

# Directory

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## ACCOMMODATION

Vietnam has something for everyone – from dives to the divine – and we cover them all. Most hotels in Vietnam quote prices in a mix of Vietnamese dong and US dollars. In the provinces the lower dong price is usually reserved for locals, while foreigners pay the higher dollar price. Prices are quoted in dong or dollars throughout this book based on the preferred currency of the particular property.

When it comes to budget, we are talking about guesthouses or hotels where the majority

of rooms cost less than US\$20. These are usually family-run guesthouses, mini-hotels or, usually the least-appealing option, government-run guesthouses that time forgot. Budget rooms generally come well equipped for the money, so don't be surprised to find air-con, hot water and a TV for 10 bucks or less.

Moving on to midrange, we are referring to rooms in the US\$20 to US\$75 range, which buys some pretty tasty extras in Vietnam. At the lower end of this bracket, many of the hotels are similar to budget hotels but with bigger rooms or balconies. Flash a bit more cash and three-star touches are available, like access to a swimming pool and a hairdryer hidden away somewhere.

At the top end are a host of international-standard hotels and resorts that charge from US\$75 a room to US\$750 a suite. Some of these are fairly faceless business hotels, while others ooze opulence or resonate with history. There are some real bargains when compared with the Hong Kongs and Singapores of this world, so if you fancy indulging yourself, Vietnam is a good place to do it. Most hotels at the top end levy a tax of 10% and a service charge of 5%, displayed as ++ ('plus plus') on the bill.

Be aware that some budget and midrange hotels also apply the 10% tax. Check carefully before taking the room to avoid any unpleasant shocks on departure.

Accommodation options are limited in off-the-beaten track destinations in the far north and the central highlands. Usually there will just be a few guesthouses and basic hotels. However, in major towns and along the coastal strip, there is now an excellent range of rooms, including some of the world's biggest names, like Sofitel and Six Senses.

### BOOK ACCOMMODATION ONLINE

For more accommodation reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at [www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com). You'll find the true, insider lowdown on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

## PRACTICALITIES

**Electricity** The usual voltage is 220V, 50 cycles, but sometimes you encounter 110V, also at 50 cycles, just to confuse things. Electrical sockets are usually two-pin.

**Laundry** Most guesthouses and hotels have cheap laundry services, but check it has a dryer if the weather is bad. There are dry-cleaning outlets in every town. Washing powder is cheap and readily available.

**Newspapers & Magazines** *Vietnam News* and the *Saigon Times* are popular English-language dailies. Good magazines include the *Vietnam Economic Times*, plus its listings mag, the *Guide*, and the *Vietnam Investment Review*.

**Radio & TV** *Voice of Vietnam* hogs the airwaves all day and is pumped through loudspeakers in many smaller towns. There are several TV channels and a steady diet of satellite stuff.

**Weights & Measures** The Vietnamese use the metric system for everything except precious metals and gems, where they follow the Chinese system.

Peak tourist demand for hotel rooms comes at Christmas and New Year, when prices may rise by as much as 25%. There is also a surge in many cities during Tet, when half of Vietnam is on the move. Try and make a reservation at these times so as not to get caught out. During quiet periods it is often possible to negotiate a discount, either by email in advance or over the counter on arrival, as there will now be a surplus of hotel beds in many destinations.

Passports are almost always requested on arrival at a hotel. It is not absolutely essential to hand over your actual passport, but at the very least you need to hand over a photocopy of the passport details, visa and departure card.

Accommodation prices listed are high-season prices for rooms with attached bathroom, unless stated otherwise. An icon is included if air-con is available; otherwise, assume that a fan will be provided.

## Camping

Perhaps because so many Vietnamese spent much of the war years living in tents, as either soldiers or refugees, camping is not yet the popular pastime it is in the West.

Some innovative private travel agencies in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) and Hanoi offer organised camping trips to national parks, plus camping out in beauty spots like Halong Bay (p136). See Travel Agencies in Hanoi (p91) and HCMC (p338).

## Guesthouses & Hotels

Many of the large hotels (*khach san*) and guesthouses (*nha khach* or *nha nghi*) are government-owned or joint ventures. There

has also been a mushrooming of minihotels – small, smart private hotels that represent good value for money. The international hotel chains are now well represented in Hanoi and HCMC.

There is considerable confusion over the terms 'singles', 'doubles', 'double occupancy' and 'twins', so let's set the record straight here. A single contains one bed, even if two people sleep in it. If there are two beds in the room, that is a twin, even if only one person occupies it. If two people stay in the same room, that is double occupancy. In some hotels 'doubles' means twin beds, while in others it means double occupancy.

While many of the newer hotels have lifts, older hotels often don't and the cheapest rooms are at the end of several flights of stairs. It's a win-win situation: cheaper rooms, a bit of exercise and better views! Bear in mind

## HOTELS FROM HELL

It is hardly unique to Vietnam, but there are quite a lot of hotel scams in Vietnam. They are mostly, although not exclusively, happening in Hanoi, although keep the radar up in most of the major cities. Copycat hotels, dodgy taxi drivers, persistent touts, all this is possible and more. Overcharging is a concern, as is constant harassment to book a tour. However, most guesthouse and hotel operators are decent folk and honest in their dealings with tourists. Don't let the minority ruin your Vietnam experience. For more on horror hotels in Hanoi, see p124.

that power outages are possible in some towns and this can mean 10 flights of stairs just to get to your room in a tall, skinny Saigon-style skyscraper.

Many hotels post a small sign warning guests not to leave cameras, passports and other valuables in the room. Most places have a safety deposit system of some kind, but if leaving cash (not recommended) or travellers cheques, be sure to seal the loot in an envelope and have it counter-signed by staff. However, many readers have been stung when leaving cash at cheaper hotels, so proceed with caution.

### Homestays

Homestays are a popular option in parts of Vietnam, but some local governments are more flexible than others about the concept. Homestays were pioneered in the Mekong Delta (p409), where it has long been possible to stay with local families. At the opposite end of the map, there are also homestays on the island of Cat Ba (p145).

Many people like to stay with ethnic minority families in the far north of Vietnam. Mai Chau (p165) was the first place to offer the chance to stay with the hospitable White Thai families. Sapa (p172) is the number one destination to meet the hill tribes in Vietnam and it is possible to undertake two- or three-day treks with an overnight in a H'mong or Dzao village. If you are serious about homestays throughout the north, consider contacting one of the travel agencies (p91) or motorbike touring companies (p107) who can help organise things. Vietnam is not the sort of country where you can just drop-in and hope things work out, as there are strict rules about registering foreigners who stay overnight with a Vietnamese family.

### Resorts

Resorts have really taken off in the last few years, particularly along the beautiful coastline. Top beach spots such as China Beach, Nha Trang and Mui Ne all have a range of sumptuous places for a spot of pampering. Up-and-coming destinations such as Phu Quoc Island are fast catching up. There are also a number of ecoresorts in the mountains of the north and the far flung corners of Bai Tu Long Bay, a trend that looks set to continue.

### ACTIVITIES

If you are looking for action, Vietnam can increasingly deliver. Biking and hiking are

taking off up and down the country, while offshore there is kayaking and surfing above the water and diving and snorkelling beneath. If it all sounds like too much hard work, rent a motorbike and let the engine take the strain.

### Cycling

For distances near and far, cycling is an excellent way to experience Vietnam. A bicycle can be rented in most tourist centres from as little as US\$1 a day.

The flatlands of the Mekong Delta region are an ideal place for a long-distance ride through the back roads. The entire coastal route along Hwy 1 is an alluring achievement, but the insane traffic makes it tough going and dangerous. A better option is the newer inland route, Hwy 14, also known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail (not to be confused with the original wartime trail), which offers stunning scenery and little traffic.

North of the old Demilitarised Zone (DMZ), cycling is a bad idea in the winter months, particularly if heading from the south to the north, thanks to the massive monsoon winds, which blow from the north. There are some incredible, and incredibly challenging, rides through the Tonkin Alps (Hoang Lien Mountains) of the north, but the opportunity to get up close and personal with the minority peoples of the region makes it more than worth the while.

For some laughs, as well as the lowdown on cycling in Vietnam, visit the website [www.mrpumpy.net](http://www.mrpumpy.net).

### Diving & Snorkelling

The most popular scuba-diving area in Vietnam is around Nha Trang (p281). There are several reputable dive operators here, whose equipment and training is up to international standards. It is also possible to hire snorkelling gear and scuba equipment at several beach resorts along the coast, including Cua Dai Beach (p239), Ca Na (p299) and China Beach (p237). Phu Quoc Island (p452) has the potential to be the next big thing in underwater exploration and dive operators are starting to spread the word.

### Golf

Mark Twain once said that playing golf was 'a waste of a good walk' and apparently Ho Chi Minh agreed with him. Times have changed and government officials can often be seen fraternising on the fairways.

All over East Asia playing golf wins considerable points in the 'face game', even if you never hit a ball. For maximum snob value you need to join a country club, and in Vietnam memberships start at around US\$10,000. Most golf clubs will allow you to pay a guest fee.

The best golf courses in Vietnam are located in Dalat (p307) and Phan Thiet (p304), but there are also plenty of courses in and around Hanoi and HCMC.

For information about golf package deals visit [www.vietnamgolfresorts.com](http://www.vietnamgolfresorts.com).

### Kayaking

Kayaking has taken off around Halong Bay in the past few years, following in the footsteps of Krabi in Thailand. Several companies offer kayaking itineraries around the majestic limestone pinnacles, including overnights on islands in the bay. Even the standard Halong Bay tours now include the option of kayaking through the karsts for those that want the experience without the effort.

### Motorbiking

Motorbiking through Vietnam's 'deep north' is unforgettable. For those seeking true adventure there is no better way to go. If you are not confident riding a motorbike, it's comparatively cheap to hire someone to drive it for you. 4WD trips in the north are also highly recommended, though the mobility of two wheels is unrivalled. Motorbikes can traverse trails that even the hardest 4WD cannot follow. Just remember to watch the road when the scenery is sublime!

### Rock Climbing

Well, it's still early days, but with the sheer range of limestone karsts found up and down the country, it is only a matter of time before the word gets out. For now, it is Halong Bay (p136) that is emerging as the premier spot, but in time Ninh Binh (p186) and Phong Nha (p195) could offer some competition.

### Surfing, Kitesurfing & Windsurfing

Surfing and windsurfing have only recently arrived on the scene, but these are quickly catching on in popularity. The best place to practice these pursuits is at Mui Ne Beach (p300), but experienced surfers head for China Beach in Danang (p229). Kite surfing is now one of Mui Ne's biggest draws for thrillseekers.

### Trekking

Vietnam offers excellent trekking opportunities, notably in its growing array of national parks and nature reserves. There are ample opportunities to hike to minority villages in the north-west, northeast and central highlands regions. Anything is possible, from half-day hikes to an assault on Fansipan, Vietnam's highest mountain. The best bases from which to arrange treks are Sapa (p172), Bac Ha (p180) and Cat Ba (p143), all in northern Vietnam; Bach Ma National Park (p225) in central Vietnam; and Cat Tien (p392) and Yok Don (p323) National Parks in the south. Tour operators in Hanoi and HCMC offer a variety of programmes featuring hiking and trekking.

Bear in mind that it may be necessary to arrange special permits, especially if you plan to spend the night in remote mountain villages where there are no hotels.

### BUSINESS HOURS

Vietnamese people rise early and consider sleeping in to be a sure indication of illness. Offices, museums and many shops open between 7am and 8am and close between 4pm and 5pm. Post offices keep longer hours and are generally open from 6.30am to 9pm. Banks are generally open from 8am to 11.30am and 1pm to 4pm during the week and 8am to 11.30am on Saturday.

Most government offices are open on Saturday until noon but are closed on Sunday. Most museums are closed on Monday while temples and pagodas are usually open every day from around 5am to 9pm.

Many of the small privately owned shops, restaurants and street stalls stay open seven days a week, often until late at night.

Lunch is taken very seriously and virtually everything shuts down between noon and 1.30pm. Government workers tend to take longer breaks, so figure on getting nothing done between 11.30am and 2pm.

### CHILDREN

Children get to have a good time in Vietnam, mainly because of the overwhelming amount of attention they attract and the fact that almost everybody wants to play with them! However, this attention can sometimes be overwhelming, particularly for blond-haired, blue-eyed babes. Cheek pinching, or worse still (if rare), groin grabbing, are distinct possibilities, so keep close. For the full picture

on surviving and thriving on the road, check out Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children* by Cathy Lanigan, with a rundown on health precautions for kids and advice on travel during pregnancy.

### Practicalities

When it comes to feeding and caring for babies, almost anything and everything is available in the major cities of Vietnam, but supplies dry up quickly in the countryside. Cot beds are available in international-standard midrange and top-end hotels, but not elsewhere. There are no safety seats in rented cars or taxis, but some Western restaurants can usually find a highchair when it comes to eating.

Breastfeeding in public is quite common in Vietnam, so there is no need to worry about crossing a cultural boundary. But there are few facilities for changing babies other than the usual bathrooms. You'll need to pack a baby bag everywhere you go. For kiddies who are too young to handle chopsticks, most restaurants also have cutlery.

### Sights & Activities

There is plenty to do in big cities to keep kids interested, though in most smaller towns and rural areas you will probably encounter the boredom factor. The zoos, parks and some of the best ice-cream shops in the region are usually winners. Children visiting the south should not miss HCMC's water parks (p355), while Hanoi's two musts are the circus (p118) and a water-puppet performance (p119).

Nature lovers with children can hike in one of Vietnam's expansive national parks or nature reserves. Cuc Phuong National Park (p190) is home to the excellent Endangered Primate Rescue Centre, where endangered species of monkeys are protected and bred. This is a great place to see gibbons gallivanting about their safe houses and to learn about the plight of our furry friends.

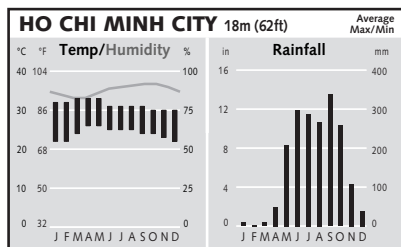
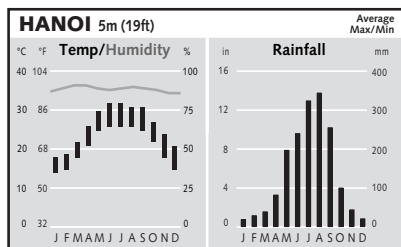
With such a long coast, there are some great beaches for young children to enjoy, but pay close attention to any playtime in the sea, as there are some big riptides at many of the most popular beaches. Note that these rips are not marked by flags.

### CLIMATE CHARTS

The climate of Vietnam varies considerably from region to region. Although the entire country lies in the tropics and subtropics,

local conditions vary from frosty winters in the far northern hills to year-round, subequatorial warmth in the Mekong Delta.

For more climatic kudos, take a look at the When to Go information (p18).



### COURSES

#### Cooking

For the full story on cooking courses, check out the Food & Drink chapter (p52).

#### Language

There are Vietnamese language courses offered in HCMC, Hanoi and elsewhere. To qualify for student-visa status you need to enrol at a bona fide university, as opposed to a private language centre or with a tutor. Lessons usually last for two hours per day, and cost from US\$3 (university) to US\$10 (private) per hour.

It is important to decide on whether to study Vietnamese in Hanoi or HCMC, as the northern and southern dialects are quite different. Many have been dismayed to discover that if they studied in one city they could not communicate clearly in the other. For more details, see under Language Courses in Hanoi (p107) and Ho Chi Minh City (p355).

### CUSTOMS

Enter Vietnam by air and the whole procedure only takes a few minutes. If you enter overland expect a bit more attention.

Duty free allowances are the standard 200 cigarettes and a bottle of booze variety. Visitors can bring unlimited foreign currency into Vietnam, but large sums (US\$7000 and greater) must be declared upon arrival.

### DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

#### Beggar Fatigue

Just as you're about to dig into the scrumptious Vietnamese meal you've ordered, you feel a tug on your shirt sleeve. This latest 'annoyance' is a bony, eight-year-old boy holding his three-year-old sister in his arms. The little girl has a distended stomach and her hungry eyes are fixed on your full plate.

This is the face of poverty. How do you deal with these situations? If you're like most of us, not very well. Taking the matter into your own hands by giving out money or gifts to people on the streets can cause more damage than good. The more people are given hand-outs, the more reliant and attracted to life on the streets they become. When money is tight, people recognise that life on the streets is no longer so fruitful. This will hopefully discourage parents and 'pimps' forcing children and beggars onto the streets.

One way to contribute and help improve the situation is to invest just a few hours to find out about local organisations that work with disadvantaged people; these groups are far more likely to make sure contributions are used in the most effective way possible to help those who need it.

However, if you want to do something on the spot, at least avoid giving money or anything that can be sold. The elderly and the young are easily controlled and are ideal begging tools. If you are going to give something

directly to a beggar, it's better to give food than money; take them to a market or stall and buy them a nutritious meal or some fruit to be sure they are the only beneficiaries.

### Noise

Remember Spinal Tap? The soundtrack of Vietnam is permanently cranked up to 11! Not just any noise, but a whole lot of noises that just never seem to stop. At night there is most often a competing cacophony from motorbikes, discos, cafés, video arcades, karaoke lounges and restaurants; if your hotel is near any or all of these, it may be difficult to sleep.

Fortunately most noise subsides around 10pm or 11pm, as few places stay open much later than that. Unfortunately, however, Vietnamese are up and about from around 5am onwards. This not only means that traffic noise starts early, but you may be woken up by the crackle of loud speakers as the Voice of Vietnam cranks into life at 5am in small towns and villages. It's worth trying to get a room at the back of a hotel.

One last thing...don't forget the earplugs!

### Prostitution

Karaoke clubs and massage parlours are ubiquitous throughout Vietnam. Sometimes this may mean an 'orchestra without instruments', or a healthy massage to ease a stiff body. However, more often than not, both of these terms are euphemisms for some sort of prostitution. There may be some singing or a bit of shoulder tweaking going on, but ultimately it is just a polite introduction to something naughtier. Legitimate karaoke and legitimate massage do exist in the bigger cities, but as a general rule of thumb, if the place looks small and sleazy, it most probably is.

### Scams

Con artists and thieves are always seeking new tricks to separate naive tourists from their money and are becoming more savvy in their ways. We can't warn you about every trick you might encounter, so maintain a healthy scepticism and be prepared to argue when unnecessary demands are made for your money.

Beware of a motorbike-rental scam that some travellers have encountered in HCMC. Rent a motorbike and the owner supplies an excellent lock, insisting you use it. What he doesn't tell you is that he has another key and that somebody will follow you and 'steal'

### GOVERNMENT TRAVEL ADVICE

The following government websites offer travel advisories and information on current hot spots.

**Australian Department of Foreign Affairs** (☎ 1300 139 281; [www.smarttraveller.gov.au](http://www.smarttraveller.gov.au))

**British Foreign Office** (☎ 0845-850-2829; [www.fco.gov.uk/countryadvice](http://www.fco.gov.uk/countryadvice))

**Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs** (☎ 800-267 6788; [www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca](http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca))

**US State Department** (☎ 888-407 4747; <http://travel.state.gov>)

the bike at the first opportunity. You then have to pay for a new bike, as per the signed contract.

