

North-Central Vietnam

Most tourists' only experience of north-central Vietnam is a torturous 16-hour bus trip from Hanoi to Huế. While it's true that you'll find more English-speakers and Western-style hotels in the south, this region offers something perhaps more tourist-friendly – the opportunity to potter about, largely left to your own devices. After the clamour of Hanoi and Huế this makes for a nice change.

While the stunning karst-ridden countryside around Ninh Binh can be seen from a tourist bus on a day trip from Hanoi, it doesn't rate with the experience of cycling around the idyllic rice paddies by yourself or on the back of a motorbike, as children leading water buffalo stop to wave and shout hello. Architecture and Graham Greene fans alike won't want to miss Phat Diem, the fascinating cathedral unchanged from its vivid description in *The Quiet American* (albeit without the bodies floating in the canals).

South of Ninh Binh it's likely you won't see another foreigner or meet many English-speakers. While some might find that daunting, for the more intrepid this presents another side of Vietnam – even if at times it can be a grim place in the still-recovering war-devastated cities of the north. The excellent *Reunification Express* train services make it easy to break the journey into comfortable legs, with Vinh and Dong Hoi interesting spots for an overnight stay.

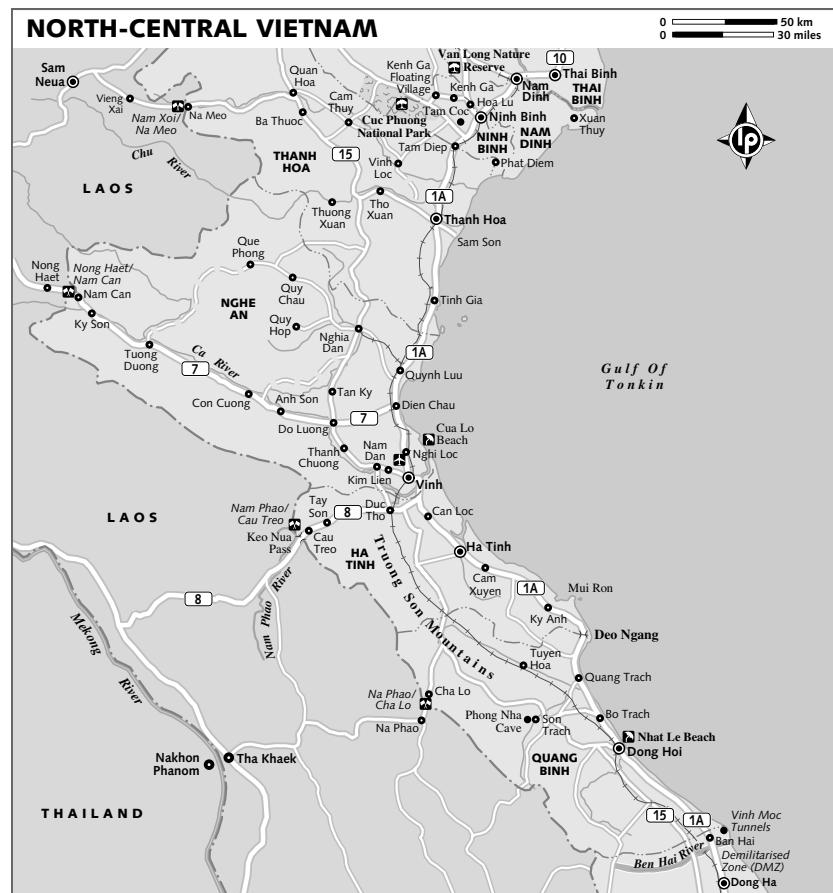
If you're anxious to hit the beaches, you're better off saving it for the south. The popular coastal communes of the north, with their ever-present concrete and litter, don't hold much appeal for foreign travellers.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Marvel at the limestone-sprouting countryside around Hoa Lu's **ancient temples** (p188)
- Zen out on the serene Ngo Dong River at **Tam Coc** (p187) – before the amusing money scramble begins
- Spot the scars of war, ever-present in a regenerating **Dong Hoi** (p197)
- Discover that East-meets-West is about more than just fashionable food, while checking out the fusion architecture of **Phat Diem Cathedral** (p189)
- Trek yourself troppo on the jungle tracks of **Cuc Phuong National Park** (p190)

ELEVATION: 1-2711M

BEST TIME TO VISIT: APR-OCT



History

This region contains much more historical importance than it might appear at first glance. One of Vietnam's earliest capitals was at Hoa Lu, where magnificent temples are strategically set amid a dramatic landscape of towering limestone cliffs and serene rice paddies.

In the 13th and 14th centuries, Tran dynasty kings ruled from the capital of Thang Long (present-day Hanoi). This was the only period in Vietnamese history when the heirs to the throne partially succeeded their fathers, taking the official role of king, while the older generation shared power in a second unofficial capital in Tuc Mac, about 5km from Nam Dinh. This prevented the succession disputes

which had previously been the norm, making the Tran dynasty one of the most politically stable and prosperous periods in Vietnamese history.

During the American War, north-central Vietnam suffered tremendous damage from US bombing. Further south, Vinh marked the start of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, as supplies passed through the docks on the way inland to the Truong Son Mountains.

Getting There & Away

The major north-south rail route cuts a swathe directly through the region, as does Hwy 1A. The only airport is situated at Vinh, and it has only limited flights to Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC).

THAI BINH

☎ 036 / pop 105,000

As it's not on Hwy 1A, few travellers get a taste of Thai Binh. The only real sight of interest is the nearby 12th-century **Keo Pagoda**. It was built to honour both the Buddha and the monk Khong Minh Khong, who miraculously cured Emperor Ly Thanh Ton (r 1128–38) of leprosy. The finely carved wooden bell tower is considered a masterpiece of traditional Vietnamese architecture. The nearby dike is a good place to get a general view of the pagoda complex.

Keo Pagoda is 9.5km southwest of Thai Binh and easily reached by *xe om* (motorbike taxi; 20,000d).

NINH BINH

☎ 030 / pop 53,000

Ninh Binh has the pace of a large country town – a welcome respite if you've just escaped the bustle of Hanoi. Apart from the scrum of guesthouse owners greeting the trains, and the charming chorus of 'Hello, how are you' from the local children, you'll largely be left alone as you wander the quiet streets.

The surrounding countryside is gorgeous, confirming all the postcard fantasies of what Vietnam has to offer – water buffalos, golden-green rice paddies, majestic limestone formations and more. There are plenty of sights in the vicinity to justify a stay of several days. The only place of interest in the town itself is a large modern east-meets-west **Cathedral** (Đ Hoang Hoa Tham) near the train station.

The best of backpacker culture can be experienced here. While not a difficult place to visit, Ninh Binh seems to attract interesting travellers with a zest for new experiences. It's a great place to make travel buddies.

Information

Internet cafés are spread around town, with a cluster on Đ Luong Van Tuy, west of Đ Tran Hung Dao (per hour 5000d).

