize these. Thus, we highly recommend the purchase of short-term travel insurance for our adventures. Travel insurance is a cost effective way to protect yourself and your equipment in the event of problems due to cancelled trips, delays, medical problems, and baggage loss or damage.

HEALTH

Health care in Vietnam varies in quantity and quality. Big cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City have very good private and state -owned hospitals and clinics, while it is often hard to see a doctor in rural areas.

Pharmacies, however, can be found in almost every town. Write down the name of the medicine you want to buy, or use body language to explain, as not many pharmacists can communicate in English.

Prior to departure, you may want to consult your doctor on vaccination. The following vaccines are recommended: polio, tetanus, yellow fever, typhoid, Japanese encephalitis. It is advisable to bring a personal kit containing solutions to stomachache, headache, etc.

The sun shines over half of a day along the country, so make sure you bring plenty of sunscreen. Additionally, the dust rate in the air is quite high in industrial cities; it is advisable you buy a small mask just like the locals in case you are allergic.

Mosquito repellents are recommended and easily obtained in Vietnam.



MONEY

Vietnam's currency issued by the Vietnam State Bank is the Dong (VND) . Currency is only in paper notes. The following values: VND 500,000; 200,000; 100,000; 50,000; 20,000; 10,000; 5,000; 2,000; 1,000

Exchange rates

In general, 1 USD is approximately 24000 VND and 1 EUR approximately 26000 VND. You can exchange your money at the airport before leaving, or at banks and official exchange centres in Vietnam. It is strongly recommended that you do not exchange money on the black market.

Banking hours

The hours may differ from bank to bank. Generally banks are open from Monday to Friday: 8:00 – 11:30 and 1:00 – 4:00. Some large banks also open through lunch or on Saturday mornings. Banks are closed on public holidays.

Method of payment

Direct payment of cash is most common in Vietnam. Small shops, restaurants and markets usually do not accept any other payment. Credit cards of the major credit card companies (such as Visa, Master Charge and to some extent American Express) are increasingly being used, especially in big cities and tourist places, but only in restaurants, hotels or big shopping malls and always with a transactional fee (3%-5%).

ATM machines

For those hesitant to carry a large amount of cash around, ATMs (automatic teller machines) have become increasingly popular in Vietnam. ATMs are found in most places and only dispense Vietnamese dong (VND).

CLIMATE

Vietnam is large enough to have several distinct climate zones

The South

The South has three somewhat distinct seasons: hot and dry from March to May/June; rainy from June/July to November; and cool and dry from December to February. April is the hottest month, with mid-day temperatures of 33°C (91°F) on most days. During the rainy season, short downpours can happen every afternoon, and occasionally streets can flood. Temperatures range from stifling hot before a rainstorm to pleasantly cool afterwards. December to February is the most pleasant time to visit, with cool evenings down to around 20° (68°F).

Central

In the Central regions the Hai Van pass separates two different weather patterns of the North starting in Lang Co (which is hotter in summer and cooler in winter) from the milder conditions South starting in Da Nang. From September until February the central regions have northeast monsoon conditions with often strong winds, large sea swells and rain. These conditions make it a difficult time to travel through Central Vietnam. Normally summers are hot and dry.

The North

The North has four distinct seasons, with a comparatively chilly winter (temperatures can dip below 15°C/59°F in Hanoi), a hot and wet summer and pleasant spring (March-April) and autumn (October-December) seasons. However, in the Highlands both extremes are amplified, with occasional snow in the winter and temperatures hitting 40°C (104°F) in the summer.



FOOD & DRINK

Vietnam's ingredients reflect its geography and climate. Rice (grown in water paddies throughout the country) is the main starch used in everyday meals, and is also used to make different kinds of cakes and noodles. Besides a number of Buddhist vegetarian dishes, most Vietnamese dishes are a combination of a variety of vegetables, herbs and meats.

Common herbs may include lemon grass, lime or kaffir. Popular meats are pork, beef, chicken, prawn and various fish. Lamb, duck, birds, and even dog or other wild animals are also used but not very often. Fish sauce and soy sauce are used as both flavorings and dipping sauces for nearly every dish. Peanuts are also used widely in Vietnamese cuisine.

Besides the typical meal with rice, Vietnamese cuisine has many different types of noodles and cakes (mostly made from rice). To name a few: beef soup noodles (pho), crab noodle (bun rieu), spring rolls (nem), sticky rice cake (chung cake)

The Vietnamese cook their food in a variety of ways: deep fry, stir fry, boil and steam. Unlike the Chinese, the Vietnamese use a minimal amount of oil while cooking. Vietnamese cooks aim to preserve the freshness and natural taste of food as much as possible. Hence Vietnamese cuisine is often considered as one of the healthiest in the world.