More common is when your motorbike won't start after you parked it in a 'safe' area with a guard. But yes, the guard knows somebody who can repair your bike. The mechanic shows up and quickly reinstalls the parts they removed earlier and the bike works again. That will be US\$10, please.

Beware of massage boys who, after a price has been agreed upon, try to extort money from you afterwards by threatening to set the police on you (these threats are generally empty ones).

The most common scam most visitors encounter is the oldest in the book. The hotel of choice is 'closed' or 'full', but the helpful taxi driver will take you somewhere else. This has been perfected in Hanoi, where there are often several hotels with the same name in the same area. Book by telephone or email in advance and stop the scammers in their tracks.

Despite an array of scams, however, it is important to keep in mind the Vietnamese are not always out to get you. One concerning trend we're noticing in Vietnam, relative to neighbouring countries such as Cambodia and Laos, is a general lack of trust in the locals on the part of foreigners. Try to differentiate between who is good and bad and do not close yourself off to every person you encounter.

### Sea Creatures

If you plan to spend your time swimming, snorkelling and scuba diving, familiarise yourself with the various hazards. The list of dangerous creatures that are found in seas off Vietnam is extensive and includes sharks, jellyfish, stonefish, scorpion fish, sea snakes

and stingrays. However, there is little cause for alarm as most of these creatures avoid humans, or humans avoid them, so the number of people injured or killed is very small.

Jellyfish tend to travel in groups, so as long as you look before you leap into the sea, avoiding them should not be too hard. Stonefish, scorpion fish and stingrays tend to hang out in shallow water along the ocean floor and can be very difficult to see. One way to protect against these nasties is to wear enclosed shoes in the sea.

### Theft

The Vietnamese are convinced that their cities are full of criminals. Street crime is commonplace in HCMC and Nha Trang, and on the rise in Hanoi, so it doesn't hurt to keep the antennae up wherever you are.

HCMC is the place to really keep your wits about you. Don't have anything dangling from your body that you are not ready to part with, including bags and jewellery, which might tempt a robber. Keep an eye out for drive-by thieves on motorbikes – they specialise in snatching handbags and cameras from tourists on foot and taking *cyclos* in the city.

Pickpocketing, which often involves kids, women with babies and newspaper vendors, is also a serious problem, especially in the tourist areas of HCMC. Many of the street kids, adorable as they may be, are very skilled at liberating people from their wallets.

Avoid putting things down while you're eating, or at least take the precaution of fastening these items to your seat with a strap or chain. Remember, any luggage that you leave unattended for even a moment may grow legs and vanish.

There are also 'taxi girls' (sometimes transvestites) who approach Western men, give them a big hug, often more, and ask if they'd like 'a good time'. Then they suddenly change their mind and depart, along with a mobile phone and wallet.

We have also had reports of people being drugged and robbed on long-distance buses. It usually starts with a friendly passenger offering a free Coke, which turns out to be a chloral-hydrate cocktail. You wake up hours later to find your valuables and new-found 'friend' gone.

Despite all this, don't be overly paranoid. Although crime certainly exists and you need to be aware of it, theft in Vietnam does not

seem to be any worse than what you'd expect anywhere else. Don't assume that everyone's a thief – most Vietnamese are poor, but honest.

### Undetonated Explosives

For more than three decades four armies expended untold energy and resources mining, booby-trapping, rocketing, strafing, mortaring and bombarding wide areas of Vietnam. When the fighting stopped most of this ordnance remained exactly where it had landed or been laid; American estimates at the end of the war placed the quantity of unexploded ordnance at 150,000 tonnes.

Since 1975 more than 40,000 Vietnamese have been maimed or killed by this leftover ordnance. While cities, cultivated areas and well-travelled rural roads and paths are safe for travel, straying from these areas could land you in the middle of a minefield that is completely unmarked.

Never touch any rockets, artillery shells, mortars, mines or other relics of war you may come across. Such objects can remain lethal for decades. And don't climb inside bomb craters – you never know what un-detonated explosive device is at the bottom.

You can learn more about the issue of landmines from the Nobel Peace Prize-winning **International Campaign to Ban Landmines** (ICBL; www.icbl.org), or see the boxed text, p203.

### DISCOUNT CARDS

#### Senior Cards

There are no 'senior citizen' discounts for pensioners, as all foreigners who can afford to fly to Vietnam are considered rich enough to pay the full whack.

#### Student & Youth Cards

Ditto for student cards. Carry one if you are travelling through the region, but it will gather dust in your wallet while you are in Vietnam.

### EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

#### Vietnamese Embassies & Consulates

The following are Vietnamese diplomatic representations abroad:

**Australia** Canberra (☎ 02-6286 6059; www.vietnamembassy.org.au; 6 Timbarra Cres, O'Malley, ACT 2606); Sydney (☎ 02-9327 2539; tlssyd@auco.net.au; 489 New South Head Rd, Double Bay, NSW 2028)

**Cambodia** Phnom Penh (☎ 023-362531; 436 Monivong Blvd)

**Canada** Ottawa (☎ 613-236 1398; www.vietnamembassy-canada.ca; 470 Wilbrod St, ON K1N 6M8)

**China** Beijing (☎ 010-6532 1125; vnaemba@mailhost.cinet.co.cn; 32 Guanghua Lu, 100600); Guangzhou (☎ 020-8652 7908; Jin Yanf Hotel, 92 Huanshi Western Rd)

**France** Paris (☎ 01 44 14 6400; 62-66 Rue Boileau, 75016)

**Germany** Berlin (☎ 030-509 8262; Konigswinter St 28, D-10318)

**Hong Kong** Wan Chai (☎ 22-591 4510; 15th fl, Great Smart Tower, 230 Wan Chai Rd)

**Italy** Rome (☎ 06-6616 0726; 156 Via di Bravetta, 00164)

**Japan** Tokyo (☎ 03-3466 3311; 50-11 Moto Yoyogi-Cho, Shibuya-ku, 151); Osaka (☎ 06-263 1600; 10th fl, Estate Bakurocho Bldg, 1-4-10 Bakurocho, Chuo-ku)

**Laos** Vientiane (☎ 21-413 409; That Luang Rd); Savannakhet (☎ 41-212 239; 418 Sisavang Vong)

**Philippines** Metro Manila (☎ 2-525 2837; 670 Pablo Ocampo, Makati City)

**Thailand** Bangkok (☎ 2-251 7202; 83/1 Wireless Rd 10500)

**UK** London (☎ 020-7937 1912; www.vietnamembassy.org.uk/consular.html; 12-14 Victoria Rd, W8 5RD)

**USA** Washington (☎ 202-861 0737; www.vietnamembassy-usa.org; 1233 20th St NW, Ste 400, DC 20036); San Francisco (☎ 415-922 1707; www.vietnamconsulate-sf.org; 1700 California St, Ste 430, CA 94109)

### Embassies & Consulates in Vietnam

With the exception of those for Cambodia, China and Laos, Hanoi's embassies and HCMC's consulates do very little visa business for non-Vietnamese.

It's important to realise what your country's embassy can and can't do to help if you get into trouble. Generally speaking, it won't be much help if the trouble you're in is remotely your own fault. Remember that you are bound by the laws of the country you are in. Your embassy won't be sympathetic if you end up in jail after committing a crime, even if such actions are legal in your own country.

In genuine emergencies you might get some assistance, but only if other channels have been exhausted. If you have all your money and documents stolen, it might assist with getting a new passport, but a loan for onward travel is out of the question.

The following are some of the embassies and consulates found in Vietnam.

**Australia** (www.ausinnv.com) Hanoi (Map pp88-9; ☎ 831 7755; 8 Duong Dao Tan, Ba Dinh District); HCMC (Map p350; ☎ 829 6035; 5th fl, 5B Đ Ton Duc Thang)

**Cambodia** Hanoi (Map pp92-3; ☎ 825 3788; 71A Pho Tran Hung Dao); HCMC (Map p336; ☎ 827 7696; cambocg@hcm.vnn.vn; 41 Đ Phung Khac Khoan)

### PLANET OF THE FAKES

You'll probably notice a lot of cut-price Lonely Planet *Vietnam* titles available as you travel around the country. Don't be deceived. These are pirate copies, churned out on local photocopiers. Sometimes the copies are very good, sometimes awful. The only certain way to tell is price. If it's cheap, it's a copy. Look at the print in this copy... if it is faded and the photos are washed out, then this book will self-destruct in five seconds.

**Canada** (www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/vietnam) Hanoi (Map pp92-3; ☎ 823 5500; 31 Đ Hung Vuong); HCMC (Map p350; ☎ 827 9899; 10th fl, 235 Đ Dong Khoi)

**China** Hanoi (Map pp92-3; ☎ 845 3736; Pho Hoang Dieu); HCMC (Map p336; ☎ 829 2457; chinaconsul\_hcm\_vn@mfa.gov.cn; 39 Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai)

**France** Hanoi (Map pp92-3; ☎ 943 7719; Pho Tran Hung Dao); HCMC (Map p336; ☎ 829 7231; 27 Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai)

**Germany** Hanoi (Map pp92-3; ☎ 845 3836; 29 Đ Tran Phu); HCMC (Map p336; ☎ 822 4385; 126 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu)

**Japan** Hanoi (Map pp88-9; ☎ 846 3000; 27 Pho Lieu Giai, Ba Dinh District); HCMC (Map p350; ☎ 822 5314; 13-17 Đ Nguyen Hue)

**Laos** Hanoi (Map pp92-3; ☎ 825 4576; 22 Pho Tran Binh Trong); HCMC (Map p350; ☎ 829 7667; 93 Đ Pasteur); Danang (Map p230; 16 Đ Tran Qui Cap)

**Netherlands** HCMC (Map p336; ☎ 823 5932; hcm-ca@minbuza.nl; 29 Đ Le Duan)

**New Zealand** Hanoi (Map p350; ☎ 824 1481; nzebhan@fpt.vn; Level 5, 63 Pho Ly Thai To); HCMC (Map p336; ☎ 822 6907; Ste 909, 235 Đ Dong Khoi)

**Philippines** Hanoi (Map pp92-3; ☎ 825 7948; 27B Pho Tran Hung Dao)

**Singapore** Hanoi (Map pp92-3; ☎ 823 3965; 41-43 Đ Tran Phu)

**Sweden** Hanoi (Map pp88-9; ☎ 726 0400; 2 Đ Nui Truc)

**Thailand** Hanoi (Map pp92-3; ☎ 823 5092; 63-65 Pho Hoang Dieu); HCMC (Map p336; ☎ 932 7637; 77 Đ Tran Quoc Thao)

**UK** (www.uk-vietnam.org) Hanoi (Map p96; ☎ 936 0500; Central Bldg, 31 Pho Hai Ba Trung); HCMC (Map p336; ☎ 829 8433; 25 Đ Le Duan)

**US** (http://usembassy.state.gov/vietnam) Hanoi (Map pp88-9; ☎ 772 1500; 7 Pho Lang Ha, Ba Dinh District); HCMC (Map p336; ☎ 822 9433; 4 Đ Le Duan)

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Major religious festivals in Vietnam have lunar dates; check against any Vietnamese calendar for the Gregorian dates. If you know when Tet kicks off, simply count from there.

Special prayers are held at Vietnamese and Chinese pagodas when the moon is full or a thin sliver. Many Buddhists eat only vegetarian food on these days, which, according to the Chinese lunar calendar, fall on the 14th and 15th days of the month and from the last day of the month to the first day of the next month.

**Tet (Tet Nguyen Dan)** The Big One! The Vietnamese Lunar New Year is Christmas, New Year and birthdays all rolled into one. Lasting from the first to seventh days of the first moon, the Tet Festival falls in late January or early February. See p64 for more on Tet.

**Holiday of the Dead (Thanh Minh)** It's time to honour the ancestors with a visit to graves of deceased relatives. Fifth day of the third moon.

**Buddha's Birth, Enlightenment and Death** A big celebration at Buddhist temples and pagodas with lively processions. Eighth day of the fourth moon.

**Summer Solstice Day (Tiet Doan Ngo)** Keep the epidemics at bay with offerings to the spirits, ghosts and the God of Death. Fifth day of the fifth moon.

**Wandering Souls Day (Trung Nguyen)** Second in the pecking order to Tet, offerings are made for the wandering souls of the forgotten dead. Fifteenth day of the seventh moon.

**Mid-Autumn Festival (Trung Thu)** A fine time for foodies with moon cakes of sticky rice filled with lotus seeds, watermelon seeds, peanuts, the yolks of duck eggs, raisins and other treats. Fifteenth day of the eighth moon.

**Confucius' Birthday** Happy birthday to China's leading philosophical export. Twenty-eighth day of the ninth moon.

**Christmas Day (Giang Sinh)** Needs no introduction, this is not a national holiday, but is celebrated throughout Vietnam, particularly by the sizable Catholic population.

## FOOD

Vietnamese cuisine has become a favourite throughout the Western world and a journey through Vietnam is a gastronomic treat. For the full story on Vietnamese cuisine, see the Food & Drink chapter (p45).

## GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Vietnam is a relatively hassle-free place for homosexuals. There are no official laws on same-sex relationships in Vietnam, nor much in the way of individual harassment.

That said, the government is notorious for clamping down on gay venues, and places that are covered in the mass media are 'coincidentally' closed down days later. Most gay venues keep a fairly low profile. There is, however, a healthy gay scene in Hanoi and HCMC, evidenced by unabashed cruising around certain lakes in Hanoi (p116) and the thriving café scene in HCMC (p369).

Homosexuality is still far from accepted in the wider community, though the lack of any laws keeps things fairly safe. Major headlines were made in 1997 with Vietnam's first gay marriage, and again in 1998 at the country's first lesbian wedding, in the Mekong Delta. However, displaying peculiar double standards, two weeks later government officials broke up the marriage of the women and the couple signed an agreement promising not to live together again.

With the vast number of same-sex travel partners – gay or otherwise – checking into hotels throughout Vietnam, there is little scrutiny over how travelling foreigners are related. However, it would be prudent not to flaunt your sexuality. As with heterosexual couples, passionate public displays of affection are considered a basic no-no.

**Utopia** (www.utopia-asia.com) features gay travel information and contacts, including detailed sections on the legality of homosexuality in Vietnam and some local gay terminology.

## HOLIDAYS

Politics affects everything, including public holidays. After a 15-year lapse, religious holidays were re-established in 1990. The following are public holidays in Vietnam:

**New Year's Day (Tet Duong Lich)** 1 January

**Anniversary of the Founding of the Vietnamese Communist Party (Thanh Lap Dang CSVN)** 3 February – the date the party was founded in 1930.

**Liberation Day (Saigon Giai Phong)** 30 April – the date on which Saigon surrendered is commemorated nationwide as Liberation Day.

**International Workers' Day (Quoc Te Lao Dong)** 1 May

**Ho Chi Minh's Birthday (Sinh Nhat Bac Ho)** 19 May  
**Buddha's Birthday (Phat Dan)** Eighth day of the fourth moon (usually June).

**National Day (Quoc Khanh)** 2 September – commemorates the Declaration of Independence by Ho Chi Minh in 1945.

## INSURANCE

Insurance is a *must* for Vietnam, as the cost of major medical treatment is prohibitive. Although you may have medical insurance in your own country, it is probably not valid while you are in Vietnam. A travel insurance policy to cover theft, loss and medical problems is the best bet.

There is a wide variety of policies available, so check the small print. Some insurance policies specifically exclude such 'dangerous activities' as riding motorbikes, diving and even trekking. Check that the policy covers an emergency evacuation in the event of serious injury.

## INTERNET ACCESS

Today the internet is widely available throughout towns and cities in Vietnam. There is everything from trendy cybercafés to computer terminals in the lobbies of hotels and

guesthouses, plus public internet access in many Vietnamese post offices. Many of the budget and midrange hotels in major cities offer free internet in the lobby. Some even offer free access in the room for those travelling with a laptop.

The cost of internet access generally ranges from 3000d to 20,000d per hour, depending on where you are and what the competition is like. Printing usually costs around 1000d per page and scanning about 2000d a page.

Wi-fi access is spreading fast. Hanoi, HCMC and other big towns have plenty of cafés and bars offering free access. Many of the leading hotels also offer wi-fi, but in keeping with the five-star tradition, it is not a free service.

For laptop travellers with older machines, check out the prepaid internet-access cards that can provide you with nationwide dial up to the net. FPT is one of Vietnam's largest ISPs, and its internet card is sold in most cities.

Remember that the power supply voltage will vary from that at home. The best investment is a universal AC adapter, which will enable you to plug it in anywhere without frying the innards of your equipment. For more information on travelling with a portable computer, see www.teleadapt.com.

## LAUNDRY

It is easy to get your laundry done at guesthouses and cheaper hotels for just a few US dollars. There have, however, been a number of reports of gross overcharging at certain hotels, so make sure you check the price beforehand.

Budget hotels do not have clothes dryers, as they rely on the sunshine – so allow at least a day and a half for washing and drying, especially during the wet season. You can also elect to wash your own clothes as washing powder is cheap and readily available.

## LEGAL MATTERS Civil Law

On paper it looks good, but in practice the rule of law in Vietnam is a fickle beast. Local officials interpret the law any way it suits them, often against the wishes of Hanoi. There is no independent judiciary. Not surprisingly, most legal disputes are settled out of court. In general, you can accomplish more with a carton of cigarettes and a bottle of good cognac than you can with a lawyer.

## Drugs

The drug trade has made a comeback in Vietnam. The country has a very serious problem with heroin these days and the authorities are clamping down hard.

Marijuana and, in the northwest, opium are readily available, but giving in to this temptation is a risk. There are many plain-clothes police in Vietnam and, if arrested, the result might be a large fine and/or a long prison term.

## Police

Vietnamese police are the best that money can buy. Police corruption is an everyday reality and has been acknowledged in official newspapers. If something does go wrong, or if something is stolen, the police can't do much more than prepare an insurance report for a fee (no fixed cost).

Hanoi has warned all provincial governments that any police caught shaking down foreign tourists will be fired and arrested. The crackdown has dented the enthusiasm of the police to confront foreigners directly with demands for bribes, but it still happens in more out-of-the-way places.

## MAPS

Most bookshops in Vietnam stock a good range of maps. A must for its detailed road maps of every province is the *Viet Nam Administrative Atlas*, published by Ban Do. It is perfect for cyclists or motorbikers looking for roads less travelled and costs 68,000d in softback.

Ban Do also publishes reasonable tourist maps of HCMC, Hanoi, Danang, Huế and a few other cities. Unfortunately, maps of smaller towns are practically nonexistent. Most of the listings maps produced in Vietnam have city maps of Hanoi and HCMC, and there are some good hand-drawn 3D maps of Hanoi, Huế and Sapa available from Covit, a local publisher.

Vietnamese street names are preceded with the words Pho, Duong and Dai Lo – on the maps and in the text in this book, they appear respectively as P, Đ and DL.

## MONEY

The first currency of Vietnam is the dong, which is abbreviated to 'd'. Banknotes come in denominations of 500d, 1000d, 2000d, 5000d, 10,000d, 20,000d, 50,000d, 100,000d, 200,000d

and 500,000d. Now that Ho Chi Minh has been canonised (against his wishes), his picture is on *every* banknote. Coins are also in circulation, although they are more common in the cities, including 500d, 1000d and 5000d. The second currency is the US dollar and that needs no introduction.

