

Central Highlands



CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

It's easy to get off the beaten track in this wonderfully scenic part of the country. Only Dalat makes it on to most tourists' radars, meaning that the rest of the region still allows an element of adventure. This is a great part of the country to see on the back of a motorbike – stopping at will to admire an amazing mountain view, to explore a wild waterfall or to interact with villagers from the local hill tribes. The cooler climate also makes a good respite for those not used to tropical climates.

However, there's a darker side to this region – large tracts of the highlands around Pleiku and Buon Ma Thuot bear the scars of Agent Orange deforestation from the American War, and children in these areas continue to have a high rate of birth defects.

Also in February 2001 the government forbade travellers from visiting the central highlands because of unrest among the local tribes. In March 2004 a clash in Buon Ma Thuot precipitated another brief closure of the area, so before heading to the hills make local inquiries to confirm that your destinations are accessible. At the time of research, the only restrictions in place likely to affect tourists were around Pleiku.

The upgrading of the historic Ho Chi Minh Trail has made it easier than ever to visit out-of-the-way places like Kon Tum. It remains to be seen whether increased tourism will leave these delightful backwaters unchanged. There's still an openness and friendliness in the highlands that is becoming harder to find in the tourist traps of the coast.

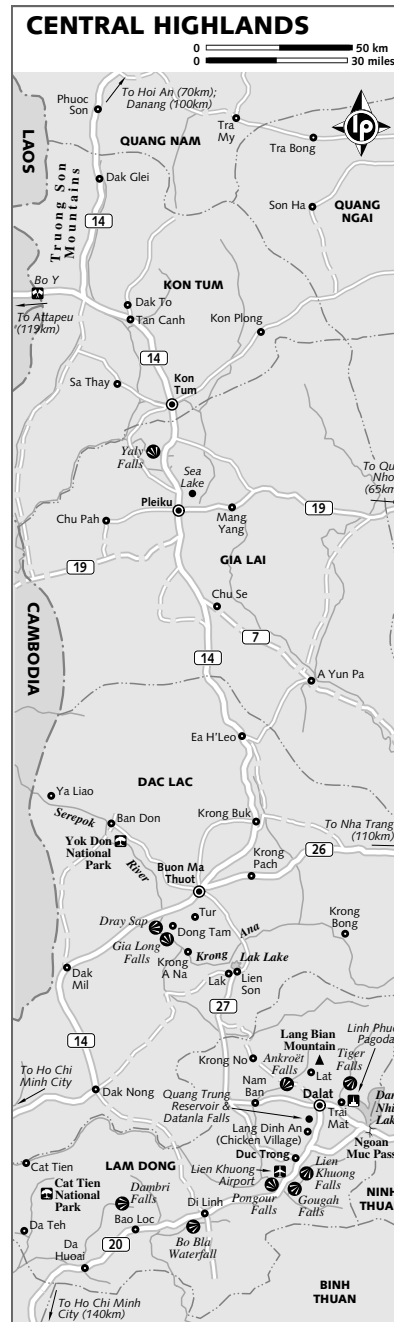
HIGHLIGHTS

- Wander through the lanes of the minority neighbourhoods of friendly **Kon Tum** (p327)
- Trek within earshot of the raging waters of the **Dray Sap** and **Gia Long Falls** (p322)
- Indulge your Indochine colonial fantasies in Francophile **Dalat** (opposite)
- Awake to the crowing of the roosters in a traditional stilt house on the shores of **Lak Lake** (p324)
- Get on the back of a motorbike and hit the haunting passes of the **Ho Chi Minh Trail** (p329)



ELEVATION: 200m–2598m

BEST TIME TO VISIT: NOV-MAR



CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

Getting There & Away

The region has three main airports – Dalat, Buon Ma Thuot and Pleiku. You can reach them all from HCMC. From Hanoi you can only fly directly to Dalat; for the other two you'll need to fly through Danang. There are no trains servicing this region.

By road you can access Dalat via Hwy 20 from HCMC or Phan Rang. Hwy 14 is the main north-south route, passing through Buon Ma Thuot, Pleiku and Kon Tum. Pleiku is connected to the coast by Hwy 19, which hits Hwy 1A near Quy Nhon. Similarly, Buon Ma Thuot can be reached from Ninh Hoa, just north of Nha Trang, by Hwy 26. There are frequent buses on all of these routes, although only Dalat is served by open-tour buses.

DALAT

☎ 063 / pop 188,400 / elevation 1475m

Dalat is quite different from anywhere else you'll visit in Vietnam. You would almost be forgiven for thinking you'd stumbled into the French Alps in springtime. This was certainly how the former colonists treated it – escaping to their chalets to enjoy the cooler climate.

The French feel is compounded by a radio mast shaped like the Eiffel Tower and the local bohemian artists' predilection for swanning around in berets. Dalat is small enough to remain charming, and the surrounding countryside is blessed with lakes, waterfalls, evergreen forests and gardens.

Local products include silk, garden vegetables and flowers (especially beautiful hydrangeas), which are sold all over southern Vietnam. But the biggest contribution to the economy is tourism: more than 800,000 domestic tourists and another 80,000 foreigners visit here every year. It's the country's favourite honeymoon spot and still retains the final word in Vietnamese kitsch.

The Dalat area was once famous for hunting and a 1950s brochure boasted that 'a two-hour drive from the town leads to several game-rich areas abounding in deer, roe, peacocks, pheasants, wild boar, black bear, wild cats, panthers, tigers, gaurs and elephants'. So successful were the hunters that all of the big game is now extinct. The closest you'll get to the formerly diverse fauna are the taxidermied specimens about town.

The city's population includes about 5000 members of hill tribes, which make up 33 distinct communities in Lam Dong province.

Truong Chinh, was Ho Chi Minh's successor, serving as Vietnam's second president from 1981 until his death in 1988. There's a fascinating display on his history and achievements in the main hall.

Probably the strangest thing about this construction is that people can actually stay here (rooms range from US\$19 to US\$84), although the constant stream of tourists and the glowing red eyes of the giant kangaroo would surely take some getting used to.

CRÉMAILLÈRE RAILWAY STATION

Dalat's pretty **station** (Map p316; Ga Da Lat; ☎ 834 409; 1 Đ Quang Trung; return ticket 70,000đ; 🕒 6.30am-5pm) is now largely decorative. Railway enthusiasts will be interested in the old locomotives on display, including a Japanese steam train.

From 1928 to 1964, when it was closed because of VC attacks, the cog-railway linked Dalat and Thap Cham. It's unfortunate that the line has never been fully replaced, as it would provide a great tourist link to the main north-south lines. A section of track has been re-opened, allowing you to ride in an historic carriage 8km to **Trai Mat village** (30 minutes) and back again. Although there are scheduled six trains per day, in reality this varies according to demand – they won't leave unless there's a minimum of two passengers.

Once in Trai Mat, most travellers make a requisite stroll over to visit the ornate **Linh Phuoc Pagoda**. This colourful pagoda was built between 1949 and 1952, and recent renovations included the installation of an 8½-tonne bell in a seven-tiered tower. Remove your shoes when entering the main temple building, where an amusement-park dragon guards the gate. Once inside, visitors are greeted by a 5m-high Buddha sporting a five-ringed neon halo. From the ground floor, take the left-hand staircase up to the 2nd-level balcony area for great views.

LAM DONG MUSEUM

This hilltop **museum** (Map p316; ☎ 820 387; 4 Đ Hung Vuong; admission 40,000đ; 🕒 7.30-11.30am & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Sat), housed in a lovely French-colonial style villa, displays ancient stone artefacts and pottery as well as costumes and musical instruments of local ethnic minorities. It was once the abode of Nguyen Huu Hao, the richest person in the Go Cong district of the Mekong Delta and the father of Vietnam's last empress.

BAO DAI'S SUMMER PALACE

This Art Deco-influenced **villa** (Dinh 3; Map p316; off Đ Trieu Viet Vuong; admission 5000đ; 🕒 7-11am & 1.30-4pm) was constructed in 1933 and was one of

three palaces Bao Dai kept in Dalat. The décor has not changed in decades, except for the addition of Ho Chi Minh's portrait over the fireplace, but the palace is filled with artefacts from decades and governments past and is extremely interesting.

In Bao Dai's office, the life-sized white bust above the bookcase is of the man himself; the smaller gold and brown busts are of his father, Emperor Khai Dinh. Note the heavy brass royal seal (on the right) and military seal (on the left). The photographs over the fireplace are of Bao Dai, his eldest son Bao Long (in uniform), and his wife, Empress Nam Phuong.

Upstairs are the living quarters. The room of Bao Long, who now lives in France, is decorated in yellow, the royal colour. The huge semicircular couch was used by the emperor and empress for family meetings, during which their three daughters were seated in the yellow chairs and their two sons in the pink chairs. Check out the ancient tan Routhermique infrared sauna machine near the top of the stairs.

Bao Dai's Summer Palace is set in a pine grove, 2km southwest of the city centre. Shoes must be removed at the door. There's an extra charge for cameras and videos.

