History

Vietnam has a history as rich and evocative as anywhere on the planet. Sure, the American War in Vietnam captured the attention of the West, but centuries before that Vietnam was scrapping with the Chinese, the Khmers, the Chams and the Mongols. Vietnamese civilisation is as sophisticated as that of its mighty northern neighbour China, from where it drew many of its influences under a thousand-year occupation. Later came the French and the humbling period of colonialism from which Vietnam was not to emerge until the second half of the 20th century. The Americans were simply the last in a long line of invaders who had come and gone through the centuries and, no matter what was required or how long it took, they too would be vanquished. If only the planners back in Washington had paid just a little more attention to the history of this very proud nation, then Vietnam might have avoided the trauma and tragedy of a horribly brutal war.

Visitors to Vietnam can't help but notice that the same names pop up again and again on the streets of every city and town. These are Vietnam's national heroes who, over the last 2000 years, have led the country in its repeated expulsions of foreign invaders and whose exploits have inspired subsequent generations of patriots.

The people of the Dong Son period were major traders in the region and bronze drums from northern Vietnam have been found as far afield as the island of Alor, in eastern Indonesia.

THE EARLY DAYS

Recent archaeological finds suggest that the earliest human habitation of northern Vietnam was about 500,000 years ago. Neolithic cultures were romping around the same area just 10,000 years ago and engaged in primitive agriculture as early as 7000 BC. The sophisticated Bronze Age Dong Son culture, which is famous for its drums, emerged sometime around the 3rd century BC.

Archaeologists conducting excavations at Oc-Eo discovered a Roman medallion dating from AD 152, bearing the likeness of Antoninus Pius.

From the 1st to 6th centuries AD, southern Vietnam was part of the Indianised Cambodian kingdom of Funan – famous for its refined art and architecture. Known as Nokor Phnom to the Khmers, this kingdom was centred on the walled city of Angkor Borei, near modern-day Takeo. The Funanese constructed an elaborate system of canals both for transportation and the irrigation of rice. The principal port city of Funan was Oc-Eo in the Mekong Delta and archaeological excavations here tell us of contact between Funan and China, Indonesia, Persia and even the Mediterranean.

The Hindu kingdom of Champa emerged around present-day Danang in the late 2nd century AD (see p264 for more information). Like Funan, it adopted Sanskrit as a sacred language and borrowed heavily from Indian art and culture. By the 8th century Champa had expanded southward to include what is now Nha Trang and Phan Rang. The Cham were a feisty bunch who conducted raids along the entire coast of Indochina, and thus found themselves in a perpetual state of war with the Vietnamese to the north and the Khmers to the south. Ultimately this cost them their kingdom, as they found themselves squeezed between two great powers. Check out some brilliant sculptures in the Museum of Cham Sculpture in Danang (p231).

1000 YEARS OF CHINESE DOMINATION

The Chinese conquered the Red River Delta in the 2nd century BC. In the following centuries, large numbers of Chinese settlers, officials and scholars moved south to impose a centralised state system on the Vietnamese.

Needless to say, local rulers weren't very happy about this and in the most famous act of resistance, in AD 40, the Trung Sisters (Hai Ba Trung) rallied the people, raised an army and led a revolt that sent the Chinese governor fleeing. The sisters proclaimed themselves queens of an independent Vietnam. In AD 43 the Chinese counterattacked and, rather than suffer the ignominy of surrender, the Trung Sisters threw themselves into the Hat Giang River. There were numerous small-scale rebellions against Chinese rule – which was characterised by tyranny, forced labour and insatiable demands for tribute – from the 3rd to 6th centuries, but all were crushed.

For a closer look at China's thousand-year occupation of Vietnam, which was instrumental in shaping the country's outlook and attitude today, try *The Birth of Vietnam* by Keith Weller Taylor.

During this era, Vietnam was a key port of call on the sea route between China and India. The Chinese introduced Confucianism, Taoism and Mahayana Buddhism to Vietnam, while the Indians brought Theravada Buddhism. Monks carried with them the scientific and medical knowledge of these two great civilisations and Vietnam was soon producing its own great doctors, botanists and scholars.

The early Vietnamese learned much from the Chinese, including the construction of dikes and irrigation works. These innovations helped make rice the 'staff of life', and paddy agriculture remains the foundation of the Vietnamese way of life to this day. As food became more plentiful the population expanded, forcing the Vietnamese to seek new lands. The ominous Truong Son Mountains prevented westward expansion, so the Vietnamese headed south.

LIBERATION FROM CHINA

In the early 10th century the Tang dynasty in China collapsed. The Vietnamese seized the initiative and launched a long overdue revolt against Chinese rule in Vietnam. In 938 AD popular patriot Ngo Quyen finally vanquished the Chinese armies at a battle on the Bach Dang River, ending 1000 years of Chinese rule. However, it was not the last time the Vietnamese would tussle with their mighty northern neighbour.

From the 11th to 13th centuries, Vietnamese independence was consolidated under the enlightened emperors of the Ly dynasty, founded by Ly Thai To. During the Ly dynasty, many enemies launched attacks on Vietnam, among them the Chinese, the Khmer and the Cham but all were repelled. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese continued their expansion southwards and slowly but surely began to consolidate control of the Cham kingdom.

In AD 679 the Chinese changed the name of Vietnam to Annam, which means the 'Pacified South'. Ever since this era, the collective memory of Chinese domination has played an important role in shaping Vietnamese identity and attitudes towards their northern neighbour.

Mongol warrior Kublai Khan completed his conquest of China in the mid-13th century. For his next trick, he planned to attack Champa and demanded the right to cross Vietnamese territory. The Vietnamese refused, but the Mongol hordes – all 500,000 of them – pushed ahead, seemingly invulnerable. However, they met their match in the legendary general Tran Hung Dao; he defeated them in the battle of Bach Dang River, one of the most celebrated scalps among many the Vietnamese have taken. See the boxed text 'Playing for High Stakes' (p138) for more on this big win or soak up some of the story in Halong Bay (p136).

TIMELINE

2000 BC
The Bronze Age Dong Son culture emerges in the Red River Delta around Hanoi

AD 40
The Trung Sisters (Hai Ba Trung) lead a rebellion against the Chinese occupiers

938
The Chinese are kicked out of Vietnam after more than a thousand years of occupation

1010
Thanh Long (City of the Soaring Dragon) known today as Hanoi, becomes Vietnam's capital

CHINA BITES BACK

The Chinese seized control of Vietnam again in the early 15th century, carting off the national archives and some of the country's intellectuals to China – an irreparable loss to Vietnamese civilisation. The Chinese controlled much of the country from 1407, imposing a regime of heavy taxation and slave labour. The poet Nguyen Trai (1380–1442) wrote of this period:

> Were the water of the Eastern Sea to be exhausted, the stain of their ignominy could not be washed away; all the bamboo of the Southern Mountains would not suffice to provide the paper for recording all their crimes.

LE LOI ENTERS THE SCENE

In 1418 wealthy philanthropist Le Loi sparked the Lam Son Uprising, travelling the countryside to rally the people against the Chinese. Upon victory in 1428, Le Loi declared himself Emperor Le Thai To, the first in the long line of the Le dynasty. To this day, Le Loi is riding high in the Top Ten of the country's all-time national heroes.

Following Le Loi's victory over the Chinese, Nguyen Trai, a scholar and Le Loi's companion in arms, wrote his infamous *Great Proclamation* (Binh Ngo Dai Cao). Guaranteed to fan the flames of nationalism almost six centuries later, it articulated Vietnam's fierce spirit of independence:

> Our people long ago established Vietnam as an independent nation with its own civilisation. We have our own mountains and our own rivers, our own customs and traditions, and these are different from those of the foreign country to the north…We have sometimes been weak and sometimes powerful, but at no time have we suffered from a lack of heroes.

Le Loi and his successors launched a campaign to take over Cham lands to the south, wiping the kingdom of Champa from the map, and parts of eastern Laos were forced to kowtow to the might of the Vietnamese.

THE COMING OF THE EUROPEANS

The first Portuguese sailors came ashore at Danang in 1516 and were soon followed by a proselytising party of Dominican missionaries. During the following decades the Portuguese began to trade with Vietnam, setting up a commercial colony alongside those of the Japanese and Chinese at Faifo (present-day Hoi An, p239). The Catholic Church eventually had a greater impact on Vietnam than on any country in Asia except the Philippines (which was ruled by the Spanish for 400 years).

Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) began life as humble Prey Nokor in the 16th century, a backwater of a Khmer village in what was then the eastern edge of Cambodia.

LORDING IT OVER THE PEOPLE

In a dress rehearsal for the tumultuous events of the 20th century, Vietnam found itself divided in half through much of the 17th and 18th centuries. The powerful Trinh Lords were later Le kings who ruled the North. To the south were the Nguyen Lords, who feigned tribute to the kings of the north but carried on like an independent kingdom. The powerful Trinh failed in their persistent efforts to subdue the Nguyen, in part because their Portuguese weaponry was far inferior to the Dutch armaments supplied to the Nguyen.

For their part, the Nguyen expanded southwards again, absorbing the Khmer territories of the Mekong Delta.

TAY SON REBELLION

In 1765 a rebellion erupted in the town of Tay Son near Qui Nhon. The Tay Son Rebels, as they soon became known, were led by the brothers Nguyen. In less than a decade they controlled the whole of central Vietnam. In 1783 they captured Saigon from the Nguyen Lords as well as the rest of the South, killing the reigning prince and his family. Nguyen Lu became king of the South, while Nguyen Nhac was crowned king of central Vietnam.

Continuing their conquests, the Tay Son Rebels overthrew the Trinh Lords in the North. Ever the opportunists, the Chinese moved in to take advantage of the power vacuum. In response, the third brother, Nguyen Hue, proclaimed himself Emperor Quang Trung. In 1789 Nguyen Hue's armed forces overwhelmingly defeated the Chinese army at Dong Da in another of the greatest hits of Vietnamese history.

In the South, Nguyen Anh, a rare survivor from the original Nguyen Lords – yes, know your Nguyens if you hope to understand Vietnamese history – gradually overcame the rebels. In 1802 Nguyen Anh proclaimed himself Emperor Gia Long, thus beginning the Nguyen dynasty. When he captured Hanoi, his victory was complete and, for the first time in two centuries, Vietnam was united, with Hué as its new capital city.

Buddhism flourished during the 17th and 18th centuries and many pagodas were erected across the country. However, it was not pure Buddhism, but a peculiarly Vietnamese blend mixed with ancestor worship, animism and Taoism.

THE LAST OF THE NGUYENS

Emperor Gia Long returned to Confucian values in an effort to consolidate his precarious position. Conservative elements of the elite appreciated the familiar sense of order, which had evaporated in the dizzying atmosphere of reform stirred up by the Tay Son Rebels.

Gia Long's son, Emperor Minh Mang, worked to strengthen the state. He was profoundly hostile to Catholicism, which he saw as a threat to Confucian traditions, and extended this antipathy to all Western influences.

The early Nguyen emperors continued the expansionist policies of the preceding dynasties, pushing into Cambodia and westward into the mountains along a wide front. They seized huge areas of Lao territory and clashed with Thailand to pick apart the skeleton of the fractured Khmer empire.

One of the most illustrious of the early missionaries was the brilliant French Jesuit Alexandre de Rhodes (1591–1660), widely lauded for his work in devising *quoc ngu*, the Latin-based phonetic alphabet in which Vietnamese is written to this day.

THE FRENCH TAKEOVER

France's military activity in Vietnam began in 1847, when the French Navy attacked Danang harbour in response to Emperor Thieu Tri's suppression of Catholic missionaries. Saigon was seized in early 1859 and, in 1862, Emperor Tu Duc signed a treaty that gave the French the three eastern provinces of Cochinchina. However, over the next four decades the French colonial venture in Indochina was carried out haphazardly and without any preconceived plan. It repeatedly faltered and, at times, only the reckless adventures of a few mavericks kept it going.

The next saga in French colonisation began in 1872, when Jean Dupuis, a merchant seeking to supply salt and weapons to a Yunnanese general via the Red River, seized the Hanoi Citadel. Captain Francis Garnier, ostensibly dispatched to rein in Dupuis, instead took over where Dupuis left off and began a conquest of the North.

A few weeks after the death of Tu Duc in 1883, the French attacked Hué and imposed the Treaty of Protectorate on the imperial court. There then began a tragi-comic struggle for royal succession that was notable for its palace coups, mysteriously dead emperors and heavy-handed French diplomacy.

The Indochinese Union proclaimed by the French in 1887 may have ended the existence of an independent Vietnamese state, but active resistance continued in various parts of the country for the duration of French rule. The expansionist era came to a close and the Vietnamese were forced to return territory seized from Cambodia and Laos.

The French colonial authorities carried out ambitious public works, such as the construction of the Saigon–Hanoi railway, the government taxed the peasants heavily to fund these activities, devastating the rural economy. Colonialism was supposed to be a profitable proposition, so operations became notorious for the low wages paid by the French and the poor treatment of Vietnamese workers. Out of the 45,000 indentured workers at one Michelin rubber plantation, 12,000 died of disease and malnutrition between 1917 and 1944. Shades of King Leopold's Congo.

INDEPENDENCE ASPIRATIONS

Throughout the colonial period, a desire for independence simmered under the surface. Seething nationalist aspirations often erupted into open defiance of the French. This ranged from the publishing of patriotic periodicals to a dramatic attempt to poison the French garrison in Hanoi.

The imperial court in Hué, although quite corrupt, was a centre of nationalist sentiment and the French orchestrated a game of musical thrones, as one emperor after another turned against their patronage. This comical caper culminated in the accession of Emperor Bao Dai in 1925, who was just 12 years old at the time and studying in France.

Ultimately, the most successful of the anticolonialists were the communists, who were able to tune into the frustrations and aspirations of the population – especially the peasants – and effectively channel their demands for fairer land distribution.

The story of Vietnamese communism, which in many ways is also the political biography of Ho Chi Minh (see p34), is complicated. Keeping it simple, the first Marxist grouping in Indochina was the Vietnam Revolutionary Youth League, founded by Ho Chi Minh in Canton, China, in 1925. This was succeeded in February 1930 by the Vietnamese Communist Party. In 1941 Ho formed the League for the Independence of Vietnam, much better known as the Viet Minh, which resisted the Japanese and carried out extensive political activities during WWII. Despite its nationalist programme, the Viet Minh was, from its inception, dominated by Ho's communists. But Ho was pragmatic, patriotic and populist and understood the need for national unity.

WWII BREAKS OUT

When France fell to Nazi Germany in 1940, the Indochinese government of Vichy France collaborators acquiesced to the presence of Japanese troops in Vietnam. For their own convenience the Japanese left the French administration in charge of the day-to-day running of the country. For a time, Vietnam

was spared the ravages of Japanese occupation and things continued much as normal. However, as WWII drew to a close, Japanese rice requisitions, in combination with floods and breaches in the dikes, caused a horrific famine in which two million of North Vietnam's 10 million people starved to death. The only forces opposed to both the French and Japanese presence in Vietnam were the Viet Minh and Ho Chi Minh received assistance from the US government during this period. As events unfolded in Europe, the French and Japanese fell out and the Viet Minh saw its opportunity to strike.

A FALSE DAWN

By the spring of 1945 the Viet Minh controlled large parts of the country, particularly in the north. In mid-August, Ho Chi Minh formed the National Liberation Committee and called for a general uprising, later known as the August Revolution, to take advantage of the power vacuum. In central Vietnam, Bao Dai abdicated in favour of the new government, and in the South the Viet Minh soon held power in a shaky coalition with noncommunist groups. On 2 September 1945 Ho Chi Minh declared independence at a rally in Hanoi's Ba Dinh Square. Throughout this period, Ho wrote no fewer than eight letters to US president Harry Truman and the US State Department asking for US aid, but received no replies.

A footnote on the agenda of the Potsdam Conference of 1945 was the disarming of Japanese occupation forces in Vietnam. It was decided that the Chinese Kuomintang would accept the Japanese surrender north of the 16th Parallel and that the British would do the same to the south.

When the British arrived in Saigon, chaos reigned. The Japanese were defeated, the French were vulnerable, the Viet Minh was looking to assert itself, plus private militias were causing trouble. In order to help the Brits restore order, defeated Japanese troops were turned loose. Then 1400 armed French paratroopers were released from prison and, most likely looking for vengeance after Ho Chi Minh's declaration of independence, immediately went on a rampage around the city, breaking into the homes and shops of the Vietnamese and indiscriminately clubbing men, women and children. The Viet Minh responded by calling a general strike and by launching a guerrilla campaign against the French. On 24 September French general Jacques Philippe Leclerc arrived in Saigon, pompously declaring 'We have come to reclaim our inheritance'. The end of the war had brought liberation for France, but not, it seemed, for its colonies.

In the north, Chinese Kuomintang troops were fleeing the Chinese communists and pillaging their way southward towards Hanoi. Ho tried to placate them, but as the months of Chinese occupation dragged on, he decided 'better the devil you know' and accepted a temporary return of the French. For the Vietnamese, even the French colonisers were better than the Chinese. The French were to stay for five years in return for recognising Vietnam as a free state within the French Union.

Between 1944 and 1945, the Viet Minh received funding and arms from the US Office of Strategic Services (OSS, the CIA today). When Ho Chi Minh declared independence in 1945, he had OSS agents at his side and borrowed liberally from the American Declaration of Independence. Such irony.

WAR WITH THE FRENCH

The French had managed to regain control of Vietnam, at least in name. But when the French shelled Haiphong in November 1946, killing hundreds of civilians, the patience of the Viet Minh snapped. Only a few weeks later fighting broke out in Hanoi, marking the start of the Franco–Viet Minh War.

1802
Emperor Gia Long takes the throne and the Nguyen dynasty is born; it rules until 1945

1883
The French impose the Treaty of Protectorate on the Vietnamese, marking the start of 70 years of colonial control

1887
The French proclaim the Indochinese Union, which sees active resistance by some Vietnamese

1911
Ho Chi Minh leaves Vietnam to work in Europe where his political consciousness evolves

UNCLE OF THE PEOPLE

Ho Chi Minh (Bringer of Light) is the best known of some 50 aliases assumed by Nguyen Tat Thanh (1890–1969) over the course of his long career. He was founder of the Vietnamese Communist Party and president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam from 1946 until his death. Born the son of a fiercely nationalistic scholar-official of humble means, he was educated in the Quoc Hoc Secondary School in Hué.

In 1911 he signed up as a cook's apprentice on a French ship, sailing the seas to North America, Africa and Europe. He stopped off in Europe where, while odd-jobbing as a gardener, snow sweeper, waiter, photo retoucher and stoker, his political consciousness began to develop.

Ho Chi Minh moved to Paris, where he adopted the name Nguyen Ai Quoc (Nguyen the Patriot). During this period he mastered a number of languages (including English, French, German and Mandarin) and began to promote the issue of Indochinese independence. During the 1919 Versailles Peace Conference, he tried to present an independence plan for Vietnam to US President Woodrow Wilson.

Ho Chi Minh was a founding member of the French Communist Party, which was established in 1920. In 1923 he was summoned to Moscow for training by Communist International and from there to Guangzhou (Canton), China, where he founded the Revolutionary Youth League of Vietnam.

During the early 1930s the English rulers of Hong Kong obliged the French government by imprisoning Ho for his revolutionary activities. After his release he travelled to the USSR and China. In 1941 Ho Chi Minh returned to Vietnam for the first time in 30 years. That same year, at the age of 51, he helped found the Viet Minh, the goal of which was the independence of Vietnam from French colonial rule and Japanese occupation. In 1942 he was arrested and held for a year by the Nationalist Chinese. As Japan prepared to surrender in August 1945, Ho Chi Minh led the August Revolution, and his forces then established control throughout much of Vietnam.

