



Northeast Vietnam

For most visitors, the northeast is all about Halong Bay. The sublime seascape at this World Heritage site is undoubtedly one of Vietnam's most enchanting experiences. But high up in the rugged mountains of the interior are some of the country's most intriguing destinations and far fewer tourists than in the coastal clusters.

Bizarre but beautiful, Halong Bay is geology gone wild, with hundreds and thousands of limestone pinnacles protruding from the waters. North of Halong Bay is the less-visited Bai Tu Long Bay, where nature's spectacular show continues all the way to the Chinese border. To the south of Halong Bay is Cat Ba Island, a 'lost world' landscape with hiking, biking or just hanging around the order of the day. And just a hydrofoil ride away is Haiphong, the north's major port and a step back in time with wide boulevards and elegant architecture.

Looming above the coast, the brooding mountains of the northeast are another world entirely. The karst connection continues into Cao Bang province, the surreal scenery some of the most stunning in all Vietnam. It is the perfect base for meeting Montagnard minorities and exploring idyllic waterfalls or Ba Be National Park.

Getting back to the basics, this area is a popular route for travelling overland between China and Vietnam. There are two border crossings: one on the coast at Mong Cai that is seldom used, and nother near Lang Son. With all this border traffic, it's looking good for the locals and the northeast is riding on a boom, as the gateway to Hanoi, by land and by sea.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Cruise emerald waters and see where nature has gone wild to create more than 3000 weird and wonderful islands in **Halong Bay** (p136)
- Breach the rugged coast to see the hidden beaches and dense jungle of **Cat Ba Island** (p143)
- Turn the clocks back 10 years to discover the Hanoi of yesteryear in the somnolent port city of **Haiphong** (p132)
- Board a boat to glide through lakes and rivers, and spend the night with a minority family in a homestay at **Ba Be National Park** (p157)
- In a pretty province of waterfalls, caves and superb scenery, check out the crazy karsts of **Cao Bang** (p154)



■ ELEVATION: 0M-1980M

■ BEST TIME TO VISIT: MAR-MAY & SEP-NOV



History

Dominated by the Red River basin and the sea, the fertile northeast is the cradle of Vietnamese civilisation. Much of Vietnamese history (and not all of it happy) was made here. Vietnam has had less than cordial relations with the Chinese, who invaded in the 2nd century BC and stuck around for about 1000 years. They were finally vanquished in the 10th century; see the boxed text, p138.

Any time the Chinese wanted to interfere in Vietnam's affairs, it was through the northeast that they approached. The last time was in 1979 to punish the Vietnamese for invading Cambodia (see the boxed text, p152).

As well as invasions, this region has also witnessed an exodus during the late 1970s and

early 1980s, as thousands of ethnic-Chinese and later thousands more Vietnamese took to the mountains or the seas to search for a better life in China, Hong Kong and beyond.

National Parks

The beautiful national parks of the northeast all involve a certain amount of water-based activity. Cat Ba National Park, near Halong Bay, is straight out of Lost Valley of the Dinosaurs, a rugged island jutting out of the sea, liberally cloaked in lush jungle.

Further north, Halong Bay becomes Bai Tu Long National Park, a stunning scene of karsts that is every bit the equal of its more illustrious neighbour. Enjoy the beauty without the tourists and explore the hidden beaches.

Ba Be National Park is home to a stunning series of lakes, hemmed in by soaring mountains and lush forest on all sides. Almost alpine, this is a great park for hiking, biking and boat trips to caves and waterfalls. Consider a homestay in a minority village in the park.

Getting There & Away

Hanoi is the gateway to the northeast and there are excellent roads connecting the capital to Haiphong, Halong City and Lang Son. As the terrain gets more mountainous the roads become more mischievous, but they are generally good throughout the region. Buses are fast and modern in the lowlands, but slow and creaking in the highlands. There are also rail links to Haiphong and Lang Son, but the trains move at a snail's pace.

CON SON & DEN KIEP BAC

More appealing to domestic travellers than foreigners, Con Son and Den Kiep Bac are nonetheless potential diversions en route to Haiphong or Halong City.

Con Son was home to Nguyen Trai (1380–1442), the famed Vietnamese poet, writer and general. Nguyen Trai assisted Emperor Le Loi in his successful battle against the Chinese Ming dynasty in the 15th century. **Con Son pagoda complex** (admission per person/vehicle 3000/5000d) has a temple honouring Nguyen Trai atop a nearby mountain. It's a 600-step climb to reach it – a serious workout. Alternatively, take the loop walk past a spring, heading up through pine forests, and return down the steps.

Several kilometres away, **Den Kiep Bac** (Kiep Bac Temple; admission per person/vehicle 2000/5000d) is dedicated to Tran Hung Dao (1228–1300). An outstanding general of renowned bravery, his armies defeated 500,000 Mongol invaders in the mid-1280s. Perhaps second only to Ho Chi Minh in the historic hall of fame, he is a revered Vietnamese folk hero.

This beautiful temple was founded in 1300 and built on the site where Tran Hung Dao is said to have died. The temple was built not only for the general, but also to honour other notable members of his family. One was the general's daughter, Quyen Thanh, who married Tran Nhat Ton, who was credited with founding the Truc Lam sect of Vietnamese Buddhism.

Within the temple complex there's a small exhibition on Tran Hung Dao's exploits, but you'll need a Vietnamese speaker to translate

the details. The **Tran Hung Dao Festival** is held at Den Kiep Bac every year from the 18th to the 20th day of the eighth lunar month, usually in October.

Den Kiep Bac and Con Son are in Hai Duong province, about 80km from Hanoi. With wheels, it is easy to visit on the way to Haiphong or Halong Bay. There are several hotels and guesthouses in the immediate area.

HAIPHONG

☎ 031 / pop 1,667,600

Fed up with old-timers telling you Hanoi was so much more authentic in the early 1990s? Fear not, for Haiphong is a graceful city that has the flavour of Hanoi a decade ago. Bicycles are as common as motorbikes and the verdant tree-lined boulevards conceal some classic colonial-era structures. Stroll around the centre and soak up the atmosphere.

Despite being one of the country's most important seaports and industrial centres, and officially Vietnam's third-largest city, Haiphong today seems a somnolent place with clean streets and an understated air of prosperity. In general, the city is far less hassle than major tourist magnets, with barely a tout in sight.

Haiphong makes a sensible stopover for travellers making their own way to or from Cat Ba Island or Halong Bay. A combination of bus, boat and train make an economical and easy way to link the popular places of the northeast.

History

The French took possession of Haiphong back in 1874 when it was just a small market town. The city developed rapidly, becoming a major port. Heavy industry was a natural choice thanks to its proximity to coal supplies.

One of the most immediate causes of the Franco-Viet Minh War was the infamous French bombardment of the 'native quarters' of Haiphong in 1946, in which hundreds of civilians were killed and injured. A contemporary French account estimated civilian deaths at more than 6000.

Haiphong came under US air and naval attack between 1965 and 1972. In May 1972 President Nixon ordered the mining of Haiphong Harbour to cut the flow of Soviet military supplies to North Vietnam. As part of the Paris cease-fire accords of 1973, the USA agreed to help clear the mines from Haiphong



Harbour – 10 US navy mine-sweepers were involved in the effort.

Since the late 1970s Haiphong has experienced a massive exodus, including many ethnic-Chinese refugees, who took much of the city's fishing fleet with them.

Information

EMERGENCY

If you need medical treatment it is best to head to Hanoi. **Vietnam-Czech Friendship Hospital** (Benh Vien Viet-Tiep; Pho Nha Thuong) is the best of the hospitals, but rely on it for emergencies only.

INTERNET ACCESS

There are centrally located internet cafés on Pho Dien Bien Phu, charging around 3000d per hour, and there seems to be at least one internet café on most other streets in the city. Free wi-fi is available at **New Story** (84 Pho Dien Bien Phu), a somewhat kitsch café-bar.

MONEY

Vietcombank (11 Pho Hoang Dieu) Not far from the post office, this beautifully housed bank can deal with cash and cheques, plus has an ATM.

POST

Main post office (3 Pho Nguyen Tri Phuong) A grand old yellow dame on the corner of Pho Hoang Van Thu.

Sights & Activities

Half a day on your hands in Haiphong? There are a few low-key sights to keep you busy, but the museums have the most obscure opening times in the country.

Haiphong Museum (Pho Dien Bien Phu; admission free; ☎ 8-10.30am Tue & Thu, 7.30-9.30pm Wed & Sun) is in a splendid colonial building and has a small collection. Don't change your travel plans just to visit, however. Nearby, opposite the Navy Hotel, is the **Navy Museum** (Bao Tang Hai Quan; Pho Dien Bien Phu; ☎ 8-11am Tue, Thu & Sat), possibly popular with visiting sailors and veterans.

Check out the **Opera House** (Pho Quang Trung) if there is anyone able to let you inside. Smaller than the Hanoi Opera House from the outside, the interior is lavish.

Du Hang Pagoda (Chua Du Hang; 121 Pho Chua Hang) was founded three centuries ago. Though it has been rebuilt several times, it remains a fine example of traditional Vietnamese architecture and sculpture. Pho Chua Hang itself is narrow and bustling with Haiphong street life, and is fun to wander along.

Sleeping

Haiphong sometimes plays host to large numbers of mainland Chinese tourists, although numbers had evaporated during our last visit. To guarantee a bed in one of the more expensive hotels, it is best to book ahead. There are no genuine budget options in Haiphong.

Hotel du Commerce (☎ 384 2706; fax 384 2560; 62 Pho Dien Bien Phu; r US\$10-18; 🏠) In a venerable old building from the French period, this could be Haiphong's ultimate retreat if tourists took an interest in the town. Fortunately for budget travellers, it remains a characterful place with high ceilings and gigantic bathrooms. Basics include satellite TV, fridge and hot water, but think atmosphere above amenities.

Khach San Thang Nam (☎ 374 7216; vntourism.hp@bdvn.vnmail.vnd.net; 55 Pho Dien Bien Phu; r US\$15-18; 🏠) This place is one of the best all-rounders in town, with bright, clean rooms and all mod cons, including satellite TV. It doesn't get more central than this.

Monaco Hotel (☎ 374 6468; monacohotel@hn.vnn.vn; 103 Pho Dien Bien Phu; r US\$20-40; 🏠) One of the newer hotels in town, the décor here is a cut above the competition. All rooms are well appointed, but US\$40 buys an apartment complete with a kitchen.

Ben Binh Hotel (☎ 384 2260; fax 384 2524; 6 Đ Ben Binh; r US\$25-40; 🏠) Conveniently located opposite the ferry pier, this is a huge old place set in spacious gardens. The old cheapies were swallowed up by the renovation, so it's no longer a budget option, but the current crop of rooms is much smarter.

Huu Nghi Hotel (☎ 382 3244; fax 382 3245; 62 Pho Dien Bien Phu; r US\$35-45; 🏠 📺 📺) An ugly skyscraper on the outside, it blossoms into a smart business hotel on the inside. The four-star rooms include satellite TV, minibar and individual shower and bathtub. Hotel facilities include a swimming pool and tennis courts.

Harbour View Hotel (☎ 382 7827; www.harbourviewvietnam.com; 4 Pho Tran Phu; s/d US\$70/80; 🏠 📺 📺) The leading address in Haiphong, it is designed in classic colonial style. Rooms are stylish, while the facilities include a swimming pool, gym and spa. The hotel is popular with French tour groups, although staff tend to speak English, leading to much Gallic angst. Healthy discount rates are often available.

There are plenty of other options:

Duyen Hai Hotel (☎ 384 2134; 6 Đ Nguyen Tri Phuong; r 200,000-300,000d; 🏠) A good-value central option if other places are full.

Haiphong Station Guesthouse (☎ 385 5391; 75 Đ Luong Khanh Thien; r 150,000-180,000d; 🏠) Overpriced given the air of dereliction, but it's literally in the train station for an early ride.

Eating

Haiphong is noted for its sumptuous fresh seafood, which is available at all the popular restaurants in town.

The best options for cheap eats are the glut of eateries on Pho Minh Khai. Another good hunting ground is Pho Quang Trung, with a whole strip of point-and-cook tanks outside. This strip is also brimming with popular *bia hoi* (beer) bars and cafés.

