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VIETNAM CHALLENGE

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About Vietnam

Vietnam's history is one of conquest and struggle going back more than two thousand years. At various times the region has been occupied by the feudal emperors of neighbouring China and French colonialism. In between, Vietnam experienced numerous imperial dynasties resulting in the capital moving from Hanoi to Hue before the last emperor,

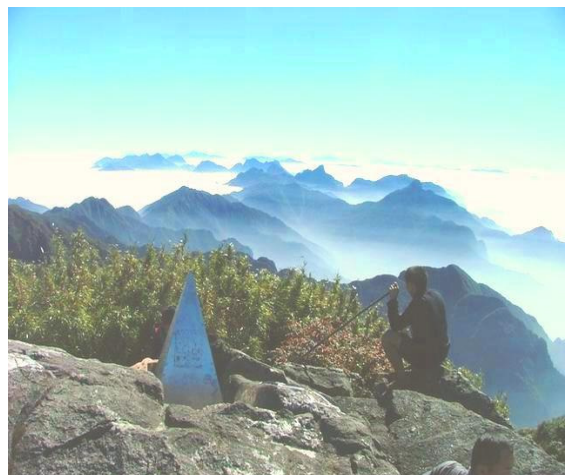


Bao Dai's abdication in 1945. But it would be a further 30 years before Vietnam (or to give it its proper title the Socialist Republic of Vietnam) became a unified nation when the 'American War' officially ended on April 30th 1975. Since independence in 1975 the country has had to recover from the ravages of war, the loss of financial support from the old Soviet Bloc, and a rigid centrally-planned economy although in the last 10 years the Vietnamese government has adopted a much more flexible and pragmatic approach resulting in a rapid increase in investment from overseas, a burgeoning middle class and a desirable destination for the inquisitive visitor. Vietnam shares its land borders with Cambodia and Laos to the west and China to the north whilst her eastern border

is the 3,000kms of coastline facing the South China Sea. The country covers an area of 329,600 sq. kms and its two main cultivated areas are the Red River Delta in the north and the Mekong Delta in the south. With a population of almost 85 million, Vietnam is one of the most densely crowded nations in the world with 80% of the population still living a rural existence. The majority of the population are Viet or 'Kinh' (85%); people who speak the tonal Vietnamese language. The remaining 15% is made up of over 50 ethnic hill tribe peoples who live mostly in the central and northern mountainous areas of the country. Each hill tribe has its own unique customs and dialect and most speak Vietnamese.

Sapa & Mount Fansipan

Sapa is situated in the country's northwest at an altitude of 1,600 metres where rugged mountain ranges combine with dramatic, lush terraced valleys and a colourful and fascinating indigenous people to leave an indelible impression on the visitor. Several of Vietnam's 54 ethnic groups can be found in and around the valleys of Sapa; a small hill town built by the French and perched in the hills below the slopes of Indochina's highest mountain - Fansipan. At 3,143 metres Mt. Fansipan is smaller than many of Asia's more illustrious and famed mountains. Even so, it takes at least three days to get to the peak and back and can be a challenging climb not least because there are no mountain huts on the way and therefore camping is a necessity. On this trip our porters ease the burden by carrying the equipment and food. No ropes or technical climbing skills are needed, just endurance and plenty of energy. The terrain is rugged, wet and often cold.



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Itinerary

Day 1: London Depart London for Hanoi on an overnight flight.

Day 2: Hanoi Upon arrival, transfer to a central hotel. Welcome dinner tonight.

Day 3: Hanoi/Sapa A sightseeing tour of Hanoi today before taking the overnight train to Sapa.

Day 4: Sapa On arrival drive for 25 km to the hill town of Sapa. Enjoy a gentle acclimatising walk this afternoon.

Day 5: Sapa / Tram Tom (2,900m) Embark on the first part of the ascent, trekking through terraced rice paddies and some of the villages of the H'mong minority people. At an elevation of 1,700m, it's time to stop for lunch and an energy boost before climbing up to the first peak at an elevation of 2,900m. Here camp is set up for the night.

