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# HO CHI MINH CITY GUIDE

wordtravels



Ho Chi Minh City, better known by its former name of Saigon, is an industrious and dense metropolis, the largest city in Vietnam and the business capital of the country. With a population of roughly seven million, it is crowded and noisy, yet also exciting, a historic city that encompasses the essence of the nation.

Located on the Saigon River on the edge of the Mekong Delta, Saigon became the capital of the Republic of South Vietnam and was the American headquarters during the Vietnam War. Two years later the Communist north took control of the country, the city's name was changed to Ho Chi Minh City, and recession and poverty ensued.

Today Ho Chi Minh City has a cosmopolitan atmosphere, and having actively welcomed capitalism its citizens are clearly business-minded. Although relatively modern, it has still managed to hold onto its historical character, and fine restaurants, chic hotels and bars line the sidewalks. The buzzing of motorbikes and scooters merges with the calls of street vendors and the urgent business of stall owners, selling a range of delectable street food and exotic delicacies. The sight of a family of four balanced precariously on a scooter, a squealing pig strapped onto the back of a bicycle, bowed heads topped by pointed lampshade-style hats and orange-clothed monks are just some of the vibrant images the city has to offer.

Although overshadowed by modern and Asiatic influences, a little of Ho Chi Minh City's French colonial charm still remains, evident in the graceful architecture, wide boulevards, and a sidewalk cafe society. It is not for the attractions that one visits Ho Chi Minh City however, but for the vibrancy of its street life, and its proximity to the Mekong Delta.

## 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 apposed 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**

Ho Chi Minh City is in the tropics, and very close to the sea, so its climate is warm to hot all year, with temperatures averaging between 70°F (21°C) and 90°F (32°C) all year round. Temperatures are slightly cooler between December and April, which is also the dry season. Rains begin in May and become heavy between June and August, but the showers are sudden and short, with the sun usually reappearing fairly quickly. There is a danger of typhoons from July to November. The best time to visit is in the cool, dry season, between December and April.

## **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 Dong (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 Dong can be withdrawn from ATMs at a time, and most banks will have useful leaflets listing ATM locations throughout the country. Dong 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**

This city has some of the world's most chaotic traffic, much of which consists of bicycles and motorcycles. It is tempting to want to hire a bike and join in the fray, and they are available, but it can be a nerve-wracking experience piloting your own vehicle. A better option is to flag down a motorcycle taxi and negotiate an hourly rate. Most of the major hotels and restaurants attract concentrations of taxi cabs that can be hailed from the roadside, and taxis can also be ordered by telephone. Most tour operators offer the services of a car and driver for the day.

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## **ATTRACTIONS**

Ho Chi Minh City stands out as Vietnam's premiere commercial metropolitan and is without a doubt the embodiment of big city life in the country. As such, its major attractions include massive markets in the city's Chinese district, the famous nightlife of District One, various museums, French colonial buildings and older remnants of past emperors.

As with Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City offers a blend of traditional, colonial and modern sites to see. War museums and history museums tell of the recent American invasion and earlier conflicts with European powers, while the Reunification Palace celebrates Vietnam as a nation.

Hidden within this hectic metropolis are temples, secluded gardens and cloisters that offer a brief reprieve from the whirr of activity. Rural Vietnam is also never too far away, so it's easy to leave the city for some fresh air among rice paddies, to visit a small village or retreat to a tiny temple in the surrounding country before plunging into the city once more.

The frantic construction of modern skyscrapers and office blocks is apparent everywhere you go, and the Saigon Skydeck Tower with its 360° viewing deck is the perfect lens through which to view this sprawling city in its entirety. It is this mixture of youthful flair, old-world charm and the ease of escaping to the tranquillity of rural life that makes this space so unique as a meeting place of history and modernity.



#### BEN THANH MARKET

Ben Thanh Market, in Ho Chi Minh City's District 1, is one of the cities best known landmarks. It is often crowded, hot and frantic, but it's a great place to buy local handicrafts, branded goods and souvenirs. In fact, almost anything. There is a wet market at the back which sells every kind of food imaginable. It is rumoured that buyers will be given their purchases in differently coloured bags according to their bargaining ability, as a sign to other vendors. The market is open daily from 7am to 6pm, but an outdoor night market and food stalls that surround the area are open until much later.

**Telephone:** +84 28 3829 9274; **Opening time:** Daily from 7am to 6pm;



#### CHOLON

Cholon, the Chinese district of Saigon, is comprised of a dense network of vibrant streets and alleyways. It was first settled by the Chinese Hoa merchants at the end of the 18th century, and is now the home of Vietnam's biggest ethnic minority community. Cholon diverges from the conventional 'Chinatown' set up that exists in many prominent cities the world over, largely due to its impressive expanse.

