

Destination Vietnam

Welcome to another world, a world where the colours are more vivid, the culture is richer, and the history more compelling. This is the world of Vietnam, the latest Asian dragon to awake from its slumber.

Nature has blessed Vietnam with a bountiful harvest. Soaring mountains, a killer coastline and radiant rice fields, Vietnam is simply stunning. Blanketed from head to toe with a patchwork of emerald-green rice paddies, timelessly tended by peasant women in conical hats, this time the brochures don't lie.

The rumble of a million motorbikes, the cries of hawkers and the buzz of business transactions are as ever-present as the tinkle of the past in the pagodas, and the swish of the scythe. Modern Asia meets medieval Asia and, in the Old Quarter of Hanoi, the two become one.

For culinary adventurers, Vietnam is a treasure trove of more than 500 different dishes. It's a wonderful world of pungent herbs and secret spices. Dip delicate spring rolls in *nuoc mam*, a fish sauce that is as compulsory as ketchup for the Vietnamese. Or play 'down-in-one' with *xeo* (rice wine), the whisky of the mountains.

'Nam to a generation, the sorrow of war weighs heavily on the consciousness of all who can remember it, but here the Viet side of the story is told at poignant sites across the country. Fiercely protective of their independence and sovereignty, the Vietnamese are graciously welcoming of foreigners who come as guests not conquerors.

Don't believe the hype. Or the propagandist party billboards that are as common as statues of 'Uncle Ho'. Believe your senses, as you discover one of the most enriching, enlivening and exotic countries on earth.



Getting Started

There's a buzz about Vietnam and we're not just talking motorbike engines. Vietnam is hot and the word is travelling far and wide. The country offers an intoxicating blend: vibrant yet traditional cities, unashamedly idyllic coastline, incredible scenery, pulsating history and culture, and a kaleidoscope of people. Vietnam has it all, but it's also raw in places, so pack some flexibility, humour and patience. Come expecting the unexpected, be ready for an adventure as much as a holiday, and Vietnam will deliver.

WHEN TO GO

When it comes to weather, it's a tough call, as Vietnam's climate is so diverse. Think frosts and occasional snow in the mountains of the north, and temperatures soaring to 40°C in the south during the dry season.

Vietnam's weather is dictated by two monsoons. The winter monsoon comes from the northeast between October and March, bringing damp and chilly winters to all areas north of Nha Trang, and dry and warm temperatures to the south. From April or May to October, the summer monsoon brings hot, humid weather to the whole country except for those areas sheltered by mountains. For the best balance, try the months of April, May or October. For those sticking to the south, November to February is dry and a touch cooler. From July to November, violent and unpredictable typhoons hit central and northern Vietnam, which can dampen the spirits of even the most enthusiastic traveller.

It gets pretty crowded from November to March and in July and August. Prices tend to peak over the Christmas and New Year period, and if you don't fancy sharing the sites with the masses, try to avoid these busy times.

Some travellers like to time a visit with Tet (Vietnamese New Year; see p64), which is the biggest festival in the calendar in late January or early February; a nice idea, but not ideal, as the whole country is on the move. High season in Vietnam runs from November to March, with a summer surge in July and August, particularly for domestic tourists. May, June and September are usually the quietest months.

COSTS & MONEY

The cost of travel in Vietnam varies from pocket change to the platinum card, depending on taste and comfort. Ascetics could just about get by on

US\$10 a day, while a conventional budget traveller can live it up from US\$20 to US\$25. Midrange travellers can have a ball from US\$50 to US\$100 a day, staying comfortably, eating well and travelling comfortably. At the top end, spending US\$200 or more a day, anything is possible.

Foreigners are frequently overcharged, particularly when buying souvenirs and occasionally in restaurants. Rapacious bus and taxi drivers will often bump up their rates to several times the Vietnamese price. However, don't assume that everyone is trying to rip you off. Despite widespread poverty, many Vietnamese will only ask the local price for many goods and services.