The return of the French shortly thereafter forced Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh to flee Hanoi and take up armed resistance. Ho spent eight years conducting a guerrilla war until the Viet Minh's victory against the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. He led North Vietnam until his death in September 1969 – he never lived to see the North's victory over the South. Ho is affectionately referred to as 'Uncle Ho' (Bac Ho) by his admirers.

The party has worked hard to preserve the image of Bac Ho who, like his erstwhile nemesis South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem, never married. His image dominates contemporary Vietnam more than three decades after his death and no town is complete without a statue of Ho, no city complete without a museum in his name. This cult of personality is in stark contrast to the simplicity with which Ho lived his life.

However, a surprise spate of sensationalist stories published in Vietnamese newspapers during the early 1990s alleged that Ho had had numerous lovers, two wives – one French – and a son born to a Tay minority woman. She later died in mysterious circumstances. Perhaps time will reveal the true story. For the fullest picture of Ho's legendary life, check out *Ho Chi Minh*, the excellent biography by William J Duiker.

The Vietnamese government has so far refused anyone permission to capitalise on Ho Chi Minh's name. A proposed American joint venture called 'Uncle Ho's Hamburgers' floated like a lead balloon, although Kentucky Fried Chicken successfully entered Vietnam. The Vietnamese joint-venture partner, however, was not amused when the American business rep pointed out that Ho Chi Minh does vaguely resemble Colonel Sanders. 'No' said the frowning Vietnamese, 'Ho Chi Minh was a general.'

1925
Ho Chi Minh establishes the Vietnam Revolutionary Youth League in Canton, later to morph into the Vietnamese Communist Party

1941
Ho Chi Minh forms the Viet Minh

Ho Chi Minh and his forces fled to the mountains, where they would remain for the next eight years.

In the face of determined Vietnamese nationalism, the French proved unable to reassert their control. Despite massive US aid (an effort to halt the communist domino effect throughout Asia)and the existence of significant indigenous anticommunist elements, it was an unwinnable war. As Ho said to the French at the time, 'You can kill 10 of my men for every one I kill of yours, but even at those odds you will lose and I will win.'

After eight years of fighting, the Viet Minh controlled much of Vietnam and neighbouring Laos. On 7 May 1954, after a 57-day siege, more than 10,000 starving French troops surrendered to the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu (p168). This was a catastrophic defeat that brought an end to the French colonial adventure in Indochina. The following day, the Geneva Conference opened to negotiate an end to the conflict. Resolutions included an exchange of prisoners; the temporary division of Vietnam into two zones at the Ben Hai River (near the 17th Parallel) until nationwide elections could be held; the free passage of people across the 17th Parallel for a period of 300 days; and the holding of nationwide elections on 20 July 1956. In the course of the Franco–Viet Minh War, more than 35,000 French fighters had been killed and 48,000 wounded; there are no exact numbers for Vietnamese casualties, but they were certainly far higher.

In May 1954 the Viet Minh dug a tunnel network under the French defences on Hill A1 and rigged it with explosives. Comrade Sapper Nguyen Van Bach volunteered himself as a human fuse in case the detonator failed. Luckily for him it didn't and he is honoured as a national hero.

A SEPARATE SOUTH VIETNAM

After the Geneva Accords were signed and sealed, the South was ruled by a government led by Ngo Dinh Diem, a fiercely anticommunist Catholic. His power base was significantly strengthened by 900,000 refugees, many of them Catholics, who had fled the communist North during the 300-day free-passage period.

Nationwide elections were never held, as the Americans rightly feared that Ho Chi Minh would win with a massive majority. During the first few years of his rule, Diem consolidated power fairly effectively, defeating the Binh Xuyen crime syndicate and the private armies of the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai religious sects. During Diem's 1957 official visit to the USA, President Eisenhower called him the 'miracle man' of Asia. As time went on Diem became increasingly tyrannical in dealing with dissent. Running the government became a family affair.

In the early 1960s the South was rocked by anti-Diem unrest led by university students and Buddhist clergy, which included several highly publicised self-immolations by monks that shocked the world (see p222). The US decided Diem was a liability and threw its support behind a military coup. A group of young generals led the operation in November 1963. Diem was to go into exile, but the generals got over-excited and both Diem and his brother were killed. He was followed by a succession of military rulers who continued his erratic policies.

The USA closed its consulate in Hanoi on 12 December 1955 and would not officially reopen an embassy in the Vietnamese capital for more than 40 years.

A NEW NORTH VIETNAM

The Geneva Accords allowed the leadership of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam to return to Hanoi and assert control of all territory north of the 17th Parallel. The new government immediately set out to eliminate those elements of the population that threatened its power. Tens of thousands

1945
Ho Chi Minh proclaims Vietnamese independence on 2 September, but the French have other ideas

1946
Fighting breaks out in Hanoi, marking the start of the Franco–Viet Minh War

of 'landlords', some with only tiny holdings, were denounced to 'security committees' by envious neighbours and arrested. Hasty 'trials' resulted in between 10,000 and 15,000 executions and the imprisonment of thousands more. In 1956, the party, faced with widespread rural unrest, recognised that things had got out of control and began a Campaign for the Rectification of Errors.

In Hanoi and the North, Ho Chi Minh created a very effective police state. The regime was characterised by ruthless police power; denunciations by a huge network of secret informers; and the blacklisting of dissidents, their children and their children's children.

THE NORTH–SOUTH WAR

The campaign to 'liberate' the South began in 1959. The Ho Chi Minh Trail, which had been in existence for several years, was expanded. In April 1960 universal military conscription was implemented in the North. Eight months later, Hanoi announced the formation of the National Liberation Front (NLF), which came to be known, derogatorily, as the Viet Cong or the VC. Both are abbreviations for Viet Nam Cong San, which means Vietnamese communist. American soldiers nicknamed the VC 'Charlie'.

As the NLF launched its campaign, the Diem government rapidly lost control of the countryside. To stem the tide, the Strategic Hamlets Program was implemented in 1962, based on British tactics in Malaya. This involved forcibly moving peasants into fortified 'strategic hamlets' in order to deny the VC bases of support. This programme was abandoned with the death of Diem, but years later the VC admitted that it had caused them major problems.

The 2002 remake of *The Quiet American,* starring Michael Caine, is a must. Beautifully shot, it is a classic introduction to Vietnam in the 1950s, as the French disengaged and the Americans moved in to take their place.

And for the South it was no longer just a battle with the VC. In 1964 Hanoi began sending regular North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. By early 1965 the Saigon government was on its last legs. Desertions from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), whose command was notorious for corruption and incompetence, had reached 2000 per month. The South was losing a district capital each week, yet in 10 years only one senior South Vietnamese army officer had been wounded. The army was getting ready to evacuate Hué and Danang, and the central highlands seemed about to fall. It was clearly time for the Americans to 'clean up the mess'.

ENTER THE CAVALRY

The Americans saw France's colonial war in Indochina as an important part of a worldwide struggle against communist expansion. Vietnam was the next domino and could not topple. In 1950, the US Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) rocked into Vietnam, ostensibly to instruct local troops in the efficiency of US firepower; there would be American soldiers on Vietnamese soil for the next 25 years, first as advisers, and then the main force. By 1954 US military aid to the French topped US$2 billion.

A decisive turning point in US strategy came with the August 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Incident. Two US destroyers, the *Maddox* and the *Turner Joy,* claimed to have come under 'unprovoked' attack while sailing off the North Vietnamese coast. Subsequent research indicates that there was plenty of provocation; the first attack took place while the *Maddox* was in North Vietnamese waters assisting a secret South Vietnamese commando raid and the second one never happened.

However, on US President Johnson's orders, 64 sorties rained bombs on the North – the first of thousands of such missions that would hit every single

TRACKING THE AMERICAN WAR

The American War in Vietnam was *the story* for a generation. Follow in the footsteps of soldiers, journalists and politicians on all sides with a visit to the sites where the story unfolded.

- **China Beach** (p237) The strip of sand near Danang where US soldiers dropped in for some rest and relaxation.
- **Cu Chi Tunnels** (p378) The Vietnamese dug an incredible and elaborate tunnel network to evade American forces, just 30km from Saigon and right under the noses of a US base.
- **Demilitarised Zone** (DMZ; p202) The no-man's land at the 17th Parallel, dividing North and South Vietnam after 1954, became one of the most heavily militarised zones in the world.
- **Dien Bien Phu** (p168) The ultimate historic battle site, where the French colonial story came to a close in May 1954.
- **Ho Chi Minh Trail** (p329) The supply route for the South; the North Vietnamese moved men and munitions down this incredible trail through the Truong Son Mountains in an almost unparalleled logistical feat.
- **Hué Citadel** (p211) The ancient citadel was razed to the ground in street-to-street fighting in early 1968 when the Americans retook the city from the communists after a three-week occupation.
- **Khe Sanh** (p207) This was the biggest smokescreen of the war, as the North Vietnamese massed forces around this US base in 1968 to draw attention away from the coming Tet Offensive.
- **Long Tan Memorial** The Australian contingent who fought in Vietnam, mostly based near Vung Tau in the south, is remembered here. The Long Tan Memorial Cross was erected by Australian survivors of a fierce 1967 battle. The original is now in Bien Hoa Military Museum. The Vietnamese erected a memorial cross in 2002, but you need to arrange a permit to visit (for more details see www.diggerhistory.info/pages-memorials/longtan.htm).
- **My Lai** (p269) The village of My Lai is infamous as the site of one of the worst atrocities in the war, when American GIs massacred hundreds of villagers in March 1968.
- **Vinh Moc Tunnels** (p203) The real deal, these tunnels haven't been surgically enlarged for tourists and they mark yet another feat of infrastructural ingenuity.

road and rail bridge in the country, as well as 4000 of North Vietnam's 5788 villages. Two US aircraft were lost and Lieutenant Everett Alvarez became the first American prisoner of war (POW) of the conflict; he would remain in captivity for eight years.

A few days later, an indignant (and misled) US Congress overwhelmingly passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which gave the president the power to 'take all necessary measures' to 'repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression'. Until its repeal in 1970, the resolution was treated by US presidents as carte blanche to do whatever they chose in Vietnam without any congressional control.

As the military situation of the Saigon government reached a new nadir, the first US combat troops splashed ashore at Danang in March 1965. By December 1965 there were 184,300 US military personnel in Vietnam and 636 Americans had died. By December 1967 the figures had risen to 485,600 US soldiers in country and 16,021 dead. There were 1.3 million

men fighting for the Saigon government, including the South Vietnamese and other allies.

By 1966 the buzz words in Washington were 'pacification', 'search and destroy' and 'free-fire zones'. Pacification involved developing a pro-government civilian infrastructure in each village, and providing the soldiers to guard it. To protect the villages from VC raids, mobile search-and-destroy units of soldiers moved around the country hunting VC guerrillas. In some cases, villagers were evacuated so the Americans could use heavy weaponry such as napalm and tanks in areas that were declared free-fire zones.

These strategies were only partially successful: US forces could control the countryside by day, while the VC usually controlled it by night. Even without heavy weapons, VC guerrillas continued to inflict heavy casualties in ambushes and by using mines and booby traps. Although free-fire zones were supposed to prevent civilian casualties, plenty of villagers were nevertheless shelled, bombed, strafed or napalmed to death – their surviving relatives soon signed up to join the VC.

Neil Sheehan's account of the life of Colonel John Paul Vann, *Bright Shining Lie,* won the Pulitzer Prize and is the portrayal of one man's disenchantment with the war, mirroring America's realisation it could not be won.

THE TURNING POINT

In January 1968 North Vietnamese troops launched a major attack at Khe Sanh (p207) in the Demilitarised Zone. This battle, the single largest of the war, was in part a massive diversion to draw attention away from the Tet Offensive.

The Tet Offensive marked a decisive turning point in the war. On the evening of 31 January, as the country celebrated the Lunar New Year, the VC launched a series of strikes in more than 100 cities and towns, including Saigon. As the TV cameras rolled, a VC commando team took over the courtyard of the US embassy in central Saigon.

US forces had long been itching to engage the VC in open battle and the Tet Offensive delivered. Although utterly surprised – a major failure of US military intelligence – the South Vietnamese and Americans immediately counterattacked with massive firepower, bombing and shelling heavily populated cities as they had the open jungle. The counterattack devastated the VC, but also traumatised the civilian population. In Ben Tre, a US officer bitterly remarked that they 'had to destroy the town in order to save it'.

The Tet Offensive killed about 1000 US soldiers and 2000 ARVN troops, but VC losses were more than 10 times higher, at around 32,000 deaths. In addition, some 500 American and 10,000 North Vietnamese troops had died at the battle of Khe Sanh the preceding week.

Hitch a ride with Michael Herr and his seminal work *Dispatches*. A correspondent for *Rolling Stone* magazine, Herr tells it how it is, as some of the darkest events of the American War unfold around him, including the siege of Khe Sanh.

The VC may have lost the battle, but this was the critical turning point on the road to winning the war. The military had long been boasting that victory was just a matter for time. Watching the killing and chaos in Saigon beamed into their living rooms, many Americans stopped believing the hype. While US generals were proclaiming a great victory, public tolerance of the war and its casualties reached breaking point. For the VC the Tet Offensive ultimately proved a success: it made the cost of fighting the war unbearable for the Americans.

Simultaneously, stories began leaking out of Vietnam about atrocities and massacres carried out against unarmed Vietnamese civilians, including the infamous My Lai Massacre (see p271 for more information). This helped turn the tide and a coalition of the concerned emerged that threatened the establishment. Antiwar demonstrations rocked American university campuses and spilled onto the streets.

NIXON & HIS DOCTRINE

Richard Nixon was elected president in part because of a promise that he had a 'secret plan' to end the war. The Nixon Doctrine, as it was called, was unveiled in July 1969 and it called on Asian nations to be more 'self-reliant' in defence matters. Nixon's strategy called for 'Vietnamisation', which meant making the South Vietnamese fight the war without US troops. More recently, it's been dusted off for Iraq, but no-one has yet referred to it as the Bush Doctrine.

Even with the election of 'Tricky Dicky', the first half of 1969 saw yet greater escalation of the conflict. In April the number of US soldiers in Vietnam reached an all-time high of 543,400. While the fighting raged, Nixon's chief negotiator, Henry Kissinger, pursued peace talks in Paris with his North Vietnamese counterpart Le Duc Tho.

In 1969 the Americans began secretly bombing Cambodia in an attempt to flush out Vietnamese communist sanctuaries across the border. Given the choice between facing US troops and pushing deeper into Cambodia, they fled west. In 1970 US ground forces were sent into Cambodia to extricate ARVN units, whose combat ability was still unable to match the enemy's. The North Vietnamese moved deeper into Cambodian territory and together with their Khmer Rouge allies controlled half of the country by the summer of 1970, including the world-famous temples of Angkor.

This new escalation provoked yet more bitter antiwar protests. A peace demonstration at Kent State University in Ohio resulted in four protesters being shot dead by National Guard troops. The rise of organisations such as Vietnam Veterans Against the War demonstrated that it wasn't just 'cowardly students fearing military conscription' who wanted the USA out of Vietnam. It was clear that the war was tearing America apart.

In the spring of 1972 the North Vietnamese launched an offensive across the 17th Parallel; the USA responded with increased bombing of the North and by laying mines in North Vietnam's harbours. The 'Christmas bombing' of Haiphong and Hanoi at the end of 1972 was meant to wrest concessions from North Vietnam at the negotiating table. Eventually, the Paris Peace Accords were signed by the USA, North Vietnam, South Vietnam and the VC on 27 January 1973, which provided for a cease-fire, the total withdrawal of US combat forces and the release of 590 American POWs. The agreement failed to mention the 200,000 North Vietnamese troops still in South Vietnam.

In total, 3.14 million Americans (including 7200 women) served in the US armed forces in Vietnam during the war. Officially, 58,183Americans were killed in action or are listed as missing in action (MIA). Pentagon figures indicate that by 1972, 3689 fixed-wing aircraft and 4857 helicopters had been lost and 15 million tonnes of ammunition had been expended. The direct cost of the war was officially put at US$165 billion, though its real cost to the economy was double that or more.

By the end of 1973, 223,748 South Vietnamese soldiers had been killed in action; North Vietnamese and VC fatalities have been estimated at one million. Approximately four million civilians (or 10% of the Vietnamese population) were injured or killed during the war, many of them as a direct

The American War in Vietnam claimed the lives of countless journalists. For a look at the finest photographic work from the battlefront, *Requiem* is an anthology of work from fallen correspondents on all sides of the conflict and a fitting tribute to their trade.

The definitive American War movie has to be *Apocalypse Now*. Marlon Brando plays renegade Colonel Kurtz who has gone AWOL, and native, in the wilds of northeast Cambodia. Martin Sheen is sent to bring him back and the psychotic world into which he is drawn is one of the most savage indictments of war ever seen on screen.

1963
South Vietnam's president Ngo Dinh Diem is overthrown and killed in a coup backed by the USA

1964
The US bombs North Vietnam for the first time

1965
The first US marines wade ashore at Danang

1967
By December there are 1.3 million soldiers fighting for the South; nearly half a million of these are US soldiers

result of US bombing in the North. At least 300,000 Vietnamese and 2200 Americans are still listed as MIA or 'Missing in Action'. US teams continue to search Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia for the remains of their fallen comrades. In more recent years, the Vietnamese have been searching for their own MIAs in Cambodia and Laos. Individual family members often use mediums to try and locate the remains of their loved ones.

For a human perspective on the North Vietnamese experience during the war, read *The Sorrow of War* by Bao Ninh, a poignant tale of love and loss that shows the soldiers from the North had the same fears and desires as most American GIs.

OTHER FOREIGN INVOLVEMENT

Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, the Philippines and Thailand also sent military personnel to South Vietnam as part of what the Americans called the 'Free World Military Forces', whose purpose was to help internationalise the American war effort and thus confer upon it some legitimacy. Sound familiar?

Australia's participation in the conflict constituted the most significant commitment of its military forces since WWII. There were `46,852 Australian military personnel that served in the war; the Australian casualties totalled 496 dead and 2398 wounded.

Most of New Zealand's contingent, which numbered 548 at its high point in 1968, operated as an integral part of the Australian Task Force, which was stationed near Baria, just north of Vung Tau.

Mostly neglected by writers is the painful experience of the fatherless Amerasian children left behind in Vietnam after 1975. The sordid tale is recounted in unforgettable detail in *Vietnamerica* by Thomas Bass.

THE FALL OF THE SOUTH

All US military personnel departed Vietnam in 1973, leaving behind a small contingent of technicians and CIA agents. The bombing of North Vietnam ceased and the US POWs were released. Still the war raged on, only now the South Vietnamese were fighting alone.

In January 1975 the North Vietnamese launched a massive ground attack across the 17th Parallel using tanks and heavy artillery. The invasion provoked panic in the South Vietnamese army, which had always depended on the Americans. In March, the NVA occupied a strategic section of the central highlands at Buon Ma Thuot. South Vietnam's president, Nguyen Van Thieu, decided on a strategy of tactical withdrawal to more defensible positions. This proved to be a spectacular military blunder.

Whole brigades of ARVN soldiers disintegrated and fled southward, joining hundreds of thousands of civilians clogging Hwy 1. City after city – Hué, Danang, Quy Nhon, Nha Trang – were simply abandoned with hardly a shot fired. The ARVN troops were fleeing so quickly that the North Vietnamese army could barely keep up.

The concept of 'embedded' journalists was a direct result of bad press coverage during the war in Vietnam. Journalists were allowed to travel anywhere and everywhere during the conflict and told both sides of the story. Some American military commanders maintain it was the press that lost the US the war.

Nguyen Van Thieu, in power since 1967, resigned on 21 April 1975 and fled the country, allegedly carting off millions of dollars in ill-gotten wealth. The North Vietnamese pushed on to Saigon and on the morning of 30 April 1975 their tanks smashed through the gates of Saigon's Independence Palace (now called Reunification Palace). General Duong Van Minh, president for just 42 hours, formally surrendered, marking the end of the war.

