

# Vietnam

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Northern mountains** – hill-tribe women hawking handmade tapestries in Sapa, and a base for visiting tribal villages set in lush terraced valleys as well as Fansipan, Vietnam's highest peak (p849)
- **Hanoi** – frenetic scenes of modern Hanoi play out in a labyrinth of French colonial buildings (p823)
- **Ho Chi Minh City** – visiting remnants of the American War by day and living it up by night in the backpacker area that never sleeps (p881)
- **Hoi An** – roaming Cham ruins at dawn, then sunbathing and sampling local culinary specialities dressed in custom-made clothes (p862)
- **Nha Trang** – beaches, diving and a thriving nightlife lets you choose your own adventure (p867)
- **Off the beaten track** – heading to Phu Quoc Island for the ultimate in chill, with long stretches of untouched nature and pristine coral reefs (p901)

## FAST FACTS

- **Budget** US\$25 a day
- **Capital** Hanoi
- **Costs** guesthouse in Hanoi US\$8 to US\$15, four-hour bus ride US\$4 to US\$6, beer US\$0.65
- **Country code** ☎ 84
- **Languages** Vietnamese, ethnic dialects
- **Money** US\$1 = approx 16,000d (dong)
- **Phrases** *xin chao* (hello), *tam biet* (good-bye), *cam on* (thanks), *xin loi* (sorry), *khong cam on, di bo* (no thanks, I'll walk)
- **Population** 85.2 million
- **Time** GMT + seven hours
- **Visas** arrange in advance, with fixed arrival and departure dates; US\$30-60 for 30 days



## TRAVEL HINT

To avoid unwanted attention from touts, say no politely and keep moving; take breaks from big cities to enjoy the country's natural beauty and warm people.

## OVERLAND ROUTES

Take a boat to Phnom Penh in Cambodia from Chau Do, or a high-speed ferry to the Chinese border from Halong City or Haiphong. Those who prefer terra firma can travel via bus to Cambodia and Laos, or by bus or rail to China.

Vietnam is a country in overdrive that's a wonder to watch and sometimes overwhelming. Nearly mythical in the Western imagination thanks to a slew of American War movies, this is the place everyone will be asking about back home and you'll have more than a few good stories to share.

The big cities feel like Wild West towns where the horses have been replaced by a stampede of motorbikes and everyone's gunning to make a buck. Make no mistake, though, there's plenty of peace and quiet here but unlike other places you have to seek it out.

The national parks are lightly visited, but are often only a few hours off the main tourist trail. Bach Ma National Park is a pristine mountain getaway near Hue, at the midpoint of many a traveller's itinerary – in the words of the old Coca-Cola slogan, it's the pause that refreshes. Think of the calm spots here as the sweetened condensed milk in an ice coffee so strong it would be illegal in other countries. Both are good by themselves, but together they're even better.

## CURRENT EVENTS

The Communist Party is alive, but not well. Only a very small percentage of the population are party members and government officials are struggling to keep their hands on the steering wheel of the zooming economy.

There is only one political party and people who speak out are often jailed for long periods without a trial. In 2004 a protest by hill-tribe people against government restrictions on religious practices and confiscation of ancestral lands saw 10 people dead in clashes with police (the government claims only two people died). Three protestors received long prison sentences.

The country has a nascent prodemocracy movement with the rather stark name of Bloc 8406 (named for 8 April 2006, when it issued a prodemocracy manifesto), but a number of its founding members have been harassed and arrested. The movement's leader, Catholic priest Father Ly, was sentenced to eight years in prison and five years of house arrest in March 2007. If a picture is worth a thousand words there is not much that's good to say about the authorities involved: a televised image from his trial shows a dour prison guard with a hand clamped over the priest's mouth.

Nevertheless, foreign investors are setting up joint ventures with Vietnamese companies, cultural exchange is exerting international influence over fashion, technology and a new generation, and Vietnam is speeding towards the future.

## HISTORY Early Vietnam

The sophisticated Indian-influenced kingdom of Funan flourished from the 1st to the 6th centuries AD in the Mekong Delta area. Archaeological evidence reveals that Funan's

busy trading port of Oc-Eo in the Mekong area had contact with China, India, Persia and even the Mediterranean.

