

# BIG FIVE

TOURS & EXPEDITIONS

*Enriching Lives Through Distinctive Journeys™*

## Destination Information Guide

# Vietnam



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# Welcome to the World of Big Five!

The following general outline offers practical information, suggestions and answers to some frequently asked questions. It is not intended to be the definitive guide for your trip.

Big Five Tours & Expeditions is pleased to welcome you on this exciting adventure. We take great care to insure that your travel dreams and expectations are well met. Our distinctive journeys allow you to experience the finest aspects each destination has to offer. We also aim to provide you with a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the places you'll visit and the people you'll meet.



## Hanoi, Vietnam

Elevation: 19 feet    Latitude: 21 01N    Longitude: 105 48E

### Average Temperature

YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	
°F	76	62	64	69	76	82	85	86	85	83	78	71	66

### Average High Temperature

YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	
°F	80	66	67	72	80	87	90	90	89	88	82	76	71

Years on Record: 19

### Average Low Temperature

YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	
°F	71	58	60	65	71	77	80	80	80	78	73	66	60

Years on Record: 19

## Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Elevation: 62 feet    Latitude: 10 49N    Longitude: 106 40E

### Average Temperature

YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	
°F	83	80	82	84	86	86	84	83	83	83	82	81	80

Years on Record: 21

### Average High Temperature

YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	
°F	89	88	90	92	93	92	89	89	88	88	87	87	87

Years on Record: 21

### Average Low Temperature

YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	
°F	76	72	73	76	79	79	77	77	77	76	76	74	72

Years on Record: 21

## WEATHER

Because of its geography, the climate in Vietnam varies greatly from north to south. Tropical monsoons occur from May to September/October in the north and south, and from September to January in the center. It is almost totally dry throughout the rest of the year.

A warm, dry season lasts from mid-October to mid-March.

**Tourist Seasons:** Vietnam is a country where tourists can visit in all four seasons. The country's tourism services offer a range of programs. In the North, the best tourist season lasts from November to April. Springtime is especially pleasant because of the cooler, drier climate. This is also the time for many ritual ceremonies and folk festivals such as celebrations to commemorate national heroes and heroines, folk cultural festivals, and spring festivals as well as prayer ceremonies for good crops. Lunar New Year Festival remains one of the most interesting this time of year. Warm clothes will be necessary when visiting Vietnam in that season. Temperatures in winter hover around 10-15 degrees Celsius (50-59 degrees F). But March and April are warmer. Meanwhile in the South, the average temperature throughout the year is about 27 degrees Celsius (80 degrees F), so you need thin garments, sunglasses, and a hat.

## TIME ZONES

Greenwich Mean Time (GMT +7:00).

## PASSPORTS & VISAS

**Passports:** For international travel, a passport valid for at least six months from date of departure, containing at least 3 blank pages are necessary.

**Visas:** Many countries require travelers to obtain visas prior to arrival. Big Five Tours & Expeditions has appointed Trivisa to process required visas for our passengers. You can find the necessary forms from Trivisa's website at: [www.trivisa.com](http://www.trivisa.com). Please use account code JP1551, and follow the directions.

**Important:** Even if you do not need a visa prior to departure, please check your passport well in advance of departure to insure:

- 1) It is valid for at least six months after the date of travel.
- 2) You have sufficient blank pages for visa/entry stamps that will be added as you travel in and out of various countries. **Please note:** Pages reserved for amendments and endorsements cannot be used for visas.

**Note:** Remember to carry with you in a safe place photocopies of all important documents in the event your passport or other documents are lost or stolen. Also, it's a good idea to have a passport photo with you. As a tourist, you will need to produce your passport when booking in at hotels, changing money or travelers' checks and prove your identity whenever requested by a policeman.

## AIRPORT FORMALITIES

Most international carriers enter via Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) and/or Hanoi. Upon arrival, proceed through immigration and baggage claims and customs. Then, Big Five personnel or their representatives will meet you outside the customs and assist you with your baggage, escort you to your hotel, and assist with check-in. Our representative will have a plaque with your name on it.