Just a few hours before the surrender, the last Americans were evacuated by helicopter from the US embassy roof to ships stationed just offshore. Iconic images of US Marines booting Vietnamese people off their helicopters were beamed around the world. And so more than a quarter of a century of American military involvement came to a close. Throughout the entire conflict, the USA never actually declared war on North Vietnam.

The Americans weren't the only ones who left. As the South collapsed, 135,000 Vietnamese also fled the country; in the next five years, at least half a million of their compatriots would do the same. Those who left by sea would become known to the world as 'boat people'. These refugees risked everything to undertake perilous journeys on the South China Sea. Pirates raped and pillaged, storms raged, but eventually these hardy souls found a new life in places as diverse as Australia and France.

REUNIFICATION OF VIETNAM

On the first day of their victory, the communists changed Saigon's name to Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). This was just the first of many changes.

The sudden success of the 1975 North Vietnamese offensive surprised the North almost as much as it did the South. Consequently, Hanoi had no specific plans to deal with the reintegration of the North and South, which had totally different social and economic systems.

Oliver Stone has never been one to shy away from political point-scoring and in the first of his famous trilogy about Vietnam, *Platoon,* he earns dix points. A brutal and cynical look at the conflict through the eyes of rookie Charlie Sheen, with great performances from Tom Berenger and Willem Dafoe.

The North was faced with the legacy of a cruel and protracted war that had literally fractured the country. There was bitterness on both sides, and a mind-boggling array of problems. Damage from the fighting extended from unmarked minefields to war-focused, dysfunctional economies; from a chemically poisoned countryside to a population who had been physically or mentally battered. Peace may have arrived, but in many ways the war was far from over.

Until the formal reunification of Vietnam in July 1976, the South was ruled by the Provisional Revolutionary Government. The Communist Party did not trust the Southern urban intelligentsia, so large numbers of Northern cadres were sent southward to manage the transition. This fuelled resentment among Southerners who had worked against the Thieu government and then, after its overthrow, found themselves frozen out.

The party decided on a rapid transition to socialism in the South, but it proved disastrous for the economy. Reunification was accompanied by

INNOCENT VICTIMS OF THE WAR

One tragic legacy of the American War was the plight of thousands of Amerasians. Marriages, relationships and commercial encounters between Americans and Vietnamese were common during the war. But when the Americans headed home, many abandoned their 'wives' and mistresses, leaving them to raise children who were half-American or half-Vietnamese in a society not particularly tolerant of such racial intermingling.

After reunification, the Amerasians – living reminders of the American presence – were often mistreated by Vietnamese and even abandoned, forcing them to live on the streets. They were also denied educational and vocational opportunities, and were sadly referred to as 'children of the dust'.

At the end of the 1980s, the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) was designed to allow Amerasians and political refugees who otherwise might have tried to flee the country by land or sea to resettle in the West (mostly in the USA).

Unfortunately, many Amerasian children were adopted by Vietnamese eager to emigrate, but were then dumped after the family's arrival in the USA. **Asian American LEAD** (☎ 202-518 6737; www.aalead.org; 1323 Girard St NW, Washington, DC 20009, USA) is an organisation that has done some fine work training and mentoring Amerasian kids as they adapt to life in the USA.

1968
The Viet Cong launches the Tet Offensive, an attack on towns and cities throughout the South that catches the Americans unaware

1973
All sides put pen to paper to sign the Paris Peace Accords on 27 January 1973

1975
On 30th April 1975 Saigon falls to the North Vietnamese and is renamed Ho Chi Minh City

1978
Vietnam invades Cambodia on Christmas Day, overthrowing the Khmer Rouge government in 1979

widespread political repression. Despite repeated promises to the contrary, hundreds of thousands of people who had ties to the previous regime had their property confiscated and were rounded up and imprisoned without trial in forced-labour camps, euphemistically known as re-education camps. Tens of thousands of businesspeople, intellectuals, artists, journalists, writers, union leaders and religious leaders – some of whom had opposed both Thieu and the war – were held in horrendous conditions.

Contrary to its economic policy, Vietnam sought some sort of *rapprochement* with the USA and by 1978 Washington was close to establishing relations with Hanoi. But the China card was ultimately played: Vietnam was sacrificed for the prize of US relations with Beijing and Hanoi was pushed into the arms of the Soviet Union, on whom it was to rely for the next decade.

Relations with China to the north and its Khmer Rouge allies to the west were rapidly deteriorating and war-weary Vietnam seemed beset by enemies. An anticapitalist campaign was launched in March 1978, seizing private property and businesses. Most of the victims were ethnic-Chinese – hundreds of thousands soon became refugees or 'boat people', and relations with China soured further.

Author and documentary filmmaker John Pilger was ripping into the establishment long before Michael Moore rode into town. Get to grips with his hard-hitting views on the American War at http://pilger.carlton.com/vietnam.

Meanwhile, repeated attacks on Vietnamese border villages by the Khmer Rouge forced Vietnam to respond. Vietnamese forces entered Cambodia on Christmas Day 1978. They succeeded in driving the Khmer Rouge from power on 7th January 1979 and set up a pro-Hanoi regime in Phnom Penh. China viewed the attack on the Khmer Rouge as a serious provocation. In February 1979 Chinese forces invaded Vietnam and fought a brief, 17-day war before withdrawing (see the boxed text Neighbouring Tensions, p152).

Liberation of Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge soon turned to occupation and a long civil war. The command economy was strangling the commercial instincts of Vietnamese rice farmers. Today, the world's leading rice exporter, by the early 1980s Vietnam was a rice importer. War and revolution had brought the country to its knees and a radical change in direction was required.

OPENING THE DOOR

In 1985 President Mikhael Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union. *Glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) were in, radical revolutionaries were out. Vietnam followed suit in 1986 by choosing reform-minded Nguyen Van Linh to lead the Vietnamese Communist Party. *Doi moi* (economic reform) was experimented with in Cambodia and introduced to Vietnam. As the USSR scaled back its commitments to the communist world, the far-flung outposts were the first to feel the pinch. The Vietnamese decided to unilaterally withdraw from Cambodia in 1989, as they could no longer afford the occupation. The party in Vietnam was on its own and needed to reform to survive.

The majority of 'Vietnamese boat people' who fled the country in the late 1970s were not in fact Vietnamese, but ethnic-Chinese whose wealth and business acumen, to say nothing of their ethnicity, made them an obvious target for the revolution.

However, dramatic changes in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 were not viewed with favour in Hanoi. The party denounced the participation of noncommunists in Eastern Bloc governments, calling the democratic revolutions 'a counterattack from imperialist circles' against socialism. Politically things were moving at a glacial pace, but economically the Vietnamese decided to embrace the market. It has taken

THE NORTH–SOUTH DIVIDE

Sound familiar? It's how George Bush won two elections. It keeps England divided at the Watford Gap. It sometimes threatens to snap Italy in two. Vietnam knows more about north-south divides than most, as the country spent 21 years partitioned along the 17th Parallel á la Korea.

War and politics are not the only explanation for two Vietnams. Climatically, the two regions are very different and this has an impact on productivity, the Mekong Delta yielding three rice harvests a year and the Red River just two. There are two dialects with very different pronunciation. There is different food. And, some say, a different persona.

The war amplified the differences. The north experienced communist austerity and US bombing. The south experienced the rollercoaster ride that was the American presence in 'Nam. As the war came to a close and southerners began to flee, thousands settled abroad, known as the *Viet Kieu*. Many have returned, confident thanks to an overseas education and savvy in the ways of the world. Their initiative and investment has helped to drive the economy forward.

This meant that is was the south that benefited most from the economic reforms of *doi moi,* self-confident Saigon the dynamo driving the rest of the country forward. The economy has grown by more than 7% for a whole decade, but this is heavily skewed to the south. Much of this is down to the attitude of government officials and the fact that many northern cadres were far more suspicious of reform than their southern cousins.

The government is aware of these divisions and tries to ensure a fair balance of the offices of state. It wasn't always so and many southern communists found themselves frozen out after reunification, but these days the party ensures that if the prime minister is from the south, the head of the Communist Party is from the north.

When it comes to the older generation, the south has never forgiven the north for bulldozing their war cemeteries, imposing communism and blackballing whole families. The north has never forgiven the south for siding with the Americans against their own people. Luckily for Vietnam, the new generation seems to have less interest in their harrowing history and more interest in making money. Today there is only one Vietnam and its mantra is business.

time, but capitalism has taken root and it's unlikely Ho Chi Minh would recognise the dynamic Vietnam of today.

VIETNAM TODAY

Relations with Vietnam's old nemesis, the USA, have improved in recent years. In early 1994 the USA finally lifted its economic embargo, which had been in place since the 1960s. Full diplomatic relations with the USA have been restored and Bill Clinton, who didn't fight in the war (and didn't inhale!), became the first US president to visit northern Vietnam in 2000. George W Bush followed suit in 2006, as Vietnam was welcomed into the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Relations have also improved with the historic enemy China. Vietnam is still overshadowed by its northern neighbour and China still secretly thinks of Vietnam as a renegade province. But Vietnam's economic boom has caught Beijing's attention and it sees northern Vietnam as the fastest route from Yunnan and Sichuan to the South China Sea. Cooperation towards the future is more important than the conflict of the past.

Vietnam is an active member of Asean, an organisation originally established as a bulwark against communism, and this is all adding up to a rosy economic picture. Vietnam's economy is growing at more than 8% a year and

1979
China invades northern Vietnam in February to 'punish' the Vietnamese for attacking Cambodia

1986
Doi moi (economic reform), the first step towards re-engaging with the West, is launched

1989
Vietnamese forces pull out of Cambodia and Vietnam is at peace for the first time in decades

1995
Vietnam joins the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean)

tourists just can't get enough of the place. The future is bright, but ultimate success depends on how well the Vietnamese can follow the Chinese road to development: economic liberalisation without political liberalisation. With only two million paid-up members of the Communist Party and 80 million Vietnamese, it is a road they must tread carefully.

2000

Bill Clinton visits Vietnam and becomes the first American president to set foot in Hanoi

2006

Vietnam's rehabilitation is complete as it plays host to the glitzy APEC summit and formally joins the WTO

Food & Drink

Table set up with the northern dish of *bun cha* (grilled pork served with fresh herbs and a dipping sauce), Hanoi
AUSTIN BUSH

One of the delights of visiting Vietnam is the cuisine, and there are said to be about 500 traditional dishes. Eating is such an integral part of the culture that a time-honoured Vietnamese proverb, *'hoc an, hoc noi',* dictates that people should 'learn to eat before learning to speak'.

Vietnamese cuisine is the sum of many parts. Vietnam has an enviable natural prosperity, and the cooking techniques showcase the bounty from land and sea to great advantage. Colonialism and foreign influences led to a marrying of techniques and ingredients. The result? The Vietnamese table.

Famous dishes such as *pho* (rice-noodle soup) and fresh spring rolls are but the tip of a gastronomic iceberg. In addition to a myriad of foods and preparations, there are a staggering number of sauces and dips limited only by the imagination of the cook. If cooking were painting, Vietnam would have one of the world's most colourful palettes. The Vietnamese have no culinary inhibitions and are always willing to try something new. When you combine these two tendancies, nothing is ruled out.

A steaming dish of *pho bo*
AUSTIN BUSH

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

From the land comes rice, and from the sea and waterways fresh fish for *nuoc mam* (fish sauce; see the boxed text p46). Together they form the bedrock of Vietnamese cuisine. In supporting roles are the myriad pungent roots, leafy herbs and aromatic tubers, which give Vietnamese salads, snacks, soups and stews their distinctive fragrance and kick. But there are constants: for the Vietnamese cook, freshness and a balanced combination of flavours and textures are paramount.

Pho

You can have *pho* everywhere in Vietnam, but it is almost a cult in Hanoi. This full and balanced meal in a bowl will cost you less than US$1. In the north the people eat it at any time of day or night, while in the south (the southern variety comes with a lot more DIY herbs and sauces) it's popular for breakfast. It is artistry, practicality and economy. Pho comes in two varieties: chicken *(pho ga)* or beef *(pho bo)*.

Banh goi (Vietnamese-style turnovers) served with fresh veggies and herbs and a sweet dipping sauce
AUSTIN BUSH

THERE'S SOMETHING FISHY AROUND HERE...

Nuoc mam (fish sauce) is the one ingredient that is quintessentially Vietnamese and it lends a distinctive character to Vietnamese cooking. The sauce is made by fermenting highly salted fish in large ceramic vats for four to 12 months. Connoisseurs insist the high-grade rocket fuel has a much milder aroma than the cheaper variety. Dissenters insist it is a chemical weapon. It is very often used as a dipping sauce, and takes the place of salt on a Western table. Insist on the real thing (rather than the lighter stuff) – you will not have been to Vietnam otherwise.

If *nuoc mam* isn't strong enough for you, try *mam tom,* a powerful shrimp paste that American soldiers sometimes called 'Viet Cong tear gas'. It's often served with dog meat, a popular dish in the north – foreigners generally find it far more revolting than the dog itself.

Com

Vietnamese have a reverence for *com* (rice). It is the 'staff of life', not only at the table but in the economy and culture. Rice can be made into almost anything – wrappers, wine and noodles. *Banh trang* (rice paper) is something of a misnomer: this stuff is not very good for writing on, but is very good for eating. People use it to wrap Vietnamese spring rolls.

Nem

One of the most popular dishes is *nem* (fried Vietnamese spring rolls), which are known as *cha gio* in the south and *nem Sai Gon* or *nem ran* in the north. They are made of rice paper, and are filled with minced pork, crab, vermicelli, onion, mushroom and eggs. *Nem rau* are vegetable spring rolls.

A variation on the theme are the delicious larger 'fresh' spring rolls called *banh trang* in the south and *banh da* in the north. Put the ingredients (rice paper, lettuce, onions, herbs, cucumber and meat or fish or shrimp) together yourself and roll your own in restaurants. You can also try *goi cuon chay* (vegetarian rice-paper rolls).

Herbs & Spices

While rice and *nuoc mam* define Vietnamese 'food', it is spices that define Vietnamese 'cuisine' – the study, practice and development of the kitchen arts. There could be no *pho bo* without them, just plain beef noodle soup, and nothing to wax lyrical about. Mint brings coolness, chillies bring

Street vendor, Hanoi
AUSTIN BUSH

Fresh herbs and vegetables: an essential and colourful part of Vietnamese cooking
AUSTIN BUSH

heat, ginger offsets aromas, coriander is king and crowns every dish, while lemongrass has a citrus tang.

Fruits & Vegetables

After rice, fruits and vegetables make up the bulk of the Vietnamese diet. If given the choice of abandoning vegetables or abandoning meat, virtually all Vietnamese would eschew flesh and keep the vegies. *Rau muong* (water spinach) is a staple. Considered a weed in many countries, it tastes divine with garlic and oyster sauce *(rau muong xao)* . Other constants include succulent eggplant (aubergine) and meaty mushrooms, as well as bamboo shoots and bean sprouts. The Vietnamese would not be the inveterate snackers and grazers that they are were it not for the gift of fruit. For more on the flourishing fruits of Vietnam, see p425.

Fish, Meat & Fowl

Thanks to Vietnam's long coastline, seafood has always been a major source of protein. Crabs, prawns, shrimps, cuttlefish, clams, eel, shellfish and many species of fin fish can be found up and down the coast. For seafood lovers a coastal culinary cruise is a highlight of a trip to Vietnam.

In Vietnam, chickens, as well as other fowl, are produced in barnyards. Beef tends to be expensive as there is not much suitable land for cattle to graze. Pork is one of the favourite meats. Frogs' legs are popular but lamb and mutton are rarely seen. Then there are those, shall we say, 'unusual' meats (see the boxed text Travel Your Tastebuds, p48).

Dining streetside, Hanoi
AUSTIN BUSH

Desserts

Do ngot (Vietnamese sweets) and *do trang mieng* (desserts) are popular everywhere, and are especially prevalent during festivals, when *banh* (traditional cakes) come in a wide variety of shapes and flavours. Believe it or not given the bright colours, rice flour is the base for most desserts, sweetened with sugar palm, coconut milk and other goodies. Yellow and green beans turn up in many desserts, as do crisp lotus seeds. The French influence is evident in crème caramel–style custards. *Sua chua* is a healthy option, Vietnam's answer to frozen yoghurt.

Regional Specialities

For such a long country, the way that the people treat their produce is bound to differ according to where they are. Northern food displays a Chinese heritage, but in the south, where the weather is more tropical, the dishes have a more aromatic, spicy nose. In the middle lies Hué, the home

All the ingredients for a grilled seafood feast
AUSTIN BUSH

of Vietnamese imperial cooking, which features a range of sophisticated, refined dishes designed to tempt jaded royal appetites of yore.

THE NORTH

We are forever thankful to the capital for *pho,* but there are other tasty teasers in the north. *Banh cuon* (rice crepe rolls; wafer thin rice-paper sheets that contain chopped pork, fried garlic, chopped mushrooms and a side of herbs and salad) are produced everywhere in Vietnam, but those that are made in Hanoi have special characteristics, with wrappings as thin as a sheet of paper.

In Hanoi there is an *oc* (snail) living in ponds and lakes that grows to the size of a golf ball, has a streaked colour and, while chewy, is very tasty.

THE CENTRE

Emperor Tu Duc (1848–83) was a demanding diner who expected 50 dishes to be prepared by 50 cooks to be served by 50 servants at every meal, but Hué should be thankful as his legacy is some of the best food in Vietnam.

Preparing silkworms for sale
AUSTIN BUSH

TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS

No matter what part of the world you come from, if you travel much in Vietnam you are going to encounter food that to you might seem unusual. The fiercely omnivorous Vietnamese find nothing strange in eating insects, algae, offal or fish bladders. They'll feast on the flesh of dogs, they'll eat a crocodile, or a dish of cock's testicles. They'll kill a venomous snake before your eyes, cut out its still-beating heart, feed it to you with a cup of the serpent's blood to wash it down, and say it increases your potency. They'll slay a monkey and then barbecue it at your tableside.

To the Vietnamese there is nothing 'strange' about anything that will sustain the body. They'll try anything once, even KFC.

During your travels, avoid eating endangered species, as this will only further endanger them. If you are keen for some canine chow, or keen to avoid it, look out for the words *thit cho* in the north, *thit cay* in the south.

We Dare You! The Top Five

■ crickets ■ dog ■ duck embryo ■ field mouse ■ king cobra

Appearance is very important, not only in the use of colour and presentation, but also in the style of serving. The menu for an imperial-style banquet today, whether in a fine restaurant or hotel banquet room or even a private home, might include up to a dozen dishes.

Hoi An is best known for *cao lau* (doughy flat noodles mixed with croutons, bean sprouts and greens and topped off with pork slices). True *cao lau* can only be made from water drawn from the Ba Le Well (p247), and (honest) you can taste the difference if someone tries to sneak a bastardised version by you.

THE SOUTH

With the cultivation of a greater range of tropical and temperate fruits and vegetables, and more varieties of spice, the south favours spicy dishes. Curries have been around since earliest times, although – unlike the Indian originals – they are not hot but aromatic, influenced by Cambodia. Almost anything cooked in coconut milk is a typical southern dish.

Freshly squeezed sugarcane: one of the most refreshing drinks on a hot Vietnamese day
AUSTIN BUSH

DRINKS

Vietnam has a healthy drinking culture, and the heat and humidity will ensure that you hunt out anything on offer to slake your thirst.

You will never be more than a few minutes from beer. There is no national brand, but a rip-roaring selection of regional beers, some of them distributed countrywide. Memorise the words *bia hoi,* which mean 'draught beer'. There are signs advertising it everywhere and most cafés have it on the menu. See the boxed text on p118 for the full picture on this Vietnam institution.