When you enter Cholon, the difference in environment is immediately noticeable. Madarin signposts lead into a fascinating labyrinth of temples, restaurants, exotic stores, medicine shops and markets. The best place to experience the bustle of trade is at the crowded Binh Tay Market where the corridors are filled with stalls offering a variety of exotic produce, from live tethered ducks to nuts and seeds, as well as other household items.

There are several temples of interest in Cholon, including the colourful Jade Emperor Pagoda, the Quan Am Pagoda with its ornate exterior, Phuoc An Hoi Quan Temple, its roof exquisitely ornamented with dragons and sea monsters, and the Thien Hau Pagoda dedicated to the goddess of the sea.

**Address:** Corner of Tran Binh and Thap Muoi in Ho Chi Minh City.; **Transport:** From the city centre take bus number 62 enroute to Ben xe Quan 8 and get off at the 13C-13D stop in Thap Muoi street. ;



#### DAM SEN WATER PARK

The best way to cool off in the hot dusty city is the Dam Sen Water Park. The water park is set within three hectares of Vietnamese gardens and is the centre of a larger theme park complex. Among all the rides there is a great selection of water slides which hurtle passengers, full speed, up railings and down steep drops.

The large wave pool offers more relaxing fun and the wide stream encircling the park is a great place to float under the hot sun. There is also a designated section of the compound for relaxing away from the excited crowds.

Avoid public holidays unless you don't mind being a tinned sardine.

**Address:** 3 Hoa Binh Street, District 11, Ho Chi Minh City. ; **Website:** [www.damsenwaterpark.com.vn/en/](http://www.damsenwaterpark.com.vn/en/); **Telephone:** +84 8 3858 8418; **Opening time:** Open daily from 8am-6pm.; **Admission:** Fares are free for over 60s and people under 0.8m tall, and range up to 100,000 VND for people between 0.8m and 1.4m tall and up to 150.000 VND for people over 1.4m tall. Discounts are available after 4pm. .



#### PHAM NGU LAO

This area of Saigon, located in District One, is known as South Vietnam's backpacker district. Stretching along the streets of De Tham, Pham Ngu Lau and Bui Vien, Pham Ngu Lao is often compared to the more famous Khao San road of Bangkok, this district, similarly, is an amalgamation of bars, guesthouses, restaurants, souvenir shops and small travel agencies.

Known also to be an expat playground, these bars stay open later than most in the city. The prominent Go2 Bar is the most popular among tourists but dozens dot the area. Day trips to the Mekong Delta or the Cu Chi tunnels are easily organised in any of the travel agencies as well as transport to most of Vietnam. Although prices vary the trips usually are the same despite the agency.

**Address:** Pham Ngu Lao, District One; **Transport:** The easiest way to get there is to take a taxi from Ho Chi Minh City Centre. ;



#### WAR REMNANTS MUSEUM

The disturbing War Remnants Museum highlights the horrors of modern combat, and especially portrays the suffering inflicted on the Vietnamese people during the Vietnam War. Its former name, the Museum of American War Crimes, was altered so as not to cause offence to American visitors, but the museum's displays still give an anti-American perspective.

The museum houses a collection of weapons, machinery, artefacts and horrific photographs illustrating the devastating affects of napalm, Agent Orange and other weapons of mass destruction.

One room is dedicated to biological warfare, including the effects of the defoliant sprays that were dumped over the country. Another room looks at worldwide demonstrations for peace and international opposition to the war. In the courtyard there are tanks, helicopters, planes and bombs on display.

**Address:** 28 Vo Van Tan St, District 3; **Website:** [warremnantsmuseum.com](http://warremnantsmuseum.com) ; **Telephone:** +82 28 3930 5587; **Opening time:** Open daily from 7:30am to 12pm and 1:30pm to 5pm (including holidays); **Admission:** Tickets cost 15,000 VND, with concession for students.

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## EXCURSIONS



### CU CHI TUNNELS

The Cu Chi Tunnels system is an underground network of tunnels dug in the 1940s by the Vietnamese as a place to hide during the fight against the French. The network was later expanded and used in the American War. Today the system is more than 150 miles (250km) long.

It is comprised of winding tunnels and unlit offshoots, secret trap doors connecting narrow routes to hidden shelters, local rivers and tunnels reaching to the Cambodian border. It was once a sprawling city of improvised hospitals, living quarters, kitchens and fresh water wells, with some tunnels barely large enough to wriggle through. The plan was to launch surprise assaults on the enemy, and then disappear; this strategy was so successful that the superior firepower of the French and American armies was insufficient in the face of continuous ambushes in which the assailants seemed to vanish into fresh air.

