

# The Best of Vietnam

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

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## 1 THE BEST VIETNAM EXPERIENCES

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- **Eat on the Street:** “Real” Vietnamese food is best at street side or in small market areas, and though it might be a little grungy or off-putting to some, dining alfresco in old Indochina offers the most authentic and delicious meals. Prepare yourself for some adventurous dining. If you’re in Ho Chi Minh City, try Quan An Ngon Restaurant (p. 318) for a safe overview of Vietnamese fare. See the “Where to Dine” sections in following chapters.
- **Get Lost in the Markets:** In Vietnam, the market—spelled *Cho* and pronounced like the beginning of the word *could*—is the epicenter of culture and commerce. The best market for tourists is Ben Thanh Market (p. 321) in Saigon, which caters to foreign visitors with low-cost T-shirts, souvenirs, and local treats. Every town has a market: Dalat’s market, with its delicious strawberry preserves; Hoi An’s busy riverside fish market and wholesale silk market; Hanoi’s sprawling Dong Xuan Market (p. 122); and the hilltribe markets of Sapa and Bac Ha in the far north.
- **Visit Hilltribe Groups:** Vietnam’s remote mountain regions, the Central Highlands and the far north, are home to a patchwork of ethnic minorities. Ethnic hilltribe people still practice their own brands of animistic religion and wear colorful traditional clothing. Travelers among them, in places like Sapa and Bac Ha in the far north or near Buon Ma Thuot or Kontum in the Central Highlands, can even experience a homestay in some villages through certain eco-tours and trekking companies. See chapters 6 and 10.
- **See the Water Puppets of Hanoi:** Okay, this is one for the tour buses, but the Thang Long Water Puppet Theater (p. 123) in Hanoi is magical. Intricate puppets emerge from the surface of a small watery stage as if by magic, telling tales of old Vietnam. Don’t miss it.
- **Take a Wild Ride:** Whether through Hanoi’s narrow alleyways and mazelike neighborhoods or on the broad boulevards of busy Ho Chi Minh City, the traffic in Vietnam is a trip. Darwinian road rules mean that any ride by motorcycle, car, or bus is a test of faith, as drivers swerve and angle through some of the world’s craziest traffic. In Vietnam, “getting there” is an adventure in itself. See “Getting There” sections in the following chapters for more information.
- **Celebrate the Tet Holiday:** This Lunar New Year celebration (p. 20) in early February is the most important event on the calendar. Should you be in Vietnam at this time of year, the greatest gift you could get is an invite to a family’s

Tet celebration. Bring a little something to eat as a contribution, and enjoy some

of the most unique hospitality in the world.

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## 2 THE BEST SITES (ACCORDING TO UNESCO)

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- **Halong Bay:** Just a short few hours from Hanoi, the bay at Halong, with its craggy limestone towers dotting the wide-open bay all the way to the horizon, has long inspired Vietnamese poets and philosophers. A ride on the bay these days is a rather busy, crowded affair, but some luxury tours and a few eco-tour operators can take you to the back of beyond, exploring little-known caves by kayak. See chapter 7.
- **Phong Nha—Ke Bang National Park:** These massive caves (more or less an off-the-track site popular with backpackers) are about halfway between Hue and Vinh. You have to arrange your own transport or go with a tour. See p. 183.
- **Hoi An:** Tourism has exploded on the ancient streets of Hoi An. A hub of international craft and commerce since the 14th century, this is where Vietnamese, Chinese, and even Japanese tradesmen made and sold their designer wares. Many shops are still-operational wood, stone, and ceramic workshops, but now among them are fine-dining outlets, funky little hotels (as well as new resorts on the outlying beach area of Cua Dai), and lots of bespoke tailors. Shoppers swoon. See section 6, “Hoi An,” in chapter 9.
- **My Son Sanctuary:** The Cham people, an Indonesian group who arrived by ship from the Malay Peninsula, held sway over most of central Vietnam and built arching hilltop towers. My Son is the finest example. See “An Excursion to My Son,” in chapter 9.
- **Hue Monuments:** The Nguyen Kings—the last and perhaps the most glorious (or grandiose) of Vietnam’s dynastic rulers—built grand monuments to themselves in and around the massive Hue Citadel. Hue’s sights, particularly the elaborate kings’ tombs, make for a very interesting visit. See section 1, “Hue,” in chapter 9.