Xeo (rice wine) is as old as the hills. Formerly seen as a sort of cider for country bumpkins, it is gaining new kudos in the cities as a cheap and cheerful route to oblivion.

Another Vietnamese speciality is *ruou ran* (snake wine). This is basically rice wine with a pickled snake floating in it. This elixir is considered a tonic and allegedly cures everything from night blindness to impotence.

The preparation, serving and drinking of tea has a social importance seldom appreciated by Western visitors. Serving tea in the home or office is more than a gesture of hospitality, it is a ritual.

Vietnamese coffee is fine stuff. There is, however, one qualifier: most drinkers need to dilute it with hot water. The Vietnamese prefer their coffee so strong and sweet that it will strip the enamel from your teeth. Ordering 'iced coffee with milk' *(ca phe sua da)* usually results in coffee

Open-air bar serving *bia hoi* (draught beer), Hanoi
AUSTIN BUSH

Eating *nem chua* (fermented pork) served with fresh herbs and rice paper, Hanoi
AUSTIN BUSH

with about 30% to 40% sweetened condensed milk. Hot coffee with milk *(ca phe sua nong)* is available in big cities and tourist places, but not in more remote areas where they might not keep fresh milk.

CELEBRATIONS

Vietnam, for all its poverty, is a land rich with abundant natural resources and potential. There are many holidays and festivals accompanied by special food, as well as weddings and other family celebrations.

For a festival, the family coffers are broken open and no matter how much they hold, it is deemed insufficient. They will go towards the Vietnamese version of Peking duck, sliced into juicy slabs, drizzled with a piquant sauce. The more highly prized species of fish will be steamed or braised whole, and the cooks will give themselves over to the Chinese penchant for elaborate decoration.

In the highly structured Vietnamese society, the standard meal is knocked askew for the feast, symbolising the fact that during the festival the world is a different, better, place. Attendance at a festive meal in Vietnam will convince you, should you even need convincing, that the Vietnamese do not eat to live, but live to eat.

Dining in Vietnam, typically an informal affair
AUSTIN BUSH

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Whatever your taste, one eatery or another in Vietnam is almost certain to offer it, be it the humble peddler with his yoke, a roadside stall, a simple *pho* shop or a fancy-pants restaurant.

Barbecue is a speciality and many such restaurants are easy to locate by the aroma wafting through the streets. Also popular is the dish known as *bo bay mon,* which is beef prepared in seven different ways – a good feed when you're feeling protein-impaired.

Don't neglect the remaining French and Chinese restaurants. They are not as common as they used to be, but they are an important part of Vietnam's culinary and cultural legacy. And they have now been supplemented by Indian, Italian, Turkish and Thai restaurants, as the cities of Vietnam boast truly international cuisine.

There are often no set hours for places to eat, but as a general rule of thumb, cafés are open most of the day and into the night. Street stalls are open from very early in the morning until late at night. Restaurants usually open for lunch (between 11am and 2pm) and dinner (between 5pm or 6pm and 10pm or 11pm).

Quick Eats

Street food is an important part of everyday life. Like much of Southeast Asia, the Vietnamese people are inveterate snackers. They can be found in impromptu stalls at any time of day or night, delving into a range of snacky things. Streetfood is cheap, cheerful and it's a cool way to get up close and personal with Vietnamese cuisine.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

The good news is that there is now more choice than ever before when it comes to vegetarian dining. The bad news is that you have not landed in Veg Heaven, for the Vietnamese are voracious omnivores. While they dearly love their vegies, they also dearly love anything that crawls on the ground, swims in the sea or flies in the air.

In keeping with Buddhist precepts, many restaurants go vegie on the 1st and 15th of each lunar month, and this is a great time to scour the markets. Otherwise, be wary. Any dish of vegetables is likely to have been cooked with fish sauce or shrimp paste. If you're vegan, you've got a bigger challenge.

'Mock meat' restaurants are an exquisite experience for those who want to remain true to their vegetarian principles, but secretly miss their bacon sandwiches. Found all throughout Vietnam, these restuarants use tofu and pulses to cook up magic meat-like dishes that even the most hardened carnivores enjoy. These restaurants are known as *com chay* (vegetarian restaurant) and serve such dishes as *dau phu/tau hu kho* (braised tofu – North/South).

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Enter the Vietnamese kitchen and you will be convinced that good food comes from simplicity. Essentials consist of a strong flame, basic cutting utensils, a mortar and pestle, and a well-blackened pot or two. The kitchen is so sacred that it is inhabited by its own deities. The spiritual guardian of the hearth must have its due and the most important object in the kitchen is its altar.

The Vietnamese like to eat three meals a day. Breakfast is simple and may be *pho* or *congee* (rice porridge). Baguettes are available at any time of day or night, and go down well with coffee.

A mobile rambutan stall
AUSTIN BUSH

DOS & DON'TS

- Do wait for your host to sit first.
- Don't turn down food placed in your bowl by your host.
- Do learn to use chopsticks.
- Don't leave chopsticks in a V-shape in the bowl (a symbol of death).
- Do use the cold towel that is usually provided.
- Don't jump out of your seat when somebody pops open the cold towel.
- Do tip directly to the staff and not with the bill, as this will ensure the staff get the gratuity.
- Don't tip if there is already a service charge on the bill.
- Do drink every time someone offers a toast.
- Don't be sick or pass out face down on the table if festivities go on all night.

Betel leaves, often accompanied by betel nuts
AUSTIN BUSH

A speciality of northern Vietnam: *banh cuon* (steamed rice noodles with a savoury filling)
AUSTIN BUSH

Lunch starts early, around 11am. People traditionally went home to eat with their families, but many locals now eat at nearby street cafés, washing the food down with lashings of *bia hoi*.

Dinner is a time for family bonding. The dishes are arranged around the central rice bowl and diners each have a small eating bowl.

When ordering from a restaurant menu don't worry about the proper succession of courses. All dishes are placed in the centre of the table as soon as they are ready. It may seem like gastronomic Russian roulette, but just spin the cylinder, pull the trigger and take your chance. The worst blast you can get will come from the spices.

Table Etiquette

Sit at the table with your bowl on a small plate, chopsticks and a soup spoon at the ready. Each place setting will include a small dipping bowl at the top right-hand side of the bowl for the *nuoc mam, nuoc cham* (dipping sauce made from *nuoc mam,* with oil, sugar, garlic, rice wine vinegar, lime juice and onions) or other dipping sauces.

When serving yourself from the central bowls, use the communal serving spoon so as not to dip your chopsticks into it. To begin eating, just pick up your bowl with the left hand, bring it close to your mouth and use the chopsticks to manoeuvre in the food.

It is polite for the host to offer more food than the guests can eat, and it is polite for the guests not to eat everything in sight. If you are invited out, bringing something that links back to your home country will always be a winner.

COOKING COURSES

The best way to tackle Vietnamese cuisine head on is to sign up for a cooking course during your stay. For those who fall in love with the food, there is no better experience than re-creating the real recipes back home. It's also a great way to introduce your Vietnam experience to friends; they may not want to hear the stories or see the photos, but offer them a mouthwatering meal and they will all come running!

Cooking courses have really taken off in the last few years as more and more travellers combine the twin passions of eating and exploring. Courses range from budget classes in the local specialities of Hoi An (p248) to gastronomic gallops through the country's classic cuisine at some of the luxury hotels in Hanoi (p106) and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC; p355). If you are set on serious studies, try a short course in Hoi An and negotiate for something longer once you've tasted the experience.

Dishing up steamed crabs
AUSTIN BUSH

EAT YOUR WORDS

Speaking some of the local lingo always helps and never more than when it's time for a meal. Locals will appreciate your efforts, even if your pronunciation is off the mark, and might just introduce you to some regional specialities you would otherwise never have discovered.

Useful Phrases

restaurant		
	nhà hàng	nyaà haàng
Do you have a menu in English?		
	Bạn có thực đơn bằng tiếng Anh không?	baạn káw tụhrk đern bùhng díng aang kawm
I'm a vegetarian.		
	Tôi ăn chay.	doy uhn jay
I'd like ...		
	Xin cho tôi ...	sin jo doy ...
What's the speciality here?		
	Ở đây có món gì đặc biệt?	ẻr đay kó món zeè dụhk bee·ụht
Not too spicy please.		
	Xin đừng cho cay quá.	sin đừng jo ğay gwaá
No sugar.		
	Không đường.	kawm dur-èrng
No salt.		
	Không muối.	kawm moo-eé
Can I get this without the meat?		
	Cho tôi món này không thịt được không?	jo doi món này kawm tịt đuhr-ẹrk kawm
I'm allergic to		
	Tôi bị dị ứng với ...	doy beẹ zeẹ úhrng ver-eé ...
I don't eat ...		
	Tôi không được ăn ...	doy kawm đuhr-ẹrk uhn ...
beef		
	thịt bò	tịt bò
chicken		
	thịt gà	tịt gaà
fish		
	cá	kaá
fish sauce		
	nước mắm	nuhr-érk múhm
pork		
	thịt heo	tịt hay-o
peanuts		
	lạc/đậu phộng (N/S)	lak/dọh fọm
Can you please bring me ...?		
	Xin mang cho tôi...?	sin maang jo doy ...
a spoon		
	cái thìa	ğaí tee-ùh
a knife		
	con dao	ğon zow
a fork		
	cái dĩa/cái nĩa (N/S)	ğaí deẽ-uh/ğaí neẽ-uh

chopsticks
đôi đũa đoy-ee đoō-uh
a glass
cái cốc/cái ly (N/S) găi káwp/găi lee

Can I have a (beer) please?
Xin cho tôi (chai bia)? sin jo doy (jai bee-uh)
Thank you, that was delicious.
Cám ơn, ngon lắm. găam ern, ngon lúhm
The bill, please.
Xin tính tiền. sin díng dee-ùhn

Menu Decoder

TYPICAL DISHES

bánh bao (baáng bow) – sweet, doughy Chinese pastry filled with meat and vegetables and dunked in soy sauce
bánh chưng (baáng juhrng) – square cakes made from sticky rice and filled with beans, onion and pork, boiled in leaves for 10 hours
bánh cuốn (baáng găoo-úhn) – steamed rice-paper rolls with minced and pressed pork, dried shrimp
bò bảy món (bò bảy món) – seven beef dishes
bún bò huế (bún bò hwé) – spicy beef noodle soup
bún chả (bún jaả) – rice vermicelli with pork and vegetables
bún thịt nướng (bún tịt nuhr-érng) – rice vermicelli with char-grilled pork
canh khổ qua (găaáng kảw gwaa) – a bitter soup
chả (jaả) – pressed pork, a cold meat/cold cut
chả cá lã vọng (jaả găá laã vọm) – grilled fish cooked with noodles, dill, turmeric and spring onions in a charcoal brazier
chả cá (jaả găá) – filleted fish slices grilled over charcoal
chả quế (jaả gwé) – pressed pork prepared with cinnamon
chạo tôm (jọw dawm) – grilled sugar cane rolled in spiced shrimp paste
ếch tẩm bột rán (ék dủhm bạwt zaán) – frog meat soaked in a thin batter and fried in oil
gỏi ngó sen (gỏy ngó san) – lotus stem salad
khoai tây rán/chiên (N/S) (kwai day zaán/jee-uhn) – french fries
lẩu (lỏh) – Vietnamese hotpot, with fish *(lẩu cá)*, goat *(lẩu dê)* or vegetables only *(lẩu rau)*
ốc nhồi (áwp nyòy) – snail meat, pork, chopped green onion, fish sauce and pepper rolled up in ginger leaves and cooked in snail shells
rau muống xào (zoh moo-úhng sòw) – stir-fried water spinach with garlic and oyster sauce

NOODLES

bún bò (bún bò) – braised beef with rice vermicelli
hủ tiếu bò kho (hoả dee-oó bò ko) – beef stew with flat rice noodles
mì gà (meè gaà) – chicken soup with thin egg noodles
miến cua (mee-úhn găoo-uh) – cellophane-noodle soup with crab
phở gà/bò (fér gaà/bò) – rice-noodle soup with chicken/beef

VEGETARIAN

đậu phụ/tàu hũ (N/S) kho (đọw fụ/tòw hoō ko) – braised tofu
đậu phụ/tàu hũ (N/S) xào xả ớt (đọw fụ/tòw hoō sòw saả ért) – tofu fried with lemon grass and chilli
gỏi cuốn chay (gỏy găoo-úhn jay) – vegetarian rice-paper rolls
nấm rơm kho (núhm zerm ko) – braised straw mushrooms
rau cải xào thập cẩm (zoh găi sòw tụhp gảhm) – stir-fried mixed vegetables
súp rau (súp zoh) – vegetable soup

DESSERTS

bánh đậu xanh (baáng đọh saang) – mung-bean cake
bánh ít nhân đậu (baáng ít nyuhn đọh) – pastry made of sticky rice, beans and sugar that's steamed in a banana leaf folded into a triangular pyramid
chè (jà) – served in a tall ice-cream sundae glass containing beans, fruit, coconut and sugar
kem dừa (găm zuhr-ùh) – mix of ice cream, candied fruit and the jellylike flesh of young coconut
mứt (mút) – candied fruit or vegetables, made with carrot, coconut, kumquat, gourd, ginger root, lotus seeds or tomato
sữa chua (sūhr-uh joo-uh) – sweetened yoghurt

Food Glossary

RICE

mixed fried rice	*cơm rang thập cẩm* (N)	ğerm zaang tụhp gủhm
	cơm chiên (S)	ğerm jee-uhn
rice	*cơm*	ğerm
rice porridge	*cháo*	jów
steamed rice	*cơm trắng*	ğerm chaáng

MEAT & SEAFOOD

beef	*thịt bò*	tịt bò
chicken	*thịt gà*	tịt gaà
crab	*cua*	ğoo-uh
eel	*lươn*	luhr-ern
fish	*cá*	ğaá
frog	*ếch*	ék
goat	*thịt dê*	tịt ze
offal	*thịt lòng*	tịt lòm
pork	*thịt lợn/heo* (N/S)	tịt lẹrn/hay-o
shrimp/prawns	*tôm*	dawm
snail	*ốc*	áwp
squid	*mực*	mụhrk

FRUIT

apple	*táo/bơm* (N/S)	dów/berm
banana	*chuối*	joo-eé
coconut	*dừa*	zuhr-ùh
grapes	*nho*	nyo
lemon	*chanh*	chaang
lychee	*vải*	vaỉ

FURTHER CULINARY ADVENTURES

- For the lowdown on great eating in HCMC, visit www.noodlepie.com, an excellent foodie insider's guide to Saigon written by a *bun cha*-loving expat.
- *Pleasures of the Vietnamese Table* (2001), by Mai Pham, owner of the renowned Lemon Grass Restaurant in Sacramento, California, sees the author returning to Vietnam to reconnect with her family and food.
- Sticky Rice (http://stickyrice.typepad.com) the website for foodies in Hanoi, and has the lowdown on dozens of places to dine and drink in the city.
- For the full take on Vietnamese cuisine, check out *Authentic Vietnamese Cooking: Food from a Family Table* (1999) by Corinne Trang. Illustrated with captivating black and white images, this is an entertaining way to learn the art of cooking.

mandarin	*quýt*	gweét
mango	*xoài*	swaì
orange	*cam*	ğaam
papaya	*đu đủ*	đoo đỏo
pineapple	*dứa*	zuhr-úh
strawberry	*dâu*	zoh
watermelon	*dưa hấu*	zuhr-uh hóh

VEGETABLES

cabbage	*bắp cải*	búhp ğaỉ
carrot	*cà rốt*	ğaà záwt
corn	*ngô/bắp (N/S)*	*n*gow/búp
cucumber	*dưa leo*	zuhr-uh lay-o
eggplant	*cà tím*	ğaà dím
green beans	*đậu xanh*	đọh saang
green pepper	*ớt xanh*	ért saang
lettuce	*rau diếp*	zoh zee-úhp
mushrooms	*nấm*	núhm
peas	*đậu bi*	đọh bee
potato	*khoai tây*	kwai day
pumpkin	*bí ngô*	beé ngaw
sweet potato	*khoai lang*	kwai laang
tomato	*cà chua*	ğaà joo-uh

DRINKS

beer	*bia*	bi-a
coffee	*cà phê*	ğaà fe
fruit shake	*sinh tố*	sing dáw
hot black coffee	*cà phê đen nóng*	ğaà fe đen nóm
hot black tea	*trà nóng*	chaà nóm
hot milk	*sữa nóng*	sữhr-uh nóm
hot milk black tea	*trà sữa nóng*	chaà sữhr-uh nóm
hot milk coffee	*nâu nóng* (N)	noh nóm
	cà phê sữa nóng (S)	ğaà fe sữhr-uh nóm
ice	*đá*	đaá
iced black coffee	*cà phê đá*	ğaà fe đaá
iced chocolate	*cacao đá*	ğa-ğow đaá
iced lemon juice	*chanh đá*	jaang đaá
iced milk	*sữa đá*	sữhr-uh đaá
iced milk coffee	*nâu đá* (N)	noh đaá
	cà phê sữa đá (S)	ğaà fe sữhr-uh đaá
milk	*sữa*	sữhr-uh
mineral water	*nước khoáng* (N)	nuhr-érk kwaáng
	nước suối (S)	nuhr-érk soo-eé
no ice	*không đá*	kawm đaá
orange juice	*cam vắt*	ğaam vúht
soda water & lemon	*soda chanh*	so-daa jaang
soy milk	*sữa đậu nành*	sữhr-uh đọh naàng
tea	*chè/trà* (N/S)	jà/chaà

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

The Vietnamese have been shaped by their history, which is littered with the scars of battles against enemies old and new. The Chinese have been the traditional threat and the proximity of this northern giant has cast a long shadow over Vietnam and its people. They respect but fear China, and in the context of 2000 years of history, the French and the Americans are but a niggling annoyance that were duly dispatched. The Vietnamese are battle-hardened, proud and nationalistic, as they have earned their stripes in successive skirmishes with the world's mightiest powers.

But that's the older generation, who remember every inch of the territory for which they fought and every bomb and bullet that rained upon them during the long, hard years. For the new generation, Vietnam is a different place: a place to succeed, a place to ignore the staid structures set in stone by the communists, and a place to go out and have some fun. While Uncle Ho (Chi Minh) is respected and revered down the generations for his dedication to the national cause, the young are more into Manchester United's latest signings than the party's latest pronouncements.

It's not only young and old who are living a life apart, but also the urban and rural populations, and the rich and poor. Communism is dead; long live the one-party capitalist dictatorship, where survival of the fittest is the name of the game. Some have survived the transition better than others, and this has created strains in the shape of rural revolts and political backlash. One of the great ironies of the Vietnamese revolution is that it strove to impose a communist system on a people born with a commercial gene, a competitive instinct to do business and to do it at any hour of the dayor night. To the Vietnamese, business, work, commerce – call it what you like – is life.

The north-south divide lingers on. The war may be history, but prejudice is alive and well. Ask a southerner what they think of northerners and they'll say they have a 'hard face', that they take themselves too seriously and don't know how to have fun. Ask a northerner what they think of southerners and they will say they are too superficial, obsessed by business and, well, bling. Caricatures they may be, but they shed light on the very real differences between north and south that go beyond the language. Climate plays its part too; just think of the differences between northern and southern Europe and you have a snapshot of how one people can become two. Not forgetting that the north has lived with communism for more than half a century, while the south had more than two decades of freewheelin' free-for-all with the Americans. For more on this, see The North-South Divide, p43.

Shadows and Wind (1999) by journalist Robert Templer is a snappily written exploration of contemporary Vietnam, from Ho Chi Minh personality cults to Vietnam's rock-and-roll youth.