Day 6: Summit day (3,100m) After the first night on the mountain we set out for the summit, which will take the best part of the day. Continue on through primary forest containing giant, centuries old pine trees and expanses of yellow bamboo before reaching an altitude of over 3,000m, at the roof of Vietnam: Fansipan Peak. Once at the summit enjoy time to savour the best panorama in Vietnam before descending back to camp.

Day 7: Sin Chai/ Sapa Today it's downhill just about all the way. After a couple hours of hiking you will stop for lunch. You will then continue descending toward Sin Chai village of Black Hmong minority. On the way you will be able to enjoy valley views and beautiful surrounding. You stop at the village for a while before you go by car back to Sapa, where you can celebrate your achievement and relax. Overnight train back to Hanoi.

Day 8: Hanoi / Danang Arrive in Hanoi and fly down to Danang, your base for 3 days of project work. All transport, meals and accommodation will be provided.

Days 9-11: Danang Spend three full days working on the project.

Day 12: Hanoi / Ha Long Bay Early morning flight to Hanoi, then travel by bus down to Ha Long Bay and board a traditional wooden junk, for an overnight boat trip around this stunning bay with over a thousand limestone islands.

Day 13: Ha Long Bay / Hanoi / London Spend the day cruising around the bay before returning to Hanoi airport this evening for your overnight flight home.

Day 14: London Early morning arrival into London

BEFORE YOU GO: AN A - Z OF INFORMATION ON VIETNAM

A is for Arrival. You must obtain a visa prior to travel. You should check visa validity and conditions carefully. They are usually valid for one month. There are fines and/or imprisonment if you overstay your visa. Entry to Vietnam may be refused if your passport has less than six months validity. All visitors to Vietnam must complete an arrival card. This should be submitted together with passport and visa to the Immigration Department officials, as well as the Customs officers. The Exit portion will be torn off and returned to the visitor, who should retain this for presentation upon

departure.

B is for Begging. Although still relatively rare in Vietnam, begging has become more prevalent in recent years especially where tourists congregate. In Sapa visitors will encounter groups of ethnic H'mong children dressed in black asking for 'bonbons' (sweets) and occasionally money. In most cases however they will try to sell you trinkets and jewellery that can either be purchased or in some cases exchanged for the taking of their photo. This has become an issue in Sapa due to the best but ultimately wrong intentions of tourists to the area and we **strongly advise against** giving anything to the children.

C is for Communications. International telecommunications charges from Vietnam are among the highest in the world, and hotels usually add a high surcharge on top of this. It's best to make quick calls and to have the other party call you back. However, you can make a phone call to talk with your relatives in your country with half of the cost with 178 or 171 services. With these services, cost is about 0.60US\$ per minute to most of countries. Dial 171 (or 178) + 00 + country code + city code + number. The country code is +84. All major hotels provide internet access in their business centres. Internet cafes have sprouted up throughout the country and can be found in nearly every city frequented by foreign tourists. Internet usage at peak times can be slow due to narrow bandwidth.

D is for Drink. Fresh fruit and vegetables should always be peeled or washed thoroughly with purified water. Bottled water should be used at all times for drinking. Boiled drinks such as coffee or tea are fine. Ice is not to be trusted unless you are sure it has been made with bottled water.

D is also for Dietary Requirements. The majority of special diets, such as vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free, etc., can be catered for. Please ensure that you notify us of any dietary requirements at the time of booking or as soon as possible.

E is for Expenses. Please remember to allow extra money for porters' tips, laundry, drinks, souvenirs, telephone calls and any other personal spending.

E is also for Electricity. The sockets in Vietnam vary between the two flat parallel prongs (USA style), two round pins (European style) and three square pins (British style). It is advised that you take an adaptor that will work on any of these options.

