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Vietnam Discovery

Project Overview



Want to experience the 'real' Vietnam?

Be prepared to get away from it all and savor all that Vietnam has to offer. From the hustle and bustle of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh city to the stunning islands of Ha Long Bay and the ancient town of Hoi An, this trip really does take you to all the great sights (and a fair few off the beaten track!) of what is a wonderful and rewarding country. During your time living with a hill tribe community you'll have the opportunity not only to get an understanding of local life but also to pass on your language skills to the local children. Travelling by train, boat and car you'll get to experience Vietnam from the inside led throughout by our expert local guide.

Trip Highlights

- Experience the traditional ways of life of a hill-tribe community
- Work with the children at the local school
- Enjoy the stunning sights of Ha Long Bay
- Explore Hue, the ancient capitol of Vietnam
- Hoi An - you won't want to leave!
- Travelling the length of Vietnam by train - aptly named the 'Reunification Express'



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Day 1: Arrival into Hanoi

You will be met at the airport and taken to your hotel accommodation in Hanoi. Spend the afternoon on a walking tour of this great city focusing on the old town - be prepared to be blown away, Hanoi is one of the most fascinating cities in Asia. In the evening there will be a group meeting to run through what you are going to do for the next two weeks and get to know each other. Overnight in Hanoi, no meals included.

Day 2: Hanoi to Ha Long Bay – overnight on boat

Today you will drive to Ha Long Bay (you may not have heard of it but as soon as you're there you'll recognise the stunning islands and limestone pinnacles) and embark on a traditional junk boat for a cruise through the bay visiting a limestone cave along the way. Enjoy the relaxing experience of falling asleep to the gentle lapping of the South China sea - and make your friends jealous with the amazing photos you'll get. Overnight on boat, lunch and dinner included.

Day 3: Ha Long Bay to Hanoi

After a leisurely breakfast on board your boat you will head to dry land before transferring back to Hanoi (around 3.5 hours). The remainder of the afternoon is free for you to enjoy at your leisure - explore the old town further, visit the tomb of Ho Chi Minh or take a look at the war museum, the choice is yours. Overnight in hotel in Hanoi, breakfast included.

Days 4 to 7: Mai Chau and volunteer project

You will be spending the next four days in the picturesque Mai Chau valley where you will spend your time in a traditional hill tribe village living with a local family. This is an amazing opportunity to experience traditional life largely untouched by modern ways and also help children at the local school with your language skills. The valley provides a beautiful insight into a largely forgotten (by travelers!) part of Vietnam and will give you a great insight into traditional and fast disappearing way of life. Please note however that the accommodation is basic. Depending on the family there will either be a 'western' style or 'squat' toilet and a simple shower or bucket and scoop from a well depending on the family. Accommodation with local family, breakfast, lunch and dinner included.

Day 8: Mai Chau to Hanoi and overnight train

Today you will leave the village and journey back to Hanoi where you will board the sleeper train to Hue, the capital of Vietnam until 1945. Remember to take your book as it is a 12 hour train ride - but what a journey it is through the heart of North Vietnam! Overnight on train in soft sleeper, breakfast

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included.

Day 9: Arrive Hue

Arrive into Hue in the morning and transfer to your hotel. Today you are free to explore the delights of Hue - a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The city has a range of great things to see and do but our favorite is to chill out whilst taking a boat down the 'Perfume River'. Our guide will be able to help make suggestions and arrange whatever you'd like to do. Overnight in Hue, no meals included.

Day 10: Hue to Hoi An

After breakfast you will enjoy a guided tour of the famous Citadel (where the emperors used to live) before starting your drive to Hoi An which will take around 4 hours. On the way you'll pass the stunning Lang Co Beach and over the Hai Van Pass –don't forget your camera! A walking tour of Hoi An's old town - full of winding lanes and old style Chinese shophouses - awaits you after your arrival. Overnight in Hoi An, breakfast included.