The official currency may be Vietnam dong (d), but the US dollar is pretty widely accepted. In tourist centres, most hotels will accept either, while other businesses may prefer dong. As you venture off the trail, make sure you are packing plenty of local currency. Rooms start from as little as US\$3 to US\$5 in busy tourist centres. Spending US\$10 to US\$20 will boost the comforts quickly, and rooms will generally include air-con, satellite TV, fridge and hot water. Make the step up to US\$50 and three-star frills are available. At US\$100 and above, it's five-star territory. Don't be afraid to negotiate for a discount if it is low season or if numbers are down.

Dining out is where Vietnam comes into its own. Surfing the street stalls and markets, meals can be found for between US\$0.50 and US\$1. Local restaurants are more comfortable and you can eat well for between US\$1 and US\$3.50. Then there are the Vietnamese gourmet restaurants, where you can still only spend around US\$10 with drinks; with the right wines you could easily spend US\$50.

Domestic flights are relatively expensive compared with some countries in the region. A one-way ticket from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) is around US\$110. Trains are great value and overnight sleepers are a good way to cover long distances like Hanoi to Huế or HCMC to Nha Trang.

Bus travel is a bargain by Western standards. Public buses between major destinations have fixed fares, but when travelling by bus in remote areas, overcharging is the rule. For maximum flexibility, many travellers prefer to rent a car or 4WD and go exploring with a guide. Costs run from about US\$25 around town to as much as US\$100 a day upcountry (including the driver's food and lodging). A guide costs from US\$20 to US\$40, depending on the destination.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Vietnam: A Traveller's Literary Companion (1996), edited by Nguyen Qui Doc, is an engaging collection of stories by various Vietnamese writers, ranging from folklore and the tragedy of war to love and family ties, all set against evocative backdrops from Hanoi to Dalat.

Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind and Spirit (2003), edited by Nguyen Van Huy, is a beautifully shot photographic journey that gets to the heart of Vietnam. It's put together by locals and residents of Vietnam and offers an intimate portrait of the country today.

Fragrant Palm Leaves (1998) is a remarkable, poetic collection of journal entries by Zen monk and peace crusader Thich Nhat Hanh, written in Vietnam and the USA during the 1960s. As the American War in Vietnam rages on, he tries to make sense of it all, and there are some vivid scenes from South Vietnam in the 1960s.

Sparring with Charlie: Motorbiking down the Ho Chi Minh Trail (1996), by Christopher Hunt, is a light-hearted travelogue about modern Vietnam that takes the reader off the tourist trail and into some less-travelled parts of the country.

HOW MUCH?

Restaurant meal US\$3-10

Hotel room with air-con US\$10-20

Internet access US\$0.20-0.50 per hour

Short *cydo* ride US\$0.50

Two-kilometre taxi ride US\$1-2

See Climate Charts (p464) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

Bring as little as possible, as Vietnam has pretty much anything you can find back home but at lower prices. All the soaps and smellies are cheap and plentiful, and clothing, shoes and backpacks are all manufactured in Vietnam and available at a snip. Tampons are available in all major towns and cities, but not in more remote areas.

A Swiss army knife or equivalent comes in handy, but you don't need 27 separate functions, just one blade and an opener. A torch (flashlight) and compass are also useful.

Other handy things to bring are business cards, as Vietnamese deal them out like a deck of cards; ear plugs to block the ever-present soundtrack that is Vietnam; a universal plug adaptor; a rain cover for the backpack; a sweater for the highlands and air-con bus trips; and mosquito repellent to keep the bugs at bay.

Finally, the secret of successful packing: plastic bags, as not only do they keep things separate and clean, but also dry. That means a lot at the end of a long, wet day.

