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## HANOI GUIDE

wordtravels



Vietnam's small and vibrant capital lies at the heart of the northern Red River Delta, and is a city of lakes, leafy boulevards and open parks with a French colonial feel. Hanoi was founded in 1010, and became the centre of government for the Indochina Union under French rule in 1888. In 1954 it became the official capital of independent Vietnam.

Today ancient crumbling buildings dating from the 11th century lie scattered among grand French colonial residences, while shrines and monuments to Vietnam's first president, Ho Chi Minh, sit in the shadow of modern high-rise buildings. The streets of the Old Quarter preserve age-old customs, where trade takes one back half a century and temples, pagodas and monuments reflect the historic character of Vietnam.

Although a city of historical importance, and the social and cultural centre of Vietnam, it is a surprisingly modest and charming place, far slower and less developed than Ho Chi Minh City in the south. Hanoi has retained its appealing sense of the old world, despite the onset of a brisk tourism trade in 1993, absorbing the boom of hotels, travellers' hangouts and Internet cafes, and the gradual infiltration of western-style food and fashions into the once inaccessible city.

As the early morning mist rises from the serene Hoan Kiem Lake, tracksuit-clad elders perform the slow movements of tai chi, like park statues coming to life. Streets fill with activity, mopeds and bicycles weave among pedestrians, while cyclo drivers (three-wheeled bicycle taxis) clamour for attention, and postcard vendors cluster around tourists like bees sensing an open honey pot.

Hanoi is fast becoming one of the most enticing and interesting cities in Asia. As a cultural centre there are traditional water puppet shows, music and dance performances. It is also a good base for excursions to the beautiful Halong Bay, or into the Hoang Lien Mountains inhabited by several hill tribes.

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### THE BASICS

#### TIME

Local time in Vietnam is GMT +7.

#### ELECTRICITY

Electrical current in Vietnam is 220 volts, 50Hz. Plugs are either the two flat-pin or the two round-pin type. Three rectangular blade plugs can be found in some of the newer hotels.

#### LANGUAGE

The official language in Vietnam is Vietnamese. Some Chinese, English and French are spoken. Tour guides can also speak Russian and Japanese. Numerous ethnic languages are also spoken in parts.

#### TRAVEL HEALTH

Health risks in Vietnam include Hepatitis A and E, typhoid, Japanese encephalitis, bilharzia, plague, cholera, diarrhoea and HIV/AIDS. Malaria prophylaxis is recommended for travel outside the main cities and towns, the Red River delta and north of Nha Trang.

There has been an increase in the amount of reported cases of dengue fever in recent years, and visitors should take care to protect themselves from mosquito bites during the day, especially just after dawn and just before dusk, particularly in the southern Mekong Delta region. Travellers should seek medical advice about vaccinations at least three weeks before leaving for Vietnam and ensure they have adequate insect protection. Typhoid can be a problem in the Mekong Delta. Those arriving from an infected area require a yellow fever vaccination certificate. Water is drinkable, but visitors usually prefer to drink bottled water.

Decent health care is available in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) with English-speaking doctors, and there is a surgical clinic in Da Nang, but more complicated treatment may require medical evacuation. Pharmacies throughout the country are adequate, but check expiry dates of medicines carefully and be aware that some medicines are counterfeit. Health insurance is essential.

#### TIPPING

Most restaurants and hotels in Vietnam now add a five to ten percent service charge to their bills. In top hotels porters expect a small tip. Hired drivers and guides are usually tipped, and it is customary to round up the bill for taxi drivers in the cities. Tipping is not generally expected, but some small change for most services is appreciated.

#### SAFETY INFORMATION

Vietnam is relatively safe travel destination and violent crime is uncommon. That said, petty crime can be an issue; pick-pocketing is rife and in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) drive-by purse snatching is a common trick. Be wary with your belongings when in crowds and on public transport. It is best to leave valuables in a secure hotel safe and avoid obvious displays of wealth. During the monsoon season (usually between June and October) the country is prone to serious flooding and typhoons (until December), particularly the Mekong Delta and Central Region, try stay aware of the weather forecasted for the areas you are traveling to.

## LOCAL CUSTOMS

Try dress modestly when away from the beaches (shoulders covered and shorts below the knee) and avoid excessive public displays of affection. Shoes must be removed on entering religious sites and a donation is expected when visiting a temple or pagoda. Photography is restricted at ports, harbours and airports, and it is polite to ask permission before taking photographs of people, especially of ethnic minorities. Never leave chopsticks sticking upright in a bowl of rice as it has strong connotations to death. Use your hand as opposed to pointing with your finger.

