



choice
TRAVEL

Destination Guide: Vietnam

What to know before you go
Essential preparation and planning tips
Accommodation and transport

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Who is CHOICE? Set up by consumers for consumers, **CHOICE** is the [consumer advocate](#) that provides Australians with information and advice, free from commercial bias.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

OVERVIEW

Best time to go, culture, language, health, safety, laws, watchouts, scams, emergency contacts and more.

Travel-size tips

- › Aussies can [fly to Vietnam](#) in as little as 7.5 hours.
- › The best time to visit is in spring or autumn.
- › You'll need a [visa](#) to visit Vietnam.

Know before you go

- › Scams and petty theft are common, but violent crime is rare. Always check the latest safety advice from [smartraveller.gov.au](#).
- › [Driving](#) is only permitted on a Vietnamese licence.
- › See a doctor about [recommended vaccinations](#) as early as possible before your trip.

Best time to go

The weather in Vietnam varies greatly from the north to the south of the country, with added quirks in the timing of the wet season along the central coast.

Southern Vietnam

- › Dry season: December–May
- › Wet season: May–November

Northern Vietnam

- › Dry season: September–February
- › Wet season: March–August

Central coast

- › Nha Trang's wet season: November–December
- › Hue and Da Nang's wet season: September–February

If you're planning to visit a particular area of Vietnam, check the [expected weather](#) for your dates of travel.

[Lonely Planet](#) recommends the best time to visit Hanoi is October to April, the best time to visit Ho Chi Minh City is January to March and the best time to visit Nha Trang is February to June. If you want to see the whole country, there's no perfect time to go, but spring (April to June) or autumn (September to November) is probably best.

- › Monsoon rains can cause flash flooding, delaying transport and cutting off remote villages.

- › Temperatures can reach as high as 40°C in summer, particularly in the south. Summers are generally humid and sticky.
- › Winter temperatures rarely drop below 20°C in the south, but northern winters can get quite chilly, with the highland regions even experiencing the occasional snowfall or frost.
- › The central coast is prone to typhoons, and although they're hard to predict, August to November is the peak time.
- › The busiest tourist season is between July and August, when foreign and domestic school holidays converge to drive prices high and make booking more difficult.
- › Tet Nguyen Dan (Vietnamese New Year) is celebrated in January or February ([dates change](#) with the lunar calendar and are the same as Chinese New Year). Tet is when most local people take their holidays and travel home to see family, so expect crowds, higher prices and more trouble getting bookings.
- › If you prefer to avoid crowds, mid-February to mid-March is one of the quietest times of the year when you may even grab an off-season bargain on flights or accommodation.



Culture

- › Vietnamese people are known for their friendliness, generosity and sense of humour.
- › They rarely lose their cool, so avoid losing yours. Raising your voice and arguing with someone in public is extremely embarrassing for all involved.
- › Despite the heat, locals dress quite conservatively and visitors are expected to do the same. Shorts should only be worn at the beach. Women wearing short skirts or tank tops are likely to draw unwanted attention from locals.
- › When visiting temples or pagodas, it's respectful for both men and women to wear long sleeves and long trousers, or a long skirt.
- › Cultural taboos include public displays of affection, pointing or beckoning with your finger, standing with your hands on your hips, touching a person on the shoulder or head, passing items over a person's head, passing items with one hand instead of two and not covering your mouth while using a toothpick.
- › Always ask permission before taking a person's photo. Don't take your camera into ethnic minority villages – it's considered an invasion of privacy.
- › Tipping is not expected, but it's appreciated since many workers earn very low wages. Some hotels and restaurants add a 5–10% service charge to your bill, which counts as a tip.

Language: Vietnamese

The Vietnamese language is written in the same alphabet as English, so you should have no trouble reading signs and maps, although pronunciation may be tricky/

English-speakers are easily found in tourist areas, but most Vietnamese people speak very little English. Older people may speak French.