Today many of the tunnels have been enlarged to allow visitors the dirty and claustrophobic experience of crawling through a portion of the underground network, past secret trapdoors and booby traps laid against invasion. The two main sites, Ben Dinh and Ben Duoc, are different in that one was constructed specifically for tourists (Ben Dinh) and the other was actually used in war (Ben Duoc). Due to their popularity with tourists, hard-sell vendors can be a constant hassle among the touring throngs.

**Address:** Ben Dinh is 22 miles (35km) northwest of Ho Chi Minh City at Tay Ninh and Ben Duoc is 31 miles (50km) in the same direction. ; **Telephone:** +84 3794 8820; **Transport:** The tunnels are best visited on a day tour, otherwise a bus from Ben Thanh bus station stops in Cu Chi where public transport services the site.; **Opening time:** Sunday to Friday 7am-6pm, Saturday 7am-5pm. It is best to arrive before 3pm as it gets quite dark towards late afternoon/evening. ;



### MEKONG DELTA

The delta is a vast network of waterways formed by the Mekong River. It is surrounded by a fertile patchwork of endless green rice paddies, orchards and swamplands, where most of the country's rice is grown. Not only does the Mekong River irrigate what is known as 'the rice bowl of Vietnam', it also serves as a vital form of transport.

A unique way of life has evolved among the villagers that have lived on or beside the river for centuries. The best way to experience the delta is by boat, joining the rowing boats and fishermen, rickety houseboats, ferries and traditional sampans on the brown water. On the banks are small villages, vegetable gardens, fish farms and stilted houses. Trading is carried out between boats at floating markets, where whole sections of the river are covered by bobbing merchants who advertise their wares, often hung from long bamboo poles.

There are several towns in the region from where visitors can arrange boat trips, if not already on an organised tour. Try to avoid the rainy season, as the tides may be too high for canal travel. There is an impressive range of local dishes on offer and besides seafood there are opportunities for adventurous travellers to sample snake, eel and bat.

**Transport:** It is best to use a tour operator or local guide to navigate the region.;



### MUI NE

Mui Ne is Vietnam's most western style resort beach. The city itself is a typical Vietnamese fishing community sporting a fleet of beautiful fishing boats but with little to see or do in town. The beach beside it, however, is home to luxury resorts and hotels, while cheaper guesthouses can be found across the road or closer to town.

A variety of water activities are available including surfing, kite surfing, jet-skiing, and sailing. The young and tireless will enjoy the beach and roadside bars where cheap drinks and electro music carry on late into the night. Most parts of the long six mile (10 km) stretch of beach resemble the tropical paradise Mui Ne has always been touted as, but other sections have experienced coastal erosion, travellers should keep this in mind when selecting a resort.

There are red coloured sand dunes close to town, but beyond those lie much larger white sand dunes which are worth the extra half-hour trip. For a small tip, children will rent out sand sleds and demonstrate how to surf the dunes. One of Vietnam's top golf courses is also just outside the city. Mui Ne is a scenic 5 hour motorbike trip from Vung Tau or five to seven hour highway bus ride from Ho Chi Minh City.

**Address:** Mui Ne, Phan Thiet, Binh Thuan; **Transport:** Buses from Ho Chi Minh City cost between 105,000-140,000 VND (up to 7 USD), while the total train journey will be around 400,000 VND (around 18 USD). Scooters or motor bikes are available for hire in Mui Ne, but taxis are safer. ;

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## RESTAURANTS

The flavours one experiences when dining out in Ho Chi Minh City will linger on the palate long after the last morsel has been eaten. Vietnamese cuisine makes use of the freshest ingredients, dishes are anchored around herbs such as lemongrass, mint, Vietnamese mint, long coriander and Thai basil leaves. Known as the culinary capital of Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City offers a mix of delectable street food, casual dining and modern Vietnamese restaurants.

Visitors will also be able to enjoy a wide array of restaurants specialising in cuisines from all over the globe, peppered along the streets of Ho Chi Minh City. With everything from French and Italian to good old American burgers and fries, travellers will find something to suit their taste.

Some of the best areas for dining out in the city are around the Ben Thanh Market where some of the best local fare can be sampled, including dishes like mien ga (vermicelli, chicken, and mushrooms in a broth-like soup) and the Vietnamese staple, pho (noodle soup). Dine on a riverboat while you float along the Saigon or grab your meal on the go from one of the city's popular street vendors - the choices are endless!

### PHO 24

\$\$\$\$\$ | Local

Serving some of Ho Chi Minh City's finest pho, Pho 24 is a popular chain restaurant serving up Vietnam's staple for a number of years. The choices aren't that exciting, but meat lovers will enjoy the pho with beef fillet and fat brisket, or pho with chicken, while vegetarian options are available too. Open for lunch and dinner.