TOP 10



VIETNAM EXPERIENCES

Travel is not just about visiting, it's about experiencing. It's not enough to tick off the sights and charge down the coast between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). Try to get beneath the skin of the country: this can take many shapes or forms. It might be a culinary adventure or a walk on the wild side. It could be a cultural encounter or perhaps spiritual enlightenment. It could be you.

- 1 Count the number of locals crammed on to one motorbike in the countryside
- 2 Get the measure of a tailor, the only time you want to be stitched up in Vietnam
- 3 Haggle with a cyclo driver about the price before enjoying the ride
- 4 Cross the road like a local in a busy city
- 5 Meet the minorities, a multicoloured mosaic of mountain people
- 6 Play *tram phan tram* (100%) or bottoms up with the locals in a backstreet bar
- 7 See the sunrise over the South China Sea from a beautiful beach
- 8 Slurp a steaming bowl of *pho* at a street stall
- 9 Take some time out in a temple, the spiritual sanctuary of the Vietnamese
- 10 Turn down the volume and drift down a river by sampan

MUST-SEE MOVIES

Filmmakers have found a rich vein of material in the tales of Vietnamese history, and foreign and local directors have tapped it well. There are some moody, atmospheric movies set in a time before the torment, a whole host of films dealing with the American experience in Vietnam, and some that deal with both Americans and Vietnamese coming to terms with life after so much death.

- 1 *Apocalypse Now* (1979) Director: Francis Ford Coppola
- 2 *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) Director: Oliver Stone
- 3 *Cyclo* (1995) Director: Tran Anh Hung
- 4 *The Deer Hunter* (1978) Director: Michael Cimino
- 5 *Heaven and Earth* (1993) Director: Oliver Stone
- 6 *The Lover* (1992) Director: Jean-Jacques Annaud
- 7 *Platoon* (1986) Director: Oliver Stone
- 8 *The Quiet American* (2002) Director: Phillip Noyce
- 9 *The Scent of Green Papaya* (1992) Director: Tran Anh Hung
- 10 *We Were Soldiers* (2002) Director: Randall Wallace

TOP EATS, TOP DRINKS

Vietnam's cuisine is full of sensual flavours, subtle aromas and super-fresh ingredients. *Bia hoi* (beer) is the new tea, but in the mountains it is all about *xeo* (rice wine), medicine to the minorities.

- 1 **Bia hoi** The world's cheapest draught beer keeps on flowing
- 2 **Ca phe** Caffeine cravers unite, Vietnam's coffee has a real kick
- 3 **Cao lau** Hoi An's answer to fried noodles, made with water from a well
- 4 **Nem** Spring rolls are the country's most famous export, fried or fresh
- 5 **Nuoc mam** Fermented fish sauce, the stinky secret of Vietnamese cuisine
- 6 **Pho bo** Rice-noodle soup with beef, the meal that built a nation
- 7 **Rau muong** Just the thing on a glorious morning, with a dash of garlic and chilli
- 8 **Thit cho** Dog lover has a whole different meaning in this part of the world
- 9 **333 Ba ba ba**, learn to count with the leading local beer in the south
- 10 **Xeo** The local firewater, particularly potent is the 'five times a night' variety

In a similar vein is *Ten Years After* (1987) by Tim Page. This impressive book boasts '12-months' worth of photos taken 10 years after the war'. The author also returned to Vietnam to write *Derailed in Uncle Ho's Victory Garden* (1995), the story of his quest to erect a war memorial in the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) to honour the fallen war correspondents on all sides.

A Dragon Apparent (1952) is Norman Lewis' fascinating account of his journeys through Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in 1950, and is a good insight into the last days of French rule.

Karin Muller's *Hitchhiking Vietnam* (1998) is a travelogue detailing one woman's tumultuous seven-month journey through Vietnam.

Part memoir and part travel narrative, *Catfish and Mandala* (1999) is Vietnamese-American Andrew X Pham's fascinating account of his escape from the war-torn Vietnam of 1977 and his subsequent return two decades later, equipped with a bicycle and a need to work out his mixed-up cultural identity.