Health and safety

- › The tap water in Vietnam is not safe to drink and wells in the Red River Delta have been found to contain arsenic at levels that exceed WHO guidelines. Boiling water won't remove arsenic and other metal contaminants, so stick to bottled water, and avoid ice in your drinks. If you're particularly concerned about tummy bugs, also avoid salads that may have been rinsed in tap water.
- › Traveller's diarrhoea is common. Wash your hands regularly and opt for fresh, fully-cooked food. Carry anti-diarrhoeal medication with you as a precaution.
- › Mosquito-borne diseases including dengue fever, malaria and Japanese encephalitis are a risk in Vietnam. Consider a vaccination against Japanese encephalitis, and if you're travelling to remote areas, talk to a doctor about malaria prophylactics. There's no vaccination against dengue fever – avoiding mosquito bites is the best protection.
- › Hand foot and mouth disease and conjunctivitis are common in Vietnam, particularly among children. Wash your hands regularly to avoid infection.
- › Other disease risks include measles, hepatitis, rabies, typhoid, tuberculosis, and meningitis. Find out about which [vaccinations](#) you might need.
- › The quality of medical care varies in Vietnam and is generally not up to Australian standards. Most doctors demand payment upfront, even in emergencies, although some may be willing to treat you if you have proof of travel insurance.
- › There are English-speaking private clinics in cities and tourist areas (see [emergency contacts](#)), but



if you are very ill you may need to be evacuated to Bangkok, Singapore or Australia at your own expense – so [travel insurance is essential](#).

- › Some medications may be hard to find, and some may even be counterfeits. Bring all of your regular medication with you – in its original packaging along with the original prescriptions.
- › For the latest health and safety advice on Vietnam, check smartraveller.com.au

[Do I need vaccinations to travel to Vietnam? > Page 9](#)

Tip: Have you registered your travel plans with [smartraveller](#) and checked the latest safety advice on the region you're travelling to?

Laws and watchouts

Laws

- › Vietnam has no minimum legal drinking age (just don't tell your kids).
- › The country has strict drug laws with severe punishments, including the death penalty. Don't be

fooled by the party drug culture – drugs are illegal.

- › Pornography, prostitution and public nudity (including topless sunbaking) are illegal.
- › Gambling is illegal, but foreign passport holders can gamble at government-licensed casinos.
- › 'Political actions' are illegal – that means marching in protests or even voicing your political beliefs, so don't go around telling locals what you think of their communist government. This also applies to activities online, like social media.
- › Avoid taking photographs of demonstrations, border crossings, police or military.
- › Religion is only somewhat tolerated by the secular government. It's no problem if you're religious, but westerners who have tried to openly preach Christianity have been detained, fined and deported from the country. Again, be careful about your online activities, too.
- › It is illegal to export antiques from Vietnam without a permit.



Watchouts

- › Violent crimes against travellers are rare, but petty theft such as pickpocketing is common.
- › Touts are a fact of life in Vietnam. In cities and tourist areas, expect to be offered taxis, hotel rooms, souvenirs and more. A polite 'no thank you', or 'tôi không muốn' ('I don't want it') should work.
- › Always make sure you know the exact price before you agree to buy something – for example, are you sure you're negotiating in dong, not dollars? Are you agreeing to a price per room or per person? And

always count your change.

- › [Lonely Planet](#) recommends Mai Linh and Vinasun as the most reputable taxi companies. But beware of impersonators pretending to be members of these fleets! [More about taxis in Vietnam](#).
- › The scams in Vietnam are many and varied, and forever changing. See CHOICE's article on common [tourist traps](#) all over the world, or read up on Vietnam's latest and most common scams at [tripadvisor.com](#), [virtualltourist.com](#) and [vietnamonline.com](#).