Food of three regions

Vietnamese food differs geographically from location to location. Northern Vietnam's food uses soy sauce, fish sauce and prawn sauce and has many stir fried dishes. With the harsh weather and a less developed agriculture than the South, North Vietnamese tend to use less meat, fish and vegetables; and black pepper (instead of chili) to create spice. The taste is strict and less sweet, but more salty than in other regions.

Central Vietnam is distinct in its extreme spices and color of food. Hue's cuisine, affected by royal cuisine once created for kings and queens, emphasizes on quality and quantity: a meal constitutes of many complex dishes served only at small proportions.

Southern Vietnamese are heavily affected by Cambodia, Thai and Chinese cuisines, due to trade and immigrants. Southerners prefer sweet tastes (created by adding sugar or coconut milk) and spicy tastes (created by chili peppers). A variety of dried fish and sauces originate from the South. Southerners prefer seafood and use simple cooking methods with larger portions and less servings.

Culinary customs

Vietnam has certain customs when it comes to food: Chopsticks and spoons are used in Vietnam.

Many foods (such as cakes) are wrapped in banana or coconut leaves.

When eating with elders, younger Vietnamese always ask the elders to eat first.

A typical Vietnamese meal (lunch or dinner) will include steamed rice; a soup dish to eat with rice, a meat or fish dish and a vegetarian dish (either stir fried or boiled). Vietnamese do not eat in separate servings, but the food is placed in the middle. Each member of the family has a small bowl and chopsticks with which they take food from the table throughout the meal.



PASSPORTS & VISAS

In Vietnam, tipping for good service in tourism is nowadays expected and very much appreciated. It is customary, though not compulsory, to tip tour guides and drivers at the end of a tour. It is also advisable to tip hotel and station porters, especially if the service exceeds expectations.

If you consider tipping tour guides, drivers, hotel staff, boat crews, waiters or waitresses, and cyclo drivers here are a few tips that can help you along your way:

- People rarely tip at street-food stands.
- If you want to tip the hotel staff, ask if there is a community tip box.
- If someone ever politely declines your tip, thank them, take back your tip, and please do not overly press the issue (this is normal Vietnamese culture).
- A fair tip for tour guides on a one-day tour is from \$5 to \$10, for the driver is half of it. But it is completely up to you, you can give more than the standard if our staff are doing a great job.
- For multi-day tours you might tip more depending on how long the trip was, the quality of your guide, and how you perceive the level of service.

DONATIONS & GIFT-GIVING

Although there is poverty in certain areas of Vietnam, you should be careful when it comes to donations and gift-giving.

Do not give to begging children as it reinforces for these children that begging is an acceptable way to make a living. However in many places, it is considered acceptable to give to the elderly or disabled, as there is no social security or other way these people can earn money.

Giving money and goods away to random individuals can result in the local communities acting like beggars. It accentuates an unequal relationship between locals and visitors, with tourists being seen as purely 'money givers'. We do not want to encourage the development of a society that equates every human action as a potential money making scheme – for example paying to take photographs.

Do not give sweets to children in villages that we visit. Local people often have no access to dentists, nor can they afford them and again there is the issue of turning children into beggars. Pens, toothbrushes, clothing or other 'worthwhile' items are best distributed via a local charity, schoolteacher or community leader.

Avoid feeling that you necessarily have to give 'material' things. The best giving can sometimes be shared interactions: **a smile, a joke, a singsong, dance or playing a game**. Giving something of your friendship, time and interest to interact with locals can be the best gift of all.

COMMUNICATION

Using a mobile phone in Vietnam is quite easy, and it is worth familiarising yourself with the system if you plan to travel. The three most popular networks in Vietnam are MobiFone, Vinaphone and Viettel. You can go to any mobile store on the street with the sign “Bán SIM – Thẻ” (“Selling SIM card – Mobile card”) and buy a pre-paid activated SIM card for around 50.000 VND. When the card runs low on money, you can simply recharge by getting a pre-paid mobile card ranging from 10.000 VND to 500.000 VND and continue using the service.

Roaming is available in Vietnam but the charge per minutes is extremely expensive. For that reason, we advise not to use the roaming function but to try and use Wi-Fi networks as much as possible. Using Wi-Fi is easy since networks are available at almost all hotels, restaurants, and coffee shops in the bigger cities.



CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

You will always find differences between different cultures. Vietnam has its own ways and habits. One of these habits is for example asking for someone's age. Do not be offended when Vietnamese people ask your age right away. They address people according to their age (em, anh, chi, ong, co, etc.). The Vietnamese are very straightforward in general. Not only can they ask you directly for your age, they will also tell you exactly what they think about you and they mean no offence by it. They could tell you that you are fat, big, hairy, and they could even tell you that you look strange. Strange to them means different, not ugly or horrible. On the flipside, they will also tell you how beautiful or handsome you are at all times.

Vietnamese people stare a lot and sometimes even touch your arms, face, and hair. They mean no harm. They are just incredibly curious. Foreigners are typically much bigger than Vietnamese, have much more body hair, and have diverse colours of hair. The Vietnamese find this all very interesting.

The prices in Vietnam are usually not fixed prices. You are encouraged to bargain. It is important to note that if they charge you a much higher price, it is not a skin tax or a foreigner price, it is a local price versus a stranger price. Vietnamese people from Saigon who go to Hanoi get overcharged just as much as you do because we don't know the local prices. Don't feel discriminated against.

When you are shopping in local markets or in heavily touristic areas, please be careful as they may expect you to bargain until you reach an agreement and then buy. If you pick something up and then don't purchase it, the salesman could be offended. This is not widespread anymore but if in doubt, look with your eyes not your hands.

Half of the Vietnamese population is 35 years old or younger. This means that most will have no recollection of the Vietnam War. In general, the Vietnamese hold no grudges from that way or any war, and instead are actually very curious about Americans and other Westerners because they are fairly fascinated with these cultures. Some people might tell you they were in the war, and might even tell you they killed Americans. Again, in general they mean no harm or ill will by saying this. Due to their limited English, it may come across brash, but they just want to share their history with you.



SAFETY

Vietnam is generally a safe place for tourists. Pickpocket activities are reported to be decreasing significantly. We strongly recommend you keep your valuables at the hotel safety box where available. Throughout your stay, always keep a copy of your passport, airline tickets and credit card numbers and choose to take a taxi rather than a cyclo when travelling at night. Grab and travel apps are becoming increasingly popular and are prevalent in bigger cities.

If you are robbed, do not hesitate to contact the local police. Many tourists have their stolen possessions returned this way. Emergency contact number: Police (113) - Fire (114) - Ambulance (115)



LANGUAGE

Vietnam's official language is Vietnamese, a tonal language spoken as a mother tongue by 90% the country's population. Vietnamese is written using a 29 letter alphabetical system. The accent of Vietnamese varies from province to province. Besides Vietnamese, Ho Chi Minh City is home to a sizable ethnic Chinese community, many of whom speak Cantonese. The more remote parts of the country are also home to many ethnic minorities who speak various languages belonging to the Mon-Khmer, Tai-Kadai and Austronesian language families.

Most Vietnamese youth learn English in school, so many young people have a basic grasp of English, but proficiency is generally poor. However, most hotel and airline staff will know enough English to communicate with foreign visitors.

Directional signs are generally bilingual in both Vietnamese and English. In the big cities, some of the big international luxury hotel chains will have staff that is able to speak French and other foreign languages such as Mandarin, Japanese or Korean.

LINKS & READING

There are a couple of websites and books that are very useful and interesting if you want to get to know the country of Vietnam.

The website www.wordhcmc.com is a website that provides you with lots of up to date information about Ho Chi Minh City. You will find news, events, information and tips about things to do and much more!

This website also has a version for the city of Hanoi: www.wordhanoi.com

The website <http://www.asialifemagazine.com/vietnam/> covers all that is interesting in and around Vietnam. You can find lots of nice travelling tips and much more on this website.

Concerning books, one that is worth reading is *The Quiet American* by Graham Greene. This anti-war novel is written by an English author and was first published in 1955. The book was adapted into a film twice (1958 and 2002). The novel draws on Greene's experience as a war correspondent for *The Times* and for *Le Figaro*. He wrote the book during his journey back to Saigon from Ben Tre province and he was lectured by an American aid worker about finding a third force in Vietnam. The book was criticized by the Americans for portraying the Americans as murderers. It was however really popular in England and has achieved notable status over the years.

Another book that is definitely worth reading is *The Girl in the Picture* by Denise Chong. This is the biography of the girl photographed in one of the most unforgettable images of the twentieth century – that of nine-year-old Kim Phuc running from her blazing South-Vietnamese village while severely burned by napalm. This book describes what happened to the girl after the photo and gives you a unique insight in the everyday life in the wake of the Vietnam War.

If you would like to know more about how to survive and thrive in Vietnamese culture; *Culture Shock! Vietnam* by Claire Ellis is a good recommendation. It's a book covering the cultural differences, written by someone who's lived and worked in the country. The information is practical, accurate and enjoyable and will help you find your way in Vietnam.



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