**Please note:** Unauthorized airport taxi drivers at Hanoi International Airport may claim that they are working on behalf of travel agents and try to convince you to go with them, then charge you for the trip. If, for whatever reason, you cannot locate your driver, contact our 24-hour **White Glove Service®** guest assistance number provided with your itinerary.

**Airport Departure Tax: Currently included in airfare.** *Please note that any government taxes and fees are subject to change without notice.*

## CUSTOMS INTO VIETNAM

The following items may be freely imported into Vietnam by foreign visitors without incurring customs duty: 200 cigarettes; 100 cigars or 500g of tobacco; 1.5l of liquor at 22% and above, and 2l of liquor below this amount, and 3l of all other alcoholic beverages; a reasonable quantity of perfume and personal belongings.

**Note:** Foreign currency has to be declared on arrival. Procedures are always subject to change. Travelers are asked to fill out a form declaring cash, jewelry and other valuables. Customs will review, stamp, and keep one copy. Keep your copy.

**Prohibited Imports:** The importation of non-prescribed drugs, firearms, anti-government literature and pornography is prohibited.

## U.S. CUSTOMS

Returning U.S. residents are allowed to bring back \$800 worth of merchandise duty-free. Regulations often change. Visit Customs & Border Protection at [www.customs.gov/xp/cgov/home.xml](http://www.customs.gov/xp/cgov/home.xml). This site will give you a lot of useful current information. You can also contact your nearest Customs office or write the U.S. Customs Service, Box 7407, Washington, DC 20044 for more information.

## HEALTH REQUIREMENTS

International travelers should be in generally good health. Talk with your personal physician about any shots or boosters recommended depending on your personal health profile and your itinerary. Tetanus and polio vaccines should be up to date. If you wear prescription glasses or contact lenses, it is advisable to bring an extra pair and cleaning fluid. The same is true for any medications you take regularly; bring enough to last the length of the trip. Currently, there are no required vaccinations. As needed, booster doses for tetanus-diphtheria and measles and a one-time dose of polio for adults are recommended.

**Yellow Fever: There is no risk for yellow fever in Southeast Asia.** A certificate of yellow fever vaccination may be required for entry into certain of these countries if you are coming from countries in South America or sub-Saharan Africa.

**Malaria:** your risk of malaria may be high in some of the countries in this region. See your health care provider for a prescription anti-malarial drug.

**Rabies,** if you might have extensive unprotected outdoor exposure in rural areas, such as might occur during camping, hiking, or bicycling, or engaging in certain occupational activities.

**Typhoid,** particularly if you are visiting developing countries in this region. Typhoid fever can be contracted through contaminated drinking water or food, or by eating food or drinking beverages that have been handled by a person who is infected. Large outbreaks are most often related to fecal contamination of water supplies or foods sold by street vendors

**Cholera:** a cholera vaccination certificate is not an official condition of entry to Vietnam, however, cholera is a serious risk in this country and precautions are essential.

**Other Risks:** Bilharzia (schistosomiasis) is present in the delta of the Mekong River. Avoid swimming and paddling in fresh water; swimming pools which are

chlorinated and well maintained are safe. Japanese encephalitis is a risk in Hanoi and in rural areas.

A vaccine is available and travellers are advised to consult their doctor prior to departure. Hepatitis A, B and E occur; precautions should be taken. Dengue fever can be epidemic; cases have doubled in the south of Vietnam in 2006. Filariasis is endemic in some rural areas. Dengue fever can be epidemic; cases have doubled in the south of Vietnam in 2006.

**Health insurance is strongly advised during any foreign travel.** Please check the latest regulations with your local health office or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention hotline for international travelers at 1-877-FYI-TRIP (1-877-394-8747); fax: 1-888-CDC-FAXX (1-888-232-3299), or their main telephone number in Atlanta, 404-332-4559. Or, visit the CDC Internet home page at <http://www.cdc.gov>.