Day 11: Hoi An

A free day in Hoi An. Hit the nearby beaches, explore the old town further or even get a made to measure suit - the choice is yours how to get the most out of this atmospheric and fascinating town. Overnight in Hoi An, breakfast included.

Day 12: Hoi An to Ho Chi Minh by overnight train

A final morning to explore Hoi An before heading off to Danang to catch the overnight train to Ho Chi Minh city. The train journey is a great chance to just put your feet up and watch South Vietnam roll by. It's also a great way to meet people - you'll always find someone keen to chat with you and teach you more and more about life in this great country. Overnight train in soft sleeper, breakfast included.

Day 13: Ho Chi Minh City

Wow - Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). Perhaps one of the world's most famous (and misunderstood) cities is all yours to explore. After checking into the hotel you will have a walking tour of the city ticking off many of the key spots including the old Post Office, Notre Dame Cathedral, Re-Unification Palace, the War Museum and the bustling Ben Thanh market! Overnight in hotel in Ho Chi Minh City, no meals included.

Day 14: Ho Chi Minh City

A free day to explore the city. There is enough here to keep you busy for years (just watching the



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motorbikes whizzing by keeps us fascinated for hours!) but some highlights are exploring Chinatown, the local markets or heading further afield to the Cu Chi tunnels. Your guide can advise you on all the best things to do! Overnight in hotel in Ho Chi Minh City, breakfast included.

Day 15: Day tour to Mekong Delta

Today you will head to the Mekong Delta and take a relaxing boat journey for round 2.5 hours through the maze of canals whilst learning about typical daily life in this rural part of Vietnam. Return to Ho Chi Minh city in the early evening. Overnight in hotel in Ho Chi Minh City, breakfast and lunch included.

Day 16: Tour ends

Today is the end of your voyage of discovery and time either to head back to the airport for your flight home or, if you're lucky, time to head on to further travels.

What the project does and why does it need you?

You will be spending 4 days with a hill tribe community who have been largely by-passed by the modern world giving you a truly unique experience. You'll spend a couple of these days working with the children at the local village school helping to pass on your language skills - and hopefully having a lot of fun at the same time.

Who is it for?

This is an ideal trip for anyone with a love of travel and a real desire to get to know one of South East Asia's most beautiful and interesting destinations. There really is something for everyone during this tour, from spending time with a hill tribe village to cruising amongst the pinnacles and islands of Ha Long Bay. Vietnam is a beautiful country and as you travel from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City, by boat, car and train you will get to experience so much of what this wonderful country has to offer!

What you`ll be doing

Experiencing the sights and sounds of an incredible country and spending time learning about how rural Vietnamese communities live.

Where you`ll be staying

You will be staying at various places and styles of accommodation during your trip. Hotels will be 2 star on a twin room share basis where shown on the itinerary. Homestay accommodation during your stay in Mai Chau is basic and based on a dormitory style with mattresses and mosquito nets provided. Please note that some homestays do not have western style

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toilets and most 'showers' are of the basic 'bucket' style..

Overnight accommodation during your stay in Ha Long Bay is on board a traditional junk boat.

During your overnight train journeys from Hanoi to Hue and Danang to Ho Chi Minh City you will be in 'soft sleeper' carriages.

What you`ll be eating

Meals are included as per the itinerary and will be a range of local dishes. For other meals we'd encourage you to explore the range of great food available in Vietnam. Vietnam really is a 'foodies' paradise.

Advice and what to bring

You will need to bring your own towel for your homestay accommodation and a good book for your train journeys. Please note that between November and March it can be quite cold in parts of Northern Vietnam so please bring a warm sweater / fleece with you! The North and South have very different climates so you will need to bring sun cream and a rain jacket!