## BUSINESS

Business practices in Vietnam are conducted in a similar fashion to those of China, Japan and Korea rather than their Southeast Asian counterparts. Pride and tact are important to bear in mind, as practices tend to be formalised more so than in Western countries. Often it is best to be introduced rather than approach the person with whom business is intended for fear of suspicion. Negotiations and settlements may take longer as the Vietnamese like to examine contracts thoroughly. Formal dress is common but in summer months the dress tends to be more casual. It is important to be on time for business appointments as the Vietnamese consider lateness rude.

The person is always addressed as Mr., Mrs., and Ms., followed by their personal name (not family name), unless otherwise referred; it is worth finding out in advance. Shaking hands with both hands is the most respectful greeting although bowing is still popular among the older population, and meetings always begin with the exchange of business cards, which should be given and received with both hands; each person expects to receive one, so be sure to bring a vast supply. Business hours are typically 8am to 5pm Monday to Friday with an hour taken at lunch, and 8am to 11.30am on Saturdays.

## COMMUNICATIONS

The international country code for Vietnam is +84. The outgoing code is 00, followed by the relevant country code (e.g. 001 for the United States or Canada). City/area codes are in use, e.g. Hanoi is (0)24 and Ho Chi Minh City is (0)28. Wifi availability is widespread, especially in the cities, and internet cafés are available in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and other major centres.

## DUTY FREE

Travellers to Vietnam over 18 years do not have to pay duty on the following items: 400 cigarettes, 100 cigars, 100g tobacco, 1.5 litres alcohol with alcohol content higher than 22 percent and 2 litres below 22 percent; up to 5kg tea and 3kg coffee; perfume and items for personal consumption within reasonable amounts; other goods to the value of five million Vietnamese dong.

## CLIMATE

Hanoi has a humid tropical climate, characterised by monsoons, like most of northern Vietnam. Summers (between May and September) are very hot with plenty of rain and average temperatures between 76°F (24°C) and 91°F (33°C); while winters (from November to March) are cool and relatively dry, averaging between 57°F (14°C) and 72°F (22°C). During the transitional months of April and October anything is possible, and spring often brings light rain. The hottest month of the year is June. January is the coolest month, usually beset with a cold northeasterly wind.

## ENTRY REQUIREMENTS FOR SOUTH AFRICANS

South Africans must have a passport valid for 30 days beyond the period of intended stay, and a visa is required. Visas are not required for stays of up to 30 days for South African nationals arriving at Phu Quoc (PQC).

## PASSPORT/VISA

Although officially Vietnam demands six months of validity on passports, passports valid for at least one month after expiry date of visa will be accepted. Nationals of a handful of countries only require three months of passport validity. All visitors must have sufficient funds for the duration of their stay, onward or return tickets, and all documents needed for next destination. Visitors should hold a spare passport photograph on arrival in Vietnam for use on the immigration form that must be filled out. You should retain the yellow portion of your immigration Arrival-Departure card on entry to Vietnam, as this is required for exit. Visitors coming from countries with no Vietnamese diplomatic representation will be issued a visa on arrival, provided the visitor is holding a letter from Vietnamese Immigration confirming this. It is highly recommended that passports have at least six months validity remaining after your intended date of departure from your travel destination. Immigration officials often apply different rules to those stated by travel agents and official sources.

## MONEY

The official currency is the Vietnamese Đồng (VND). Currency can be exchanged at banks, bureaux de change and larger hotels, though only US dollars are easily exchanged outside of major cities. Visa and MasterCard are becoming more widely acceptable, particularly in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and all major tourist centres. US currency is accepted by many hotels in tourist centres and is useful as a back-up, but notes must be relatively new and unmarked. Between four and nine million Đồng can be withdrawn from ATMs at a time, and most banks will have useful leaflets listing ATM locations throughout the country. Đồng is not easy to find outside of Vietnam and can be difficult to exchange, so change money on arrival and use up leftover cash before departing Vietnam.

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## TRANSPORT

Public transport is limited to buses, which are extremely cheap, but slow, crowded and a challenge for non-Vietnamese speakers. There are plenty of taxis to be hired and this is the safest and easiest way to get across the city, but make sure the meter is switched on and change is given. Motorbike taxis are also a cheap and easy way to get around, but the driving can be nerve-wracking. Renting a car or a motorbike are also popular options; all cars come with a driver/guide, which is a good idea considering the chaotic nature of the streets.

Visitors should be cautious about renting a self-drive motorbike, bearing in mind the primary cause of injury and death among foreigners in Vietnam is motorcycle accidents. Two-seater cyclos (cycle rickshaws) are plentiful and can be flagged down anywhere, but should be avoided at night. Fares should be negotiated beforehand and a map is useful, as many drivers don't speak English.