Fanny Ice Cream (☎ 153 0475; 4 Pho Hoang Van Thu; ice cream from 10,000d) Famous in Hanoi, Fanny has expanded to Haiphong. Indulge in fine French ice cream while strolling along the old French boulevards.

Com Vietnam (☎ 384 1698; 4 Pho Hoang Van Thu; mains 20,000-60,000d) A blink-and-you'll-miss-it courtyard restaurant, it's consistently popular with the local crowd, thanks to affordable local seafood and Vietnamese specialities.

Van Tue (☎ 374 6338; 1 Pho Hoang Dieu; mains 20,000-150,000d) This is one of the biggest Vietnamese restaurants in town, with a menu to match. The seafood selection is dizzying, as is the home-brewed Czech beer if you drink too much.

BKK (☎ 382 1018; 22 Pho Minh Khai; mains 30,000-60,000d) The card proclaims 'trendy Thai restaurant' and it's damn right. Set in a thoughtfully restored colonial-era house, this is boutique dining. The menu includes all the Thai favourites, plus a serious amount of seafood. It can double as a bar for those looking for clever cocktails and a sophisticated ambience.

Chie (☎ 382 1018; 18 Pho Tran Quang Khai; mains from US\$3-15) Probably the best Japanese restaurant in town – yes, believe it or not, there is more than one. Exquisite presentation and serious sushi and sashimi thanks to an endless supply of fresh fish.

Drinking & Entertainment

It's hardly Hanoi, let alone HCMC, but there is a subtle buzz to the place. Bia Haiphong is the local brew and it gets the thumbs up from aficionados of the amber nectar.

La Villa Blanche (Pho Tran Hung Dao). For a one-size-fits-all night stop, head to this old French mansion. Aptly nicknamed the White House in English, it has a shady garden housing

several bargain *bia hoi* shops. It fills up with locals from mid-afternoon and the food is impressive.

Bar la Marine (☎ 382 2934; Pho Ly Tu Trong) In the same compound as La Villa Blanche is this claustrophobic cavern of a place that is a minor institution with Francophone expats. Mind your head, particularly if partaking of the extensive spirit selection.

Saigon Cafe (cnr Pho Dien Bien Phu & Pho Dinh Tien Hoang) One of the trendiest spots in town, it was about to get trendier thanks to an expensive renovation. A lounge café-bar with an extensive food and drinks menu, plus live music most evenings.

Maxims (☎ 3822 934; 51B Pho Dien Bien Phu) A sort of vague relation to the famous Maxims in Saigon, it has live music from classical to jazz most nights.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Vietnam Airlines (☎ 9381 0890; www.vietnamair.com.vn; 30 Pho Hoang Van Thu) serves the Haiphong–Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) and the Haiphong–Danang routes.

BOAT

All boats leave from the **ferry pier** (Đ Ben Binh), 10 minutes' walk from the centre of town.

Hydrofoils leave for Cat Ba (45 minutes) three times a day in the high summer season and just once a day the rest of the year. Summer season services depart between 7am and 11am. The rest of the year, the services leave at about 9am. **Transtour** (☎ 384 1009) runs the Mekong Express (100,000d), which is the safest and most comfortable option. **Tahaco** (☎ 374 7055) has smaller hydrofoils, which are cheaper at 70,000d. There are no longer hydrofoils operating to Halong City, as the road journey is faster.

Transtour also has a fast boat to Mong Cai (200,000d, four hours) leaving at 7.30am daily. There is also a slow ferry (70,000d, eight hours) departing daily at 6pm. Do the maths, it arrives at an ungodly hour.

BUS

Haiphong has three long-distance bus stations. Buses to Hanoi (35,000d, two hours) leave from **Tam Bac bus station** (Pho Tam Bac) about every 10 minutes throughout the day. Buses to points south such as Ninh Binh leave from **Niem Nghia bus station** (Đ Tran Nguyen Han).

Lac Long bus station (Pho Cu Chinh Lan) has buses to Bai Chay (Halong City; 25,000d, 1½ hours), and from there connections to Mong Cai on the Chinese border by boat or road. Lac Long also has buses to/from Hanoi, convenient for those connecting with the Cat Ba hydrofoil.

CAR & MOTORBIKE

Haiphong is 103km from Hanoi on Hwy 5. This expressway (Vietnam's first) between the two cities was completed in 1999 and is one of the biggest and busiest roads in the country.

TRAIN

Haiphong is not on the main line between Hanoi and HCMC, but there is a spur line connecting it to Hanoi. There's one express train daily to Long Bien station (24,000d, two hours) at 6.10pm and several slower trains (18,000d, 2½ hours).

There are two train stations within the Haiphong city limits. Thuong Li train station is in the western suburbs of the city, while Haiphong train station is right in the city centre.

Getting Around

Haiphong is serviced by several companies that use metered, air-con taxis. Try **Haiphong Taxi** (☎ 383 8383) or **Taxi Mai Linh** (☎ 383 3833). There are also plenty of *cyclos* (pedicabs) and *xe om* (motorbike taxis) cruising around town (between 5000d and 15,000d, depending on distance).

AROUND HAIPHONG Do Son Beach

Do Son Beach, 21km southeast of central Haiphong, is a honky-tonk seaside resort that is popular with Vietnamese for karaoke and massage, otherwise known as singing and sex. The hilly, 4km-long promontory ends with a string of islets, and the peninsula's nine hills are known as Cuu Long Son (Nine Dragons). There are plenty of colourful fishing boats on the water and a long promenade, but the beaches are disappointingly small and disappear completely at high tide. The resort is not all it's cracked up to be (or should that be: it's more cracked up than it used to be?). Many hotels are looking rather forlorn.

In 1994 the first casino to open in Vietnam since 1975 commenced operation as a joint venture between the government and a Hong Kong company. Foreigners are welcome to

win or lose their fortunes at **Doson Resort Hotel** (☎ 031-386 4888; www.dosonresorthotel.com.vn), but your average Vietnamese person is barred from entering the casino.

Do Son town is famous for its ritual **buffalo fights**, the finals of which are held annually on the 10th day of the eighth lunar month, usually late September or October, commemorating the date when the leader of an 18th-century peasant rebellion was killed here.

HALONG BAY

☎ 033

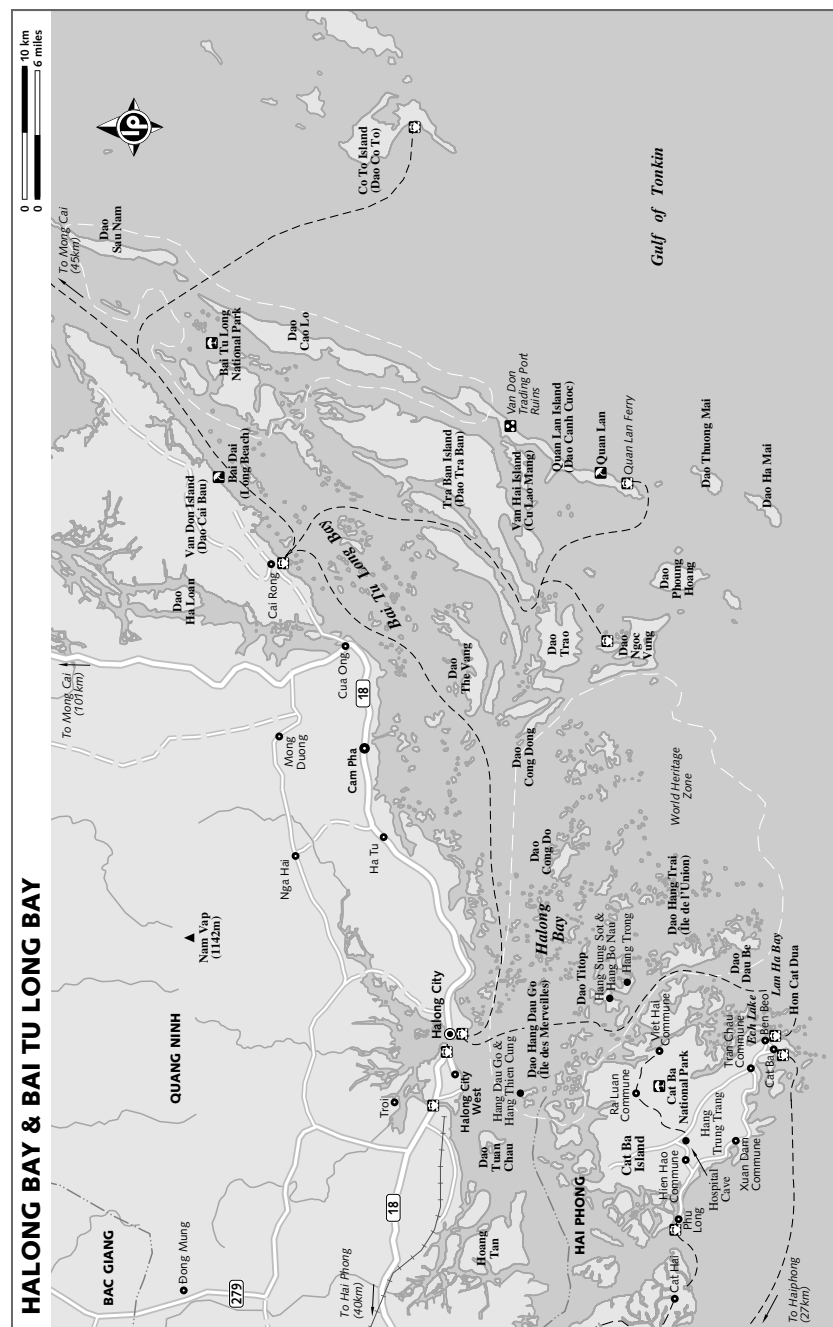
Majestic and mysterious, inspiring and imperious: words alone cannot do justice to the natural wonder that is Halong Bay. Imagine 3000 or more incredible islands rising from the emerald waters of the Gulf of Tonkin and you have a vision of breathtaking beauty. Halong Bay is pure art, a priceless collection of unfinished sculptures hewn from the hand of nature.

In 1994 it was designated a World Heritage site. Visitors can't help but compare the magical, mystical landscape of limestone islets to Guilin in China and Krabi in southern Thailand, but in reality Halong Bay is more spectacular. These tiny islands are dotted with beaches and grottoes created by wind and waves, and have sparsely forested slopes ringing with birdsong.

Beyond the breathtaking vistas on a boat cruise through the bay, visitors to Halong come to explore the caves – some of which are beautifully illuminated for the benefit of tourists – and to hike in Cat Ba National Park. There are few real beaches in Halong Bay, but Lan Ha Bay (off the coast of Cat Ba Island) has more than 100 sandy strips.

Halong City is the gateway to Halong Bay but not the ideal introduction to this incredible World Heritage site. Developers have not been kind to the city and most visitors sensibly opt for tours that include sleeping on a boat in the bay. In short, Halong Bay is the attraction; Halong City is not. For more on tours in and around the bay, see the boxed text (p140).

As the number-one tourist attraction in the northeast, Halong Bay draws a steady stream of visitors year-round. From February to April the weather in this region is often cool and drizzly. The ensuing fog can make visibility low, but this adds an ethereal air to the place and the temperature rarely falls below



10°C. During the summer months tropical storms are frequent, and tourist boats may have to alter their itineraries, depending on the weather.

Halong Bay is the stuff of myths and naturally the Vietnamese have concocted one. *Halong* translates as 'where the dragon descends into the sea'. Legend has it that the islands of Halong Bay were created by a great dragon that lived in the mountains. As it charged towards the coast, its flailing tail gouged out valleys and crevasses. When it finally plunged into the sea, the area filled with water, leaving only the pinnacles visible.

Dragons aside, the biggest threat to the bay may be from souvenir-hunting tourists. Rare corals and seashells are rapidly being stripped from the sea floor, and stalactites and stalagmites are being broken off from the caves. These items get turned into key rings, paperweights and ashtrays, which are on sale in the local souvenir shops. Obviously the fewer people buy, the less the local people will take to sell, so don't encourage the trade.

Information

All visitors must purchase a 30,000d entry ticket that covers all the sights in the bay. It's a flat fee whether you visit one or all. Tickets are available at the tourist boat dock in Bai Chay, but it is usually included for those on a tour.

There's an excellent map of Halong Bay, together with neighbouring Bai Tu Long Bay, published by the Management Department of

Halong Bay (15,000d). Look for it at souvenir stalls at the cave sites, or ask your tour guide where you can get your hands on a copy. Covit publishes an attractive hand-drawn map of Halong Bay (20,000d), but it's easier to find in Hanoi than Halong City.