DALAT FLOWER GARDENS

An unusual sight in Vietnam, these **gardens** (Vuon Hoa Thanh Pho; Map p309; ☎ 822 151; Đ Tran Nhan Tong; admission 5000đ; 🕒 7.30am-4pm) were established in 1966. Flowers here include hydrangeas, fuchsias and orchids. Most of the latter are in special shaded buildings to the right of the entrance. All in all it's a very nice and well-kept cross section of Dalat foliage, along with some crazy kitsch topiary.

The Dalat Flower Gardens front Xuan Huong Lake, on the road that leads from the lake to Dalat University.

DALAT UNIVERSITY

Dalat's climate has made it something of an education centre; before air-con it was one of the few places in Vietnam where it was possible to study without working up a sweat. **Dalat University** (Map p316; 1 Đ Tran Nhan Tong) was founded as a Catholic university in 1957 by Hué Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc (the older brother of unpopular South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem) with the help of Cardinal Spellman of New York. It was seized from the

church in 1975 and reopened two years later as a state-run institution. There are presently more than 13,000 students studying here. Foreign visitors are generally welcome.

DOMAINE DE MARIE CONVENT

The pink tile-roofed structures of this hill-top **convent** (Nha Tho Domaine; Map p309; 6 Đ Ngo Quyen; admission free; 🕒 7-11.30am & 2-5pm), constructed between 1940 and 1942, were once home to 300 nuns. Today the remaining nuns support themselves by making ginger candies and selling the fruit grown in the orchard out the back. The French-speaking nuns are pleased to show visitors around and explain the work they do for orphans, the homeless and children with disabilities. The shop sells handicrafts made by the children and nuns. Mass is celebrated in the large chapel, Sunday to Friday.

LINH SON PAGODA

Built in 1938, this **pagoda** (Chua Linh Son; Map p309; 120 Đ Nguyen Van Troi) is a lovely ochre-coloured building that fuses French and Chinese architecture. The giant bell is said to be made of bronze mixed with gold, its great weight making it too heavy for thieves to carry off.

DALAT CATHEDRAL

This gingerbread-style **cathedral** (Map p309; Đ Tran Phu) was built between 1931 and 1942 for use by French residents and holiday-makers. The cross on the spire is topped by a weathercock, 47m above the ground. The church itself is rarely open outside of mass times.

DU SINH CHURCH

This **church** (Map p316; Đ Huyen Tran Cong Chua) was built in 1955 by Catholic refugees from the north. The four-post, Sino-Vietnamese steeple was constructed at the insistence of a Hué-born priest of royal lineage. The church is on a hilltop with beautiful views in all directions, making this a great place for a picnic.

To get to Du Sinh Church, walk 500m southwest from the **former Couvent des Oiseaux** (Đ Huyen Tran Cong Chua), which is now a teachers' training college.

Activities

ADVENTURE SPORTS

Dalat's cool climate and mountainous surrounds lend themselves to all manner of outdoor activities.

ARE YOU EASY?

Dalat's notorious Easy Riders started off as a witty, informal crew of 30-odd freelance motorbike guides offering reasonably priced day trips and longer journeys throughout the highlands. Like all good ideas in Vietnam, this has spawned a thousand clones of varying quality. Now you can hardly walk down the road without some clown trying to get you on the back of his bike and parting with your cash. You may even get harassed in your hotel room.

That said, this is still one of the best ways to see the country, and numerous visitors rate it as a highlight of their trip. Some have even adopted their drivers and ridden with them all the way north to Hanoi.

So how do you go about finding a good ride? Firstly, it should be noted that not all Easy Riders are good, and many non-Easy Riders are excellent. Many of the originals have done extremely well for themselves and demand ever-increasing rates. Day trips that were US\$8 to US\$10 a few years back are now being offered for up to US\$30 (US\$15 is fair, but you'll be asked for US\$20). These invariably come with a hard sell for a longer trip (usually around US\$50 per day).

For those planning a lengthier excursion, it's a good idea to take a day trip first to try to reduce the odds of choosing a suicidal maniac. Make sure you'll be comfortable keeping in close quarters with him for an extended period. Check that the bike is large enough, with a thick padded seat, and that a satisfactory helmet is provided. Most riders can produce portable guestbooks containing raving testimonials from past clients.

Sometimes your hotel can recommend good riders, although less reputable establishments may have vested interests. There should be no problem finding a rider who speaks good English; some speak French or German as well.

Unlike many operators in Vietnam, who use it as a licence to charge higher prices, **Phat Tire Ventures** (Map p309; ☎ 829 422; www.phat-tireventures.com; 73 Đ Truong Cong Dinh) takes the term 'ecotourism' seriously. It offers canyoning, abseiling (rappelling), rock climbing, kayaking and treks to minority villages. It also runs a range of kick-arse 'fat tyre' cycling tours of the Dalat area (US\$30 to US\$38), as well as a two-day ride 120km downhill to the sand dunes at Mui Ne Beach (US\$135 including accommodation).

Groovy Gecko Tours (see p308) also offers extended trekking and mountain biking trips, including single-day descents to Mui Ne or Nha Trang for US\$60.

CABLE CAR

Dalat's newest attraction, this **cable car** (Cap Treo; Map p316; ☎ 837 938; off Đ 3 Thang 4; adult/child return 50,000/25,000đ; 🕒 7-11.30am & 1.30-5pm), dangles along a 2.3km wire to Quang Trung Reservoir (p317). Needless to say, the views are stunning but it's not for the faint-hearted.

GOLF

The **Dalat Palace Golf Club** (Map p309; ☎ 821 202; www.vietnamgolfresorts.com; Đ Tran Nhan Tong), established in 1922, was once used by Emperor Bao Dai. Visitors can play 18-hole rounds on this attractive course on the shores of the lake for around US\$65 (inquire about its Twilight Specials).

There are some reasonably priced golf-package tours available if you book from **HCMC** (☎ 08-824 3640).

Sleeping

Dalat is one of the few places in Vietnam where you will not need to bother about air-conditioning. Its popularity with local tourists has meant there's a wealth of budget options, while its attractiveness to colonial fantasists has resulted in some extraordinary properties at the top end. While there is not a great amount of accommodation options in between, many of the cheapies offer comfortable midrange standards.

BUDGET

Phuong Huy (Map p309; ☎ 520 243; 5 Đ Bui Thi Xuan; r US\$5-8) This clean, new minihotel has good facilities and a wonderfully kitsch *Last Supper* reproduction and mirrored crucifix in reception.

Viet Thanh (Map p309; ☎ 823 369; www.vngold.com/dlt/vthanh/index.html; 16 Đ Bui Thi Xuan; r US\$5-9) Further up the same road, this is Buddhist equivalent. Ask for the quiet rooms at the rear facing over the market gardens.

Phuong Thanh Hotel (Map p309; ☎ 825 097; fax 836 521; 65 Đ Truong Cong Dinh; s US\$4-5, d US\$6-7) You can't beat the prices at this friendly, modest, villa-style home. The cheapest rooms are located in the basement.

Hotel Phuong Hanh (Map p309; ☎ 828 213; fax 838 839; 80-82 Đ 3 Thang 2; r US\$7-30) A larger place on the side of a killer hill, the better rooms are spacious and have balconies while the very cheapest are windowless and basic.

our pick Dreams Hotel (Map p309; ☎ 833 748; dreams@hcm.vnn.vn; 151 Đ Phan Dinh Phung; r US\$10-15; 📺) Sweet dreams are indeed made of this. We get constant fan mail about this super-friendly spot, offering tidy rooms (some with balconies) and a breakfast complete with such rare delicacies as Vegemite, Marmite and peanut butter. There's no hassling over tours – it doesn't sell any and although it will help you make arrangements, it doesn't take any kickbacks.

Ocean Hotel (Dai Duong; Map p309; ☎ 837 793; daiduonghotel@yahoo.com; 130 Đ Phan Dinh Phung; s/d US\$8/12) Very much a Vietnamese hotel, with motorbikes (available for hire) in the foyer and a restaurant on the first floor, the staff don't speak much English but try hard to please.

Hotel Chau Au Europa (Map p309; ☎ 822 870; europa@hcm.vnn.vn; 76 Đ Nguyen Chi Thanh; s US\$8, d US\$10-15, tr US\$18; 📺) Another affable family-run place, the Europa has a shared terrace overlooking town and free wi-fi.

Thien An Hotel (Map p316; ☎ 520 607; thienanhotel@vnn.vn; 272A Đ Phan Dinh Phung; r US\$12-15; 📺) Carrying on a family tradition of hospitality, this smart new hotel is owned by the brother of the woman who runs Dreams. It follows the same winning formula – great breakfasts, modest rates, sincere friendliness and no hassling for tours. It's a little further out, but free bicycles are provided.

Dreams Hotel (Map p309; ☎ 833 748; dreams@hcm.vnn.vn; 164B Đ Phan Dinh Phung; r US\$15-20; 📺) A recurring dream, this is a new, more upmarket companion of the long-standing budget favourite. Rooms are larger, with Jacuzzis and massaging showers.