The ultimate spoof guidebook, *Phaic Tan: Sunstroke on a Shoestring* (2004) makes fun of us all. No-one is spared, not the locals, not the travellers, not even hallowed guidebook authors. An absolute must for anyone travelling through Vietnam and the region beyond.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Jewels of the Mekong Delta (www.travelmedia.com/mekong) Features travel information and news about countries along the Mekong River.

Living in Vietnam (www.livinginvietnam.com) One of the most popular expat websites on Vietnam and a good source of information on settling down here, including job adverts.

Lonely Planet (lonelyplanet.com) Provides summaries on travelling to Vietnam, the Thorn Tree forum travel news and loads of links to other useful travel resources.

Things Asian (www.thingsasian.com) Bubbling with information on the culture of Vietnam, this site has everything, including architecture, literature and fashion.

Vietnam Adventures Online (www.vietnamadventures.com) Another fine site full of practical travel information that features monthly adventures and special travel deals.

Vietnam Online (www.vietnamonline.com) Loaded with useful travel lore and handy coverage of employment and business opportunities in Vietnam.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

THE GREAT OCEAN ROAD Three to Four Weeks / Hanoi to HCMC

Acclimatise in the capital, **Hanoi** (p86); see the sights, wine and dine and prepare for the long ride south. Head to nearby **Ninh Binh** (p186), gateway to the striking scenery of **Tam Coc** (p187) and **Hoa Lu** (p188), and the funky gibbons of **Cuc Phuong National Park** (p190).

Experience **Hue** (p209), imperial capital of old, then head up and over (or under) the mighty Hai Van Pass to **Danang** (p229), gateway to **China Beach** (p237). **Hoi An** (p239) is the place for some time out – sightseeing, shopping and sunning yourself on the beach.

Head to the golden sands of **Quy Nhon** (p277) for some relaxation. Enter **Nha Trang** (p281), the biggest, and brashest, beach resort in Vietnam, and try a hedonistic boat trip to nearby islands. If it's all too much, carry on south to **Mui Ne Beach** (p300), a tropical idyll with smart resorts, blissed-out budget options, towering dunes and crazy kitesurfing.

Finish up in **Ho Chi Minh City** (HCMC, p331), where you can indulge in sophisticated shopping, delectable dining and the liveliest night scene in the country.

Many tour companies offer this trip in a two-week timeframe, but this barely allows enough time to unpack your bags in each place. Train, bus or opt for a car and driver for this 1710km epic.



THE WORKS

One Month or More / HCMC to Sapa

Run this one in reverse, start out in the cauldron of commerce that is **Ho Chi Minh City** (p331). Hit the markets, browse a couple of museums and go underground into the alternate world that is the **Cu Chi Tunnels** (p378). Carry on to **Tay Ninh** (p381), headquarters of the Cao Dai sect and its rococo temple, for a morning service.

Dip into the Mekong Delta for a day or two. Try an overnight or two at **Can Tho** (p421), the social and commercial heart of the region, and take to the water to cruise through the watery world of the floating markets.

Head up into the central highlands to the romantic hill station of **Dalat** (p307). Back down on the coast, take in the stops from the Great Ocean Road itinerary (see opposite), including the beach resort of **Nha Trang** (p281), the cultured charmer that is **Hoi An** (p239) and the old imperial capital of **Hue** (p209). North of Hue is the former Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) that divided North and South Vietnam. All around this area are famous sites from the American War, including **Khe Sanh Combat Base** (p206) and the **Vinh Moc Tunnels** (p203). All aboard the night train to **Hanoi** (p86), gateway to the north, or cruise up the coast checking out the up and coming beach destination of **Dong Hoi** (p197).

To the east of the capital lies **Halong Bay** (p136), with more than 3000 limestone outcrops dotting the scenic bay. Cruise through the bay to the rugged, foreboding **Cat Ba Island** (p143) before looping back to the capital through **Haiphong** (p132), for the feel of old Hanoi.