For a virtual 360° tour of Halong Bay in full panorama, check out www.world-heritage-tour.org/asia/vn/halongbay/island.html.

Sights & Activities

CAVES

Halong Bay's limestone islands are peppered with caves of all shapes and sizes. Many of these are accessible only by charter boat, but some can easily be visited on a tour.

Hang Dau Go (Cave of Wooden Stakes), known to the French as the Grotte des Merveilles (Cave of Marvels), is a huge cave consisting of three chambers, which you reach via 90 steps. Among the stalactites of the first hall, scores of gnomes appear to be holding a meeting. The walls of the second chamber sparkle if bright light is shone on them. The cave derives its Vietnamese name from the third chamber. This chamber is said to have been used during the 13th century to store the sharp bamboo stakes that Vietnamese folk hero and war general Tran Hung Dao planted in the bed of the Bach Dang River to impale Mongolian general Kublai Khan's invasion fleet. It's the closest cave site to the mainland. Part of the same system, the nearby **Hang Thien Cung** has 'cauliflower' limestone growths as well as stalactites and stalagmites.

HALONG BAY'S VERY OWN LOCH NESS MONSTER

The dragon that gave birth to Halong Bay may be legend, but sailors have often reported sightings of a mysterious marine creature of gargantuan proportions known as the *tarasque*. The more paranoid elements of the military suspect it's an imperialist spy submarine, while eccentric travellers believe they have discovered Vietnam's version of the Loch Ness monster. Meanwhile, the monster – or whatever it is – continues to haunt Halong Bay, unfettered by the marine police, Vietnam Tourism and the immigration authorities. Enterprising Vietnamese boat owners have made a cottage industry out of the creature, offering cash-laden tourists the chance to rent a junk and pursue the *tarasque* before it gets bored and swims away.

Hang Sung Sot is a popular cave to visit. It too has three vast and beautiful chambers, in the second of which there's an astonishing pink-lit rock phallus, which is regarded as a fertility symbol. 'Penis rock' is the only way to describe it. It, too, requires a hike up steps to reach it, and a loop walk through the cool interior takes you back to the bay. **Hang Bo Nau**, another impressive cave, can be visited nearby.

Hang Trong (Drum Grotto) is so named because when the wind blows through its many stalactites and stalagmites, visitors think they can hear the sound of distant drumbeats.

Exactly which of the caves you visit will probably be decided on the day you travel. It depends on several factors, including the weather, number of other boats in the vicinity, and the number of people putting environmental pressure on the caves.

ISLANDS

Dao Tuan Chau (Tuan Chau Island), just 5km west of Bai Chay (western Halong City), is one of the few islands in Halong Bay that has seen any development. For many years the only accommodation was in Ho Chi Minh's former summer residence, an elegant but decaying structure. However, all this changed as the island rebranded itself **Tuan Chau International Recreation Complex** (☎ 842 115; aulaco@hn.vnn.vn; r US\$80-110; 📶 📺 📷), complete with aquarium,

circus, golf course and private villas. There are more than 300 rooms in this vast complex. The beachside rooms are tasteful and the top rate includes steam baths and saunas in the rooms.

Dao Titop (Titop Island) is a small island in the middle of the bay with a small, somewhat scruffy beach. Ignore its dubious charms and make for the summit of the island, which offers one of the best panorama views of Halong Bay. It's cheaper than a chopper.

Cat Ba Island (p143) is the best known and most developed of Halong Bay's islands.

KAYAKING

A leisurely paddle among the karsts is an activity that has taken off in recent years and Halong Bay is now following hard on the heels of Krabi in Thailand as kayaking capital of Southeast Asia. Many of the boat tours to Halong Bay include the option of kayaking into hollow karsts or through a floating village. Specialist operator **Handspan Adventure Travel** (☎ in Hanoi 04-926 0581; www.handspan.com; 80 Pho Ma May) was one of the first to offer kayaking and operates a private island camp near Quan Lan Island.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Northern Airport Flight Service Company (☎ 04-827 4409; fax 827 2780; 173 Pho Truong Chinh, Hanoi) offers a helicopter charter service from Gia Lam in Hanoi to Halong Bay on Saturday from 8am. Free transfers are available from the Sofitel Metropole Hotel (p110). The cost for the charter service is US\$175 per person, but it only runs with a minimum of six guests. The same helicopters can be privately chartered for US\$3695 round trip.

WATCH THOSE VALUABLES!

Take real care with your valuables when cruising the waters of Halong Bay. Do not leave valuables unattended as they might grow legs and walk. Always try and ensure there is someone you know and trust watching your valuables on a day cruise. When it comes to overnight cruises, most boats have lockable cabins. Also take care with cameras and other items when your tour boat is approached by smaller, nimbler boats, as snatch thefts are not unknown.

PLAYING FOR HIGH STAKES

A military general and one of Vietnam's greatest heroes, Tran Hung Dao (1228–1300) defeated the Mongol warriors of the Chinese army no fewer than three times as they attempted to invade Vietnam.

His most famous victory was at the Bach Dang River in northeast Vietnam in 1288, which secured the country's sovereignty. He borrowed the military strategy of Ngo Quyen, who had regained Vietnam's independence in 939, following 1000 years of Chinese rule.

After dark, sharpened bamboo poles – of a length designed to remain hidden underwater at high tide – were set vertically in the river, near the bank where it was shallow. At high tide, Tran Hung Dao sent small boats out – passing easily between the posts – to goad the Chinese warships to approach. As the tide receded, the impaled Chinese boats were left high and dry, and flaming arrows destroyed the fleet. In Halong Bay you can visit the Cave of Wooden Stakes (Hang Dau Go; above), where Tran Hung Dao's forces are said to have prepared and stored the bamboo poles.

Now you know why he is commemorated in all of those Tran Hung Dao streets in every Vietnamese town, and why every street parallel to a river is called Bach Dang, in memory of the victory.

BUS & BOAT

For more on tours to Halong Bay, see the boxed text below. It is hard to do it any cheaper on your own, but some travellers prefer to steer their own course. Travelling independently allows you to take more or less time in places, depending on the weather. The downside is that it is hard to arrange an overnight on a boat this way. You can take

a bus to Halong City from Hanoi (40,000d, 3½ hours) and book a passage on a Cat Ba tourist boat (130,000d including entry ticket, six hours). This boat takes in the main sites and drops you at Ben Beo harbour. Then chill out on Cat Ba before taking a hydrofoil to Haiphong and a bus to Hanoi. Alternatively, run the route in reverse and try and hook up with a tour boat in Cat Ba.

CRUISING THE KARSTS: TOURS TO HALONG BAY

Don't even think about a day trip to Halong, as the real beauty of the bay is best experienced from the deck of a junk over a gin and tonic as the sun sinks into the horizon. Many travellers to this part of the country book a one- or two-night Halong Bay tour at cafés or hotels in Hanoi. While we don't usually promote the tour option, Halong Bay is hard to explore properly without the services of an experienced tour company. However, for those with a bit more money to spend, there are lots of specialised boat companies offering excursions in the bay. Tourists travelling on inclusive tours through Vietnam have the Halong experience aboard a luxury junk. There are also now some genuine sailing junks operating in the bay and these are able to explore further afield when the wind is up. Finally, there is the option of a luxurious replica paddle ship.

Budget trips sold out of Hanoi are reasonably priced, starting from US\$15 per person for a dodgy day trip and rising to as much as US\$100 for two nights on the bay with kayaking. Remember, you get what you pay for and the cheaper the tour, the more basic the boat, the meals and the service. We get heaps of complaints about poor service, bad food and rats running around the boats, but these tend to be on the cheapest of the cheap tours. Spend a little more and enjoy the experience a lot more. Most tours include transport, meals, the boat tour and, sometimes, island hikes. Drinks are extra and are generally more expensive than on the mainland.

If you book a tour there is always a small chance that the boat-trip part may be cancelled due to bad weather. This may actually entitle you to a partial refund, but remember that the boat trip is only a small portion of the cost of the journey. Depending on the number of people in the group, you probably won't get back more than a handful of dollars if the boats don't sail.

For a list of reliable operators offering two- and three-day tours of the bay, check out the travel agents in Hanoi (p91) or in the Transport chapter (p490).

Boat Operators

There are hundreds of boats plying the waters these days. The following is just a selection of the most interesting companies. For more on the government-run boats that are available for charter, see opposite.

Emeraude Classic Cruise (☎ 04-934 0888; www.emeraude-cruises.com; s/d US\$245/290) The *Emeraude* is a replica paddle steamer that cruises the waters of Halong Bay daily. The smart cabins include hot-water showers, meals are served buffet style and the upper deck and bar offer superb views. The main drawback is that the cruise is relatively short compared with the competition. Plans are afoot to build a second boat, which should make two-nighters a possibility.

Halong Ginger (☎ 04-984 2807; www.cruisehalong.com; d from US\$373) This beautiful junk is visible from a distance thanks to its trademark ginger sails. Well finished throughout, it also has a good reputation for its food.

Huong Hai Junks (☎ 033-845 042; www.halongtravels.com; s/d US\$125/220) The leading boat company in Halong Bay, Huong Hai has a fleet of traditional junks that are all kitted out to a three-star standard. Most of the boats have about a dozen cabins and include an open-plan restaurant and bar on the upper floor.

Tropical Sails (☎ 04-923 2559; www.tropical-sails.com; s/d from US\$127/196) This small outfit operates some of the only junks with working sails, allowing the boats to get up a head of steam on a windy day. Most trips venture further afield to the southern reaches of Bai Tu Long Bay. The company also runs the *Dragon's Pearl*, a larger luxury junk with 12 cabins.

Getting Around

You won't see much unless you take a boat tour of the islands and their grottoes. For those travelling independently, life has gotten much easier under the watch of **Halong Bay Management Department** (☎ 846 592; http://halong.org.vn/; 166 Đ Le Thanh Tong). It regulates pricing for cruises on the bay and has a published list in its office at the Bai Chay tourist dock. Some of the staff speak English and can usually hook you up with other people. Be aware that the tourist boat dock is a bit of a circus, as dozens of boats unload one set of passengers and welcome another. There are usually hundreds of people milling about around midday.

There is no need to rent a whole boat for yourself, as there are plenty of other travellers, Vietnamese and foreign, to share with. The official prices are ridiculously reasonable at 30,000/40,000d for a four-/six-hour cruise. Whole boats can be chartered starting from 100,000/140,000/160,000/220,000d per hour for a no-star/1-star/2-star/3-star boat respectively – an affordable indulgence for those wanting some privacy. Boats to Cat Ba Island cost 100,000d per person or from 1,000,000d for a charter.

HALONG CITY

☎ 033 / pop 149,900

If Halong Bay is heaven, Halong City can be hell. Overdeveloped but underloved, the hideous high-rise hotels come in every shade of pastel and the beaches are definitely not the best in the region. However, the majority of

food, accommodation and other life-support systems for Halong Bay are found in Halong City. The capital of Quang Ninh province, it is sin city, with 'massage' heavily promoted at every hotel. The town draws large numbers of domestic tourists and, until recently, was a major magnet for Chinese tourists. Suddenly they stopped coming, giving birth to a million conspiracy theories about bankrupting hotels to buy them out.

Orientation

Halong City is bisected by a bay, and the most important district for travellers is called Bai Chay. Located on the western side, Bai Chay is closer to Hanoi and offers a better choice of hotels and restaurants. It's also where the majority of tourist boats are moored.

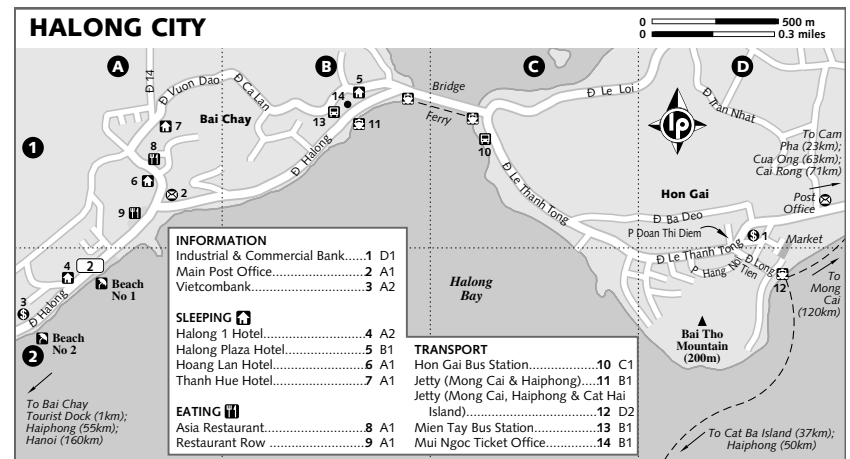
A short ferry ride (500d) across the bay takes you to the Hon Gai district. Hon Gai is the main port district for coal exports, which means it's a bit dirty, but at least there is some local flavour.