Finally, don't forget 'face' – or more importantly the art of not making the locals lose face. Face is all in Asia, and in Vietnam it is above all. Having 'big face' is synonymous with prestige, and prestige is particularly important in Vietnam. All families, even poor ones, are expected to have big wedding parties and throw their money around like it is water in order to gain face. This is often ruinously expensive but far less important than 'losing face'. And it is for this reason that foreigners should never lose their tempers with the Vietnamese; this will bring unacceptable 'loss of face' to the individual involved and end any chance of a sensible solution to the dispute.

LIFESTYLE

Traditionally, Vietnamese life has revolved around family, fields and faith, the rhythm of rural existence continuing for centuries at the same pace. For

the majority of the population still living in the countryside, these constants have remained unchanged, with several generations sharing the same roof, the same rice and the same religion. But in recent decades these rhythms have been jarred by war and ideology, as the peasants were dragged from all they held dear to defend their motherland, and later herded into cooperatives as the party tried to take over as the moral and social beacon in the lives of the people.

The Communist Party failed to move the masses in the post-war period. Communism only converted a few, just as the French and Americans had only corrupted a few before it, and, for the majority, it was to the familiar they looked to define their lives. But this is beginning to change and it's not due to Uncle Ho or Tricky Dicky (Nixon), but to a combination of a population shift from the countryside to the cities and a demographic shift from old to young.

For an in-depth insight into the culture of Vietnam, including fashion, film and music, check out www.thingsasian.com.

Like China and Thailand before it, Vietnam is experiencing its very own '60s swing, as the younger generation stand up for a different lifestyle to that of their parents. This is creating plenty of feisty friction in the cities, as sons and daughters dress as they like, date who they want and hit the town until all hours. But few live on their own and they still come home to mum and dad at the end of the day, where arguments might arise, particularly when it comes to marriage and settling down.

Extended family is important to the Vietnamese and that includes second or third cousins, the sort of family that many Westerners may not even realise they have. The extended family comes together during times of trouble and times of joy, celebrating festivals and successes, mourning deaths or disappointments. This is a source of strength for many of the older generation, while for the younger generation it's likely to be friends, girlfriends or gangs who play the role of anchor.

With so many family members under one roof, the Vietnamese don't share Western concepts of privacy and personal space. Don't be surprised if people walk into your hotel room without knocking. You may be sitting starkers in your hotel room when the maid unlocks the door and walks in unannounced.

One tradition that remains central to Vietnamese life is geomancy, or feng shui as most of us know it today. Known as *phong thuy* to the locals, this is the art (or science) of living in tune with the environment. The orientation of houses, tombs, *dinh* (communal meeting halls) and pagodas is determined by geomancers. The location of an ancestor's grave is an especially serious matter: if the grave is in the wrong spot or facing the wrong way, there's no telling what trouble the spirits might cause. The same goes for the location of the family altar, which can be found in nearly every Vietnamese home. Westerners planning to go into business with a Vietnamese partner will need to budget for a geomancer to ensure the venture is successful.

Failing businesses often call in a geomancer (feng shui expert). Sometimes the solution is to move a door or a window. If this doesn't do the trick, it might be necessary to move an ancestor's grave. Distraught spirits may have to be placated with payments of cash.

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

Vietnam is a paradox. It's a communist government with a capitalist economy. Telling it how it is, communism, socialism, call it what you will, is dead. This is a one-party capitalist bureaucracy that doesn't need to sweat about bothersome elections and democratic rights. Officially, communism is still king, but there can be few party hacks that really believe Vietnam is a Marxist utopia. Market-oriented socialism is the new mantra, although socially-responsible capitalism might be nearer the mark.

DISPATCHES FROM THE NORTH

How has Vietnam changed in your lifetime?

Life was very hard before *doi mo* (economic reform; 1986) as many people lived on subsidies. *Doi moi* was not only an economic awakening, but a social awakening, as people had a better understanding of the shortages and the misery of the past. Now we have access to information and news from all over the world and this has raised our national expectations.

The government has begun to look after the cultural history of the country. Monuments and buildings have been restored, artists like me have more freedom to express our vision and the media is more free to discuss the bad as well as the good.

How has Hanoi changed?

Life is changing every day in Hanoi. Hanoi is no longer poor like it was in the 1980s. There is lots of construction and it sometimes seems the buildings sprout like mushrooms after the rain.

Many people in Hanoi are earning high salaries working for foreign companies, but they soon start to live a foreign lifestyle. They forget who they are and lose touch with their traditions and this is also changing the face of Hanoi. Hanoi is growing, but growth is not always for the best.

How has your life changed?

When I came back to Vietnam from the Soviet Union 20 years ago, life was difficult. I had to cycle daily from Hanoi to Bat Trang to work as a painter to earn money to attend the Fine Arts University.

In 1993, I graduated but it was not an easy climate to find a job. I had to take a job in advertising to make money to follow my dream to be a painter. In 1996, the tourism industry started to grow and I started work as a painter for a tourist company, which allowed me to travel all over the country.

My real love is painting and my work is quite popular. My living is stable, my family is happy, and we like to visit new areas of Vietnam for our holidays. I like to wander around the desolate and natural places that will soon disappear when life moves on.

How has tourism affected Vietnam?

As tourism grows, many people are trying to study foreign languages. Tourists are coming not only to enjoy, but also to learn about the culture and tradition of our country. Tourism has re-invigorated our traditional culture, such as water puppets, hand-made silk and folk songs.

Nowadays the young Vietnamese like travelling. They are exploring the beauty of the country, the spirit of the Vietnamese nation. They are also learning about foreign cultures and traditions. It has opened their mind and reinforced their pride to be Vietnamese.

What about the north-south divide?

The southerners are generous and free. They live for today, and don't worry about tomorrow. Southerners are not good at saving up for rainy days. They work hard by day but play hard by night. They are quick-learners. They are as sharp as a needle in business and dare to take risks. This means service in the South is of a higher standard than in the north.

Southerners respect northerners, because they see them as polite and courteous. When southerners meet Hanoi people for the first time, they often don't like them. Yet the more they get to know each other, the more the Saigonese really treasure their brothers from Hanoi.

Your favourite place in Vietnam?

I like Hoi An very much. Everybody is very kind. Hoi An has ancient streets, an old village atmosphere and a beautiful beach.

Conversations in Hanoi with artist Mr Tran Do Nghia

It's full steam ahead, China style, with Vietnam becoming Asia's second-fastest growing economy in 2005, posting growth of 8.4%. Ho Chi Minh may be a hero, but it is Deng Xiaoping's school of economics that has prevailed, not the austere collectivism once espoused by Ho. And it's working well. Vietnam has become the new darling among international investors, challenging Thailand's ambition to become the 'Detroit' of Asia, churning out garments galore for Western fashion houses and sucking in hi-tech investors such as Intel, with multimillion dollar plans for chip plants. Let the good times roll, Vietnam's economy is in top gear. It's not only the big ticket industries that are doing well; Vietnam recently overtook Thailand as the world's largest rice exporter, proving that the rural economy is roaring.

Vietnam now produces and uses more cement each year than its former colonial ruler France.

Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization in late 2006. It remains to be seen how this will impact on the economy, but even more interesting will be to see how the government deals with the issues of piracy and intellectual property rights. Vietnam, like China, has long been a nation where copy-catting is a national pastime. Not just software, music, books and the usual suspects, but even hotels, restaurants and travel agents. It will be interesting to see if the government has the teeth to tackle this issue.

Doi moi or economic reform began in 1986. Collectivisation had almost bankrupted the country and turned the rice bowl of the region into a rice importer. As Soviet aid was scaled back, the Communist Party realised it had to reform to survive. Free market reforms were slowly introduced and Vietnam's economy began to take off.

POPULATION

Vietnam's population hovers at around 84 million, making it the 13th most populous country in the world, and with its population growth rate it might soon hit the top 10. Vietnam is a young country, with an incredible 65% of the population under the age of 30, and after years of revolutionary initiatives encouraging large families, a two-child policy is now enforced in urban areas.

Traditionally a rural agrarian society, the race is on for the move to the cities. Like Thailand and Malaysia before it, Vietnam is experiencing a tremendous shift in the balance of population, as increasing numbers of young people desert the fields in search of those mythical streets paved with gold in Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). The population of HCMC and its suburbs is already approaching seven million, Hanoi has more than three million, and both Danang and Haiphong are millionaires. As economic migrants continue to seek their fortune, these numbers look set to soar.

DISPATCHES FROM THE SOUTH

How has Vietnam changed in your lifetime?

Vietnam has changed in so many ways. It is not so long ago that Vietnam had food shortages and now we are one of the largest exporting rice countries in the world. More freedom to study overseas, plus increasing access to information from the internet, is contributing to more open-mindedness in Vietnam. Vietnamese people have more choices in what they want for their lives: what they want to study, what they want to buy, what they want to do, where they want to go. Life is just not as difficult as it was in my parents time days before *doi moi* (1986).

How has Saigon changed?

Saigon has changed so much. As a local, I can feel the changes in every little corner. People have more liberty and freedom in their lives. Saigon is a young dynamic city where people can have fun. We have learned to be more relaxed and live life to the full. Physically, the city has changed a lot, with new buildings altering the skyline every year. It's not as crazy as Bangkok yet, but it is getting there.

How has your life changed?

I am 30 years old now, so I didn't really experience the difficulties of my parents' generation. But I have heard a lot of stories and often compare my life to that of my father. I have been a lot more lucky than him. I am living without the war. I am living very comfortably. I can choose to study at university. I can choose any job or career. I can choose where I want to go for holiday. When my father was this age, he just didn't have any real choices.

THE PEOPLE OF VIETNAM

Vietnamese culture and civilisation have been profoundly influenced by the Chinese, and to many observers of Vietnamese history, China has long treated Vietnam as some sort of renegade province rather than an independent entity. However, the Vietnamese existed as a people in the Red River Delta region long before the first waves of Chinese arrived more than 2000 years ago.

Vietnamese who have emigrated are called Viet Kieu. They have traditionally been maligned by locals as cowardly, arrogant and privileged. In the '90s, returning Viet Kieu were often followed by police but now official policy is to welcome them, and their money, back to the motherland.

History has, however, influenced the mix of Vietnamese minorities. The steady expansion southwards in search of cultivable lands absorbed first the Kingdom of Champa and later the eastern extent of the Khmer empire, and both the Chams and the Khmers are sizeable minorities today. There are perhaps one million Khmers inhabiting the Mekong Delta, or what they refer to as Kampuchea Krom (lower Cambodia), and almost as many Chams living along the coastal regions between Phan Rang and Danang.

Traffic was not only one way. Many of the 50 or more ethno-linguistic minority groups that inhabit the far northwest only migrated to these areas from Yunnan (China) and Tibet in the last few centuries. They moved into the mountains that the lowland Vietnamese considered uncultivable and help make up the most colourful part of the ethnic mosaic that is Vietnam today. For more on the minorities who inhabit the mountains of Vietnam, see Hill Tribes, p72.

While the invasions and occupations of old may be over, the largest minority group in Vietnam has always been the ethnic-Chinese community, which

How has tourism affected Vietnam?

People over the world know more about Vietnam, because the media coverage has changed. No more wars, no more soldiers, just a beautiful country with smiling people. More and more tourists are coming to Vietnam. This brings more money into the economy, more knowledge to the local people, and promotes cultural exchange. This is good for everyone, the locals and the tourists.

What about the north-south divide?

I think northern people are still very traditional when compared with Saigon. They are more discreet than the more open southerners, but can be a bit self-righteous. They are a little more frugal than southerners when it comes to spending money, but they seem more industrious than Saigon people. But I think Saigon people are friendly, open-minded, easy-going, simple… of course, I'm from the south!

Your favourite place in Vietnam?

In Vietnam, it has to be Saigon. In my heart, the name 'Saigon' is so spiritual and so dear… Even though I travel a lot, I can't wait to get back to Saigon. I love that feeling when the plane is landing at Tan Son Nhat Airport in Saigon, I can imagine the heat of the weather, the haste of the people and the buzz of traffic… Everything seems so familiar and so friendly… I whisper to myself, 'home'.

Conversations in Saigon with office manager Miss Nhu Ly Thu

WHEN IN NAM... DO AS THE VIETS

Take your time to learn a little about the local culture in Vietnam. Not only will this ensure you don't inadvertently cause offence or, worse, spark an international incident, but it will also ingratiate you to your hosts. Here are a few top tips to help you go native.

Dress Code
Respect local dress standards: shorts to the knees, women's tops covering the shoulder, particularly at religious sites. Always remove your shoes before entering a temple. Nude sunbathing is considered *totally* inappropriate, even on beaches.

Meet & Greet
The traditional Vietnamese form of greeting is to press your hands together in front of your body and bow slightly. These days, the Western custom of shaking hands has almost completely taken over.

It's on the Cards
Exchanging business cards is an important part of even the smallest transaction or business contact. Get some printed before you arrive in Vietnam and hand them out like confetti.

Deadly Chopsticks
Leaving a pair of chopsticks sitting vertically in a rice bowl looks very much like the incense sticks that are burned for the dead. This is a powerful sign and is not appreciated anywhere in Asia.

Mean Feet
Like the Chinese and Japanese, Vietnamese strictly maintain clean floors and it's usual to remove shoes when entering somebody's home. It's rude to point the bottom of your feet towards other people. Never, ever point your feet towards anything sacred, such as a Buddha image.

Hats Off to Them
As a form of respect to elderly or other esteemed people, such as monks, take off your hat and bow your head politely when addressing them. In Asia, the head is the symbolic highest point – never pat or touch an adult on the head.

In the past, the term *lien xo!* (Soviet Union) was often shouted at Westerners, all of whom were assumed to be the legendary and very unpopular Russians residing in Vietnam. These days, depending on your dress, a more common name is *tay balo!* (literally, 'Westerner backpack'), a contemporary term for scruffy-looking backpackers.

makes up much of the commercial class in the cities. While the government has traditionally viewed them with suspicion, and drove many of them out of the country as 'boat people' in the late 1970s, many are now comfortably resettled and play a major part in driving economic development.

RELIGION

Four great philosophies and religions have shaped the spiritual life of the Vietnamese: Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and, later, Christianity. Over the centuries, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism have fused with popular Chinese beliefs and ancient Vietnamese animism to create the Tam Giao (Triple Religion). When discussing religion, most Vietnamese people are likely to say that they are Buddhist, but when it comes to family or civic duties they are likely to follow the moral and social code of Confucianism, and turn to Taoist concepts to understand the nature of the cosmos.

Although the majority of the population has only a vague notion of Buddhist doctrines, they invite monks to participate in life-cycle ceremonies, such as funerals. Buddhist pagodas are seen by many Vietnamese as a physical and spiritual refuge from an uncertain world.

Buddhism

Buddhism, like all great religions, has been through a messy divorce, and arrived in Vietnam in two flavours: Mahayana Buddhism (the Northern school) proceeded north into Nepal, Tibet, China, Korea, Mongolia, Vietnam and Japan, while Theravada Buddhism (the Southern school) took the southern route from India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Cambodia.

Mahayana Buddhists believe in Boddhisatvas (Quan Am in Vietnam) or Buddhas that attain nirvana but postpone their enlightenment to stay on earth to save their fellow beings.

The Theravada school of Buddhism is an earlier and, according to its followers, less corrupted form of Buddhism than the Mahayana schools found around East Asia and the Himalayan regions. As Therevada followers tried to preserve and limit the Buddhist doctrines to only those canons codified in the early Buddhist era, the Mahayana school gave Theravada Buddhism the pejorative name 'Hinayana' (meaning 'Lesser Vehicle'). They considered themselves 'Greater Vehicle' because they built upon the earlier teachings.

The predominant school of Buddhism, and indeed religion, in Vietnam is Mahayana Buddhism (Dai Thua, or Bac Tong, meaning 'From the North'). The largest Mahayana sect in the country is Zen (Dhyana or Thien), also known as the school of meditation. Dao Trang (the Pure Land school), another important sect, is practised mainly in the south.

Theravada Buddhism (Tieu Thua, or Nam Tong) is found mainly in the Mekong Delta region, and is mostly practised by ethnic-Khmers.

Vietnamese Buddhist monks *(bonze)* minister to the spiritual needs of the peasantry, but it is largely up to the monks whether they follow the lore of Taoism or the philosophy of Buddhism.

Taoism

Taoism (Lao Giao, or Dao Giao) originated in China and is based on the philosophy of Laotse (The Old One), who lived in the 6th century BC. Little is known about Laotse and there is some debate as to whether or not he actually existed. He is believed to have been the custodian of the imperial archives for the Chinese government, and Confucius is supposed to have consulted him.

To learn more about Buddhism in Vietnam, check out the website www.quangduc.com. The official website of the Quang Duc Monastery in Melbourne, Australia, it is a gateway to all things Buddhist.

Understanding Taoism is not easy. The philosophy emphasises contemplation and simplicity. Its ideal is returning to the Tao (The Way, or the essence of which all things are made), and it emphasises *am* and *duong*, the Vietnamese equivalents of Yin and Yang. Much of Taoist ritualism has been absorbed into Chinese and Vietnamese Buddhism, including, most commonly, the use of dragons and demons to decorate temple rooftops.

Confucianism

More a philosophy than an organised religion, Confucianism (Nho Giao, or Khong Giao) has been an important force in shaping Vietnam's social system and the lives and beliefs of its people.

Confucius (Khong Tu) was born in China around 550 BC. He saw people as social beings formed by society yet also capable of shaping their society.

PAGODA OR TEMPLE?

Travelling around Vietnam, there are a lot of pagodas and temples, but how does the average person know which is which? The Vietnamese regard a *chua* (pagoda) as a place of worship where they make offerings or pray. A Vietnamese *den* (temple) is not really a place of worship, but rather a structure built to honour some great historical figure (Confucius, Tran Hung Dao, even Ho Chi Minh).

The Cao Dai temple seems to somehow fall between the cracks. Given the mixture of ideas that is part and parcel of Cao Daism, it's hard to say if it's a temple, pagoda, church or mosque.

TET: THE BIG ONE

Tet is Christmas, New Year and birthdays all rolled into one. Tet Nguyen Dan (Festival of the First Day) ushers in the Lunar New Year and is the most significant date in the Vietnamese calendar. It's a time when families reunite in the hope of good fortune for the coming year, and ancestral spirits are welcomed back into the family home. And the whole of Vietnam celebrates a birthday; everyone becomes one year older.

The festival falls some time between 19 January and 20 February, the same dates as Chinese New Year. The first three days after New Year's Day are the official holidays but many people take the whole week off, particularly in the south.

Tet rites begin seven days before New Year's Day. This is when the Tao Quan – the three Spirits of the Hearth, found in the kitchen of every home – ascend to the heavens to report on the past year's events to the Jade Emperor. Altars, laden with offerings, are assembled in preparation for the gods' departure, all in the hope of receiving a favourable report and ensuring good luck for the family in the coming year.

Other rituals as Tet approaches include visiting cemeteries and inviting the spirits of dead relatives home for the celebrations. Absent family members return home so that the whole family can celebrate Tet under the same roof. All loose ends are tied up so that the new year can be started with a clean slate; debts are paid and cleaning becomes the national sport.

A New Year's tree *(cay neu)* is constructed to ward off evil spirits. Kumquat trees are popular throughout the country, while branches of pink peach blossoms *(dao)* grace houses in the north, and yellow apricot blossoms *(mai)* can be found in homes further south.

For a spectacular sight, go to ĐL Nguyen Hue in Ho Chi Minh City, much of which is taken over by the annual Tet flower market. In Hanoi, the area around Pho Hang Dau and Pho Hang Ma is transformed into a massive peach-blossom and kumquat-tree market.

On New Year's Eve the Tao Quan return to earth. At the stroke of midnight all problems from the previous year are left behind and mayhem ensues. The goal is to make as much noise as possible. Drums and percussion are popular, as were firecrackers until they were banned in 1995.