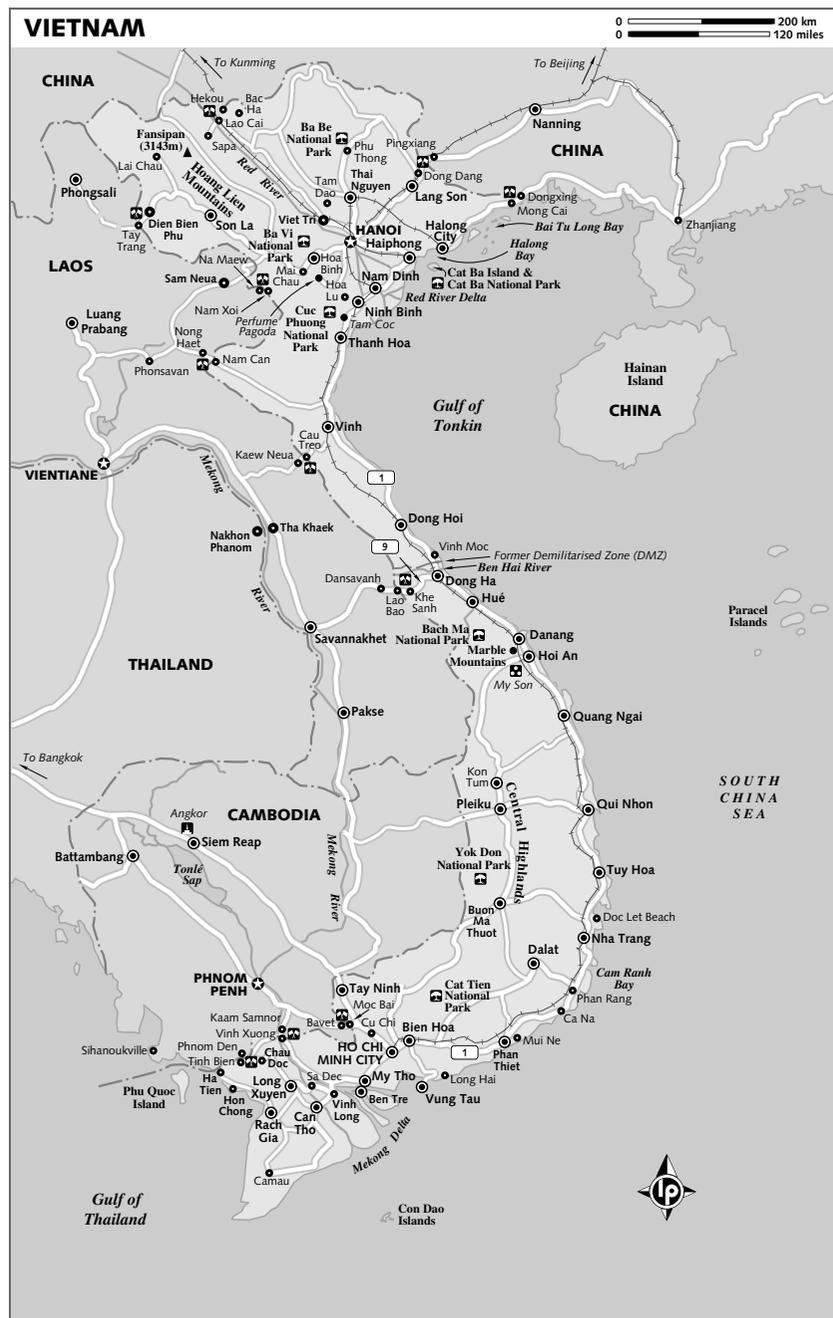
Around the late 2nd century AD when the Cham empire was putting down roots in the Danang area, the Chinese had conquered the Red River Delta near Hanoi. So began a 1000-year pattern of the Vietnamese resisting the yoke of Chinese rule, while at the same time adopting many Chinese innovations. The most famous act of resistance during this period (ending in AD 938) was the rebellion of the two Trung sisters (Hai Ba Trung), who drowned themselves rather than surrender to the Chinese.

By the 10th century, Vietnam had declared independence from China and begun almost 1000 years of a dynastic tradition. During this era, the Vietnamese successfully repulsed attacks by the Khmers, Chams, Mongols and Chinese, eventually assimilating the Cham civilisation into Vietnamese society.

## Vietnam & the West

As far back as AD 166, Vietnam had contact with Europeans from the Rome of Marcus Aurelius. In the early 16th century European merchants and missionaries trickled into the country, among them the brilliant Alexandre de Rhodes who developed the *quoc ngu* script still used for written Vietnamese.

In 1858 a joint military force from France and the Spanish colony of the Philippines stormed Danang after several missionaries were killed. Early the following year, it seized Saigon. By 1883 the French had imposed a Treaty of Protectorate on Vietnam; French colonial rule often proved cruel and arbitrary. Ultimately, the most successful resistance came from the communists. The Vietnam Revolutionary Youth League was founded by Ho Chi Minh in 1925.



During WWII, the only group that significantly resisted the Japanese occupation was the communist-dominated Viet Minh. When WWII ended, Ho Chi Minh – whose Viet Minh forces already controlled large parts of the country – declared Vietnam independent. French efforts to reassert control soon led to violent confrontations and full-scale war. In May 1954, Viet Minh forces overran the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu.

The Geneva Accords of mid-1954 provided for a temporary division of Vietnam at the Ben Hai River. When Ngo Dinh Diem, the anticommunist, Catholic leader of the southern zone, refused to hold the scheduled 1956 elections, the Ben Hai line became the border between North and South Vietnam.

Around 1960 the Hanoi government changed its policy of opposition to the Diem regime from one of ‘political struggle’ to one of ‘armed struggle’. The communist guerrilla group popularly known as the Viet Cong (VC) was founded.

A brutal ruler, Diem was assassinated in 1963 by his own troops. After Hanoi ordered units of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) to infiltrate the South in 1964, the situation for the Saigon regime became desperate. In 1965 the USA committed its first combat troops, soon joined by soldiers from South Korea, Australia, Thailand and New Zealand.

As Vietnam celebrated the Lunar New Year in 1968, the VC launched a deadly surprise attack (the Tet Offensive), marking the beginning of the end of American involvement. The Paris Agreements, signed

in 1973, provided for a cease-fire, the total withdrawal of US combat forces and the release of American prisoners of war.

## Reunification

Saigon surrendered to the NVA on 30 April 1975. Vietnam’s reunification by the communists meant liberation from more than a century of colonial repression, but it was soon followed by large-scale internal repression. Hundreds of thousands of southern Vietnamese fled the country, creating a flood of refugees for the next 15 years.

Vietnam’s campaign of repression against the ethnic-Chinese, plus its invasion of Cambodia at the end of 1978, prompted China to attack Vietnam in 1979. The war lasted only 17 days, but Chinese-Vietnamese mistrust lasted well over a decade.

## Transition & Globalisation

With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Vietnam and Western nations sought *rapprochement*. The 1990s brought foreign investment and Asean (Association of South-East Asian Nations) membership. The USA established diplomatic relations with Vietnam in 1995, and in 2000, Bill Clinton became the first US president to visit northern Vietnam.

Vietnam is a country that’s been dealing with a rapid transition since the mid 1990s, and the pace of social and economic change should quicken now that it has been accepted into the World Trade Organization (WTO).

## COPY CULTURE

Even people who understand that pirating hurts legitimate businesses will have a hard time finding the real thing in Vietnam. A US-based software group estimates that 90% of the software for the Windows operating systems in Vietnam is pirated. The country’s recent admission into the World Trade Organization (WTO), though, means that the pirating party may be coming to an end.

Vietnam has had antipiracy laws on the books for some time, but one of the conditions of WTO membership – and by extension, the international business ties needed to grow the economy – is that officials have to start cracking down on counterfeiting. Local newspapers have been reporting more police visits to the fake DVD shops in Hanoi, and international companies have been hosting seminars galore for customs officials on how to stop counterfeit goods from leaving the country.