There is a bridge nearing completion to finally link Bai Chay and Hon Gai, which is good news for everyone (except perhaps the ferry captains). It will have opened by the time you read this.

District names are important: most long-distance buses will be marked 'Bai Chay' or 'Hon Gai' rather than 'Halong City'.

Information

Industrial & Commercial Bank (Đ Le Thanh Tong)
Useful ATM for those staying in Hon Gai.



Main post office (Đ Halong) Along with the usual postal services, there's cheap and fast internet access with plenty of webcams.

Vietcombank (Đ Halong) A new and more convenient branch in Bai Chay with the usual exchange facilities and ATM.

Beaches

The 'beaches' around Halong City are basically mud and rock – a problem the authorities have tried to 'correct'. There are two beaches in Bai Chay, both 'built' with imported sand, but they are not great for swimming as the water is pretty murky.

Sleeping

If you have any choice in the matter, stay on a boat in the bay rather than in a hotel in Halong City. The majority of visitors who do stay here opt for Bai Chay. There are hundreds of hotels located here, and keen competition keeps prices down, especially if you can avoid the commission-seeking touts. Prices rise in the peak season (summer) or during the Tet festival. There are also accommodation options in Hon Gai, but it's noisier and dustier across the water...coal dust that is!

The nearby island of Dao Tuan Chau (p139) has been overhauled as a luxury resort retreat, an attempted antidote to the mistakes made in the development of Halong City.

BAI CHAY

The heaviest concentration of hotels is in town, in the aptly named 'hotel alley' of Đ Vuon Dao. This is where you'll find more than 50 minihotels, most of them almost identical (a guidebook author's nightmare). Expect to pay something between US\$8 and US\$12 for a double room with private bathroom and air-con.

Hoang Lan Hotel (☎ 846 504; 17 Đ Vuon Dao; s US\$8-12, d US\$10-15; 🍷) Right in the thick of the action on hotel alley, this family place has a friendly feel. Not only are the usual suspects (hot water, satellite TV and a fridge) here, but breakfast is thrown in for good measure.

Thanh Hue Hotel (☎ 847 612; Đ Vuon Dao; r US\$10-12; 🍷) Continue up, up, up the hill from the Hoang Lan and you come to this great-value hotel. It offers some cracking views of the bay as a reward for the climb and most rooms include hot water, TV and balcony.

Halong 1 Hotel (☎ 846 320; fax 846 318; Đ Halong; r US\$30-55; 🍷) This rambling old government-run hotel used to be set in four buildings, but

the other blocks have recently branched out on their own. Set in a rambling old colonial-era building, this place always had the charm. Splash the extra for the space of a suite. You'll be following in the footsteps of Catherine Deeneuve who stayed here during the filming of *Indochine*.

Halong Plaza Hotel (☎ 845 810; www.halongplaza.com; 8 Đ Halong; r from US\$140; 🍷) A huge hotel with about 200 rooms, this place looms large over the car-ferry landing. Rooms are business-like, but are packing four stars. Discounts of at least 30% off the published rates are usually offered, making for a real deal.

Eating

Minihotels aside, most hotels have restaurants. If you're in Halong City as part of a tour, the meals are usually included.

Unsurprisingly, seafood is a serious feature of most menus. There are a couple of seafood strips in the centre of town, just south of the post office along Đ Halong. The strip nearest the post office is on the slide and several places have been converted to souvenir shops in the last couple of years. However, the second strip, a few hundred metres south, is still going strong. Aim for the places with fresh seafood in tanks out the front, or gravitate to where the locals are dining. All have tables inside and spill out onto the pavement at night. These are good places to indulge in a beer in the absence of any real bars in town.

Asia Restaurant (☎ 846 927; Đ Vuon Dao; mains 20,000-40,000d) One of the few restaurants daring to intrude on 'hotel alley', this is a reliable spot for Vietnamese food and a smattering of Western favourites. The owner used to run a restaurant in East Berlin and speaks excellent German and pretty good English.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

For all the details on boat trips in Halong Bay, see p140 and p141 sections earlier.

With a marked improvement in roads around the region, boat transport is not as popular as it once was, but the hydrofoil to Mong Cai remains a good option for anyone overland to China.

There are daily slow boats connecting Hon Gai with Haiphong (35,000d, three hours). Boats depart Hon Gai at 6.30am, 11am and 4pm. It could be considered a cheap way to

do a Halong Bay tour. There are no longer hydrofoils linking Halong and Haiphong, as travel by road is cheaper and just as fast.

From Bai Chay, **Mui Ngoc** (☎ 847 888; Đ Halong) operates hydrofoils to Mong Cai (US\$15, three hours) leaving at 8am and 1pm; the ticket office is almost next door to the Mien Tay bus station. The trip is definitely preferable to the long road journey. Book ahead, as demand often outstrips supply.

The best way to get to Cat Ba Island is to hop onto the regular tourist boats from Bai Chay tourist-boat dock. It costs 100,000d one way, including a leisurely cruise through the most beautiful parts of the bay. An extra 30,000d brings entry to the most important caves and grottoes in the bay. The whole trip takes about five or six hours, but there are no precise departure times, as it depends on numbers.

As always, be prepared for changes to these schedules.

BUS

Buses from Halong City to Hanoi (40,000d, 3½ hours) leave from **Mien Tay bus station** (Đ Ca Lan) in Bai Chay every 15 minutes. Buses to Haiphong (25,000d, 1½ hours) depart every 20 minutes from here.

Most buses to northeastern destinations start from Mien Tay bus station before passing through **Hon Gai bus station** (Đ Le Loi). Buses for Mong Cai (42,000d, five hours) and Cai Rong (20,000d, 1½ hours) for Van Don Island (Dao Cai Bau) depart frequently during daylight hours. There is also one bus a day to Lang Son (45,000d, five hours) at 12.30pm, handy for anyone heading to Nanning.

CAR & MOTORBIKE

Halong City is 160km from Hanoi and 55km from Haiphong. The one-way trip from Hanoi to Halong City takes about three hours by private vehicle.

Getting Around

Bai Chay is fairly spread out, so metered taxis are a good option for moving around. **Mai Linh** (☎ 822 226) is a reliable option. Otherwise, there are usually some taxis hanging around near the bus stations or the post office.

CAT BA ISLAND

☎ 031 / pop 7000

Rugged, craggy and jungle-clad Cat Ba, the largest island in Halong Bay, is straight out of

Jurassic Park. **Lan Ha Bay**, off the eastern side of the island, is especially scenic and offers numerous beaches to explore. While the vast majority of Halong Bay's islands are uninhabited vertical rocks, Cat Ba has a few **fishing villages**, as well as a fast-growing town.

Except for a few fertile pockets, the terrain is too rocky for serious agriculture; most residents earn their living from the sea, while others cater to the tourist trade. Life has always been hard here and many Cat Ba residents joined the exodus of Vietnamese boat people in the 1970s and '80s. Although the island lost much of its fishing fleet this way, overseas Vietnamese have sent back large amounts of money to relatives on the island, fuelling the hotel boom of the past decade. Cat Ba is still relatively laid-back, despite about a 20-fold increase in hotel rooms (and karaoke machines!) since 1996.

Almost half of Cat Ba Island (which has a total area of 354 sq km) and 90 sq km of the adjacent waters were declared a national park in 1986 to protect the island's diverse ecosystems. These include subtropical evergreen forests on the hills, freshwater swamp forests at the base of the hills, coastal mangrove forests, small freshwater lakes and coral reefs. Most of the coastline consists of rocky cliffs, but there are a few sandy beaches hidden away in small coves.

There are numerous lakes, waterfalls and grottoes in the spectacular limestone hills, the highest of which rises 331m above sea level. The largest permanent body of water on the island is **Ech Lake**, which covers an area of 3 hectares. Almost all of the surface streams are seasonal; most of the island's rainwater flows into caves and follows underground streams to the sea, which creates a shortage of fresh water during the dry season.

The waters off Cat Ba Island are home to 200 species of fish, 500 species of mollusc and 400 species of arthropod. Larger marine animals in the area include seals and three species of dolphin.

Ho Chi Minh paid a visit to Cat Ba Island on 1 April 1951 and there is a large annual festival on the island to commemorate the event. A **monument** to Uncle Ho stands on Mountain No 1, the hillock opposite the pier in Cat Ba town.

The best weather on Cat Ba Island is from late September to November, particularly the latter, when the air and water temperature is

mild and skies are mostly clear. December to February is cooler, but still pleasant. From February to April rain is common, while the summer months, from June through August, are hot and humid. This is also peak season and the island is overrun with Vietnamese tourists from Hanoi and beyond.

Cat Ba National Park

This accessible **national park** (☎ 216 350; admission 15,000d, guide fee per day US\$5; ☒ dawn-dusk) is home to 32 types of mammals – including langurs, wild boar, deer, squirrels and hedgehogs – and more than 70 species of birds have been sighted, including hawks, hornbills and cuckoos. The golden-headed langur is officially the world's most endangered primate with just 60 left in the park. Cat Ba lies on a major migration route for waterfowl, which feed and roost on the beaches in the mangrove forests. There are 745 species of plants recorded on Cat Ba, including 118 timber species and 160 plants with medicinal value. The park is also home to a species of tree called Cay Kim Gao. In ancient days, kings and nobles would eat only with chopsticks made from this timber, as anything poisonous it touches is reputed to turn the light-coloured wood to black.

A guide is not mandatory, but is definitely recommended if you want to go walking; otherwise, all you are likely to see is a canopy of trees.

Two caves in and around the national park are open to visitors. **Hospital Cave** oozes historical significance, as it served as a secret, bomb-proof hospital during the American War. This cave is actually just outside the park and the entrance is located about 2 kilometres along the road to Cat Ba town. **Hang Trung Trang** (Trung Trang Cave) is easily accessible, but you will need to contact a ranger to make sure it is open. Bring a torch (flashlight) as it is gloomy inside.

There is a challenging 18km hike through the park and up to one of the mountain summits. Arrange a guide for this six-hour hike,

and organise a bus or boat transport to the trailhead and a boat to get back to town. All of this can be easily organised with rangers at the national park headquarters or at the hotels in Cat Ba if you're travelling independently. Many hikes end at Viet Hai, a remote minority village just outside the park boundary, from where boats shuttle back to Cat Ba town (about 250,000d per boat). Don't get stranded or you'll get stiffed. Take proper hiking shoes, a raincoat and a generous supply of water for this hike. Independent hikers can buy basic snacks at the kiosks in Viet Hai, which is where many hiking groups stop for lunch. This is *not* an easy walk, and is much harder and more slippery after rain. There are shorter hiking options that are less hard core. If you're planning to join an organised tour from Hanoi, check the trekking options before you book, as many of the cheaper trips don't actually hike through the park at all.

To reach the national park headquarters at Trung Trang, take a minibus from one of the hotels in Cat Ba town (15,000d, 30 minutes). Another option is to hire a motorbike (one way 30,000d).

Beaches

The white-sand Cat Co beaches (simply called Cat Co 1, Cat Co 2 and Cat Co 3) used to be great places to lounge around for the day. However, 1 and 3 have been taken over by new resorts, leaving Cat Co 2 as the only sane and safe haven. There is also simple accommodation here. It is accessible via a wooden cliffside walkway around the mountain from Cat Co 1.

On weekends the beaches fill up with Vietnamese tourists and litter becomes a real blight, but during the week the crowds diminish.

The beaches are about 1km southeast from Cat Ba town over a steep headland, and can be reached on foot or by motorbike (about 10,000d).

Other beaches include Cai Vieng, Hong Xoai Be and Hong Xoai Lon.