The events of New Year's Day are crucial as it's believed they affect the course of life in the year ahead. People take extra care not to be rude or show anger. Other activities that are believed to attract bad spirits include sewing, sweeping, swearing and breaking things.

It's crucial that the first visitor of the year to each household is suitable. They're usually male – best of all is a wealthy married man with several children. Foreigners are sometimes welcomed as the first to enter the house, although not always, so it's unwise to visit any Vietnamese house on the first day of Tet, unless explicitly invited.

Apart from New Year's Eve itself, Tet is not a particularly boisterous celebration. It's like Christmas Day, a quiet family affair. Difficulty in booking transport and accommodation aside, this is an excellent time to visit the country, especially to witness the contrasting frenzied activity before the New Year and the calm (and quiet streets!) that follows. Wherever you're staying, you're sure to be invited to join in the celebrations.

If you are visiting Vietnam during Tet, be sure you learn this phrase: *chúc mùng nam mói* – Happy New Year!

He believed that the individual exists in and for society and drew up a code of ethics to guide the individual in social interaction. This code laid down a person's obligations to family, society and the state, which remain the pillars of Vietnamese society today.

Ancestor Worship

Vietnamese ancestor worship dates from before the arrival of Confucianism or Buddhism. Ancestor worship is based on the belief that the soul lives on after death and becomes the protector of its descendants. Because of the influence the spirits of one's ancestors exert on the living, it is considered not only shameful for the spirits to be upset or restless, but downright dangerous.

Traditionally, the Vietnamese worship and honour the spirits of their ancestors regularly, especially on the anniversary of their death. To request help for success in business or on behalf of a sick child, sacrifices and prayers are given to the ancestral spirits. Important worship elements are the family altar and a plot of land whose income is set aside for the support of the ancestors.

Cao Daism

Cao Daism is a Vietnamese sect that seeks to create the ideal religion by fusing the secular and religious philosophies of both East and West. It was founded in the early 1920s based on messages revealed in seances to Ngo Minh Chieu, the group's founder. At present there are about two million followers of Cao Daism in Vietnam. The sect's colourful headquarters is in Tay Ninh (p381), 96km northwest of HCMC.

Cao Daism is a cocktail of the world's faiths and philosophies. Its prophets include Buddha, Confucius, Jesus Christ, Moses and Mohammed, and some wacky choices, such as Joan of Arc, William Shakespeare and Victor Hugo.

LUNAR CALENDAR

The Vietnamese lunar calendar closely resembles that of the Chinese. Year one of the Vietnamese lunar calendar corresponds to 2637 BC and each lunar month has 29 or 30 days, resulting in years with 355 days.

Approximately every third year is a leap year; an extra month is added between the third and fourth months to keep the lunar year in time with the solar year. If this was not done, the seasons would shift around the lunar year, playing havoc with all elements of life linked to the agricultural seasons. To check the Gregorian (solar) date corresponding to a lunar date, pick up any Vietnamese or Chinese calendar.

The Vietnamese have 12 zodiacal animals, each of which represents one year in a 12-year cycle. If you want to know your sign in the Vietnamese zodiac, look up your year of birth in the following chart. Don't forget that the Vietnamese New Year falls in late January or mid February. If your birthday is in the first half of January it will be included in the zodiac year before the calendar year of your birth.

Rat *(tý)*: generous, social, insecure, idle							
1924	1936	1948	1960	1972	1984	1996	2008
Buffalo *(suu)*: stubborn, conservative, patient							
1925	1937	1949	1961	1973	1985	1997	2009
Tiger *(dan)*: creative, brave, overbearing							
1926	1938	1950	1962	1974	1986	1998	2010
Cat *(mao)*: timid, affectionate, amicable							
1927	1939	1951	1963	1975	1987	1999	2011
Dragon *(thin)*: egotistical, strong, intelligent							
1928	1940	1952	1964	1976	1988	2000	2012
Snake *(ty)*: luxury seeking, secretive, friendly							
1929	1941	1953	1965	1977	1989	2001	2013
Horse *(ngo)*: emotional, clever, quick thinker							
1930	1942	1954	1966	1978	1990	2002	2014
Goat *(mui)*: charming, good with money, indecisive							
1931	1943	1955	1967	1979	1991	2003	2015
Monkey *(than)*: confident, humorous, fickle							
1932	1944	1956	1968	1980	1992	2004	2016
Rooster *(dau)*: diligent, imaginative, needs attention							
1933	1945	1957	1969	1981	1993	2005	2017
Dog *(tuat)*: humble, responsible, patient							
1934	1946	1958	1970	1982	1994	2006	2018
Pig *(hoi)*: materialistic, loyal, honest							
1935	1947	1959	1971	1983	1995	2007	2019

Hoa Hao Buddhism

The Hoa Hao Buddhist sect (Phat Giao Hoa Hao) was founded in the Mekong Delta in 1939 by Huynh Phu So. After he was miraculously cured of an illness, So began preaching a reformed Buddhism based on the common people and embodied in personal faith rather than elaborate rituals. His Buddhist philosophies involve simplicity in worship and no intermediaries between humans and the Supreme Being. Hoa Hao Buddhists are thought to number approximately 1.5 million.

Christianity

Catholicism was introduced in the 16th century by missionaries. Today, Vietnam has the highest percentage of Catholics (8% to 10% of the population) in Asia outside the Philippines. Under the communist government Catholics faced severe restrictions on their religious activities. As in the USSR, churches were viewed as a capitalist institution and a rival centre of power that could subvert the government. Since 1990, the government has taken a more liberal line and Catholicism is making a comeback.

Protestantism was introduced to Vietnam in 1911 and most of the 200,000 today are Montagnards living in the central highlands. Protestants were doubly unfortunate in that they were persecuted first by the pro-Catholic regime of Diem and later by the communists.

Islam

Muslims, mostly ethnic-Chams, make up about 0.5% of the population. The Chams consider themselves Muslims, but in practice they follow a localised adaptation of Islamic theology and law. Though Muslims usually pray five times a day, the Chams pray only on Fridays and celebrate Ramadan (a month of dawn-to-dusk fasting) for only three days. In addition, their Islam-based religious rituals co-exist with animism and the worship of Hindu deities. Circumcision is symbolically performed on boys at age 15, when a religious leader makes the gestures of circumcision with a wooden knife.

Hinduism

Champa was profoundly influenced by Hinduism and many of the Cham towers, built as Hindu sanctuaries, contain *lingas* that are still worshipped by ethnic-Vietnamese and ethnic-Chinese alike. After the fall of Champa in the 15th century, most Chams who remained in Vietnam became Muslims (Arab traders brought Islam to Indonesia and Malaysia; these merchants then brought it to Champa) but continued to practise various Hindu rituals and customs. Hundreds of thousands more migrated southwest to Cambodia, where they make up an important minority today.

WOMEN IN VIETNAM

For a look at the impact of *doi moi* (economic reform) on some Vietnamese women, Vu Xuan Hung's film *Misfortune's End* (1996) tells the tale of a silk weaver deserted by her husband for an upwardly mobile businesswoman.

As in many parts of Asia, Vietnamese women take a lot of pain for little gain, with plenty of hard work to do and little authority at the decision-making level. Vietnamese women were highly successful as guerrillas in the American War and brought plenty of grief to US soldiers. After the war, their contributions were given much fanfare, but all the government posts were given to men. In the countryside, you'll see women doing backbreaking jobs, such as crushing rocks at construction sites and carrying heavy baskets. It's doubtful that many Western men would be capable of such strenuous activity.

The country's two-children-per-family policy is boosting the independence of Vietnamese women, and more are delaying marriage to get an education. Around 50% of university students are female, but they're not always given the same opportunity as males to shine after graduation.

One of the sadder realities of the recent opening up to the West has been the influx of pimps posing as 'talent scouts'. Promises of lucrative jobs in developed countries are dangled in front of naive Vietnamese women who later find themselves enslaved as prostitutes. The trafficking of poor, rural women into the sex industry in Cambodia has been a huge problem and in many cases this involves the connivance of family members sacrificing one of their daughters for the rest to survive.

The Vietnamese consider pale skin to be beautiful. On sunny days, trendy Vietnamese women can often be seen strolling under the shade of an umbrella in order to keep from tanning. Women who work in the fields will go to great lengths to preserve their pale skin by wrapping their faces in towels and wearing long-sleeved shirts, elbow-length silk gloves and conical hats. To tell a Vietnamese woman that she has white skin is a great compliment; telling her that she has a 'lovely suntan' is a grave insult.

MEDIA

To the untrained eye, Vietnam looks like it has a flourishing free press, with plenty of newspapers and glossy magazines. However, in reality it is not possible to get a publishing licence unless you are affiliated to the communist party. As many in media say, there is no censorship in Vietnam, only self-censorship. Newspapers and magazines that cross the line are periodically closed down, sometimes for good. TV is even more tightly controlled, although the advent of satellite TV and the internet have made it much easier to get unbiased information from overseas. Vietnam uses the same technology as China to block access to (politically) undesirable websites.

ARTS

Music

TRADITIONAL

Heavily influenced by the Chinese to the north and Indian-influenced Khmer and Cham musical traditions to the south, this blend has produced an original style and instrumentation for Vietnamese music. Written music and the five note (pentatonic) scale may be of Chinese origin, but Vietnamese choral music is unique, as the melody and the tones must move as one; the melody cannot rise during a verse that has a falling tone.

Founded in 1981, Tieng Hat Que Huong's mission is to preserve, develop and promote Vietnamese traditional music, building a bridge between artists, old and new. Visit them at www.tienghatquehuong.com and look up details of forthcoming performances in HCMC.

Vietnamese folk music is usually sung without any instrumental accompaniment and was adapted by the Communist Party for many a patriotic marching song.

Classical, or 'learned music', is rather formal and frigid. It was performed at the imperial court for the entertainment of the mandarin elite. There are two main types of classical chamber music: *hat a dao* from the north and *ca Hue* from central Vietnam.

Traditional music is played on a wide array of indigenous instruments, dating back to the ancient *do son* drums that are sought-after works of art. The best known traditional instrument in use is the *dan bau,* a single-stringed zither that generates an astounding array of tones. Also common at performances of traditional music is the *dan tranh,* a 16-string zither with a haunting melody, and the *to rung,* a large bamboo xylophone.

Each of Vietnam's ethno-linguistic minorities has its own musical traditions that often include distinctive costumes and instruments, such as reed flutes, lithophones (similar to xylophones), bamboo whistles, gongs and stringed instruments made from gourds.

The easiest way to catch a performance of Vietnamese music is to dine at one of the many local restaurants offering traditional performances. Several museums offer short performances.

CONTEMPORARY/POP

Like the rest of Southeast Asia, Vietnam has a thriving domestic pop scene. The most celebrated artist is Khanh Ly, who left Vietnam in 1975 for the USA. She is massive both in Vietnam and abroad. Her music is widely available in Vietnam, but the government frowns on her recently composed lyrics that recall the trials of her life as a refugee.

Vietnam's number one domestic heart-throb is Hué-born Quang Linh, whose early popularity among Saigonese shot him up the local pop charts. He is adored by Vietnamese of all ages for his radiant love songs.

Other celebrated local pop singers include sex symbol Phuong Thanh, Vietnam's answer to Madonna or Britney Spears, only with more clothes. Vietnamese girls are seriously into heart-throb Lam Truong.

Of the legion of legendary Vietnamese contemporary-music composers, the leader of the pack was Trinh Cong Son, who died in HCMC in 2001. A former literature student from Hué, he wrote more than 500 songs, making him perhaps the most prolific Vietnamese composer in history.

Dance

Traditionally reserved for ceremonies and festivals, tourism has brought Vietnamese folk dance back to the mainstream. The Conical Hat Dance is one of the most visually stunning dances. A group of women wearing *ao dai* (the national dress of Vietnam) shake their stuff and spin around, whirling their classic conical hats like Fred Astaire with his cane.

Vietnam's ethnic minorities have their own dancing traditions, which are distinctly different from the Vietnamese majority. A great deal of anthropological research has been carried out in recent years in order to preserve and revive important indigenous traditions.

Some upmarket restaurants host dance performances at the weekend. Minority dances are organised in some of the more popular tourist stops in northwest Vietnam.

Theatre & Puppetry

Vietnamese theatre fuses music, singing, recitation, dance and mime into an artistic whole. These days, the various forms of Vietnamese theatre are performed by dozens of state-funded troupes and companies around the country.

TOP OF THE POPS

Pop music in Vietnam is a fickle beast and artists go in and out of fashion like David Beckham's haircuts. At the time of writing, the music currently doing the rounds on DJ turntables includes this Top 10 of albums.

genre	artist/band	album
Pop Diva	Hong Nhung	*Khu Vuon Yen Tinh*
R&B Diva	My Linh	*Made in Vietnam*
Pop Diva	Phuong Thanh	*Tim Lai Loi The*
Pop Diva	My Tam	*Yesterday and Now*
Male Pop	Dam Vinh Hung	*Hung*
Male Pop	Dan Truong	*Di Ve Noi Xa*
Girl Band	5DK (Nam Dong Ke)	*Em*
Boy Band	MTV	*Rock Show Thoi Gian*
Boy Band	AC&M	*Xin Chao*
Rock Band	The Wall	*Bong Hong Thuy Tinh*

Classical theatre is known as *hat tuong* in the north and *hat boi* in the south and is based on Chinese opera. Classical theatre is very formal, employing fixed gestures and scenery similar to the Chinese classics. The accompanying orchestra, which is dominated by the drum, usually has six musicians. Often, the audience also has a drum so it can pass judgement on the onstage action. It has a limited cast of characters, each of whom is easily identifiable through their make-up and costume. Red face-paint represents courage, loyalty and faithfulness, while traitors and cruel people have white faces. A male character expresses emotions (pensiveness, worry, anger) by fingering his beard in different ways.

To learn more about the unique art of water puppetry or 'Punch and Judy in a pool', visit www.thanglongwaterpuppet.org

Popular theatre *(hat cheo)* expresses social protest through satire, although there has been less protest and more satire since 1975. The singing and verse are in everyday language and include many proverbs and sayings, accompanied by folk melodies.

Modern theatre *(cai luong)* originated in the South in the early 20th century and shows strong Western influences. Spoken drama *(kich noi* or *kich),* with its Western roots, appeared in the 1920s and is popular among students and intellectuals.

Conventional puppetry *(roi can)* and the uniquely Vietnamese art form of water puppetry *(roi nuoc),* draw their plots from the same legendary and historical sources as other forms of traditional theatre. It is believed that water puppetry developed when determined puppeteers in the Red River Delta managed to continue performances despite annual flooding (see the boxed text Punch & Judy in a Pool, p121).

Cinema

One of Vietnam's earliest cinematographic efforts was a newsreel of Ho Chi Minh's 1945 Proclamation of Independence. Later, parts of the battle of Dien Bien Phu (p169) were restaged for the benefit of movie cameras.

Returning to Ngo Thuy (1977), directed by Le Manh Thich and Do Khanh Toan, pays homage to the women of Ngo Thuy village. In 1971, these women were the subject of a propaganda film to encourage people to sign up for the war effort.

Prior to reunification, the South Vietnamese movie industry produced a string of sensational, low-budget flicks. Conversely, North Vietnamese film-making efforts were dedicated to 'the mobilisation of the masses for economic reconstruction, the building of socialism and the struggle for national reunification'. Yawn.

In recent years, Vietnamese cinema has evolved from the realm of propaganda to a world that more closely reflects the lives of modern Vietnamese people and the issues they face. Contemporary films span a wide range of themes, from warfare to modern romance.

In Nguyen Khac's *The Retired General* (1988), the central character copes with adjusting from his life as a soldier during the American War to life as a civilian family man, symbolising Vietnam's difficult transition to the post-war era.

Dang Nhat Minh is perhaps Vietnam's most prolific film-maker. In *The Return* (1993), Minh hones in on the complexities of modern relationships, while *The Girl on the River* (1987) tells the stirring tale of a female journalist who joins an ex-prostitute in search of her former lover, a Viet Cong soldier whose life she had saved and whose heart she'd been promised.

Dancing Girl, directed by Le Hoang, caused a major splash with its release in 2003. Telling the story of two HIV-positive prostitutes, Hoa (played by My Duyen) is seen mainlining heroin.

Young overseas-Vietnamese film directors are steadily carving a niche for themselves in the international film industry and snapping up awards at film festivals worldwide.

Tran Anh Hung's touching *The Scent of Green Papaya* (1992), filmed in France, celebrates the coming of age of a young girl working as a servant for an affluent Saigon family during the 1950s. *Cyclo* (1995), Tran Anh Hung's visually stunning masterpiece, charges to the core of HCMC's gritty underworld and its violent existence.

lonelyplanet.com

Vietnamese-American Tony Bui made a splash in 1999 with his exquisite feature debut *Three Seasons* (1999). Set in present-day HCMC, this beautifully made film weaves together the lives of four unlikely characters with a US war veteran, played by Harvey Keitel, who comes to Vietnam in search of his long-lost daughter.

Literature

There are three veins of Vietnamese literature. Traditional oral literature *(truyen khau)* began long before recorded history and includes legends, folk songs and proverbs. Sino-Vietnamese literature was written in Chinese characters *(chu nho)*. Dominated by Confucian and Buddhist texts, it was governed by strict rules of metre and verse. Modern Vietnamese literature *(quoc am)* includes anything recorded in *nom* characters. The earliest text written in *nom* was the late-13th-century *Van Te Ca Sau* (Ode to an Alligator).

One of Vietnam's literary masterpieces, *Kim Van Kieu* (The Tale of Kieu) was written during the first half of the 19th century by Nguyen Du (1765–1820), a poet, scholar, mandarin and diplomat.

Paradise of the Blind, by Duong Thu Huong, the first Vietnamese novel to be published in the USA, is set in a northern village and a Hanoi slum and recalls the lives of three women and the hardships they faced over some 40 years.

Architecture

The Vietnamese have not been prolific builders like their Khmer neighbours, who erected the monuments of Angkor in Cambodia, and the Chams, whose graceful brick towers adorn many parts of the southern half of the country. For more on the Chams, check out the boxed text on p264 or follow in their footsteps (p26).

Traditionally, most Vietnamese constructions were made of wood and other materials that decayed in the tropical climate. This, coupled with the fact that almost all stone structures erected by the Vietnamese have been destroyed in countless feudal wars and invasions, means that very little premodern Vietnamese architecture remains.

The Sacred Willow (2000), by Duong Van Mai Elliot, spans four tumultuous generations of an upper-class Vietnamese family. This enlightening historical memoir traces French colonisation, WWII and the wars with the French and Americans.

Plenty of pagodas and temples founded hundreds of years ago are still functioning, but they have usually been rebuilt many times with little concern for the original. As a result, many modern elements have been casually introduced into pagoda architecture – those garish neon haloes for statues of Buddha are a shining example.

Thanks to the custom of ancestor worship, many graves from previous centuries survive today. These include temples erected in memory of high-ranking mandarins, royal-family members and emperors.

Memorials for Vietnamese who died in the wars against the Chinese, French and Americans usually contain cement obelisks inscribed with the words *to quoc ghi cong* ('the country will remember their exploits').

Painting & Sculpture

Painting on frame-mounted silk dates from the 13th century and was at one time the preserve of scholar-calligraphers, who painted grand scenes from nature. Before the advent of photography, realistic portraits for use in ancestor worship were produced. Some of these – usually of former head monks – can still be seen in certain Buddhist pagodas.

Vietnamese Painting – From Tradition to Modernity, by Corinne de Ménonville, is a lush look at Vietnamese contemporary painting. For the contributions of women to the art scene, check out *Vietnamese Women Artists* (2004).

During the past century, Vietnamese painting has been influenced by Western trends. Much recent work has had political rather than aesthetic or artistic motives. These propagandist pieces are easy to spot at the Fine Arts Museum (p102) in Hanoi.