## CLOTHING

*For general clothing information, please review the **Travel Handbook** in your pre-departure materials. See pre-departure information for general packing check list.*

Natural fabrics all year, but warmer clothing is required in the highlands, and in the winter in northern Vietnam. Rainwear is essential during the wet season. Light, loose-fitting cotton garments are still the best choice, including cotton socks. Observe appropriate dress codes when visiting religious sanctuaries, buildings, sites, or palaces, where modesty is the rule. This means **do not** wear short shorts, halter-tops or muscle shirts. If you are inappropriately dressed, you will not be allowed to enter. Note that sandals or other easily removed shoes are best on days you visit pagodas and monasteries as you will need to remove your shoes before entering. Laundry Service is available in the hotels and resorts. The service is inexpensive although the turn around time in many cases will depend upon the weather. No sun means it takes longer for the clothing to dry.

## LUGGAGE

*For general baggage information, please review the **Travel Handbook** in your pre-departure materials.*

Luggage restrictions change frequently for individual carriers as well as in the industry as a whole. In this security conscious era, they may change without notice. It is always best to call the specific airline prior to departure for the latest information. The information in the Travel Handbook is intended as a guideline.

## **MONEY**

The currency issued by the Vietnam State Bank is the dong (abbreviated "d" or VND) which is used uniformly throughout the country. Bank notes in denomination of 500d; 1,000d; 2,000d; 5,000d; 10,000d; 20,000d, 50,000d 100,00d and 500,000d are presently in circulation.

**Currency Exchange:** Travelers can exchange money for Vietnamese dong (VND) at banks, hotels and jewelry shops throughout the country. Foreign currency must be changed into Vietnamese dong for shopping. Travelers may take out of the country unlimited amounts of souvenirs, provided they have receipts, but cannot take out more cash than they brought in. Plan to carry enough cash or travelers' checks to pay all your bills. It is possible to exchange traveler's checks at various banks, hotels, exchange bureaus and jewelry shops. Most major hotels in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi accept credit cards. The dollar is accepted many places; carry a small amount in small denominations for the few instances when you must convert to dong. When using U.S. dollars, the bills must be relatively new with no markings or tears. The US Dollar, Australian, British, Japanese, Singaporean and Thai currency, as well as the Euro, can usually be changed in the larger cities; great difficulty may be encountered in trying to exchange any other currencies. There is a commission charge for changing money in banks.

**Credit/Debit Cards and ATMs:** An increasing number of outlets accept MasterCard and Visa. However, outside main towns and cities, it is wise to carry cash. There are ATMs in many major towns, but not everywhere.

**Traveler's Checks** are widely accepted in hotels and banks. To avoid additional exchange rate charges, travelers are advised to take traveler's checks in US Dollars.

## **LANGUAGE**

Vietnamese is the official language. Khmer, tribal languages (Mon-Khmer and Malayo-Polynesian), English, French, Chinese and occasionally Russian and German are spoken. Learning foreign languages such as English, French, Chinese is implemented widely and particularly in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Hue, and Da Nang. Tour guides speak English, French, Russian, Chinese, and Japanese.

**TELEPHONES:** Country code: 84

International calls can be made almost everywhere. If there is a post office in your hotel, make the calls there because it is cheaper. Faxing cost is less than \$7 a page whereas a phone call can run about \$4 to \$6 a minute. Collect calls are almost impossible. It's best to call home and leave a number where you can be reached.

**Mobile Telephone** Roaming agreements exist with some international mobile phone companies. Coverage is available throughout large parts of the country. Check with your company to see if you can get a sim chip for use there.

**Internet:** Internet cafes are widely available throughout the country, and are inexpensive.

## **ELECTRICITY**

220/110 volts AC, 50Hz; two-pin flat plugs are in use.

## **FOOD & DRINK**

Drink bottled water and beverages when available.