MIDRANGE

Fortune Hotel (Khach San Dai Loi; Map p309; ☎ 837 333; fax 837 474; 3A Đ Bui Thi Xuan; r US\$18-26) Typically

Dalat, the Fortune Hotel is a riot of fairy lights, fake flowers and pink paint. Rooms here are spacious and comfortable; some have balconies overlooking a quiet park-like back lane and corner baths.

Trung Cang Hotel (Map p309; ☎ 822 663; http://www.sinhcafevn.com/Accommodation.asp; 4A Đ Bui Thi Xuan; s/d/tr US\$20/25/30; 📺) A new addition to the Sinh Café empire, Trung Cang is an easy option for open-tour ticket holders. The rooms are attractive and clean, and the buses arrive right outside.

Cam Do Hotel (Map p309; ☎ 822 732; www.camdohotel.com.vn; 81 Đ Phan Dinh Phung; s US\$30-35, d US\$38-45, ste US\$40-60; 📺) A one-time backpacker's oasis, Cam Do has been completely transformed into a smart midrange hotel.

Novotel Dalat (Map p309; ☎ 825 777; www.novotel.com; 7 Đ Tran Phu; s US\$49-64, d US\$55-70, ste US\$79-85; 📺) Nearly opposite the Sofitel, the Novotel was constructed in 1932 as the Du Parc Hotel. It retains much of the original French-colonial feel, with an old-fashioned gated lift, sombre wooden corridors and period light fittings. Its simple, smallish rooms are probably more authentic than the sumptuous fit-out across the road.

Golf 3 Hotel (Map p309; ☎ 826 042; golf3hot@hcm.vnn.vn; 4Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai; r US\$52-70, ste US\$80-100; 📺) This centrally located property has a roof-top café commanding great views of Dalat. The top-end rooms have wood and tile floors, nice linen, sunken bathtubs, views of the lake and DVD players.

TOP END

Hotel Sofitel Dalat Palace (Map p309; ☎ 825 444; www.sofitel.com; 12 Đ Tran Phu; s US\$148-178, d US\$160-190, ste US\$258-310; 📺) This grand old place was built between 1916 and 1922. Major renovation work has perfectly preserved an Indochine fantasy of French-colonial life, right down to claw-foot tubs, working fireplaces, 1920s desk lamps and faux period telephones. Even the reception staff, in their immaculate *ao dai*, have cultivated a whiff of Parisian snobbery. Panoramic views of Xuan Huong Lake can be enjoyed in the expansive ground-floor chandelier-illuminated public areas, where one can sit in a rattan chair and sip iced tea.

Evason Ana Mandara Villas & Spa (Map p316; ☎ 520 558; www.sixsenses.com/evason-dalat/index.php; Đ Le Lai; r US\$179-224, ste US\$322-460; 📺 📺) Not quite open at the time of research, this incredible

complex is set to be the most desirable location in Dalat. This luxury hillside compound encompasses a collection of unique French villas dating from the 1920s and '30s, nestled among the pine trees. Each unique villa has its own butler, kitchen and outdoor barbecue area. Most have been converted into three to five magnificent rooms or suites, with one being set aside as a spa complex, another as a top-notch restaurant and yet another as the pool house for a heated outdoor pool.

Eating

Making the most of the local produce (see p314), Dalat has an appealing selection of smart eateries scattered throughout the town.

VIETNAMESE

Trong Dong (Map p309; ☎ 821 889; 220 Đ Phan Dinh Phung; mains 24,000-55,000đ; 🕒 lunch & dinner) A good place to sample superb Vietnamese food, house specialities include grilled shrimp paste on sugar cane and fish hotpot. It's a bit outside the centre, but well worth the walk.

Art Café (Map p309; ☎ 510 089; 70 Đ Truong Cong Dinh; dishes 30,000-45,000đ; 🕒 lunch & dinner) Owned by an artist whose work adorns the walls, this elegant, bamboo-lined eatery has intimate tables sporting white linen tablecloths. The menu features Vietnamese dishes with a twist, including plenty of vegetarian options.

Da Quy (Wild Sunflower; Map p309; ☎ 510 883; 49 Đ Truong Cong Dinh; dishes 25,000-70,000đ) With an up-market ambience (white linen, fresh roses) and great service, this newcomer has won lots of fans. The traditional clay pots are excellent.

HNL (Map p309; ☎ 835 505; 94 Đ Phan Dinh Phung; dishes 25,000-75,000đ) Painted in kooky pastels and with a classic motorbike as its centrepiece, HNL serves interesting Vietnamese dishes – along with pizza to keep the kids happy. There's a fun karaoke lounge upstairs.

VEGETARIAN

There are vegetarian food stalls (*com chay*) in the market area. All serve up delicious 100% vegetarian food, with some meals prepared to resemble and taste like traditional Vietnamese meat dishes.

An Lac (Map p309; ☎ 822 025; 71 Đ Phan Dinh Phung; meals 10,000đ) There's an English menu here, and options range from noodle soups to rice and *banh bao* (steamed rice-flour dumplings stuffed with a savoury filling).

An Lac (Map p309; ☎ 833 717; 26 Đ Bui Thi Xuan; meals 10,000d) Yep, it's another one of the same name and incredibly popular with the locals.

INTERNATIONAL

V Cafe (Map p309; ☎ 837 576; 1 Đ Bui Thi Xuan; dishes 25,000-59,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A long-time traveller's favourite, this cute place hung with Chinese lanterns serves a mix of Eastern and Western mains, along with some beautiful desserts (try the chocolate pie).

Le Rabelais (Map p309; ☎ 825 444; 12 Đ Tran Phu; set dinner US\$23-33; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) For fine French dining, the signature hotel at the Sofitel cannot be beaten – but bring a wheelbarrow full of dong. This impressive dining room is the place to indulge yourself in grand style. If the kids are under 12, they're not welcome in the evenings.

Drinking

Saigon Nite (Map p309; ☎ 820 007; 11A Đ Hai Ba Trung) The best late-night place to shoot pool and share a drink with expats and visitors.

Peace Café (Map p309; ☎ 822 787; 64 Đ Truong Cong Dinh) A popular gathering point for backpackers and Easy Riders, it also serves food.

Stop & Go Cafe (Map p309; ☎ 828 458; 2A Đ Ly Tu Trong) Hidden along a quiet back lane, this little bohemian oasis is run by a poet who always sports a beret and a smile. It's not open at night.

Cafe Tung (Map p309; 6 Hoa Binh Sq) During the 1950s, Cafe Tung was a famous hang-out for

Saigonese intellectuals. Old-timers swear that it remains exactly as it was when they were young. As it did then, Cafe Tung serves only tea, coffee, hot cocoa, lemon soda and orange soda to the sound of mellow French music.

There's a lively strip of bars overlooking the market on Đ Le Dai Hanh.

Shopping

In the past few years the Dalat tourist-kitsch market has really come into its own. Without any effort at all you can find that special something for your loved ones – perhaps a battery-powered stuffed koala that sings 'Waltzing Matilda' or a lacquered alligator with a light bulb in its mouth. The **Central Market** (Map p309) is one big buy and sell, and a great place to pick up clothing at a good price.

The hill tribes of Lam Dong province make various handicrafts. Lat products include dyed rush mats and rice baskets that roll up when empty. Koho and Chill people produce the split-bamboo baskets used to carry things on their backs. The Chill also weave cloth, including the dark-blue cotton shawls worn by some of the Montagnard women. If you're interested in Montagnard handicrafts, try Lang Dinh An (Chicken village ; p317) or Lat village (p317).

A fascinating place to visit is **Cuong Hoan Traditional Silk Centre** (☎ 852 338) in Nam Ban village, near the Elephant Falls (see p318). Here you can see every part of the miraculous process, from the live silkworms spinning

out their precious cocoon, to the vats where they're boiled up and the threads separated, to the loom where the shimmery cloth is woven. You can even sample the cooked grub – they taste kinda nutty. For those of us concerned about fair trade, the women here are paid reasonably well and work only standard government hours. There are some beautiful garments and lengths of fabric for sale, including kimono-style robes for US\$10.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Vietnam Airlines (Map p309; ☎ 833 499; 2 Đ Ho Tung Mau) has daily services that connect Dalat to HCMC and Hanoi. Dalat's Lien Khuong Airport is located 30km south of the city.

BUS

Dalat's **long distance bus station** (Map p316; Đ3 Thang 4) is 1km south of Xuan Huong Lake, although many private services will (if asked) pick up and drop off at the hotel of your choice. Services are available to most of the country, including several to HCMC (60,000d, six to seven hours), Phan Rang (40,000d, 4½ hours), Nha Trang (60,000d, seven hours) and Buon Ma Thuot (65,000d, four hours).

Dalat is a major stop for open-tour buses. Sinh Café (see p308) has a daily bus to Mui Ne (US\$7, 5½ hours).

CAR & MOTORBIKE

From HCMC, taking the inland (Hwy 20) route to Dalat via Bao Loc and Di Linh is faster than taking the coastal route (Hwy 1A) via Ngoan Muc Pass.

