



VIETNAM

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"Vietnam is a country with a past as rich as the soil in the blazing green deltas. This past reads like a romantic legend, full of heroic struggles and astounding victories whereby this small country retained its culture, absorbing and adapting the strengths of its foes but never losing its traditions or sense of history."

Excerpted from the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism Website, 2004

Stretching nearly 2,000 kilometers, over 1,200 miles, from the misty mountains on the Chinese border to the fertile Mekong Delta, Vietnam is one of the most beautiful countries in Asia. Vietnam offers an indescribable sense of history and struggle. Despite the country's turbulent history, its people remain friendly, open and hospitable. You will find many smiling Vietnamese faces welcoming you with politeness, the likes of which you've never seen before.

Unlike the surrounding countries in Southeast Asia, Vietnam's culture was sculptured by China, not India. The largest single minority group is Chinese, but the country offers a wide mix of more than 60 ethnic groups. By striving to understand the Vietnamese and their culture, your everyday life will be simplified and your business relationships will be greatly enhanced.

Vietnam got its independence from the French in 1954, when the country was divided into the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, headed by Ho Chi Minh, and the Republic of South Vietnam. The entire country was eventually united after the Vietnam War.

In 1986, the government launched the Doi Moi, a plan that would make Vietnam's presence known in the global market and regenerate the country. Much progress has since been made in decreasing inflation, promoting economic growth and upgrading the general standard of living in Vietnam, especially in such fields as education and health care. Vietnam has proven itself to be a versatile nation. One can expect a highly organized and progressive atmosphere as this country strives to develop into an industrialized nation.

The population of Vietnam is around 82 million. Today, Ho Chi Minh City has almost seven million residents, while the capital city, Hanoi, has a population of close to four million.

Ho Chi Minh City, formerly known as Saigon prior to 1975, is the largest city in Vietnam. It is also the nation's foremost commercial and industrial center. It is interesting to note that many people, even officials, still call the downtown area of the city "Saigon." When one mentions the city's name on official business documents such as letters or correspondence, though, it is proper to refer to it as District One or Ho Chi Minh City, that way no one will be confused or insulted.

Climate

Vietnam has a typical monsoon climate, with temperatures that vary depending on location. In southern Vietnam, there is a dry season that lasts from December until April or May. The most temperate weather in the north is during the warm season that lasts from October to December, but during those months there is nearly constant misting in the air. In the south it is most pleasant during spring and fall.

The Culture

Vietnam is home to a peculiar culture where characteristics such as respect and harmony are among the most socially revered. For example, the Vietnamese have a tendency to say "yes" to a question even though they may not mean it. This is a typical example of Vietnamese courtesy. It is considered rude to say "no" to someone, so many will avoid that in order to be polite.

Similarly, the Vietnamese do not stare directly into your eyes while conversing with you. This is done out of respect. You may also find soliciting on the streets. Bargaining for goods, services or transportation is a common practice, so be prepared. Perseverance and a positive outlook are necessary tools in this region of the world.

You will no doubt find the Vietnamese to be hard workers who wish only to create and maintain social harmony. One of the most highly regarded personality traits in Vietnam is self discipline. Do not expect to see many arguments or confrontations, but be alert as you could be acting in a disagreeable manner without realizing it. The Vietnamese would rather avoid a discomforting display than upset you or someone else. In this region, it is considered rude to brag or boast, so try to remain outwardly modest.

Business Customs & Etiquette

In general, foreign nationals are viewed in a good light in Vietnam. Business people are familiar with doing business with foreigners. Few Vietnamese businessmen and women speak English, but many have translators. If your business associate is using a translator, be sure to keep your focus on the person with whom you are meeting, not the translator.

You should carry many business cards as the Vietnamese are fond of exchanging them. Shaking hands is the common greeting although women do not traditionally shake hands with each other or with men. A foreigner should only shake hands with a woman if she extends her hand first. Pointing the sole of one's foot at another person while sitting and any touching of someone's head is also considered rude.

Dress during the hot summer months is often a shirt and tie, but suits are commonly worn for official functions. Women should dress modestly because clothes that are casual illustrate a lack of respect. When in doubt, wear more conservative clothing. It is advisable to cover arms and legs in the evenings against biting insects. A lightweight raincoat is a good idea in the rainy season. During the winter months warm clothing is needed for visiting the north of Vietnam. Visitors to Buddhist countries should not wear shorts, short skirts or other revealing clothing when visiting religious buildings and shoes should be removed before entering a private home and certain religious sites.