The recent economic liberalisation has convinced many young artists to abandon the revolutionary themes and concentrate on producing commercial paintings. Some have gone back to the traditional-style silk or lacquer paintings, while others are experimenting with contemporary subjects.

The Chams produced spectacular carved sandstone figures for their Hindu and Buddhist sanctuaries. Cham sculpture was profoundly influenced by Indian art but over the centuries it managed to also incorporate Indonesian and Vietnamese elements. The largest single collection of Cham sculpture in the world is found at the Museum of Cham Sculpture (p231) in Danang. For the lowdown on Cham architecture, see the Po Klong Garai Cham Towers, p296.

Lacquerware & Ceramics

The art of making lacquerware was brought to Vietnam from China in the mid-15th century. During the 1930s, the Fine Arts School in Hanoi had several Japanese teachers who introduced new styles and production methods.

Lacquer *(son mai)* is made from resin extracted from the rhus tree. It is creamy white in raw form, but is darkened with pigments in an iron container for 40 hours. After the object has been treated with glue, the requisite 10 coats of lacquer are applied. Each coat must be dried for a week and then thoroughly sanded with pumice and cuttlebone before the next layer can be applied. A specially refined lacquer is used for the 11th and final coat, which is sanded with a fine coal powder and lime wash before the object is decorated. Designs include engraving in low relief, or inlaying mother-of-pearl, egg shell or precious metals.

If you're crazy about your china, or pots about your pottery, try to find a copy of *Viet Nam Ceramics,* an illustrated insight into Vietnamese pottery over the centuries.

The production of ceramics *(gom)* has a long history in Vietnam. In ancient times, ceramic objects were made by coating a wicker mould with clay and baking it. Later, ceramic production became very refined, and each dynastic period is known for its particular techniques and motifs.

It's possible to view ancient ceramics in museums throughout Vietnam. Excavations of archaeological sites are still revealing ancient examples, as are the ongoing discoveries of shipwreck treasures.

Bat Trang (p125), located near Hanoi, is famous for its contemporary ceramic industry.

SPORT

Football (soccer) is Vietnam's number-one spectator sport and the country is mad for it. During the World Cup, the European Champions League or other major clashes, half the country stays up all night to watch live games in different time zones around the world. Post-game fun includes hazardous high-speed motorbike cruising in the streets of Hanoi and HCMC, horns blaring, flags waving. Sadly the national team has not kept pace with this obsession and although one of the stronger teams in Southeast Asia, they remain minnows on the international stage. Think World Cup 2030 or beyond. Their FIFA world ranking is a lowly 172, only one place above Tahiti.

Tennis has considerable snob appeal these days and trendy Vietnamese like to both watch and play. Similarly, golf has taken off as a way to earn brownie points with international investors or local movers and shakers. Golf courses have been developed all over the country, although membership fees ensure it remains a game for the elite.

The Vietnamese are a nation of badminton players and every street is a potential court. Other favourite sports include volleyball and table tennis.

The Hill Tribes

Commonly known as 'hill tribes', a mosaic of ethnic minorities inhabits the mountainous regions of Vietnam. Encountering these hardy people in their mystical mountain homeland is undoubtedly one of the highlights of a visit to Vietnam. Many of the minorities wear incredible costumes and this isn't just a day job. So elaborate are some that it's easy to believe minority girls learn to embroider before they can walk. Even the architecture is individual and most minority houses are raised on stilts and finished in natural materials, in tune with their environment.

To get up close and personal with the north-eastern hill tribes, Tim Doling's *Mountains and Ethnic Minorities: North East Vietnam*, available in most Hanoi bookshops, is an essential companion for a tour of the region.

The French called these ethnic minorities Montagnards (highlanders or mountain people) and this term is still used today. The Vietnamese traditionally referred to them as *moi*, a derogatory term meaning savages, which reflects all too common attitudes among lowland majority Vietnamese. The current government prefers the term 'national minorities'. There are more than 15 separate groups.

The most colourful of these minorities live in the northwest of Vietnam, carving an existence out of the lush mountain landscapes along the Chinese and Lao borders. Many of the minorities in the central highlands and the south can be difficult to distinguish, at least by dress alone, from other Vietnamese.

While some of these minorities number as many as a million people, it is feared that other groups have dwindled to as few as 100. Some hill-tribe groups have lived in Vietnam for thousands of years, others only migrated south in the past few hundred years from China. In some ways they are 'fourth world' people in that they belong neither to the first-world powers nor to the developing nations. Rather, they have crossed and continue to cross national borders, often fleeing oppression by other cultures, without regard for recent nationhood. They inhabit a world that falls beyond the boundaries of modern nation states. The areas inhabited by each group are often delineated by altitude, with more recent arrivals settling at a higher altitude. First come, first served even applies to the remote mountains of the north.

Each hill tribe has its own language, customs, mode of dress and spiritual beliefs. Language and culture constitute the borders of their world. Some groups are caught between medieval and modern worlds, while others have already assimilated into modern life.

Most groups share a rural, agricultural lifestyle with similar village architecture and traditional rituals, coupled with a long history of intertribal warfare. Most hill-tribe communities are seminomadic, cultivating crops such as rice and using slash-and-burn methods, which have taken a heavy toll on the environment. The government has been trying to encourage the hill tribes to adopt standard agriculture at lower altitudes, including wet rice agriculture and cash crops such as tea and coffee. Despite incentives such as subsidised irrigation, better education and health care, the long history of independence and a general distrust of the ethnic-Vietnamese majority keep many away from the lowlands.

As in other parts of Asia, the traditional culture of so many of Vietnam's ethnic minorities is gradually giving way to a variety of outside influences. Many no longer dress in traditional clothing and those who do are often found only in the remote villages of the far north. Often it is the women of the community who keep the costume alive, weaving the traditional clothes and passing the knowledge on to their daughters. While factors such as the introduction of electricity, modern medicine and education improve the standard of living, they have also contributed to the abandonment of many age-old traditions.

A more recent, and equally threatening, outside influence is tourism. With growing numbers of people travelling to see the different ethnic minorities, increased exposure to business-savvy lowlanders and ever greater commercialism, it is a situation that could get worse before it gets better. It has resulted in some children, particularly in Sapa, expecting hand-outs of money or sweets. Worse, domestic tourism has created a market for karaoke, massage and sex, and in some areas unscrupulous ethnic-Vietnamese are luring minority women into this trade (see Prostitution, p465). See Tread Lightly in the Hills, (p76) for tips on minimising impact.

Vietnam's hill-tribe minorities have substantial autonomy and, though the official national language is Vietnamese, children still learn their local languages, though this can vary from group to group (see Hill Tribe Languages, p515, for useful phrases). Taxes are supposed to be paid, but Hanoi is far away and it seems that if the Montagnards don't interfere with the political agenda, they can live as they please. But if they choose to interfere it's a different story, as shown by the harsh suppression of demonstrations in the central highlands during 2001 and 2002 over language rights in schools and against the Vietnamisation of their culture.

Traditionally highland areas were allowed to remain independent as long as their leaders recognised Vietnamese sovereignty and paid tribute and taxes. Two autonomous regions were established in the northwest in 1959 and only abolished in 1980.

While there may be no official discrimination system, cultural prejudice against hill-tribe people helps ensure they remain at the bottom of the educational and economic ladder. Despite improvements in rural schooling and regional healthcare, many minority people marry young, have large families and die young. Put simply, life is a struggle for most of the minority people.

Here we profile some of the better known minority groups in Vietnam, including those that many visitors will encounter on a journey into the mountains.

BAHNAR

Pop: 135,000
Origin: China
Area: Kon Tum, Binh Dinh, Phu Yen
Economy: rice, corn
Belief system: animism
Cultural characteristics: The Bahnar are believed to have migrated long ago to the central highlands (p306) from the coast. They are animists and worship trees such as the banyan and ficus. The Bahnar keep their own traditional calendar, which calls for 10 months of cultivation, with the remaining two months set aside for social and personal duties, such as marriage, weaving, ceremonies and festivals. Traditionally when babies reached one month of age, a ceremony was held in which their lobes were pierced to make them a member of the village. Those who died without such holes were believed to be taken to a land of monkeys by a black-eared goddess called Dudyai. The Bahnar are skilled woodcarvers and wear similar dress to the Jarai.

Many of the hill tribes in the northwest find their spouse at regional love markets. Speed-dating minority style, this is where youngsters find new love and old flames fan the embers of a bygone passion. For more, see the box, p183.

DZAO

Pop: 470,000
Origin: China
Area: Chinese and Lao border areas, including Sapa
Economy: rice, corn
Belief system: animism
Cultural characteristics: The Dzao (or Zao/Dao) are one of the largest and most colourful of Vietnam's ethnic groups and live in the northwestern provinces (p172) near China and Laos. The Dzao practise ancestor worship of spirits or 'Ban Ho' (no relation to Uncle Ho) and hold elaborate rituals with

sacrifices of pigs and chickens. The Dzao's close proximity to China explains the common use of traditional medicine and the similarity of the Nom Dao script to Chinese characters.

The Dzao are famous for their elaborate dress. Women's clothing typically features intricate weaving and silver-coloured beads and coins – the wealth of a woman is said to be in the weight of coins she carries. Their long flowing hair, shaved above the forehead, is tied up into a large red or embroidered turban. A curious blend of skinhead and Sikh.

EDE

Pop: 25,000
Origin: China
Area: Gia Lai, Kon Tum, Dac Lac
Economy: livestock, forest products
Belief system: animism
Cultural characteristics: The polytheistic Ede live communally in beamless boat-shaped longhouses on stilts. About one-third of these homes, which often accommodate large extended families, are reserved for communal use, with the rest partitioned into smaller sections to give some privacy to married couples. Speaking of which, like the Jarai, the Ede girls must propose to the men and after marriage the couple resides with the wife's family and bears the mother's name. Inheritance is also the preserve of women, in particular the youngest daughter of the family. Ede women generally wear colourfully embroidered vests with copper and silver jewellery.

H'MONG

Pop: 550,000
Origin: China
Area: Cao Bang, Ha Giang, Lai Chau, Lao Cai, Son La, Yen Bai
Economy: medicinal plants, opium, livestock
Belief system: animism
Cultural characteristics: Since migrating from China in the 19th century, the H'mong have grown to become one of the largest ethnic groups in Vietnam. Numbering around half a million, they are spread across the far north, but most visitors will run into them in Sapa (p172) or Bac Ha (p180). The H'mong are animist, and worship spirits.

For more on the H'mong people, their culture and their music, head to www.learnabouthmong.com, a US-based website with lots of information about this dispersed minority.

The H'mong live at high altitudes and cultivate dry rice and medicinal plants (including opium), and raise animals. There are several groups within the H'mong, including Black, White, Red, Green and Flower, each of which has its own subtle dress code. One of the most recognisable are the Black H'mong, who wear indigo-dyed linen clothing, with women typically wearing skirts, aprons, retro leggings and cylindrical hats. The Flower H'mong women wear extrovert outfits, with bright rainbow banding and '70s-style sequins from head to toe. Many H'mong women wear large silver necklaces, earrings and clusters of silver bracelets.

The H'mong are also found in neighbouring Laos and Thailand and many have fled to Western countries as refugees. Their cultivation of opium has made them the target of much government suspicion over the years.

JARAI

Pop: 200,000+
Origin: China
Area: Dac Lac, Gia Lai, Khanh Hoa, Phu Yen
Economy: rice, corn
Belief system: animism

Cultural characteristics: The Jarai are the most populous minority in the central highlands, many living around Pleiku (p325), as well as northeast Cambodia and southern Laos. Villages are often named for a nearby river, stream or tribal chief, and a *nha-rong* (communal house) is usually found in the centre. Jarai women typically propose marriage to men through a matchmaker, who delivers the prospective groom a copper bracelet. Animistic beliefs and rituals still abound, and the Jarai pay respect to their ancestors and nature through a host or *yang* (genie). Popular spirits include the King of Fire (Po Teo Pui) and the King of Water (Po Teo La) who are summoned to bring forth the rain.

The Jarai construct elaborate cemeteries for their dead, which include carved effigies of the deceased. These totems can be found in the forests around villages, but sadly many are being snapped up by culturally insensitive collectors.

Perhaps more than any of Vietnam's other hill tribes, the Jarai are renowned for their indigenous musical instruments, from bronze gongs to bamboo tubes, which act as wind flutes and percussion. Jarai women typically wear sleeveless indigo blouses and long skirts.

During the war, many of the Montagnards in the central highlands were enrolled in the Civil Irregular Defense Program (CIDG), part of the US Army Special Forces, and were highly regarded by the Green Berets.

MUONG

Pop: 900,000
Origin: China
Area: Hoa Binh, Thanh Hoa
Economy: rice, corn
Belief system: animism
Cultural characteristics: Mainly concentrated in Hoa Binh province (p162), the male-dominated Muong live in small stilt-house hamlets. Though their origins lie close to the ethnic-Vietnamese, the Muong have a culture similar to the Thai.

They are known for producing folk literature, poems and songs, much of which have been translated into Vietnamese. Musical instruments such as the gong, drums, pan pipes, flutes and two-stringed violin are popular. Muong women wear long skirts and short blouses, while the men traditionally wear indigo tops and trousers.

NUNG

Pop: 700,000
Origin: China
Area: Bac Thai, Cao Bang, Ha Bac, Lang Son
Economy: fruit, vegetables, spices, bamboo
Belief system: ancestor worship
Cultural characteristics: The Nung inhabit the far northeastern provinces near the Chinese border. Concentrated into small villages, Nung homes are typically divided into two areas, one to serve as living quarters and the other for work and worship.

From ardent ancestral worship to traditional festivities, the Nung are spiritually and socially similar to the Tay people. Nung brides traditionally command high dowries from their prospective grooms and tradition dictates inheritance from father to son, which is a sure sign of Chinese influence.

Most Nung villages still have medicine men who are called upon to help get rid of evil spirits and cure the ill. The Nung are also known for their handicrafts, such as bamboo furniture, basketry, silverwork and paper making. The Nung primarily wear black and indigo clothing, and the women have elaborate headdresses.

SEDANG

Pop: 95,000
Origin: China
Area: Kon Tum, Quang Ngai, Quang Ngam
Economy: rice, corn
Belief system: animism
Cultural characteristics: Native to the central highlands, the Sedang extend as far west as Cambodia. Like many of their neighbours, the Sedang have been adversely affected by centuries of war and outside invasion and may have been raided by both the Cham and the Khmer to become slaves. They do not carry family names, and there is said to be complete equality between the sexes. The children of one's siblings are also given the same treatment as one's own, creating a strong fraternal tradition. The Sedang practise unique customs, such as grave abandonment (unlike the other hill-tribe groups who return to graves annually for ceremonies), sharing of property with the deceased and giving birth at the forest's edge. Sedang women traditionally wear long skirts and a sarong-like top wrap.

TREAD LIGHTLY IN THE HILLS

For the world's indigenous people, tourism is both a blessing and a curse.

Studies show indigenous cultures are a major drawcard for travellers and attract substantial revenue. However, little of it directly benefits these minority groups, who are often among their country's poorest and most disadvantaged.

Hill-tribe communities in Vietnam aren't usually involved in initiating tourist activities, often they aren't the major economic beneficiaries from these activities, are powerless to stop the tide and have little say in its development.

Tourism can bring many benefits to highland communities. These include cross-cultural understanding; improved infrastructure, such as roads; cheaper market goods; and tourist dollars supporting handicraft industries and providing employment opportunities.

However, there are also negative side-effects. Tourism creates or contributes to overtaxing of natural resources; increased litter and pollutants; dependency on tourist dollars; proliferation of drug use and prostitution; and erosion of local values and practices.

If you travel to these regions, the good news is that you can make a positive contribution and ensure that the benefits of your stay outweigh the costs.

Interaction

- Be polite and respectful.
- Dress modestly.
- Minimise litter.
- Do not urinate or defecate near villagers' households; bury faeces.
- Do not take drugs – young children tend to imitate tourists' behaviour.
- Do not engage in sexual relationships with local people, including prostitutes.
- Try to learn something about the community's culture and language and teach something good about yours.

Gifts

- Do not give children sweets or money; it encourages begging and paves the way for prostitution for 'gifts' and money. Sweets also contribute to tooth decay.
- Do not give clothes – communities are self-sufficient.

TAY

Pop: 1.2 million
Origin: China
Area: Bac Kan, Cao Bang, Lang Son, Thai Nguyen
Economy: rice, tobacco, herbs, spices
Belief system: Tam Giao, animism
Cultural characteristics: The Tay are the largest group among the hill tribes and live at low elevations and in valleys between Hanoi and the Chinese border. They traditionally live in wooden stilt houses, although a long history of interaction with the Vietnamese has seen a gradual shift to brick structures. They adhere closely to Vietnamese beliefs in Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, but also worship genies and local spirits. Since they developed their own script in the 16th century, Tay literature and arts have become famous throughout Vietnam. Tay people wear distinctive indigo-blue and black clothes. They often wear head wraps of the same colours and can sometimes be seen carrying machete-like farming tools in belt sheaths.

- Don't give medicines – it erodes traditional healing practices and the medicine may not be correctly administered.
- Individual gifts create jealousy and create expectations. Instead make donations to the local school, medical centre or community fund.
- No matter how poor they are, villagers are extremely hospitable; however, feeding a guest can result in food shortages. If you accept an invitation to share a meal, be sure to bring a generous contribution. Usually it is possible to chip in with a chicken or something similar in a remote village. However, most guides will be able to offer help on what is appropriate.

Shopping

- Haggle politely and always pay the agreed (and fair) price for goods and services.
- Do not ask to buy a villager's personal household items or the jewellery or clothes they are wearing.
- Don't buy village treasures, such as altar pieces or totems.

Photographs

- Do not photograph without first asking permission – this includes children. Some hill tribes (particularly the Dzao people) believe the camera will capture their spirit. Don't photograph altars.
- If you take a picture, do it quickly and avoid using a flash. It is polite to send copies (if possible) – if you promise to do so, keep your word.

Travel

- Travel in small, less disruptive groups.
- Stay, eat and travel with local businesses.
- Try to book tours with responsible tourism outlets who employ hill-tribe people or contribute to community welfare.

Note, www.hilltribe.org is aimed at visiting the hill tribes of northern Thailand, but it's still a useful resource on how to behave yourself in hill-tribe villages.

Compiled with assistance from Oxfam Community Aid Abroad

THAI

Pop: 1 million
Origin: China
Area: Dien Bien Phu, Hoa Binh, Lai Chau, Son La
Economy: rice, corn
Belief system: animism
Cultural characteristics: Like the Tay, the Thai originated in southern China before settling along the fertile riverbeds of the northwest from Hoa Binh (p162) to Muong Lay (p170). Villagers typically consist of 40 or 50 thatched houses built on bamboo stilts. The Thai minority are usually categorised by colour, including the Red, Black and White Thai. Black Thai women wear vibrantly coloured blouses and headgear, while the White Thai tend to dress in contemporary clothing. Theories vary on the relationship with the Thais of Thailand, as they do when it comes to the many colour groupings. Some suggest it corresponds to colours on the women's skirts, while others believe it comes from the nearby Red and Black Rivers.

The Thai, using a script developed in the 5th century, have produced literature ranging from poetry and love songs to folk tales. Travellers staying overnight in Mai Chau (p164) can usually catch a performance of the Thai's renowned music and dance.

For a lavish introduction to the landscapes of the northwest, check out *The Colours of Sapa*, a photographic portrait of the incredible people and breathtaking scenery around this old French hill station.

WHERE TO VISIT THE HILL TRIBES

The ethnic minorities of Vietnam are spread throughout the highland areas in the north and centre of the country. The old French hill station of Sapa (p172) is the gateway to the northwest and the most popular place in the country to encounter the Montagnards. Most famous for Black H'mong and Red Dzao villages, it is also within striking distance of the colourful Flower H'mong markets around Bac Ha (p180).

