

Vietnam

Made famous by the war with the United States of America which inspired films such as "Apocalypse Now" and "Rambo," Vietnam is a fascinating country which can be the destination of an unforgettable vacation.

Thanks to extraordinary climatic variation, Vietnam can be visited at any time of year. In its 1600 kilometers (1000 miles) from north to south, this country encompasses an incredible variety of landscapes and people: the Mekong delta, the beaches at Mui Ne and Nha Trang, the south-central coast, the historical cities of Hoi An and Hue (an UNESCO world heritage site) the mountains near Sapa, not to mention the 3000 islands in Halong Bay (itself having been recognized by UNESCO). The coast can be entirely traveled by bus, with the due stops obviously, but one should be prepared for a bumpy ride and for the possibility of flooding which can occur where the streets are at sea level.

If you ask a Vietnamese person their religion, they will almost definitely respond "Buddhist." More precisely, they are Mahayana Buddhists. This type of Buddhism comes from China and combines three philosophical doctrines: Confucianism, Taoism, and Cao Daiism. The temple of the latter can be found in Long Hoa near Ho Chi Minh city.

If you go to Vietnam, you definitely don't go for cities with great nightlife, with the exception of Ho Chi Minh City or Saigon as it is also known. Vietnam's largest city is always filled to the brim with people. The traffic, to put it lightly, is unbelievable. Just crossing the street is only for the brave as waves of motorbikes with up to 3 or 4 people (counting children) flow by. Here, many people wear anti-smog masks and the young women seem to be on their way to a royal gala with their forearm-length gloves. It's said that they protect the skin from the sun as tans are not considered fashionable.

The Vietnam War is one of the saddest chapters in the nation's history: The Cu Chi galleries keep its memories alive. The underground tunnels used by the Viet Cong during the war to catch the enemy by surprise are 250 km (150 miles) long and represent a true underground fortress. They are furnished with all the modern conveniences, if that's what you consider kitchens, dormitories, armories, etc. Anyone who wants to visit one should keep in mind the low ceilings, and it wouldn't be a bad idea to go on a diet to get a little slimmer. Be ready to get on all fours and watch out for attacks of claustrophobia. And to think that the Viet Cong could stay there for months!

One image that will remain in your head after a trip to Vietnam is that of outdoor markets. These are places where you can get a taste of the lives of the local population by watching people's expressions while they examine, choose, and purchase their merchandise. When you go to the Mekong delta, Hoi An, or the northwest of the country, you'll see that everyone is united by one common denominator: "body gestures"

The most visited place in southern Vietnam is definitely Cai Rai in the Mekong Delta. If you want to fully appreciate its hectic hustle and bustle you need to get there early in the morning. Hundreds of watercraft come here everyday, ready to trade merchandise. Some boats that are just passing by seem like they're going to tip over from the enormous weight of the goods they're carrying. But in the middle of all this pandemonium it's easy to navigate, in fact you can find the items you're looking for because they will be raised up on a perch like a pirate's flag near the vessel that's selling them.

The alluvial plain formed by the Mekong delta, one of the longest rivers in the world, is Vietnam's driving force, present day Vietnam's heart and soul. Here sugarcane and coconuts are grown, alongside a small production of peanut brittle and incense. This area is called "the bread-basket" because it produces an amount of rice large enough to feed the country's whole population and to make Vietnam the world's second largest rice exporter behind Thailand. The area's inhabitants have learned to live with the frequent flooding by building their typical floating houses. Villages with thousands of canals can be crossed in complete silence as long as you hold your nose to avoid getting a whiff of the noxious smell. There's nothing mystical in this sight, it could be described as surreal: the houses are simple boxed containers with sheet metal roofs on which stand triumphant TV antennas while in the distance lies a forest of mangrove and bamboo where white storks have found their natural habitat.

The process of modernization can also be easily seen in Sapa and Bac. The well-known crowded markets, full of ethnic minorities like the H'Mong (narrow eyes and a golden complexion), are a good place to buy anything and everything. Here you can find goods from radios that make terrible screeching noises to boots; from watches that don't work to the plastic sandals that by now have taken the place of the traditional ones made of natural fiber. Besides these and the tourists, the markets remain quite authentic. They are true parades of colors, a real treat for your eyes which will be pleasantly stunned by this astounding multi-colored whirlwind. The H'Mong represent the largest minority of the 54 different ethnic groups in Vietnam. They can be found between Sapa and Bac and the Chinese border. At first they are hard to distinguish but it becomes easier if you get familiar with their clothes. The scenery of these highlands is some of the best in the country; entire hillsides used for rice cultivation and small villages scattered among the valleys.

In the north, unlike the south, the people are less social, more reserved and less curious about the presence of foreigners which by now has become commonplace. Walking through the streets filled with cafés you'll also notice that many people, especially those of the younger generation, have been influenced by western fashion and customs.

In Hanoi the old town is also known as "the 36 streets" and each one sells a different good, definitely a one of a kind place. It is a must-see and don't miss the opportunity to get lost in its labyrinth of streets. Here in Hanoi it has become increasingly difficult to get a glimpse of the typical cone-shaped hat which nowadays can only be seen on elderly women. However we can still hope that next time we won't see a H'Mong talking on a mobile phone...