The following are road distances from Dalat: Di Linh (82km), Nha Trang (205km), Phan Rang (108km), Phan Thiet (247km) and HCMC (308km). There are secondary roads connecting Dalat to Buon Ma Thuot and other parts of the central highlands.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The Vietnam Airlines shuttle bus between Lien Khuong Airport and Dalat (20,000d, 30 minutes) is timed around flights, leaving from the door of the terminal and, in Dalat, from in front of 40 Đ Ho Tung Mau, two hours before each departure.

Private taxis can be hired to make the trip for around US\$10, while a motorbike taxi should cost from US\$3 to US\$5.

BICYCLE

Pedal power is a great way of seeing Dalat, but the hilly terrain and long distances between the sights make it hard work. Several hotels rent out bicycles and sometimes provide them free to guests. It's also well worth looking into the cycling tours on offer (see p311).

MOTORBIKE

Dalat is too hilly for *cyclos*, but a motorbike is a good way of touring the environs. For short trips around town, *xe om* (motorbike taxi) drivers can be flagged down around the Central Market area for 10,000d. Self-drive motorbikes are available for US\$6 to US\$8 a day.

TAXI & CAR

Taxis are easy to find and a one-way trip to just about anywhere in Dalat costs US\$2 or less. Dalat Travel Service (see p308) can arrange daily car rentals (with a driver) for around US\$25.

AROUND DALAT Valley of Love

Named the Valley of Peace by Emperor Bao Dai in a wonderful lack of prescience, this **valley** (Thung Lung Tinh Yeu, or Vallée d'Amour; Map p316; Đ Phu Dong Thien Vuong; adult/child 6000/3000d; ☺ 7am-5pm) had its name changed in 1972 by romantically minded students from Dalat University.

Today this ever-tacky place has taken on a surreal atmosphere and cynical locals call it the Valley of Shops. Tourist buses line up to regurgitate visitors and boats line up to accommodate them. Get into the spirit with some aquatic activities: paddle boats, 15-person canoes and obnoxious noise-making motorboats can be hired to tour the lake.

This is a good place to see the 'Dalat cowboys': Vietnamese guides dressed as American cowboys. We've also seen locals dressed as bears. The cowboys rent horses to tourists for a guided tour around the lake. The cowboys and bears expect cash if you take their picture. Refreshments and local delicacies (such as jams and candied fruits) are on sale at the lookout near where the buses disgorge tourists.

The Valley of Love is 5km north of Xuan Huong Lake.

Lake of Sighs

The **Lake of Sighs** (Ho Than Tho; Map p316; admission 5000d) is a natural lake enlarged by a French-built dam. The forests are not Dalat's finest.

DELECTABLE DALAT

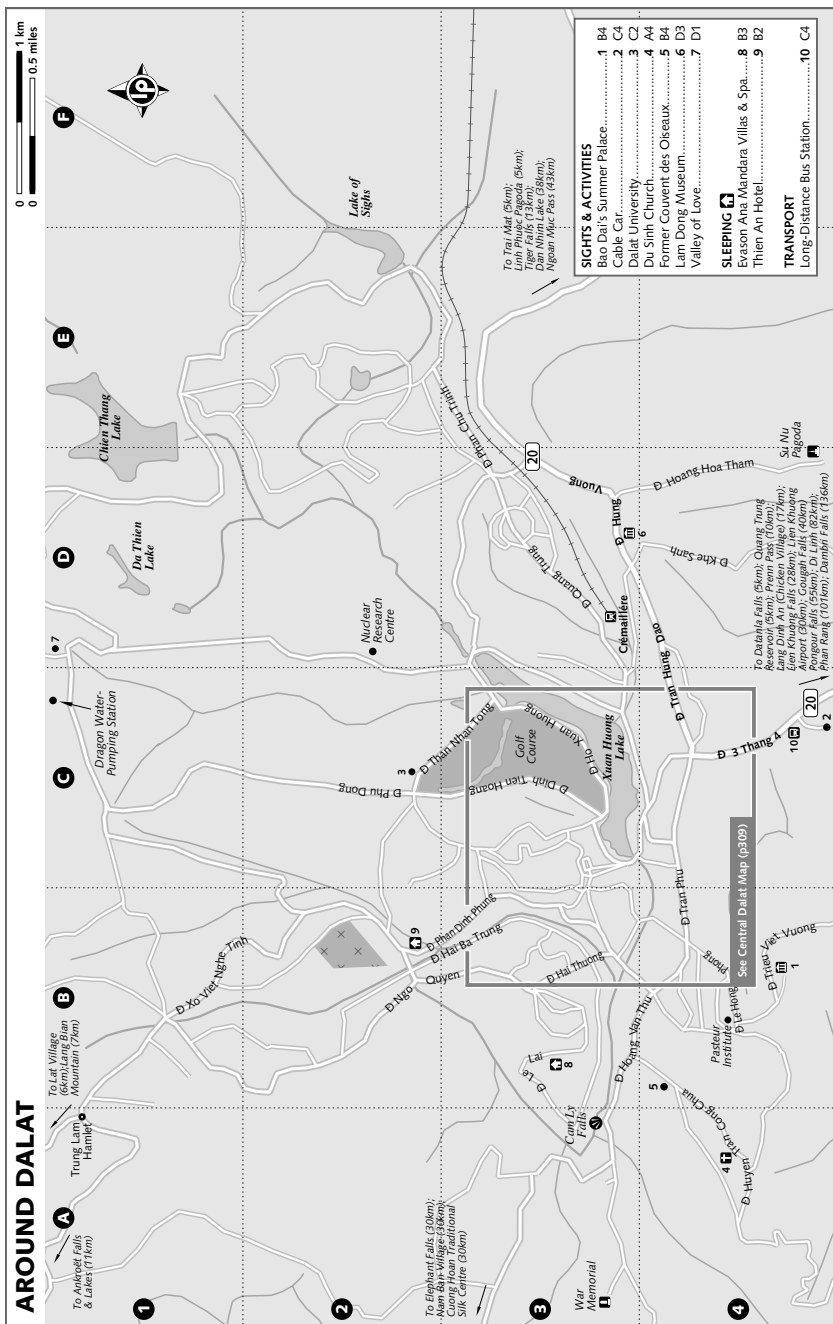
For French colonists craving a taste of home, Dalat's climate was perfectly suited for growing fresh garden vegetables. Peas, carrots, radishes, tomatoes, cucumbers, avocados, capsicums, lettuce, beets, green beans, potatoes, garlic, spinach, squash and yams are all grown here, making for meals unavailable elsewhere in the country.

The Dalat area is justly famous for its strawberry jam, dried blackcurrants and candied plums, persimmons and peaches. Apricots are popular, and often served in a heavily salted hot drink. Other local delicacies include avocado ice cream, sweet beans (*mut dao*) and strawberry, blackberry and artichoke extracts (for making drinks). The strawberry extract is great in tea. Artichoke tea, another local speciality, is said to lower blood pressure and benefit the liver and kidneys.

Dalat wine is served all over Vietnam and some of it's quite good. Don't go stressing over grape varieties – your choice is white or red. The reds are pleasantly light in style, while the whites tend to be heavy on the oak.

Dau hu, a type of pudding made from soy milk, sugar and a slice of ginger, is one of Dalat's specialities, as is hot soy milk (*sua dau nanh*). Both are sold by itinerant female vendors, who walk around carrying a large bowl of the stuff and a small stand suspended from either end of a bamboo pole.

Most vendors in the Central Market will let you sample a bit of something before you buy.



The cheery name comes from the story of Mai Nuong and Hoang Tung, who met here in 1788 while he was hunting and she was picking mushrooms. They fell in love and sought their parents' permission to marry. At that time Vietnam was threatened by a Chinese invasion and Hoang Tung, like a macho fool, joined the army without telling Mai Nuong. Mai Nuong sent word for him to meet her at the lake, and when he didn't come she was overcome with sorrow and drowned herself. She clearly wasn't used to being stood up.

There are several small restaurants up the hill from the dam. Horses can be hired for 80,000d an hour, while a ride in a horse-drawn carriage costs 140,000d per hour.

The Lake of Sighs is 6km northeast of the centre of Dalat via Đ Phan Chu Trinh.

Quang Trung Reservoir

Quang Trung Reservoir (Tuyen Lam Lake) is an artificial lake created by a dam in 1980. Paddle boats, rowboats and canoes can be hired nearby. The hills around the reservoir are covered with pine trees, and there's a path up the hill southwest of the water-intake tower. Ethnic-minority farmers live and raise crops in the vicinity.

The fun way to get here is by cable car (see p312). If heights aren't your thing, head out of Dalat on Hwy 20 and turn right at the signpost 5km from town and continue for 2km.

Lat Village

pop 6000

The nine hamlets of **Lat village** (pronounced 'lak') are 12km north of Dalat at the base of Lang Bian Mountain. Only five of the hamlets are actually Lat; the residents of the other four are members of the Chill, Ma and Koho tribes, each of which speaks a different dialect.

