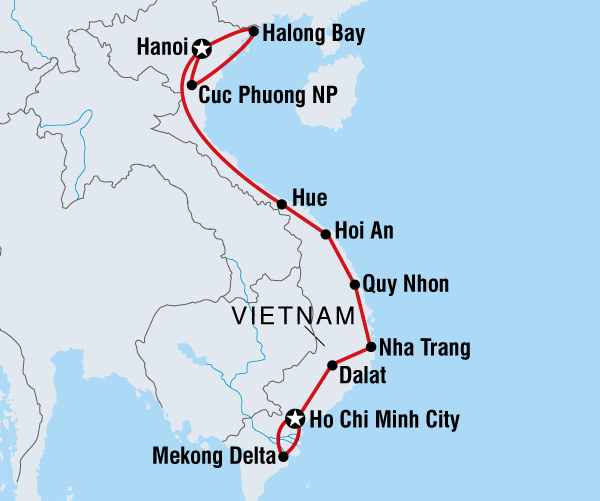
Best of Vietnam

Exchange Rate: AUD$1 = VND16,186

Experience quintessential Vietnam on this comprehensive journey from south to north. Travel from Ho Chi Minh City to Hanoi and experience dynamic cities, tranquil backwaters, imperial ruins, faded colonial elegance and picture-perfect landscapes dotted with reminders of past history. This was our first trip to Vietnam, and many say it remains our best.

Trip Map



Itinerary

Days 1-2 Ho Chi Minh City

Xin chao! Welcome to Vietnam!

Your adventure begins with a welcome meeting at 6pm on Day 1. You can arrive at any time, as there are no activities planned until this important meeting. Please look for a note in the hotel lobby or ask the hotel reception where it will take place. If you can't arrange a flight that will arrive in time, you may wish to arrive a day early so you're able to attend. We'll be happy to book additional accommodation for you (subject to availability). If you're going to be late, please inform the hotel reception. We'll be collecting your insurance details and next of kin information at this meeting, so please ensure you have all these details to provide to your leader.

Formerly known as Saigon, Ho Chi Minh City is characterised by a vast array of sights and sounds, and is a fascinating blend of old and new, East and West. The huge number of people rushing about their daily lives in Vietnam's largest city gives it a dynamic atmosphere and the French influence is evident in the excellent baguettes and coffee on offer. Much of city life takes place on the busy streets lined with shops, stalls and vendors, who have their wares spread out on the footpath and sell everything from soup to sophisticated electronics.

Visit the famous Cu Chi Tunnels. This former Viet Cong stronghold provides an insight into the resourcefulness and tenacity of the Vietnamese people, as well as a unique sense of what underground life was like during the American War.

Included Activities

* Cu Chi Tunnels

An arrival transfer from the airport is available if arranged at the time of booking. Transfers cannot be arranged on arrival. Please advise your flight arrival details at least 14 days prior to your departure. If you plan to arrive earlier, this arrival transfer can only be offered in conjunction with pre-tour accommodation booked through Intrepid.

Metered taxis are readily available as you leave the customs hall in Ho Chi Minh City Airport, they cost around AUD$6.50 (VND120000) set price for the drive to the joining hotels in city centre. The hotels we use are easy to find and well known to most drivers. Please AVOID taxi touts who tell you that they have a metered taxi parked outside the airport.

If you have pre-booked an airport transfer you will be met on arrival, and your driver will be waiting for you as you get out of the customs hall and will be holding an Intrepid sign bearing your name.

Please note that neither the driver nor any representative should ask you for additional payment.

If you cannot find your pre-booked transfer, or you have any concerns about your transfer, please call our hotline at +84 903 117 770.

Normal check-in time at the hotel is after 1pm.

Day 3 Mekong Delta Homestay

Travel south to Cai Be by private bus (approx 3 hours).

Board our boats to cruise the Mekong Delta and explore its intricate waterways. This is our introduction to a world where life depends on the river. Often referred to as the 'rice bowl' of Vietnam, the fertile delta is famous for its abundant harvests of tropical fruits, flowers and rice, as well as it fantastic views while boating along the canals.