The Vietnamese people have said they’re afraid they won’t be able to afford the technological basics, such as computer software, that they need to run a business or go to school. Nevertheless, some business people are accepting of the change, and in a few years there just might be one less hassle for travellers; the heads of reputable tour companies say they’re looking forward to a future where it won’t be so easy for others to steal their good name.

## THE CULTURE

### The National Psyche

It's been a long hard road to become an independent, unified country – and by long we mean thousands of years – and the Vietnamese have the art of getting ahead under the worst of conditions seemingly ingrained in their DNA.

The north-south divide lingers on. Southerners think people in the north are uptight and northerners think southerners aren't serious enough and obsessed with business.

Finally, keep in mind 'face' – or more importantly the art of not making the locals lose face. Face is all in much of Asia, and in Vietnam it is above all. This is why foreigners should never lose their tempers with the Vietnamese; this will bring unacceptable 'loss of face' to the individual involved and end any chance of a sensible solution to the dispute.

### Lifestyle

Family, work, working with family, then more work. It's no surprise that the country has an unemployment rate of only 2% (guys lounging on their motorbike calling out to tourists are considered to be on the job), because people of all ages work from sunrise to late at night seven days per week on a regular basis.

Between working, people socialise over small meals throughout the day with friends and family and then return to back-breaking labour without a moment's hesitation.

### Population

Vietnam's population hovers at around 84 million, making it the 13th most populous country in the world, and with its population growth rate it might soon hit the top 10. Vietnam is a young country, with an incredible 65% of the people under the age of 30. Traditionally a rural agrarian society, the race is on for the move to the cities to be a part of the economic surge.

### RELIGION

Over the centuries, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism have fused with popular Chinese beliefs and ancient Vietnamese animism to form what's collectively known as the Triple Religion (Tam Giao). Most Vietnamese people identify with this belief system, but if asked, they'll usually say they're Buddhist. Vietnam also has a significant percentage of Catholics (7% of the population).

The unique and colourful Vietnamese sect called Cao Daiism was founded in the 1920s. It combines secular and religious philosophies of the East and West, and was based on séance messages revealed to the group's founder.

### ARTS

#### Water Puppetry

Vietnam's ancient art of *roi nuoc* (water puppetry) originated in northern Vietnam at least 1000 years ago. Developed by rice farmers, the wooden puppets were manipulated by puppeteers using water-flooded rice paddies as their stage. Hanoi is the best place to see water-puppetry performances, which are accompanied by music played on traditional instruments.

#### Architecture

Most early Vietnamese buildings were made of wood and other materials that proved temporary in the tropical climate. The grand exception is the stunning towers built by Vietnam's ancient Cham culture. These are most numerous in central Vietnam. The Cham ruins at My Son (p867) are a major tourist draw.

Plenty of pagodas and temples founded hundreds of years ago are still functioning, but they have usually been rebuilt many times with little concern for the original.

#### Sculpture

Vietnamese sculpture has traditionally centred on religious themes and has functioned as an adjunct to architecture, especially that of pagodas, temples and tombs.

The Cham civilisation produced exquisite carved sandstone figures for its Hindu and Buddhist sanctuaries. Cham sculpture was profoundly influenced by Indian art but over the centuries it managed to also incorporate Indonesian and Vietnamese elements. The largest single collection of Cham sculpture is at the Museum of Cham Sculpture (p860) in Danang.

#### MUST READ

*The Girl in the Picture* by Denise Chong (2000), tells the fascinating story of how one picture – of a terrified, naked child running from a bombing attack – changed many lives.

#### MUST SEE

*The Daughter from Danang* (2002) is a gut-wrenching documentary about a woman sent to the US for adoption as a child and her return to Vietnam.

#### Cinema

Vietnamese cinema is the most exported of the contemporary arts. Tran Anh Hung, who fled to France, is the most famous Vietnam-born *auteur*; he wrote and directed *The Scent of Green Papaya*, *Cyclo* and *Vertical Rays of the Sun*. The lyrical, sombre *Buffalo Boy*, by Minh Nguyen-Vo, was Vietnam's submission to the Academy Awards in 2005.

#### Music

Like the rest of Southeast Asia, Vietnam has a thriving domestic pop scene. The most celebrated artist is Khanh Ly, who left Vietnam in 1975 for the USA.

#### Painting & Photography

The work of contemporary painters and photographers covers a wide swathe of styles and gives a glimpse into the modern Vietnamese

psyche. The work of one of the country's most acclaimed photographers, Long Thanh, is on display in Nha Trang (see p869).

#### Theatre & Dance

It's sometimes possible to catch modern dance, classical ballet and stage plays in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC; Saigon). Check the *Guide* or *Time Out* for current theatre or dance listings in Hanoi and HCMC.

### ENVIRONMENT

#### The Land

Vietnam stretches more than 1600km along the eastern coast of the Indochinese peninsula. The country's area is 326,797 sq km, making it a bit bigger than Italy and slightly smaller than Japan. Vietnam has 3451km of mostly gorgeous coastline and 3818km of land borders.

The most striking geological features are the karst formations (limestone regions with caves and underground streams), particularly in the north around Halong Bay and Tam Coc.

#### Wildlife

With a wide range of habitats – from equatorial lowlands to high, temperate plateaus and

#### DOING YOUR BIT

- Vietnam has a low level of environmental awareness and responsibility, and many people remain unaware of the implications of littering. Try and raise awareness of these issues by example, and dispose of litter as responsibly as possible.
- Money talks; spending it at environmentally aware businesses sends a clear message to others. For example, proprietors of some beachfront accommodations make it a point to keep the beach and swimming area litter free.
- Plastic water bottles wreak havoc on the environment; kudos goes to the small but growing number of travellers who have been refilling their bottles from the large jugs at bars and restaurants.
- Vietnam's fauna and flora are under considerable threat from domestic consumption and the illegal international trade in animal and plant products. Though it may be 'exotic' to try wild meat such as muntjac, bats, deer, sea horses, shark fins and so on – or to buy products made from endangered plants and animals – doing so will add to the demand for them.
- When visiting coral reefs and snorkelling or diving, or simply boating, be careful not to touch live coral or anchor boats on it, as this damages the coral. If it's possible to anchor in a sandy area, try to convince the operator to do so and indicate your willingness to swim to the coral. Don't buy coral souvenirs.
- When visiting limestone caves, be aware that touching the formations hinders growth and turns the limestone black. Don't break off the stalactites or stalagmites as they take lifetimes to regrow. Don't carve graffiti onto limestone formations, cave walls or other rock.
- Do not remove or buy 'souvenirs' that have been taken from historical sites and natural areas.

even alpine peaks – the wildlife of Vietnam is enormously diverse. It is home to 275 species of mammal, more than 800 species of bird, 180 species of reptile, 80 species of amphibian, hundreds of species of fish and thousands of species of invertebrates.