When you arrive

Fly into Hanoi Noibai airport (airport code HAN) and meet a representative at the airport. You will spend your first night in a hotel. Please note that the trip will end in Ho Chi Minh City and you will be free to arrange your onward travel from there (airport code SGN)

Please note that this trip has minimum numbers, please enquire for details. It is also a 15 night 16 day tour.

Please also note that a criminal record check or equivalent is required for this trip.

You will need to obtain a 30 day tourist visa prior to your arrival.

Fast Facts

Project Information

- Project Duration: Min 2 weeks
- Project Costs: US\$ 2195.00 for 2 weeks
- Location of project: *Various locations along the tour, Mai Chau province during the project*
- Arrival Airport: *Hanoi Noibai (airport code HAN)*
- Activities: *Teaching English to the children at the local school in a hill tribe community*
- Working Hours: *2 and half days at the project during your stay in Mai Chau.*



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- Getting to the project:*In the village*
- Requirements:*Minimum Age 18*

What's Included

- Accommodation:*Shared room in hotels, overnight boat in Ha Long Bay, overnight train from Hanoi to Hue and Danang to Ho Chi Minh City based on soft sleeper 4 berth cabin, homestay in Mai Chau.*
- Food:*Food included as per the itinerary, please note that beverages are not included*
- Airport Pickup:*Included on arrival date. Ask us for details if you're arriving early!*
- Training:*In-country orientation*
- Support:*Pre-departure helpdesk, Local in-country team and 24hr emergency support, English speaking guide during the land tour*
- Transport: *All transport as shown in the itinerary.*

What's not included

- *Flights, Insurance, Visas, Return Airport transfer, Local Transport not mentioned in the itinerary*
- *Sightseeing fees and permits during guided time (approximately US\$10 as per itinerary)*

Country Guide--Vietnam

A little bit of history...



Vietnam's history has been marred by war and various power struggles as it has sought to regain and maintain independence. Its earliest origins are believed to

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date back to the Dong Son civilization circa the 3rd century. Up until the 10th century it was ruled by a succession of Chinese dynasties before it achieved independence. The period up until the mid 19th century saw a series of dynasties including, Ly, Tran and Le, with aims to carve out the country's own identity against the influence of China.

The country was unable to fend off the dominance of the French Empire and by 1883 the French had overtaken the country. Ho Chi Minh, the founder of the Vietnamese Communist party, was a key force in the country's quest for independence, and post-WW II he declared the country independent after his communist army defeated French colonists in 1954. At the 1954 Geneva conference the French agreed to withdraw and the country was effectively divided into the communist north and the anti-communist south, which was intended to be temporary and followed by democratic elections. This didn't turn out as planned when Ngo Dinh Diem, the leader of the south, refused to hold elections and the north began strengthening their communist influence in the south. An armed struggle ensued and the USA, who supported the south, intervened in the early 1960s and was joined by other foreign troops. War raged until a ceasefire in 1973, and two years later the north gained control and unified Vietnam under communist rule.

Stability was not assured and Vietnam incurred the wrath of China when it invaded Cambodia in 1978 which resulted in China attacking Vietnam the following year. Years of fierce combat meant an economy at near collapse which contributed to thousands of refugees fleeing the country in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Aside from Soviet influence, it remained isolated from the world. Economic reforms in 1986 paved the way for a modernized economy and economic growth. Having established diplomatic relations (notably with the USA) the country opened itself up to foreign investment. While it remains one of the world's poorest countries, it has one of the fastest growing economies in Asia.

Best time to go...

To experience Vietnam at its most weather-friendly, there is no clean cut time of when to go as climate varies between the north, south and central regions. The north is defined by a cool, wet winter from November to April and a hot summer from May to October, during which time typhoons may occur. The temperatures in the north are at their mildest from late September to November and in March and April. To avoid the wet season in the central region which runs from August to December, it's best to visit between January and July; the coastal regions tend to bear the brunt of the wet weather. The most desirable time to visit the south is between October and February when it's dry and a respite from the baking temperatures experienced during March through to May. The south's two main seasons are wet, from May to November, and dry, during the months of December to April, with June to August the wettest period.

