

VIETNAM - FAQs

AIRLINES

Domestic: Three domestic airlines are currently operating in Vietnam: Vietnam Airlines, Jetstar-Pacific Airlines and Indochina Airlines. Both Jetstar-Pacific and Indochina Airlines are low-cost carriers (LCC). Jetstar is a joint venture company between Qantas Australia and Pacific Air. Indochina Airiness is Vietnam's newest airline and is privately owned. All airlines are using a mixture of Boeing and Airbus planes and Vietnamese as well as foreign pilots.

AIRPORT TAX

There is a departure tax on all international flights from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City but this tax is already included in the price of your all airplane tickets.

ARRIVAL IN VIETNAM

BY AIR: Consult your local travel agent for routings, fares and availability on flights to Vietnam. Discount websites and flight search engines may offer some good deals. Major airlines flying to Ho Chi Minh City or Hanoi include: Vietnam Airlines, Air France, United Airlines, Lufthansa, Thai Airways, Qatar Airways, Bangkok Airways and many more. Major airlines flying to Danang International Airport include PB Air from Bangkok and Silk Air from Singapore.

BY LAND: Vietnam shares a border with China in the north (three border crossings), Laos in the west (three border crossings) and Cambodia in the south-west (three border crossings).

From China: Trains from Beijing to Hanoi pass by Nanning and Pinxiang in China and enter Vietnam at Dong Dang (north of Lang Son). There is also a road crossing known as Huu Nghi in Lang Son province. Trains coming from Kunming cross the border at Lao Cai, in northwest Vietnam. From Guangzhou, you will cross the border at Mong Cai, a few hours' drive from Halong and its spectacular Bay.

From Laos: If you travel from Laos by road via Savannakhet and Sepon, you will get to Vietnam by the Lao Bao (Vietnam) border crossing. This crossing links Laos to central Vietnam (Danang and Dong Ha). If you travel from Vientiane, you will cross Lak Sao before entering Vietnam by Cau Treo border crossing, in Ha Tinh Province (Vietnam). The Nam Can border crossing connects Nghe An Province (Vietnam) and Xieng Khuang Province (Laos).

From Cambodia: If you travel from Phnom Penh by speedboat, you will enter Vietnam at Chau Doc, in the Mekong Delta area. If you arrive from Cambodia by road into Ho Chi Minh City, you will enter Vietnam at Moc Bai, which connects Vietnam's Tay Ninh Province with Cambodia's Svay Rieng Province. Border crossing at Prek Chak/Xaxia (close to Kep in Cambodia and Ha Tien in Vietnam) are now possible.

NOTE: You cannot obtain a visa on arrival at land border- crossing points. If you enter Vietnam by land, you must obtain the visa before arrival. Refer to our VISA section below for more information.

ARRIVAL FORMALITIES/ VISA ON ARRIVAL

In case you are obtaining your pre-arranged visa on arrival please proceed to the Visa counter and read the visa section.

ATMs

ATMs for withdrawing Vietnamese Dong are available in major airports, hotels, towns and capitals of provinces throughout Vietnam. Most ATMs have an English language version. Ask your tour guide for help when you need to locate an ATM.

CLOTHING

Comfortable lightweight clothing in natural fabrics such as cotton is most suitable for traveling in Vietnam. The dress code is fairly casual as in most parts of the tropics but it is advisable to cover arms and legs in the evenings against biting insects. A lightweight raincoat and umbrella are a good idea in the rainy season and an umbrella can also offer useful shade from the sun.

Evenings in the north and the centre can be quite chilly so bring a sweater and a good jacket especially from November to February. Visitors should not wear shorts, short skirts or other revealing clothing when visiting pagodas and monasteries. Shoes must be removed before entering some religious building or a private home. It is therefore useful to wear shoes without too many laces and which can easily be taken off.

CREDIT CARDS

Most credit cards are accepted in Vietnam. Visa and MasterCard are the most widely accepted. JCB and American Express are also accepted in some outlets. Not all hotels, commercial centres, shops and restaurants accept credit cards. Check with the cashier before making any purchases. Bear in mind that in some places a surcharge applies for credit card purchases: Visa and MasterCard charge approximately 2.2% surcharge,

JCB: 2.75% surcharge, American Express: 4% surcharge.