Traditionally, Lat houses are built on piles with rough plank walls and a thatched roof. The people here eke out a living on 300 hectares of land, growing rice, coffee, black beans and sweet potatoes. Economics have forced many villagers into producing charcoal, a lowly task often performed by Montagnards. Before 1975 many men from Lat worked with the Americans, as did many Montagnards elsewhere.

Classes in the village's schools are conducted in Vietnamese rather than tribal languages. Lat has one Catholic and one Protestant church. A Koho-language Bible (Sra Goh) was published

by Protestants in 1971; a Lat-language Bible, prepared by Catholics, appeared a year later. Both dialects are quite similar and are written in a Latin-based script.

To get to Lat from Dalat, head north on Đ Xo Viet Nghe Tinh. At Trung Lam Hamlet there's a fork in the road marked by a street sign. Continue straight on (northwest) rather than to the left. By bicycle the 12km trip from Dalat to Lat takes about 40 minutes. On foot it's a two-hour walk.

Lang Bian Mountain

Also called Lam Vien Mountain, it has five volcanic peaks ranging in altitude from 2100m to 2400m. Of the two highest peaks, the eastern one is known by the woman's name K'Lang while the western one bears a man's name, K'Biang. Only the upper reaches of the mountain remain forested. Only half a century ago the foothills had lush foliage that sheltered wild oxen, deer, boars, elephants, rhinoceroses and tigers.

The hike up to the top's spectacular views takes three to four hours from Lat village. The path begins due north of Lat and is recognisable as a red gash in the green mountainside.

Dalat Travel Service (p308) offers guided tours which combine the mountain with Lat village.

Lang Dinh An (Chicken Village)

Famous for its giant concrete chicken caught mid-strut in the village centre, **Lang Dinh An** has become very popular with travellers because it's conveniently situated on the highway, 17km from Dalat.

The village is home to about 600 people of the Koho minority, who were enticed down from the hills and have, to a certain extent, been Vietnamese. Most no longer live in stilt houses and they wear Vietnamese-style clothing.

The chicken was an elaborate decorative device for a long-dysfunctional water system, which used to crow as the water was pumped. The symbolism of the chicken probably relates to yet another local legend involving a doomed romance ending in a dead heroine.

Though the residents of Chicken village are extremely poor, we'd suggest that you don't give sweets or money to the children. If you want to help the villagers, there are a couple of shops where you can buy simple things like drinks and biscuits. There are also beautiful weavings for sale near the highway.

Waterfalls

DATANLA FALLS

The nice thing about **Datanla Falls** (admission 5000d) is the short but pleasant walk to get there. The cascade is 350m from Hwy 20 on a path that first passes through a pine forest and then continues steeply down into a rainforest. The other good thing is the wildlife – lots of squirrels, birds and butterflies.

To get to Datanla Falls, turn right off Hwy 20 about 200m past the turn-off to Quang Trung Reservoir. It's well signposted.

TIGER FALLS

These **falls** (Thac Hang Cop; admission 4000d) are named after the local legend of a ferocious tiger living in a nearby cave. There's a huge ceramic tiger statue here, as well as one of a hill-tribe hunter. The falls themselves are set in a quiet pine forest, and are very photogenic. There are good hiking trails in the area.

Tiger Falls is about 14km east of Dalat and can be easily reached by bicycle or motorbike. Follow Đ Hung Vuong to Trai Mat village. From the train station there, continue for another 3.5km to a left-hand turn (signposted). From here it's another 3km along a dirt road to the falls. It is also possible to trek to the falls from Dalat but you'll need to allow a full day.

ANKROËT FALLS & LAKES

The two **Ankroët Lakes** were created as part of a hydroelectric project. The waterfall, **Thac Ankroët**, is about 15m high. The Ankroët Lakes are 18km northwest of Dalat in an area inhabited by hill tribes.

ELEPHANT FALLS

A popular stop on the Easy Rider trail, these imposing curved **falls** (admission 3000d) are best seen from below; a hazardous path heads down to the base – expect to get wet.

Nearby, the **Linh An Pagoda** (2004), has been built to take advantage of the good feng shui of having water in front and a mountain behind. Inside, the large central Buddha is flanked by two multi-armed Buddhas. The one on the right has eyes on his hands, making him all-seeing, while the one of the left has extra arms to help people in need. Around the back is a particularly jolly giant – a Happy Buddha with neon halos and a room built into his ample belly.

The falls are situated near the town of Nam Ban, 30km west of Dalat. You can combine

this with a visit to Cuong Hoan Traditional Silk Centre (p314).

PONGOUR, GOUGH & LIEN KHUONG FALLS

The largest in the area, **Pongour Falls** (admission 6000d) forms a semicircle during the rainy season, but even when it's dry the stepped formation is impressive. Make the most of it, because these falls could dwindle to a trickle when a hydroelectric dam further up the river opens in 2008. A great viewpoint is the pavilion built for Emperor Bao Dai's hunting expeditions. The surrounding area has been badly deforested by slash-and-burn agriculture. The falls are signposted on the right about 50km towards HCMC from Dalat and 6km off the highway.

Gough Falls (admission 5000d) is 36km from Dalat towards HCMC. It is only 500m from the highway so it's easy to get to.

At **Lien Khuong Falls**, the 100m-wide Dan Nhim River drops 15m over an outcrop of volcanic rock. The best view is from the café, where buying a coffee covers the admission. Sometimes, when the dam upstream is closed, the water disappears completely. The falls are visible from the highway, not far from Lien Khuong Airport, 28km towards HCMC from Dalat.

DI LINH

The town of Di Linh (pronounced zee ling), also known as Djiring, is 1010m above sea level. The area's main product is tea, which is grown on giant plantations founded by the French. Only a few decades ago the region was famous for its tiger hunting, but the hunters were a little too efficient and the tigers now only survive as hideous fur coats and wall-mounted trophies.

The 32m-high **Bo Bla Waterfall** (admission 5000d; ☎ 7am-4.30pm) is on the east side of Hwy 20, 16km southwest of Di Linh, near the village of Lien Dam. There's a steep 25-minute walk down to the base of the falls, but you can get a good view from near the top of the path.

Di Linh is 226km northeast of HCMC and 82km southwest of Dalat on Hwy 20. It's a pleasant drive, passing tea and coffee plantations and houses with racks of silk worms.

BAO LOC

pop 136,000

The unassuming town of Bao Loc has a large hill-tribe population. Tea and silk (and the cultivation of the mulberry leaves that make up the

silkworms' diet) are the major local industries, and free samples of the local tea can be had at a couple of the roadside rest stops in town. There are also a few guesthouses here, making it a practical place to break the journey between HCMC (180km) and Dalat (118km).

Nearby **Dambri Falls** (admission 10,000d) is one of the highest (90m), most magnificent and easily accessible waterfalls in Vietnam. The views are positively breathtaking – the steep walk up the path to the top of the falls will almost certainly take your breath away (unless you opt to ride the cable car for 5000d).

If you continue walking upstream from the top of the falls you reach Monkey Island, a minizoo filled with monkeys and reindeer living at the usual captive standard (ie poor) of Vietnam. While it's best to avoid the zoo, the Dambri Restaurant, which adjoins the car park, is cheap and good.

To reach Dambri Falls, turn off the main highway north of Bao Loc and follow the road for 18km through tea and mulberry plantations. The high peak to your right is May Bay Mountain.

DAN NHIM LAKE

elevation 1042m

The 9.3 sq km Dan Nhim Lake is often used by movie studios for filming romantic scenes. Created by a dam built between 1962 and 1964 by Japan as part of its war reparations, the huge Dan Nhim hydroelectric project supplies electricity to much of the south. Water drawn from the lake gathers speed as it rushes almost a vertical kilometre down from Ngoan Muc Pass in two enormous pipes.

Dan Nhim Lake is 38km from Dalat as you head towards Phan Rang, about a kilometre to the left of Hwy 20. The power station is at the base of Ngoan Muc Pass near the town of Ninh Son.

NGOAN MUC PASS

Known to the French as Bellevue Pass, **Ngoan Muc Pass** (altitude 980m) is 5km east of Dan Nhim Lake and 64km west of Phan Rang. On a clear day you can see the ocean, 55km away. As the highway winds down the mountain it passes under two gargantuan water pipes – still guarded by armed troops in concrete fortifications – that link Dan Nhim Lake with the hydroelectric power station.

South of the road (to the right as you face the ocean) you can see the steep tracks of the *cré-*

maillère (cog railway) linking Thap Cham with Dalat (p310). At the top of Ngoan Muc Pass there's a waterfall next to the highway, pine forests and the old Bellevue train station.

BUON MA THUOT

☎ 050 / pop 312,000 / elevation 451m

The caffeine capital of Vietnam, the biggest buzz you'll get in Buon Ma Thuot (also known as Ban Me Thuot) is from the beans. There's not a lot to do here, but it makes for a good base to explore Yok Don National Park and several stunning waterfalls in the vicinity. Before WWII, this was a centre for big-game hunting, but the animals have all but disappeared – along with most of the region's rainforest.