- › When making purchases or booking services, it's not unusual to be quoted a very high price and then have to haggle your way down. Don't lose your cool, this is a normal part of life in Vietnam and if you're a tourist you can probably afford to pay a little more than the locals do anyway.
- › [travelfish.org](#) advises: "Have your wits about you, always, always, always ask for personal recommendations from other travellers, and don't obsess about being ripped off. You will be ripped off at some stage or another – that's just a part of the Vietnamese experience unfortunately".

Making a complaint

If you fall victim to theft or any other serious crime, contact the police (numbers below).

Most police officers don't speak English, so unfortunately they may not be much help unless you can find an interpreter. Police can choose whether or not to take on your case, so they're likely to turn you away if they don't think the crime is very serious.

If you need a police report so you can make a claim on your travel insurance, expect to pay for it. This isn't bribery, it's a legitimate fee.

Vietnam doesn't have much in the way of consumer protection, but if you have a dispute with a local business or service and you're unable to reach an agreement, you could try contacting the non-profit Vietnam Standard and Consumers Association for advice (email vinastas@fpt.vn) or the National Administration of Tourism (vietnamtourism.com). The Vietnam Hotel Association (vietnamhotel.org.vn) may also be able to help.



If your gripe is with an Australian or international tour operator, airline, or booking site, check choice.com.au for the [usual procedures](#) for making a complaint or seeking compensation.

Emergency contacts

If calling from your Australian mobile phone, dial the country code (+84) first.

Operators are unlikely to speak English, so consider calling your hotel, your insurance provider, an English-speaking hospital or the Australian Embassy instead.

Police: 113

Fire: 114

Ambulance: 115

Some hospitals have their own private ambulance services, or you may find catching a taxi is quicker and easier than waiting for an ambulance. Paramedics are unlikely to speak English.

Hospitals

Vietnam's public health care facilities are not up to the standard of Australia's, but there are a number of private English-speaking hospitals and clinics in cities and tourist areas.

The US embassy to Vietnam has a [full list](#) of clinics, specialists and dentists.

Hanoi

International SOS (24 hour)

51 Xuan Dieu, Tay Ho, Hanoi

+84 4 3934 0666

internationalsos.com

Hanoi Family Medical Practice (24 hour)
298 I Kim Ma Street
Van Phuc Compound, Ba Dinh District, Hanoi
+84 4 3843 0748
vietnammedicalpractice.com

Ho Chi Minh City
International SOS (24 hour)
167A Nam Ky Khoi Nghia Street, District 3, Ho Chi Minh City
+84 8 3829 8520
internationalsos.com

Family Medical Practice HCMC (24 hour)
Diamond Plaza Clinic
34 Le Duan Street, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City
+84 8 3822 7848
vietnammedicalpractice.com

Columbia Asia International Clinic
8 Alexandre de Rhodes, District 1
+84 8 3823 8888
columbiaasia.com/vietnam

Hai Phong
Viet-Tiep Hospital
1 Nha Thuong Road, Le Chan District
+84 31 370 0436

Hue
Hue Central Hospital
16 Le Loi Street, Hue City
+84 54 382 2325/6

Da Nang
C Hospital
74 Hai Phong Road, Da Nang City
+84 511 382 1480 (administration), +84 511 383 2642 (emergency)

Nha Trang
Central Hospital of Khanh Hoa Province
19 Yersin Street, Nha Trang City
+84 58 382 2168

Vung Tau
Le Loi Central Hospital of Ba Ria Vung Tau Province
22 Le Loi Street, Vung Tau City
+84 64 383 2667

Phan Thiet
Central Hospital of Binh Thuan Province
Hai Thuong Lan Ong Road, Phan Thiet
+84 62 382 2733 (Administration), +84 62 382 1733 (emergency)

Australian Embassy, Hanoi
vietnam.embassy.gov.au
8 Dao Tan Street, Ba Dinh District
+84 4 3774 0100
Facebook: [Australian Embassy Vietnam](#)

Australian Consulate-General, Ho Chi Minh City
hcmc.vietnam.embassy.gov.au
20th Floor, Vincom Centre
47 Ly Tu Trong Street, District 1
+84 8 3521 8100

24-hour Australian Consular Emergency Centre: +61
2 6261 3305 or 1300 555 135 or SMS +61 421 269 080



WHAT YOU NEED TO DO

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Visas, vaccinations, phone roaming, SIM cards, internet, power adapters, money, travel insurance, handy apps and more.

