

Rising star

Sublimely beautiful Vietnam, with its unspoiled beaches, misty mountains and brilliant green rice paddies, has emerged from its war-torn past with a strength and determination to build on the future

For over 2,000 years Vietnam's development as a nation has been marked by its proximity to China. No country in Southeast Asia is culturally closer to China than Vietnam and no other country in the region has spent so long fighting off Chinese domination. The cost in terms of lives, economic development and political compromise has been huge.

The last 10 years, however, have seen a new chapter opening for this beautiful country. In the 30 years following World War II, Vietnam was almost synonymous with war, first with the French and later with the Americans and the vestiges of these turbulent times – bomb craters, military hardware, labyrinthine tunnels – still abound. Looking westwards to their near neighbours in Thailand, the Vietnamese have seen what the benefits of international tourism can bring and gradually the country has begun to open up to the outside world. Most of the country is now

accessible, standards of accommodation have risen dramatically, thousands of new restaurants have opened up and the Vietnamese people have relaxed into welcoming a growing number of foreign visitors to their shores.

That said, travel in Vietnam is not easy. The country's infrastructure is still far behind most Southeast Asian standards but, in many ways, this should be seen as a blessing. It is a country for travellers rather than tourists, for people who are prepared to put time and effort into getting around and who want to look beneath the surface. The rewards are immense for this is a truly remarkable country where the beauty of its culture and the diversity of its landscape seduce all who visit.

Geographically long and thin, Vietnam falls into two distinct regions – the north, anchored by the ancient city of Hanoi and the south, dominated by former Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh City. Linking the two is an enviable coastline stretching along the South China Sea. Inland, the interior is characterised by the dense mountains of the Annamite Cordillera and, further south, the Central Highlands.

Of the two main cities, Hanoi is the most beautiful. Its old villas and facades of the French colonial era give the city an ambience not found anywhere else in Asia. The city can be broadly divided into three districts: the Old Quarter, a picturesque, bustling area devoted almost entirely to commerce; Central Hanoi, which represents the historic heart of old Hanoi; and Western Hanoi,

Vietnam's long, narrow shape gives rise to a complex climate that varies considerably between north and south. Overall, however, the best time to visit is between November to April when it is cooler in the north and drier in the south. The summer months are wet and extremely humid. Audley Travel (Tel: 01933 838 000; www.audleytravel.com) is a specialist operator arranging bespoke trips worldwide. The company offers an excellent 16-day 'Classic Vietnam' trip which is ideal for the first-time visitor.



home to the Tran Hoc Pagoda, one of Vietnam's oldest temples, and several other sights of historical interest. Ho Chi Minh City by contrast is relatively modern – a frenetic and buzzing hub that is quick to embrace new trends and fashions. Wining, dining and shopping are all at their best here, but culturally it is not as rich as Hanoi.

Beyond the cities, the coast holds particular allure for many travellers. In the north Halong Bay is an area of outstanding natural beauty where the tranquil, emerald sea is dotted with thousands of limestone islands and caves. Exploring these is best done by boat – one of the truly memorable Vietnamese experiences.

Further south, en route to the lovely beaches of Nha Trang Bay, visitors should pause at Hue, the former Imperial capital and the most staunchly Buddhist region of the entire country. Although it was badly damaged in 1968, there is a sublime beauty to this city, which lies at the very heart of Vietnamese cultural tradition. The Song Huong, or Perfume River, flows sedately and serenely through the city while the surrounding countryside is studded with royal tombs built during the time of the Nguyen Kings who ruled Vietnam between 1802 and 1945. Lang Tu Duc is probably the most beautiful of all the tombs.

Hoi An, another picturesque city and World Heritage Site, is a delightful old river port with some well-preserved historical monuments. Of particular note are the traditional waterfront houses which were built in the 18th century by the Chinese

merchants who dominated the commerce of Hoi An. As well as numerous small temples there are also some lovely beaches in the area, plus one of the country's newest, top-of-the-range boutique hotels, the Nam Hai, which opened recently to great acclaim.

Vietnamese beachlife is at its best at Nha Trang, one of the most sought-after spots in the country for watersports – snorkelling, scuba diving and fishing in particular. The Evason Ana Mandara Nha Trang, built to resemble an old Vietnamese village, is a stunning beach resort but, better still, is the Six Senses Hideaway Ninh Van Bay. Accessible only by boat, this exquisite hotel, with its views of the South China Sea and a backdrop of towering mountains, is the most luxurious and expensive hotel in the country.

Nha Trang is brilliantly combined with Dalat, Vietnam's premier hill station in the Central Highlands to which, in the early 20th century, the crème de la crème of Saigon's French society would retreat in the height of summer. The town of Dalat is still very French in feel but there are also numerous temples and pagodas. The Evason Ana Mandara Dalat is the best place to stay where 17 colonial villas, built in the 1920s and 30s and now lovingly restored to their former glory, overlook the hills and valleys of this cool, mountain region. Travellers will not be disappointed, but then there is little to disappoint in Vietnam – it is a country of breathtaking beauty where a calamitous past promises a wonderful future. [F]