Take a night train to **Sapa** (p172), unofficial capital of the northwest hill-tribe region and a beautiful base for hiking and biking.



Trains and buses stop at most destinations, but to cover this huge distance a Hue–Hanoi flight could save time. Travel by boat around the Halong Bay area – the only way to get a good look at the crazy karsts.

ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

MINORITY REPORT

Northern Vietnam is a world unto itself, a land of brooding mountains, a mosaic of ethnic minorities, a region of overwhelming beauty. Hit the road by 4WD or motorbike for an adventure more than a holiday.

Leaving the capital, head west to the villages of **Mai Chau** (p164), which are home to the White Thai people and a perfect introduction to the life of the minorities. Northwest of here, where the road begins to climb into the Hoang Lien Mountains (Tonkin Alps), a logical stop is **Son La** (p165).

Dien Bien Phu (p168) is a name that resonates with history; it was here that the French colonial story ended with their overwhelming defeat at the hands of the Viet Minh in one of the most celebrated military victories in Vietnamese history.

Climb over the mighty **Tram Ton Pass** (p175) to **Sapa** (p172). This is the premier destination in the northwest, thanks to the infinite views (on a clear day!), an amazing array of minority peoples and some of the region's most colourful markets. Bail out here by train from **Lao Cai** (p179), or continue east to **Bac Ha** (p180), home to the Flower H'mong. Motorbikers can continue on to **Ha Giang** (p182), a realm of mythical landscapes and uncharted territory. From here head to the lovely lakes of **Ba Be National Park** (p157) before heading north east to **Cao Bang** (p154), a province peppered with karsts, caves and beautiful waterfalls.

One to Three Weeks / Hanoi to Cao Bang

The snaking roads on this journey are some of the most treacherous in Vietnam, and landslips and floods are common. The motorbiking here is pure heaven for seasoned two-wheelers, but for the majority a 4WD is the sanest way to go.



MEKONG MEANDERS

Two Weeks / Ben Tre to Phu Quoc Island

With their own wheels, travellers can tear up the three-day tourist trail through the Mekong byways and delve deeper into the delta to be rewarded with its rhythms, fragrances and colours. For anyone battling the insane highways of the delta by motorbike, a helmet is a wise accessory (and required by law!)

Beginning in **Ben Tre** (p407), take a boat trip to the islands around Vinh Long for an overnight in a bungalow set in a small longan orchard. From Ben Tre, a trek to **Can Tho** (p421) takes you to the home of the famous Ho Chi Minh 'Tin Man' statue and the delta's most cosmopolitan and commercial city. Take a detour to **Soc Trang** (p427), home to a sizeable Cambodian community and its wonderful *wats* (temples).

Float by boat through the local floating markets before moving on to charming **Chau Doc** (p436), a border-crossing town for those pushing westward into Cambodia via river or road. Check out the views of the pancake delta from the heights of **Sam Mountain** (p440).

The departure from the road more travelled starts here, heading southwest to **Ba Chuc** (p443) and its bone pagoda, and then through **Ha Tien** (p443), another border town with a beach to boot. Even more bucolic a beach can be found at **Hon Chong** (p447), where the sunset meets the sea and the rocky coastal geography contrasts sharply with the sandy beaches east of Ho Chi Minh City.

From here, travellers can take the highway along the southern edge of the delta region to **Rach Gia** (p448), the jumping-off point for those bound for **An Thoi** (p452) on serene **Phu Quoc Island** (p452). Phu Quoc affords rest and relaxation, *nuoc mam* (fish sauce) and forest reserves – a spectacular end to the Mekong Delta experience.



Down to Chau Doc, public transport is a breeze; after that, it's sparse and requires flexibility. Flights from Phu Quoc Island to HCMC run daily; if flying back to HCMC, book return flights well before hitting the delta to guarantee a quick getaway.