Visas and passports

Australian passport holders need a visa to enter Vietnam. Visitor visas are available for 30 or 90 days. You can apply by post or in person at the embassy in [Canberra](#) or at the consulate in [Sydney](#).

You'll need:

- › your passport, with at least one empty page and at least one month's validity after the expiry of the visa (although six months is recommended as some airlines may refuse to fly you with less)
- › a passport-sized photo
- › a completed application form (if applying by post)
- › a self-addressed return envelope (if applying by post)
- › the visa fee (money order or cheque if applying by post).

For the visa application form, fees, embassy/consulate addresses and full instructions, go to vietnamembassy.org.au/Consular.

According to the embassy, the processing time is three working days from the date the application is received, or you can pay extra for a same-day express service. It's recommended you organise your visa well ahead of time, though, in case you encounter any problems.

Tip: Never post your passport by standard mail. Use registered mail or a courier service.

Scam alert: The Vietnamese Embassy [has a list](#) of illegitimate websites offering to organise Vietnamese visas for a fee, or offering 'visa on arrival' approval letters.

Visa on arrival

It's possible to get a visa on arrival at Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi or Da Nang airports if you have the appropriate 'letter of approval' from the Vietnamese Immigration Department. This can be organised through a trusted travel agent, but again, beware of scam agencies and websites selling fake letters.

Vaccinations

Recommended vaccinations depend on your health status, which part of Vietnam you're travelling to, and how long you plan to stay.

The Travel Doctor recommends you make sure your standard vaccinations are up to date, and consider shots for rabies, Japanese encephalitis, typhoid and hepatitis A and B, as well as a malaria prophylactic. See their [Vietnam travel health planner](#) for advice, and speak to your doctor.

Tip: Some vaccinations need to be given four to six weeks before departure, so get in early. More about [health and safety in Vietnam](#).

Phone and internet

Global roaming and coverage

You should be able to get phone and 3G coverage in most areas of Vietnam using your Australian mobile phone, but keep in mind that if you use your phone more than very occasionally, you're likely to be stuck with a huge bill when you get home.

Check with your telco for their global roaming prices and to find out what steps you can take to avoid bill shock overseas.

› [Telstra](#)

› [Vodafone](#)

› [Optus](#)

› [Virgin](#)

Tip: Switch off data roaming on your phone before you leave Australia. Likewise, switch off your voicemail and ask friends and family to text

you rather than calling (you'll be charged if you answer incoming calls).

Local SIM

Using a Vietnamese pre-paid SIM card will get you local phone and data rates while you're in the country, and it's easy to set up as long as your phone is unlocked. Technically, all Vietnamese SIMs should be registered using a passport or ID, but you can buy pre-registered SIMs almost anywhere. Look for the sign 'Bán SIM – Thẻ' ('Selling SIM card – mobile') at kiosks, phone shops and at the airport, choose what kind of SIM you need (look at the amount of credit, the type of credit – phone calls/data, and the expiry date) and ask the shopkeeper to set it up on your phone for you. If you need more credit, buy a recharge card from any shop with the 'Bán SIM' sign.

MobiFone, Vinaphone and Viettel are the three main GSM phone companies in Vietnam, and they should all be compatible with Australian handsets.

Travel SIM

If you like to be organised before you go, pre-paid travel SIMs are available from some travel agents,



travel shops, post offices and online. They're particularly good if you're planning on visiting a number of countries and you want to keep the same number. Rates are unlikely to be as cheap as on a local SIM.

Remember: Your phone will need to be unlocked to accept a SIM from another network.

Beat global roaming bill shock – our guide to unlocking your phone and changing your global roaming settings.