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## ATTRACTIONS

The bustling nature of this city seamlessly synchronises with its old-world feel. This combination is the reason it is so attractive to backpackers and luxury holidaymakers alike. As if this wasn't enough, its rich history has been steeped in a mythic aura due to its relatively recent introduction to the tourist landscape.

Hanoi is as much a Romantically charming city as Ho Chi Minh City is a hive of commercial interest and big city living. Its lively merchant quarters and bar districts host tourists until first light, where cheap accommodation and drinks make the fun that much more enjoyable. During the day, museums, temples, memorials and the famous Old Quarter of Hanoi provide a myriad of cultural experiences unique to the city.

Within Hanoi's busy streets lie some of Vietnam's most tranquil cloisters and sanctuaries, tucked away from the daily flurry.

If the city lights become too bright, Sapa and Bac Ha are two nearby country getaways that offer an opportunity to experience rural Vietnam. In addition, no trip to Hanoi would be complete without a foray into Halong Bay, often accompanied by a stay at Cat Ba island. These emerald waters are famous for their adventure activities, set in a bay littered with thousands of small islands and inlets - the product of a giant dragon who stormed through the bay aeons ago.

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#### CAT BA ISLAND



For most, a trip in Halong Bay means at least a night on Cat Ba Island. Many enlist for a package tour of one night on the island and one on a boat, but Cat Ba is worth investing extra time in. This 54 sq mile (140 sq km) island houses equally impressive beach relaxation and hardcore outdoor activities including kayaking, trekking and world-class rock climbing.

For those wishing to relax, there are three beaches within walking distance of town. Each is spacious and all are protected inlets with views of Halong islands. Beaches one and three are the most secluded and both offer beautiful views from the short walks along surrounding cliff lines. For those looking for something more rugged, the many limestone cliffs dotting the island are ideal for rock climbing and hotels located on the town's main strip offer guides and gear. Various treks range in length but most are fairly steep. However, the reward is well worth it, as they give a bird's-eye-view of the island's national park which is also home to the rare Cat Ba Langur.

All hotels can arrange excellent boat tours of the surrounding islands. This includes visits to deep caves with stalagmites and stalactites, secluded swimming holes, floating fish farms and kayaking. The tour is the same regardless of whom it's booked through, so the cheaper the better. Whether it has been a relaxing day of sun and sea or one of thrilling adventure, it must end at the bay's floating restaurant, which has some of the best seafood in Vietnam.

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#### HALONG BAY



The natural wonder of Halong Bay, renowned for its spectacular scenery and limestone grottos and caves, has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The bay is peppered with over 1,600 inlets and tiny islands emerging almost mystically out of the emerald waters of the Gulf of Tonkin, scoured by wind and wave erosion to form dramatic rock shapes, many of which contain caves.

Many of the islands have been named for their astonishing resemblance to their namesakes, such as Dragon, Incense Burner, Pair of Roosters and Man's Head Islands. The weird protuberances have been at the source of several local legends, particularly about a dragon whose thrashing tail created the bay and its islands. The name Vinh Ha Long means 'where the dragon descended into the sea'.

The most impressive cave is the Hang Dau Go (Grotto of the Wooden Stakes), an extensive grotto with rock formations presenting various eerie images in the mysterious light. It was named from the Battle of 1288 when General Tran Hung Dao prepared hundreds of stakes to be planted in the riverbed of the largest chamber to counter a boat attack. Nearby the beautiful Hang Thien Cung cave is famous for its sparkling stalagmites and stalactites. When booking a cruise in advance, travellers should consider reserving a night or two, to experience Halong Bay at its most picturesque; sunrise, sunset and star scattered night.

**Transport:** Local bus or tour from Hanoi. Boats can be arranged from Hanoi or in Halong City. Overnight tours are the easiest way to see the bay and are arranged from traveller's cafes in Hanoi; otherwise it's a four-hour bus journey from Hanoi.; **Admission:** The cheapest day tours in Halong Bay cost around 30 USD..

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#### HO CHI MINH'S MAUSOLEUM



Ba Dinh Square was where, in 1945, Ho Chi Minh read out the Declaration of Independence and is the site of annual national celebrations today. Dominating the west side is the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, where the embalmed body of the 'father of the modern state', 'liberator of the Vietnamese people' and beloved public figure is displayed.