Homestays with minority families are a rewarding experience and Mai Chau (p164) is famous for the warm welcome of the White Thai people. Other centres in the northwest also offer opportunities for ethnic minority encounters, including Ha Giang (p182) and Lai Chau (p172).

Further east, the province of Cao Bang (p154) is a less travelled region with several minorities, including the H'mong, the Nung and the Tay. Lang Son (p153) also provides a home to these minority groups, but sees fewer tourists still.

Down in the central highlands, Buon Ma Thuot (p319), Dalat (p307), Kon Tum (p327) and Pleiku (p325) are useful bases to meet the Bahnar, Jarai and Sedang. However, most families here have forsaken their traditional costume, so meet-the-minorities tourism has less pulling power than in the north.

Environment

THE LAND

Vietnam is a land shaped by its history. Dominated by the Chinese for a thousand years, the Vietnamese pushed southwards seeking new lands for cultivation and to put a bit of distance between them and their northern neighbour. Hemmed in by the Truong Son Mountains to the west, they had little choice but to head on down the coast, eating up the Kingdom of Champa and taking a bite-sized chunk out of Cambodia.

The result is the map of Vietnam today. As the Vietnamese are quick to point out, it resembles a *don ganh,* the ubiquitous bamboo pole with a basket of rice slung from each end. The baskets represent the main rice-growing regions of the Red River Delta in the north, and the Mekong Delta in the south. The country is S-shaped, broad in the north and south and very narrow in the centre, where at one point it is only 50km wide.

Vietnam stretches more than 1600km along the eastern coast of the Indochinese peninsula. The country's land area is 326,797 sq km, making it a bit bigger than Italy and slightly smaller than Japan. Vietnam has 3451km of coastline and 3818km of land borders.

The coastline is one of the big drawcards for tourists and it doesn't disappoint, with sweeping beaches, towering cliffs, undulating dunes and countless uninhabited islands along its length. The largest of these islands is Phu Quoc (p452), off the coast of Cambodia in the Gulf of Thailand. Other major islands include Cat Ba (p143) and Van Don (p148) in the Halong Bay area and a splattering of dots off Nha Trang (p281).

The Red River Delta and the Mekong Delta are pancake flat and prone to flooding. Silt carried by the Red River and its tributaries, confined to their paths by 3000km of dikes, has raised the level of the river beds above the surrounding plains. Breaches in the dikes result in disastrous flooding. The Mekong Delta has no such protection and when *cuu long* (the nine dragons – the nickname for the nine tributaries of the Mekong where it splits in the delta) burst their banks it creates havoc for communities and crops. The Mekong Delta expands at a rate of about 100m per year, though global warming and the consequent rise of sea levels around the world could one day submerge it.

Three-quarters of the country consists of rolling hills and mighty mountains, the highest of which is 3143m-high Fansipan (p175) in the far northwest. The Truong Son Mountains, which form the central highlands, run almost the full length of Vietnam along its borders with Laos and Cambodia.

The most striking geological features in Vietnam are the karst formations. Karst consists of limestone in which erosion has produced fissures, sinkholes, caves and underground rivers. Northern Vietnam is a showcase for these outcrops, with stunning examples at Halong Bay (p136) and Bai Tu Long Bay (p148), and around Ninh Binh (p186) and the Perfume Pagoda (p125). At Halong and Bai Tu Long Bays, an enormous limestone plateau has steadily sunk into the ocean and the old mountain tops stick out of the sea like bony vertical fingers pointing towards the sky.

Not all of Vietnam's mountains are limestone. The coastal ranges near Nha Trang and those at Hai Van Pass (Danang) are composed of granite, and the giant boulders littering the hillsides are a surreal sight.

The western part of the central highlands, near Buon Ma Thuot and Pleiku, is well known for its red volcanic soil, which is incredibly fertile. The highlands are, of course, high above sea level, but are mostly undulating and not as scenic as the north.

The Vietnamese are starting to take environmental protection seriously, particularly as the popularity of national parks soars. The Vietnam Environment Protection Agency has the tough task of environmental watchdog; see its website at www.nea.gov.vn/english.

TRAVEL WIDELY, TREAD LIGHTLY, GIVE SUSTAINABLY – THE LONELY PLANET FOUNDATION

The Lonely Planet Foundation proudly supports nimble nonprofit institutions working for change in the world. Each year the foundation donates 5% of Lonely Planet company profits to projects selected by staff and authors. Our partners range from Kabissa, which provides small nonprofits across Africa with access to technology, to the Foundation for Developing Cambodian Orphans, which supports girls at risk of falling victim to sex traffickers.

Our nonprofit partners are linked by a grass-roots approach to the areas of health, education or sustainable tourism. Many – such as Louis Sarno who works with BaAka (Pygmy) children in the forested areas of Central African Republic – choose to focus on women and children as one of the most effective ways to support the whole community. Louis is determined to give options to children who are discriminated against by the majority Bantu population.

Sometimes foundation assistance is as simple as restoring a local ruin like the Minaret of Jam in Afghanistan; this incredible monument now draws intrepid tourists to the area and its restoration has greatly improved options for local people.

Just as travel is often about learning to see with new eyes, so many of the groups we work with aim to change the way people see themselves and the future for their children and communities.

WILDLIFE

Despite some disastrous bouts of deforestation, Vietnam's flora and fauna is as exotic, abundant and varied as any tropical country. Scientists are only just beginning to effectively catalogue the country's plant and animal life, and the government is showing some determined enthusiasm for ecological conservation.

Animals

On paper, Vietnam has plenty to offer to those who are wild about wildlife, but in reality many of the animals live in remote forested areas and an encounter is extremely unlikely. A lot of the wildlife is rapidly disappearing, thanks to population pressures and the destruction of habitats. Hunting, poaching and pollution have taken their toll, too.

With a wide range of habitats – from equatorial lowlands to high, temperate plateaus and even alpine peaks – the wildlife of Vietnam is enormously diverse. It is home to 275 species of mammal, more than 800 species of bird, 180 species of reptile, 80 species of amphibian, hundreds of species of fish and thousands of species of invertebrates.

Every now and then Vietnam throws up a new creature that manages to elude scientific classification. Since Vietnam reopened for business around 1990, zoologists have discovered several previously unknown species of large mammal in Vietnam, including a new breed of muntjac deer in 1998. The scientific and conservation value of these recent discoveries has not been lost on authorities, and the Vietnamese government has been expanding the size of national parks and nature reserves, and banning logging within these areas. As research and conservation efforts gather pace, Vietnam may turn out to be a treasure chest of undiscovered species.

Twitchers with a serious interest in the birdlife of Vietnam should seek out a copy of *A Field Guide to the Birds of South-East Asia* (1982) by Ben King, Martin Woodcock and Edward Dickinson, which has thorough coverage of Vietnam.

Rare and little-known birds previously thought to be extinct have been spotted and no doubt there are more in the extensive forests along the Lao border. Edwards' pheasant, previously believed to be extinct, was found on a scientific expedition, and other excursions have yielded the white-winged wood duck and white-shouldered ibis.

Even casual visitors will spot a few bird species: swallows and swifts flying over fields and along watercourses; flocks of finches at roadsides and in paddies; and bulbuls and mynahs in gardens and patches of forest. Vietnam is on the east-Asian flyway and is an important stopover for migratory waders en route from Siberian breeding grounds to their Australian winter quarters.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

Tragically, Vietnam's wildlife has been in deadly decline as forest habitats are destroyed and waterways polluted. In addition, widespread illegal hunting has exterminated local animal populations, in some cases wiping out entire species. Continued deforestation and poaching means that many endangered species are on a one-way ticket to extinction. Captive-breeding programmes may be the only hope for some.

Officially, the government has recognised 54 species of mammal and 60 species of bird as endangered. The tapir and Sumatran rhinoceros are already extinct in Vietnam. In the early 1990s a small population of Javan rhinos (the world's rarest rhinoceros) was discovered in Cat Tien National Park (p392), northeast of Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), but there are probably just 10 to 20 left in the entire country.

Larger animals crucial to the country's conservation efforts include the elephant, tiger, leopard, black bear, honey bear, snub-nosed monkey, flying squirrel, crocodile and turtle.

In a positive sign, some wildlife populations are re-establishing themselves in reforested areas. Birds, fish and crustaceans have reappeared in replanted mangrove forests. Areas in which large animals were thought to have been wiped out by war are now hot spots of biodiversity and abundance. The extensive forests of the central highlands and far north remain a home to some of nature's most noble creatures, such as the tiger, Asian elephant, clouded leopard and sun bear. Their chance of survival rests in the balance, as Vietnam's population continues to expand, eating up more and more of the remaining wilderness areas. Only when the population learns to live in harmony with nature rather than live off the environment will the situation improve.

Vietnam: A Natural History is well worth tracking down for those who want to learn more about the country's extraordinary flora and fauna. A collaboration between American and Vietnamese biodiversity scientists, it is exquisitely illustrated.

Plants

Years ago Vietnam was blanketed in forest, from vast mangrove fringing the coast to dense rainforest in the mountainous regions. Over the centuries the forests have progressively been pushed back: first by the clearing of land for cultivation, and later by a booming population and the ravages of war.

Although the scars of war are still visible and much of the damage is long-term, reforestation programmes have been implemented and today some of the landscape is showing signs of recovery. Natural forests at higher elevations, such as those in the northwest, feature wild rhododendrons, dwarf bamboo and many varieties of orchid; the central coast is drier and features stands of pine; while the river deltas support mangrove forests, which are valuable nurseries for fish and crustaceans, as well as feeding sites for many bird species.

The remaining forests of Vietnam are estimated to contain more than 12,000 plant species, only around 7000 of which have been identified and 2300 of which are known to be valuable to humanity. Recently the islands and caves of Halong Bay yielded seven previously unknown plants – the largest and most conspicuous of the new flora has been christened the Halong Fan Palm.

The Vietnamese make good use of the plants around them for medicines and remedies. Locals forage in the forests for barks, roots, herbs and flowers, which go into making cures for all sorts of ailments.

NATIONAL PARKS

Vietnam has been rapidly expanding the number of national parks in the country and there are now almost 30. There is also an expanding array of nature reserves, numbering more than 30 today. There are plans to increase and improve existing parks and nature reserves, as all too many of them remain lines on maps and are not properly protected.

Most of Vietnam's national parks are seldom visited by travellers, who tend to get stuck on the 'must-see' tourist trail, without the time or wanderlust to explore the parks. Access can be problematic with some parks hidden in remote areas, but others are easy to reach. For those who make the effort to seek them out, national parks reveal a whole different face to Vietnam. They also have the added appeal of being among the few places in Vietnam where tourists are unlikely to be hassled to buy anything. However, if you are wanting a bit of peace and quiet to soak up the serenity and splendour, it is better to visit parks during the week, as hordes of Vietnamese descend during the weekend.

The most interesting and accessible parks are Cat Ba National Park (p144), Bai Tu Long National Park (p148), Ba Be National Park (p157), Hoang Lien National Park (p174) and Cuc Phuong National Park (p190) in the north; Bach Ma National Park (p225) in the centre; and Cat Tien National Park (p392) and Yok Don National Park (p323) in the south. All of the parks levy some sort of admission charge, but it is usually very reasonable at around 10,000d or less than US$1. Most of the parks have accommodation available, most often a mix of rooms and bungalows, and camping is sometimes possible if you have your own gear.

Cat Ba National Park is on a beautiful island and during the summer months it attracts a steady stream of foreign travellers willing to make the boat journey. In 2000, Vietnam also created Bai Tu Long National Park, a protected reserve situated to the northeast of Halong Bay, which includes more than 15,000 hectares of tropical evergreen forest, plenty of hidden beaches and a spot of surf.

Ba Be National Park features spectacular waterfalls and is accessible by hired 4WD or motorbike from Hanoi. Hoang Lien National Park was recently created to protect the landscape and peoples around Sapa. Cuc Phuong National Park is less visited, but easily reached from Hanoi and offers great hiking, plus an amazing array of rescued primates that are being rehabilitated. Bach Ma National Park, near Hué, receives far fewer visitors than its attractions deserve, but is demonstrating good potential for responsible ecotourism.

Cat Tien National Park, in the southern part of the central highlands, is relatively easy to reach from HCMC or Dalat, and very popular with bird-watchers. Also in the central highlands is Yok Don National Park, which is home to many elephants and local minority tribes.

One other park in the south that is a must for any serious birder is Tram Chim Nature Reserve (p420), east of Chau Doc in Dong Thap province. This is home to the magnificent rare eastern sarus crane and one of only two nesting sites in the world, the other at Ang Trapeng Thmor in northwest Cambodia.

NATIONAL PARKS: THE TOP 10

park (size in hectares)	features	activities	best time to visit	page
Ba Be (7610)	lakes, rainforest, waterfalls, towering peaks, caves, bears, langurs	hiking, boating, birding	Apr-Nov	p157
Bai Tu Long (15,000)	karst peaks, hidden beaches, caves	boating, kayaking, swimming, surfing, hiking	Apr-Nov	p148
Bach Ma (22,000)	waterfalls, tigers, primates	hiking, birding	Feb-Aug	p225
Cat Ba (15,200)	jungle, caves, langurs, boars, deer, waterfowl	hiking, swimming, birding	Apr-Aug	p144
Cat Tien (73,878)	primates, elephants, birdlife, rhinos, tigers	hiking, birding jungle exploration	Nov-Jun	p392
Con Dao (19,998)	dugongs, turtles, beaches	birding, snorkelling	Nov-Jun	p397
Cuc Phuong (22,200)	jungle, grottoes, primates, birding centre, caves	hiking, endangered-primate viewing	Sep-Apr	p190
Hoang Lien (24,658)	mountains, minority people, birdlife	hiking, cycling, birding, mountain climbing	Sep-Nov, Apr-May	p174
Phong Nha-Ke Bang (85,800)	caves, karsts, birdlife	boat trips, caving, birding	Apr-Sep	p195
Yok Don (115,545)	minority people, stilt houses	elephant rides, hiking	Nov-Feb	p323

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Vietnam's environment is not teetering on the brink, but there are some worrying signs. Vietnam is a poor, densely populated, agricultural country, so humans are competing with native plants and animals over the same limited resources.

Deforestation is the most serious problem facing the country today. Since the arrival of human beings many millennia ago, Vietnam has been progressively denuded of forest cover. While 44% of the original forest cover was extant in 1943, by 1983 only 24% was left and in 1995 it was down to 20%. In a positive turnaround, recent reforestation projects by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, including the banning of unprocessed timber exports in 1992, have seen a slight rise in the amount of forest cover. However, it's bad news for the neighbours, as it simply means the Vietnamese have been sourcing their timber from Laos and Cambodia.

The Ministry of Education and Training has made the planting and taking care of trees part of the school curriculum. However, even at this rate, reforestation cannot keep up with forest losses. Each hectare of land stripped of vegetation contributes to a multitude of environmental problems, including the flooding of areas downstream from catchment areas; irreversible soil erosion; the silting up of rivers, streams, lakes and reservoirs; the loss of wildlife habitat; and unpredictable climatic changes. This could get worse again before it gets better, as more and more lowland Vietnamese are resettling the mountainous areas of the central highlands and the far north, putting new pressures on land for plantations and farmland.

Vietnam has so far suffered little industrial pollution largely because there has been little industry. However, the nation's rapid economic and population growth indicate environmental trouble ahead. The dramatic increase in the number of noisy, smoke-spewing motorbikes in recent years should be taken as a sign of abominations to come.

Flora and Fauna International produces an excellent *Nature Tourism Map of Vietnam,* which includes detailed coverage of all the national parks in Vietnam. As well as 1:1,000,000 scale map, there are breakout boxes on most of the popular parks. All proceeds from sales of the map go towards supporting primate conservation in Vietnam.

Ecotourism

Ecotourism is increasingly on the rise, with trekking and other outdoor activities becoming more and more popular with travellers. The government has set aside tens of thousands of square kilometres of forest land with plans to create around 100 protected areas in the form of national parks and

lonelyplanet.com

Ecotourism is increasingly popular in Vietnam and more and more companies are launching environmentally friendly biking and hiking tours. Vietnam Ecotours (www.ecotourismvietnam.com) is dedicated to promoting ecotourism.

nature reserves. Local ecologists hope that as tropical ecosystems have highly diverse species but low densities of individual species, reserve areas will be large enough to contain viable populations of each species. However, there are development interests that are not particularly amenable to boosting the size of Vietnam's national parks and nature reserves. As in the West, even the best-laid plans can sometimes go awry. Massive infrastructure projects such as new highways are threatening protected areas, as it is cheaper for the government to use park land than compensate villagers for farm land. A case in point is the Ho Chi Minh road, Hwy 15, which cuts through Cuc Phuong National Park.

That said, ecotourism will continue to be a growth industry, as more and more international visitors demand environmentally friendly activities. As well as trekking in national parks and mountain areas, cycling is increasingly popular and kayaking has taken off in Halong Bay. However, the fact is that ecotourism remains a much used-and-abused phrase and many of the so-called 'ecotourism' products in Vietnam are more about marketing than the environment.

War on the Environment

Some 13 million tonnes of bombs – equivalent to 450 times the energy of the atomic bomb used on Hiroshima – were dropped on the Indochina region. This equates to 265kg for every man, woman and child in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

Much has been written about the human and economic devastation wrought by the USA during the American War, but there was also ecocide – the war saw the most intensive attempt to destroy a country's natural environment the world has ever seen. American forces sprayed 72 million litres of herbicides (named Agents Orange, White and Blue after the colour of their canisters) over 16% of South Vietnam to destroy the Viet Cong's natural cover.

Another environmentally disastrous method of defoliation employed during the war involved the use of huge bulldozers called 'Rome ploughs' to rip up the jungle floor. Large tracts of forest, agricultural land, villages and even cemeteries were bulldozed, removing the vegetation and topsoil. Flammable melaleuca forests were ignited with napalm. In mountain areas, landslides were deliberately created by bombing and spraying acid on limestone hillsides. Elephants, useful for transport, were attacked from the air with bombs and napalm. By the war's end, extensive areas had been taken over by tough weeds (known locally as 'American grass'). The government estimates that 20,000 sq km of forest and farmland were lost as a direct result of the American War.

Scientists have yet to conclusively prove a link between the residues of chemicals used by the USA and spontaneous abortions, stillbirths, birth defects and other human health problems. However, the circumstantial evidence is certainly compelling. In 2002, on the heels of a landmark Agent Orange conference in Hanoi, the USA and Vietnam initiated a joint investigation into the health effects of this damaging herbicide. Delegates from Vietnam's Environment Protection Agency and the US National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences co-signed a directive for scientists to explore possible links between Agent Orange and various physical illnesses, such as cancers in adults and leukaemia in children.

DOING YOUR BIT

- Vietnam has a low level of environmental awareness and responsibility, and many people remain unaware of the implications of littering. Try and raise awareness of these issues by example, and dispose of your litter as responsibly as possible.
- Vietnam's faunal populations are under considerable threat from domestic consumption and the illegal international trade in animal products. Though it may be 'exotic' to try wild meat such as muntjac, bats, deer, sea horses, shark fins and so on – or to buy products made from endangered plants and animals – doing so will indicate your support or acceptance of such practices and add to the demand for them.
- When visiting coral reefs and snorkelling or diving, or simply boating, be careful not to touch live coral or anchor boats on it, as these hinder the coral's growth. If it's possible to anchor in a sandy area, try to convince the operator to do so and indicate your willingness to swim to the coral. Don't buy coral souvenirs.
- When visiting limestone caves, be aware that touching the formations hinders growth and turns the limestone black. Don't break off the stalactites or stalagmites as they take lifetimes to regrow. Don't carve graffiti onto limestone formations, cave walls or other rock.
- Do not remove or buy 'souvenirs' that have been taken from historical sites and natural areas.