Wi-Fi

Plenty of cafes and hotels offer free Wi-Fi in the cities and tourist areas. Hotspots include KFC, Lotteria, Jollibee, Pizza Hut and Gloria Jean's, as well as local businesses. Wi-Fi will usually be locked, but if you're a customer just ask staff for the password. Internet speeds and service can be patchy in some places, and at times the entire country experiences drop outs (which can happen **when sharks chew** on the undersea cable providing internet to Vietnam!).

Check wificafespots.com for maps showing free Wi-Fi hotspots in Vietnamese towns and cities, or download an app such as [wefi](#) (Android or PC) or Wi-Fi Finder ([Apple](#) or [Android](#)).

Tip: The Vietnamese government monitors online activity and restricts access to pornographic and political content as well as to social media sites, including

Facebook. Check [Too Many Adaptors](#) for a trick for getting onto Facebook. We don't recommend you try to scale the firewall to access any more serious censored sites, though.



Money

Currency: Dong (VND)

Check xe.com for the latest exchange rates.

Important: Tell your bank about your travel plans two weeks before you leave. Card activity in a foreign country could be mistaken for fraud and you could find your account frozen.

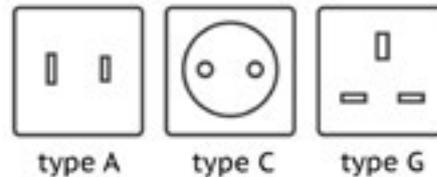
Power plugs

Voltage: 127V / 220V

Frequency: 50Hz

Vietnam uses the same frequency as Australia, but voltage varies from place to place and may not be compatible with Australian appliances (our electricity runs at 230V). Check your appliances – they should have the voltage range printed on them. Phone chargers and laptops are generally designed to withstand variable voltage. If an appliance isn't compatible with Vietnam's voltage, don't take the risk – it could be destroyed, and you could be injured. Either take a transformer/converter with you (they're quite bulky), or buy a Vietnamese version of the appliance.

Power sockets: Type A / C / G



As with voltage, Vietnam's plugs and sockets vary from place to place. None are compatible with Australia's I plugs, so you'll need a universal adaptor.

Credit cards and ATMs

Credit cards are accepted in most hotels and pricier restaurants and shops (expect a 3–4% surcharge).

Everywhere else, cash is still king.

ATMs are easy to find in cities and towns, but often the maximum amount dispensed from local banks is quite low. ANZ and HSBC will allow you to withdraw higher amounts, saving you from paying multiple withdrawal fees. [Tripadvisor](#) users warn that some banks charge foreign cards particularly high rates, with only the generic warning: “There will be fees”. They recommend avoiding Techcombank and Vietinbank and using SCB or Vietcombank instead. Fees may change though, so ask other travellers about their experiences once you’re in Vietnam.

Tips:

- ANZ customers pay no withdrawal fees when they use ANZ ATMs in Vietnam (see their [list of locations](#)).
- Commonwealth Bank has a number of [branches and ATMs](#) in Ho Chi Minh City. Australian customers pay a \$2 withdrawal fee (the fee is \$5 at other ATMs).

Money changers

You’ll have no trouble finding exchange outlets in tourist areas and cities. Most banks, including the government-run Vietcombank, can also exchange your Australian dollars for Vietnamese dong. Avoid changing too much money at the airport as you’re unlikely to get a very good exchange rate.

Tip: Don’t change money anywhere that doesn’t look official (for example, in souvenir or jewellery shops). Black market money exchange is illegal and you could be ripped off.

Travellers’ cheques are becoming a thing of the past

and you’ll have trouble finding many places to cash them outside of the big cities and tourist centres. If you’re concerned about money security, you could consider a pre-loaded [travel money card](#).

Tip: Carry at least two credit/debit cards and more than one currency (Australian, US, and the currency of your destination). Split your money and cards between separate bags. That way if you lose one, you have a back-up.