Officially, the government has recognised 54 species of mammal and 60 species of bird as endangered. In a positive sign, some wildlife populations are re-establishing themselves in reforested areas. Birds, fish and crustaceans have reappeared in replanted mangrove forests.

### National Parks

There are now almost 30 national parks in Vietnam. The most interesting and accessible national parks are Cat Ba, Ba Be and Cuc Phuong in the north; Bach Ma in the centre; and Cat Tien and Yok Don in the south.

### Environmental Issues

The country is facing a slew of environmental problems. Logging and slash-and-burn agricultural practices contribute to deforestation and soil degradation, pollution and overfishing threaten marine life, groundwater contamination limits potable water supply, growing urban industrialisation and population migration are rapidly degrading the environment.

The government passed environmental protection laws in 1993 but changing the decades-long habits of farmers and loggers is easier said than done and even industrial-waste enforcement has been patchy. The exhaust fumes from motorbikes are so bad in the cities that a face mask to breathe easier is standard motorbike gear.

To its credit, the government has been proactive about expanding the boundaries of national parks and adding new protected areas, and has made the planting and taking care of trees part of the school curriculum.

## TRANSPORT

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

#### Air

Hanoi has fewer international flights than HCMC, but with a change of aircraft in Hong Kong or Bangkok you can get to either city. Danang international airport offers connections to Bangkok, Hong Kong and Singapore.

Maximise your time and minimise cost and hassle by booking an open-jaw ticket – then you can fly into HCMC and out of Hanoi (or vice versa). These tickets save you from backtracking and are easily arranged in hubs such as Bangkok and Hong Kong.

Keep in mind that international flights purchased in Vietnam are always more expensive than the same tickets purchased outside. For more information about flights from outside Southeast Asia, see p925; from within the region, see p927.

Airlines flying to and from Vietnam within the region often operate code-share flights with Vietnam Airlines. The following phone numbers are for Hanoi; when ringing from outside the city, add ☎ 04 as the area code.

**Air Asia** (code AK; www.airasia.com) Flights between Kuala Lumpur and Hanoi.

**Air France** (code AF; www.airfrance.com) Flights between Bangkok and HCMC, Hanoi.

**Bangkok Airways** (code PG; www.bangkokair.com) Flights between HCMC, Siem Reap and Hong Kong.

**Cathay Pacific** (code CX; ☎ 826 7298; www.cathay.com) Flights between Hong Kong and HCMC, Hanoi. It occasionally has All Asia Pass specials.

**Lao Airlines** (code QV; www.laoairlines.com) Flights between Vientiane and Hanoi.

**Malaysia Airlines** (code MH; ☎ 826 8819; www.malaysiaairlines.com) Flies from Kuala Lumpur to HCMC, Hanoi.

**Singapore Airlines** (code SQ; ☎ 826 8888; www.singaporeair.com) Flights between Singapore and HCMC, Hanoi.

**Thai Airways International** (THAI, code TG; ☎ 826 7921; www.thai.com) Flights between Bangkok and HCMC, Hanoi.

**Tiger Airways** (code TR; www.tigerairways.com) Flights between Singapore and Hanoi.

**Vietnam Airlines** (code VN; ☎ 943 9660; www.vietnamairlines.com) Operates daily flights throughout the region.

### Land

There are land-border crossing points from Vietnam into China (p837, p843 and p848), Laos and Cambodia; see p932 for a full list of border crossings for Laos and Cambodia. At the time of writing there was also word that a new border crossing between Vietnam and

Cambodia had opened up at Xa Xia (Vietnam) and Prek Chek (Cambodia).

### GETTING AROUND

#### Air

Air travel within Vietnam is dominated by **Vietnam Airlines** (code VN; ☎ in Hanoi 04-943 9660, in Ho Chi Minh City 08-832 0320; www.vietnamairlines.com). Its competitor **Pacific Airlines** (code BL; ☎ in Hanoi 04-851 5350, in Ho Chi Minh City 08-823 1285; www.pacificairlines.com.vn) offers limited routes between Ho Chi Minh City, Danang and Hanoi. The reasonably priced domestic flights can trim precious travel time off a busy itinerary.

A domestic departure tax of 25,000d is included in the ticket price.

#### Bicycle

Long-distance cycling is becoming a popular way to tour Vietnam, most of which is flat or moderately hilly. With the loosening of borders in Southeast Asia, more and more people are planning overland trips by bicycle. All you need to know about bicycle travel in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia is contained in Lonely planet's *Cycling Vietnam, Laos & Cambodia*.

The main hazard for bicycle riders is the traffic, and it's wise to avoid certain areas (notably National Hwy 1). The best cycling is in the northern mountains and the Central Highlands, though you'll have to cope with some big hills.

Purchasing a good bicycle in Vietnam is hit or miss. It's recommended that you bring one from abroad, along with a good helmet and spare parts.

Hotels and some travel agencies rent bicycles for about US\$1 to US\$3 per day and it is a great way to explore some of the smaller cities. Be sure to check the condition of the bicycle before pedalling into the sunset.

#### Boat

Commercial hydrofoils connect HCMC with the beach resort of Vung Tau, as well as points in the Mekong Delta. The extensive network of canals in the Mekong Delta makes getting around by boat feasible in the far south. Travellers to Phu Quoc Island can catch ferries from Rach Gia.

In the northeast, fast and slow boats connect Haiphong with Cat Ba Island in Halong Bay. Day cruises on Halong Bay are extremely popular.