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## 3 THE BEST TEMPLES & ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

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- **The Cao Dai Holy See:** The spiritual home base of the Cao Dai religion, a unique contemporary faith, the Holy See is a fantasyland of colored mosaics and elaborate painting. Followers are dressed in white turbans during the picturesque daily procession. See p. 327.
- **Tomb of Khai Dinh:** The egotistical, eccentric emperor Khai Dinh left behind a tomb that is a gaudy mix of Gothic, baroque, and classical Chinese architecture. Quite unique. See p. 197.
- **The Tunnels of Vinh Moc and Cu Chi:** Faced with devastating air raids, both of these sites supported large groups of soldiers and civilians who used the tunnels as supply lines, as escape routes, and as bases for waging a devastating guerilla campaign against U.S. forces. Day trips to either site are memorable. See p. 202 and 328.
- **Hoa Lo Prison (aka Hanoi Hilton):** Home to U.S. pilots—including John McCain—who were shot down during

the Vietnamese war with the U.S., Hoa Lo Prison is now a small museum (most of it was demolished for a high-rise). A good glimpse into Vietnam's grisly past. See p. 111.

- **Reunification Palace:** In 1975 tanks rolled over the gates of the prime minister's palace, signaling an end to the Vietnam War. You can see the actual tanks on-site. See p. 322.

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## 4 THE BEST MUSEUMS

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- **War Remnants Museum** (Ho Chi Minh City): Formerly called the Museum of American War Crimes, this ever-evolving collection is the face of Vietnam's war past. Exhibits are insightful and certainly rife with rhetoric, but offer a unique glimpse at propaganda from "the other side," and a yin to the heavy yang of Western reporting and documentation of the war years. A unique perspective and a must-see. See p. 325.
- **The Cham Museum** (Danang): This open-air colonial structure houses the largest collection of Cham sculpture in the world. Many of the 300-plus Hindu-inspired carvings are captivating. See p. 210.
- **Vietnam National Museum of Fine Arts** (Hanoi): This large colonial structure houses a fine collection of new works, historical lacquer and silk paintings, woodblocks, and folk and expressive works in oil. See p. 109.
- **Ho Chi Minh Museum** (Hanoi): Like the War Remnants Museum, the Ho Chi Minh Museum is a battleground of ideology. Located adjacent to his very tomb, the museum tells the tale of the revolutionary from cradle to grave. See p. 108.

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## 5 THE BEST BEACHES

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- **Nha Trang:** Vietnam's Ocean City is very crowded in the summertime with domestic tourists, but it's a great escape. The city has a few worthy sights—otherwise a cluttered market town—but there are some great new resorts and the best seafood going. See p. 268.
- **Mui Ne Beach, Phan Thiet:** Just a few hours from Saigon, Phan Thiet is the perfect getaway for Saigon residents. There's a golf course designed by Nick Faldo, the seafood is good, and there are some great day trips to remote sand dunes and smaller fishing villages. See p. 285.
- **Phu Quoc Island:** Phu Quoc boasts vast tracts of interior forestland and far-flung beaches great for exploring by motorbike. There's a small clutch of mid- to low-end resorts and La Veranda, an affordable luxury resort, but the times they are a-changin' and development is on the way. Get here fast. See p. 360.

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## 6 THE BEST OF THE OUTDOORS

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

vegetation tower hundreds of feet overhead and crawl with monkeys, snakes, and rare animals. Kayaks are the only way to get up close. See chapter 7.