For more advice, see our [travel money guide](#).

Travel insurance

Travel insurance is essential – don’t leave it until the last minute. Buy insurance at the same time as you book your trip, that way you’ll be covered if you have to cancel for some reason before you go.

For more information read our [buying guide](#), and to choose the best cover, see CHOICE’s [travel insurance reviews and comparisons](#).



Common exclusions:

- › Most travel insurance policies [won't pay out](#) if you make a claim for something that happened while you were under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
- › Standard travel insurance policies are unlikely to cover you for motorbike or scooter accidents – and that includes if you're a passenger on the back of a motorcycle taxi. Check with your insurer.

Tips:

- › Keep a printout of your travel insurance details with you at all times while on your trip. Some hospitals may refuse to treat you if you can't pay up-front or show proof that you're insured.
- › Share your insurance details with family or friends before you leave.

Handy links and apps

Consider adding these links and apps to your phone, tablet or laptop before you go.

Tip: If possible, choose apps that work offline so they won't chew up your mobile data or stop working when you're in remote places.

- › The [Triposo app](#) (Apple or Android) includes offline maps, hotel booking and city guides for Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and Hue.
- › Search for more [Vietnam travel apps](#) or check this [top 10 list](#).
- › [Currency conversion apps](#) help you work out costs in Australian dollars.
- › [Translation apps](#) or the Collins



[Vietnamese Phrasebook app](#) help with communication.

Tip: To save a map onto your mobile device for offline use, select the area on Google Maps then select 'Save offline map' from the menu and follow the directions on the screen. Your GPS positioning will still work on the saved map, even when you don't have access to the internet. Alternatively, go to 'Offline maps' in the menu and select a city.

Websites

- › [vietnamtourism.com](#) (Vietnam's official tourism website)
- › [vietnamtravel.org](#) (more comprehensive than the above site)
- › [smartraveller.gov.au](#) for the Australian government's latest advice on the safety of the region you're travelling in
- › [xe.com](#) for current exchange rates
- › [wikitravel.org/en/vietnam](#) for crowd-sourced information on history, culture, travel tips and more (may not always be accurate)

ACCOMMODATION AND TRANSPORT

GETTING THERE AND AROUND

Flights to Vietnam, airport guides, key destinations, transport, car hire, accommodation, tours and more.

Flights

Flight time from Australia: 7.5+ hours

- › Qantas and [Vietnam Airlines](#) operate direct flights from Sydney and Melbourne to Ho Chi Minh City.
- › [Domestic flights](#) connect Ho Chi Minh City with Hanoi and other destinations in Vietnam.
- › [Indirect flights](#) to Vietnam are available through Vietnam Airlines, Singapore Airlines Tigerair, Jetstar and AirAsia.
- › You can compare fares on airline booking sites such as [expedia.com](#), [skyscanner.net](#), [kayak.com](#) or with a travel agent. See our tips on [booking flights](#).

At the airport

You'll need a [visa](#) to enter Vietnam. Immigration officers are likely to check your paperwork quite thoroughly, so make sure you have everything in order and your arrival-departure card filled in correctly (this will be given to you on the plane or will be available at the airport when you arrive).

Scam alert: Politely turn down anyone who approaches you at the airport offering you a lift. If they're not an official taxi driver, you run the risk of paying too much or even getting deliberately taken to the wrong hotel (where they'll score a commission).

Tip: Make sure you have the name and address of your hotel written down in Vietnamese. Many hotels share the same name.

Ho Chi Minh City – Tan Son Nhat International Airport (SGN)

- › 6km north of the CBD.
- › [Taxis](#) are available outside the terminals. Make sure your driver turns on their meter, or an easier (but not necessarily cheaper) option is to simply pay a flat fee for a voucher at one of the official taxi desks in the airport arrivals area.
- › Public bus 152 is the cheapest way to get to the city centre. It runs to the central bus station near Ben Thanh Market.
- › Private cars and vans can be booked in advance through your hotel or through companies

such as [greenpathtransfers.com](https://www.greenpathtransfers.com) and [vietnamairporttransfer.com](https://www.vietnamairporttransfer.com).