Visit an orchard where you can sample tropical fruits, before continuing on to visit some local cottage industries. Around sunset we make our way up one of the many canals to our homestay where we enjoy a wonderful meal of local specialities. At our homestay we'll be sleeping on simple camp beds in a dorm-style arrangement. Bedding and mosquito nets are provided. Shared toilet and bathroom facilities are basic with cold water only.

Included Activities

* Mekong Delta - boat cruise and homestay

Day 4 Ho Chi Minh City

Activity in the delta starts at dawn, so we'll be up early. After breakfast, we visit the busy Cai Be floating market.

Return to Ho Chi Minh City (approx 3 hours) and enjoy more sightseeing in this vibrant metropolis.

Visit the War Remnants Museum. Originally opened in September 1975, it displays old military equipment and other related items from the Vietnam War. In the courtyard you'll find some larger exhibits including a F5A fighter and a UH1-Huey helicopter.

Included Activities

* HCMC - War Remnants Museum

Optional Activities

* HCMC - Reunification Palace - VND30000 ($1.60)

Days 5-6 Dalat

Rubber, tea and coffee line the route into the cooler climate of the South Central Highlands and the honeymoon town of Dalat (approx 8 hours). Make a brief stop at La Nga River to see the fishing community and also stop at Chicken Village, home to K'hor, Chill and Cham minorities.

One of Vietnam's most delightful cities, Dalat is a perfect base to explore this pleasant region. There's plenty to see around town, including lakes, palaces, flower gardens, pagodas, and churches.

Join a city tour, which takes us into Bao Dai's Summer Palace, the famed Crazy House and the vibrant Dalat market. In the afternoon you have free time to explore or to take the train to Trai Mat Village.

Included Activities

* Bao Dai's Summer Palace
* Hang Nga Crazy House

Optional Activities

* Trai Mat village trip (approx. cost depending on numbers) - VND250000 ($14)

Days 7-8 Nha Trang

Today's drive is predominantly downhill through pine forests and paddy fields as we descend nearly 1,500m travelling through the Bidoup-Nui Ba National Park. This area is home to rare pine forests as well as small villages inhabited by the ethnic minority people of the central highlands.

Once referred to as the 'Cannes of the Orient', Nha Trang's sandy palm-lined beach and island-dotted bay still make an idyllic picture, and a cosmopolitan feel prevails in the town itself.

A highlight for many travellers is our boat trip amongst the islands. From the main boat, we take basket boats to shore and visit a fishing village, snorkel in the turquoise waters, enjoy a seafood buffet, and pass the afternoon lazing in deck chairs or swimming.

Included Activities

* Nha Trang - Boat trip

Optional Activities

* Nha Trang - Bao Dai Villa - VND120000 ($6.50)
* Nha Trang - Mud baths - VND280000 ($15)

Day 9 Quy Nhon

Stop en route to visit the striking Po Nagar Cham Towers, one of the more impressive remaining temples of the Cham civilisation.

Travel one of the most breathtakingly scenic sections of Highway One. The road hugs granite cliffs, which fall away into the blue of the South China Sea. Islands, lagoons and sand dunes give way to sugar plantations and rice fields as we approach our destination of Quy Nhon (approx 6 hours).

Although it boasts a beautiful beach and bay, Quy Nhon remains off the main tourist trail.

Visit the Nguyen Nga Training Centre, a charity venture established in 1993, with the aim of teaching life skills to orphans and people with disabilities in order for them to support themselves. Spend some time here with the kids - they'll be more than happy to entertain you with songs and music, as well as practice their English. There's also an opportunity to purchase a wide range of goods that have been crafted in the workshop.

Included Activities

* Nguyen Nga Training Centre visit
* Cham Tower

Days 10-12 Hoi An

Another long but scenic drive takes us to Hoi An (approx 7 hours).

The journey is punctuated with a sobering visit to the My Lai Memorial, marking the site where American troops massacred a whole village of civilians.

Recently declared a World Heritage site, Hoi An is being beautifully restored and preserved. Known as Faifo to early western traders, it was one of South-East Asia's major international ports during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Today, parts of Hoi An look exactly as they did more than a century ago and it retains the feel of centuries past, making it the sort of place that grows on you the more you explore it.