NOTE: Surcharges can change without prior notice. Check the percentage charged before you pay.

ELECTRICITY

Vietnam mainly uses 220V but in some areas, 110V is also used. A mixture of flat and round 2-pin outlets are used throughout the country. It is recommended to bring a universal plug adaptor.

ENTERTAINMENT

There are plenty of entertainment options in Vietnam and restaurants, bars and nightclubs open until late at night/early in the morning. A wide variety of restaurants are on offer, with everything from Vietnamese, Asian, Italian, French cuisine, etc. to fast food.

FOOD

Vietnamese cuisine comes as a pleasant surprise to many visitors and is definitely a part of the Vietnam experience not to be missed. One of the characteristics of Vietnamese food is that it is always bought fresh from the market the same morning. Food is usually prepared with a

minimum of oil and served with the ubiquitous fish sauce called nuoc mam. Typical Vietnamese dishes you can expect to try include: pho, a type of rice noodle soup eaten for breakfast, cha gio, deep-fried spring rolls and goi ngo sen, a delicious salad made with lotus stems, shrimps and peanuts. Due to the strong Buddhist influence in Vietnam, vegetarian food is widely available.

HEALTH

No vaccinations are mandatory except for yellow fever if you are coming from an area where the disease is present. However visitors should be inoculated against typhoid, cholera, hepatitis A & B, tetanus and polio. Malaria is present in most of the region and it is advisable to take precautions, especially if traveling off the beaten track. Medical facilities are limited and it is essential to take out a good medical insurance policy before traveling in case evacuation is needed.

Consult your doctor for up-to-date information and prescriptions for vaccinations, anti-malarial tablets and any reasonably foreseeable illnesses whilst traveling in Vietnam. Some vaccination courses may need time to be completed. If you plan to take anti-malarial tablets, you usually need to start one week before arrival. We recommend that you carry a first aid kit as well as any personal medical requirements (including a spare pair of glasses).

HOURS OF BUSINESS

Offices are usually open from Monday to Friday from 07:30 or 08:00 until 17:00 or 18:00 and often close for lunch between 11:30 and 13:00. Some offices also open on Saturday morning. Shops open early and close any time between 18:00 and 22:00. Most shops are open 7 days a week.

INTERNET

Major hotels have Business Centres with PCs connected to the Internet. Some of them have wireless broadband access in rooms or public areas. Cybercafés are available everywhere and are easily found in major towns and cities. Prices are reasonable, usually below US\$1 per hour. Most Internet cafés are equipped with web-cams, headsets and microphones. Vietnam has an exceptional amount of cafés and restaurants offering free WIFI connections, if having a meal or a drink internet fees are waived.

LANGUAGE

The national language of Vietnam is Vietnamese. In big cities and in places with many tourists, people will speak basic English. The younger generation will be more adept at speaking English, while the older generation still speaks some French. Because Vietnamese has six different tones, it is a difficult language for most foreigners to speak despite the fact that the Roman alphabet is used in modern Vietnamese. The same word can have six different meanings depending on the tone used to pronounce it. Russian and Chinese are also spoken by some people.

MONEY

The currency in Vietnam is the Vietnamese Dong (VND). US Dollars and Euros are accepted in many hotels, restaurants and shops. Banks are open Monday to Friday from 08:00 to 05:00 and some on Saturday morning. In the major cities, some exchange offices open long hours near

places frequented by tourists and most hotels will change US Dollars and Euros at very reasonable rates.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Normal print films are available in Vietnam as well as professional quality films (like slide films). Digital photos can easily be downloaded and loaded onto a CD- Rom in case you run out of memory.

POSTAL MAIL

Postcards are sold at all main tourist sites and stamps are available from post offices and some hotel reception desks. A postcard to Europe costs VND 9,000 (0.5 USD) to send and can take up to two weeks to reach the country of destination.

PUBLIC HOLIDAYS 2011 - 2012

January 1 New Year's Day

February 2-5 Tet or Vietnamese New Year. The actual dates vary from year to year according to the lunar calendar. Officially a three-day holiday but many businesses close down for a full week. This is the busiest time of the year for travelling in Vietnam and hotels, flights and trains are often full.