Cat Ba Town

A sleepy fishing village just a decade ago, it is now the Costa del Cat Ba! Since being 'discovered' by Hanoi residents, Cat Ba has turned into a highly popular summer getaway, filling up on weekends and holidays, when the town is jumping. This has been a boon for the range of amenities available, from hotels to restaurants, but the downside is a boom in karaoke joints and the tuneless waiting they often emit. During the summer the town also fills up with cars, as Hanoi residents use the car ferries to come via Cat Hai. Weekdays are saner, as is just before or just after the peak summer season.

INFORMATION

Internet Access

There are now several internet cafés in Cat Ba. Prices tend to be higher than the mainland, at 15,000d an hour or more, and the connections quite slow. There are a couple of places to the southeast of the boat pier, plus one or two on 'hotel alley'.

Money

Remarkably, there are still no banks on Cat Ba Island, but **Vu Binh Jewellers** (☎ 888 641) can change cheques at 3% commission and does credit card cash advances at 5%. The nearest ATMs are in Haiphong or Halong City.

Post

The **main post office** (☎ 1-4) is a one-stop-shop for postal needs and telephone calls.

Tourist Information

There is now an official **Tourism Information & Development Centre** (☎ 688 215; ☎ 1-4), located almost opposite the boat pier in Cat Ba town. The staff here can bring you up to speed on transport options in and around Cat Ba, plus it has *Cat Ba Biosphere Reserve* maps available.

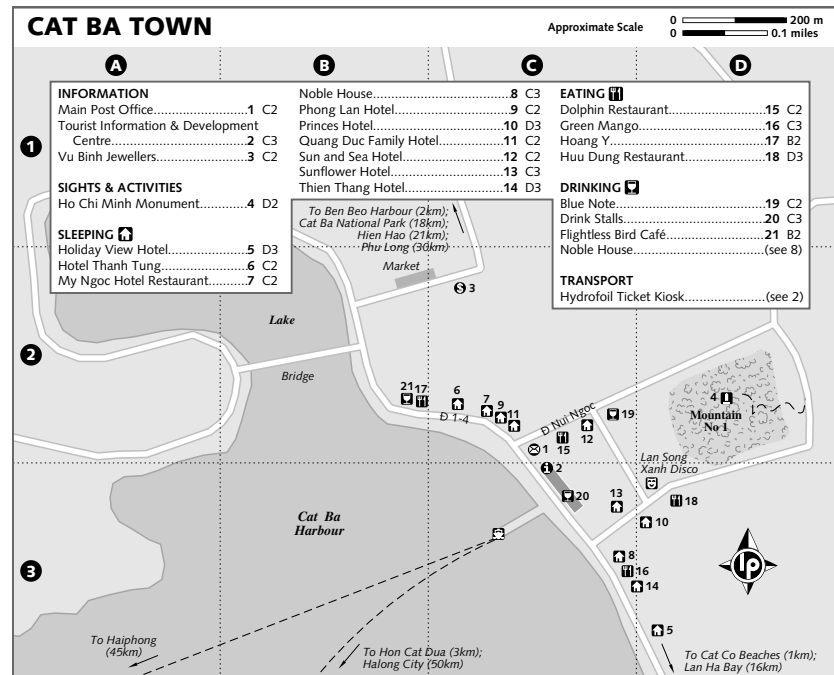
Most guesthouses and hotels can 'help' with tourist information (booking you on their trips, in other words).

SLEEPING

Over the past few years the number of accommodation offerings in Cat Ba has risen

MONKEY BUSINESS

Monkey Island is also part of Cat Ba National Park and many visitors make a boat trip here. However, we do not recommend this trip as the troop of monkeys on this island is pretty aggressive and many travellers have been bitten. The bite itself can be painful and shocking, but worse are the rabies shots that follow. Save the monkey business for somewhere more interesting like Cuc Phuong National Park (p190).



dramatically to keep pace with an ever-expanding tourist market. Look around, as the quality of hotels varies widely. There are now a couple of upmarket resorts in prime beachfront locations for those with the money to spend.

Most hotels are situated on the waterfront in Cat Ba town. The ones to the east, built right up against the hillside, tend to offer better cross-breezes and less of the karaoke call-girl scene. Most hotels have at least one staff member who speaks English.

Room rates fluctuate greatly. In the high-season summer months (May to September) you can expect to pay a minimum of US\$15 per room. During the slower winter months (October to April) you can find decent rooms for US\$10 or under. The rates given here are for low season, when there's usually the opportunity for negotiation. It is impossible to quote high-season rates, as they tend to pick a number out of their head depending on demand.

Budget

My Ngoc Hotel Restaurant (☎ 888 199; fax 888 422; ☎ 1-4; r US\$5-8; 🍷) This old-timer has simple, clean rooms that are very good value. The hotel also has a popular little restaurant spilling out onto the street. Kayaks are available for those that want to explore the rugged coast.

Phong Lan Hotel (☎ 888 605; ☎ 1-4; r US\$5-10; 🍷) Right in the middle of the seafront strip, it is worth requesting a room at the front with a balcony overlooking the harbour. Check out the glam tiles in the bathroom: bizarre.

Hotel Thanh Tung (☎ 888 364; ☎ 1-4; r US\$6-10; 🍷) Another popular spot on the seafront strip, this place has 'bed rooms forward sea', which is sea-view rooms to the uninitiated. Same as the other budget places really, but meticulously clean.

Quang Duc Family Hotel (☎ 888 231; fax 888 423; ☎ 1-4; r US\$10; 🍷) One of the longest-running cheapies in town, this friendly little family hotel has just seven rooms, resisting the expansionist tendencies of the competition. Satellite TV and hot water come as standard.

Tien Thang Hotel (☎ /fax 888 568; tienthanghotel@yahoo.com; ☎ 1-4; r US\$10; 🍷) One of the newer hotels in town, the rooms here deliver mid-range standards at budget prices, making for great value. Satellite TV, big bathrooms and sea-view balconies are all available.

Sun and Sea Hotel (☎ 888 315; sunseahotel@mail.ru; ☎ Nui Ngoc; r US\$12-15; 🍷) This popular little

hotel is a friendly place to rest a weary head. All rooms include satellite TV, fridge and hot water, plus breakfast is thrown in for good measure...not literally thrown in, you eat it at the table just like normal.

To avoid the hoopla in town, try a night in the rustic **guesthouse** (r 120,000d) over on Cat Co 2. The huts are basic bamboo shelters and the price includes a tent to protect you from the elements.

The small village of Hien Hao offers homestays in local houses. This is quite an authentic experience and what's more the villagers are very friendly. For more details contact **Mr Tuan** (☎ 888 737). Hien Hao is about 20km from Cat Ba town or just 12km from the ferry landing at Phu Long.

Midrange & Top End

Noble House (☎ 888 363; thenoblehousevn@yahoo.com; ☎ 1-4; r US\$10-30; 🍷) Small in size, big in character, this place has thoughtful decoration and elegant bathrooms. It's worth booking ahead, but bear in mind that prices leap to US\$30 or more during peak season.

Princes Hotel (☎ 888 899; www.princeshotel-catba.com; ☎ Nui Ngoc; r US\$20-30; 🍷) One of the smarter addresses in town, the Princes (it's plural) has swish rooms that are spanking clean. The hotel is also a bit of an entertainment mecca, with a rooftop bar and basement nightclub.

Sunflower Hotel (☎ 888 215; sunflowerhotel@hn.vn.vn; ☎ Nui Ngoc; r US\$18-25, ste US\$45; 🍷) A well-established Cat Ba landmark, this has a whopping 104 rooms located within its two properties. All rooms feature TV, minibar and full bathroom, plus the bonus of breakfast.

Holiday View Hotel (☎ 887 200; ☎ 1-4; r US\$25-35; 🍷) Looming large over Cat Ba, this major new hotel is serious value for money. The large rooms include all the trimmings and, on the upper floors, panoramic views. Its claim to be 'the only star hotel with international standard' isn't strictly true, however.

Sunrise Resort (☎ 887 366; catba-sunriseresort@vnn.vn; Cat Co 3; s/d from US\$79/89; 🍷 📺 📺) Occupying a private beach on Cat Co 3, this is the most sophisticated place on Cat Ba. Rooms are spacious and smart and facilities include a swimming pool and spa. It's a good option for families, as it has a kiddies playground.

Cat Ba Water Park Resort (☎ 688 686; catbawaterparkresort@fpt.vn; Cat Co 1; s/d US\$90-100; 🍷 📺 📺) Of course it has a swimming pool – after all it's a water park. But unlike most water parks, it

also offers smart rooms for those that want to linger at Cat Co 1. It's a better bet during the week or low season, as the water park draws huge crowds on summer weekends.

Ocean Beach Resort (☎ 210 668; www.oceanbeachresort.com.vn; r per person from US\$35) Going one better than a private beach, this little retreat boasts its own island about 5km offshore. Accommodation is in traditional but comfortable bungalows set on the beach and all rates include boat transfers and breakfast.

EATING

Sumptuous seafood is the smart choice in Cat Ba town and there are plenty of restaurants to choose from along the seafront strip.

Huu Dung Restaurant (☎ Nui Ngoc; dishes 10,000-50,000d) This place has always served up wholesome food, but it's best to eat early, as the Lan Song Xanh Disco is right across the road and cranks up the volume from 8pm or so. The house special is whole steamed fish with lashings of garlic and soy sauce.

Hoang Y (☎ 1-4; dishes 15,000-50,000d) If you are in the market for fresh grilled shrimp or squid with garlic, this little seafront place is a popular option. As well as a solid selection of seafood dishes, there are also good vegetarian dishes on offer.

Dolphin Restaurant (☎ 888 804; ☎ Nui Ngoc; mains 20,000-50,000d) This place is popular with travellers thanks to a selection of Western dishes to complement the reliable Vietnamese fare. Don't worry, definitely no dolphin!

Green Mango (☎ 887 151; ☎ 1-4; mains 50,000-100,000d) The restaurant of choice in Cat Ba, the chef here learnt his tricks at Bobby Chinn's in Hanoi. The alluring menu includes a selection of smaller appetisers if you just can't settle on one thing. The braised duck is superb but save

some space for the delightful desserts. The interior is all drapes and candles, so customers often linger for cocktails.

DRINKING

One of the most enjoyable ways to spend time in the evening is to sit at tables on the waterfront towards the eastern end of the harbour, order a drink from one of the stalls, and watch the world go by.

Noble House (☎ 888 363) As well as a popular restaurant downstairs, this spot has a great 2nd-floor bar. Comfy chairs and inspired décor help people settle in for the evening, plus there's a free pool table, board games and plenty of drinks flowing.

Flightless Bird Café (☎ 888 517; ☎ 1-4; 🍷 from 6.30pm). Little more than a hole in the wall, this small, welcoming place is a good option for those with their drinking boots on and as the night wears on, travellers gravitate. There is a breezy 2nd-floor balcony overlooking the harbour, plus a small book exchange.

Blue Note (☎ Nui Ngoc) The after-hours haunt in town, this is karaoke with kudos. The well-stocked bar stays open until the last person leaves and the song list includes indie anthems from Oasis and Radiohead. Plus there is a stage: perform at your peril.

Getting There & Away

Cat Ba Island is 45km east of Haiphong and 20km south of Halong City. Be aware that there are several piers on Cat Ba Island. Most handy is the jetty directly in front of Cat Ba town from where the hydrofoils to Haiphong depart. A second popular one is at Ben Beo, about 2km from Cat Ba town where most of the tourist boats berth. The other pier is at Phu Long, 30km from Cat Ba, where boats

FLOATING RESTAURANTS

There are numerous 'floating' seafood restaurants just offshore in Cat Ba Harbour. There have been several stories of overcharging, so be sure to work out in advance the price, as well as the cost of a boat to get you out there and back. Locals advise heading around the bay to the couple of floating restaurants in Ben Beo Harbour: the water's cleaner and it's less touristy. A boat ride there and back, including waiting time, should cost around 50,000d. Ask your hotel to recommend a boatman.

One of these restaurants is **Xuan Hong** (☎ 888 485), a fish-farm-cum-restaurant at Ben Beo Pier, just next to the passenger jetty, where you can tread on the edges of the large fish cages and get a close look at the workings of the 'farm'. You will know that the fish is fresh when it is plucked from the cages *after* you've ordered. Prices simply go by weight and type of seafood; you can eat your fill of a selection of fish for around 100,000d.

from Cat Hai arrive. At Phu Long, motorbike drivers wait to whisk passengers from the ferries to town (or the 15km to Cat Ba National Park) for about 50,000d. There is also a public bus that meets the boats, but this takes longer to get across the island.