### Bus

Bus drivers rely on the horn as a defensive driving technique. Motorists use the highway like a speedway; accidents, unsurprisingly, are common. On bus journeys, keep a close eye on your bags, never accept drinks from strangers, and consider bringing earplugs. Try to sit away from little kids; they have the bad habit of getting sick.

### LOCAL BUS & MINIBUS

On the highways you'll often see big public buses packed to the gills. It's the cheapest means of getting around and these buses cover the entire country. They can sometimes be crowded and experience breakdowns, but overall they're not a bad way to go for shorter trips.

A step up – in speed at least – are the express minibuses that go everywhere the public buses go. Run by private companies, they're a bit more expensive. They'll pick up passengers along the way until full – minibuses can sometimes get overcrowded as well and unfortunately often have video screens that play Vietnamese music videos on the loud side. Private minibuses almost always have a stop in the middle of nowhere for food – open-tour bus travellers (see p822) can rest easy knowing that the Vietnamese get the same abuse.

It's a good idea to try to buy tickets at the station the day before; while not always possible, this reduces your chances of having to bargain with the driver immediately before departure.

The only time we recommend avoiding these private minibuses (and the public ones) is around Tet when drivers are working overtime and routes are dangerously overcrowded.

Generally, buses of all types leave very early in the morning, but shorter, more

### THINGS CHANGE...

The information in this section is particularly vulnerable to change. Check directly with the airline or a travel agent to make sure you understand how a fare (and ticket you may buy) works and be aware of the security requirements for international travel. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

#### DEPARTURE TAX

There is an international departure tax of US\$14 from the main airports at Hanoi, HCMC and Danang. Dollars or dong will do, but take small change if paying in dollars.

popular routes will often leave at intervals throughout the day, and usually until about mid-afternoon.

### OPEN-TOUR BUS

For the cost of around US\$23, the sold-everywhere open ticket can get you from HCMC to Hanoi at your own pace, sometimes even in air-conditioned comfort. Open-tour tickets entitle you to exit or board the bus at any city along its route without holding you to a fixed schedule. Confirm your seat the day before departure.

These tickets are inexpensive because they're subsidised by an extensive commission culture. You're never obligated to stay at the hotel you've been dropped at; if you don't like it, find another.

Once you buy the ticket, you're stuck with it and the company you've bought it from ('guaranteed' refunds are not always honoured).

An alternative to the open-tour ticket is to buy individual, point-to-point tickets along the way. This will give you more flexibility to try different companies or modes of travel.

All companies offering open-tour tickets have received both glowing commendations and bitter complaints from travellers. Your best bet is to ask your fellow travellers about specific routes. Look for open tickets at traveller cafés throughout Vietnam.

### Car & Motorcycle

Except for legal foreign residents, buying a motorbike for touring Vietnam is technically illegal. However, so far the authorities seem to be turning a blind eye to the practice. The big issue is what to do with the motorbike at trip's end. Some sell it back to the shop they bought it from (for less than they paid, of course). Others sell it to another shop or to

a foreigner travelling in the opposite direction. But, since buying a motorbike is illegal a crackdown could come at any time.

Motorbikes can be hired from US\$5 per day, depending on the make of the cycle and what region you're in; with someone driving for you, the cost can go up to US\$12 per day. Hiring a car with a driver costs around US\$40 per day. In smaller towns and cities, you should be fine on your own if you first watch how people ride and go with the flow. In HCMC or Hanoi, consider hiring a driver unless you're used to driving in Southeast Asia. Fifteen minutes on a bus travelling National Hwy 1 should convince you to leave the long-distance driving to a local.

Some of the most memorable experiences come from hiring a motorbike guide. If guides don't come to you, traveller cafés can often recommend one. Hiring a motorbike guide leaves you free to gawk at daily life and scenery, and guides are experts on their own turf.

For the long haul, drivers usually charge around US\$45 per day. You should also expect to pay for their meals.

The road rule to remember: small yields to big (always). Traffic cops may (or may not) be looking to be paid off. Vehicles drive on the right-hand side of the road (usually). Spectacular accidents are frequent. There were almost 13,000 traffic fatalities in 2006, a 10% increase from the year before.

When driving on Vietnam's highways, helmets are required by law only for motorbikes (and a necessary accessory if you're fond of your skull).

Never leave a motorbike unattended – if you can't park it where you can keep it in constant view, park it with a motorbike valet (2000d) and don't lose your claim ticket.

### MOTORCYCLING VIETNAM

David and Sarah Zimmerman motorcycled through Vietnam and have some tips for would-be two-wheeled adventurers. Read more about their 14-country odyssey at sarahetdavid.top-depart.com (in French, but with more than 1000 photos).

According to the pair: 'Have some motorcycling experience and wear motorcycle clothes and a helmet. Be careful. Have enough time – don't expect to have a higher average speed than 30-40km/h. If you have to choose one region, do only the north by motorbike, as Hwy 1 is not very fun to drive. If you do only the north consider renting a bike in Hanoi. Minks are not easy to sell in Ho Chi Minh City. Nobody wants them there, so be prepared to sell it for very cheap unless you're lucky enough to find a foreigner that wants to do the same trip. Vietnamese people won't pay more than US\$100.'

### Hitching

As in any country, hitching is never entirely safe in Vietnam, and it is not recommended. If you do decide to hitch, keep in mind that drivers will usually expect to be paid for picking you up, so negotiate the fare before getting in. Never hitch alone, especially if you're female.

### Local Transport

You'll never have to walk in Vietnam if you don't want to; drivers will practically chase you down the street.

At least once during your visit, take a whirl on a *xich lo* (*cyclo*), a bicycle rickshaw with the chair at the front, the bicycle at the back. They're a pleasant, nonpolluting way to see a city but are being phased out by authorities. Generally, short *cyclo* rides should cost 10,000d, and an hourly rate equivalent to US\$1 to US\$2 is the norm. Be sure to negotiate up front and make sure the final price is crystal clear; bring a map if possible and stick to bargaining in dong. Don't take *cyclos* at night; travellers have been mugged by their drivers.

*Xe om* or *Honda om* (literally, 'Honda hug'; motorcycle taxi) are faster – made up of a motorbike, a driver and you. Prices are roughly the same as with *cyclos*.

Metered taxis are abundant, but check the meter before you get in and make sure the driver uses it. Better yet, negotiate a fixed price.