The capital of Dac Lac province, the city has grown exponentially over the last few years, with the coffee industry largely responsible for its improving fortunes. The major approach roads are currently being upgraded to cope with the extra traffic, but it can still be a crawl in and out of town.

A large percentage of the area's population is made up of Montagnards. The government's policy of assimilation has been effective: nearly all of the Montagnards now speak Vietnamese fluently. Not a lot of English is spoken here though, and you won't see too many Western tourists.

The rainy season around Buon Ma Thuot lasts from May to October, though downpours are usually short. Because of its lower elevation, Buon Ma Thuot is warmer and more humid than Dalat; it is also very windy.

Information

MEDICAL SERVICES

Dak Lak General Hospital (☎ 852 665; 2 Đ Mai Hác De)

MONEY

Agriculture & Rural Development Bank (☎ 853 930; 37 Đ Phan Boi Chau) This branch can make foreign-currency exchanges and cash travellers cheques.

Vietcombank (1 Nguyen Tat Thanh) ATM in front of Thang Loi Hotel.

POST & INTERNET ACCESS

Main post office (☎ 852 612; 6 Đ Le Duan; ☎ 6.30am-9pm) Also has internet access.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Both agencies offer tours of the surrounding villages, waterfalls, Lak Lake and Yok Don National Park.

DakLak Tourist (☎ 852 108; daklaktourist.com.vn; 3 Đ Phan Chu Trinh; ☎ 7.30-11am & 1.30-5pm)

Damsan Tourist (☎ 851 234; damsantour@dng.vnn.vn; 212-214 Đ Nguyen Cong Tru; ☎ 7am-6pm) Attached to the Damsan Hotel.

TRAVEL PERMITS

Permits are still required if you wish to visit certain minority villages in the area surrounding Buon Ma Thuot. Contact DakLak Tourist to get these valuable bits of paper.

Sights

VICTORY MONUMENT

You can hardly miss this monument, as it dominates the square in the centre of town. The **victory monument** commemorates the

events of 10 March 1975, when VC and North Vietnamese troops liberated the city. It was this battle that triggered the complete collapse of South Vietnam.

It's one of the most interesting pieces of socialist realist sculpture in the country, consisting of a column supporting a central group of figures holding a flag, with a modernist arch forming a rainbow over a concrete replica tank.

The frieze, starting from the right-hand side of the column, shows hill-tribe people with their traditional gongs and a communal wine vessel. On the rear panel the minority women are shown hugging a proud soldier, while on the left side there's a glimpse into a socialist future, peopled with happy nurses,

farmers, industrial workers and children carrying a globe. It's a far cry from the reality of the situation in these parts, where many of the hill-tribe people fought with the Americans, and there are continuing allegations of mistreatment at the hands of corrupt officials.

AKO DHONG VILLAGE

Between the northern end of Buon Ma Thuot and outlying coffee plantations, the Ede village of **Ako Dhong** is a neat little community of stilt-house suburbia. Strolling the village makes for a pleasant break from the downtown din (such as it is), and you may be able to find some locals at work weaving traditional fabrics – which might also be for sale.

The village is located about 1.5km from the centre of town and makes an easy walk; take Đ Phan Chu Trinh northward and hang a left on Đ Tran Nhat Duat.

ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM

There are said to be 31 distinct ethnic groups in Dac Lac province, and the **Ethnographic Museum** (☎ 850 426; 4 Đ Nguyen Du; admission 10,000d; ☎ 7.30-11am & 2-5pm) is one place to get some understanding of these disparate groups. Displays at the museum feature traditional costumes, agricultural implements, fishing gear, bows and arrows, weaving looms and musical instruments. There is a photo collection with accompanying explanations about the historical contacts between the Montagnards and the rest of Vietnam – some of the history is plausible, some is pure fiction.

The Ethnographic Museum is housed in the Bao Dai Villa, a grand French-colonial building surrounded by gardens that was one of the former emperor's many residences. A local guide can show you around the exhibits for around 5000d.

REVOLUTION MUSEUM

If you're lucky enough to find it open, this little **museum** (☎ 850 426; 1 Đ Le Duuan; admission 10,000d; ☎ 7.30-11am & 2-5pm Wed-Sun) focuses on the city's role during the American War.

DAK LAK WATER PARK

If sampling the local rocket-fuel coffee doesn't raise your heart rate, then perhaps waterslides will at **Dak Lak Water Park** (☎ 950 381; Đ Nguyen Chi Thanh; admission 30,000d; ☎ 9am-6pm). It's about 4km from the centre of town, just before the bus station.

Sleeping BUDGET

Nguyen Nhi Hotel (☎ 859 868; fax 810 662; 164 Đ Ly Thuong Kiet; s/d/tr/q 160,000/180,000/320,000/350,000d; ☎) Nobody speaks any English here, but this shiny place has good-value spacious rooms and free wireless internet access.

My Linh Hotel (☎ 815 353; mylinhhotel@yahoo.com; 27-29 Đ Le Dai Hanh; r 150,000-220,000d; ☎) This chic minihotel borders on the boutique, with modern décor and new computers in the reception. It's a shame about the stains on the sheets.

Tay Nguyen Hotel (☎ 851 009; taynguyenhotel@dng.vnn.vn; 110 Đ Ly Thuong Kiet; s/d US\$14/16; ☎) The paint is peeling and it's definitely past its prime, but this decent place has clean rooms and good facilities. The comfortable doubles have terraces and are more spacious than the singles.

Ban Me Hotel (☎ 951 001; fax 954 741; 9 Đ Nguyen Chi Thanh; r US\$10-20; ☎) About 4km north of the centre but within walking distance of the bus station is this large, friendly motel with a tidy, garden-like setting. A *xe om* to the centre costs about 10,000d. Air-con rates include breakfast, but fan rooms are more spacious and arguably more comfortable, with bigger terraces upstairs.

MIDRANGE

Cao Nguyen Hotel (☎ 851 913; www.daklaktourist.com/english/hotels/info.html; 65 Đ Phan Chu Trinh; r US\$15-45; ☎) The Cao Nguyen is a few years old but still fairly luxurious and now offers free wi-fi. It's known for its dance hall, karaoke and massage service.

Damsan Hotel (☎ 851 234; www.damsanhotel.com.vn; 212-214 Đ Nguyen Cong Tru; r US\$25-40; ☎) Although the communal areas are looking a little shabby, the rooms are surprisingly nice, making Damsan the best deal in town. This quiet hotel features clean rooms with wooden floors, bathtubs and satellite TV, plus a raucous restaurant (breakfast is included). Rooms at the back of the building overlook the swimming pool, tennis court and neighbouring coffee plantations.

White Horse Hotel (Khach San Bach Ma; ☎ 851 656; whitehorsehotelvn@yahoo.com; 9-11 Đ Nguyen Duc Canh; r US\$25-40; ☎) Sparkling with varnished surfaces and marble, the White Horse has immaculate, comfortable rooms with satellite TV.

Thang Loi Hotel (☎ 857 615; www.daklaktourist.com/english/hotels/info.html; 1 Đ Phan Chu Trinh; r US\$25-40; ☎) You'll find most amenities at this government-run hotel, including satellite TV

BUON MA THUOT

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Other locations on map:
 To Aiko Dhong Village (1.5km)
 To Vietnam Airlines Office (2.5km); Bus Station (4km); Ban Me Hotel (4km); Dak Lak Water Park (4km); Dak Lake (50km); Pleiku (197km); Nha Trang (205km)
 To Airport (8km)
 To Tuy Village (13km); Gray Sap Falls (22km); Gia Long Falls (33km)

and bathtubs. *Thang loi* means ‘victory’, so it’s not surprising that the hotel faces the eponymous monument.

Eating

There aren’t a lot of great restaurants in Buon Ma Thuot – unless you’re not bothered by rowdy beer halls and the odd rat.

Thanh Loan (☎ 818 464; 14-16 Đ Ly Thuong Kiet; meals 12,000d) It would be tempting to eat at this wonderful roll-your-own rice-paper-roll joint every night. You get a massive plate of green veges, herbs and edible leaves to roll up in fresh rice paper with fried pork, crunchy rice paper and raw garlic, and then dip in either a meaty broth or a mix of fish sauce and chilli. Delicious.

Dac Biet Bun Bo (☎ 810 135; 10 Đ Le Hong Phong; meals 12,000d) With its big stock pot bubbling on the street, this popular humble eatery serves big hunks of meat in a spicy broth over white noodles, served with a plate of fresh herbs.

Kem (50 Đ Ly Thuong Kiet; ice cream 5000d) After Thanh Loan you can stop here, a few doors down, for a delectable ice cream.

Hanoi Bakery (☎ 853 609; 123-125 Đ Le Hong Phong; pastries 5000d; 🍳 breakfast & lunch) Not only are there shelves of freshly-baked pastries, but it also carries snack foods like cheese and chocolate.

Drinking

Buon Ma Thuot is justifiably famous for its coffee, which is the best in Vietnam. As usual, the Vietnamese serve it so strong and sweet that it will make your hair stand on end, and typically in a very tiny cup that allows no room to water it down. There are dozens of cafés to explore in the streets around Đ Le Thanh Ton. Some also serve alcohol.