TAILORED TRIPS

NATURAL HIGHS

For adrenaline junkies or nature lovers, Vietnam has plenty to offer. Start out with a visit to **Halong Bay** (p136) for some sea kayaking among the karsts. Experienced climbers with their own gear might leave the water far below, as these limestone outcrops offer some excellent ascents, plus there is organised climbing around **Cat Ba Island** (p143).

Further northeast in **Bai Tu Long Bay** (p148), take to the water by local boat to see the 'new' Halong Bay without the tourists. Boating, kayaking, even surfing, are possibilities here and there are some beautiful beaches on Quan Lan's east coast.

Heading south to central Vietnam, **Bach Ma National Park** (p225) is well geared up for walkers and has a series of lush trails to secluded waterfalls. Down on the coast below Bach Ma is **China Beach** (p237).

Go under the waves at **Nha Trang** (p281), dive capital of Vietnam, before heading up towards the hills of the central highlands. Wind up, or down, in **Dalat** (p307), a base for abseiling, cycling or rock climbing. Don't forget two of Vietnam's best-known national parks: the birding hot spot of **Cat Tien** (p392), with a population of rare Javan rhinos, and **Yok Don** (p323), home to elephants, elephants and more elephants.



CHAM CHARM, BEACH BLISS

Start in **Mui Ne Beach** (p300), one of the prettiest of Vietnam's beach resorts. Windsurf, sandboard, kite sail or just chill out before heading up the Cham coast of culture. Veer off the trail to the atmospheric Cham tower of **Po Ro Me** (p297), a home to bats on an isolated hill. Continue north to Thap Cham to visit the famous **Po Klong Garai Cham Towers** (p296) from the 13th century.

Further up the coast is **Nha Trang** (p281), Vietnam's honky-tonk beach capital, but you can also dose up on culture at the **Po Nagar Cham Towers** (p283). Carrying up the coast are Cham towers and beaches in abundance. Keep up with the Chams at **Tuy Hoa** (p279), **Quy Nhon** (p271) and **Tam Ky** (p266). Break for the beach at **Doc Let** (p280), **Whale Island** (p280) or **My Khe** (p270).

Head into **Hoi An** (p239), a charming old port town and a base for the Cham finalé. Make a day trip to the former Cham capital of **My Son** (p262), spectacularly situated under the shadow of Cat's Tooth Mountain. Finally romp into Danang to put it all into perspective at the **Museum of Cham Sculpture** (p231), home to the world's finest collection of Cham sculpture.

Oh, and by the way, central Vietnam has a 30km-long beach running from Danang to Hoi An. Call it **China Beach** (p237) to the north, **Cua Dai Beach** (p239) to the south – either way it's paradise and the perfect end to this trip.



Snapshot

Vietnamese society has undergone a profound transition in the past decade, even if the politics hasn't come along for the ride. Communism, the mantra for a generation, has taken a back seat to capitalism and the rush to embrace the market. Following the Chinese road to riches espoused by Deng Xiaoping, the Vietnamese have taken the brakes off the economy while keeping a firm hand on the steering wheel. The result is a contradictory blend of ultraliberal economics and ultraconservative politics that has left many Vietnamese confused about the country in which they live. They have the freedom to make money but not the basic freedom to voice a political opinion. And the more the average Vietnamese person engages with the outside world – through business, tourism, the internet – the harder this paradox is to swallow.

For now, the economy keeps the communist circus on the road. It's one of the new generation of Asian tigers, growing at more than 8% a year, one of the few countries capable of keeping the Chinese juggernaut in their sights. Political power may be held by a small elite, but economic power is firmly in the hands of the middle classes. The government is buying the popularity it hasn't tested at the ballot box by embarking on a building spree of immense proportions. Roads, bridges, tunnels, civic buildings – the scale is enormous, but it has to be, otherwise questions could be asked.