**Also, make sure the seal is intact.** Water used for drinking, brushing teeth, cleaning contacts or making ice should have first been boiled or otherwise sterilized. Unpasteurized milk should be boiled; however, pasteurized milk is widely available now. Still, you should avoid dairy products that are likely to have been made from unboiled milk. Only eat well-cooked meat and fish, preferably served hot. Vegetables should be cooked and fruit peeled.

**Local Cuisine:** Having said that, realize that traditional Vietnamese cuisine is excellent, and boasts 500 specialties ranging from spring rolls to tamarind crab. Vietnamese foods share familial ties with both Thai and Chinese variations while retaining distinctive differences. For vegetarians, Vietnam offers unique Buddhist-style dishes prepared with a vast array of legumes and tofu as well as an abundant selection of tropical fruits such as dragon fruit, longans, and rambutans. Grilled rice used for the main meals of the day (lunch and dinner). Bang chung, sticky rice cakes, are available at any time of the year, although they are a Vietnamese traditional dish that must be part of Tet meals. As a matter of fact, every Vietnamese family must have these rice cakes among offerings placed on the altar to their ancestors. The cakes are made of glutinous rice, pork meat, and green beans paste wrapped in a square of bamboo leaves, giving the rice a green color after boiling. Pho, grated rice noodle, is one of the most popular foods. People commonly eat it for breakfast, although many also have it for lunch or dinner. Anyone feeling hungry in the small hours of the morning can also enjoy a bowl of hot and spicy pho to fill their empty stomachs. Preparations vary but

the best variety is made using fragrant rice called Gao Te. Soup for Pho Bo (pho with beef) is made by stewing the bones of cows and pigs for a long time in a large pot. Pieces of fillet mignon together with several slices of ginger are reserved for Pho Bo Tai (rare fillet). Slices of well-done meat are available. *(From Vietnam National Administration of Tourism)*

**Note:** If you have food allergies or are on a special/restricted diet, please notify your travel agent or our office in advance, so that we may try to comply with your needs. Also, please advise your travel agent or our office if you have any mobility restrictions, so that we may inform our representatives accordingly. They will always strive to accommodate you to the best of their ability.

### TIPPING

Tipping should be done at your discretion and as a reward for good or exceptional service.

For general tipping guidelines please refer to:  
**[www.cntraveler.com/travel-tips/travel-etiquette/2008/12/Etiquette-101-Tipping-Guide](http://www.cntraveler.com/travel-tips/travel-etiquette/2008/12/Etiquette-101-Tipping-Guide)**

### SHOPPING

Many are open 8:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., seven days a week. Department stores are generally open from 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 or 9:00 p.m. Vietnamese artisans create thousands of types of handicraft products, some of which have gained international reputations such as lacquer ware. While lacquer artists produce a limited number of paintings and sculptures, lacquer crafts have been part of Vietnamese life in many forms: vases, boxes, interior decorating items, jewelry articles, and office products. Other items include woven tapestries and woven "tho cam" handbags, unique works by skillful women in northwestern regions such as Cao Bang. Embroidered and silk products from the regions of Ha Dong, Nam Ha, Thai Binh and Hue are internationally recognized, as are wool tapestries from Ha Noi and Hai Phong. Jute tapestries from Hung Yen, Hai Phong, Ha Noi and Thai Binh, are also much sought after. Ceramic and porcelain items have been produced in Vietnam for a long time. Ceramic and porcelain products glazed by traditional methods into beautiful arts are well known in Bat Trang (Ha Noi), Quang Ninh, and Hai Phong. Talented coppersmiths in Nam Ha, Ngu Xa (Ha Noi), Dong Son (Thanh Hoa), and Long fabricate copperware Tho. Jewelry and metalwork are concentrated in Ha Noi, Thai Binh and Hai Hung, while stonework is mainly produced in Da Nang. Wood products and woodcarvings can

usually be found in Phu Xuyen (Ha Tay), Hai Phong, and Hue. Markets are always great places to enjoy the local flavor and buy souvenirs. Ben Thanh market in Ho Chi Minh City and Dong Xuan market in Hanoi are worth a visit. The hill tribes of the Central Highlands and the north of the country now sell colorful woven bags and clothing. Good souvenirs are marble figurines and vases, ceramics from Bat Trang village, silk paintings and hand-painted greetings cards. VAT is included on most items sold, but at the moment there is no system for foreign visitors to be able to claim this back. Bargaining is expected in markets and many souvenir shops.