The dong has experienced its ups and downs. The late 1990s Asian economic crisis, which wreaked severe havoc on the regional currencies, caused the dong to lose about 15% of its US-dollar value. Since then the dong has stabilised at around 16,000d to the US dollar.

Where prices are quoted in dong, we quote them in this book in dong. Likewise, when prices are quoted in dollars, we follow suit. While this may seem inconsistent, this is the way it's done in Vietnam and the sooner you get used to thinking comparatively in dong and dollars, the easier your travels will be.

For a smattering of exchange rates at the time of going to print, see the Quick Reference section on the inside front cover of this book.

## ATMs

It used to be just a couple of foreign banks in Hanoi and HCMC that offered ATMs, but Vietnamese banks have now got into this game in a big way. Vietcombank has the best network in the country, including most of the major tourist destinations and all the big cities. Every branch stocks a useful leaflet with a list of their nationwide ATMs. Withdrawals are issued in dong, and there is a single withdrawal limit of 2,000,000d (about US\$125). However, you can do multiple withdrawals until you hit your own account limit. ANZ offers 4,000,000d withdrawals per transaction. Most banks charge 20,000d per transaction. Cash advances for larger amounts of dong, as well as US dollars, can be arranged over the counter during office hours.

## Black Market

The black market is Vietnam's unofficial banking system that is almost everywhere and operates quite openly. Private individuals and some shops and restaurants will exchange US dollars for dong and vice versa. While the practice is technically illegal, law enforcement is virtually nonexistent. Ironically, black market exchange rates are usually *worse* than the official exchange rates, so the only advantage

is the convenience of changing money when and where you like.

If people approach you on the street with offers to change money at rates better than the official one, you can rest assured that you are being set up for a rip-off. Fake notes or too few notes, they will get you somehow. Don't even think about trying it! Remember, if an offer seems too good to be true, that's because it probably is.

## Cash

Most major currencies can be exchanged at leading banks in Vietnam, but away from the tourist centres the US dollar remains king. Vietcombank is the most organised of the local banks for changing cash and can deal with euros, pounds and pretty much anything else you are packing. The US dollar exchange rate worsens the further you get from the tourist trail, so stock up on dong if you are heading into remote areas. In small towns it can be difficult to get change for the larger notes, so keep a stack of smaller bills handy. Changing US\$100 will make you an instant millionaire!

It's a good idea to check that any big dollar bills you take do not have any small tears or look too tatty, as no-one will want to touch them in Vietnam.

You cannot legally take the dong out of Vietnam but you can reconvert reasonable amounts of it into US\$ dollars on departure.

## Credit Cards

Visa, MasterCard and JCB cards are now widely acceptable in all major cities and many tourist centres. However, a 3% commission charge on every transaction is pretty common; check first, as some charge higher commissions than others. Some merchants also accept Amex, but the surcharge is typically 4%. Better hotels and restaurants do not usually slap on an additional charge.

Getting a cash advance from Visa, MasterCard and JCB is possible at Vietcombank in most cities, as well as at some foreign banks in HCMC and Hanoi. Banks generally charge a 3% commission for this service. This is handy if you want to get out large sums, as the ATMs have low daily limits.

## Tipping

Tipping is not expected in Vietnam, but it is enormously appreciated. For a person who earns US\$100 per month, a US\$1 tip is signifi-

cant. Upmarket hotels and some restaurants may levy a 5% service charge, but this may not make it to the staff. If you stay a couple of days in the same hotel, try and remember to tip the staff who clean your room.

You should also consider tipping drivers and guides – after all, the time they spend on the road with you means time away from home and family. Typically, travellers on minibus tours will pool together to collect a communal tip to be split between the guide and driver.

It is considered proper to make a small donation at the end of a visit to a pagoda, especially if a monk has shown you around; most pagodas have contribution boxes for this purpose.

## Travellers Cheques

It is wise not to rely entirely on travellers cheques by keeping a reasonable stash of US dollars to hand. Travellers cheques can only be exchanged at authorised foreign-exchange banks, but these aren't found throughout Vietnam. Strangely, there are no banks at most of the land border crossings. The only way to change money at these places is on the black market.

If you only have travellers cheques, stock up on US dollars at a bank, which will usually charge anywhere from 0.5% to 2% commission to change them into cash. Vietcombank charges no commission for exchanging Amex travellers cheques; a reasonable 0.5% for other types.

If your travellers cheques are in currencies other than US dollars, they may be useless beyond the major cities. Hefty commissions are the norm if they can be exchanged at all.

## PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

Memory cards are pretty cheap in Vietnam, pretty fortunate given the visual feast awaiting even the amateur photographer. Most internet cafés can also burn photos on to a CD or DVD to free up storage space. It's worthwhile bringing the attachment for viewing your files on televisions, as many hotels come equipped with televisions.

Colour print film is widely available and prices are pretty reasonable at about US\$2.50 for a roll of 36 print film. Slide film can be bought in Hanoi and HCMC, but don't count on it elsewhere. Supplies of black-and-white film are rapidly disappearing, so bring your own.

Photo-processing shops are located all over Vietnam and developing costs are about US\$4 per roll depending on the print size selected. The quality is generally very good. Processing slide film is best saved for somewhere else. Printing digital shots is pretty cheap and works out at between 1000d and 2000d a photo.

Cameras are a reasonable price in Vietnam but the selection is limited. All other camera supplies are readily accessible in major towns, but soon dry up in remote areas.

The Vietnamese police usually don't care what you photograph, but on occasion they get picky. Obviously, don't photograph sensitive sites such as airports and border checkpoints. Don't even think of trying to get a snapshot of Ho Chi Minh in his glass sarcophagus!

Photographing anyone, particularly hill-tribe people, demands patience and the utmost respect for local customs (see p77). Photograph with discretion and manners. It's always polite to ask first and if the person says no, don't take the photo. If you promise to send a copy of the photo, make sure you do. For endless tips on better travel photography, pick up a copy of Lonely Planet's *Travel Photography*.

## POST

Every city, town, village and rural subdistrict in Vietnam has some sort of post office (*buu dien*). Post offices all over the country keep long hours, from about 6.30am to 9pm including weekends and public holidays (even Tet).

Vietnam has a pretty reliable post service these days. Gone are the days of your stamps being steamed off and your postcards being delivered to the rubbish bin. International postal rates are similar to those in European countries. Postcards cost from 7000d to 10,000d depending on the destination.

Items mailed from anywhere other than large towns and cities might take a month to arrive at their international destination. Airmail service from HCMC and Hanoi takes approximately five to 10 days to get to most Western countries. Express-mail service (EMS), available in the larger cities, is twice as fast as regular airmail and everything is registered.

Private couriers such as FedEx, DHL and UPS are reliable for transporting small parcels or documents.

Poste restante works well in post offices in Hanoi and HCMC. Foreigners must pay a small service charge for each letter received through the poste restante.

Receiving even a small package from abroad can cause a headache and large ones will produce a migraine. If the parcel contains books, documents, CDs, DVDs or dangerous goods it's possible that a lengthy inspection will be required, which could take anywhere from a few days to a few weeks.

## SHOPPING

Vietnam has some fantastic shopping opportunities so it is well worth setting aside half a day or more to properly peruse. Hotspots include Hanoi, Hoi An and HCMC, each of which has a tempting selection of everything from avant-garde art to sumptuous silk suits. Some of the best buys on the block include gorgeous glazed pottery, classic lanterns, 'almost' antiques, embroidered tablecloths, fine furnishings, and lavish silk and linen creations in designer boutiques.

## Art & Antiques

There are several good shops to hunt for art and antiques, but Vietnam has strict regulations on the export of real antiques, so be sure the items are allowed out of the country. Most reputable shops can provide the necessary paperwork.

Both traditional and modern paintings are a popular item. Cheaper mass-produced stuff is touted in souvenir shops and by street vendors. More sophisticated works are displayed in art galleries, with paintings from US\$50 to US\$500, but some of the hottest Vietnamese artists now fetch up to 10 times that. It's important to know that there are forgeries around – just because you spot a painting by a 'famous Vietnamese artist' does not mean that it's an original.

A Vietnamese speciality is the 'instant antique', such as a teapot or ceramic dinner plate, with a price tag of around US\$2. Of course, it's OK to buy fake antiques as long as you aren't paying genuine prices.

## Clothing

Forget the rubber sandals and pith helmets, Vietnam is emerging as a regional design centre and there are some extravagant creations in the boutiques of Hanoi and HCMC. Beautiful silk dresses cost a fraction of what

they would at home, and men can get in on the action with some flamboyant shirts or sharp suits.

*Ao dai* (*ow-zai* in the north, *ow-yai* in the south) is the national dress for Vietnamese women and is a popular item to take home. Ready-made *ao dai* cost from US\$15 to US\$30, but custom numbers can cost a lot more but may be required due to sizing differentiation. There are *ao dai* tailors nationwide, but those in the tourist centres are more familiar with foreigners.

These days more and more hill-tribe gear is winding its way to shops in Hanoi and HCMC. It is brightly patterned stuff, but you may need to set the dyes yourself (try to soak the clothes in some salty water overnight) so those colours don't bleed all over the rest of your clothes. Alternatively, put it in a plastic bag and wait until you get home.

Women all over the country wear conical hats to keep the sun off their faces, though they also function as umbrellas in the rain. The best-quality conical hats are produced in the Huế area.

T-shirts are ever popular items with travellers. A printed shirt starts from 20,000d while an embroidered design will cost about 50,000d.

## Handicrafts

Hot items on the tourist market include lacquerware, boxes and wooden screens with mother-of-pearl inlay, ceramics (check out the elephants), colourful embroidery, silk greeting cards, wood-block prints, oil paintings, watercolours, blinds made of hanging bamboo beads, reed mats, carpets, jewellery and leatherwork.

## War Souvenirs

In places frequented by tourists, it's easy to buy what looks like equipment left over from the American War. However, almost all of these items are reproductions and your chances of finding anything original are slim.

The fake Zippo lighters engraved with platoon philosophy are still one of the hottest-selling items. You can pay extra to get one that's been beat up to look like a war relic, or just buy a brand-new shiny one for less.

## Bargaining

Some bargaining is essential in most tourist transactions. Remember that in Asia 'saving

face' is important, so bargaining should be good-natured. Smile and don't get angry or argue. In some cases you will be able to get a 50% discount or more, at other times this may only be 10%. And once the money is accepted, the deal is done. Don't waste time getting stressed if you find out someone else got it for less, it is about paying the price that is right for you, not always the 'right' price.

## TELEPHONE & FAX

For the all-important numbers like emergency services and the international access code, check out the Quick Reference section on the inside cover of this book.

Every city has a **general information service** (☎ 1080) that provides everything from phone numbers and train and air timetables to exchange rates and the latest football scores. It even provides marriage counselling or bedtime lullabies for your child – no kidding! You can usually be connected to an operator who speaks English or French.

## Domestic Calls

Phone numbers in Hanoi, HCMC and Haiphong have seven digits. Elsewhere around the country phone numbers have six digits. Telephone area codes are assigned according to the province.

Local calls can usually be made from any hotel or restaurant phone and are often free. Confirm this with the hotel so you don't receive any unpleasant surprises when you check out. Domestic long-distance calls are reasonably priced and cheaper if you dial direct. Save up to 20% by calling between 10pm and 5am.

## International Calls

Charges for international calls from Vietnam have dropped significantly in the past few years. With the introduction of Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP), international phone calls to most countries cost a flat rate of just US\$0.50 per minute. The service is easy to use from any phone in the country; just dial ☎ 17100, the country code and the number.

International and domestic long-distance calls can be made at hotels, but it's expensive at the smarter places. However, many of the cheaper hotels and guesthouses now operate VOIP services which are very cheap. Another option is to make these calls from the post office, which have handy displays telling you the cost of the call.

Reverse charges or collect calls are possible to most, but not all, Western countries including Australia, Canada, France, Japan, New Zealand, the UK and the USA.

### Mobile (Cellular) Phones

Vietnam is putting a lot of money into its cellular network. Vietnam uses GSM 900/1800, which is compatible with most of Asia, Europe and Australia but not with North America.

If your phone has roaming, it is easy enough, if expensive, to make calls in Vietnam. Another option is to buy a SIM card with a local number to use in Vietnam.

There are at least six mobile phone companies battling it out in the local market with gimmicks galore to attract new customers. All these companies have offices and branches nationwide.

Be aware that mobile-phone numbers in Vietnam start with the prefix ☎ 09 and cost more to call than a local number.

### Fax

Most post offices and hotels offer fax services. Hotels charge considerably more than the post office.

### TIME

Vietnam is seven hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time/Universal Time Coordinated (GMT/UTC). Because of its proximity to the equator, Vietnam does not have daylight-saving or summer time. When it's noon in Vietnam it is 9pm the previous day in Vancouver, midnight in New York, 5am in London and 3pm in Sydney.

### TOILETS

The issue of toilets and what to do with used toilet paper causes some concern. In general, if there's a wastepaper basket next to the toilet, that is where the toilet paper goes, as many sewage systems cannot handle toilet paper.

Toilet paper is seldom provided in the toilets at bus and train stations or in other public buildings. You'd be wise to keep a stash of your own with you at all times while on the move.

Another thing to be mentally prepared for is squat toilets. For the uninitiated, a squat toilet has no seat for you to sit on while reading this guidebook; it's a hole in the floor. The only way to flush it is to fill the conveniently placed bucket with water and pour it into the

hole. Most hotels will have Western-style loos, but squats are the norm in older hotels and public places.

The scarcity of public toilets is more of a problem for women than for men. Vietnamese men often urinate in public. Women might find road-side toilet stops easier if wearing a sarong.

### TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist offices in Vietnam have a different philosophy from the majority of tourist offices worldwide. These government-owned enterprises are really travel agencies whose primary interests are booking tours and turning a profit. Don't come here hoping for freebies.

Vietnam Tourism and Saigon Tourist are old examples of this genre, but nowadays every province has at least one such organisation. Travel cafés, budget agencies and your fellow travellers are a much better source of information than any of the so-called 'tourist offices'.

### TRAVELLERS WITH DISABILITIES

Vietnam is not the easiest of places for disabled travellers, despite the fact that many Vietnamese are disabled as a result of war injuries. Tactical problems include the chaotic traffic, a lack of pedestrian footpaths, a lack of lifts in smaller hotels and the ubiquitous squat toilets.

That said, with some careful planning it is possible to have a relatively stress-free trip to Vietnam. Find a reliable company to make the travel arrangements and don't be afraid to double-check things with hotels and restaurants yourself. In the major cities many hotels have lifts and disabled access is improving. Bus and train travel is not really geared up for disabled travellers, but rent a private vehicle with a driver and almost anywhere becomes instantly accessible. As long as you are not too proud about how you get in and out of a boat or up some stairs, anything is possible, as the Vietnamese are always willing to help.

You might try contacting the following organisations:

**Accessible Journeys** (☎ 610-521 0339; www.disabilitytravel.com)

**Mobility International USA** (☎ 54-1343 1284; www.miusa.org)

**Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation** (Radar; ☎ 020-7250 3222; www.radar.org.uk)

**Society for Accessible Travel & Hospitality** (SATH; ☎ 212-447 7284; www.sath.org)

Lonely Planet's **Thorn Tree** (www.lonelyplanet.com) is a good place to seek the advice of other travellers.

### VISAS

Tourist visas allow visitors to enter and exit Vietnam at Hanoi, HCMC and Danang airports or at any of its twelve land borders, three each with Cambodia and China, and six with Laos.

Tourist visas are valid for a single 30-day stay. The government often talks about issuing visas on arrival to certain favoured nationalities, but as yet this sensible scheme has failed to materialise. Arranging the paperwork for a Vietnamese visa has become fairly straightforward, but it remains expensive and unnecessarily time-consuming. Processing a tourist-visa application typically takes four or five working days in countries in the West.

It is possible to arrange a visa on arrival through a Vietnamese travel agent. They will need passport details in advance and will send a confirmation for the visa to be issued at your airport of arrival.

In Asia the best place to pick up a Vietnamese visa is Cambodia, where it costs around US\$30 and can be arranged the same day. Bangkok is also a popular place as many agents offer cheap packages with an air ticket and visa thrown in.

If you plan to spend more than a month in Vietnam, or if you plan to exit Vietnam and enter again from Cambodia or Laos, arrange a three-month multiple-entry visa. These cost around US\$95 in Cambodia, but are not available from all Vietnamese embassies.

In our experience personal appearance influences the reception you receive from airport immigration – if you wear shorts or scruffy clothing, look dirty or unshaven, you can expect problems. Try your best to look 'respectable'.

### Business Visas

Business visas are usually valid for three or six months, allow multiple entries and the right to work. Getting a business visa has now become cheap and easy, although prices are about double those of a tourist visa. It is generally easier to apply for a business visa once in Vietnam, after having arrived on a tourist visa.

### Student Visas

A student visa is usually arranged after your arrival. It's acceptable to enter Vietnam on a tourist visa, enrol in a Vietnamese language course and then apply at the immigration police for a change in status. In reality, the easiest way to do it is to contact a travel company and have them help you make the application.

### Visa Extensions

If you've got the dollars, they've got the rubber stamp. Tourist-visa extensions cost as little US\$10, but it is easier to pay more and sort this out through a travel agency. Getting the stamp yourself can be a bureaucratic nightmare. The procedure takes two or three days and you can only extend one time for 30 days.

In theory you should be able to extend your visa in any provincial capital. In practice it goes smoothest in major cities, such as HCMC, Hanoi, Danang and Huế, which cater to mass tourism.

### Re-Entry Visas

It's possible to enter Cambodia, Laos or any other country from Vietnam and then re-enter without having to apply for another visa. However, you must apply for a re-entry visa *before* you leave Vietnam. If you do not have a re-entry visa, you will have to go through the whole Vietnamese visa nonsense again.

Re-entry visas are easiest to arrange in Hanoi or HCMC, but you will almost certainly have to ask a travel agent to do the paperwork for you. Travel agents charge about US\$25 for this service and can complete the procedure in a day or two.

### VOLUNTEERING

There are fewer opportunities for volunteering than one might imagine in a country such as Vietnam. This is partly due to the sheer number of professional development workers based here, and the fact that development is a pretty lucrative industry these days.

For information on volunteer work opportunities, chase up the full list of non-government organisations (NGOs) at the **NGO Resource Centre** (☎ 04-832 8570; www.ngocentre.org.vn; Hotel La Thanh, 218 Pho Doi Can, Hanoi), which keeps a database of all of the NGOs assisting Vietnam.

Try contacting the following organisations if you want to help in some way:



**15 May School** ([www.15mayschool.org](http://www.15mayschool.org)) A school in HCMC for disadvantaged children, which provides free education and vocational training.

**Street Voices** ([www.streetvoices.com.au](http://www.streetvoices.com.au)) Donate your skills, time or money to help give street children career opportunities. Street Voices' primary project is KOTO Restaurant (p111); check its website to see what you can do to help in Vietnam or Australia.

The other avenue is professional volunteering through an organisation back home that offers one- or two-year placements in Cambodia. One of the largest is **Voluntary Service Overseas** (VSO; [www.vso.org.uk](http://www.vso.org.uk)) in the UK, but other countries have their own organisations, including **Australian Volunteers International** (AVI; [www.australianvolunteers.com](http://www.australianvolunteers.com)) and **Volunteer Service Abroad** (VSA; [www.vsa.org.nz](http://www.vsa.org.nz)). The UN also operates its own volunteer programme; details are available at [www.unv.org](http://www.unv.org). Other general volunteer sites with links all over the place include [www.worldvolunteerweb.com](http://www.worldvolunteerweb.com), [www.volunteerabroad.com](http://www.volunteerabroad.com) and [www.idealists.org](http://www.idealists.org).

## WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Like Thailand and other predominantly Buddhist countries, Vietnam is relatively free of serious hassles for Western women. But it is a different story for some Asian women, particularly those who are young. It's not uncommon for an Asian woman accompanied by a Western male to be stereotyped as a Vietnamese prostitute. The fact that the couple could be married, or friends, doesn't seem to occur to everyone, or that the woman may not be Vietnamese at all. Asian women travelling in Vietnam with a Western male companion have occasionally reported verbal abuse.

However, there's no need to be overly paranoid, as locals are becoming more accustomed to seeing Asian women. Things have improved as more Vietnamese people are exposed to foreign visitors.

Sanitary napkins are available in larger cities, though tampons are harder to find.

## WORK

Vietnam's opening up to capitalist countries has suddenly created all sorts of work opportunities for Westerners. The best-paid Westerners living in Vietnam are those working for international organisations or foreign companies, but most of these jobs are secured before arrival in the country.

Foreigners who look like Rambo have occasionally been approached by Vietnamese talent scouts wanting to recruit them to work as extras in war movies, but for most travellers the main work opportunities are teaching a foreign language.

English is by far the most popular foreign language with Vietnamese students, but some students also want to learn French. There is also a limited demand for teachers of Japanese, German, Spanish and Korean.

Government-run universities in Vietnam hire some foreign teachers. Pay is generally around US\$5 to US\$10 per hour, but benefits such as free housing and unlimited visa renewals are usually thrown in.

There is also a budding free market in private language centres and home tutoring; this is where most newly arrived foreigners seek work. Pay in the private sector is slightly better, at about US\$6 to US\$15 per hour, but these private schools won't offer the same extras as a government-run school. Private tutoring usually pays even better, at around US\$10 to US\$20 per hour.

Finding teaching jobs is quite easy in places such as HCMC and Hanoi, and is sometimes possible in towns that have universities. Pay in the smaller towns tends to be lower and work opportunities fewer.

Looking for employment is a matter of asking around – jobs are rarely advertised. The longer you stay, the easier it is to find work – travellers hoping to land a quick job and depart two months later will be disappointed. Check out the website [www.livinginvietnam.com](http://www.livinginvietnam.com) for job opportunities.

# Transport

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## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### ENTERING VIETNAM

It's possible to enter Vietnam by train, plane, automobile and other forms of transport. Air is popular for those holidaying in Vietnam, while bus is the most common route for those travelling extensively in the region. Anyone planning on arriving from China should consider the spectacular train ride from Kunming in China's Yunnan province to Hanoi (although there are currently no trains on the Chinese side; check for updates). Entering from Cambodia, the boat ride down the Mekong River from Phnom Penh to Chau Doc is memorable.

Formalities at Vietnam's international airports are generally smoother than at land borders, as the volume of traffic is greater. That said, crossing overland from Cambodia and China is now relatively stress-free. Crossing the border between Vietnam and Laos remains somewhat stressful.

### Passport

There are no 'suspect' stamps that will prevent foreigners from visiting Vietnam, but some Vietnamese who live overseas may be given a harder time by immigration and customs

than non-Vietnamese visitors. Arranging a visa remains essential before arrival in Vietnam, but these are easy to obtain from embassies worldwide or through Vietnamese travel agents in advance (see p490).

### AIR Airports & Airlines

There are three international airports in Vietnam. **Tan Son Nhat airport** (SGN; ☎ 08-844 6665) serves Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) and is Vietnam's busiest international air hub. Hanoi's **Noi Bai airport** (HAN; ☎ 04-886 5047) is the destination of choice for those concentrating on northern Vietnam, while a handful of international flights also serve **Danang airport** (DAD; ☎ 0511-830 339), a useful gateway to the charms of central Vietnam.

**Vietnam Airlines** ([www.vietnamair.com.vn](http://www.vietnamair.com.vn)) Hanoi (☎ 04-943 9660) HCMC (☎ 08-832 0320) is the state-owned flag carrier, and the majority of flights into and out of Vietnam are joint operations between Vietnam Airlines and foreign airlines.

Vietnam Airlines has a modern fleet of Airbus and Boeings and the level of service on its international flights is starting to catch up with its bigger rivals. However, on the domestic front, cancellations and late flights are still possible.

Many international flights leaving Hanoi connect through HCMC, but it's a headache. Passengers have to pay a domestic departure tax, fly to HCMC, claim their bags, check in again, and pay an international departure tax before boarding the international flight.

### THINGS CHANGE...

The information in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change. Check directly with the airline or a travel agent to make sure you understand how a fare (and ticket you may buy) works and be aware of the security requirements for international travel. Shop carefully. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

## CLIMATE CHANGE & TRAVEL

Climate change is a serious threat to the ecosystems that humans rely upon, and air travel is the fastest-growing contributor to the problem. Lonely Planet regards travel, overall, as a global benefit, but believes we all have a responsibility to limit our personal impact on global warming.

### Flying & Climate Change

Pretty much every form of motorised travel generates CO<sub>2</sub> (the main cause of human-induced climate change) but planes are far and away the worst offenders, not just because of the sheer distances they allow us to travel, but because they release greenhouse gases high into the atmosphere. The statistics are frightening: two people taking a return flight between Europe and the US will contribute as much to climate change as an average household's gas and electricity consumption over a whole year.

### Carbon Offset Schemes

Climatecare.org and other websites use 'carbon calculators' that allow travellers to offset the level of greenhouse gases they are responsible for with financial contributions to sustainable travel schemes that reduce global warming – including projects in India, Honduras, Kazakhstan and Uganda.

Lonely Planet, together with Rough Guides and other concerned partners in the travel industry, support the carbon offset scheme run by climatecare.org. Lonely Planet offsets all of its staff and author travel. For more information check out our website: [www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com).

## AIRLINES FLYING TO & FROM VIETNAM

All phone numbers are in Hanoi (area code 04) unless otherwise stated.

**Aeroflot** (airline code SU; ☎ 771 8742; [www.aeroflot.com](http://www.aeroflot.com); hub Moscow)

**Air Asia** (airline code AK; [www.airasia.com](http://www.airasia.com); hub Kuala Lumpur)

**Air France** (airline code AF; ☎ 825 3484; [www.airfrance.fr](http://www.airfrance.fr); hub Paris)

**Asiana Airlines** (airline code OZ; ☎ 831 5141; [www.us.flyasiana.com](http://www.us.flyasiana.com); hub Seoul)

**Cathay Pacific** (airline code CX; ☎ 826 7298; [www.cathaypacific.com](http://www.cathaypacific.com); hub Hong Kong)

**China Airlines** (airline code CI; ☎ 824 2688; [www.china-airlines.com](http://www.china-airlines.com); hub Taipei)

**China Southern Airlines** (airline code CZ; ☎ 771 6611; [www.cs-air.com](http://www.cs-air.com); hub Guangzhou)

**Japan Airlines** (airline code JL; ☎ 826 6693; [www.jal.com](http://www.jal.com); hub Tokyo)

**Jetstar Asia** (airline code 3K; [www.jetstarasia.com](http://www.jetstarasia.com); hub Singapore)

**Korean Air** (airline code KE; ☎ in HCMC 08-824 2878; [www.koreanair.com](http://www.koreanair.com); hub Seoul)

**Lao Airlines** (airline code QV; ☎ 822 9951; [www.laoairlines.com](http://www.laoairlines.com); hub Vientiane)

**Lufthansa** (airline code LH; ☎ in HCMC 08-829 8529; [www.lufthansa.com](http://www.lufthansa.com); hub Frankfurt)

**Malaysia Airlines** (airline code MY; ☎ 826 8820; [www.malaysiaairlines.com](http://www.malaysiaairlines.com); hub Kuala Lumpur)

**Philippine Airlines** (airline code PR; ☎ in HCMC 08-822 2241; [www.philippineair.com](http://www.philippineair.com); hub Manila)

**Qantas** (airline code QF; ☎ 933 3025; [www.qantas.com.au](http://www.qantas.com.au); hubs Sydney & Melbourne)

**Singapore Airlines** (airline code SQ; ☎ 826 8888; [www.singaporeair.com](http://www.singaporeair.com); hub Singapore)

**Thai Airways** (airline code TG; ☎ 826 6893; [www.thai-air.com](http://www.thai-air.com); hub Bangkok)

**Tiger Airways** (airline code TR; [www.tigerairways.com](http://www.tigerairways.com); hub Singapore)

**United Airlines** (airline code UA; ☎ in HCMC 08-823 1833; [www.unitedairlines.com](http://www.unitedairlines.com); hub Seattle)

## Tickets

Shop around and it is possible to find a good deal to Vietnam. If there are no obvious bargains to Hanoi or HCMC, then consider buying a discounted ticket to Bangkok or Hong Kong and picking up a flight or travelling overland from Thailand on to Vietnam.

Discounted flights are available into Vietnam, but Vietnam Airlines will not allow foreign carriers to sell cheap outbound tickets from Vietnam. A ticket from Bangkok to Hanoi or HCMC costs almost half the price of a Vietnam Airlines' flight, if it's purchased

## DEPARTURE TAX

There is an international departure tax of US\$14 from the main airports at Hanoi, HCMC and Danang.

in Bangkok. This also means that for anyone planning to purchase a long-haul flight in the region, Vietnam is not the place to do it with Bangkok just a short hop away.

It's hard to get reservations for flights to/from Vietnam during holidays, especially Tet, which falls between late January and mid-February. If you will be in Vietnam during Tet, make reservations well in advance or you may find yourself marooned in a regional airport along the way. The chaos begins a week before Tet and can last for about two weeks after it.

Be aware that Vietnam is not the only country to celebrate the Lunar New Year, as it falls at the same time as Chinese New Year. Many people hit the road at this time, resulting in overbooked airlines, trains and hotels all over Asia.

## Asia

Although many Asian countries now offer competitive deals, Bangkok, Singapore and Hong Kong are still the best places to shop around for discount tickets.

## CAMBODIA

Vietnam Airlines currently has a monopoly on the Phnom Penh to HCMC route, with several flights a day. There are no direct flights from Phnom Penh to Hanoi, only via HCMC or Vientiane. Vietnam Airlines also offers numerous services daily between Siem Reap and HCMC and a couple of more expensive flights direct to Hanoi. A good agent is **Hanuman Tourism** (☎ 855-23 218356; [www.hanumantourism.com](http://www.hanumantourism.com); 12 St 310, Phnom Penh).

## CHINA

Vietnam Airlines now offers links from Hanoi to several major cities in China, including Beijing, Guangzhou and Kunming. These routes are shared with Air China, China Southern Airlines and China Yunnan Airlines, respectively. The only direct flights between HCMC and mainland China are to Beijing and Guangzhou.

## HONG KONG

Vietnam Airlines and Cathay Pacific jointly operate daily services between Hong Kong and both Hanoi and HCMC. The open-jaw option is a popular deal, allowing you to fly into one and out of the other.

Reliable travel agents in Hong Kong:

**Four Seas Tours** (☎ 2200 7760; [www.fourseastravel.com](http://www.fourseastravel.com))  
**STA Travel** (☎ 2736 1618; [www.statravel.com.hk](http://www.statravel.com.hk))

## JAPAN

ANA, Japan Airlines and Vietnam Airlines connect Hanoi and HCMC with Osaka and Tokyo. Cheaper indirect flights are available via other Asian capitals.

Recommended travel agents in Japan:  
**No 1 Travel** (☎ 03-3205 6073; [www.no1-travel.com](http://www.no1-travel.com))  
**STA Travel** (☎ 03-5391 2922; [www.statravel.co.jp](http://www.statravel.co.jp))

## LAOS

Both Lao Airlines and Vietnam Airlines operate daily flights between Vientiane and Hanoi or HCMC. There are also now several flights a week between Luang Prabang and Hanoi.

## MALAYSIA

Malaysia Airlines and Vietnam Airlines have daily connections between Kuala Lumpur and both Hanoi and HCMC, but Air Asia is gaining favour thanks to low fares.

## SINGAPORE

Singapore Airlines and Vietnam Airlines have daily flights from Singapore to both Hanoi and HCMC. Jetstar Asia and Tiger Airways are cheaper budget carriers and e-tickets can be booked via their websites. For reliable fares from Singapore to Vietnam, contact **STA Travel** (☎ 6737 7188; [www.statravel.com.sg](http://www.statravel.com.sg)).

## SOUTH KOREA

Asiana Airlines, Korean Air and Vietnam Airlines all fly the Seoul-HCMC route, so there's at least one flight offered per day. There are also several direct Seoul-Hanoi flights per week.

A good agent for ticketing in Seoul is **Joy Travel Service** (☎ 02-776 9871).

## TAIWAN

Airlines flying from Taipei include China Airlines, Eva Air and Vietnam Airlines.

A long-running discount travel agent with a good reputation is **Jenny Su Travel** (☎ 02-2594 7733; [jennysu@tpe.attinet.net.tw](mailto:jennysu@tpe.attinet.net.tw)).

## THAILAND

Bangkok is still the most popular gateway to Vietnam. Air France, Thai Airways and Vietnam Airlines offer daily connections from Bangkok to Hanoi and HCMC. Air Asia is a cheaper option to both Hanoi and HCMC.

One popular choice is an open-jaw ticket that involves a flight to either HCMC or Hanoi, an overland journey to the other city, and a flight back to Bangkok.

Khao San Rd in Bangkok is the budget-travellers headquarters. If some of the agents there look too fly-by-night, try **STA Travel** (☎ 0 2236 0262; www.statravel.co.th).

## Australia

Fares between Australia and Asia are relatively expensive considering the distances involved. Most of the cheaper flights between Australia and Vietnam involve stopovers at Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok or Singapore, but Qantas and Vietnam Airlines have services linking Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth and Sydney with either Hanoi or HCMC.

The following are good places to pick up tickets in Australia:

**Flight Centre** (☎ 133 133; www.flightcentre.com.au)

**STA Travel** (☎ 1300 733 035; www.statravel.com.au)

## Canada

Discount tickets from Canada tend to cost about 10% more than those sold in the USA. For the lowdown on cheap fares, contact **Travel Cuts** (☎ 800-667 2887; www.travelcuts.com), with offices across the country.

## Continental Europe

Although London is the discount-travel capital of Europe, major airlines and big travel agents usually have offers from all the major cities on the continent.

Recommended agents with branches across France:

**Nouvelles Frontières** (☎ 08 25 00 07 47; www.nouvelles-frontieres.fr)

**OTU Voyages** (www.otu.fr) This agency specialises in student and youth travel.

**Voyageurs du Monde** (☎ 01 40 15 11 15; www.vdm.com)

Reliable agencies in Germany:

**Just Travel** (☎ 089-747 33 30; www.justtravel.de)

**STA Travel** (☎ 0180-545 64 22; www.statravel.de)

From other countries in Europe, try the following agencies in Italy, Netherlands and Spain.

**Airfair** (☎ 0206-20 51 21; www.airfair.nl; Netherlands)

**Barcelo Viajes** (☎ 902 11 62 26; www.barceloviajes.com; Spain)

**CTS Viaggi** (☎ 064 62 04 31; www.cts.it; Italy)

**NBBS Reizen** (☎ 0206-20 50 71; www.nbbs.nl; Netherlands)

**Nouvelles Frontières** (☎ 902 17 09 79; www.nouvelles-frontieres.es; Spain)

## New Zealand

The best way to get from New Zealand to Vietnam is to use one of the leading Asian carriers like Malaysian, Singapore or Thai. Good agencies to start shopping around for tickets:

**Flight Centre** (☎ 0800 243 544; www.flightcentre.co.nz)

**STA Travel** (☎ 0508 782 872; www.statravel.co.nz)

## UK & Ireland

From London there are some great fares to Asia, although prices to Vietnam are not as cheap as to Bangkok or Hong Kong. There are oodles of agencies in the UK. Some of the best bets:

**Flightbookers** (☎ 087-0010 7000; www.ebookers.com)

**North-South Travel** (☎ 01245-608291; www.northsouthtravel.co.uk) North-South Travel donates part of its profit to projects in the developing world.

**STA Travel** (☎ 087-0160 0599; www.statravel.co.uk)

**Trailfinders** (☎ 084-5050 5891; www.trailfinders.co.uk)

**Travel Bag** (☎ 087-0890 1456; www.travelbag.co.uk)

## USA

Discount travel agents in the USA are known as consolidators. San Francisco is the ticket-consolidator capital of America, although some good deals can be found in Los Angeles, New York and other big cities.

Useful online options in the USA:

- www.cheaptickets.com
- www.itn.net
- www.lowestfare.com
- www.sta.com
- www.travelocity.com

## LAND

Vietnam shares land borders with Cambodia, China and Laos and there are several border crossings open to foreigners with each neighbour, a big improvement on a decade ago.

## Border Crossings

It is essential to have a Vietnam visa before rocking up to the border, as they are not issued at land crossings. There are currently twelve international land borders: three each with Cambodia and China and six with Laos. We list the Vietnam side of the border first in the following country coverage. More are set

## BORDER CROSSINGS

Country	Border Crossing	Connecting	Visa on Arrival
Cambodia	Moc Bai/Bavet	HCMC/Phnom Penh	Cambodia (Y)/Vietnam (N)
	Vinh Xuong/Kaam Samnor	Chau Doc/Phnom Penh	Cambodia (Y)/Vietnam (N)
	Tinh Bien/Phnom Den	Chau Doc/Takeo	Cambodia (N)/Vietnam (N)
China	Youyi Guan/Huu Nghi Quan (Friendship Gate)	Hanoi/Nanning	China (N)/Vietnam (N)
	Lao Cai/Hekou	Hanoi/Kunming	China (N)/Vietnam (N)
Laos	Mong Cai/Dongxing	Mong Cai/Dongxing	China (N)/Vietnam (N)
	Lao Bao/Dansavanh	Dong Ha/Savannakhet	Laos (Y)/Vietnam (N)
	Bo Y/Attapeu	Pleiku/Attapeu	Laos (N)/Vietnam (N)
	Cha Lo/Na Phao	Dong Hoi/Tha Kaek	Laos (N)/Vietnam (N)
	Nam Can/Nong Haet	Vinh/Phonsavan	Laos (Y)/Vietnam (N)
	Cau Treo/Nam Phao	Vinh/Tha Kaek	Laos (Y)/Vietnam (N)
	Na Meo/Nam Xoi	Thanh Hoa/Sam Neua	Laos (N)/Vietnam (N)

to open during the lifetime of this book, so ask around in Hanoi or HCMC for the latest information.

There are few legal money-changing facilities on the Vietnamese side of these crossings, so be sure to have some small-denomination US dollars handy. The black market is also an option for local currencies – Vietnamese dong, Chinese renminbi, Lao kip and Cambodian riel. Remember that black marketeers have a well-deserved reputation for short-changing and outright theft.

Vietnamese police at the land-border crossings, especially the Lao borders, have a bad reputation for petty extortion. Most travellers find that it's much easier to exit Vietnam overland than it is to enter. Travellers at the border crossings are occasionally asked for an 'immigration fee' of some kind, although this is less common than it used to be.