Café Hoa Da Quy (☎ 851 304; 173 Đ Nguyen Cong Tru) This stylish open-sided three-storey bar-café is a popular night-time spot and has a good selection of top-shelf spirits.

Da Ly (☎ 812 243; 188 Đ Nguyen Cong Tru) There are great views over a coffee plantation from the garden of this chic café.

Shopping

If you like the coffee enough to take some home, be sure to pick up a bag here because the price is lower and the quality higher than in HCMC or Hanoi. You can buy whole beans or ground coffee at around 15,000d per 500g. Good places to buy the brown gold include

Thanh Bao Café (☎ 854 164; 32 Hoang Dieu), as well as along the guest-house strip on Đ Ly Thuong Kiet.

Getting There & Around

AIR

There are daily **Vietnam Airlines** (☎ 955 055; fax 956 265; 67 Đ Nguyen Tat Thanh; 🕒 8am-5pm) flights from both HCMC and Danang. The airport is 8km west of town. A taxi should cost less than 20,000d.

BUS

Buon Ma Thuot’s **bus station** (71 Đ Nguyen Chi Thanh) is about 4km from the centre, with plenty of services to Dalat (65,000d, four hours) and Pleiku (46,000d, four hours).

CAR & MOTORBIKE

The road linking the coast with Buon Ma Thuot intersects Hwy 1A at Ninh Hoa (157km), 34km north of Nha Trang. The road is surfaced and in good condition, though fairly steep. Hwy 14 to Pleiku is excellent. There’s also a scenic sealed road connecting Buon Ma Thuot with Dalat (via Lak Lake). Though full of twists and turns, it’s mainly in good condition.

AROUND BUON MA THUOT

Dray Sap & Gia Long Falls

Both these **waterfalls** (☎ 584 605; admission 8000d), sharing a stretch of the Krong Ana River, are stunning and offer good riverside trekking opportunities. Entering from the main gate, the first turning to the left heads to the spectacular 100m-wide **Dray Sap**. After heading down some slippery steps near the restaurant there’s great views from an Indiana Jones-style swinging bridge. Across the bridge there are smaller falls on a fork of the river to the left, past an area where local villagers have cleared the jungle for corn. It’s a surreal sight, seeing the spray from the main falls rising over the cornfield. It’s this ever-present mist that gave the falls their name, meaning ‘smoky falls’.

The **Gia Long Falls** are a further 7km along the road, which cuts through increasingly dense jungle. Less wide or high than Dray Sap, the volume of churning, muddy water still makes for an impressive sight. It’s possible to walk a riverside path between the two falls.

To reach them, follow Đ Le Duan until it becomes Nguyen Thi Dinh and eventually Hwy 14 heading south. After 16km you’ll pass

a major bridge. Cross this and continue for another 5km and turn left about 500m past the Eatling Markets. This road will bring you to the entrance in another 6km.

In Buon Ma Thuot, Damsan Tourist (p320) is the place to inquire about tours to the waterfalls.

Yok Don National Park

☎ 050

The largest of Vietnam’s nature preserves, **Yok Don National Park** (Vuon Quoc Gia Yok Don; ☎ 783 049; yokdon@dng.vnn.vn) has been gradually expanded and today encompasses 115,545 hectares of mainly dry deciduous forest, with the beautiful Serepok River flowing through it.

Yok Don is home to 67 mammal species, 38 of which are listed as endangered in Indochina, and 17 of those endangered worldwide. The park habitat accommodates elephants, tigers and leopards, as well as nearly 250 different species of bird – including a pair of critically-endangered giant ibis (*Thaumatibis gigantea*), sighted in 2003. More common wildlife in the park includes deer, monkeys and snakes. In recent years previously unknown animals like the *Canisauvus*, a species of wild dog, have been discovered.

The delicate balance between ecological conservation and the preservation of local cultures is a challenge, considering the poverty

of the region’s people and their traditional means of survival (eg hunting). However, the Vietnamese government is working with international agencies, such as the UN Development Programme (UNDP), to manage this ongoing balance, aiming towards education and community participation in conservation practices.

There are 17 ethnic groups in the region, including a significant number that have migrated from northern Vietnam. The locals are mostly Ede and M’ngong, a matrilineal tribe. The family name is passed down through the mother, and children are considered members of their mother’s family.

The M’ngong are known for their skills in capturing wild elephants, dozens of which live in the area (see below). Traditional elephant-racing festivals are put on from time to time. Visitors can arrange elephant rides or guided treks through beautiful forests. Elephants typically carry three people, but for heavier Westerners two is usually the limit. Elephant rides can be arranged through DakLak Tourist (p319) in Buon Ma Thuot, but you can also just turn up and make arrangements. Booking direct costs from 100,000 to 200,000d per hour.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Most of the domestic tourist action centres on the village of **Ban Don** in Ea Sup district, 45km

BABY ELEPHANT WALK

Throughout history, kings from Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos have come to the area around present-day Yok Don National Park in search of elephants. To this day the tradition of elephant trapping continues, rooted in local culture and traditions.

Typically, hunters use two domesticated elephants in order to catch one wild calf. Only elephants under the age of three are targeted, otherwise they’re too hard to train, and run a higher risk of returning to the jungle.

Custom maintains that men must abstain from sex for at least a week before commencing the hunt. The hunts involve a series of quick attacks and retreats, and the hunters’ energy needs to be saved in case they are chased down by the angry parents, who are not too keen on their loved offspring being calf-napped. Unlike the elephant poachers in Africa, the hill-tribe hunters never cause physical harm to the parents when capturing their young.

Once the hunting party has returned from the jungle, the village holds a naming ceremony for their new captive. Here’s where the niceties cease. The training of these highly intelligent and social creatures initially consists of savage beatings to break the infant’s will.

Until recently, a lifetime of heavy toil lay before it – elephants were used as combination bulldozers, fork-lifts and semitrailers. The government has now clamped down on using them to carry wood, and now their main commercial purpose is to ferry tourists. It’s an awful dilemma, as there’s an undeniable thrill in seeing elephants taking part in village life as they have for centuries. But this delight is tempered by the knowledge of what these beautiful creatures have had to endure in order to spend their years lugging hefty Westerners through the forest.

northwest of Buon Ma Thuot. The village, 5km beyond the turn-off into the national park, often gets overrun with busloads of visitors indulging in traditional activities such as **gong performances** and drinking wine from a **communal jug** – everybody gathers around and drinks at the same time through very long straws.

A good local guide based in Ban Don is **Dang Kuan Vu** (☎ 0905-057 890; xuanvupaulbmt@yahoo.com). He can help with accommodation, treks and elephant rides, as well as information on the park's flora and fauna.

There are the neglected ruins of a 13th-century Cham tower called **Yang Prong** 50km north of Ban Don at Ya Liao, near the Cambodian border. A permit and guide are necessary to visit this spot.

SLEEPING & EATING

At the national park headquarters, **Yok Don Guesthouse** (☎ 853 110; r 150,000d; 🚻) has four basic rooms (cold water only), each with two beds.

Camping in the park is possible, but you'll need to have a guide with you. Overnight treks with a guide cost 350,000d, and longer treks can also be arranged. You'll need to bring your own food on all trips.

In Ban Don, contact **Ban Don Tourist** (☎ 798 119) about overnights in minority **stilt houses** (per person US\$5). Another option (also arranged through Ban Don Tourist) is the **bungalows** (US\$12) out on nearby Aino Island, reached via a rickety series of bamboo suspension bridges.

Though it can be a bit of a circus, there is a good restaurant in Ban Don. If you're lucky you might catch a local performance of gong music and dancing put on for a group tour.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Local buses head from Buon Ma Thuot bus station to Yok Don National Park (US\$1, 40km, eight daily). Motorbike taxis in Buon Ma Thuot can take you to the park for around US\$7/10 one way/return.

Elephants can be hired overnight for 600,000d per day.

Lak Lake

This beautiful spot is awakening to tourism, offering authentic experiences of hill-tribe life, along with increasingly comfortable accommodation choices. Lak Lake (Ho Lak) covers

600 hectares in the rainy season, but shrinks to 400 hectares surrounded by rice paddies in the dry. It was once full of crocodiles, but these have long since found their fate as shoes, handbags and taxidermied monstrosities.

Located on the mountainous road between Dalat (154km southeast) and Buon Ma Thuot (50km north), the surrounding countryside is stunning. Emperor Bao Dai must have thought so, as he built yet another of his palaces (is anyone keeping count?) overlooking the lake (see below).

On the south shores, near the town of Lien Son, **Jun Village** reveals an enigmatic slice of traditional M'ngong life. The rattan and wood houses are all built on stilts, which was a way of keeping the animals out. Pigs, cows and chickens wander around at will, and you'll see the odd elephant being ridden around. The villagers go about their daily lives quite uninterested in the tourists in their midst. If you're interested in staying overnight, Mr Duc at **Café Duc Mai** (☎ 586 280; 268 Đ Nguyen Tat Thanh), in the heart of the village, can organise a mattress in one of several traditional stilt longhouses for US\$5, as well as gong concerts, elephant rides (US\$16), and kayaking or walking tours.