The body of Ho Chi Minh is enclosed in a glass case, the traditional way to honour famous communist leaders. Security is tight, there is a strict dress code and it is imperative to maintain a respectful demeanour while inside; this also means no photographs. Nearby is the Ho Chi Minh Museum that commemorates his life, housing a collection of military orders, correspondence, manifestos and photographs that illustrates the crucial role he had in the country's history.

**Address:** Hung Vuong and Le Hong Phong Streets, Ba Dinh Square.; **Telephone:** +84 24 3845 5128; **Opening time:** Open from Tuesday to Thursday from 7.30-10.30 and weekends from 8am-11pm. Closed on Mondays and Fridays. The mausoleum is closed for two months of the year, usually from 4 September to 4 November, when the body of Ho Chi Minh goes to Russia for maintenance.;

**Admission:** Free, but a donation is expected. .

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#### OLD QUARTER



The ancient meandering streets of the Old Quarter are each named after the crafts and speciality trades traditionally practised by the original artisan's guilds in the 13th century. Each guild was grouped around a temple, or dinh, dedicated to the particular beliefs of the village from where the guild originated, and many of these temples are open to the public today.

The early merchant's quarter affords an intriguing glimpse into life centuries ago with covered markets, and the ancient narrow buildings that still line the streets, known as tube or tunnel houses that contained shops. Businesses were taxed according to the width of their storefront and resulted in shops only seven foot (2m) wide with a series of storerooms, workshops and living quarters extending behind to a length of up to 197ft (60m). Many streets are still devoted to a predominant trade such as silks, religious objects or textiles, silver jewellery, antiques, and there are numerous art galleries and craft stores, as well as cafes and pavement restaurants lining the streets.

Traffic within the Old Quarter is a chaotic mix of bicycles, motorbikes and pedestrians passing noisily down the narrow streets and shady alleyways.

**Address:** Hoan Kiem District;

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#### ONE PILLAR PAGODA

One Pillar Pagoda was constructed to celebrate the tale of the heirless Emperor Ly Thai Tong, who dreamt about receiving a son from the Buddhist goddess of mercy and compassion, seated on a lotus flower. He married shortly after and bore a son, and the pagoda was built to honour the event.

It is the most interesting of the city's numerous pagodas, and beneath the ornate curved roof people come to pray for fertility and well-being, with allegedly miraculous effects. The unique wooden structure was designed to resemble a lotus flower, the Buddhist representation of enlightenment, emerging out of the water, with the single stone pillar its symbolic stalk. It was destroyed by the French during the first Indochina War and was subsequently rebuilt.

**Address:** Chua Mot Cot, Doi Can, Ba Dinh; **Telephone:** +84 4 3858 7325; **Transport:** The One Pillar Pagoda is a 15 minute walk, or short taxi ride away from Hanoi City Centre.; **Opening time:** Daily from 8am-11.30am, Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday from 2pm-4pm. ; **Admission:** 15,000 VND.

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#### SAPA AND BAC HA

The old hill station of Sapa sits high on the edge of a plateau surrounded by spectacular scenery and the Hoang Lien Mountains, which boast Vietnam's highest peak, Fan Si Pan. Sapa functions as a market town and a gathering spot for local tribes who come into town to trade every weekend.

The market is excellent for buying handicrafts and people watching. Colourful tunics of the Dao and Giay people mix with the black and blue clothing and silver ornamentation of the Black Hmong tribe, while bright red scarves cover the heads of the Red Hmong who carry large woven baskets on their backs brimming with goods.

Nearly 75 miles (140 km) from Sapa is the small town of Bac Ha situated in a valley. Bac Ha is famous for its Sunday market. Much less touristy than Sapa, the market is a riot of colour and noise, a place not only for trade but also for socialising. All paths leading into town are filled with people going to market, some riding horses or water buffalo, and the square is a mix of different minorities, buying and selling, or gathered in groups around a central pot of food. The Flower Hmong are the most vivid, with richly coloured clothes of bright red, blue and pink, and skirts embroidered with delicate flowers.

The markets have become a major tourist attraction and it is important that visitors to the region are sensitive to local culture and traditions, particularly when taking photographs of people.

**Address:** Lao Cai sits between Sapa and Bac Ha. ; **Transport:** A three to four day tour is good enough to get the feel of the Sapa-Bac Ha region, easily arranged at any travellers' cafe in Hanoi. Otherwise a train runs from Hanoi to Lao Cai (approx. 10 hrs) from where bus transfers are available.; **Admission:** Three day, two night tours start at 140 USD.

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#### TEMPLE OF LITERATURE (VAN MIEU)

The Temple of Literature is Vietnam's historical seat of learning and is the most sacred place for the disciples of Confucius. It is one of the few remaining buildings from the original city founded by Emperor Ly Thanh Tong in the 11th century and is a well-preserved example of Vietnamese architecture.