- **Multisports in the Central Highlands:** Opportunities abound for trekking, climbing, and mountain biking. Just contact one of the many small outfitters in Dalat (all are a copy of Phat Tire, a Vietnam pioneer). See chapter 10.
- **Cycling the Mekong Delta:** The best part about cycling in Vietnam is that, with some exceptions, the routes are quite flat. Adventure-tour outfitters out of both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (see “Visitor Information & Tours,” in chapters 5 and 12) can make any arrangements for a tour of any length, even providing a support van, and going by bike gives you a close-up view of it all. See chapter 13.
- **The Central Highlands or the Far North by Motorbike:** The rural roads of Vietnam beg to be explored, and going by motorbike, though dangerous, is a great way to do it. From Dalat in the Central Highlands, arrange a ride with an Easy Rider (p. 238), motorcycle guides who can take you up the Ho Chi Minh Trail (now a highway) and as far as Danang and Hoi An. In the far north, the Russian Minsk motorbike is the workhorse of the hills, and you can rent your own bike or go with a guide out of Hanoi and visit some incredible terrain. See chapter 10.
- **Taking On Fansipan or Trekking the Far North:** The very top of Vietnam, **Mount Fansipan** (p. 134) is a multiday adventure and only for the hearty, but the views afforded and the experience itself are amazing. There are lots of outfitters in the popular tourist town of Sapa, and you can arrange any number of treks to ethnic hilltribe villages, even overnights and homestays. See chapter 6.
- **Sail or Kite-Surf on the South China Sea:** Opportunities for watersports and sailing are many as you travel along Vietnam’s coast. Most resorts have boats for rent, and Nha Trang is a good bet, as is the area off Mui Ne Beach near Phan Thiet, which is becoming a very popular wind- and kite-surfing spot. See chapter 11.
- **Cuc Phuong National Park:** A great little overnight from Hanoi for nature lovers, Cuc Phuong hosts a unique primate-research center, has good basic accommodations, and offers lots of hiking trails. Good guides are on hand to assist or hire for the day. See p. 177.
- **Cat Tien National Park:** Bird-watcher heaven, little Cat Tien is halfway between Saigon and Dalat, and an overnight stay includes night spotting, rustic accommodations, and a morning hike. The place is crawling with jungle animals, birds, and lots of naturalists and ornithologists chasing after them with binoculars. See p. 346.

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## 7 THE BEST LUXURY ACCOMMODATIONS

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- **InterContinental Hanoi Westlake** (☎ 04/6270-8888; [www.intercontinental.com](http://www.intercontinental.com)): With rounded villas dotted around West Lake and a chic outdoor bar overlooking the water, this new resort is a perfect escape from the city. See p. 80.
- **Sofitel Metropole Hanoi** (☎ 04/3826-6919; [www.sofitel.com](http://www.sofitel.com)): The best hotel in Vietnam for luxury, service, style, and a connection to the history of Hanoi. See p. 81.
- **The Nam Hai** (Hoi An; ☎ 0510/394-0000; [www.gmhhotels.com](http://www.gmhhotels.com)): This

- resort is the most luxurious, over-the-top destination in Vietnam. A premier spa, three outdoor infinity pools, and private pool villas highlight a list that goes on and on. See p. 213.
- **Ana Mandara Villas Dalat** (☎ 063/355-5888; www.anamandara-resort.com): This is the most charming hotel in Vietnam, with 17 lovingly restored French colonial villas nestled upon a hill in the Central Highlands. See p. 240.
  - **Sofitel Dalat Palace** (☎ 063/382-5444; www.sofitel.com): There's nothing like it anywhere, really, this converted palace of the last emperor of Vietnam, Bao Dai. Retro-style rooms come with fireplaces, divan beds, claw-foot tubs, and great artwork. Fine dining and a high standard of service round out the package. One of those special finds in the world. See p. 240.
  - **Evason Hideaway Ana Mandara** (Nha Trang; ☎ 058/372-8222; www.sixsenses.com): Think the Ana Mandara done to perfection, but set on a far-flung beach with the country's most high-end pool villas. See p. 272.
  - **Princess d'Annam** (Phan Thiet; ☎ 062/368-2222; www.princessannam.com): This brand-new resort is an absolute dream for southern Vietnam. Luxurious suites and villas are nestled around a tropical garden, with picturesque oceanside dining, an outdoor infinity pool, and a three-story spa rounding out the indulgence. See p. 286.
  - **Grand Mercure La Veranda** (Duong Dong Beach; ☎ 077/398-2988; www.mercure-asia.com): This stately colonial resort with pristine views of the ocean is Vietnam's premier island getaway. See p. 365.
  - **Park Hyatt Saigon** (☎ 08/3824-1234; www.saigon.park.hyatt.com): This new luxury hotel has a prime downtown location overlooking the Saigon Opera House. The interior is sophisticated and modern, and the decor is luxurious without being chintzy. The hotel also has some of the best dining options in Saigon. See p. 304.
  - **Sheraton Saigon** (☎ 08/3827-2828; www.sheraton.com/saigon): Come here for glitzy surroundings and big conferences. It's a popular place for business travelers. See p. 305.