### CUSTOMS IN VIETNAM

Handshaking and a vocal greeting is normal. Clothing should be kept simple, informal and discreet. **Avoid shorts if possible as they are usually only worn by children.** Vietnamese people should not be touched on the head. Remember that most service people earn very little so a few thousand dong is enormously appreciated. But there are times when it can be taken the wrong way. At small hotels, the staff frequently goes out of their way to answer questions, reconfirm plane reservations, and look up addresses and the like. You may even be invited to join the staff for a meal. This is a great honor and their way of saying they consider you a friend. And, friends don't tip friends. A tip, no matter how well intentioned, will invariably be taken as an insult. Your best bet is to offer small gifts such as pens, writing paper or hair clips for women and cigarettes for men. If you must give money, give it to every member of the staff and only when you depart.

**Gift Giving:** Gift giving is not reserved for special occasions. In fact, the Vietnamese will use any occasion from meeting new friends to quitting a job to give a gift. It is common practice in both social and business settings. Virtually any public holiday is an occasion to exchange gifts. Gifts need not be elaborate -- book, pen, food, tea, wine and liquor are common gifts. Fruit, pastry, even pizza are always a big hit. Remember, while these items are readily available to us, they are beyond the means of most Vietnamese.

**Showing Respect:** Remember to show respect when touring religious sites. For example, each image of Buddha, large or small, ruined or not, is regarded as a sacred object. Never climb onto one to take a photograph or do anything that might indicate lack of respect. Also, please note that Buddhist monks are forbidden to touch or be touched by a woman, or to

accept anything from a woman's hand. If a woman must give anything to a monk, she first hands it to a man, who then presents it to the monk.

- You may wear shoes when walking around the compound of a Buddhist temple, but not inside the chapel where the principal Buddha image is kept.
- In a Muslim mosque, men should wear hats and women should be well covered with slacks or a long skirt, a long-sleeved blouse buttoned to the neck, and a scarf over the hair. All should remove their shoes before entering the mosque and should not be present if there is a religious gathering.
- Out of politeness, always ask permission before taking photos of people. The same rule of thumb also applies to photos taken in places of worship. Permission will almost always be granted.
- A gentle handshake is the most appropriate manner of greeting.
- Never point to anything, even casually, with your foot; use your finger instead. When standing or seated, never angle your foot in such a way that it is conspicuous or that the sole is visible. This is very rude.

### **Overview**

The conquest of Vietnam by France began in 1858 and was completed by 1884. It became part of French Indochina in 1887. Vietnam declared independence after World War II, but France continued to rule until its 1954 defeat by Communist forces under Ho Chi MINH. Under the Geneva Accords of 1954, Vietnam was divided into the Communist North and anti-

Communist South. US economic and military aid to South Vietnam grew through the 1960s in an attempt to bolster the government, but US armed forces were withdrawn following a cease-fire agreement in 1973. Two years later, North Vietnamese forces overran the South reuniting the country under Communist rule. Despite the return of peace, for over a decade the country experienced little economic growth because of conservative leadership policies, the persecution and mass exodus of individuals - many of them successful South Vietnamese merchants - and growing international isolation. However, since the enactment of Vietnam's "doi moi" (renovation) policy in 1986, Vietnamese authorities have committed to increased economic liberalization and enacted structural reforms needed to modernize the economy and to produce more competitive, export-driven industries.