## CAMBODIA

The Moc Bai–Bavet border is the traditional favourite for a cheap and quick way between HCMC and Phnom Penh. For those willing to take their time, it is much nicer to meander through the Mekong Delta and travel by river between Chau Doc and Phnom Penh. One-month Cambodian visas are issued on arrival at Bavet and Kaam Samnor for US\$20, but they are not currently available at Phnom Den. Overcharging is common at Kaam Samnor.

## Moc Bai–Bavet

The most popular border crossing between Cambodia and Vietnam is Moc Bai (p373), which connects Vietnam's Tay Ninh province

with Cambodia's Svay Rieng province. There are several buses daily between Phnom Penh and HCMC (via Moc Bai), usually departing around 8am, taking about six hours and costing as little as US\$8.

## Vinh Xuong–Kaam Samnor

A more pleasurable alternative to the Moc Bai crossing is the Vinh Xuong–Kaam Samnor border (p441) near Chau Doc. This offers the advantage of a leisurely look at the Mekong Delta without the bother of backtracking to HCMC.

There are two companies that offer luxury boat cruises between HCMC and Siem Reap via this border: the international player **Pandaw Cruises** (www.pandaw.com) and Cambodian company **Toum Teav Cruises** (www.cfmekong.com). Pandaw is an expensive option favoured by high-end tour companies, while Toum Teav is smaller and is well regarded for the personal service and excellent food.

## Tinh Bien–Phnom Den

This border crossing point (p445) sees little traffic, as most visitors in Chau Doc tend to use the river crossing direct to Phnom Penh. It's relatively remote but the roads are in better shape than they used to be, so this crossing may start to see a trickle of travellers or cyclists.

## CHINA

There are currently three border checkpoints where foreigners are permitted to cross between Vietnam and China: Huu Nghi Quan (the Friendship Pass), Lao Cai and Mong Cai.

It is necessary to arrange a Chinese visa in advance (US\$30 for three months, add US\$30 for same-day service) through the embassy in Hanoi (p468; ☎ 8.30am to 11am for visas).

The Vietnam–China border-crossing hours vary a little but are generally between 7am to 5pm (Vietnam time). Set your watch when you cross the border as the time in China is one hour ahead. Cross-border trade rumbles on all night, but foreigners can only cross during standard hours.

### Yuyi Guan–Huu Nghi Quan (Friendship Gate)

The busiest border crossing (p154) between Vietnam and China is located at the Vietnamese town of Dong Dang, 164km northeast of Hanoi. It connects Hanoi with Nanning and is on the overland route to Yuanshou and Hong Kong. Dong Dang is an obscure town, about 18km north of bustling Lang Son.

There is a twice-weekly international train between Beijing and Hanoi, departing on Tuesday and Friday at 6.30pm, that stops at Huu Nghi Quan (Friendship Pass). You can board or get off at numerous stations in China. The entire Hanoi–Beijing run is about 2951km and takes approximately 48 hours, including a three-hour delay (if you are lucky) at the border checkpoint.

Train tickets to China are more expensive in Hanoi, so some travellers prefer to buy a ticket to Dong Dang, cross the border and then buy another ticket on the Chinese side. While this plan involves a motorbike to the border and a bus or taxi on to Pingxiang, it helps avoid the three-hour delay while the international train is given the once over at the border checkpoint.

### Lao Cai–Hekou

There's a 762km railway linking Hanoi with Kunming in China's Yunnan province. The border town on the Vietnamese side of this border crossing (p180) is Lao Cai, 294km from Hanoi. On the Chinese side, the border town is Hekou, 468km south of Kunming.

There are currently no trains on the Chinese side. You will need to leave the train on the Vietnamese side, cross into Hekou and arrange a bus (Y119; 12 hours) from there. There are several train services a day from Hanoi to Lao Cai, so it is easy to combine a stop at Sapa (p172) by bus before returning to Lao Cai when crossing this way.

### CHINA GUIDEBOOKS CONFISCATED

Travellers entering China by road or rail from Vietnam report that Lonely Planet *China* guidebooks have been confiscated by border officials. The guidebook's maps show Taiwan as a separate country, and this is a sensitive issue. If you are carrying a copy of Lonely Planet's *China* guide, consider putting a cover on the book to make it less recognisable and, just to be safe, copy down any crucial details you might need while in China.

### Mong Cai–Dongxing

Vietnam's third (but seldom-used) border crossing (p150) to China can be found at Mong Cai in the northeast of the country, opposite the Chinese city of Dongxing. It might be useful for anyone planning to travel between Halong Bay and Hainan Island, but otherwise it is well out of the way.

### LAOS

There are six overland crossings and counting between Laos and Vietnam. Thirty-day Lao visas are now available at the busier borders, but not currently at Nam Xoi, Na Phao and the Attapeu border. We have received scores of letters complaining about immigration and local-transport hassles on the Vietnamese side of these borders. In fact, these border crossings are probably second only to Hanoi hotel scams in the volume of email they generate. Lies about journey times are common: yes, it really does take almost 24 hours to get from Hanoi to Vientiane and not 12. Worse are the devious drivers who stop the bus in the middle of nowhere and renegotiate the price. Transport links on both sides of the border can be very hit and miss, so don't use the more remote borders unless you have plenty of time, and patience, to play with.

Keep your ears open for news on the Tay Trang–Sop Hun border (see p171) near Dien Bien Phu (northwestern Vietnam) opening up to foreigners. This has been rumoured for years, but it might just happen this time.

### Lao Bao–Dansavanh

Known as Lao Bao–Dansavanh (p210), this is the most popular border crossing between Laos and Vietnam and is usually the most hassle-free. The border town of Lao Bao is on

Hwy 9, 80km west of Dong Ha. Just across the border is the southern Lao province of Savannakhet; the first town you come to is Sepon. There is an international service from Hué to Savannakhet (US\$15, nine hours, departing at 6am every second day) that passes through Dong Ha (US\$12, 7½ hours, around 8am). Coming in the other direction there are daily buses from Savannakhet at 10pm.

### Cau Treo–Nam Phao

Vietnam's Hwy 8 hits Laos at the Keo Nua Pass (734m), known as Cau Treo (p196) in Vietnamese, Kaew Neua in Lao.

The nearest Vietnamese city of any importance is Vinh, 96km east of the border. On the Lao side it's about 200km from the border to Tha Khaek. Most people use this border when travelling on the direct buses between Hanoi and Vientiane, but this is no picnic. In fact it's a set menu from hell. The journey takes about 24 hours and the buses get progressively more dangerous and overcrowded. The bus hardly stops for bathrooms or meals, but stops randomly when the driver fancies a sleep. Invariably the bus arrives at the border at an ungodly hour. Almost everyone ends up wishing they had flown! If you are a sucker for punishment, travel agents and guesthouses in Hanoi and Vientiane can help set you up, literally, for somewhere in the region of US\$20 to US\$25.

### Nam Can–Nong Haet

The Nam Can–Nong Haet border (p195) links Vinh with Phonsovan and the Plain of Jars. On Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays it's possible to catch a bus at 6am from Vinh to Phonsavan (US\$12, 11 hours, bookings Mr Lam ☎ 038-383 5782).

### Cha Lo–Na Phao

There is a border at Cha Lo–Na Phao (p198) that links Dong Hoi and Tha Khaek, but very few travellers have used it until now. Two buses a week run between these two cities each week.

### Na Meo–Nam Xoi

Arguably the most remote of remote borders is the Na Meo–Nam Xoi (p192) which connects Thanh Hoa, a transit town 153km south of Hanoi, with the town of Sam Neua and the famous Pathet Lao caves of Vieng Xai. This involves several changes of transport and a lot

of overcharging. Some hardy travellers who have come this way have taken a full four days to get from Luang Prabang to Hanoi. Check out the box details if you dare (p481).

### Bo Y–Attapeu

This is a new crossing (p276) that links Kon Tum and Quy Nhon with Attapeu and Pakse. The road and border only opened in mid-2006 and at the time of writing the crossing had still to be given a name. Transport is still sorting itself out but three Vietnamese-run buses link Attapeu and Pleiku (US\$10, 12 hours), departing Attapeu at 9am Monday, Wednesday and Friday, coming the other way Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. There are direct buses from Quy Nhon to Pakse (250,000d, 12 hours, four per week), but Lao visas are not available at this border.

### Bus

It is possible to cross into Vietnam by bus from Cambodia or Laos. The most popular way from Cambodia is a cheap tourist shuttle via the Bavet–Moc Bai border crossing. From Laos, most travellers take the nightmare bus from Vientiane to Hanoi via the Cau Treo crossing or the easier route from Savannakhet in southern Laos to Hué in central Vietnam via the Lao Bao border crossing.

### Car & Motorbike

It is theoretically possible to travel in and out of Vietnam by car or motorbike, but only through borders shared with Cambodia and Laos. However, in reality the bureaucracy makes this a real headache. It is generally easy enough to take a Vietnamese motorbike into Cambodia or Laos, but very difficult in the other direction. It is currently not possible to take any sort of vehicle into China from Vietnam.

Drivers of cars and riders of motorbikes will need the vehicle's registration papers, liability insurance and an International Driving Permit, in addition to a domestic licence. Most important is a *carnet de passage en douane*, which is effectively a passport for the vehicle and acts as a temporary waiver of import duty.

### Train

Several international trains link China and Vietnam. The most scenic stretch of railway is between Hanoi and Kunming via Lao Cai, but

the mammoth journey from Hanoi to Beijing via Lang Son is also a possibility. There are no railway lines linking Vietnam to Cambodia or Laos.

## RIVER

There is a river border crossing between Cambodia and Vietnam on the banks of the Mekong. Regular fast boats ply the route between Phnom Penh in Cambodia and Chau Doc in Vietnam, with a change at the Vinh Xuong–Kaam Samnor border. There are also two river boats running all the way to the temples of Angkor at Siem Reap in Cambodia.

## TOURS

Package tours to Vietnam are offered by travel agencies worldwide. Nearly all these tours follow one of a dozen or so set itineraries. Tours come in every shape and size from budget trips to ultimate indulgences. Tours booked outside Vietnam are not bad value when you tally everything up (flights, hotels, transport), but then again it's a cheap country for travelling.

It's easy enough to fly into Vietnam and make the travel arrangements after arrival (see p490). The main saving through booking before arrival is time, and if time is more precious than money, a pre-booked package tour is probably right for you.

Almost any good travel agency can book you on a standard mad-dash minibus tour around Vietnam. More noteworthy are the adventure tours arranged for people with a particular passion. These include speciality tours for cyclists, trekkers, bird-watchers, war veterans, culture vultures and gourmet travellers.

For a rewarding trip to Vietnam, consider contacting the following outfits:

### Australia

**Adventure World** (☎ 02-8913 0755; www.adventureworld.com.au) Adventure tours to Vietnam, as well as Cambodia and Laos.

**Griswalds Vietnamese Vacations** (☎ 02-9564 5040; www.vietnamvacations.com.au) Popular Australian company offering affordable adventures.

**Intrepid Travel** (☎ 1300 360 667; www.intrepidtravel.com.au) Small group tours for all budgets with an environmental, social and cultural edge.

**Peregrine** (☎ 02-9290 2770; www.peregrine.net.au) Small-group and tailor-made tours supporting responsible tourism.

**Wide Eyed Tours** (☎ 02-9290 2770; www.wideeyedtours.com) Set up by former Intrepid tour leaders, this

company offers tours all over Vietnam and has an office in the Old Quarter of Hanoi.

### France

**Compagnie des Indes & Oriens** (☎ 01 53 63 33 40; www.compagniesdumonde.com)

**Intermedes** (☎ 01 45 61 90 90; www.intermedes.com)

**La Route des Indes** (☎ 01 42 60 60 90; www.laroutedesindes.com)

### New Zealand

**Adventure World** (☎ 09-524 5118; www.adventureworld.co.nz) A wide range of adventure tours covering the country.

**Pacific Cycle Tours** (☎ 03-972 9913; www.bike-nz.com) Mountain bike tours through Vietnam, plus hiking trips to off-the-beaten-path destinations.

### UK

**Audley Travel** (☎ 01604-234855; www.audleytravel.com) Popular tailor-made specialist covering all of Vietnam

**Cox & Kings** (☎ 020-7873 5000; www.coxandkings.co.uk) Well-established high-end company, strong on cultural tours.

**Exodus** (☎ 020-8675 5550; www.exodus.co.uk) Popular adventure company with affordable overland trips.

**Hands Up Holidays** (☎ 0776-501 3631; www.handsupholidays.com) A new company bringing guests close to the people of Vietnam through its responsible holidays with a spot of volunteering.

**Mekong Travel** (☎ 01494-674456; www.mekong-travel.com) Mekong region specialist with in-depth knowledge of Vietnam.

**Selective Asia** (☎ 0845-370 3344; www.selectiveasia.com) New company that cherry-picks the best trips from leading local agents.

**Symbiosis** (☎ 020-7924 5906; www.symbiosis-travel.com) Small bespoke travel company with an emphasis on cycling and diving.

**Wild Frontiers** (☎ 020-7376 3968; www.wildfrontiers.co.uk) Adventure specialist with themed tours like Apocalypse Now.

### USA

**Asia Transpacific Journeys** (☎ 800-642 2742; www.asiatranspacific.com) Group tours and tailor-made across the Asia-Pacific region.

**Distant Horizons** (☎ 800-333 1240; www.distant-horizons.com) Educational tours for discerning travellers.

**Geographic Expeditions** (☎ 800-777 8183; www.geosex.com) Well-established high-end adventure travel company.

**Global Adrenaline** (☎ 800-825 1680; www.globaladrenaline.com) Luxury adventures for the experienced traveller.

# GETTING AROUND

## AIR

### Airlines in Vietnam

**Vietnam Airlines** (www.vietnamairlines.com.vn) has a monopoly on domestic flights, as it owns the only rival, **Pacific Airlines** (www.pacificairlines.com.vn), which flies the Hanoi–HCMC route and the HCMC–Danang route.

Most travel agents do not charge any more than when you book directly with the airline, as they receive a commission. A passport is required to make a booking on all domestic flights.

Vietnam Airlines has come a long way and many (but not all) branch offices accept credit cards for ticket purchases. The airline has retired its ancient Soviet-built fleet (thank heavens!) and purchased new Western-made aircraft.

### DEPARTURE TAX

Domestic departure tax is 25,000d, but is included when you buy the ticket.

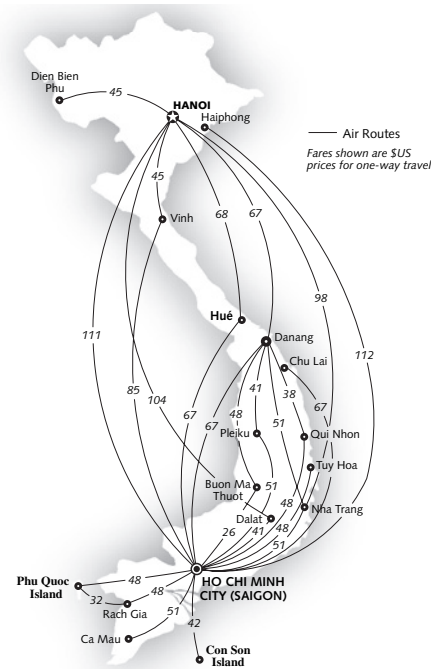
See the Air Routes map, below, for routes available within Vietnam.

## BICYCLE

A great way to get around Vietnam's towns and cities is to do as the locals do and ride a bicycle. During rush hours, urban thoroughfares approach gridlock, as rushing streams of cyclists force their way through intersections without the benefit of traffic lights. In the countryside, Westerners on bicycles are often greeted enthusiastically by locals who don't see many foreigners pedalling around.

Long-distance cycling is popular in Vietnam. Much of the country is flat or only moderately hilly, and the major roads are in good shape. Safety, however, is a considerable concern. Bicycles can be transported around the country on the top of buses or in train baggage compartments. Lonely Planet's *Cycling Vietnam, Laos & Cambodia* gives the lowdown on cycling through Vietnam.

Decent bikes can be bought at a few speciality shops in Hanoi and HCMC, but it's better to bring your own if you plan on cycling over



long distances. Mountain bikes are preferable, as large potholes or unsealed roads are rough on the rims. Basic cycling safety equipment and authentic spare parts are also in short supply, so bring all this from home. A bell or horn is mandatory – the louder the better.

Hotels and some travel agencies rent bicycles for about US\$1 to US\$5 per day and it is a great way to explore some of the smaller cities like Huế or Nha Trang. There are innumerable bicycle-repair stands along the side of the roads in every city and town in Vietnam.

Groups of foreign cyclists touring Vietnam are a common sight these days, and there are several tour companies that specialise in bicycling trips.

**BOAT**

Vietnam has an enormous number of rivers that are at least partly navigable, but the most important by far is the Mekong River and its tributaries. Scenic day trips by boat are possible on rivers in Hoi An, Danang, Huế, Tam Coc and even HCMC, but only in the Mekong Delta are boats used as a practical means of transport.

Boat trips are also possible on the sea. Cruising the islands of Halong Bay is a must for all visitors to north Vietnam. In the south, a trip to the islands off the coast of Nha Trang is popular.

In some parts of Vietnam, particularly the Mekong Delta, there are frequent ferry crossings. Don't stand between parked vehicles on the ferry as they can roll and you could wind up as the meat in the sandwich.

**BUS**

Vietnam has an extensive network of dirt-cheap buses that reach the far-flung corners of the country. Until recently, few foreign travellers used them because of safety concerns and overcharging, but the situation has improved dramatically with modern buses and fixed-price ticket offices at most bus stations.

Bus fleets are being upgraded as fast as the roads, so the old French, American and Russian buses from the '50s, '60s and '70s are becoming increasingly rare. On most popular routes, modern Korean buses are the flavour of the day. Most of these offer air-con and comfortable seats, but on the flipside most

of them are equipped with TVs and dreaded karaoke machines. You can ignore the crazy kung fu videos by closing your eyes (or wearing a blindfold), but you'd need to be deaf to sleep through the karaoke sessions – ear plugs are recommended!

Figuring out the bus system is not always that simple. Many cities have several bus stations, and responsibilities are divided according to the location of the destination (whether it is north or south of the city) and the type of service being offered (local or long distance, express or nonexpress).

Short-distance buses, mostly minibuses, depart when full (ie jam-packed with people and luggage). They often operate throughout the day, but don't count on many leaving after about 4pm.

Nonexpress buses and minibuses drop off and pick up as many passengers as possible along the route, so try to avoid these. The frequent stops make for a slow journey.

Express buses make a beeline from place to place. This is the deluxe class and you can usually be certain of there being enough space to sit comfortably. Such luxury comes at a price, but it's very cheap by Western standards.

It is also perfectly feasible (and highly recommended) to kick in with some fellow travellers and charter your own minibus.

If possible, try to travel during daylight hours only. Many drivers refuse to drive after dark because the unlit highways are teeming with bicycles and pedestrians who seem oblivious to the traffic. However, if you like living dangerously, there are some overnight buses.

Be aware that luggage is easily pilfered at toilet stops unless someone is looking after it. Bored to the rooftop, it should be safe from swift hands, but try to keep the bags in sight. A distinct disadvantage of having your gear on top is that it will be exposed to constant dust and sometimes heavy rain. You may want to consider putting your luggage in waterproof liners, if you can.