Hiring a bicycle is arguably the most fun way to see any city, and an adventure in itself. Hotels and traveller cafés usually hire them out for about US\$1 to US\$3 per day.

### Train

**Vietnam Railways** (Duong Sat Viet Nam; ☎ 04-747 0308; www.vr.com.vn) operates the 2600km-long Vietnamese train system that runs along the coast between HCMC and Hanoi, and links the capital with Haiphong and northerly points all the way into China. Odd-numbered trains travel south; even-numbered trains go north.

There are five classes of train travel in Vietnam: hard seat, soft seat, hard sleeper, soft sleeper (normal) and soft sleeper (air-con). Conditions in hard seat and soft seat can be rough – it can be even less comfortable than the bus.

A relatively new upscale train service called **5-Star Express** (☎ 08-920 6868 HCMC main office; www.5starexpress.com.vn; one-way 220,000d-450,000d)

runs a private, comfy train that goes between Nha Trang and HCMC.

Theft can be a problem. In sleeper cars, the bottom bunk is best because you can stow your pack underneath the berth; otherwise, secure it to something for the duration of the trip. Though trains are sometimes slower than the bus they are more comfortable and a terrific way to meet local people.

## HANOI

☎ 04 / pop 3.5 million

The capital of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV), Hanoi is the place for the country's best sights, cheap *bia hoi* (draught beer), and shopping on its speciality streets for everything from shoes to traditional lanterns. The trappings of a country on the rise punctuate scenes of traditional beauty – there's an ATM in the Temple of Literature and pavements on the oldest streets are filled with motorbikes. These odd juxtapositions are everywhere, but instead of ruining the city, add to its charm.

Stroll around Hoan Kiem Lake, take in a museum or two and end the day by diving into the flourishing café culture and lively bar scene.

### ORIENTATION

Rambling along the banks of the Red River (Song Hong), Hanoi's centre extends out from the edges of Hoan Kiem Lake. Just to the north of this lake is the Old Quarter, with narrow streets whose names change every block or two. Travellers mostly like to base themselves in this part of town.

About 1.5km west of the Old Quarter is Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum, in the neighbourhood where most foreign embassies are found, many housed in classical architectural masterpieces from the French colonial era. Hanoi's largest lake, Ho Tay (West Lake), lies north of the mausoleum.

Street designations in Hanoi are shortened to P for *Pho* or Đ for *duong* (both meaning street).

There are decent city maps for sale at bookshops in Hanoi for around US\$2.

### INFORMATION Bookshops

**Bookworm** (Map pp826-7; ☎ 943 7226; bookworm@fpt.vn; 15A P Ngo Van So; ☎ 10am-7pm Tue-Sun) Hanoi's best

selection of new and used English-language books including travel guides, a Vietnam section, and fiction.

**Love planet** (Map p830; ☎ 828 4864; 25 P Hang Bac) Trade in used books for other second-hand reads – lots of books in English and several other languages.

**Map and photo Shop** (Map p830; ☎ 926 0564; www.mapandphoto.com; 5 P Hang Be) A cartophile's dream: Hanoi and special-interest Vietnam maps of Hanoi bus lines, ecotourism, and Halong Bay drawn by hand.

## Cultural Centres

**American Club** (Map p830; ☎ 824 1850; americanclub.hanoi.com; 19-21 P Hai Ba Trung) Regular volleyball games and other activities – the first visit is free but after that membership is US\$225 per year.

**British Council** (Map pp826-7; ☎ 843 6780; www.britishcouncil.org/vietnam; 40 P Cat Linh) Next to the Hanoi Horizon Hotel.

**Centre Culturel Française de Hanoi** (Map p830; ☎ 936 2164; alli@hn.vnn.vn; 24 P Trang Tien) Has regular art and film (in French or Vietnamese) showings.

## Emergency

**Ambulance** (☎ 115)

**Fire** (☎ 114)

**Information** (☎ 1080)

**Police** (☎ 113)

## Internet Access

It's hard to go more than a few hundred metres anywhere in the city without stumbling across an internet café, in particular those at backpacker cafés and travel agencies along P Hang Bac and P Hang Be in the Old Quarter. Many places do not display prices, so check.

Many budget hotels offer free internet access in the lobby.

Wi-fi has come to Hanoi with a vengeance and lots of hotels, cafés and bars offer free access. In the claustrophobic Old Quarter, it's not uncommon to have a choice of several networks. Try and sign into a secure network.

## Internet Resources

There are several good websites to help get the most out of Hanoi.

**New Hanoian** (www.newhanoian.com) Places to see, dining out, special events, even jobs.

**Sticky Rice** (http://stickyrice.typepad.com) The lowdown on dozens of places to dine and drink.

## Medical Services

**Dental Clinic** (Map pp826-7; ☎ 846 2864, 0903 401 919; Van Phuc Diplomatic Compound, 298 P Kim Ma, Ba Dinh District) Take your aching teeth here.

**Institute of Acupuncture** (Map pp826-7; ☎ 853 4253; 49 P Thai Thinh, Dong Da District) US\$10 gets you needles in whatever part of your body ails you with electric pulses, and for most people, a feeling of better health afterwards. The lobby is on the 2nd level.

**Institute of Traditional Medicine** (Map pp826-7; ☎ 826 2850; 26-29 P Nguyen Binh Khiem) Worth a visit for the display of jars of plants used to make medicine – labelled with Vietnamese and scientific names – in the courtyard.

**International SOS** (Map p830; ☎ 934 0555; Central Bldg, 31 P Hai Ba Trung; initial consultations US\$55-65) Has a 24-hour emergency clinic with international physicians speaking English, French and Japanese; house calls available.

## GETTING INTO TOWN

From Noi Bai airport, Vietnam Airlines' airport minibus (US\$2, 45 minutes, 35km) is cheap and easy. It drops you on P Quang Trung in the Old Quarter. Catch the airport bus at the concrete island across the road as you exit the terminal.

Official airport taxis charge US\$10 for a ride door-to-door to or from Noi Bai airport. Drivers do *not* require that you pay the toll for the bridge you cross en route. Some other taxi drivers require that you pay the toll, though, so ask first. The official taxi rank is outside the concourse and you buy tickets from the seller at the head of the taxi line.