It's also a shopping mecca – with much to browse and buy. Choose from original paintings, handcrafted woodwork, ceramics, embroidery, lanterns and more. Hoi An has also become famous for its tailoring, with a great variety of fabrics and tailors to choose from. Bring your favourite piece of clothing or even just a picture, and you'll be able to have it copied.

On arrival, your tour leader will take you on an orientation walk around the Ancient Town, so you can get your bearings.

You have time here to explore the beautifully restored and preserved Chinese shop houses, enjoy the vibrant and busy market, visit Cua Dai Beach, cycle to the rice fields and browse the array of art galleries.

Included Activities

* My Lai Memorial (Quy Nhon) Entrance Fee
* Hoi An - Ancient town

Optional Activities

* Hoi An - My Son Cham day trip - VND800000 ($43)
* Hoi An - Thu Bon river boat trip - VND100000 ($5.50)
* Hoi An - Bicycle hire - VND40000 ($2.50)

Days 13-15 Hue

Departing Hoi An, we can stop at China Beach (known officially as My Khe Beach) before crossing the dramatic Hai Van Pass to the picturesque fishing village of Lang Co. After a quick stop, continue on to Hue (approx 5 hours including stops).

As the former imperial capital of Vietnam, Hue holds the treasures of Vietnam's royal past and is a curious mix of bustling streets and tranquil settings.

Visit the Imperial Citadel, including the Forbidden Purple City. The latter was almost totally destroyed during the Vietnam War's Tet Offensive, but the foliage-covered ruins are still atmospheric and the gaping holes left by bombs give an idea of the destruction wreaked upon the country during the war.

Enjoy a dragon boat cruise on the Perfume River, and a visit to Thien Mu Pagoda, considered by many to be the unofficial symbol of Hue. It's an active Buddhist monastery with its origins dating back to 1601. One of the most poignant displays is a car belonging to a former monk who, in 1963, drove to Saigon and set himself alight to protest against the treatment of Buddhists by the South Vietnamese regime. We also visit one of the royal tombs, that of Emperor Tu Duc, with its central lake set amid a grove of frangipani and pine trees, and we may visit what many believe to be the most majestic of all the royal tombs, Minh Mang.

The bustling Dong Ba Market offers a plethora of goods and foods to see and sample, and it's a good place to try some of the specialities that graced the Nguyen emperors' banquet tables, such as the banh khoai, a royal rice cake.

Board an overnight train to Hanoi. Although conditions are basic, overnight trains are a true experience and the best way to travel long distances with the locals. Sleeper trains typically have four berth compartments (occasionally six berth depending on seasonal variations), which have bench seats that convert into sleeping bunks. A sheet, pillow and blanket are provided, although some travellers prefer to bring their own sleeping sheet. On occasion, passengers of different genders will be required to share a compartment and there will be occasions where you'll be sharing with local travellers or travellers who are not part of your group. Most trains have a dining carriage serving simple food, but some travellers take the opportunity to stock up on fresh bread, cheese and fruit prior to departure.

Included Activities

* Hue - Imperial citadel
* Hue - Perfume river cruise and Thien Mu Pagoda
* Hue - Royal tomb

Optional Activities

* Hue - Bicycle hire - VND40000 ($2.50)

Day 16 Hanoi

We arrive in Hanoi early in the morning.

The capital of Vietnam is a charming city with a population of over six million. Hanoi is famous for its beautiful lakes, shaded boulevards, verdant public parks and its thriving Old Quarter, which is an architectural museum piece with blocks of ochre buildings retaining the air of a 1930s provincial French town. As Vietnam develops to compete with other South-East Asian countries, the beautiful Hoan Kiem Lake reflects the contrasts of modern office buildings, old Buddhist temples and the tangle of ancient streets in its still surface.

Visit the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum complex, which includes the One Pillar Pagoda and the Ho Chi Minh Museum.

In the evening, enjoy a performance of the unique Water Puppets.