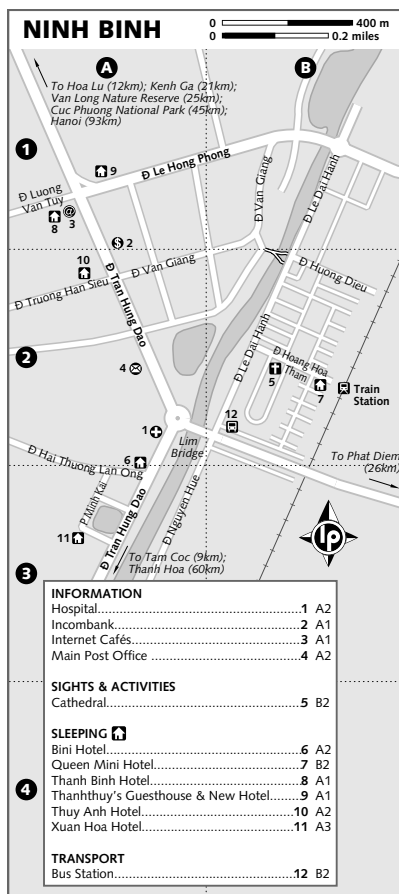
Incombank (☎ 872 675; Đ Tran Hung Dao) Deals with cash, travellers cheques and most plastic and has an ATM outside.

Hospital (☎ 871 152; So 2 Đ Tran Hung Dao)

Main post office (Đ Tran Hung Dao)

Sleeping & Eating

Ninh Binh hoteliers have a reputation for friendliness and good service, making a stay smoother than you might expect for a town



of this size. Most can make tour and transport arrangements. Generally all but the cheapest rooms have air-con, but you can save a few bucks if you forgo it. The town doesn't have much in the way of restaurants and most travellers tend to eat at their hotel, many of which serve excellent food. Goat meat is a local speciality – delicious wrapped with herbs in fresh rice paper.

our pick **Thanhthuy's Guest House & New Hotel** (☎ 871 811; tuc@hn.vnn.vn; 128 Đ Le Hong Phong; r guesthouse US\$5-8, hotel US\$12; ☎ ☎) The central courtyard is a great place to meet other travellers over a meal (dishes 15,000d to 40,000d) and a drink. The New Hotel is very comfortable, set back from the street, while the guesthouse is basic and clean, with shared bathrooms

and no air-con. The owner speaks excellent English and German, and has a crew of safe drivers available for local tours.

Queen Mini Hotel (☎ 871 874; luongvn2001@yahoo.com; 21 Đ Hoang Hoa Tham; r US\$3-15; ☎ ☎) Right by the station, the tiny fan rooms are the cheapest in town.

Xuan Hoa Hotel (☎ 880 970; xuanhoahotel@hotmail.com; 31 Đ Pho Minh Kai; r US\$5-15; ☎ ☎) Another social place with charming owners and staff, this is a firm favourite. The rooms are comfortable and clean and the food excellent. Motorbike and bicycle rentals and day trips can be arranged.

Thanh Binh Hotel (☎ 872 439; thaibinhhotel@yahoo.com; 31 Đ Luong Van Tuy; r US\$6-18; ☎ ☎) Very friendly, nice and new, the lower floors have larger rooms, but there are some cheapies upstairs. Breakfast is included in the price.

Bini Hotel (☎ /fax 882 809; 2 Đ Hai Thuong Lan Ong; r US\$10; ☎ ☎) This is an attractive new family-run hotel with large, clean rooms.

Thuy Anh Hotel (☎ 871 602; www.thuyanhhotel.com; 55A Đ Trung Han Sieu; r US\$7-40; ☎ ☎) Quite the smartest operation in town. The old wing offers spotless rooms of varying shapes and sizes, while the slick new wing, complete with lift, pulls in the tour groups. There's a good restaurant (dishes 20,000 to 60,000d) downstairs and a rooftop bar for drinkers.

Getting There & Away

The bus station in Ninh Binh is located near the Lim Bridge, just below the overpass to Phat Diem. Regular public buses leave almost hourly for the Giap Bat bus station in Hanoi (28,000d, 2½ hours, 93km). Ninh Binh is also a stop for open-tour buses between Hanoi (US\$4, two hours) and Huế (US\$6, 10 hours), which drop off and pick up passengers at some of the hotels.

Ninh Binh's **train station** (☎ 673 619; 1 Đ Hoang Hoa Tham) is a scheduled stop for *Reunification Express* trains, with destinations including Hanoi (40,000d, two to 2½ hours, four daily), Thanh Hoa (20,000d, one to 1½ hours, three daily) and Huế (205,000d, 12½ to 13½ hours, three daily).

Travelling distances to the nearest major towns are 93km to Hanoi, 60km to Thanh Hoa and 49km to Thai Binh.

Getting Around

Bikes and motorbikes (with or without drivers) can be hired from most hotels. Bicycle

hire usually only costs around US\$1 to US\$2 per day, while motorbikes are around US\$5 to US\$6. A driver's rates will depend on distance and time, but for a full day is likely to be around US\$10.

AROUND NINH BINH

Tam Coc

Poetically penned 'Halong Bay on the rice paddies', the area around Tam Coc boasts stunning scenery. While Halong Bay (p136) has rugged rock formations jutting out of the sea, here they soar skywards from a sea of green.

Tam Coc (entry fee 30,000d, boat 40,000d) is named after the low caves through which the Ngo Dong River flows. The essential Tam Coc experience is to sit back and be rowed through the caves – a serene and scenic trip, which turns into a surreal dance towards the end (see p188).

The boats carry two people as well as the main rower at the rear and a secondary rower, usually an elderly woman, whose purpose becomes clear at the end of the journey. Hang Ca, the first cave, is 127m long; Hang Giua 70m long; and the third, Hang Cuoi, is only 45m. The boat trip takes about two hours and tickets are sold at the small booking office by the car park. Even on cloudy days, bring sunscreen and a hat or umbrella, as there's no shade in the boats. It pays to arrive early in the morning or late in the afternoon to avoid the day-tripping crowds from Hanoi.

The area behind the Tam Coc restaurants is **Van Lan village**, which is famous for its embroidery. Here local artisans make napkins, tablecloths, pillowcases and T-shirts. A lot of these items wind up being sold on Hanoi's Pho Hang Gai (p121), but it is cheaper to buy them here directly from the artisan. The village has a much better selection and slightly lower prices than those available from the boat vendors.

BICH DONG PAGODA

This charming cave pagoda is just a couple of kilometres north of Tam Coc and worth a visit if you have your own wheels. The scenic road winds through rice fields hemmed in by karsts and ends in a dusty village. Bich Dong (Jade Grotto) is cut into the caves of a karst and is a holy site of pilgrimage for Vietnamese. The smoke of burning incense and the gloom of the caves give this place an unearthly atmosphere.

SLEEPING & EATING

With all the recent development it's possible to stay the night in comfort in this quiet village and get an early start on the river the next day.