April 12 Hung King's Birthday

April 30 Liberation of Saigon Day

May 1 International Labour Day

September 2 National Day

RELIGION

Buddhism is the dominant religion in Vietnam and is usually combined with elements of Confucianism and Taoism. About 10% of the country's population is Catholic and there are also communities of Protestants and Muslims. Vietnam is also home to a unique religion called Cao Dai, a religious cocktail of all the world's major faiths.

SAFETY

Vietnam is a safe country to visit. As a global rule, never leave your belongings unattended and always maintain eye contact or a firm grip on cameras and shoulder bags. Avoid cyclos late at night and choose reliable metered taxi companies as they are really cheap and air-conditioned.

SHOPPING

Souvenirs to look out for in Vietnam include lacquer-ware, silk, conical hats, woodcarvings, hill tribe fabrics and handicrafts, embroidery, marble, ceramics, silver jewellery, antique watches and paintings. Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi have the best choices when it comes to shopping but Hoi An is also a very good place to hunt for bargains.

TELEPHONE

If you have worldwide coverage, you can bring your own mobile phone and use it to make domestic or international calls. Check with your mobile phone provider for the costs before using it abroad -it may be expensive. Most hotels now have IDD phones in rooms and it is possible to send faxes from hotels and post offices although these services are expensive. It may not always be possible to make international calls in remote areas.

TIME

Vietnam is GMT 7 and does not operate daylight-saving system.

TIPPING

Tipping for good service is not expected but is always appreciated in a country where the average annual income is quite low compared to Europe for example. It is customary to tip tour guides and drivers at the end of a tour. Hotel and station porters should also be tipped. Do not let the guide talk you into tipping more than you plan to. It is totally up to you who you tip, when and how much

TRANSPORTATION

Vietnamese law does not allow foreigners to rent and drive a car. It is highly advisable to rent a car with a driver who knows the roads and can speak Vietnamese in case of any problems. Traffic and roads conditions may be very different to what you are used to. Generally drivers do not speak English although you might get lucky.

TRAVELLERS' CHEQUES

Banks such as CitiBank, ANZ Bank, HSBC and Vietcombank can change your travellers' cheques for VND or US Dollars but a commission applies (1% to 2%). Very few shops, hotels or restaurants accept travellers' cheques.

VISAS

Most visitors to Vietnam require a visa to enter the country and all travellers must have a passport valid for 6 months after their planned exit from Vietnam. Exceptions: Nationals from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Russia traveling to Vietnam and staying for 15 days or less do not need to apply for entry visas, provided that their passport is valid for at least three months and they can show their return ticket. Those who wish to stay longer than 15 days will need to apply for a visa.

Tourists holding ASEAN passports do not need a visa for a visit up to 30 days. Philippines passport holders do not need a visa for a visit up to 21 days. Japanese and South Korean passport holders do not need a visa for a visit up to 15 days.

A tourist visa is normally a single entry visa, which means that if you exit Vietnam (for example for a side trip to Cambodia), you will require a new visa to re-enter (or apply for a Multiple Entry Visa). The validity of a Tourist Visa is 30 days and is normally a single entry visa is given unless a multiple entry is requested.

There are 2 ways to obtain a visa:

Case 1: Visa application in your country before departure

If there is a Vietnamese Embassy or Consulate in your home town, apply directly at the Vietnamese embassy or consulate. The length of the process can vary.

In order to accelerate the process, bring the "Approval letter" done by us (see below) your passport 2 recent passport-sized photos and fill out the paperwork required. Your visa can then be delivered much faster. A visa stamping fee is charged locally. Fees vary from one country to another.

Note: A visa requested as a multi-entry at embassies abroad is often issued as a single entry; it is recommended to double-check your visa stamp in passport when collecting your passport. Multiple entry visas can also be arranged on arrival (Case 2).