Vietnam is a densely-populated developing country that in the last 30 years has had to recover from the ravages of war, the loss of financial support from the old Soviet Bloc, and the rigidities of a centrally-planned economy. Vietnamese authorities have reaffirmed their commitment to economic liberalization and international integration. They have moved to implement the structural reforms needed to modernize the economy and to produce more competitive export-driven industries. Vietnam joined the WTO in January 2007 following more than a decade-long negotiation process. WTO membership has provided Vietnam an anchor to the global market and reinforced the domestic economic reform process.

## SUGGESTED READING LIST

Many comprehensive and readily available guides are produced by Lonely Planet, Fodor, Insight, The Rough Guide, etc. Here are a few selections we thought might interest you. Barnes and Noble, [www.barnesandnoble.com](http://www.barnesandnoble.com), and Longitude Books, [www.longitudebooks.com](http://www.longitudebooks.com), have collections of books, searchable by country.

### **PASSAGE TO VIETNAM: THROUGH THE EYES OF SEVENTY PHOTOGRAPHERS**

**Rick Smolan, Jennifer Erwit**

In the spring of 1994, Rick Smolan led a group of 70 photographers to whom the Vietnamese government granted complete access to all regions of the country. This group of photojournalists from fourteen countries, several of whom are Vietnamese, shot 200,000 photographs over a period of seven days. The finished product is a large format book, edited down to 200 images. . . . {Among the prose pieces included in the book is an introductory essay entitled 'Dreams of a Gentle Land.' The creators of the "Day in the Life" series now present an elegant collection of photographs--the work of 70 photojournalists from 23 nations--that offers an intimate look at the people of Vietnam as their nation launches into a new era.

### **PLEASURES OF THE VIETNAMESE TABLE: RECIPES AND REMINISCENCES FROM VIETNAM'S BEST MARKET KITCHENS, STREET CAFES, AND HOME COOKS**

**By Mai Pham**

Chef and restaurateur Mai Pham brings to life this diverse and exciting cooking in Pleasures of the Vietnamese Table. Born and raised in Saigon before immigrating to the United States, Mai has often returned to her native land to learn the secrets of authentic Vietnamese cooking, from family, friends, home cooks, street vendors, and master chefs. Traveling from region to region, she has gathered the simple, classic recipes that define Vietnamese food today: Green Mango Salad with Grilled Beef, Stir-Fried Chicken with Lemongrass and Chilies, Caramelized Garlic Shrimp, and especially pho, the country's beloved beef-and-noodle soup. With more than 100 recipes in all, Pleasures of the Vietnamese Table offers home cooks the chance to create and savor the traditional flavors of Vietnam in their own kitchen. Filled with enchanting stories and stirring black-and-white photos of life in Vietnam, Pleasures of the Vietnamese Table provides a captivating taste of an enduring culture and its irresistible cuisine.

### **VALLEY OF DEATH: THE TRAGEDY AT DIEN BIEN PHU THAT LED AMERICA INTO THE VIETNAM WAR**

**by Ted Morgan**

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Ted Morgan has now written a rich and definitive account of the fateful battle that ended French rule in Indochina—and led inexorably to America's Vietnam War. Dien Bien Phu was a remote valley on the border of Laos along a simple rural trade route. But it would also be where a great European power fell to an underestimated insurgent army and lost control of a crucial colony. Valley of Death is the untold story of the 1954 battle that, in six weeks, changed the course of history. A veteran of the French Army, Ted Morgan has made use of exclusive firsthand reports to create the most complete and dramatic telling of the conflict ever written. Here is the history of the Vietminh liberation movement's rebellion against French occupation after World War II and its growth as an adversary, eventually backed by Communist China. Here too is the ill-fated French plan to build a base in Dien Bien Phu and draw the Vietminh into a debilitating defeat—which instead led to the Europeans being encircled in the surrounding hills, besieged by heavy artillery, overrun, and defeated. Superbly researched and powerfully written, Valley of Death is the crowning achievement of an author whose work has always been as compulsively readable as it is important.