The Long (☎ 618 077; luongvn2001@yahoo.com; r200,000d; 🍽️) This attractive new building opposite the jetty has big rooms with balconies, and a large restaurant (meals 60,000d) on the ground floor.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Tam Coc is 9km southwest of Ninh Binh. Follow Hwy 1A south and turn west at the Tam Coc turn-off. Ninh Binh hotels run day tours, but it is more fun to make your own way by bicycle or motorbike. Hotel staff can also advise you on some beautiful back roads that link Tam Coc with Hoa Lu. Budget cafés in Hanoi book day trips to Tam Coc and Hoa Lu; the fast-food version goes for about US\$15, but it's closer to US\$20 with a smaller group, comfortable vehicle and professional guide.

Hoa Lu

Hoa Lu was the capital of Vietnam during the Dinh (968–80) and early Le (980–1009) dynasties. The site was a smart choice for a capital city because of the natural protection

afforded by the region's bizarre landscape, with rocky outcrops as spectacular as Tam Coc's. The **ancient citadel of Hoa Lu** (admission 10,000d), most of which has been destroyed, covered an area of about 3 sq km. The outer ramparts encompassed temples, shrines and the king's palace. The royal family lived in the inner citadel.

Yen Ngua Mountain provides a scenic backdrop for Hoa Lu's two remaining temples. The first, **Dinh Tien Hoang**, was restored in the 17th century and is dedicated to the Dinh dynasty. At the front of the main temple building is the stone pedestal of a royal throne; inside are bronze bells and a statue of Emperor Dinh Tien Hoang with his three sons. In a building to the right a display features photos and some artefacts, while to the left are three Buddhist prayer stones – one supported by a turtle, another with a crab and two rats at the base.

The second temple is dedicated to **Le Dai Hanh**, an early Le monarch. Inside the main hall are an assortment of drums, gongs, incense burners, candle holders and weapons, with a statue of the king in the middle, his queen on the right and their son on the left. In the left-hand section of this complex a modern museum features part of the excavations of the 10th-century citadel wall, unearthed in 1998.

Once you've navigated the hassle of persistent sellers on the way in, it's very peaceful inside the complex, especially in the early morning or late afternoon when the crowds head back to Hanoi. On the hillside above the temples is the **tomb of Dinh Tien Hoang**. It's a good 15-minute climb up 207 steps, but your efforts will be rewarded with great views.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Hoa Lu is 12km northwest of Ninh Binh; turn left 6km north of town on Hwy 1A. There is no public transport, so most travellers get there by bicycle, motorbike or car. Ask your hotel about the blissful back roads linking Hoa Lu to Tam Coc.

Kenh Ga

The village of Kenh Ga (Chicken Canal) gets its name, apparently, from the number of wild chickens that used to live here. It's a lovely area, and one of the best places outside of the Mekong Delta to see river life – but nowhere in the Delta will you find stunning limestone formations like the ones providing the backdrop here. Another difference: people in Kenh Ga row boats with their feet, leaning back and watching the world go by.

The local people seem to spend most of their lives on or in the water: at their floating fish-breeding pens, harvesting river grass used for fish feed, trawling in the muddy shallows for shellfish or selling veggies boat-to-boat. Even the children commute to school by boat. The river is used for everything from bathing, to washing plucked chickens, to defecating in.

Until recent years this was largely a floating village, with just a few permanent buildings on the riverbanks. You'll still see some tiny wooden shelters on boats where the poorest of the poor live. However, as fortunes improve, people aim to stake their claim on solid ground.

From the pier you can hire a **motorboat** (☎ 868 560; 40,000d) to take you for an hour or so touring around the village.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Kenh Ga is 21km from Ninh Binh off the road to Cuc Phuong National Park. Follow Hwy 1A north for 11km, then it's a 10km drive west to reach the boat pier. Hotels in Ninh Binh can arrange tours, often through fantastic back roads with wonderful scenery.

Van Long Nature Reserve

Set amid yet more of the limestone pinnacles that characterise this region, **Van Long** (entry 20,000d) is a reedy wetland that attracts the birds. It's become a popular spot for international birdwatchers keen for a sighting of a rare black-faced spoonbill, a cotton pygmy goose, a white-browed crane or other fantastically named feathery fauna. The fee includes a punt through the shallow waters and, with your eyes peeled, you just might see a Delacour's langur monkey lurking in the outcrops. Van Long can be easily combined with a visit to Kenh Ga and, at a stretch, both can be visited en route to Cuc Phuong National Park.

Van Long is 2km east of Tran Me, a small town 23km from Ninh Binh along the road to Cuc Phuong.

PHAT DIEM

The Tay Ninh (p381) of the north, Phat Diem is the home of a celebrated **cathedral** (1891), which is remarkable for its vast dimensions and superb Sino-Vietnamese architecture – with a dash of European dressing for good measure.

During the French era this was an important centre of Catholicism and there was a seminary here. In a throwback to the middle ages, Phat Diem's bishop ruled the area with his own private army until 1951, when they were replaced by French troops. The cathedral featured prominently in Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American*. The 1954 division of Vietnam caused Catholics to flee south en masse and the cathedral was closed. It is now functional again, along with several dozen other churches in the district, serving the area's estimated 120,000 Catholics.

The cathedral complex comprises a number of buildings fronted by an ornamental lake with a statue of an open-armed Christ rising from an island at its centre. The cathedral itself has a vaulted ceiling supported by massive wooden columns that are almost 1m in diameter and 10m tall. Above the altar made from a single block of granite, Vietnamese-looking cherubs with golden wings swarm, while Chinese-style clouds drift across the blue ceiling. Beneath them are icons of the martyrs slaughtered by Emperor Tu Duc during the anti-Catholic purges of the 1850s. The sides of the building open up to allow the breeze to blow through and the light to flood in. Note the delicate stone carvings at the front.

THE TAM COC TANGO

As with many tourist traps in Vietnam, don't attempt the Tam Coc boat trip without a good sense of humour, or at least a modicum of patience.

As you head through the caves you'll notice boats starting to circle, stocked up with snacks and drinks. Usually they wait until you reach the dead end before they lunge. After they've exhausted the refreshment limits of their captive audience, they try their next, extremely effective, gambit: 'Drink for Madame?' Given that you're probably already feeling awkward that the frail-looking octogenarian has had to paddle you all this way, it's a hard line to resist. Many travellers cave in, only to find that 'Madame' sells the drink straight back to the vendor for half the price. A good scheme to appease your conscience without being scammed is to offer Madame some of your own drink – she'll probably refuse.

With this little dance completed, the boats head back and it's Madame's turn to cut in. It seems that all that splashing about wasn't required at all, as she's now suddenly able to put down her oar and start producing an endless stream of embroidered pictures, tablecloths and T-shirts for sale. Some of them are quite lovely, but be warned – even if you buy the entire boxful it won't be enough to satisfy.