In Vietnam, people entertain guests frequently. However, in many cases, business dinners may not be conducted until a solid relationship has been made. The

Vietnamese tend to entertain lavishly. Never offer to pay for such a meal. It is a better idea to reciprocate by inviting your host to an equally fine meal at a later date. Do not try to outdo your host or flaunt private wealth.

Language

Vietnamese is the national language, and the spoken language differs minimally throughout the entire country. Because Vietnamese is a tonal language, it can be difficult to grasp in the early stages of learning. Each syllable is inflected by a particular tone, and this differentiates the meaning of each word. Words that sound the same, then, may have several different meanings. In time you will find pronunciation easier, and tutors are cheap and readily available. English is not widely spoken except by higher Vietnamese officials and internationally orientated business persons. French is spoken by the older generations, as is some Russian.

Entertainment

If you are interested in seeing any of the famous sites of Vietnam, there are several right in Ho Chi Minh City. Many go to Thien Hau Pagoda and the former presidential palace. If you have time, you may consider a trip on the Mekong River. In Hanoi, some of the sites are Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, the one-pillared Pagoda, Reunification Park and the Temple of Literature.

There are also a number of night- and music-specific clubs in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi.

Local Cuisine

There are many options for those dining out in the cities. While there is always plenty of native Vietnamese fare, such as *pho*, or Hanoi Beef Soup, many of the upscale restaurants offer international cuisine. Both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City have restaurants that specialize in serving Chinese, French, Indian, Italian and Japanese food. While the usual Vietnamese diet consists mainly of rice and fish, this does not mean that the menu is limited. There are over 500 distinctive traditional Vietnamese dishes, so do not be afraid to try something new.

Food is often placed on dishes in the center of the table and each person usually serves him or herself, though the host may serve guests. The Vietnamese typically use chopsticks and rice bowls at most meals. The rice bowl is held in the hand; it is considered lazy to eat from a rice bowl that is set on the table and it is considered wasteful to leave any rice in one's rice bowl. Also, it is not appropriate to set your chopsticks in the rice bowl; instead, rest them across the top of the bowl. Beverages are not generally served until the meal is finished. Beer, coffee and hot tea is the most common of beverages.

It is not advisable to drink tap water in Vietnam, but bottled mineral water is safe and available everywhere. Ice in drinks is generally fine in good standard hotels and restaurants, but it is best to avoid it on street stalls or in country areas.

Currency

The currency in Vietnam is the Vietnamese Dong. Banks are open Monday to Friday, and some on Saturday morning. Travellers cheques can be exchanged at banks and some exchange bureaus, but can be difficult to change outside of the major cities. Visa and MasterCard are accepted in most hotels, restaurants and shops, but US

currency, cash, is the most reliable form of money to carry and use for purchases. You can find ATM machines in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, as well.

Shopping

Handicrafts and mementos to look for in Vietnam include lacquerware, silk, conical hats, woodcarvings, hill tribe fabrics, embroidery, marble, ceramics, silver jewelry, antique watches and paintings. Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi have the best choice when it comes to shopping but Hoi An in the center of Vietnam is also a very good place to hunt for bargains.

Health

No vaccinations are required except for yellow fever if you are coming from an area where the disease is present. However visitors should be inoculated against typhoid, cholera, hepatitis A & B, tetanus and polio. Malaria is present in most of the region and it is advisable to take precautions especially if traveling off the beaten track.

Recent outbreaks of avian flu have resulted in fatalities and travelers are reminded to avoid situations where they may be exposed to live poultry or birds.

Visas

All visitors are required to have a valid visa to enter Vietnam. A one-month tourist visa is usually sufficient for most visitors though it is possible to arrange 3-month and 6-month multiple entry visas for regular visitors. All visitors must obtain visa approval from the Vietnamese Immigration Department before a visa is issued.

Whether you are traveling for business or pleasure to Vietnam, you will find a budding, exhilarating and thriving country. Recently a US airline flew its first commercial flight from San Francisco to Ho Chi Minh City in nearly 30 years, which means the possibilities for growth and development could be endless!