The busiest time to visit is typically from November to January and April to June when tourists are out in full, leading to a rise in accommodation rates. A worthwhile, albeit packed, time to visit is during the weeks leading up to the lunar new year, known as Tet, a major holiday in Vietnam. The

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days change each year depending on the lunar cycle but for 2007 the first day of Tet is earmarked for February 18. During the holiday, there may be limited services and a number of businesses close for three or four days but the build up is the best part if you're a visitor.

Currency and living costs...

The dong is Vietnam's unit of currency. The current exchange rate is: \$1 to 16,090.00d. Check www.xe.com or equivalent for the most up to date exchange rate.

The average costs of life's little essentials are as follows:

- **Meals** – main dishes for lunch can cost between 15,000d and 30,000d in restaurants, while dinner is in the region of 30,000d and upwards. Pho, a traditional soup dish containing meat, can be purchased for as little as 2,000d to 4,000d.
- **Beer** – a bottle of beer can range between 5,000d to 10,000d, whereas draft beer is priced around 2,500d for half a liter.
- **Coffee** – A cup of coffee is priced between 2,000d and 5,000d.
- **Taxi ride** – A taxi ride is usually charged from a rate of 14,000d, though it's possible that some taxis will charge as low as 12,000d and others as high as 16,000d. Most charge between 4,000d and 5,000 per km thereafter.
- **Accommodation** – A 2* hotel room, depending on season and availability, can be priced at around 320,000d and 650,000d.
- **Internet café** – Rates per hour differ from as low as 5,000d to up to 15,000d.

Getting around...

For long distances, flying is a doable but often expensive option compared to trains and buses. The main domestic airlines are Vietnam Airlines and Pacific Airlines which offer regular services between major cities; flying time between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City is around 2 hours. It's often cheaper to purchase domestic tickets within Vietnam.

Vietnam has an extensive bus network in place and cheap fares but the buses are all too often overcrowded and road safety is dubious; driving is not recommended. While the fares may still be relatively cheap, foreigners are usually charged more than locals. Aimed at the tourist trade, Open Tour Buses are inexpensive, comfortable buses that journey to the major destinations and stop at selected hotels and restaurants along the way. Although a pleasurable way to travel, it can feel like a tourist bubble rather than an experience of the real Vietnam. Minibuses are also plentiful but can be



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irritatingly slow with numerous pick ups and drop offs. It's best to ride express minibuses which have far fewer stops and are air conditioned.

If time isn't an issue, train travel is a relaxed way to travel. The journeys can take longer than by bus but offer more leg room and are generally less crowded. Also, unlike bus fares, foreigners pay the same as locals. Depending on your travel budget, trains range from the non-air conditioned seated variety to air-conditioned sleepers, the latter being an obvious choice if you plan to brave the 30 hour plus trip from Ho Chi Minh City to Hanoi which is often referred to as the Reunification Express. All trains require a reservation and it's often possible to book a train from a station other than the one you are departing from.

Aside from crowded buses, taxis are good for getting around major cities. It's advisable to use metered taxis or at least negotiate a fare before departure. Cyclos, three-wheeled bicycles, are an alternative way of traversing city streets and can be hired for a full day. For a more high-powered mode of transport, Honda Oms, motorbikes whereby the passenger sits behind the driver, are also plentiful. For both modes, it's best to have a pen and paper to hand to write down your destination and agree on a fare prior to the journey.

Useful links

www.lonelyplanet.com

Lonely Planet are leaders in the travel guide sector and their website is a great source of travel information.

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/4130.htm>

U.S. State Department Consular sheet.

www.pacificairlines.com.vn

Pacific Airlines.

www.vietnamairlines.com

Vietnam Airlines.

www.vr.com.vn

Train operator Vietnam Railways.