- › **Note:** Cars can be hired at the airport but they aren't available to foreigners unless you have a Vietnamese licence.
- › Airport website: hochiminhcityairport.com

Hanoi – Noi Bai International Airport (HAN)

- › 45km north of the CBD.
- › **Taxis** are available outside the terminal. The fares should be a **fixed rate**, so make sure you have a mutual agreement with your driver before you set out.
- › **Public buses** are the cheapest way to reach the city centre. Bus number 7 runs to the Kim Ma bus station and number 17 runs to the Long Bien bus station.
- › **Mini-buses** can take you directly to your hotel. They charge a higher rate for foreigners and they only leave when full.
- › Private cars and vans can be booked in advance through your hotel or through a company such as [hanoitransferservice.com](https://www.hanoitransferservice.com) or [greenpathtransfers.com](https://www.greenpathtransfers.com)
- › **Note:** Cars can be hired at the airport, but they're not available to foreigners unless you have a Vietnamese licence.
- › Airport website: hanoiairportonline.com

Departure tax is included in air ticket prices so there's no need to set cash aside before leaving the country. VAT refunds of 85% can be claimed for **certain goods** when departing Vietnam.

Key destinations and their airports

- › **Ho Chi Minh City** (Vietnam's largest city, formerly known as Saigon):
[Tan Son Nhat International Airport](https://www.tansonnhatairport.com) (SGN)
- › **Hanoi** (Vietnam's capital, the second-largest city): [Noi Bai International Airport](https://www.noibaiairport.com) (HAN)
- › **Da Nang** (port city on Vietnam's central coast, close to Hue and Hoi An):
[Da Nang International Airport](https://www.danangairport.com) (DAD)
- › **Nha Trang** (beach resort town):
[Cam Ranh International Airport](https://www.camranhairport.com) (CXR)
- › **Halong Bay** (World Heritage site): 80km from Hai Phong's [Cat Bi International Airport](https://www.catbiairport.com) (HPH) or 180km from Hanoi.

Getting around

Tip: Check if you need to pre-book any tickets.

Car hire

You need a local licence to drive in Vietnam, so self-drive holidays aren't possible for most visitors. However, you can hire a car with a driver, which doesn't cost as much as you might think. Try to find a driver who speaks a little English. Travel agencies and hotels can find someone for you, or better yet, ask other travellers for a trusted recommendation. If you're happy with your driver's service, make sure you tip them.



Tip: Don't get too annoyed if your driver makes a pit stop at their "favourite" shop. They're probably being paid a commission to bring you in, but you should never feel obliged to buy anything you don't want.

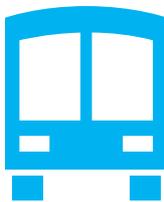
Trains

One of the best ways to see Vietnam is from the window of a train. A railway line nicknamed the 'Reunification Express' runs from Ho Chi Minh City all the way up the coast to Hanoi and across the Chinese border to Nanning. [Ticket classes](#) include hard seat, soft seat, hard sleeper and soft sleeper. Some carriages will be air conditioned and some won't – check [seat61.com](#) for a detailed description of every service.



Tickets can be bought at stations, but it's best to book at least a day in advance – or even earlier if you want a sleeper berth or if you're travelling during a peak time. It's not possible to buy tickets via the [Vietnamese Railways](#) website unless you have a Vietnamese credit card (and a working knowledge of the language). The best option is to buy your tickets through a booking agent such as [vietnamimpressive.com](#) or [internationalrail.com.au](#). See [seat61.com](#) for more ticketing options.

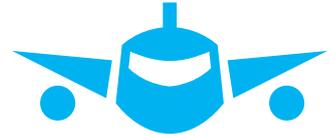
Tip: Private companies [Livitrans](#) and [Golden Trains](#) attach first class carriages to some regular train services, and the [Victoria Express](#) offers luxury trips between Hanoi and Lao Cai.