SLEEPING & EATING

Lak Resort (Du Lich Ho Lak; ☎ 586 767; Lien Son; s/d US\$8/10, bungalows US\$25, shared longhouse US\$5; 🚻) In a peaceful lake setting, under the shade of jackfruit trees, Lak Resort still offers basic cheap rooms in an old wing or mattresses in a shared M'ngong longhouse with an external toilet block, sleeping up to 30 people. At the time of research an upmarket cluster of lakeside bungalows around a central pool was near completion. A romantic restaurant over the lake serves decent food (dishes 25,000d). Tours can be arranged here and bicycles hired. Run by DakLak Tourist, the resort is committed to employing at least 51% M'ngong staff.

Bao Dai Villa (☎ 586 767; Lien Son; r US\$20-30) DakLak Tourist also owns the former emperor's palace, situated on a hill overlooking the lake. If you can manage to ignore the stuffed crocodiles and ghastly floral bedspreads, the views are lovely and some of the rooms huge. It's clean enough, but it could do with a good coat of paint. There's a restaurant downstairs (meals US\$5) and the price includes breakfast.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Lak Lake is easily and regularly visited as a stop on the Easy Rider trail on the scenic route between Dalat and Buon Ma Thuot. A day-trip on the back of a motorbike from Buon Ma Thuot should only cost around US\$12, including waiting time. DakLak Tourist in Buon Ma Thuot offers day or overnight tours (see p319).

Public buses to Lak Lake leave regularly from the Buon Ma Thuot bus station (20,000d) or inquire at DakLak Tourist.

PLEIKU

☎ 059 / pop 141,700 / elevation 785m Well off the tourist track, Pleiku (or Playcu) makes for little more than a pleasant stopover on Hwy 14. The threat of unrest among the local ethnic minorities means that much of the potential for village tourism has been stymied. You'll need a permit to go anywhere off the highway, and Westerners with their own wheels may find themselves quickly separated from them if they attempt to go it alone. However, you're unlikely to see any aggression on the streets of this sleepy market town.

In February 1965 the VC shelled a US compound in Pleiku, killing eight Americans. Although the USA already had more than 23,000 military advisers in Vietnam, their role was supposed to be noncombative at the time. The attack on Pleiku was used as a justification by US President Johnson to begin a relentless bombing campaign against North Vietnam and the rapid build-up of US troops.

When US troops departed in 1973 the South Vietnamese kept Pleiku as their main combat base in the area. When these troops fled the advancing VC, the whole civilian population of Pleiku and nearby Kon Tum fled with them. The stampede to the coastline involved over 100,000 people and tens of thousands died along the way.

The departing soldiers torched Pleiku, but the city was rebuilt in the 1980s with assistance from the Soviet Union. As a result, it lacks much of the colour and antiquity you find elsewhere in Vietnamese towns.

Information

You need a permit to visit villages in Gia Lai province and you'll also be required to hire a guide. This puts off many travellers, who usually just skip Pleiku entirely and head north to Kon Tum where the authorities are more

hospitable. Gia Lai Tourist can arrange the permit and guide as part of one of its packages, for which you're likely to be charged a set fee depending on the length of your tour.

Gia Lai Tourist (☎ 874 571; www.gialaitourist.com; 215 Đ Hung Vuong) Located beside the Hung Vuong Hotel, Gia Lai offers a wide variety of tours, including trekking, elephant riding and programmes catering for war veterans. **Inccombank** (☎ 871 054; 12 Đ Tran Hung Dao) Branch offering foreign currency and travellers cheque exchanges, and credit-card advances.

Internet 42 (42 Đ Dinh Tien Hoang; per hr 2000d) Cheap and fast.

Main post office (☎ 872 123; 69 Đ Hung Vuong; 📧 6am-9.30pm)

Vietcombank ATM (89 Đ Hung Vuong) In the foyer of the laly Hotel.

Sights MUSEUMS

Pleiku has two museums, neither of them remarkable and both often closed.

The **Ho Chi Minh Museum** (☎ 824 276; 1 Phan Dinh Phuong; admission free; 🕒 8-11am & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri) displays documents and photos to demonstrate Uncle Ho's affinity for hill-tribe people, and their love for Uncle Ho. There are also displays about a Bahnar hero, Anh Hung Nup (1914-98), who led the hill tribes against the French and Americans. There's a **statue of Anh Hung Nup** (on Đ Le Loi & Đ Tran Hung Dao) outside the nearby Hoa Lu Theatre.

The **Gia Lai Museum** (☎ 824 520; 28 Đ Quang Trung; admission 10,000d; 🕒 8-11am & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri) features hill-tribe artefacts and photographs that memorialise Pleiku's role during the American War. Check in first at Gia Lai Tourist to get a ticket and an appointment.

LE TU TRONG PARK

This little public **park** (☎ 871 699; 268 Đ Tran Hung Dao) has manicured gardens, a *rong* house (see p328) and a full-length swimming pool.

SEA LAKE

Bien Ho, or Sea Lake, is a deep mountain lake about 7km north of Pleiku, where it's possible to swim in the green water but most visitors prefer to admire it from a dry distance. It is believed to have been formed from a prehistoric volcanic crater. The surrounding area's beautiful and, thankfully, there's little here in the way of development apart from a tiered viewing terrace. This makes a pleasant bike ride and picnic from Pleiku.

even now, in Vietnam. The reason for this is largely because the fight was commemorated by a popular song, 'Nguoi O Lai Charlie' (The People Stayed in Charlie).

Not surprisingly, the hill was heavily mined during the war and is still considered unsafe to climb.

There's a **rong house** in Dak To that is worth seeking out.

Sleeping

Viet Tram (☎ 869 269; fax 869 334; 162 Đ Nguyen Hue; r US\$8-10; 🍷 📺) A friendly minihotel with basic but clean and comfortable rooms.

Huu Nghi (☎ 911 560; fax 911 556; 69 Đ Ba Trieu; r US\$18-30; 🍷) There's no English spoken in this new, upmarket and attractive hotel. Rooms at the back look out on a quiet courtyard.

Indochine Hotel (☎ 863 334; kontumtourism.com; 30 Đ Bach Dang; r US\$20-40, ste US\$70; 🍷 📺) This large new place right by the river is downright flash by highlands standards and has great views from the rooftop bar.

Eating & Drinking

Dakbla's (☎ 862 584; 168 Đ Nguyen Hue; dishes 25,000-60,000d) With good food and reasonable prices, Dakbla's tends to draw the most travellers, serving Vietnamese standards plus exotic fare such as wild boar and frog. An impressive collection of hill-tribe artefacts adorns the walls, some of which are for sale.

Quan 58 (☎ 863 814; 58 Đ Phan Chu Trinh; hotpot 50,000d; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This is an indoor-outdoor goat-meat speciality restaurant. Goat (*de*) can be ordered in over a dozen ways, such as steamed (*de hap*), grilled (*de nuong*), sautéed (*de xao lan*), curried (*de cari*) and the ever-popular hotpot (*lau de*).

Restaurant 78 Le Loi (☎ 864 404; 78 Đ Le Loi; hotpot 50,000d; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This place is crowded with locals eating hotpot and drinking beer.

Nghia II (72 Đ Le Loi; mains 10,000d). A few doors down from Restaurant 78 Le Loi, there's good vegetarian food here.

Eva Café (☎ 862 944; 1 Đ Phan Chu Trinh) A pleasant surprise, this is set up like a hill-tribe village, minus the pigs and cows, with thatched buildings scattered throughout the garden. There's a fantastic sculpture of a soldier fashioned from a large bomb, wearing a peace sign on a chain around its neck. This chic café seems a little incongruous in simple Kon Tum, but it's a good place for a coffee, cold beer or a delicious mango smoothie.

Getting There & Around

Kon Tum is easy to traverse on foot, but *xe om* are in ready supply. It shouldn't cost more than 10,000d to get anywhere on the back of a bike.

The local **Vietnam Airlines** (☎ 862 282; 129 Đ Ba Trieu; 🕒 7-11am & 1-5pm Mon-Sat) office can handle air-travel bookings; the nearest airport is in Pleiku.

Kon Tum's **bus station** (Đ 279 Phan Dinh Phung) has plenty of services to Pleiku (30,000d, one hour) and Danang (85,000d, five hours). The newly opened Bo Y border crossing into Laos lies 86km northeast of Kon Tum. There are buses that leave Quy Nhon on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays, passing through Kon Tum en route to Pakse. These services are new and don't seem to have a fixed stopping point or schedule as yet. The best thing to do is to inquire at the bus station for the latest details. Another option is to catch a bus to Ngoc Hoi (30,000d, two hours, one daily) and then pick up a Lao minivan returning to Attapeu (80,000k, three hours). Note that Lao visas are not available at this border, so you'll have to arrange one in Danang or HCMC.

Hwy 14 north and south of Kon Tum is now in very good repair. Pleiku is 49km south and Danang 300km north.