It is not only the government that is spending, not to mention *making* money like there is no tomorrow. International investors can't get enough of the place and joint ventures are springing up all over the country. The Socialist Republic of Vietnam (Vietnam's official name) was welcomed back to the world stage in 2006. The country played host to the APEC summit in November and became a fully fledged member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). It's a world away from collectivisation and Communist International.

The minorities are revolting, or that is what the central government seems to think. Vietnamisation is in full swing in the central highlands and the northwest; when the central highlanders said enough is enough, their protests provoked a repressive reaction. Engaging the minority people on equal terms is something the party has yet to grapple with. As a growing population seeks pastures new, there is a chance some of these cultures will be swamped, quite literally, as the power-hungry Vietnamese are damming the rivers like eager beavers.

Marx and Lenin may have been laid to rest in their homeland, but they are alive and well in Vietnam. Just how tenable this is as Vietnam engages with its neighbours and plugs into the world economy is anyone's guess. Whatever the Vietnamese may make of communism in private, Ho Chi Minh remains a man for all seasons. Politics aside, he was a nationalist and patriot who delivered Vietnam its independence. Come what may to the party, Ho's place in history as a hero is assured.

FAST FACTS

Population:	84 million
Life expectancy:	68 for men, 73 for women
Infant mortality:	30 per 1000 births
GDP:	US\$53.1 billion
Adult literacy rate:	94%
Annual rice production:	32.3 million tonnes
Tonnage of bombs dropped on Vietnam:	15 million
Number of motorbikes:	10 million and counting
Litres of <i>nuoc mam</i> (fish sauce) produced per year:	200 million
Members of Communist Party:	2 million

The Authors



NICK RAY

Coordinating Author, Hanoi, Northeast Vietnam, Northwest Vietnam

Nick comes from Watford, the sort of town that makes you want to travel. He has been visiting Vietnam for more than a decade, as a traveller and later leading people astray as an adventure-travel tour leader. Living in Phnom Penh, Vietnam is his backyard of sorts and he has co-authored *Cycling Vietnam, Laos & Cambodia* as well as the *Cambodia* and the new *Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos & the Greater Mekong* books. Nick has been to almost every province from north to south, but he is most at home in the mountains of the north.

Coordinating Author's Favourite Trip

Taking on the northwest mountains on a Minsk is one of the most memorable road trips in Asia. It's hard to leave Hanoi (p86), but the scenery around Mai Chau (p164) makes it easier. The hairpins dropping into the Muong Thanh Valley around Dien Bien Phu (p168) are hard to forget, but the most beautiful road has to be the Tram Ton Pass (p175) into Sapa (p172). It keeps getting better as you go east to Ha Giang (p182) and the incredible road from Dong Van (p183) to Meo Vac (p183). Cross-country to Ba Be National Park (p157) is a rollercoaster, especially in the dark, though 'the road of certain death', a small path along a cliffside, has been submerged by a new reservoir.



PETER DRAGICEVICH

North-Central Vietnam, Central Vietnam, South-Central Coast, Central Highlands

Peter's first taste of Vietnam was in the restaurants of Melbourne and Sydney. Always happy to travel on his stomach, Vietnam was a dream assignment. Over the course of a dozen years working for newspapers and magazines in his native New Zealand and Australia, Peter's covered everything from honeymooning in Verona to gay resorts in Fiji. This is the fifth book he's co-authored for Lonely Planet.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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REGIS ST LOUIS

Ho Chi Minh City, Around Ho Chi Minh City, Mekong Delta

Regis first caught the Vietnam buzz when he researched the country for a social studies class at St Benedict Elementary School. Since then he's delved deeply into Vietnam, reading extensively about its rich cultures and tumultuous history and travelling countless dusty roads in search of hidden pagodas and the perfect bowl of *pho*. Regis has worked on numerous Lonely Planet guidebooks, and his travel essays have appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*, among other publications. He lives in New York City.

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