As you reach the respite of the shore, laden down with hand-stitched doilies for the great-aunts' Christmas presents, Madame unashamedly reaches out her hand and asks for a \$2 tip – more than what most Vietnamese make in a day!

Still, you got off lightly. If this scenario pans out, at least you got to see the caves. Another common scam is for people driving towards Tam Coc to be approached by women offering to lead them to the boats. Instead you're driven to someone's private boat elsewhere on the river where a paddle around random rice paddies may cost 120,000d.

Opposite the cathedral's main doors is the free-standing bell tower, with stone columns carved to look like bamboo. At its base lie two enormous stone slabs, one atop the other. Their sole purpose was to provide a perch for the mandarins to sit and observe – no doubt with great amusement – the rituals of the Catholic mass.

Atop the tower is such an enormous bell that Quasimodo's famous chimer in Paris pales significantly in comparison. This was pulled to the cathedral's top via an enormous earthen ramp. After construction was completed, the dirt was used to raise the whole site about 1m higher than the surrounding terrain. All the large carved stones were transported from some 200km away with only very rudimentary equipment.

Between the tower and the cathedral is the tomb of the founder, a Vietnamese priest named Six. Behind the main building is a large pile of limestone boulders – Father Six piled them up to test whether the boggy ground would support his plans. The test was a success, and the rock heap has been used to form a Lourdes grotto.

The five other chapels within the compound, built in the same style, are also worth exploring. Unfortunately, as with most Vietnamese churches, these are often locked outside of mass times. However, the windowless stone and wood construction affords plenty of gaps for a good peek at the interiors. There are also large statues of the pietà and nativity within the grounds.

Hordes of Vietnamese tourists come to this place. Few of them are Catholic, but many of them are extremely curious about churches and Christianity in general. Admission to the complex is free, but you may have to negotiate hordes of sellers and aggressive beggars at busy times. Daily mass is celebrated at 5am and 5pm.

Not far from this cathedral is a **covered bridge** dating from the late 19th century. **Dong Huong Pagoda** is the largest in the area, catering to the Buddhist community. Many of its congregations are from the minority Muong people. To find it, turn right at the canal as you're approaching town from the north and follow the small road alongside the water for 3km.

Getting There & Away

Phat Diem, sometimes known by its former name Kim Son, is 121km south of Hanoi and

26km southeast of Ninh Binh. There are direct buses from Ninh Binh to Phat Diem (one hour), or you can go by bicycle or motorbike. Day trips are easily arranged from Ninh Binh – US\$7 for a motorcycle and driver, including waiting time.

CUC PHUONG NATIONAL PARK

☎ 030 / elevation 150-656m

Established in 1962, **Cuc Phuong National Park** (☎ 848 006; www.cucphuongtourism.com; admission adult/child 40,000/20,000d) is one of Vietnam's most important protected areas. Ho Chi Minh personally took time off from the war in 1963 to declare this Vietnam's first national park, saying: 'Forest is gold. If we know how to conserve it well, it will be very precious. Destruction of the forest will lead to serious effects on both life and productivity.'

This national park is 70km from the coast and covers an area about 25km long and 11km wide, spanning the provinces of Ninh Binh, Hoa Binh and Thanh Hoa. Its highest peak is Dinh May Bac (Silver Cloud Peak) at 656m.

The park is home to the excellent **Endangered Primate Rescue Center** (see opposite). The centre is located about 500m before the national park reception centre. You can't wander around the centre alone, so if you're travelling independently you need first to go to the national park reception area and arrange a guide. Entry is free, but you might consider purchasing some postcards or a poster, or making a donation.

Though wildlife has suffered a precipitous decline in Vietnam in recent decades, the park's 222 sq km of primary tropical forest remains home to an amazing variety of animal and plant life. There are 320 species of bird, 97 species of mammal including bats, and 36 species of reptile identified so far. Of the 2000 plant species, 433 have medicinal properties and 299 are food sources. The park is home to a species of tree called Cay Kim Gao (*Podocarpus fleuryi hickel*). In ancient times, kings and mandarins would only eat with chopsticks made from this lumber – it was said that anything poisonous it touches turns the light-coloured wood to black.

Poaching and habitat destruction are a constant headache for the park rangers. Many native species, such as the Asiatic black bear, Siamese crocodile, wild dog and tiger, have vanished from the area as a result of human impact. Episodes of violence have erupted

SERIOUS MONKEY BUSINESS

A highlight of a visit to Cuc Phuong is the **Endangered Primate Rescue Center** (☎ 848 002; www.primatecenter.org; admission free; ☎ 9-11am & 1-4pm). The facility, run by a mixture of German biologists and local Vietnamese, is a laudable endeavour aiming to improve the wellbeing of Vietnam's primates.

What started out as a small-scale operation in 1995 with just a handful of animals has grown into a highly productive centre, where today over 100 creatures are cared for, studied and bred. There are around 14 species of gibbon and langur on site. The langur is a long-tailed, tree-dwelling monkey; the gibbon is a long-armed, fruit-eating ape. There are also lorises (smaller nocturnal primates) at the centre.

There are estimated to be only about 20 species of primate remaining in the wild in Vietnam, most of which are threatened by hunters and/or habitat destruction. Some people attempt to keep these animals as pets, which is almost impossible. Langurs survive exclusively on fresh-cut leaves and their digestive systems will not tolerate anything else. By feeding them incorrectly, people usually discover they've killed their new pet before they can even flaunt it to their friends. All the animals in the centre were either bred here or rescued either from cages or illegal traders, who transport them mostly to China to become medicinal ingredients. Such rare animals can fetch anywhere between US\$200 and US\$1000 from buyers looking to cash in on their 'medicinal worth', be it for gallstone relief or as an aphrodisiac.

In cooperation with the Vietnamese authorities, the centre has had some major recovery and breeding successes, including the world's first grey-shanked Douc langur bred in captivity. The red-shanked Douc langurs are breeding fantastically and are fascinating animals that look as though they are wearing red shorts (their Vietnamese name translates as 'monkeys wearing shorts'). Some southern species of langur at the centre have heated sleeping quarters in winter, which is more than can be said of the human residents.

One of the larger aims of the centre is to reintroduce these primates into their natural habitat. Currently hunting pressures are still too high, but as a preliminary step, some gibbons and a group of Hatinh langurs have been released into a 2-hectare, semi-wild area adjacent to the centre; and a group of Douc langurs are in a second, 4-hectare, semi-wild enclosure.

between the Muong and park rangers who have tried to stop logging in the park. The government has responded by relocating the villagers further from the park's boundary. Some ecotourism ventures such as village homestays (see p192) provide income to the local people, thereby giving conservation a direct economic benefit to them.

Improved roads have led to increased illegal logging, which in turn is having a huge impact on the growth, movement and conservation of plants and animals.

The best time of year to visit the park is in the dry months from November to February. From April to June it becomes increasingly hot, wet and muddy, and from July to October the rains arrive, bringing lots of leeches. Visitors in April and May should be lucky enough to see some of the literally millions of butterflies that breed here.