The cheapest option is the Hanoi public bus company's service from the airport (3500d). Lines 7 and 17 go to Kim Ma bus station and Long Bien bus station (Map pp826-7) respectively, every 15 minutes from 5am to 9pm.

From the city's three central train stations, you can walk the 15 to 20 minutes to the Old Quarter to find budget accommodation. However, it's worth the 10,000d for a *xe om* (motorcycle taxi) if you have a big pack to haul around. The same goes for Long Bien bus station (Map pp826-7), which is across the street from Long Bien train station.

From other bus stations, a motorbike taxi to the Old Quarter should cost 15,000d to 25,000d, depending which station you're coming from.

## A DAY IN HANOI

Travellers with one day in Hanoi can spend the morning roaming the **Vietnam Museum of Ethnology** (p828), then grab some lunch before checking out the **Temple of Literature** (p828). Stroll by French colonial embassy buildings on P Hoang Dieu, and cycle or catch a *xe om* to the **Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum Complex** (p828). Finish with some *bia hoi* in the Old Quarter. Simple, cheap, satisfying.

**Vietnam-Korea Friendship Clinic** (Map pp826-7; ☎ 843 7231; 12 Chu Van An) Probably the least-expensive medical facility in Hanoi; maintains a high international standard.

## Money

**Citibank** (Map p830; ☎ 825 1950; 17 P Ngo Quyen)

Cashes travellers cheques and has a 24-hour ATM that lets you take out three million dong instead of the usual two million maximum; eases the pain of flat bank fees just a little.

**Incobank** (Temple of Literature; Map pp826-7; P Quoc Tu Giam; ☎ 8am-5pm) Confucius must be rolling in his grave; the Temple of Literature has an ATM, near the gift shop.

**Vietcombank** P Hang Bai (Map p830; ☎ 826 8031; 2 P Hang Bai); P Tran Quang Khai (Map p830; ☎ 826 8045; 198 P Tran Quang Khai; ☎ 7.30-11.30am & 1-3.30pm Mon-Fri, 7.30-11.30am Sat) The main branch on P Tran Quang Khai is the best bet for all currency exchange services. ATMs are scattered around the Old Quarter.

## Post

Postal kiosks are all over the city, for picking up stamps or dropping off letters.

**Domestic post office** (Map p830; ☎ 825 7036; 85 P Dinh Tien Hoang; ☎ 7am-8.30pm)

**International post office** (Map p830; ☎ 825 2030; cnr P Dinh Tien Hoang & P Dinh Le; ☎ 7.30-11.30am & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Only international parcels can be shipped from here.

International courier services in Hanoi:

**DHL** (Map pp826-7; ☎ 733 2086; 49 P Nguyen Thai Hoc)

**Federal Express** (Map p830; ☎ 824 9054; 6C P Dinh Le)  
**UPS** (Map p830; ☎ 824 6483; 4C P Dinh Le)

## Telephone

To make domestic or international calls, the domestic post office is a reliable bet, but internet cafés, guesthouses and traveller cafés will let you use their phone for a small fee,

and many internet cafés also have internet telephoning. Calls outside the local area or to mobile phones will levy a higher rate.

## Tourist Information

The new **Tourist Information Center** (Map p830; ☎ 926 3366; www.vntourists.com; 4G Đ Le Loi) is an air-conditioned haven for information and plenty of handouts on hotels, restaurants and activities. It's privately run and sells tours.

The best source of tourist information in Hanoi, as in the rest of Vietnam, is asking around at guesthouses, travel agencies and bars, and talking to fellow travellers.

## Travel Agencies

Tourist-style minibuses that often transport locals can be booked through most hotels and cafés. However, tour companies and traveller cafés are your best bet for buying other types of tickets and tours. See p831 for a list of some recommended ones.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