No matter how honest your fellow passengers might seem, never accept drinks from them, as there is a chance you may be drugged and robbed.

**Reservations & Costs**

Reservations aren't required for most of the frequent, popular services between towns and cities, but it doesn't hurt to purchase the

ticket the day before if you're set on a specific departure time. Most major bus stations now have ticket offices with official prices clearly displayed. Always buy a ticket from the office, as bus drivers are notorious overchargers.

Costs are negligible, though on rural runs foreigners are typically charged anywhere from twice to 10 times the going rate. If you have to battle it out with the bus driver, it is helpful to determine the cost of the ticket for locals before starting negotiations. As a benchmark, a typical 100km ride is between US\$2 and US\$3.

**Open Tours**

In backpacker haunts throughout Vietnam, you'll see lots of signs advertising 'Open Tour', 'Open Date Ticket' or 'Open Ticket'. This is a bus service catering mostly to foreign budget travellers, not to Vietnamese. These air-con buses run between HCMC and Hanoi and people can hop on and hop off the bus at any major city along the route.

Competition has driven the price of these tours so low that it would practically only be cheaper if you walked. Sample prices from HCMC are as follows:

Route	Price
Ho Chi Minh City–Dalat	US\$5
Ho Chi Minh City–Mui Ne	US\$6
Ho Chi Minh City–Nha Trang	US\$6
Ho Chi Minh City–Hoi An	US\$13
Ho Chi Minh City–Huế	US\$15
Ho Chi Minh City–Hanoi	US\$23

In some ways they should raise the cost of the tickets and, by actually making money on the bus fare, allow passengers some freedom of choice on arrival at a destination. Unfortunately, they depend on kickbacks from a very elaborate and well-established network of sister hotels and restaurants along the way, making the whole experience feel like you are part of the herd.

As cheap and popular as it is, the open-tour deal is not the ideal way to experience Vietnam. Once you've bought the ticket, you're stuck with it. It really isolates visitors from Vietnam, as few locals travel this way. Buying shorter point-to-point tickets on the open-tour buses costs a bit more but you achieve more flexibility, including the chance to take a train, rent a motorbike or simply change plans.

**ROAD DISTANCES (KM)**

Can Tho	---																						
Chau Doc	116	---																					
Dalat	477	593	---																				
Danang	1141	1257	746	---																			
Dien Bien Phu	2418	2534	1979	1233	---																		
Dong Ha	1331	1447	936	190	1043	---																	
Haiphong	1971	2087	1532	826	573	636	---																
Halong City	2026	2142	1587	881	691	691	55	---															
Hanoi	1948	2064	1509	763	470	617	103	165	---														
Ho Chi Minh City	169	285	308	972	2180	1169	1733	1788	1710	---													
Hoi An	1111	1227	716	30	1263	220	856	911	793	942	---												
Huế	1229	1445	854	108	1128	72	718	773	658	1097	138	---											
Lang Son	2094	2210	1655	909	616	763	249	311	146	1856	939	804	---										
Kon Tum	1053	1169	641	274	1507	464	1100	1155	1037	896	258	380	1183	---									
Mui Ne	379	495	257	762	1995	952	1548	1603	1525	210	732	870	1671	646	---								
Nha Trang	617	733	205	541	1774	731	1327	1383	1304	448	511	649	1450	436	238	---							
Qui Nhon	855	971	453	303	1536	493	1089	1144	1066	686	273	411	1212	198	979	470	---						
Sapa	2271	2388	1833	1087	253	897	427	489	324	2034	1117	979	470	1361	1849	1628	1390	---					
Vinh	1629	1745	1190	484	789	294	342	397	319	1391	514	376	465	758	1206	985	747	643	---				

Nevertheless, cheap open-tour tickets are a temptation and many people go for them. A couple of shorter routes to try are HCMC–Dalat and HCMC–Mui Ne Beach, two places that are not serviced by train.

If you are set on open-tour tickets, look for them at budget cafés in HCMC and Hanoi. From the original Sinh Café concept a decade ago, there are now lots of companies in on this game. Buses vary in size and standard, so a good rule of thumb is to turn up and check out the bus before committing to a company. Sinh Café still has some of the best buses, closely followed by Hanh Café.

## CAR & MOTORBIKE

The relative affordability of vehicle hire makes the latter a popular option. Having your own set of wheels gives you maximum flexibility to visit remote regions and stop when and where you please.

### Driving Licence

In order to drive a car in Vietnam, you need a Vietnamese licence and an International Driving Permit, usually issued by your automobile association back home. When it comes to renting motorbikes, it's a case of no licence required.

### Fuel & Spare Parts

Fuel is pretty cheap in Vietnam, at around 10,000d a litre. Fuel is readily available throughout the country, but prices rise in rural areas. Even the most isolated communities usually have someone selling petrol out of Fanta or Johnnie Walker bottles. Some sellers mix this fuel with kerosene to make a quick profit – use it sparingly, in emergencies only.

When it comes to spare parts, Vietnam is awash with Japanese motorbikes, so it is easy to get parts for Hondas, Yamahas or Suzukis, but finding a part for a Harley or a Ducati is another matter. Likewise for cars, spares for Japanese cars are easy to come by, as are spares for international brands manufactured in Vietnam like Ford and Mercedes. But if you are driving something obscure, whether with two wheels or four, bring substantial spares.

### Hire

The major considerations are safety, the mechanical condition of the vehicle, reliability of the rental agency and your budget. Don't think about driving a car yourself in Viet-

nam (a motorbike is challenging enough) and moreover, hire charges for the car include a driver.

### CAR & MINIBUS

Self-drive rental cars have yet to make their debut in Vietnam, which is a blessing in disguise given traffic conditions, but cars with drivers are popular and plentiful. Renting a vehicle with a driver and guide is a realistic option even for budget travellers, providing you have friends to share the cost.

Hanoi and HCMC have an especially wide selection of travel agencies that rent vehicles. For sightseeing trips around HCMC or Hanoi, a car with driver can also be rented by the day. It costs about US\$25 to US\$50 per day, depending on the car.

Renting a minibus (van) is good value for larger groups, as they hold between eight and 15 passengers. They are also a smart option for small groups planning to travel long distances at night, as everyone can stretch out.

For the really bad roads of northwestern Vietnam, the only reasonably safe vehicle is a 4WD. Without one, the muddy mountain roads can be deadly. In Vietnam, 4WDs come in different flavours – the cheapest (and least comfortable) are Russian made, while more cushy Korean and Japanese vehicles with air-con are about twice the price. Expect to pay about US\$80 to US\$100 a day for a decent 4WD in the far north of Vietnam.

### MOTORBIKE

Motorbikes can be rented from cafés, hotels, motorbike shops and travel agencies. If you don't fancy self-drive, there are plenty of local drivers willing to act as a chauffeur and guide for around US\$6 to US\$10 per day.

Renting a 100cc moped is cheap from around US\$5 per day, usually with unlimited mileage. To tackle the mountains of the north, it is best to go with a Minsk. The 'mule of the mountains', these sturdy Russian steeds don't look up to much, but they are designed to get you through, or over, anything. They are available for rent from specialist shops in Hanoi (see p122). For the ultimate experience in mountains of the north, consider joining a motorbike tour to discover the secret backroads: see p491 for more on motorbike touring companies.

Most places will ask to keep your passport until you return the bike. Try and sign some

sort of agreement – preferably in a language you understand – clearly stating what you are renting, how much it costs, the extent of compensation and so on. For more information, see p465.

### Insurance

If you are travelling in a tourist vehicle with a driver, then it is almost guaranteed to be insured. When it comes to motorbikes, many rental bikes are not insured and you will have to sign a contract agreeing to a valuation for the bike if it is stolen. Make sure you have a strong lock and always leave it in guarded parking where available.

Do not even consider renting a motorbike if you are daft enough to be travelling in Vietnam without insurance. The cost of treating serious injuries can be bankrupting for budget travellers.

### Road Conditions & Hazards

Road safety is definitely not one of Vietnam's strong points. The intercity road network of two-lane highways is becoming more and more dangerous. High-speed, head-on collisions between buses, trucks and other smaller vehicles (such as motorbikes and bicycles) have become a sickeningly familiar sight on the major highways. Vietnam does not have an efficient emergency-rescue system, so if something happens on the road, it could be some time until even rudimentary medical treatment. Locals might help in extreme circumstances, but in most cases it will be up to you or your guide to get you to the hospital or clinic.

In general, the major highways are hard surfaced and reasonably well maintained, but seasonal flooding can be a problem. A big typhoon can create potholes the size of bomb craters. In remote areas, roads are not surfaced and transform themselves into a sea of mud when the weather turns bad – such roads are best tackled with a 4WD vehicle or motorbike. Mountain roads are particularly dangerous: landslides, falling rocks and runaway vehicles can add an unwelcome edge to your journey. The occasional roadside shrine often indicates where a bus has plunged into the abyss.

For motorbikers, serious sunburn is a major risk and well worth preventing. The cooling breeze prevents you from realising how badly you are burning until it's too late. Cover up exposed skin or wear sunscreen. Bikers also must

consider the opposite problem – occasional heavy rains. A rainsuit or poncho is essential, especially during the monsoon season.

### Road Rules

Basically, there aren't many, arguably any. Size matters and the biggest vehicle wins by default. Be particularly careful about children on the road. It's common to find kids playing hopscotch in the middle of a major highway. Livestock on the road is also a menace; hit a cow on a motorbike and you'll both be hamburger.

Although the police frequently stop drivers and fine them for all sorts of real and imagined offences, speeding is the flavour of the month. New speed limits are surprisingly slow, probably a way to ensure more revenue from fines. In cities, there is a rule that you cannot turn right on a red light. It's easy to run afoul of this law in Vietnam and the police will fine you for this offence.

Honking at all pedestrians and bicycles (to warn them of your approach) is considered a basic element of safe driving – larger trucks and buses might as well have a dynamo-driven horn.

There is no national seat-belt law and the locals often laugh at foreigners who insist on using seat belts. Helmets are now required for motorbike riders on national highways and, although this is not always enforced, it's wise to make it a personal rule. Decent helmets are available in HCMC and Hanoi for around US\$20.

Legally a motorbike can carry only two people, but we've seen up to seven on one vehicle...plus luggage! This law is enforced in major cities, but ignored in rural areas.

### HITCHING

Hitching is never entirely safe in any country in the world, and we don't recommend it. Travellers who decide to hitch should understand that they are taking a potentially serious risk. People who do choose to hitch will be safer if they travel in pairs and let someone know where they are planning to go.

### LOCAL TRANSPORT

#### Bus

The bus systems in Hanoi and HCMC have improved immeasurably in the past few years. Get your hands on a bus map and it is now possible to navigate the suburbs cheaply and



efficiently. Some of the most popular sights in Hanoi and HCMC are accessible by public transport, making for a cheap visit. However, many travellers prefer other fast and economical options, such as meter taxis, *cyclos* and motorbike taxis.

## Cyclo

The *cyclo* (*xich-lo*), from the French *cyclo-pousse*, offers cheap and environmentally friendly transportation around Vietnam's sprawling cities.

Groups of *cyclo* drivers always hang out near major hotels and markets, and many speak at least broken English. To make sure the driver understands where you want to go, it's useful to bring a city map. Bargaining is imperative. Settle on a fare before going anywhere or you're likely to get stiffed.

As a basic rule, short rides around town should cost about 10,000d. For a longer ride or a night ride, expect to pay double that or more. It pays to have the exact change when taking a *cyclo*, as drivers may claim they don't have change. *Cyclos* are cheaper by time rather than distance. A typical price is US\$1 to US\$2 per hour.

There have been many stories of travellers being mugged by their *cyclo* drivers in HCMC so, as a general rule of thumb, hire *cyclos* only during the day. When leaving a bar late at night, take a meter taxi.

## Taxi

Western-style taxis with meters, found in most major cities, are very, very cheap by international standards and a safe way to travel around at night. Average tariffs are about 10,000d per kilometre. However, there are many dodgy taxis roaming the streets of Hanoi and HCMC and the meters are clocked to run at two or three times the normal pace. Only travel with reputable or recommended companies. See the Getting Around sections in Hanoi and HCMC for listings.

## Xe Om

The *xe om* (*zay-ohm*) is a motorbike that carries one passenger, like a two-wheeled taxi. *Xe* means motorbike, and *om* means hug (or hold), so you get the picture. Getting around by *xe om* is easy, as long as you don't have a lot of luggage.

Fares are comparable with those for a *cyclo*, but negotiate the price beforehand. There are

plenty of *xe om* drivers hanging around street corners, markets, hotels and bus stations. They will find you before you find them...

## TOURS

We are drowning in letters complaining about the quality of bottom-end budget tours being peddled in HCMC and Hanoi. Some are better than others, but remember the old adage that 'you get what you pay for'. Tour-operator gimmicks like 'one free beer' or '10 minutes of internet' are not a promising sign.

Renting a car with a driver and guide gives you the chance to design a tailor-made itinerary for you and your companions. Seeing the country this way is almost like independent travel, except that it's more comfortable, less time-consuming and allows for stops anywhere, or everywhere, along the way.

The cost varies considerably. At the high end are tours booked through government travel agencies and upmarket tour companies, while budget and midrange companies can usually arrange something just as enjoyable at a cheaper price.

The price typically includes accommodation, a guide, a driver and a car. The cost of the car depends largely on the type of vehicle.

Once you've settled on an itinerary, get a copy from the travel agency. If you find that your guide is making it up as they go along, ignoring the agreed itinerary, that piece of paper is your most effective leverage.

A good guide can be your translator and travelling companion, and can usually save you as much money along the way as they cost you. A bad guide can ruin your trip. If possible, you should meet your guide before starting out – make sure that this is someone you can travel with.

Travelling with a freelance guide, you are usually responsible for their travel expenses, but if you pay for a package through a company, any expenses for the guide and driver should be included.

For trips in and around big cities like HCMC and Hanoi, you'll often find women working as guides. However, it seems relatively few women are employed as guides on long-distance trips.

The following are Vietnam-based travel agencies who offer premium tours throughout Vietnam and Indochina:

**Buffalo Tours** (Map p96; ☎ 04-828 0702; www.buffalotours.com; 11 Pho Hang Muoi, Hanoi)

## THE REUNIFICATION EXPRESS

Construction of the 1726km-long Hanoi–Saigon railway, the Transindochinois, began in 1899 and was completed in 1936. In the late 1930s the trip from Hanoi to Saigon took 40 hours and 20 minutes at an average speed of 43km/h. During WWII the Japanese made extensive use of the rail system, resulting in Viet Minh sabotage on the ground and US bombing from the air. After WWII efforts were made to repair the Transindochinois, major parts of which were either damaged or had become overgrown.

During the Franco-Viet Minh War, the Viet Minh engaged in sabotage against the rail system. At night the Viet Minh made off with rails to create a 300km network of tracks (between Ninh Hoa and Danang) in an area wholly under their control – the French quickly responded with their own sabotage.

In the late 1950s the South, with US funding, reconstructed the track between Saigon and Hué, a distance of 1041km. But between 1961 and 1964 alone, 795 Viet Cong attacks were launched on the rail system, forcing the abandonment of large sections of track (including the Dalat spur).

By 1960 the North had repaired 1000km of track, mostly between Hanoi and China. During the US air war against the North, the northern rail network was repeatedly bombed. Even now clusters of bomb craters can be seen around virtually every rail bridge and train station in the north.

After reunification the government immediately set about re-establishing the Hanoi–Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) rail link as a symbol of Vietnamese unity. By the time the *Reunification Express* trains were inaugurated on 31 December 1976, 1334 bridges, 27 tunnels, 158 stations and 1370 shunts (switches) had been repaired.

Today the *Reunification Express* chugs along slightly faster than the trains did in the 1930s, at an average of 50km/h.

**Destination Asia** (☎ 08-844 8071; www.destination-asia.com; 143 Đ Nguyen Van Troi, Phu Nhuan district, HCMC)

**Exotissimo** (☎ 04-828 2150; www.exotissimo.com; 26 Tran Nhat Duat, Hanoi)

**Sinhbalo Adventures** (Map p357; ☎ 08-837 6766; www.sinhbalo.com; 283/20 Đ Pham Ngu Lao, District 1, HCMC)

**Sisters Tours** (☎ 04-562 2733; www.sisterstoursvietnam.com; 37 Đ Thai Think, Hanoi)

**Tonkin Travel** (☎ 08-747 3239; www.tonkintravel.com; 8, 34A Đ Tran Phu, Hanoi)

For a list of recommended budget and mid-range operators running tours of northern Vietnam out of Hanoi, see p91.

## Motorbike Tours

Specialised motorbike tours through Vietnam are growing in popularity. It is a great way to get off the trail and explore the mountainous regions of the north and centre of the country. Two-wheels can reach the parts that four-wheels sometimes can't, traversing small trails and traffic-free backroads. A little experience helps, but many of leading companies also offer tuition for first-timers. Mounting a Minsk to take on the peaks of the north is one of Vietnam's defining moments and should not be missed.

Foreign guides charge considerably more than local Vietnamese guides. Based on a group of four people, you can expect to pay around US\$100 per day per person for an all-inclusive tour providing motorbike rental, petrol, guide, food and accommodation. Some of the best companies running trips in the north include the following:

**Explore Indochina** (☎ 0913-524 658; www.exploreindochina.com) Run by Digby, Dan and Thuan, these guys have biked all over the country and can take you to the parts others cannot reach. You can usually find them at Highway 4 (Map pp88-9), a bar on Pho Hang Tre. Prices are around US\$135 per day.

**Free Wheelin Tours** (☎ 04-747 0545; www.freewheelin-tours.com) Run by Fredo (Binh in Vietnamese), who speaks French, English and Vietnamese, this company has its own homestays in the northeast, plus 4WD trips. Prices start from just US\$70 per day with a group of four. It's located opposite Cuong Minsk on Luong Ngoc Quyen

**Voyage Vietnam** (☎ 04-926 2373; www.voyagevietnam.net) A newer, locally run outfit, this company is quickly earning itself a good reputation. Prices start from around US\$60 per day.

For more on the Easy Riders operating out of Dalat, see p310. There are a host of other motorbike and bicycle day trips covered under individual towns throughout this book.

## TRAIN

The 2600km Vietnamese railway system, operated by **Vietnam Railways** (Duong Sat Viet Nam; ☎ 04-747 0308; www.vr.com.vn), runs along the coast between HCMC and Hanoi, and links the capital with Hai Phong and northern towns. While sometimes even slower than buses, trains offer a more relaxing way to get around and more room than the jam-packed buses. The trains are also considered safer than the country's kamikaze bus fleet.

Vietnam's railway authority has been rapidly upgrading trains and facilities – with air-con sleeping berths and dining cars available now on express trains – and lowering the price for foreigners. Foreigners and Vietnamese are now charged the same price, a big change from a few years ago when foreigners were charged 400% more.

The quickest train journey between Hanoi and HCMC takes 30 hours. The slowest express train on this route takes 41 hours. There are also local trains that only cover short routes, but these can crawl along at 15km/h, as there is only one track with many passing points and local trains have the lowest priority. Vietnam is planning a massive overhaul of its rail network in the next decade, including the introduction of high-speed trains. Hoorah!

Petty crime is a problem on Vietnamese trains. While there doesn't seem to be organised pack-napping gangs, such as those in India, thieves have become proficient at grabbing packs through the windows as trains pull out of stations. Always keep your bag nearby and lock or tie it to something, especially at night.