Case 2: Pre-arranged "Visa on arrival" at international entry points

If there is NO Vietnamese embassy or consulate in your home town, send us all passport details as required below and we will process a pre-approval here from Vietnam. Bring the "Visa pick-up upon arrival approval letter" (see below) to the airline check-in counter. Without this letter airlines may refuse you boarding.

On arrival in Vietnam, proceed to the Visa on Arrival counter at the airports. You will be asked to fill one more form, give 2 photos and pay USD 25/person (Single entry) and USD 50/person (Multiple entry) in cash before the visa is stamped into your passport and before going through passport control.

Such a procedure is possible at the international airports in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon and Danang) and at the land border of Moc Bai (coming from Cambodia near Ho Cho Minh City – here you need the ORIGINAL paper and a copy will not be accepted – please allow for extra time to have original sent to you by DHL). Before departure, prepare some bank notes in US Dollars to pay the visa stamping fee on arrival.

For both cases mentioned above Quintessential Travel can facilitate the visa application procedure and obtain the necessary visa pre-approval from the Vietnamese Immigration Department in advance. We need the following details from all applicants:

- Full name as it appears in your passport
- Date of birth DD/MM/YY
- Gender
- Passport number
- Issue date and expiry date of your passport
- Place of issue (e.g. Paris, France)
- Case 1: Location where you collect the visa, e.g. Vietnam embassy in Paris.
- Case 2: Arrival date and flight number (e.g. 24th of March 2009 by Vietnam Airlines flight VN532) and Port of entry (e.g. Ho Chi Minh City, Tan Son Nhat airport) We will send you in time the official document issued by the Vietnamese Immigration department. In Case 1 it is an

“Approval letter”, in Case 2 it is a “Visa pick-up upon arrival approval letter”. The approval process usually takes 5-7 working days. A processing fee is charged for this service. In urgent cases (less than 5 days) an express surcharge will be charged. In urgent cases (less than 5 days) an express surcharge of USD 20 will be charged.

A supplement for DHL fees will be charged in case you need the original document (land crossing Moc Bai from Cambodia to Vietnam).

NOTE: All the above information may change without prior notice. It remains the traveller’s responsibility to verify whether or not you are subject to a tourist visa for Vietnam.

WEATHER

Hanoi and the north of Vietnam have distinct winter and summer seasons. The mainly dry winter lasts from November to April with average temperatures of 18-20°C. Summer lasts from May to October and is hot and humid with temperatures around 30°C. Hue and Danang, in the centre of the country, see very hot, dry weather from February to August with temperatures reaching the mid-30’s°C, but can experience some heavy rainfall between September and January. Ho Chi Minh City and the south have a hot, dry season from December till April with average temperatures hovering around 28°C and a warm rainy season from May to November. In the rainy season, most rain comes in short, heavy bursts. There is good weather somewhere in Vietnam all year round! Vietnam stretches over 2000 km from North to South. The climate differs all year round from one region to another. The North can be chilly during winter months (December to March). North and Central Vietnam can encounter tropical storms and typhoons from October to January. Overall, the north of Vietnam experiences more marked seasons than the rest of the country with two distinct seasons: wet and dry. The South, including Ho Chi Minh City and the Mekong Delta, benefits from sunshine and warm weather all year round. However, the rainy season lasts from May to November (with showers once or twice daily in general) and a dry season from December to April. The Central Highlands can be chilly. Nha Trang has warm – sometimes hot - weather all year round, with a rainy season from the end of September until December. Unless you intend to visit friends, relatives or your family, we do not recommend visiting Vietnam during the Lunar New Year or Tet holiday (Vietnamese New Year falls between late January and February). Tet is the most important period of the year for many Vietnamese who take time off to visit their families in the countryside. All hotels, buses, trains and flights are full, and there is almost no activity in the markets and shops. Some hotels and restaurants are under-staffed and in some cases the quality of the service may suffer. This period of reduced activity may last from a week before and a week after the Tet period. It is also impossible to get a “visa authorization letter” processed during this period.

WATER

It is not advisable to drink tap water but bottled mineral water is safe and available everywhere. All hotels provide a complimentary bottle of local mineral water per person in the room. Ice cubes in drinks is generally okay in good standard hotels and restaurants but it is best to avoid it on street stalls or in country areas.