There is a low-key, informative **visitor centre** a few hundred metres before the park entrance.

Hiking

Excellent hiking opportunities abound in the park and you could spend several days trekking through the forest here.

Short walks include a large, enclosed **botanic garden** near the park headquarters where some native animals – deer, civets, gibbons and langurs – have been released. Another short trail leads to a steep stairway up to the **Cave of Prehistoric Man**, where in 1966 human graves and tools were found dating back 7500 years, making it one of the oldest sites of human habitation in Vietnam.

Popular day-trails include an 8km-return walk to the massive, 1000-year-old **Big Tree** (*Tetrameles nudiflora*); and a longer hike to **Silver Cloud Peak**. There's also a strenuous five-hour hike to **Kanh**, a Muong village. You can overnight here with local families (p192) and also raft on the Buoï River.

Park staff can provide you with basic maps to find the well-marked trail heads, but a guide is recommended for day trips and is

LAOS BORDER BLUES 1

All of the border crossings between north-central Vietnam and Laos have a degree of difficulty. If you've got the time, you're much better to head south and cross at Lao Bao. The crossing at **Nam Xoi/Na Meo** (☎ 7am-6pm) in Thanh Hoa province is the most remote, in a mountainous area 175km northwest of Thanh Hoa city and 70km east of Xam Nua (Laos). From the Lao side you should be able to get a *saengthaew* (pick-up truck) from Vieng Xai to the border (15,000k). There is not much here but across the border in Vietnam there's a small village with some incredibly basic accommodation – avoid it if you can. Once in Vietnam you're probably best to negotiate a motorbike for the lengthy, bumpy ride to Thanh Hoa. Another option is to take a motorbike to a town such as Ba Thuoc (US\$10, 54km) and try to find a minibus. However, we've heard reports of drivers demanding 300,000d for the journey to Thanh Hoa – over six times the going rate. The same is true if you're travelling in the opposite direction, although you're slightly less likely to be scammed if you buy your bus ticket from the Thanh Hoa station. Be aware that Lao visas are not available at this border. All in all, expect a 15-hour ordeal if you take this route.

mandatory for longer treks. A guide will cost a minimum of US\$5 per day for up to five people, plus US\$1 for each extra person.

Sleeping & Eating

There are two accommodation areas in the park, with a complicated range of prices and options.

The centre of the park, 18km from the gate, is the best place to be for an early morning walk or bird-watching. Here there are basic rooms in a **pillar house** (per person US\$6), or a couple of self-contained **bungalows** (s/d US\$15/25). There's also an enormous river-fed swimming pool.

At park headquarters there are self-contained **bungalows & guesthouse rooms** (s/d US\$15/20), as well as rooms in a **pillar house** (per person US\$5). The smartest rooms are those constructed around an artificial lake just inside the park boundary. You can **camp** (per person US\$2) at either location, but need to bring your own gear. **Meals** (10,000-25,000d) are available from reception, including a vegetarian option.

If you're looking for an unforgettable experience of tribal life, you might consider the hike to Kanh village (see p191), where it's possible to stay with local families. The dwellings are predictably basic – don't expect anything resembling a toilet as we know it. You'll need to pay US\$20 for a guide to lead you and stay overnight, but the accommodation only costs US\$5.

It can get very busy here at weekends and during Vietnamese school holidays. Reservations can be made by contacting the national park office.

Getting There & Away

Cuc Phuong National Park is 45km from Ninh Binh. The turn-off from Hwy 1A is north of Ninh Binh and follows the road that goes to Kanh Ga and Van Long Nature Reserve. There is no public transport all the way to the park so you're best to arrange a motorbike or car in Ninh Binh.

VINH

☎ 038 / pop 226,000

Hurriedly rebuilt after its wartime devastation, Vinh is only now lifting off the mantle of concrete ugliness that has been its reputation over the last 30 years. Trees have been planted along its wide boulevards, new parks opened and the lakesides landscaped – injecting a much needed splash of green among the grey Stalinist patina. There's still not a lot to detain a tourist for more than a day, but it's becoming a more attractive option for breaking up the long journey between Hanoi and Huế. The capital of Nghe An province, it has a few almost-attractions nearby, including Ho Chi Minh's birthplace Kim Lien and the beach resort of Cua Lo.

History

While the area has been inhabited for at least 4000 years, it was in the 18th century that Vinh came to prominence. Leaders of the Tay Son rebellion aimed to set up 'Phoenix Capital City' here during their short-lived rule. In 1930 it was the site of a brutally suppressed May Day demonstration, where police fired on marchers, killing seven. Revolutionary fervour spread, with Vinh's various Communist cells, trade unions and farmers' organisations earning it the appellation 'Red-Glorious City'.

From a pleasant citadel city, it was reduced to rubble in the early 1950s as a result of French aerial bombing and the Viet Minh's scorched-earth policy. Later, a huge fire finished off anything that was left standing.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail began in Nghe An province, and many of the war supplies sent south were shipped via the port of Vinh. The US military's response was to once again obliterate the city in hundreds of bombardments from 1964 to 1972, which left only two buildings intact. Casualties were high on both sides – more US aircraft and pilots were shot down over Nghe An and Ha Tinh provinces than over any other part of North Vietnam. The heavy loss of planes and pilots was one reason why the USA later brought

in battleships to pound North Vietnam from a distance.

Orientation

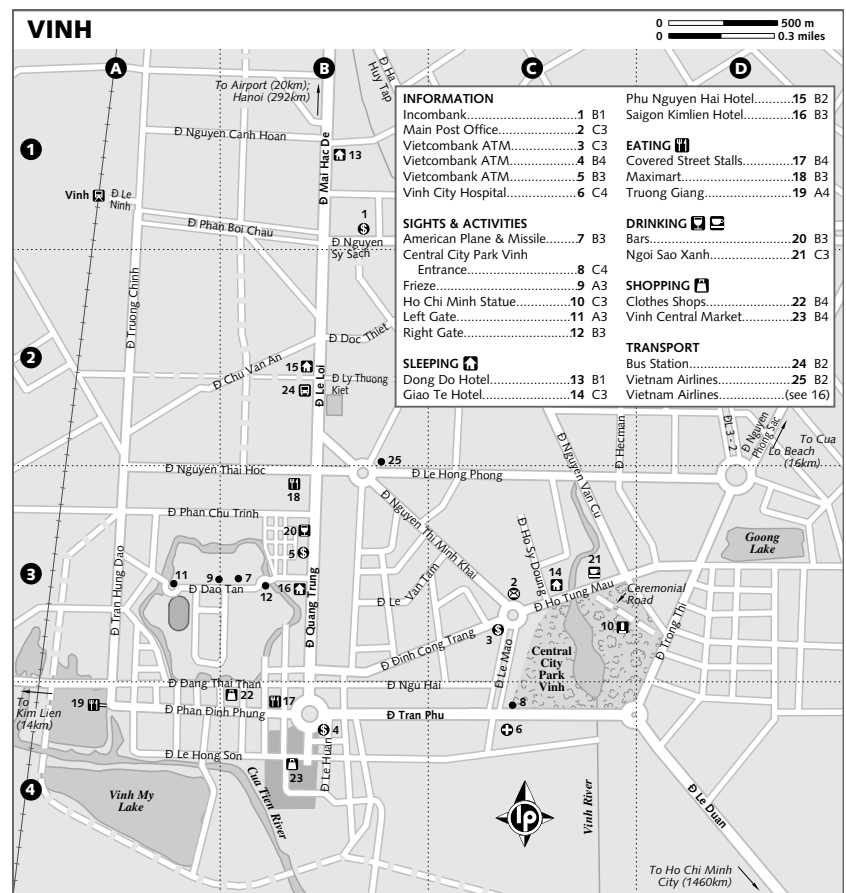
As Hwy 1A enters Vinh from the south, it crosses over the mouth of the Lam River (Ca River), also known as the Cua Hoi Estuary. Street numbers are rarely used in Vinh.