It became the site of the country's first university in 1076. Consisting of a complex of small buildings and five walled courtyards, it was an exclusive establishment teaching the principles of Confucius. In the third courtyard is a pond, the Well of Heavenly Clarity, and beside it are 82 stone stelae, mounted on tortoises and engraved with the names of successful graduates.

Over a period of 900 years thousands of Vietnamese scholars graduated from the university. In honour of their teacher's legacy, there is also a temple dedicated to Confucius, a place where the king and his mandarins would make sacrifices.

**Address:** Pho Van Mieu, corner of Pho Quoc Tu Giam; **Telephone:** +84 24 3845 2917/ +84 4 3511 4855; **Opening time:** Open daily from 7.30am to 6pm (summer), and 8am to 6pm (winter) ; **Admission:** Varying costs for English-speaking guides. Entrance costs 30,000 VND for adults, 15,000 VND for students and free for children under fifteen years old..

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## SHOPPING

Hanoi offers a less frenetic and commercialised shopping experience than Ho Chi Minh City in the south of the country. Traditional arts and crafts are more popular here than mass produced goods, and night markets are lively social occasions not to be missed.

The old town is where most of the art galleries are situated. A lot of up and coming artists exhibit here and if you can spot quality and bargain skilfully you can pick a truly unique and worthwhile memento of your Hanoi visit.

Also popular souvenirs are paraphernalia from the communist and war eras, including Chairman Mao branded goods, medals, bullets, and Zippo lighters - the latter invariably of modern provenance and not found in a former battle zone as claimed by the salesman.

Other souvenirs include silk garments, wooden carvings, shoes from silk or bamboo, ethnic weaving, rice paper notebooks and paintings, and the distinctive conical hats which have been worn for centuries and are still much in evidence today. Look out for hats made in Hue which each have a unique poem inside the rim.

Avoid buying gemstones unless you have the skill to tell the difference between jewels and polished glass.

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## NIGHTLIFE

Hanoi is a city with an abundance of choices for night-time entertainment. After dark the Old Quarter takes on a new life, it's where one can find crowded sidewalk spots to sip on cheap draughts of beer while perched on a stool. Bai Hoi Junction has a mixed patronage of locals and tourists who congregate around drinks for prices as low as 5,000 VND. The Old Quarter is also a prime location to devour street food by night, providing a wealth of tasty, quickly prepared food. For more experienced culinary navigation through the countless options, travellers can sign up for a night time street food tour.

Hanoi has no shortage of nightclubs, trendy bars and live music venues scattered around the West Lake area and Hoan Kiem district. For a more cultural experience, travellers can head to legendary Binh Minh's Jazz Club, located in the French Quarter or visit the historic Hanoi Opera House, which still hosts live performances every so often. There is also the option to tap into Hanoi's growing contemporary art scene with a visit to Manzi Cafe and Art Space, local art exhibitions and film festivals are also quite common around the city.

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## **AIRPORTS**

### **NOI BAI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT (HAN)**

#### **LOCATION**

The airport is situated 28 miles (45km) north of Hanoi.

#### **GETTING TO THE CITY**

City bus Routes 7 and 17 run to Hanoi from the airport, stopping on the right side of the terminal exit. Buses run every 15 to 20 minutes between 5am and 10pm, and the journey takes approximately one hour. Route 7 goes to the Kim Ma Bus Station, while Route 17 connects to the Long Bien Station. The bus fare is about VND 5,000. Airport minibuses offer direct transportation to hotels.

#### **TIME**

Local time is GMT +7.

#### **CONTACTS**

Tel: +84 4 3886 5047

#### **CAR RENTAL**

Car rental agencies at the airport include Avis, Budget, Hertz, Europcar and Sixt. Cars must normally be hired with drivers, since travellers without a Vietnamese drivers licence may not drive rental cars.

#### **AIRPORT TAXIS**

Taxis are available outside the terminal; rides to the city centre take approximately 30 minutes, and cost about VND 320,000.

#### **TRANSFER BETWEEN TERMINALS**

Passengers can use a shuttle bus, which is free of charge for transit passengers, to commute between Terminal 1 and Terminal 2. The shuttle operates from 6am to midnight and departs every 10 to 15 minutes.

#### **FACILITIES**

The airport has currency exchange and ATMs, a VIP lounge, massage services, shops and restaurants.

#### **DEPARTURE TAX**

#### **WEBSITE**

[www.hanoiairportonline.com](http://www.hanoiairportonline.com)

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