## 8 THE BEST MIDRANGE ACCOMMODATIONS

- **Maison d'Hanoi** (☎ 04/3938-0999; www.hanovahotel.com): This is a stylish hotel in the center of Hanoi, just south of Hoan Kiem, with a compact setup and high standard. An affordable boutique downtown hotel. See p. 83.
- **Topas Ecolodge** (☎ 020/387-1331; www.topasecolodge.com): Topas Ecolodge has the best mountain and rice paddy views in Sapa. Nestled in a misty valley away from the din of Sapa town, the lodge is also an ideal jumping-off point for treks and hikes. See p. 136.
- **Life Resort Hoi An and Quy Nhon** (www.life-resorts.com): Whether at the more isolated beachside resort in Quy Nhon (☎ 056/384-0132) or at the fine resort in Hoi An (☎ 0510/391-4555)—the very closest resort to town—Life Resort sets a new standard. See p. 214 and 264.
- **Blue Ocean Resort** (Phan Thiet; ☎ 062/384-7322; www.blueoceanresort.com): The recent face-lift has done marvels for this resort. Stand-alone bungalows, with balconies overlooking the ocean and private outdoor tubs, are your best bet here. Great spa, too. See p. 288.

- **Palace Hotel** (Ho Chi Minh City; ☎ 08/3824-4231; www.bongsencorporation.com): A recent renovation has left this place with a cool Art Deco look and modern, comfortable rooms. Fold in the ideal downtown location, and this hotel is a real bargain. See p. 309.

- **Victoria Chau Doc and Can Tho** (www.victoriahotels-asia.com): These two riverside classics are worth the trip. Chau Doc (☎ 076/386-5010) is a renovated old administration building, and Can Tho (☎ 0710/381-0111) is a retrofitted grande dame. Take great day trips and enjoy slow, riverside living. See p. 359 and 355.

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## 9 THE BEST DINING

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- **Cha Ca La Vong** (Hanoi; ☎ 04/3825-3929): A Vietnamese institution and a tourist rite of passage, really. A meal here is a memorable, do-it-yourself affair on the beat-up second floor of a restaurant as old as the hills (and it looks like it has never been painted). The food does all the talking: a unique dish of whitefish flash-fried in lots of peanut oil with dill and turmeric. See p. 90.
- **La Badiane** (Hanoi; ☎ 04/3942-4509): The hottest table in town, La Badiane offers affordable French cuisine in an atmospheric colonial mansion. See p. 89.
- **Mango Rooms** (Hoi An; ☎ 0510/391-0839): The atmosphere is fast and furious as hip young owner Duc slings a unique brand of Asian-fusion fare, heavy on grilled items and delicious light ingredients. See p. 222.
- **Le Rabelais** (Dalat; ☎ 063/382-5444): Fine French cuisine served with real panache at one of Vietnam's most luxurious rural hotels. See p. 243.
- **Quan An Ngon Restaurant** (Ho Chi Minh City; ☎ 08/3829-9449): Its popularity has spawned a number of small offshoots, including a specialty restaurant focused on northern rice dishes and another new outlet for buffet dinners, but the original restaurant near the Reunification Palace is the best. A virtual survey course of authentic Vietnamese cuisine from every region of the country, this restaurant is the town's most atmospheric, friendly, and busy. See p. 318.