Information

The city has an official website (www.vinhcity.gov.vn).

Incombank (☎ 359 5230; Đ 9 Nguyen Sy Sach) Has an ATM and exchange services.

Main post office (☎ 356 1408; Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai; ☎ 6.30am-10pm) For phone calls and postal services. Also has an air-conditioned internet café attached.



Vietcombank (53 Đ Le Huan) has an ATM. Further ATMs may be found at 33 Đ Le Mao and Đ Quang Trang, a block north of the Saigon Kimlien Hotel.

Vinh City Hospital (Benh Vien da Khoa; ☎ 835 279; 178 Đ Tran Phu) For medical emergencies.

Sights & Activities

Although the shape of Vinh's **Ancient Citadel** is easy to see on any city map, there's not a lot left that's visible from street level, apart from the moat and the **Left Gate** (Cua Ta; Đ Dao Tan) and **Right Gate** (Cua Huu; Đ Dao Tan). The citadel is not actually all that ancient, having been built in 1831. Its 4.4m-high walls once stretched for 2520m, supported by a 28m-wide, 3.2m-deep moat. The citadel is now home to a sports stadium, homes, shops and government buildings, including one with an **American plane and missile** in front and another with a **frieze** showing the Vietnamese people in shackles.

A pair of colourful giant dragons welcome you to **Central City Park Vinh** (Cong Vien Trung Tam TP Vinh; cnr Đ Le Mao & Đ Tran Phu; admission over 1.4m 5000d/1-1.4m 3000d/under 1m free; ☎ Wed-Sun 3-11pm, holidays 8am-11pm), a big new amusement park for kids, complete with a merry-go-round, small rollercoaster (no loops) and dodgems – or you can pedal around the lake Galadriel-like in a swan-shaped boat.

On the other side of the lake a giant **Ho Chi Minh statue** strides boldly forth into the future.

Sleeping

Giao Te Hotel (☎ 843 175; ks_giaote_na@yahoo.com.vn; 9 Đ Ho Tung Mau; r 100,000-220,000d; 🏨) One of the better state-run hotels you'll find, this quieter option is set back off the road near the park. Breakfast is included in the price.

Dong Do Hotel (☎ 846 989; 14 Mai Hac De; r 110,000-170,000d; 🏨) A basic place at a good price on a busy street.

Phu Nguyen Hai Hotel (☎ 848 429; ctpnh@hn.vnn.vn; 81 Đ Le Loi; s/d US\$15/20; 🏨) Built in 1928, this charming place has tatty bathrooms but otherwise nice rooms with views. Right next to the bus station, the street's noisy and incredibly difficult to cross even by Vietnamese standards. Breakfast is included.

Saigon Kimlien Hotel (☎ 838 899; www.saigon-tourist.com/en/hotel/kimlien.htm; 25 Đ Quang Trung; s US\$22-32, d US\$26-36, ste US\$60; 🏨) The only hotel approaching upmarket status, the Saigon has a fancy foyer and good views from the rooms.

Eating & Drinking

Truong Giang (☎ 838 523; 2 Đ Phan Dinh Phung; meals 40,000d; 🍴 lunch & dinner) When it's all getting too crazy, this pillar house over a lake is a good escape from the hustle and bustle. Its grand entrance past a fountain and over a red-carpeted bridge is at odds with its shabby reception-lounge charm. There's no English menu, but the staff will help you order. The fish is very good.

Ngoi Sao Xanh (☎ 567 878; 17 Đ Ho Tung Mau) This café opposite the park is a charming dive – bamboo walls are complemented by carved wooden Disney figures. The upstairs area has views over the park.

You can get *pho bo* (beef noodle soup) and a drink for less than 20,000d from the covered street stalls on Đ Phan Dinh Phung. There are bars aplenty on Đ Quang Trung and a **Maxi-mart** (Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc) on its northern corner.

Shopping

Vinh Central Market sprawls out from the south end of Đ Quang Trung. Nearby Đ Dang Thai Than has market-style clothes shops.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Vietnam Airlines (☎ 595 777; 2 Đ Le Hong Phong) connects Vinh with HCMC (US\$72) twice a week. There's another booking office in the foyer of the Saigon Kimlien Hotel (see left). The airport is about 20km north of the city.

BUS

The chaotic **bus station** (☎ 833 997; Đ Le Loi) is easy to locate right in the centre of town. Regular buses head to Danang (116,000d, 8½ hours), stopping at Dong Hoi (four hours) and Dong Ha (5½ hours) on the way. Minibuses cruise the main street looking for additional fares. All the open-tour buses pass through town en route between Hanoi and Huế, and while it's easy to ask to jump off here, it's harder to arrange a pick up. Buses also head to Tay Son on Hwy 8, near the Lao border (see p196), and there are also services through to Phonsavan on Hwy 7 (see opposite). Be aware that Tay Son was formerly called Trung Tam, and this is usually what you'll see written on the bus.

CAR & MOTORBIKE

From Vinh it's 96km to the Lao border, 197km to Dong Hoi and 292km to Hanoi.

LAOS BORDER BLUES 2

Nong Haet/Nam Can (☎ 7am-6pm) is the northernmost of the two crossings to Laos from Nghe An province. On Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays it's possible to catch a bus at 6am from Vinh to Phonsavan (US\$12, 11 hours, bookings Mr Lam ☎ 038-383 5782). Otherwise catch a morning bus from Vinh to Muang Xen (29,000d, seven hours), which departs when full. Grab a motorbike for the spectacular 25km uphill run to the border (50,000d) and get ready to wait around on the Lao side. Local transport on to Nong Haet is about 5000k if anything shows up. From Nong Haet, there are several buses a day on to Phonsavan (20,000k, four hours) starting from 7am sharp. It might also be possible to charter a private car from US\$30. From Phonsavan it is easy to connect to Luang Prabang or Vientiane.

Heading in the opposite direction, the motorbike drivers on the Vietnamese side of the border may try to demand as much as US\$10 for the 25km journey downhill.