F is for Food. Due to its history, Vietnamese cuisine is unlike any other in Asia. Rice and noodle dishes are the staple of Vietnamese food whilst fish, chicken, and/or pork dishes served along with cooked vegetables and rice form a typical meal. The distinct flavours of Vietnamese food come primarily from mint leaves, coriander, lemon grass, shrimp, fish sauce, ginger, black pepper, garlic and basil. The country's 3 main regions, the North, the Centre and the South each have their own distinct cuisine. Generally the North is best known for its noodle soups, and meat and seafood stir-fries. The central region, especially in and around the former capital Hue, has some of the most elaborate dishes. In the south, where there is a greater abundance of spices, the food tends to be a little hotter.

F is also for Fitness. Whilst Fansipan is not the Himalayas it still represents a challenge. Participants should therefore ensure they are in good shape prior to arrival. We recommend visitors get into shape and accustomed to the rigours of the trek. Daily walks and exercises are advisable as is breaking in any new walking shoes etc.

H is for Health. You should seek medical advice before travelling and ensure that all appropriate vaccinations are up to date. For further information on health, check <http://www.fitfortravel.scot.nhs.uk>. There was a marked increase in cases of Dengue Fever in 2007, (particularly in the south of Vietnam). There is no vaccine against Dengue Fever. You should take care to avoid mosquito bites during the day, especially just after dawn and just before dusk, by using 50% DEET repellent. Malaria is common in some areas of Vietnam. Malaria is transmitted by mosquitoes so please see a medical professional for advice on antimalarials.

H is also for Haggling. Unless marked with a price most items in a shop are not fixed so prepare your bargaining skills early! As a general rule halve the initial asking price and you should eventually come to a price that is agreeable to both you and the vendor.

I is for Insurance. Different Travel will do everything possible to ensure a safe and enjoyable trip. However, certain risks are involved and should be recognised by participants. Thus, we highly recommend the purchase of short-term travel insurance for our expeditions. Travel Insurance is a cost effective way to protect yourself and your equipment in the event of problems due to cancelled trips, delays, medical problems, baggage loss or damage.

L is for Language. Vietnamese is a tonal language that uses the Roman alphabet together with tone and diacritical marks. Much of the language is Sino / Vietnamese, though influences from French and English are also apparent. English has replaced French and Russian as the most widely spoken and studied foreign language and is used in most cities but not so much in rural Vietnam. A few helpful words / phrases:

Hello - Xin chao (pronounced Sin Chow)

Goodbye - Tam biet

Yes - Vang

No - Khong

Sorry - Xin loi (pronounced Sin loy)

See you again - Hen Gap Lai

Thank you - Cam on (pronounced Come urn)

How much? - Bao nhieu? (pronounced Bow knew)

1 - Mot, 2 - Hai, 3 - Ba, 4 - Buon, 5 - Nam, 6 - Sau, 7 - Bay, 8 - Tam, 9 - Chin, 10 - Muoi.

M is for Money. The official currency is the Dong (VND). Several ATMs are available in Hanoi. Crisp, clean American dollars are also widely accepted especially for larger transactions. Travellers' cheques are easily exchangeable in banks for a service fee of 2%-5% and credit cards are readily acceptable, especially in Hanoi's major hotels and restaurants. The exchange rate at time of publishing is 10,000 Dong = £0.33. Visa, Master, American Express and Diner's Club are widely accepted at most of the larger hotels, restaurants and shops. Make sure that Vietnamese notes you receive are not torn as many shops and restaurants will not accept them. Also try not to change too much money at one time, as you will end up with a large wad of notes.

P is for Personal Safety. Vietnam is widely acknowledged to be one of the safest destinations in the world. In almost all cases the Vietnamese people regard tourists with the highest level of respect as guests in their country. However petty theft and pick pockets do exist in the larger cities. In other areas reports of these activities are almost unheard of. It is certainly not something to be concerned about but you should be aware of your surroundings. You should therefore ensure that all bags have locks. It is best not to bring expensive jewellery or watches to Vietnam. Do not carry unnecessarily large amounts of cash with you at any time.