Another hazard is children throwing rocks at the train. Passengers have been severely

injured this way and many conductors insist that you keep down the metal window shield. Unfortunately, however, these shields also obstruct the view.

Bicycles and motorbikes must travel in the freight car. Just make sure that the train you are on has a freight car (most have) or your bike will arrive later than you do.

Eating is easy, as there are vendors at every station who board the train and practically stuff food, drinks and cigarettes into your pockets. The food supplied by the railway company, included in the ticket price on some long journeys, isn't Michelin-starred. It's a good idea to stock up on your favourite munchies before taking a long trip.

Odd-numbered trains travel south and even-numbered ones travel north. The fastest train service is provided by the *Reunification Express*, which runs between HCMC and Hanoi, making only a few short stops en route. If you want to stop at some obscure point between the major towns, use one of the slower local trains or catch a bus.

Aside from the main HCMC–Hanoi run, three rail-spur lines link Hanoi with the other parts of northern Vietnam. One runs east to the port city of Hai Phong. A second heads northeast to Lang Son, crosses the border and continues to Nanning, China. A third goes northwest to Lao Cai and on to Kunming, China.

Several *Reunification Express* trains depart from HCMC's Saigon station between 9am and 10.30pm every day. In the other direction, there are departures from Hanoi between 5am and 6.40pm daily.

The train schedules change frequently. The timetables for all trains are posted on the Vietnam Railway website and at major stations. Another excellent resource is the

**Man in Seat Sixty-One** ([www.seat61.com/vietnam.htm](http://www.seat61.com/vietnam.htm)), the top international train website. Most travel agents and some hotels keep a copy of the latest schedule on hand. In HCMC call or visit the **Saigon Railways Tourist Service** (☎ 08-836 7640; 275C Đ Pham Ngu Lao, District 1) in the Pham Ngu Lao area.

It's important to realise that the train schedule is 'bare-bones' during the Tet festival. The *Reunification Express* is suspended for nine days, beginning four days before Tet and continuing for four days afterwards.

## Classes

There are four main classes of train travel in Vietnam: hard seat, soft seat, hard sleeper and soft sleeper. The latter three are also split into air-con and nonair-con options; presently, air-con is only available on the faster express trains. Since it's all that many Vietnamese can afford, hard-seat class is usually packed. Hard seat is tolerable for day travel, but overnight it is worse than the bus. Soft-seat carriages have vinyl-covered seats rather than the uncomfortable hard benches.

A hard sleeper has three tiers of beds (six beds per compartment). Because of limited head room and the climb, the upper berth is cheapest, followed by the middle berth and finally the lower berth. There is no door to separate the compartment from the corridor. Soft sleeper has two tiers (four beds per compartment) and all bunks are priced the same. These compartments have a door.

## Costs

Ticket prices vary depending on the train, and the fastest trains are naturally the most

expensive. See the table, p492, for some sample fares from Hanoi to stations south. For all the details on trains from Hanoi to Haiphong (p136), Lao Cai (p180) and Lang Son (p154), see the relevant sections.

## Reservations

The supply of train seats is frequently insufficient to meet demand. Reservations for all trips should be made at least one day in advance. For sleeping berths, it is wise to book several days before the date of departure. You'll need to bring your passport when buying train tickets.

Many travel agencies, hotels and cafés sell train tickets for a small commission, and this can save considerable time and trouble. It's a good idea to make reservations for onward travel as soon as you arrive in a city.

## WALKING

If you don't want to wind up like a bug on a windshield, pay close attention to a few pedestrian survival rules when crossing the street, especially on the streets of motorbike-crazed HCMC and Hanoi. Foreigners frequently make the mistake of thinking that the best way to cross a busy street in Vietnam is to run quickly across it. This does not always work in practice, and could get you creamed. Most Vietnamese cross the street slowly – very slowly – giving the motorbike drivers sufficient time to judge their position so they can pass on either side. They won't stop or even slow down, but they will try to avoid hitting you. Just don't make any sudden moves. Good luck!

### REUNIFICATION EXPRESS FARES FROM HANOI

#### Hanoi–HCMC (S1 Express Train); 33 hours

Station	Soft seat air-con	Bottom hard air-con (6 berth)	Bottom soft air-con (4 berth)
Vinh	113,000d	168,000d	180,000d
Dong Hoi	196,000d	290,000d	310,000d
Hué	260,000d	417,000d	445,000d
Danang	297,000d	462,000d	478,000d
Nha Trang	513,000d	834,000d	890,000d
HCMC	612,000d	905,000d	965,000d

# Health

Dr Trish Batchelor

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Health issues and the quality of medical facilities vary enormously depending on where and how you travel in Vietnam. Many of the major cities are now very well developed, although travel to rural areas can expose you to a variety of health risks and inadequate medical care.

Travellers tend to worry about contracting infectious diseases when in the tropics, but infections are a rare cause of serious illness or death in travellers. Pre-existing medical conditions such as heart disease, and accidental injury (especially traffic accidents), account for most life-threatening problems.

Becoming ill in some way, however, is a relatively common thing. Fortunately most common illnesses can either be prevented with some common-sense behaviour or be treated easily with a well-stocked traveller's medical kit.

The following advice is a general guide only and does not replace the advice of a doctor trained in tropical medicine.

## BEFORE YOU GO

Pack medications in their original, clearly labelled, containers. A signed and dated letter from your physician describing your medical

### HEALTH ADVISORIES

It's usually a good idea to consult your government's travel-health website before departure, if one is available:

**Australia** ([www.dfat.gov.au/travel](http://www.dfat.gov.au/travel))

**Canada** ([www.travelhealth.gc.ca](http://www.travelhealth.gc.ca))

**New Zealand** ([www.mfat.govt.nz/travel](http://www.mfat.govt.nz/travel))

**UK** (<http://www.dh.gov.uk/Policyandguidance/Healthadvicefortravellers/fs/en>)

**US** ([www.cdc.gov/travel](http://www.cdc.gov/travel))

conditions and medications, including generic names, is also a good idea. If carrying syringes or needles, be sure to have a physician's letter documenting their medical necessity. If you have a heart condition bring a copy of your ECG taken just prior to travelling.

If you happen to take any regular medication bring double your needs in case of loss or theft. In most Southeast Asian countries you can buy many medications over the counter without a doctor's prescription, but it can be difficult to find some of the newer drugs, particularly the latest antidepressant drugs, blood pressure medications and contraceptive pills.

### INSURANCE

Even if you are fit and healthy, don't travel without health insurance – accidents do happen. Declare any existing medical conditions you have – the insurance company *will* check if your problem is pre-existing and will not cover you if it is undeclared. You may require extra cover for adventure activities such as rock climbing. If your health insurance doesn't cover you for medical expenses abroad, consider getting extra insurance – check **LonelyPlanet.com** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) for more information. If you're uninsured, emergency evacuation is expensive; bills of over US\$100,000 are not uncommon.

You should find out in advance if your insurance plan will make payments directly to providers or if they reimburse you later for overseas health expenditures. (Note that in many countries doctors expect payment in

cash.) Some policies offer lower and higher medical-expense options; the higher ones are chiefly for countries that have extremely high medical costs, such as the USA.

You may prefer a policy that pays doctors or hospitals directly rather than you having to pay on the spot and claim later. If you have to claim later, make sure you keep all documentation. Some policies ask you to call back (reverse charges) to a centre in your home country where an immediate assessment of your problem is made.

### VACCINATIONS

The only vaccine required by international regulations is yellow fever. Proof of vaccination will only be required if you have visited a country in the yellow-fever zone within the six days prior to entering Vietnam. If you are travelling to Vietnam from Africa or South America you should check to see if you require proof of vaccination.

Specialised travel-medicine clinics are your best source of information; they stock all available vaccines and will be able to give specific recommendations for you and your trip. The doctors will take into account factors such as past vaccination history, the length of your trip, activities you may be undertaking, and underlying medical conditions, such as pregnancy.

Most vaccines don't produce immunity until at least two weeks after they're given, so visit a doctor four to eight weeks before departure. Ask your doctor for an International Certificate of Vaccination (otherwise known as the yellow booklet), which will list all the vaccinations you've received. In the US, the yellow booklet is no longer issued, but it is highly unlikely the Vietnam authorities will ask for proof of vaccinations (unless you have recently been in a yellow-fever affected country).

For info on current immunisation recommendations for Vietnam, contact the international team of doctors at the **Family Medical Practice** ([www.doctorkot.com](http://www.doctorkot.com)) in Hanoi (p90) and HCMC (p337). They can provide the latest information on vaccinations, malaria and dengue-fever status, and offer general medical advice regarding Vietnam.

See the boxed text, p496, for possible vaccinations you may require.

### MEDICAL CHECKLIST

Recommended items for a personal medical kit:

- antibacterial cream, eg Muciprocin
- antibiotics for skin infections, eg Amoxicillin/Clavulanate or Cephalexin
- antibiotics for diarrhoea, eg Norfloxacin or Ciprofloxacin; Azithromycin for bacterial diarrhoea; and Tinidazole for giardiasis or amoebic dysentery
- antifungal cream, eg Clotrimazole
- antihistamines for allergies, eg Cetirizine for daytime and Promethazine for night
- anti-inflammatories, eg Ibuprofen
- anti-nausea medication, eg Prochlorperazine
- antiseptic for cuts and scrapes, eg Betadine
- antispasmodic for stomach cramps, eg Buscopa
- contraceptives
- decongestant for colds and flus, eg Pseudoephedrine
- DEET-based insect repellent
- diarrhoea 'stopper', eg Loperamide
- first-aid items such as scissors, plasters (Band Aids), bandages, gauze, thermometer (electronic, not mercury), sterile needles and syringes, safety pins and tweezers
- indigestion medication, eg Quick Eze or Mylanta
- iodine tablets (unless you are pregnant or have a thyroid problem) to purify water
- laxatives, eg Coloxyl
- migraine medication (your personal brand), if a migraine sufferer
- oral-rehydration solution for diarrhoea, eg Gastrolyte
- paracetamol for pain
- permethrin (to impregnate clothing and mosquito nets) for repelling insects
- steroid cream for allergic/itchy rashes, eg 1% to 2% hydrocortisone
- sunscreen and hat
- throat lozenges
- thrush (vaginal yeast infection) treatment, eg Clotrimazole pessaries or Diflucan tablet
- urine alkalisation agent, eg Ural, if you're prone to urinary tract infections.

### INTERNET RESOURCES

There is a wealth of travel health advice on the Internet. For further information, **LonelyPlanet.com** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) is a good place to start. The **World Health Organization** (WHO; [www.who.int/ith/](http://www.who.int/ith/)) publishes a superb book called

## RECOMMENDED VACCINATIONS

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends the following vaccinations for travellers to Southeast Asia:

- Adult diphtheria and tetanus – single booster recommended if you've had none in the previous 10 years. Side effects include a sore arm and fever.
- Hepatitis A – provides almost 100% protection for up to a year; a booster after 12 months provides at least another 20 years' protection. Mild side effects such as headache and a sore arm occur for between 5% and 10% of people.
- Hepatitis B – now considered routine for most travellers. Given as three shots over six months. A rapid schedule is also available, as is a combined vaccination with Hepatitis A. Side effects are mild and uncommon, usually a headache and sore arm. Lifetime protection occurs in 95% of people.
- Measles, mumps and rubella – two doses of MMR required unless you have had the diseases. Occasionally a rash and flulike illness can develop a week after receiving the vaccine. Many young adults require a booster.
- Polio – in 2002, no countries in Southeast Asia reported a single case of polio. Only one booster is required as an adult for lifetime protection. Inactivated polio vaccine is safe during pregnancy.
- Typhoid – recommended unless your trip is less than a week and only to developed cities. The vaccine offers around 70% protection, lasts for two or three years and comes as a single shot. Tablets are also available; however, the injection is usually recommended as it has fewer side effects. Sore arm and fever may occur.
- Varicella – if you haven't had chickenpox, discuss this vaccination with your doctor.

## Long-term Travellers

These vaccinations are recommended for people travelling more than one month, or those at special risk:

- Japanese B Encephalitis – three injections in all. A booster is recommended after two years. A sore arm and headache are the most common side effects reported. Rarely, an allergic reaction comprising hives and swelling can occur up to 10 days after any of the three doses.
- Meningitis – single injection. There are two types of vaccination: the quadrivalent vaccine gives two to three years protection; meningitis group C vaccine gives around 10 years protection. Recommended for long-term travellers aged under 25.
- Rabies – three injections in all. A booster after one year will provide 10 years of protection. Side effects are rare – occasionally a headache and sore arm.
- Tuberculosis – adult long-term travellers are usually recommended to have a TB skin test before and after travel, rather than vaccination. Note that only one vaccine is given in a lifetime.

*International Travel & Health*, which is revised annually and is available free on line. Another website of general interest is **MD Travel Health** ([www.mdtravelhealth.com](http://www.mdtravelhealth.com)), which provides complete travel health recommendations for every country and is updated daily. The **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** (CDC; [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)) website also has good general information.

## FURTHER READING

Lonely Planet's *Healthy Travel – Asia & India* is a handy pocket-size book that is packed with useful information including pretrip planning, emergency first aid, immunisation and disease information and what to do if you get sick on the road.

Other good recommended references include *Traveller's Health* by Dr Richard Da-

wood as well as *Travelling Well* by Dr Deborah Mills – check out the website ([www.travellingwell.com.au](http://www.travellingwell.com.au)).

## IN TRANSIT

### DEEP VEIN THROMBOSIS (DVT)

Deep vein thrombosis (DVT) occurs when blood clots form in the legs during plane flights, chiefly because of prolonged immobility. The longer the flight, the greater the risk. Though most blood clots are reabsorbed uneventfully, some may break off and travel through the blood vessels to the lungs, where they may cause life-threatening complications.

The chief symptom of DVT is swelling or pain of the foot, ankle or calf, usually on just one side. When a blood clot travels to the lungs, it may cause chest pain and difficulty in breathing. Travellers with any of these symptoms should immediately seek medical attention.

To prevent the development of DVT on long flights you should walk about the cabin, stretch your legs and contract the leg muscles while sitting, drink plenty of fluids, and avoid alcohol. Also, try to avoid tobacco before and after flights.

### JET LAG & MOTION SICKNESS

Jet lag is common when crossing more than five time zones; it results in insomnia, fatigue, malaise or nausea. To avoid jet lag try drinking plenty of fluids (nonalcoholic) and eating light meals. Upon arrival, seek exposure to natural sunlight and readjust your schedule (for meals, sleep etc) as soon as possible.

Antihistamines such as dimenhydrinate (Dramamine) and meclizine (Antivert, Bonine) are usually the first choice for treating motion sickness. Their main side effect is drowsiness. A herbal alternative is ginger, which works like a charm for some people.

## IN VIETNAM

### AVAILABILITY OF HEALTH CARE

The significant improvement in Vietnam's economy has brought with it some major advances in public health. Rural areas can still pose a problem when it comes to finding good health care, however; although foreigners with

hard cash will receive the best treatment available, even bars of gold cannot buy blood tests or X-rays when the local clinic doesn't even have a thermometer or any aspirin. If you become seriously ill in rural Vietnam, get to Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) or Hanoi as quickly as you can. If you need any type of surgery or other extensive treatment, don't hesitate to fly to Bangkok, Hong Kong or another renowned medical centre as soon as possible.

Government hospitals in Vietnam are overcrowded and basic. In order to treat foreigners, a facility needs to obtain a special license and so far only a few have been provided. The private clinics in Hanoi and HCMC should be your first port of call. They are familiar with the local resources and can organise evacuations if necessary. The contact details of the best medical facilities in Vietnam are listed in the Hanoi (p90) and HCMC (p337) chapters. These are the only cities where you are likely to find health facilities that come close to meeting the standard of developed countries.

Self-treatment may be appropriate if your problem is minor (eg travellers' diarrhoea), you are carrying the appropriate medication and you cannot attend a recommended clinic. If you think you may have a serious disease, especially malaria, do not waste time – travel to the nearest quality facility to receive attention. It is always better to be assessed by a doctor than to rely on self-treatment.

Buying medication over the counter is not recommended, as fake medications and poorly stored or out-of-date drugs are common. Check the expiry dates on any medicines you buy. If you need special medication then take it with you.

### INFECTIOUS DISEASES Dengue

This mosquito-borne disease is becoming increasingly problematic throughout Southeast Asia, especially in the cities. As there is no vaccine available it can only be prevented by avoiding mosquito bites. The mosquito that carries dengue bites day and night, so use insect avoidance measures at all times. Symptoms include high fever, severe headache and body ache (dengue was once known as 'breakbone fever'). Some people develop a rash and experience diarrhoea. There is no specific treatment, just rest and paracetamol – do not take aspirin as it increases the likelihood of haemorrhaging. See a doctor to be diagnosed and monitored.

## Filariasis

This is a mosquito-borne disease that is very common in the local population, yet very rare in travellers. Mosquito-avoidance measures are the best way to prevent this disease.

## Hepatitis A

A problem throughout the region, this food- and water-borne virus infects the liver, causing jaundice (yellow skin and eyes), nausea and lethargy. There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A, you just need to allow time for the liver to heal. All travellers to Vietnam should be vaccinated against hepatitis A.

## Hepatitis B

The only sexually transmitted disease that can be prevented by vaccination, hepatitis B is spread by body fluids, including sexual contact. In some parts of Southeast Asia up to 20% of the population are carriers of hepatitis B, and usually are unaware of this. The long-term consequences can include liver cancer and cirrhosis.

## Hepatitis E

Hepatitis E is transmitted through contaminated food and water and has similar symptoms to hepatitis A, but is far less common. It is a severe problem in pregnant women and can result in the death of both mother and baby. There is currently no vaccine, and prevention is by following safe eating and drinking guidelines.

## HIV

The official figures on the number of people with HIV/AIDS in Vietnam are vague, but they are on the rise. Health-education messages relating to HIV/AIDS can be seen all over the countryside, however the official line is that infection is largely limited to sex workers and drug users. Condoms are widely available throughout Vietnam.

## Influenza

Present year-round in the tropics, influenza (flu) symptoms include high fever, muscle aches, runny nose, cough and sore throat. It can be very severe in people over the age of 65 or in those with underlying medical conditions such as heart disease or diabetes; vaccination is recommended for these individuals. There is no specific treatment, just rest and paracetamol.

## Japanese B Encephalitis

While a rare disease in travellers, at least 50,000 locals are infected with Japanese B Encephalitis each year in Southeast Asia. This viral disease is transmitted by mosquitoes. Most cases occur in rural areas and vaccination is recommended for travellers spending more than one month outside of cities. There is no treatment, and a third of infected people will die while another third will suffer permanent brain damage.

## Malaria

For such a serious and potentially deadly disease, there is an enormous amount of misinformation concerning malaria. You must get expert advice as to whether your trip actually puts you at risk. Many parts of Vietnam, particularly city and resort areas, have minimal to no risk of malaria, and the risk of side effects from the tablets may outweigh the risk of getting the disease. For most rural areas, however, the risk of contracting the disease far outweighs the risk of any tablet side effects. Travellers to isolated areas in high-risk regions such as Ca Mau (p431) and Bac Lieu (p429) provinces, and the rural south, may like to carry a treatment dose of medication for use if symptoms occur. Remember that malaria can be fatal. Before you travel, seek medical advice on the right medication and dosage for you.