TRAIN

The **Vinh train station** (Ga Vinh; ☎ 853 158; Đ Le Ninh) is on the northwestern edge of town. The *Reunification Express* heads to destinations including Hanoi (113,000d, 5½ to eight hours, seven daily), Ninh Binh (73,000d, 3½ to 4½ hours, four daily), Thanh Hoa (50,000d, 2½ to 3½ hours, six daily), Dong Hoi (80,000d, 3½ to 9½ hours, eight daily) and Huế (143,000d, 6½ to 10 hours, seven daily).

AROUND VINH

Cua Lo Beach

This is one of three original state-dominated beach resorts in the northern half of the country – the others being Sam Son and Do Son. The beach here is beautiful, with white sand, clean water and a shady grove of pine trees along the shore. During holiday season it's a popular destination for locals, but the concrete, karaoke, massage parlours and litter won't suit many foreign travellers. Nevertheless, if you're in the area and the weather is warm, Cua Lo is worth a visit for a cooling dip and a good seafood lunch at one of the restaurants on the beach.

There are masses of **guesthouses** (r from US\$5) along the waterfront and huge **government hotels** (r US\$30). Most offer 'massage' and karaoke, and most have prostitutes hanging around outside, even in low season. Hotel rates drop considerably during the winter months – the name of the game is negotiation if for some reason you really want to stay here.

Cua Lo is 16km northeast of Vinh and can be reached easily by motorbike or taxi.

Kim Lien

Just 14km northwest of Vinh is **Ho Chi Minh's birthplace** in the village of Hoang Tru. The

house is maintained as a sacred shrine; it's a popular pilgrimage spot for Vietnamese tourists. Ho Chi Minh's childhood home is a simple farmhouse that's made of bamboo and palm leaves, reflecting his humble beginnings, although what you see today is a 1959 recreation. He was raised in this house until 1895, when the family sold it and moved to Huế so that his father could study.

In 1901 Ho Chi Minh's family returned to a **house** in Kim Lien, about 2km from Hoang Tru. Not far from this house, there is a **museum**, complete with the usual black-and-white photos of Ho's life.

Admission to all the **sites** (☎ 7.30-11am & 1.30-5pm) is free. However you are obliged to buy three bouquets of flowers (10,000d each) from the reception desk and place one by each of the altars. No English-language information is available.

There is no public transport to Kim Lien, but it's easy enough to hire a motorbike or taxi in Vinh.

PHONG NHA CAVE

☎ 052

The complex karst formations stretching throughout the surrounding Ke Bang National Park were formed approximately 400 million years ago, making them the oldest in Asia. Part of this system, **Phong Nha Cave** (☎ 675 110; admission 30,000d, charter boat 100,000d; 🍴 7am-4pm) is the largest and most beautiful cave in Vietnam. Located in the village of Son Trach, 55km northwest of Dong Hoi, it was designated a Unesco World Heritage site in 2003. It's remarkable for its thousands of metres of underground passageways and river caves filled with abundant stalactites and stalagmites. In November and December

the river is prone to flooding and the underground cave may be closed.

Phong Nha means Cave of Teeth, but, unfortunately, the 'teeth' (or stalagmites) that were by the entrance are no longer there. Once you get further into the cave, it's mostly unspoiled. In 1990 a British expedition explored 35km of the cave and made the first reliable map of the underground (and underwater) passageways. They discovered that the main cavern is nearly 8km long, with 14 other caves nearby.

Tien Son Cave (☎ 675 110; admission 20,000d; ☞ 7am-4pm) is a dry cave in the mountainside just above Phong Nha Cave. You can walk to it from the entrance to Phong Nha Cave (10 minutes) – look for the sign at the foot of the stairs.

The Chams used the cave's grottoes as Hindu sanctuaries in the 9th and 10th centuries; the remains of their altars and inscriptions are still here. Vietnamese Buddhists continue to venerate these sanctuaries, as they do other Cham religious sites.

More recently, this cave was used as a hospital and ammunition depot during the American War. The entrance shows evidence of aerial attacks. That US war-planes spent considerable time bombing and strafing the Phong Nha area is hardly surprising; this was one of the key entrance points to the Ho Chi Minh Trail (see p329). Some overgrown remains of the trail are still visible, though you'll need a guide to point them out to you.

You should be aware that Phong Nha is heavily visited by Vietnamese groups. The cave itself is fantastic, the experience less so. That is, unless you like your World Heritage sites to incorporate litter, noise, people climbing on stalagmites and cigarette smoke in confined spaces. Of course these things are prohibited, but enforcement is lax to say the least. Presumably these distractions can be avoided if you arrive early in the morning. The toilets might be less putrid then, too.

The Phong Nha Reception Department, an enormous complex in **Son Trach village**, organises tourist access to the cave. You buy your

admission ticket here and organise a boat to take you to the cave. Boats seat up to 10 people and it's cheaper to share. The cave system is electrically lit, but you may want to bring a torch (flashlight).

Sleeping & Eating

There is better accommodation available in Dong Hoi, but staying in Son Trach may help you to beat the crowds.

Saigon Phong Nha (☎ 675 016; sqquangbinhtourist@vnn.vn; r US\$13; ☞ ☑) This hotel provides rooms with en suites and hot water, and free breakfast.

In Son Trach itself there are plenty of cheap *com pho* places. Don't expect *haute cuisine*. Make sure you bring cash, as there are no banks here.

Getting There & Away

From Dong Hoi head 20km north on Hwy 1A to Bo Trach and then turn west for the 30km to Son Trach. Some hotels in Dong Hoi offer tours, but a cheaper option is by motorbike.

The actual cave entrance is 3km by river from Son Trach. The one-way ride takes about 30 minutes and gives a great glimpse of the life of river people. Overall, it takes about two hours to visit the river cave, or about four hours with a trip to the dry cave too.

DONG HOI

☎ 052 / pop 130,640

Following the 1954 partition, Dong Hoi and its southern neighbour Dong Ha went from being at the centre of the country to frontier towns. Both suffered more than most during the American War – as the ruins and bomb craters throughout the area will attest. The fact that Dong Hoi has bounced back to become an attractive city while Dong Ha still retains a badlands feel surely owes a lot to being on the winning side.

It has a wonderful location with the Nhat Le River dividing the main part of the city from a beautiful sandy spit, with lengthy stretches of beach to the north and south of town. While most tourists head from Hanoi to Huế, Dong Hoi is the best spot to break up the journey. It's also a much nicer base to explore the DMZ sites than Dong Ha – but it's slightly further away, and being on the northern side you won't find as many English-speaking drivers. From Dong Hoi you can easily make a day trip to the Phong Nha Cave (see p195).



Information

Main post office (☎ 822 560; 1 Đ Tran Hung Dao; ☞ 7am-9.30pm)

Vietcombank has an ATM outside the post office.