R is for Religion. Buddhism is the most common religion in Vietnam with about 60% of the population practicing some form. About 8% are Catholic. Other religions include Confucianism, Taoism, Islam, Hinduism and Caodaism.

S is for Souvenirs. Vietnam is renowned for its various forms of lacquer ware and for its silk industry. An array of other handicrafts includes quality hand embroidery, woodcarvings, brass and marble figurines. Paintings, silk screens and hand-painted ceramics can be found in Hanoi as well as a wide range of hand-woven products in Sapa.

T is for Tipping. Whilst tipping is not part of Vietnam's cultural make-up it is nonetheless a welcome recent addition, ensuring that some of the least well paid people within the tourism industry are rewarded directly. Bear in mind the average monthly wage for a guide is likely to be less than US\$ 150 / month. In the case of porters and hotel staff less still.

W is for Weather. Vietnam has a tropical monsoon climate with wet and dry seasons. These seasons vary from north to south and with elevation changes. In general, the dry season lasts from November to April in the north, south and central highland regions. The coolest, driest times to visit are from October to January (north), from February to April (Central Highlands) and from late December to March (south).

Z is for Zen Travelling. We suggest these tips for successfully dealing with Vietnamese officials, airport personnel and bureaucrats:

- Try your best to smile and be pleasant. Don't complain loudly.
- If you feel you need to criticise someone, do it in a joking, light-hearted manner to avoid confrontation.
- Expect delays - build them into your schedule.
- Never show anger - ever! Getting visibly upset is not only rude; it will cause you to lose face.
- Don't be competitive. Treating your interaction as a cooperative enterprise works much better.
- Don't act as though you deserve service from anyone. If you do so, it's likely that you will be delayed.

Last updated Feb 2010

Packing List

Clothing

- Flip Flops/sandals
- Trainers
- Walking boots
- Sun hat
- Long sleeve shirt x 2
- Two t-shirts/vests x 2
- Lightweight (or convertible) trousers x 2
- Underwear and socks
- Warm trousers (e.g. tracksuit) for evenings
- Fleece
- Thick sweater
- Long sleeved thermal vest
- Long thermal trousers
- Breathable waterproof jacket
- Breathable waterproof trousers
- Gloves
- Warm hat covering ears
- Swimwear
- Shorts

Luggage

- Small rucksack
- Trek bag / Rucksack

Eating and Drinking

- Powdered fruit juice
- Energy snacks (dried fruit/nuts/glucose sweets etc)
- 2 litre personal water bottle x2
- Iodine tablets/water purification

Hygiene

- Wash bag and washing kit
- Personal toiletries
- Toothbrush
- Toothpaste
- Multi-purpose travel wash
- Hand sanitizer
- Wet wipes
- Travel towel
- Sun block/ cream (high SPF) and aftersun (or Aloe Vera gel)
- Sanitary towels/ tampons/Mooncup
- Spare glasses/contact lenses

Essentials

- Toilet roll
- Sunglasses
- Diary/notebook and pen
- Books/pack of cards
- Sewing kit
- Adaptor (two flat parallel prongs (USA)/ two round pins (European) / three square pins (British)
- Spare torch bulb/batteries
- Small torch (head torch best)

Sleeping

- Ear plugs
- Eye mask

Optional

- Camera/video camera + charger
- Films/batteries/memory stick
- Binoculars
- Mobile phone/spare battery + charger
- Walkman/radio/mp3 player
- Protective footwear for project

First Aid Kit

- Prescription medicine
- Painkillers
- Plasters/blister spray
- Antimalarials
- Insect repellent (cont. 50% DEET)
- Anti-histamine cream/tablets
- Kaolin/Imodium (loperamide)/lomotil
- Rehydration sachets
- Antiseptic cream/powder
- Antifungal cream/powder
- Lip balm with SPF protection
- Scissors/ Tweezers
- Calamine lotion

If there are any questions or queries regarding the items on this list, please feel free to contact us on info@different-travel.com