The best option for independent travellers is the hydrofoils linking Cat Ba directly to Haiphong. These air-con rockets reduce the journey to just 45 minutes. There are several companies running the route, with three departures a day in the high summer season and just once a day the rest of the year. Summer season services depart between 10am and 5pm. **Transtour** (☎ 888 314) runs the *Mekong Express* (100,000d, 2.45pm departure), which is the safest and most comfortable option. **Tahaco** (☎ 031-374 7055) has smaller hydrofoils, which are cheaper at 70,000d and depart at 3.15pm. There are no longer hydrofoils operating to Halong City.

The easiest way to get from Halong City to Cat Ba is to hop on the tourist boats (100,000d, five hours) that leave several times a day. This is less organised going in the other direction to Halong City, but your guesthouse or hotel should be able to hook you up with a boat going that way.

There are also plenty of slow, chartered tourist boats making the run from Halong City to Cat Ba Island; check with the cafés and travel agencies in Hanoi about tour options. Such trips generally include all transport, accommodation, food and a guide, but double check to be sure.

An alternative way to reach Cat Ba town is via the island of Cat Hai, which is closer to Haiphong. A boat departs Haiphong and makes a brief stop in Cat Hai on the way to the port of Phu Long on Cat Ba Island. It is also possible to drive a motorbike or car to Haiphong, from where you can get the ferry to Cat Hai, then drive 15 minutes across the island to a pier from where you take a ferry to Phu Long. This accounts for all those surreal traffic jams during the summer season. A bridge is under construction to Cat Hai which will make Cat Ba even easier to reach by vehicle.

There are also direct buses from Hanoi to Cat Ba town. Hoang Long bus operates four services daily to Cat Ba (120,000d, four hours) from the Luong Yen bus station. However, it is just as easy to use the bus-hydrofoil combination via Haiphong.

Getting Around

Rented bicycles are a great way to explore the island and many of the hotels can arrange Chinese mountain bikes (70,000d per day). There are also some tandems available for double the pedal power.

Minibuses with driver are easily arranged. Motorbike rentals (with or without a driver) are available from most of the hotels (from US\$5 without a driver). If you are heading out to the beaches or national park, pay the parking fee to ensure that the bike is still there when you return: there have been reports of theft and vandalism.

You'll get plenty of offers to tour Cat Ba Harbour in a rowboat (around 30,000d), or you can hire a kayak from one of the hotels.

Tours of the island and national park, boat trips around Halong Bay and fishing trips are peddled by nearly every hotel and restaurant in Cat Ba. Cost depends on the number of people, but typical prices are US\$8 for day trips and US\$20 for two-day, one-night trips.

Among the consistently reputable tour operators, take a look at the **My Ngoc Hotel** (☎ 888 199) and **Quang Duc Family Hotel** (☎ 888 231).

BAI TU LONG BAY

☎ 033

There's more to northeastern Vietnam than Halong Bay. The sinking limestone plateau, which gave birth to the bay's spectacular islands, continues for some 100km to the Chinese border. The area immediately northeast of Halong Bay is part of **Bai Tu Long National Park** (☎ 793 365).

Bai Tu Long Bay is every bit as beautiful as its famous neighbour. Indeed, in some ways it's more beautiful, since it has scarcely seen any tourist development. This is good news and bad news. The bay is unpolluted and undeveloped, but there's little tourism infrastructure. It's pretty hard travelling around and staying here, and unless you speak Vietnamese, it's difficult to get information.

Charter boats can be arranged to Bai Tu Long Bay from Halong Bay; boats range from 100,000d to 250,000d per hour depending on size and amenities. See the Halong Bay entry (p141) for more details; the one-way trip takes about five hours. A cheaper alternative is to travel overland to Cai Rong and visit the outlying islands by boat from here. Foreigners are almost always charged double the going rate on the ferries around Bai Tu Long Bay.

Van Don Island (Dao Cai Bau)

Van Don is the largest, most populated and most developed island in the archipelago. However, there remains only very limited tourism development here to date.

Cai Rong (pronounced Cai Zong) is the main town on the island, which is about 30km in length and 15km across at the widest point. **Bai Dai** (Long Beach) runs along much of the southern side of the island and is hard-packed sand with some mangroves. Just offshore, almost touching distance away, there are stunning **rock formations** similar to those in Halong Bay.

SLEEPING & EATING

The only hotels are at Cai Rong pier, about 8km north of the new bridge to the mainland. Cai Rong is a colourful, busy area, with lots of fishing boats and passenger vessels, and a backdrop of limestone mountains in the bay. It's also full of karaoke bars and motorbikes. You might want to get a room with air-con to block out some of the noise. There's no beach.

Hung Toan Hotel (☎ 874 220; r120,000d; ☺) Head to the top floor for the best rooms, which share a huge balcony. This value-for-money spot is about 100m before the pier.

Viet Linh Hotel (☎ 793 898; r180,000; ☺) One of the newer hotels in Cai Rong, this is very clean and rooms include satellite TV, fridge and hot-water bathtubs.

Bai Tu Long Ecotourism Resort (☎ 793 156; www.atiresorts.com; bungalows 250,000-450,000d; ☺) This resort is up on Long Beach and is a much nicer alternative to the places in Cai Rong. There are attractive beachside bungalows or more traditional rooms in stilt houses, and the beach has a beautiful backdrop.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There is a new bridge linking Van Don to the mainland, making it much more accessible from Halong City. Frequent buses run between Hon Gai (Halong City) and Cai Rong bus station (20,000d, 1½ hours). You'll pass plenty of coal mines en route – your face (and lungs) will receive a fine coating of black coal dust before the journey is completed. Just pity the people who live here and have to breathe this in every day.

A good way to get to Van Don is with the **Mui Ngoc hydrofoil** (☎ 793 335) from Halong City (US\$8, one hour) departing at 8am. In the other direction, it leaves for Halong City at

4pm. There is also an irregular service to Mong Cai (US\$10, two hours), departing Van Don at 8.30am and returning at 2pm.

Note that these boat schedules may change and are dependent on the weather. Be prepared to hang around here a day or so.

Several of the companies offering tours of Halong Bay also offer tours of Bai Tu Long Bay; see p91 for more details. **ATI** (www.atiresorts.com) operates ecolodges on Van Don and Quan Lan Islands and offers a combination of tours to the bay.

Other Islands

Cai Rong Pier (Cai Rong Pha) is just on the edge of Cai Rong town. This is the place for boats to the outlying islands. Chartering a boat from here to Halong City costs around US\$10 per hour (the one-way journey takes five hours).

Tourist boats can be chartered at Cai Rong to cruise the nearby islands for a few hours. Ask at the pier. The hourly rate is between 120,000d and 150,000d, but the boats are basic compared with what's on offer at Halong.

QUAN LAN ISLAND (DAO CANH CUOC)

The main attraction here is a beautiful, 1km-long **white-sand beach** shaped like a crescent moon. The water is clear blue and the waves are suitable for surfing. However, there is no shortage of blissful beaches on the eastern seaboard, so take a hike. The best time to play in the water is from about May to October – winter is a bit chilly.

The northeastern part of the island has some battered **ruins** of the old Van Don Trading Port. There is little to show that this was once part of a major trading route between Vietnam and China. Deep-water ports, such as Haiphong and Hon Gai, long ago superseded these islands in importance.

The rowing-boat festival **Hoi Cheo Boi** is held here from the 16th to the 18th day of the sixth lunar month. It's the biggest festival in the bay area, and thousands of people turn out to see it.

There are several cheapies on the island: **Minh Vu Guesthouse** (☎ 877 479) and **Vinh Ly Guesthouse** (☎ 877 354) both have solar-powered hot water and rooms around the 120,000d mark.

Quan Lan Ecotourism Resort (☎ 033-877 417; www.atiresorts.com; bungalows from 150,000-350,000d) has a fine location on the beach, with a choice of

comfortable bungalows or a large stilt house for larger groups.

A ferry service between Quan Lan and Van Don runs daily (25,000d, two hours), departing Van Don at 2pm and Quan Lan at 7am; in other words, a trip to the island requires an overnight stay. Foreigners usually get charged 50,000d.

TRA BAN ISLAND (DAO TRA BAN)

One of the largest islands in Bai Tu Long Bay, Tra Ban borders Bai Tu Long National Park and offers some of the most dramatic karst scenery in the bay. The southern part of the island is blanketed in thick jungle like Cat Ba and provides a habitat for many colourful butterflies. There are boats to and from Van Don Island at 7am and 2pm (20,000d, 90 minutes).

NGOC VUNG ISLAND (DAO NGOC VUNG)

This island is one of the most southerly in Bai Tu Long Bay, bordering on Halong Bay, and offers scenery every bit as good as the more famous World Heritage site. There is some accommodation available here in some basic **beach houses** (150,000d). There are daily boats between Cai Rong (1pm) and Ngoc Vung (6am), costing 50,000d for foreigners and taking three hours.

CO TO ISLAND (DAO CO TO)

In the northeast, Co To Island is the furthest inhabited island from the mainland. Its highest peak reaches a respectable 170m. There are numerous other hills, and a large lighthouse atop one of them. The coastline is mostly cliffs and large rocks, but there's at least one fine sandy **beach**. Fishing boats usually anchor just off here, and you can walk to some of the boats during low tide. There is a small and very basic guesthouse on the island.

Ferries bound for Co To Island depart Van Don Island on Monday, Wednesday and Friday at unspecified times – check the schedule in Cai Rong. They return from Co To Island on Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. The one-way fare is 50,000d and the journey takes about five hours, depending on the winds.

MONG CAI & CHINESE BORDER

☎ 033 / pop 48,100

Mong Cai is a revealing place. The Vietnamese are fast developing their side of the bor-

der while the Chinese side remains a bit of a backwater. The Vietnamese are making a statement of intent, a show of face that their economy is keeping pace with China. China is making its own statement: 'We don't care, we have bigger fish to fry', sharing as they do borders with India, Russia and several other economic giants.

It would take a real optimist to think Mong Cai is an attractive place. For the Vietnamese, the big draw here is the chance to purchase low-priced (and low-quality) Chinese-made consumer goods. For the Chinese, the attraction is mostly gambling and girls.

Chinese speakers will find plenty of opportunity to practice in Mong Cai. Most of the market stalls are run by Chinese. This explains why the market shuts so early: the Chinese have to head back across the border before it closes at 4.30pm. It also means it's easy to offload any leftover Chinese yuan.

Other than the prospect of crossing the border, Mong Cai is of no interest to tourists. The town is dusty, the buildings are ramshackle, and there's construction-site chaos everywhere. Dongxing (on the Chinese side) is even less appealing.

Information

Vietcombank, in the centre of town, can change travellers cheques and also has a handy ATM. **Internet access** (per hr 3000d) is available in a cluster of places on Pho Hung Vuong near the post office.

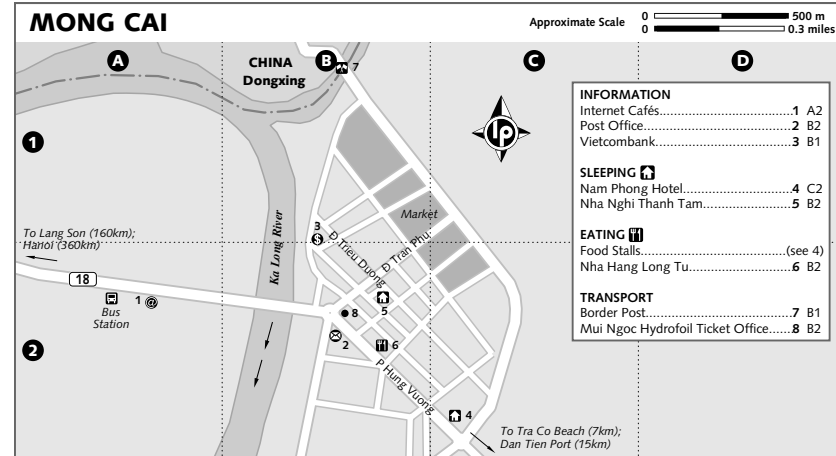
Sleeping & Eating

It is possible to spend the night in the nearby beach retreat of Tra Co (opposite). There are masses of hotels in Mong Cai catering to cross-border traders.