Sights

A major new bridge links the town with **Nhat Le Beach**, a long stretch of sand lining the

LAOS BORDER BLUES 3

The **Nam Phao/Cau Treo border** (☞ 7am-6pm) is 96km west of Vinh and about 30km east of Lak Sao in Laos. While the most travelled and shortest distance of the four crossings in north-central Vietnam, there are still lots of horror stories from travellers on this route. This area is well known to drug smugglers and other dodgy dealers. Lao Bao, near Dong Ha in Central Vietnam, is a much better option.

30-day Lao visas (US\$30) are available on arrival in Nam Phao, but Vietnamese visas still need to be arranged in advance; try the Vietnamese embassy in Vientiane.

Buses from Vinh for Tay Son (formerly Trung Tam; 10,000d) leave 10 times a day between 6am and 2pm. A lot of travellers have reported bad experiences on this local bus, including chronic overcharging and being kicked off in the middle of nowhere. From Tay Son it's a further 26km to the border. Take a minibus or hire a motorbike to cover the last stretch; both cost 50,000d. The last 25km climbs through some spectacular steep and forested country. There is absolutely nothing here except the border post itself, so stock up on water and snacks in Tay Son when passing through.

The Vietnamese border guards have been known to close the country for lunch – any time from 11.30am to 1.30pm. It's also quite common for them to ask for a US\$1 fee to stamp your visa. From the Vietnamese side it's a short walk to the Laos border. Once in Laos, *jumbo* (three-wheeled taxis) and *sawngthaew* (pick-up trucks) to Lak Sao leave the border when full or cost about US\$10 to charter.

Coming the other way from Laos to Vietnam, *sawngthaew* (US\$1.50, 45 minutes) depart regularly from the market. Once in Vietnam the vultures begin circling to arrange transport to Vinh. Many will try to charge US\$20 per person to Vinh, but US\$5 is more sensible. Try to hook up with as many other people as possible as you cross the border to improve your bargaining position.

A common scam exists with minibuses in Lak Sao offering travellers a ride directly on to Vinh. Once they're in a suitably remote section on the Vietnamese side they stop and demand an extra US\$20 on threat of abandonment in the dark. There are four direct buses a day and a ticket should cost no more than US\$10.

narrow spit forming the east bank of the Nhat Le River all the way to its mouth. Further beaches extend north of the town. All that remains of Dong Hoi Citadel (1825) are two beautifully restored **gates**, one just behind the Saigon Quangbinh Hotel and the other on Đ Quang Trung. A poignant reminder of the American War is the **ruined church**, by the river on Đ Nguyen Du. Another is the **plane** in front of a government building on Đ Quang Trung. The **Me Suot statue** (Đ Quach Xuan Ky) is lovely piece of socialist art, showing a proud heroine with a cartoonish wind at her back, rowing forward with her cargo of VC fighters.

Sleeping & Eating

You'll find dozens of hotels lining Hwy 1A as it passes through town.

Hotel Mau Hong (☎ 821 804; Đ Truong Phap; r US\$7-10; 🏠) The friendliest of the riverfront cheapies, it's a small guesthouse run by a delightful family, with basic bright and clean rooms.

Guesthouse Ngoc Lan (☎ 843 732; r 120,000d; 🏠) No English is spoken at this new minihotel on the beach side of Nhat Le bridge, but the rooms are spotless and in walking distance of the surf.

Hoang Linh Hotel (☎ 821 608; Đ Mac Dinh Chi; r 180,000d; 🏠) An attractive new place with large comfortable rooms, right by the river at the south end of town.

Saigon Quangbinh Hotel (☎ 822 276; 20 Đ Quach Xuan Ky; r US\$58-81, ste US\$127; 🏠) This flash, new, Western-style hotel has a quiet riverside position and comfortable rooms, some with great views. Its restaurant (dishes 40,000d to 80,000d) is one of the few in town for those for whom linen tablecloths are a necessity. The small pool area faces the road and has an unusual decorative feature – the casings of American bombs.

Sun Spa Resort (☎ 842 999; sunsparesortvietnam.com; r US\$86-127, ste US\$207; 🏠) This massive complex on Nhat Le Beach has a large pool, tennis courts and an opulent landscaped garden complete with a waterfall, fountain, swan-shaped boats on a lake and tethered deer. You shouldn't find yourself short of a bed amongst the 234 well-furnished rooms and 50 luxury villas facing on to the beautiful private beach.

There is a cluster of very good **local restaurants** (meals around 15,000d) situated on Đ Nguyen Trai near the market. They specialise in the delicious pancake-like *banh cuon* (rice-crepe rolls).

Getting There & Away

BUS

Buses to all destinations zip up and down Hwy 1A, including open-tour buses between Hanoi and Huế. It's easy to leave an open tour bus in Dong Hoi, but more difficult to arrange to be picked up from here.

From the **bus station** (☎ 822 150; Đ Tran Hung Dao) you can catch services south to Danang (56,000d, five hours, six daily) via Dong Ha (30,000d, two hours), and north to Vinh (50,000d, four hours).

It's possible to get a bus to the busy Lao border at Lao Bao (40,000d, three daily) and directly to the Lao city of Muang Khammouan (190,000d, 11 hours, twice weekly, bookings Mr Thang ☎ 828 939) passing through the little used **Cha Lo/Na Phao border crossing** (🚗 7am-5pm) situated between Don Bai Dinh (Vietnam) and Na Phao (Laos). The buses leave from Dong Hoi at 6am on Mondays and Fridays, with the return journey leaving from Muang Khammouan at 7am on Wednesdays and Sundays. It is not possible to arrange a Lao visa at this border.

CAR & MOTORBIKE

Dong Hoi is on Hwy 1A, 166km north of Huế, 95km north of Dong Ha and 197km south of Vinh.

TRAIN

The **train station** (Ga Dong Hoi; ☎ 820 558; Đ Thuan Ly) is located 3km from Hwy 1A. Take Đ Tran Hung Dao until it crosses a bridge. A sign-

post directs you to take the next right, then take another right and then the station is directly ahead.

The *Reunification Express* heads to destinations that include Hanoi (202,000d, nine to 12 hours, six daily), Vinh (80,000d, 3½ to 9½ hours, eight daily), Dong Ha (38,000d, two to 2½ hours, six daily) and Huế (65,000d, 2½ to 5½ hours, eight daily).

BETEL NUT

One thing you'll undoubtedly see for sale at street stalls everywhere in Vietnam is betel nut. This is not a food – swallow it and you'll be sorry! The betel nut is the seed of the betel palm (a beautiful tree, by the way) and is meant to be chewed. The seed usually has a slit in it and is mixed with lime and wrapped in a leaf. Like tobacco, it's strong stuff that you can barely tolerate at first, but eventually you'll be hooked.

The first time you bite into betel nut, your whole face gets hot – chewers say it gives them a buzz. Like chewing tobacco, betel nut causes excessive salivation and betel chewers must constantly spit. The reddish-brown stains you see on footpaths are not blood, but betel-saliva juice. Years of constant chewing cause the teeth to become stained progressively browner, eventually becoming nearly black.

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