Included Activities

* Hanoi - Water puppet show
* Hanoi - Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum and Museum

Optional Activities

* Hanoi - Fine Arts Museum - VND20000 ($1.10)
* Hanoi - Hoa Lo 'Hanoi Hilton' Prison - VND20000 ($1.10)
* Hanoi - Temple of Literature - VND20000 ($1.10)
* Hanoi - Women's Museum - VND30000 ($1.60)
* Hanoi - Army Museum - VND20000 ($1.10)

Day 17 Cuc Phuong National Park

Take a bus through green paddy fields to Cuc Phuong National Park (approx 3 hours).

Stop along the way to visit Hoa Lu, the capital of Vietnam under the 10th-century Dinh Dynasty.

Vietnam's oldest national park, Cuc Phuong is home to thousand year-old trees and caves where evidence of pre-historic man has been found. The park's primary tropical rain forest contains rare hardwoods and is home to an amazing variety of wildlife including lorises, langurs, bats and giant squirrels.

Visit the Cuc Phuong Primate Rescue Centre to see some of the incredible work they've done with injured, orphaned and threatened species before heading into the centre of the park, where we have the option of taking a two-hour walk through the forest.

Included Activities

* Cuc Phuong National Park
* Hoa Lu Citadel entrance fee
* Primate Rescue Centre

Day 18 Halong Bay

Drive to Bai Chay Harbour, gateway to the famous World Heritage site of Halong Bay (approx 4 hours).

Halong Bay is a breathtaking secluded harbour with 2,000 limestone islands rising from the emerald waters of Bac Bo Gulf. One of Vietnam's most scenic regions, this area of about 1,500 sq km is dotted with innumerable beaches and grottos, created over thousands of years by waves and wind.

Board our private boat and cruise among the dramatic limestone peaks. There's an opportunity to swim in the famed South China Sea (known locally as the East Sea), as well as to explore caves filled with stunning stalactites and stalagmites. Spend a peaceful night on board, beneath a night sky alive with stars. Our sailing junk has twin-share cabins that have air-conditioning and private facilities. There's also a dining room and bar where we enjoy a sumptuous lunch and dinner.

Boat Shortage  
Due to recent unforeseen late changes by local authorities in Halong Bay a large proportion of boats are now no longer permitted to stay overnight, thus resulting in a shortage of boats. To ensure we can accommodate all Intrepid travellers overnight on a boat we are occasionally using a larger boat (approx. 12 cabins) and splitting our groups across different boats. An Intrepid group leader will be present on each boat, and the route taken and inclusions on board will remain the same.

Included Activities

* Halong Bay - Overnight boat cruise

Days 19-20 Hanoi

Take a bus to Hanoi (approx 3.5 hours).

Enjoy a farewell group dinner with our long time friends at KOTO restaurant - an organisation that is supporting street kids with a career in the hospitality industry.

There are no activities planned for the final day and you are able to depart the accommodation at any time.

Included Activities

* KOTO dinner

The Eastin Easy Hotel is located within walking distance of sights like the Opera house and the Temple of Literature. The 70 rooms are equipped with air conditioning, TV, Wi-Fi and a safety deposit box. www.eastineasygtchanoi.com

A metered taxi to the airport costs approx. AUD$12.50 (VND230, 000) and takes approx. 45 minutes.

A departure transfer is available - enquire with your agent.

If you have booked a post trip airport transfer, ask your leader to confirm the time of departure and meeting place. If you have any problems please call our hotline at +84 903 117 770.

Checkout time from the hotel is 12 noon. If you are departing later, you can arrange luggage storage at the hotel.

Itinerary disclaimer

Occasionally our itineraries are updated during the year to incorporate improvements stemming from past travellers' comments and our own research. The information given in this itinerary may be slightly different to that in the brochure. It's very important that you print and review a final copy of your Trip Notes a couple of days prior to travel, in case there have been changes that affect your plans. For the latest updated Trip Notes please visit our website: www.intrepidtravel.com

Please note that while we operate successful trips in this region throughout the year, some changes may occur in our itineraries due to inclement weather and common seasonal changes to timetables and transport routes. This can happen with little notice so please be prepared for modifications to the route.