Buses

Buses are cheaper than trains and they connect all major towns and cities in Vietnam. You can buy tickets at bus stations or through an online booking agent such as [vietnambustickets.com](#). 'Open Tour' buses offer a hop-on-hop-off service throughout the country that's very popular with backpackers. Operators include [Sinh Cafe](#), [Hahn Café](#), [Phuong Trang](#) and [many more](#). (Tip: Avoid TM Brothers – many travellers have given their tours

terrible reviews.) Comfortable overnight [sleeper buses](#) are also popular with travellers on a budget.



Domestic flights

Flying between cities is a good option if you're too short on time to take the scenic route.

[Vietnam Airlines](#), [VietJet](#) and Jetstar are the main domestic airlines. Tickets are usually quite competitively priced and can be booked online.

Bicycles

Vietnam is a great place to ride a bike – particularly along the flat roads of the coastline and the Mekong Delta. Bikes are available to hire or buy, but they aren't always the best quality. If you're travelling long distances, consider bringing your own wheels or booking through a specialist cycle tour company.



Transport tip: [rome2rio.com](#) is a great resource for working out how to get from A to B by any means of transport, anywhere in the world.



Short distances around towns and cities are best done on foot, by bicycle, by taxi, by xe om (motorbike taxi) or by cyclo (three-wheeled bicycle taxi).

Tip: It's unlikely your travel insurance will cover you for riding on the back of a motorbike taxi, particularly since most won't offer you a helmet.

Stress-free taxis

Taxis in Vietnam should be cheap, but tourists often report getting taken for a ride (literally) with highly inflated fares. Your driver may claim to have a 'broken' meter, quote you one price then demand another, short-change you or deliberately take you to the wrong hotel to earn a commission.



[Lonely Planet](#) recommends Mai Linh and Vinasun taxis as the most reputable companies. But beware of impersonators pretending to be members of these fleets!

Tip: Always make sure you have plenty of small change with you. If you try to pay with a big note, chances are your driver will say they don't have change.

Tip: Motorcycle taxis and bicycle rickshaws are unmetered, so you'll need to negotiate a price.

Accommodation and tours

Tip: Have you booked your accommodation for at least the first night of your trip?

Accommodation in Vietnam can vary from basic hostels to beach bungalows to five-star resorts. Prices are generally cheaper than almost anywhere else in South East Asia, so Vietnam is a great place to grab a bargain.

Plenty of Vietnamese accommodation providers accept reservations through online booking sites, or through their own websites. Hotels, resorts and hostels are easy enough to book using sites such as [wotif.com](#), [lastminute.com](#) and [hostels.com](#) and you can check customer reviews on Tripadvisor before you book. However, if you're looking for bespoke accommodation like homestays, beach shacks or B&Bs, it's less likely you'll find them easily online.

Check Airbnb for homestay options, as well as guide books and review sites such as Tripadvisor and Lonely Planet. Sometimes you'll find great recommendations that won't show up at all in booking site searches.

Tip: Hotels need to register your presence with local police. They'll need your passport to do this, but make sure you get it back. You should never leave your passport as a deposit.

Tours

Tours can be booked through a travel agent or online through a major tour operator before you go (try [travelvietnam.com](#), [footprintsvietnam.com](#), [intrepidtravel.com](#) and [geckosadventures.com](#) or look for recommended tours on Tripadvisor). If you're only interested in taking day trips, you're likely to have more choice if you wait until you're on the ground. You'll probably get a better rate, too. Bus tours aren't really necessary in Vietnam unless you're on a very tight budget. Private drivers and taxis should be relatively affordable for day trips.

Package deals are a low-stress option for travellers who don't want to organise their flights, accommodation and ground transport separately. Check airline sites for special offers, as well as booking sites such as expedia and local travel agents. ■