There are currently two huge casino resorts under construction to cater to Chinese high rollers. They should be open by the time you read this if you need to flutter away some dong before crossing into China.

BORDER CROSSING: MONG CAI/ DONGXING

Mong Cai is located on the Chinese border in the extreme northeastern corner of Vietnam. One of three official international overland border crossings with China, it's open from 7.30am to 4.30pm daily.



Nha Nghi Thanh Tam (☎ 881 373; Đ Trieu Duong; r 120,000d; 🏠) Rooms here are just US\$8 for those who have just arrived and can't sort their dongs from their yuan. Clean and comfortable, this is good value and the family are warm and welcoming.

Nam Phong Hotel (☎ 887 775; fax 887 779; Pho Hung Vuong; s/d 220,000/250,000d; 🏠) A smart business hotel, this is one of the only places in town where staff speak English. The rooms are well kitted out with satellite TV and water and there is a good Vietnamese restaurant at the rear.

Nha Hang Long Tu (☎ 770 489; Pho Hung Vuong; mains 20,000-50,000d) A long-running restaurant, this eatery offers a plastic-fantastic set-up downstairs and a more refined dining room upstairs. Try a table-top barbecue or steamboat, or indulge in the seafood.

There are plenty of food stalls on Pho Hung Vuong, including several good spots near the Nam Phong Hotel.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Mui Ngoc (☎ 883 988; Pho Hung Vuong) runs high-speed hydrofoils daily from Mong Cai to Bai Chay (US\$15, three hours) in Halong City at 9am and 2pm (8am and 1pm from Halong City). From Mong Cai, shuttle vans leave the hydrofoil ticket offices for the pier at Dan Tien Port, about 15km away. Arriving in Mong Cai, the hydrofoils often berth in the middle of the open sea; don't worry, you haven't broken down! Low tides require a transfer by small boat.

Mui Ngoc has hydrofoils to Cai Rong on Van Don Island. The boat heads south to Van Don (US\$10, two hours) at 2pm. In the other direction, it departs Van Don at 8.30am.

Finally, there is also a slow ferry to Haiphong (70,000d, eight hours), departing daily at 6pm. Do the maths, it arrives at an ungodly hour.

BUS

Mong Cai is located 360km from Hanoi. Buses to/from Hanoi (75,000d, nine hours) depart regularly in the morning. Many buses and minibuses connect Mong Cai and Hon Gai (42,000d, five hours) between 5.30am and 4.30pm. Smart folk take the hydrofoil.

For Mong Cai to Lang Son (50,000d, five hours) there is just one bus a day at 12.30pm. Don't miss it, as going your own way involves two changes. Much of the road is unpaved – expect plenty of dust or mud.

AROUND MONG CAI

Tra Co Beach

☎ 033

Tra Co's claim to fame is that it is the northernmost beach resort in Vietnam. The downside is that it's also the closest to China. A fine beach of hard-packed sand with shallow water at 17km in length it's one of the longest stretches of sandy beachfront real estate in Vietnam. Sadly it's succumbing to dodgy developments.

It's still a small-scale resort, but there's a high season between May and August, with many Vietnamese and Chinese tourists and the usual swathe of karaoke bars and massage

parlours. Out of season it's worth the detour (from Mong Cai, not Hanoi). It's peaceful, clean and beautiful. It's a more tranquil option for an overnight stay than Mong Cai.

There are plenty of hotels and guesthouses; those described here have direct beach frontage. Low-season rates are given; expect inflation in high season.

Tra Co Beach Hotel (☎ 881 264; r 100,000-150,000d; 🏠) A rambling old government hotel, it has a prime location on the beach. Rooms are pretty run down, but there is a certain raffish charm about the place.

Hotel Gio Bien (☎ 881 635; r 120,000-150,000d; 🏠) This is a family-run minihotel, located just off the main road as you enter town from

NEIGHBOURING TENSIONS

Mong Cai is a free-trade zone with plenty of frenetic activity in the city's booming markets. It wasn't always so. From 1978 to 1990 the border was virtually sealed. How two former friends became such bitter enemies and then 'friends' again is a spicy story.

China was on good terms with North Vietnam from 1954 (when the French left) until the late 1970s. But relations began to sour shortly after reunification, as the Vietnamese government became more and more friendly with China's rival, the USSR. There's good reason to believe that Vietnam was simply playing them off against each other, while receiving aid from both.

In March 1978 the Vietnamese government launched a campaign in the south against 'commercial opportunists', seizing private property to complete the country's 'socialist transformation'.

The campaign hit the ethnic Chinese particularly hard. It was widely assumed that the Marxist-Leninist rhetoric was a smokescreen for ancient Vietnamese antipathy towards the Chinese.

The anti-capitalist and anti-Chinese campaign caused up to 500,000 of Vietnam's 1.8 million ethnic Chinese citizens to flee the country. Those in the north fled overland to China, while those in the south left by sea. The creation of Chinese refugees in the south proved to be lucrative for the government – to leave, refugees typically had to pay up to US\$5000 each in 'exit fees'. Chinese entrepreneurs in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) had that kind of money, but refugees in the north were mostly dirt poor.

In response, China cut all aid to Vietnam, cancelled dozens of development projects and withdrew 800 technicians. Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in late 1978 was the final straw: Beijing – alarmed because the Khmer Rouge was its close ally, and worried by the huge build-up of Soviet military forces on the Chinese–Soviet border – became convinced that Vietnam had fallen into the Russian camp, which was trying to encircle China with hostile forces. Which, ironically enough, was exactly what Vietnam suspected about the Chinese–Khmer Rouge alliance.

In February 1979 China invaded northern Vietnam at Lang Son 'to teach the Vietnamese a lesson'. Just what lesson the Vietnamese learned is not clear, but the Chinese learned that Vietnam's troops, battle-hardened by many years of fighting the USA, were no pushovers. Although China's forces were withdrawn after 17 days, and the operation was officially declared a 'great success', most observers soon realised that China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) had been badly mauled by the Vietnamese. It is believed to have suffered 20,000 casualties in 2½ weeks of fighting. Ironically, China's aid to Vietnam was partially responsible for China's humiliation.

Officially, these 'misunderstandings' are considered ancient history. Trade across the Chinese–Vietnamese border is booming and both countries profess to be 'good neighbours'. In practice, China and Vietnam remain highly suspicious of each other's intentions. Continued conflicts over who owns oil-drilling rights in the South China Sea are exacerbating tensions. The border area remains militarily sensitive, though the most likely future battleground is at sea.

If you visit China and discuss this border war, you will almost certainly be told that China acted in self-defence because the Vietnamese were launching raids across the border and murdering innocent Chinese villagers. Virtually all Western observers, from the US government's Central Intelligence Agency to historians, consider China's version of events to be nonsense. The Chinese also claim they won this war. Nobody outside of China believes that, either.

For the inside story on how the communist comrades fell out, read *Brother Enemy* (1988) by Nayan Chanda, an excellent account of Cold War power plays and the making and breaking of alliances.

Mong Cai. Rooms on the upper floors have shared balconies and a bird's-eye panorama over the beach.

Opposite the Tra Co Beach Hotel, on the edge of the beach, are some great little **restaurants** (dishes 15,000-50,000d) knocking out fresh seafood.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

A one-way metered taxi from Mong Cai will be about 75,000d. A motorbike taxi is cheaper at 30,000d. Inexplicably, the road deteriorates into a pot-holed mess on arrival in Tra Co, before turning into a superhighway after a couple of kilometres.

LANG SON

☎ 025 / pop 62,300 / elevation 270m

Nestled amid a nest of karst peaks, Lang Son is the capital of mountainous Lang Son province. The town of Lang Son is in an area populated largely by Tho, Nung, Man and Dzaio Montagnards. You'll see that many of these people continue living their traditional way of life.

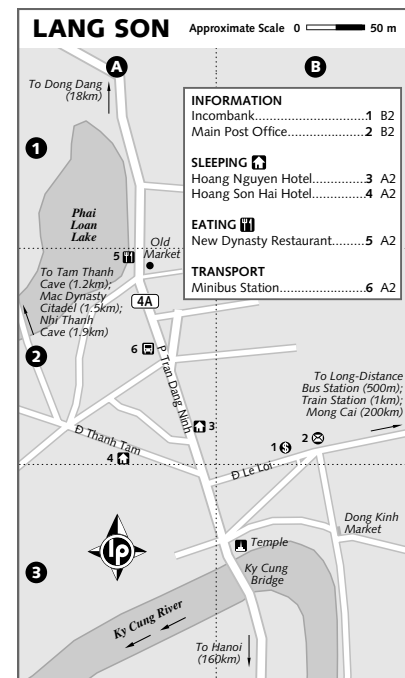
Lang Son was partially destroyed in February 1979 by invading Chinese forces (see the boxed text, opposite); the ruins of the town and the devastated frontier village of Dong Dang were frequently shown to foreign journalists as evidence of Chinese aggression. Although the border is still heavily fortified, both towns have been rebuilt and Sino–Vietnamese trade is in full swing again.

Close to Lang Son, there are a couple of impressive caves in the surrounding limestone hills, and remnants of the ruined 16th-century Mac dynasty Citadel. Most travellers come to Lang Son when crossing between Vietnam and China: the border is actually just outside Dong Dang, a village 18km to the north. It's not a town to linger in, but if you find yourself with a few hours to spare there's enough to explore.

Information

Internet access is pretty straightforward in Lang Son these days and almost every street has a little gaming place, including Đ Thanh Tam. You can expect to pay about 3000d an hour.

Check out **Incombank** (51 Đ Le Loi) for all your currency needs, and you can use up the last of your Vietnamese stamps at the **main post office** (Đ Le Loi).



Sights & Activities

There are two large and beautiful **caves** (admission 5000d; ☎ 6am-6pm) just a few kilometres from the centre of Lang Son. In fact it's fair to say that they are now in the suburbs. Both are illuminated, which makes for easy exploration, and have Buddhist altars inside. **Tam Thanh Cave** is vast and seductive. There's an internal pool and a viewing point or natural 'window' offering a sweeping view of the surrounding rice fields. Just a few hundred metres up a stone staircase are the ruins of the **Mac Dynasty Citadel**. It's a lovely, deserted spot, with stunning views across the countryside.

The Ngoc Tuyen River flows through **Nhi Thanh Cave**, 700m beyond Tam Thanh. The cave entrance has a series of carved poems written by the cave's discoverer, a soldier called Ngo Thi San, in the 18th century. There's also a carved stone plaque commemorating an early French resident of Lang Son, complete with his silhouette in European clothing.

Sleeping & Eating

Hoang Nguyen Hotel (☎ 870 349; 84 Pho Tran Dang Ninh; s/d US\$10/15; 🏠) Ignore the unlikely mobile

top of Ma Phuc Pass. From there carry on for 1km to the fork in the highway – take the left branch and continue another 4km.

Hang Pac Bo (Water-Wheel Cave)

Hang Pac Bo (Water-Wheel Cave) is just 3km from the Chinese border. The cave and the surrounding area is sacred ground for Vietnamese revolutionaries. Here, on 28 January 1941, Ho Chi Minh re-entered Vietnam ready to lead the revolution that he had long been planning during 30 years of exile.

Ho Chi Minh lived in this cave, writing poetry while waiting for WWII to end. He stuck close to China so that he would be able to flee across the border if French soldiers discovered his hiding place. He named the stream in front of his cave Lenin Creek and a nearby mountain Karl Marx Peak.

There's an Uncle Ho **museum** (admission free; ☎ 7.30-11.30am & 1.30-4.30pm) at the entrance to the Pac Bo area. About 2km beyond this is a parking area. The cave is a 10-minute walk away, and a **jungle hut**, which was another of Ho's hideouts, is about 15 minutes' walk in the opposite direction, across a paddy field and in a patch of forest. On the way to the hut is a rock outcrop used as a 'dead-letter box', where he would leave and pick up messages. It's a lovely, quiet spot and has seen very little development compared with other parts of Vietnam.

Hang Pac Bo is about 60km northwest of Cao Bang; allow three hours to make the

return trip by road, plus 1½ hours to poke around. To do this as a return half-day trip by *xe om*, expect to pay around US\$10. No permits are currently needed, despite the proximity to the Chinese border.