**Address:** 358 Nguyen Van Linh, District 7 | **Telephone:** (08)3848 0807 | **Website:** www.pho24.com.vn

#### AL FRESCO'S

\$\$\$\$ | American

For travellers who are feeling a little homesick, Al Frescos offers good old America fare that most western visitors will enjoy. From ribs, burgers and pizzas to tex-mex, steaks and fries with lashings of ketchup, Al Fresco's has it all. Open daily for breakfast lunch and dinner.

**Address:** 27 Dong Du, District 1 | **Telephone:** (08) 822 7317 | **Website:** www.alfrescosgroup.com

#### LEMONGRASS

\$\$\$\$ | Asian

With local cane furniture and low lighting and three storeys to choose from Lemongrass makes the perfect location for a romantic dinner in Ho Chi Minh City. Its lunch menu's not bad either. This eatery has been serving local Vietnamese fare to visitors and locals for years and comes highly recommended. Serving healthy and light dishes, the menu is varied, incorporating seasonal flavours and ingredients and catering to all tastes. Try the soup or spring rolls and the deep-fried prawn in coconut batter - delicious! Open daily for lunch and dinner.

**Address:** 4 Nguyen Thiep St, District 1 | **Telephone:** (08) 822 0496

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## SHOPPING

Travellers in Ho Chi Minh City will at first be overwhelmed with the amount of stalls and roadside vendors that cram the sidewalks and street corners, but there are plenty of bargains to be found among the usual tourist wares and counterfeit handbags.

Best buys include silk clothing and other hand-woven fabrics, bamboo goods, ceramics, boxes and vases made from lacquer ware, while traditional Vietnamese hats can be found just about anywhere. Tailor-made clothing is also popular.

Most of Ho Chi Minh City's shopping can be done from the local markets and street vendors where polite haggling is expected, especially at the Anh Dong Market in District 5 or the Ban Thanh indoor market in downtown Saigon.

Shoppers looking for something a little more upmarket should head to Dong Khoi Street in District 1 where designer stores, boutiques, antique stores and jewellery stores abound while bargain hunters will also be pleased to know there is a duty-free store on Nguyen Hue Boulevard in District 1, which specialises in duty-free items such as perfumes and colognes.

Most shops in Ho Chi Minh City are open daily from 8am to 8pm.

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## NIGHTLIFE

Its nightlife gained notoriety during the Vietnam War for its girly-bars but a lot has changed recently thanks to Vietnam's tourist boom. Ho Chi Minh City's nightlife has grown and diversified considerably, and while not rivalling the range of entertainment of other Southeast Asian destinations, it's still guaranteed to do the job.

With everything from rooftop bars and lounges to pubs and nightclubs playing all the latest dance hits, travellers looking to let loose on a night out on the town will have plenty of options in this bustling, neon city.

Start your night off at a rooftop bar or beer garden, from where you can watch the sunset over the busy streets before heading out to District 1. Here the bars and fashionable clubs can be found, particularly on the streets around Dong Khoi and Hai Ba Trung. Travellers can expect to encounter many popular spots for expats and other westerners, where party goers can make use of the bar, dance floor and pool tables.

When you start feeling more confident, why not try your hand at hitting those high notes at one of the many karaoke bars, for a night of fun and singing. Then head over to District 3, where you can attend one of the nightly live gigs, including local rock bands. But if you are after something special and really different, why not hop on one of the many dinner cruises that operate from District 1 and cruise down the Saigon River in style. This is the perfect way to relax and spend a lazy evening.

Travellers should also note that many of Ho Chi Minh City's bars and nightclubs close early by big city standards, around midnight or when the last customer leaves so anyone looking to keep going until the early hours of the morning will be sorely disappointed.

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## AIRPORTS

### TAN SON NHAT INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT (SGN)

#### LOCATION

The airport is situated four miles (6km) from Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon).

#### GETTING TO THE CITY

Minibuses and metered taxis are available for transport to the city centre. Make sure the driver is wearing an official name badge and that the meter is on. Most hotels can arrange transport for arriving passengers, but visitors should organise this in advance.

#### TIME

Local time is GMT +7.

#### CONTACTS

Tel: +84 28 3 848 5634

#### CAR RENTAL

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

#### AIRPORT TAXIS

The main taxi queue is located on the ground floor on the left side of the international terminal. Mai Linh taxi company is authorised by the airport, Vinasun taxi company is also another reliable option.

#### TRANSFER BETWEEN TERMINALS

The terminals are in walking distance of each other, taking 10 minutes at most.

**FACILITIES**

The airport is small, but the facilities are perfectly adequate. Facilities include tourist information desks, children's play area, rest zones, foreign exchange kiosks, a post office, VIP lounges, and a selection of restaurants and snack bars.

**DEPARTURE TAX**

**WEBSITE**

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

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