Malaria is caused by a parasite transmitted by the bite of an infected mosquito. The most important symptom of malaria is fever, but general symptoms such as headache, diarrhoea, cough, or chills may also occur. Diagnosis can only be made by taking a blood sample.

Two strategies should be combined to prevent malaria – mosquito avoidance, and antimalarial medications. Most people who catch malaria are taking inadequate or no antimalarial medication.

Travellers are advised to prevent mosquito bites by taking these steps:

- Choose accommodation with screens and fans (if not air-conditioned).
- Impregnate clothing with Permethrin in high-risk areas.
- Sleep under a mosquito net impregnated with Permethrin.
- Spray your room with insect repellent before going out for your evening meal.
- Use a DEET-containing insect repellent on exposed skin. Wash this off at

night, as long as you are sleeping under a mosquito net. Natural repellents such as Citronella can be effective, but must be applied more frequently than products containing DEET.

- Use mosquito coils.
- Wear long sleeves and trousers in light colours.

## MALARIA MEDICATION

There are a variety of medications available. The effectiveness of the Chloroquine and Paludrine combination is now limited in most of Southeast Asia. Common side effects include nausea (40% of people) and mouth ulcers. It is generally not recommended.

Lariam (Mefloquine) has received a lot of bad press, some of it justified, some not. This weekly tablet suits many people. Serious side effects are rare but include depression, anxiety, psychosis and seizures. Anyone with a history of depression, anxiety, other psychological disorder or epilepsy should not take Lariam. It is considered safe in the second and third trimesters of pregnancy. It is around 90% effective in most parts of Southeast Asia, but there is significant resistance in parts of northern Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. Tablets must be taken for four weeks after leaving the risk area.

Doxycycline, taken as a daily tablet, is a broad-spectrum antibiotic that has the added benefit of helping to prevent a variety of tropical diseases, including leptospirosis, tick-borne disease, typhus and melioidosis. The potential side effects include photosensitivity (a tendency to sunburn), thrush in women, indigestion, heartburn, nausea and interference with the contraceptive pill. More serious side effects include ulceration of the oesophagus – you can help prevent this by taking your tablet with a meal and a large glass of water, and never lying down within half an hour of taking it. It must be taken for four weeks after leaving the risk area.

Malarone is a new drug combining Atovaquone and Proguanil. Side effects are uncommon and mild, most commonly nausea and headaches. It is the best tablet for scuba divers and for those on short trips to high-risk areas. It must be taken for one week after leaving the risk area.

Derivatives of Artesunate are not suitable as a preventive medication. They are useful treatments under medical supervision.

## SCORCHED OEU F POLICY

There have been periodic outbreaks of avian influenza or bird flu in Vietnam in the past few years. Dozens of people have died and the threat of human-to-human transmission remains very real. Now the H5-N1 strain has now gone global, Vietnam is no longer in the spotlight. However, when outbreaks occur, eggs and poultry are usually banished from the menu in many hotels and restaurants. Even where eggs are available, we recommend a scorched oeu f policy. Ensure they are well cooked in whatever shape or form they come. No runny omelettes, no sunny side up. Don't take risks or you might end up with egg on your face.

A final option is to take no preventive medication but to have a supply of emergency medication should you develop the symptoms of malaria. This is less than ideal, and you'll need to get to a good medical facility within 24 hours of developing a fever. If you choose this option the most effective and safest treatment is Malarone (four tablets once daily for three days). Other options include Mefloquine and Quinine but the side effects of these drugs at treatment doses make them less desirable. Fansidar is no longer recommended.

## Measles

Measles remains a problem in some parts of Vietnam. This highly contagious bacterial infection is spread via coughing and sneezing. Many people born before 1966 are immune as they had the disease in childhood. Measles starts with a high fever and rash and can be complicated by pneumonia and brain disease. There is no specific treatment.

## Rabies

This uniformly fatal disease is spread by the bite or lick of an infected animal – most commonly a dog or monkey. Seek medical advice immediately after any animal bite and commence post-exposure treatment. Having a pretravel vaccination means the postbite treatment is greatly simplified. If an animal bites you, gently wash the wound with soap and water, and apply iodine-based antiseptic. If you are not vaccinated you will need to receive rabies immunoglobulin as soon as possible.

## Schistosomiasis

Schistosomiasis (also called bilharzia) is a tiny parasite that enters your skin after you've been swimming in contaminated water – travellers usually only get a light infection and hence have no symptoms. If you are concerned, you can be tested three months after exposure. On rare occasions, travellers may develop 'Katayama fever' – this occurs some weeks after exposure, as the parasite passes through the lungs and causes an allergic reaction – symptoms are coughing and fever. Schistosomiasis is easily treated with medications.

## STDs

Sexually transmitted diseases include herpes, warts, syphilis, gonorrhoea and chlamydia. People carrying these diseases often have no signs of infection. Condoms will prevent gonorrhoea and chlamydia but not warts or herpes. If after a sexual encounter you develop any rash, lumps, discharge or pain when passing urine seek immediate medical attention. If you have been sexually active during your travels have an STD check on your return home.

While abstinence from sexual contact is the only 100% effective prevention, using condoms is also effective. Condoms are widely available throughout Vietnam; when purchasing, ensure the package hasn't been stored in the sun as the rubber could have deteriorated.

## Tuberculosis

Tuberculosis (TB) is rare in short-term travellers. Medical and aid workers, and long-term travellers who have significant contact with the local population should take precautions,

however. Vaccination is usually only given to children under the age of five, but adults at risk are recommended pre- and post-travel TB testing. The main symptoms are fever, cough, weight loss, night sweats and tiredness.

## Typhoid

This serious bacterial infection is spread via food and water. It gives a high, slowly progressive fever and headache, and may be accompanied by a dry cough and stomach pain. It is diagnosed by blood tests and treated with antibiotics. Vaccination is recommended for all travellers spending more than a week in Southeast Asia, or travelling outside of the major cities. Be aware that vaccination is not 100% effective so you must still be careful with what you eat and drink.

## Typhus

Murine typhus is spread by the bite of a flea whereas scrub typhus is spread via a mite. These diseases are rare in travellers. Symptoms include fever, muscle pains and a rash. You can avoid these diseases by following general insect-avoidance measures. Doxycycline will also prevent them.

## TRAVELLERS' DIARRHOEA

Travellers' diarrhoea is by far the most common problem affecting travellers – between 30% and 50% of people will suffer from it within two weeks of starting their trip. In over 80% of cases, travellers' diarrhoea is caused by a bacteria (there are numerous potential culprits), and therefore responds promptly to treatment with antibiotics. Treatment with antibiotics will depend on your situation –

how sick you are, how quickly you need to get better, where you are and so on.

Travellers' diarrhoea is defined as the passage of more than three watery bowel-actions within 24 hours, plus at least one other symptom such as fever, cramps, nausea, vomiting or feeling generally unwell.

Treatment consists of staying well-hydrated. Rehydration solutions like Gastrolyte are the best for this. Antibiotics such as Norfloxacin, Ciprofloxacin or Azithromycin will kill the bacteria quickly.

Loperamide is just a 'stopper' and doesn't get to the cause of the problem. It can be helpful, for example if you have to go on a long bus ride. Don't take Loperamide if you have a fever, or blood in your stools. Seek medical attention quickly if you do not respond to an appropriate antibiotic.

## Amoebic Dysentery

Amoebic dysentery is very rare in travellers but is often misdiagnosed by poor-quality labs in Southeast Asia. Symptoms are similar to bacterial diarrhoea, ie fever, bloody diarrhoea and generally feeling unwell. You should always seek reliable medical care if you have blood in your diarrhoea. Treatment involves two drugs: Tinidazole or Metronidazole to kill the parasite in your gut and then a second drug to kill the cysts. If left untreated complications such as liver or gut abscesses can occur.

## Giardiasis

*Giardia lamblia* is a parasite that is relatively common in travellers. Symptoms include nausea, bloating, excess gas, fatigue and intermittent diarrhoea. 'Eggy' burps are often attributed solely to giardiasis, but work in Nepal has shown that they are not specific to this infection. The parasite will eventually go away if left untreated but this can take months. The treatment of choice is Tinidazole, with Metronidazole being a second-line option.

## ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

### Air Pollution

Air pollution, particularly vehicle pollution, is an increasing problem in most of Vietnam's major cities. If you have severe respiratory problems speak with your doctor before travelling to any heavily polluted urban centres.

This pollution also causes minor respiratory problems such as sinusitis, dry throat

and irritated eyes. If troubled by the pollution leave the city for a few days and get some fresh air.

## Food

Eating in restaurants is the biggest risk factor for contracting travellers' diarrhoea. Ways to avoid it include eating only freshly cooked food, and avoiding shellfish and food that has been sitting around in buffets. Peel all fruit, cook vegetables, and soak salads in iodine water for at least 20 minutes. Eat in busy restaurants with a high turnover of customers.

## Heat

Many parts of Southeast Asia are hot and humid throughout the year. For most people it takes at least two weeks to adapt to the hot climate. Swelling of the feet and ankles is common, as are muscle cramps caused by excessive sweating. Prevent these by avoiding dehydration and excessive activity in the heat. Take it easy when you first arrive. Don't eat salt tablets (they aggravate the gut) but do drink rehydration solution and eat salty food. Treat cramps by stopping activity, resting, rehydrating with double-strength rehydration solution and gently stretching.

Dehydration is the main contributor to heat exhaustion. Symptoms include feeling weak, headache, irritability, nausea or vomiting, sweaty skin, a fast, weak pulse and a normal or slightly elevated body temperature. Treatment involves getting out of the heat and/or sun, fanning the victim and applying cool wet cloths to the skin, laying the victim flat with their legs raised and rehydrating with water containing a quarter of a teaspoon of salt per litre. Recovery is usually rapid, though it is common to feel weak for some days afterwards.

Heatstroke is a serious medical emergency. Symptoms come on suddenly and include weakness, nausea, a hot dry body with a body temperature of over 41°C, dizziness, confusion, loss of coordination, seizures and eventually collapse and loss of consciousness. Seek medical help and commence cooling by getting the person out of the heat, removing their clothes, fanning them and applying cool wet cloths or ice to their body, especially to the groin and armpits.

Prickly heat is a common skin rash in the tropics, caused by sweat being trapped under the skin. The result is an itchy rash of tiny

### DRINKING WATER

The number one rule is *be careful of the water*. Ice can be particularly risky; if you don't know for certain that the water is safe, assume the worst. However, a lot of the ice in Vietnam comes from factories introduced by the French, so it is as safe as the bottled water. Following these rules will help you avoid water-borne diseases.

- Never drink tap water.
- Bottled water is generally safe – check the seal is intact at purchase.
- Boiling water is the most efficient method of purifying it.
- The best chemical purifier is iodine. It should not be used by pregnant women or those people who suffer with thyroid problems.
- Water filters should filter out viruses. Ensure your filter has a chemical barrier such as iodine and a small pore size, ie less than four microns.

lumps. Treat by moving out of the heat and into an air-conditioned area for a few hours and by having cool showers. Creams and ointments clog the skin so they should be avoided. Locally bought prickly heat powder can be helpful.

Tropical fatigue is common in long-term expats based in the tropics. It's rarely due to disease and is caused by the climate, inadequate mental rest, excessive alcohol intake and the demands of daily work in a different culture.

### Insect Bites & Stings

Bedbugs don't carry disease but their bites are very itchy. They live in the cracks of furniture and walls and then migrate to the bed at night to feed on you. You can treat the itch with an antihistamine. You can try to prevent or minimise their bite by using your own sheet sleeping bag cover. Lice inhabit various parts of your body but most commonly your head and pubic area. Transmission is via close contact with an infected person, although body lice can come from contaminated bedclothes. They can be difficult to treat and you may need numerous applications of an antilice shampoo such as Permethrin, or in the case of body lice, with medicated creams or ointments. Pubic lice are usually contracted from sexual contact.

Ticks are contracted during walks in rural areas. They are commonly found behind the ears, on the belly and in armpits. If you have had a tick bite and experience symptoms such as a rash (at the site of the bite or elsewhere), fever or muscle aches you should see a doctor. Doxycycline prevents tick-borne diseases.

Leeches are found in humid forest areas. They do not transmit any disease but their bites are often intensely itchy for weeks afterwards and can easily become infected. Apply an iodine-based antiseptic to any leech bite to help prevent infection.

Bee and wasp stings mainly cause problems for people who are allergic to them. Anyone with a serious bee or wasp allergy should carry an injection of adrenaline (eg an EpiPen) for emergency treatment. For others pain is the main problem – apply ice to the sting and take painkillers.

Most jellyfish in Vietnamese waters are not dangerous, just irritating. First aid for jellyfish stings involves pouring vinegar onto the affected area to neutralise the poison. Do

not rub sand or water onto the stings. Take painkillers, and anyone who feels ill in any way after being stung should seek medical advice. Take local advice if there are dangerous jellyfish around and keep out of the water.

### Parasites

Numerous parasites are common in local populations in Vietnam; however, most of these are rare in travellers. The two rules to follow if you wish to avoid parasitic infections are to wear shoes and to avoid eating raw food, especially fish, pork and vegetables. A number of parasites are transmitted via the skin by walking barefoot including strongyloides, hookworm and cutaneous larva migrans.

### Skin Problems

Fungal rashes are common in humid climates. There are two common fungal rashes that affect travellers. The first occurs in moist areas that get less air such as the groin, armpits and between the toes. It starts as a red patch that slowly spreads and is usually itchy. Treatment involves keeping the skin dry, avoiding chafing and using an antifungal cream such as Clotrimazole or Lamisil. *Tinea versicolor* is also common – this fungus causes small, light-coloured patches, most commonly on the back, chest and shoulders. Consult a doctor.

Cuts and scratches become easily infected in humid climates. Take meticulous care of any cuts and scratches to prevent complications such as abscesses. Immediately wash all wounds in clean water and apply antiseptic. If you develop signs of infection (increasing pain and redness) see a doctor. Divers and surfers should be particularly careful with coral cuts as they become easily infected.

### Snakes

Vietnam is home to many species of both poisonous and harmless snakes. Assume all snakes are poisonous and never try to catch one. Always wear boots and long pants if walking in an area that may have snakes. First-aid in the event of a snakebite involves pressure immobilisation via an elastic bandage firmly wrapped around the affected limb, starting at the bite site and working up towards the chest. The bandage should not be so tight that the circulation is cut off, and the fingers or toes should be kept free so the circulation can be checked. Immobilise the limb with a splint and carry the victim to medical atten-

tion. Do not use tourniquets or try to suck the venom out. Antivenom is available only in major cities.

### Sunburn

Even on a cloudy day sunburn can occur rapidly. Always use a strong sunscreen (at least factor 30), making sure to reapply after a swim, and always wear a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses outdoors. Avoid lying in the sun during the hottest part of the day (from 10am to 2pm). If you become sunburnt stay out of the sun until you have recovered, apply cool compresses and take painkillers for the discomfort. One percent hydrocortisone cream applied twice daily is also helpful.

### WOMEN'S HEALTH

Pregnant women should receive specialised advice before travelling. The ideal time to travel is in the second trimester (between 16 and 28 weeks), during which the risk of pregnancy-related problems is at its lowest and pregnant women generally feel at their best. During the first trimester there is a risk of miscarriage and in the third trimester complications such as premature labour and high blood pressure are possible. It's wise to travel with a companion.

Always carry a list of quality medical facilities available at your destination and ensure you continue your standard antenatal care at these facilities. Avoid rural travel in areas with poor transportation and medical facilities. Most of all, ensure travel insurance covers all pregnancy-related possibilities, including premature labour.

Malaria is a high-risk disease in pregnancy. WHO recommends that pregnant women do not travel to areas that have Chloroquine-resistant malaria. None of the more effective antimalarial drugs are completely safe in pregnancy.

Travellers' diarrhoea can quickly lead to dehydration and result in inadequate blood flow to the placenta. Many of the drugs used to treat various diarrhoea bugs are not recommended in pregnancy. Azithromycin is considered safe.

In the urban areas of Vietnam, supplies of sanitary products are readily available. Birth control options may be limited so bring adequate supplies of contraception. Heat, humidity and antibiotics can all contribute to thrush. Treatment is with antifungal creams

and pessaries such as Clotrimazole. A practical alternative is a single tablet of Fluconazole (Diflucan). Urinary tract infections can be precipitated by dehydration or long bus journeys without toilet stops; bring suitable antibiotics.

### TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

A number of traditional medical treatments are practised in Vietnam. Herbal medicine, much of it imported from China, is widely available and sometimes very effective. As with Western medicine, self-diagnosis is not advisable – see a doctor. Traditional Chinese doctors are found wherever a large Chinese community exists, including HCMC, Hanoi and Hoi An.

If you visit traditional Chinese doctors, you might be surprised by what they discover about your body. For example, the doctor will almost certainly take your pulse and then may perhaps tell you that you have a 'slippery' or 'thready' pulse. They have identified more than 30 different kinds of pulse. A pulse could be empty, prison, leisurely, bowstring, irregular or even regularly irregular. The doctor may then examine your tongue to see if it is slippery, dry, pale, greasy, has a thick coating or possibly no coating at all. The doctor, having discovered your ailment, such as wet heat, as evidenced by a slippery pulse and a red greasy tongue, will prescribe the proper herbs for your condition.

Once you have a diagnosis you may be treated by moxibustion, a traditional treatment whereby various types of herbs, rolled into what looks like a ball of fluffy cotton, are held near the skin and ignited. A slight variation of this method is to place the herb on a slice of ginger and then ignite it. The idea is to apply the maximum amount of heat possible without burning the patient. This heat treatment is supposed to be very good for diseases such as arthritis.

It is common to see Vietnamese people with long bands of red welts on their necks, foreheads and backs. Don't worry, this is not some kind of hideous skin disease, but rather a treatment known as *cao gio*, literally 'scrape wind'. In traditional Vietnamese folk medicine, many illnesses are attributed to 'poisonous wind', which can be released by applying eucalyptus oil or tiger balm and scraping the skin with a spoon or coin, thus raising the welts. The results aren't pretty, but

the locals say this treatment is good for the common cold, fatigue, headaches and other ailments. Whether the cure hurts less than the disease is something one can only judge from experience.

Another technique to battle bad breezes is called *giac hoi*. This one employs suction cups, typically made of bamboo or glass, which are placed on the patient's skin. A burning piece of alcohol-soaked cotton is briefly put inside the cup to drive out the air before it is applied. As the cup cools, a partial vacuum is produced, leaving a nasty-looking but harmless red circular mark on the skin, which goes away in a few days. Looks pretty weird on the forehead though!

There is some solid evidence attesting to the efficacy of acupuncture. Some major surgical operations have been performed using acupuncture as the only anaesthetic (this works

best on the head). In this case, a small electric current (from batteries) is passed through the needles.

If done properly the practice doesn't hurt. Knowing where to insert the needle is crucial. Acupuncturists have identified more than 2000 insertion points, but only about 150 are commonly used. The exact mechanism by which it works is not fully understood. Practitioners talk of energy channels or meridians that connect the needle insertion point to the particular organ, gland or joint being treated. The acupuncture point is sometimes quite far from the area of the body being treated.

Nonsterile acupuncture needles pose a genuine health risk in this era of AIDS. You would be wise to purchase your own acupuncture needles if you plan on having this treatment in Vietnam.