Ban Gioc Waterfall

One of Vietnam's best-known waterfalls, its image adorns the lobby of many a cheap guesthouse throughout Vietnam. It's a very scenic spot, marking the border with China, but sees very few visitors. The name Ban Gioc is derived from the Montagnard languages spoken in the area, and is sometimes split Ban Doc.

The waterfall is the largest, although not the highest, in the country. The vertical drop is 53m, but it has an impressive 300m span; one end of the falls is in China, the other is in Vietnam. The water volume varies considerably between the dry and rainy seasons: the falls are most impressive from May to September, but swimming during this period in the waterholes below may be difficult due to turbulence. The falls have three levels, creating a sort of giant staircase, and there's enough water any time, most years, to make the trip worthwhile. Half the pleasure of the visit is walking across paddy fields to reach the base of the falls.

The falls are fed by the Quay Son River. An invisible line halfway across the river marks the border, and **rafts** (per trip 50,000d) pole out the

few metres to exactly the halfway mark – and no further – from each side. There's been some development of tourist facilities on the Chinese side in recent years, including a large resort, but almost nothing except a bamboo footbridge and a couple of bamboo rafts on the Vietnamese side.

There is no official border checkpoint here, but you need a police permit to visit. However, this no longer needs to be arranged in advance and can be picked up at the police office near the falls for just 50,000d.

NGUOM NGAO CAVE

This is one of the most spectacular caves in northeast Vietnam. There are two sections to visit but the main entrance to the **cave** (admission 5000d) is 2km from Ban Gioc Waterfall, just off the road to Cao Bang. Electricity has been installed in the main cave and the lighting is quite beautiful compared with the kitsch colours in most Vietnamese caves. It takes about 45 minutes to explore. Solo travellers will have to pay 30,000d to fire up the lights. There is a second, bigger cave that is simply enormous and one branch reaches almost all the way to the waterfalls, where there is a 'secret' entrance. A full tour takes around two hours and requires the use of a torch (flashlight). Expect to pay about 50,000d for this experience.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are no hotels located on the Vietnamese side of the border. Cao Bang is really the closest option for decent accommodation. There is limited local food available in Ban Gioc. Try the little stall by the car park.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The road between Cao Bang and Ban Gioc via Quang Yen is in pretty good shape, and is presently fine for cars and minibuses. The 87km trip takes about 2½ hours each way; it's mountainous and winding and very beautiful. If you take the loop route to and from the falls, the section between Tra Linh and Trung Khanh is still a bit bumpy, and 4WD is recommended, especially after rain. There is public transport between Cao Bang and Trung Khanh but nothing beyond that; negotiate for a *xe om* in Trung Khanh to take you to the falls. Hotels and guesthouses in Cao Bang can arrange a motorbike (self-drive) or vehicle (with driver).

Montagnard Markets

In the province of Cao Bang, Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) are a distinct minority. The largest ethnic groups are the Tay (46%), Nung (32%), H'mong (8%), Dzao (7%) and Lolo (1%). Inter-marriage, mass education and 'modern' clothing is gradually eroding tribal and cultural distinctions.

Check out Tim Doling's *Mountains and Ethnic Minorities: North East Vietnam* for detailed accounts of tribal people in the region. It's available from the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (p101) and bookshops in Hanoi.

Most of Cao Bang's Montagnards remain blissfully naive about the ways of the outside world. Cheating in the marketplace, for example, is virtually unknown and even tourists are charged the same price as locals without bargaining. Whether or not this innocence can withstand the onslaught of even limited tourism remains to be seen.

The following big Montagnard markets in Cao Bang province are held every five days, according to lunar calendar dates.

Nuoc Hai 1st, 6th, 11th, 16th, 21st and 26th day of each lunar month

Na Giang 1st, 6th, 11th, 16th, 21st and 26th day of each lunar month. Attracting Tay, Nung and H'mong, this is one of the best and busiest markets in the provinces.

Tra Linh 4th, 9th, 14th, 19th, 24th and 29th day of each lunar month

Trung Khanh 5th, 10th, 15th, 20th, 25th and 30th day of each lunar month

BA BE NATIONAL PARK

☎ 0281 / elevation 145m

Often referred to as Ba Be Lakes, **Ba Be National Park** (☎ 894 014; fax 894 026; admission per person /car 10,000/20,000d) is in Bac Kan province and was established in 1992 as Vietnam's eighth national park. It really is a babe: a beautiful region that covers more than 7000 hectares and boasts mountains high, rivers deep, waterfalls, plunging valleys, lakes and caves set amid towering peaks. The surrounding area is home to members of the Tay minority, who live in stilt homes.

The park is a tropical-rainforest area with over 550 named plant species, and the government subsidises the villagers not to cut down the trees. The 300 or so wildlife species in the forest include 65 (mostly rarely seen) mammals, 214 bird species, butterflies and other insects. Hunting is forbidden, but villagers are permitted to fish.

THE LEGEND OF THE LAKES

The charming setting of Thang Hen wouldn't be complete without a depressing legend to go with it. It seems that there was a very handsome and clever young man named Chang Sung. His mother adored him and deemed that he should become a mandarin and then marry a beautiful girl.

Under Confucian tradition, the only way to become a mandarin was to pass a competitive examination. Chang Sung, being a clever boy, sat the exam and passed. He received an official letter bearing the good news and ordering him to report to the royal palace just one week later.

With her son virtually guaranteed admission to mandarinhood, Chang Sung's mother completed her plan. A beautiful girl, Biooc Luong (Yellow Flower), was chosen to marry Chang Sung and a big wedding was hastily arranged.

Chang Sung couldn't have been happier. In fact, he and Biooc were having such a great time on their honeymoon that he forgot all about his crucial appointment at the royal palace until the night before the deadline.

Knowing how disappointed his mother would be if he missed his chance to be a mandarin, Chang Sung summoned magical forces to help him hop in great leaps and bounds to the palace. Unfortunately, he messed up the aerodynamics and leapt 36 times, with no control over his direction or velocity, and wound up creating 36 craters, finally landing at the top of Ma Phuc Pass, where he died of exhaustion and became a rock. The craters filled up with water during the rainy season and became the 36 Lakes of Thang Hen.

THE LEGEND OF WIDOW'S ISLAND

A tiny islet in the middle of Ba Be Lakes is the source of a local legend. The Tay people believe that what is a lake today was once farmland, and in the middle was a village called Nam Mau.

One day, the Nam Mau residents found a buffalo wandering in the nearby forest. They caught it, butchered it and shared the meat. However, they didn't share any with a certain lonely old widow.

Unfortunately for the villagers, this wasn't just any old buffalo. It belonged to the river ghost. When the buffalo failed to return home, the ghost went to the village disguised as a beggar. He asked the villagers for something to eat, but they refused to share their buffalo buffet and ran the poor beggar off. Only the widow was kind to him and gave him some food and a place to stay for the night.

That night the beggar told the widow to take some rice husks and sprinkle them on the ground around her house. Later in the evening, it started to rain, and then a flood came. The villagers all drowned, the flood washed away their homes and farms, thus creating Ba Be Lakes. Only the widow's house remained: it's now Po Gia Mai (Widow's Island).

The park is surrounded by steep mountains, up to 1554m in height. The 1939 *Madrolle Guide to Indochina* suggests travelling around Ba Be Lakes 'in a car, on horseback, or, for ladies, in a chair', meaning, of course, a sedan chair.

Ba Be (Three Bays) is in fact three linked lakes, which have a total length of 8km and a width of about 400m. The deepest point in the lakes is 35m, and there are nearly 50 species of freshwater fish.

Two of the lakes are separated by a 100m-wide strip of water called Be Kam, sandwiched between high walls of chalk rock. The **Thac Dau Dang** (Dau Dang or Ta Ken Waterfall) consists of a series of spectacular cascades between sheer walls of rock, and is accessible by boat and on foot during day trips. Just 200m below the rapids is a small Tay village called Hua Tang. It costs 400,000d for a boat here and takes at least four hours.

Hang Puong (Puong Cave) is visited on day tours. It's about 30m high and 300m long, and completely passes through a mountain. A navigable river flows through the cave, making for an interesting boat trip. It costs 300,000d for a boat and takes three hours.

Renting a boat is *de rigueur*, and costs from 150,000d per hour. The boats can carry about 12 people (but it's the same price if there are just two), and you should allow at least seven hours to take in most sights. Enjoy the ride: it's lovely despite the noisy engines. An optional guide, worth considering, costs US\$10 per day. The boat dock is about 2km from park headquarters.

The park staff can organise several **tours**. Costs depend on the number of people, but

expect to pay at least US\$25 per day if you're travelling alone. There's the option of a one-day tour by boat; a one-day tour combining motorboat, a 3km or 4km walk, and a trip by dugout canoe; and there are also combination cycling, boating and walking possibilities. Homestays can be arranged at several of the villages in the park, and longer treks can also be arranged.

The park entrance fee is payable at a checkpoint on the road into the park, about 15km before the park headquarters, just beyond the town of Cho Ra.

Sleeping & Eating

Not far from the park headquarters are two accommodation options. Rooms in the newer **guesthouse** (r 165,000d) are fine, if a bit pricey. There are also comfortable air-con two-room **cottages** (r 275,000d). There's a reasonable **restaurant** (dishes 10,000-30,000d) – note that you'll need to place your order an hour or so before you want to eat.

It's also possible to stay in **stilt houses** (per person 60,000) at Pac Ngoi village on the lakeshore. The park office can help organise this. Food is available at the homestays, which can include fresh fish from the lake, and prices are reasonable.

Take enough cash for your visit – there are no money-exchange facilities, although there are banks in Bac Kan, the provincial capital en route from Hanoi.

Getting There & Away

Ba Be National Park is in Bac Kan province not far from the borders of Cao Bang province

and Tuyen Quang province. The lakes are 240km from Hanoi, 61km from Bac Kan and 18km from Cho Ra.

Most visitors to the national park get there by chartered vehicle from Hanoi. Since the 2000 opening of a new road into the park, 4WD is no longer necessary. The one-way journey from Hanoi takes about six hours; most travellers allow three days and two nights for the trip.

Reaching the park by public transport is possible, but not easy. Take a bus from Hanoi to Phu Thong (50,000d, five hours) via Thai Nguyen and/or Bac Kan, and from there take another bus to Cho Ra (15,000d, one hour). In Cho Ra arrange a motorbike (about 40,000d) to cover the last 18km.

THAI NGUYEN

☎ 028 / pop 171,400

It's definitely not northeast Vietnam's most interesting city, but Thai Nguyen is home to the **Museum of the Cultures of Vietnam's Ethnic Groups** (Bao Tang Van Hoa Cac Dan Toc; admission 10,000d; ☎ 7-11am & 2-5.30pm Tue-Sun). The largest Montagnard museum in Vietnam, it's worth a stop on the way to or from Ba Be National Park. The giant pastel-pink building houses a wide array of colourful exhibits representing the 50-odd hill tribes residing in Vietnam. There is an interesting English booklet about the displays available for US\$2.

Thai Nguyen is 76km north of Hanoi, and the road here is in good shape. Buses and

minibuses to Thai Nguyen (15,000d, two hours) depart from Hanoi's Gia Lam station regularly between 5am and 5pm.

AROUND THAI NGUYEN Phuong Hoang Cave

Phuong Hoang Cave is one of the largest and most accessible caverns in northeastern Vietnam. There are four main chambers, two of which are illuminated by the sun when the angle is correct. Most of the stalactites and stalagmites are still in place, although quite a few have been broken off by thoughtless souvenir hunters. Like many caves in Vietnam, this one served as a hospital and ammunition depot during the American War. If you want to see anything, bring a good torch.

The cave is a 40km motorbike ride over a bumpy road from Thai Nguyen.

Nui Coc Reservoir

A scenic spot popular with locals, **Nui Coc Reservoir** (admission 10,000d; hotel rooms) is 25km west of Thai Nguyen. It's a pretty stretch of water, and is a major drawcard for Hanoi residents looking to get away from it all (hotel rooms 80,000-250,000d). On summer weekends it can get particularly crowded. A one-hour, circular motorboat tour of the lake is *the thing* to do and costs about 250,000d. You can use the water park's swimming pool for 20,000d, and also rent rowboats. It could be worth a visit if you're travelling to Ba Be National Park, with your own wheels, and fancy a dip.

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