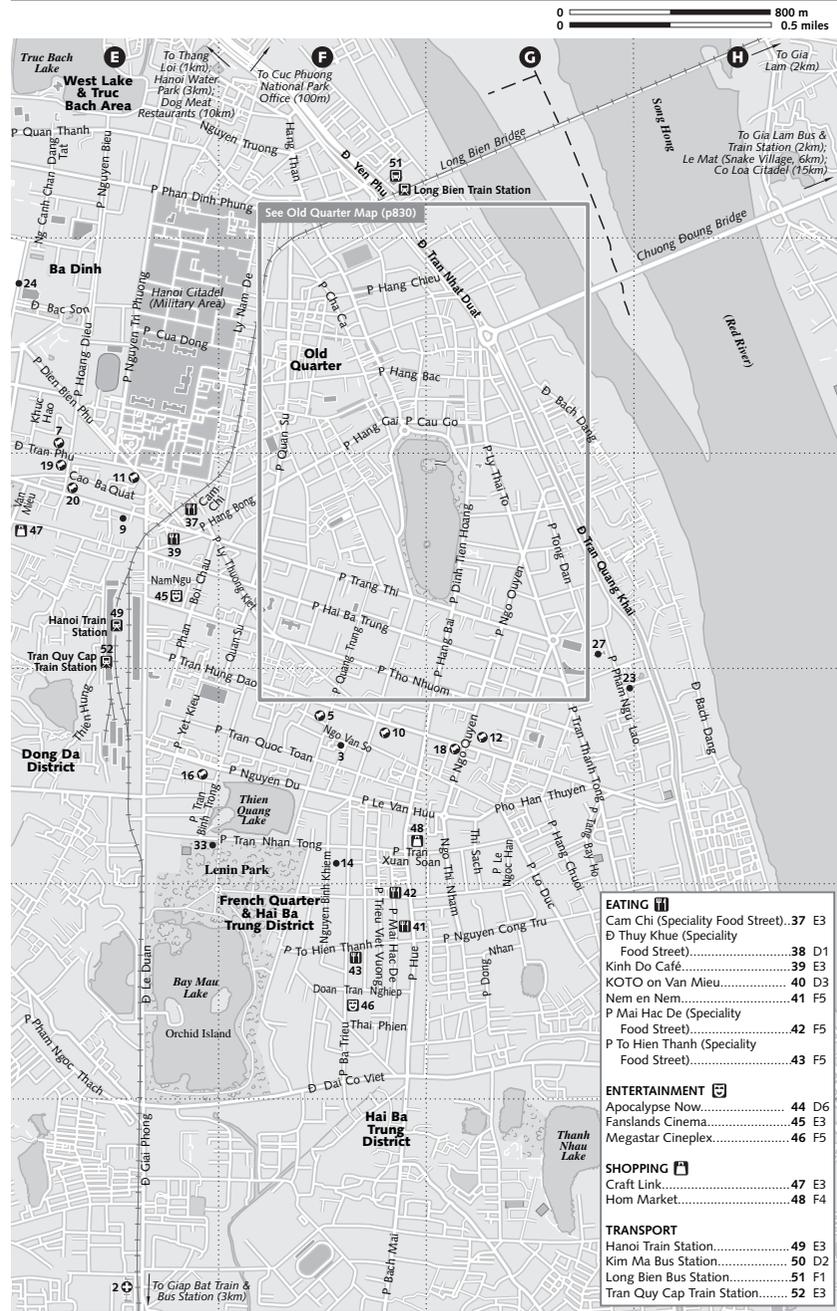
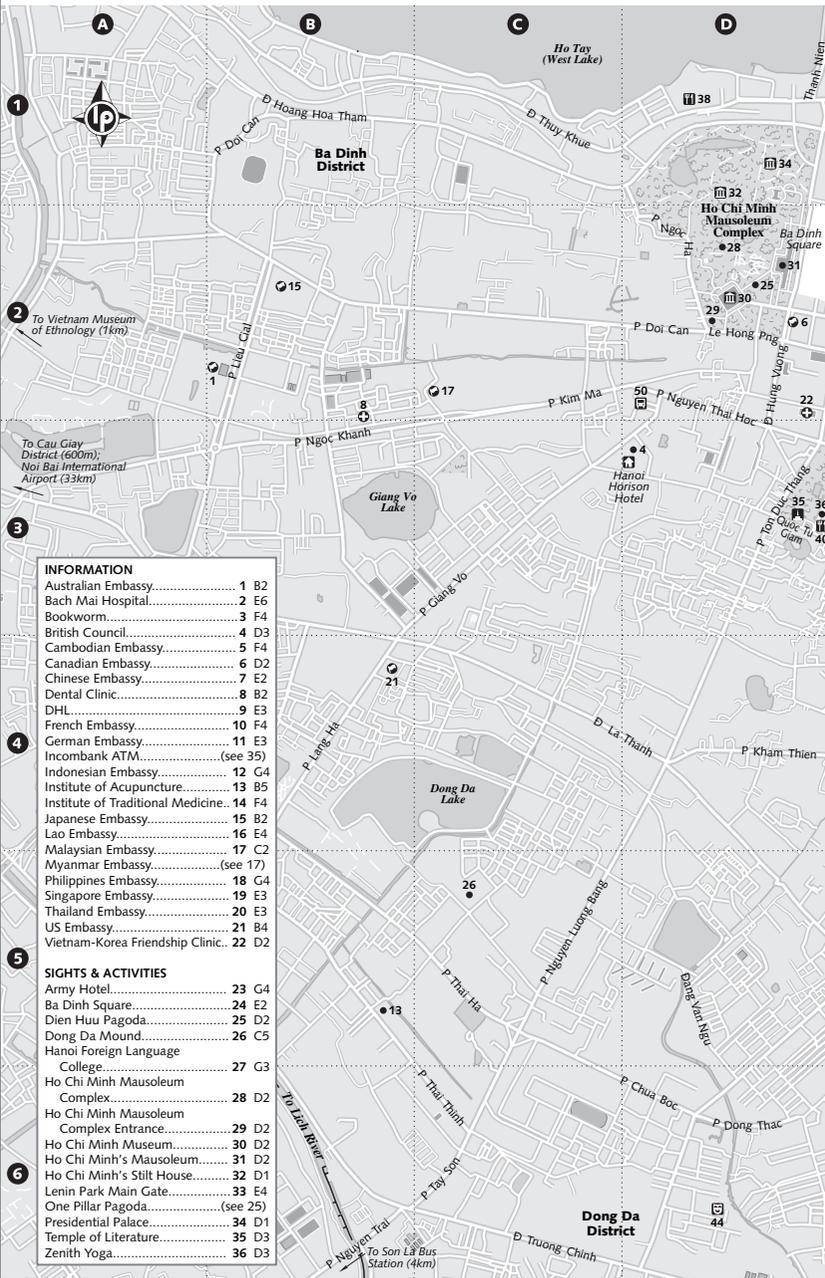
One of the most scenic cities in Vietnam is unfortunately also the most prone to scams. Taxis and motorbikes have the annoying habit of taking travellers to hotels that give a commission. We've even heard stories of travellers who took a legitimate Vietnam Airlines bus from the airport into the Old Quarter only to see a fake representative of Vietnam Airlines board the bus and try to tout people into hotels. There are several substantiated reports of verbal aggression and physical violence towards tourists when deciding against a hotel

## SAFE CROSSING

Wherever you roam, you'll have to cross the street eventually, so go armed with this survival tip: wait for a break in traffic and slowly make your way across. It used to be that a slow and confident walk into the constant stream of motorbikes was like parting the Red Sea, but now with the occasional and oft-ignored cross walks and pedestrian signals in many cities, motorists are downright resentful.

Keep in mind that might makes right (of way). Buses and lorries yield to no-one, scooters yield to buses, and pedestrians yield to everyone. If you lack the nerve, look for locals crossing the street and creep behind.

CENTRAL HANOI



room or tour. Stay calm and back away slowly or things could quickly flare up.

If coming in from the airport, it's a good idea to call your hotel and ask for an airport pickup. If arriving by train or bus, get to the hotel where you have 'reservations' and if that fails, pick a good neighbourhood with lots of hotels where you are supposedly meeting friends.

Some Western women have been hassled by young men around town who follow them home, so it pays to hit the town in larger numbers. Walking alone in well-lit areas of the Old Quarter is usually safe, but stay alert in the darker streets, particularly in the early hours of the morning. When getting from one part of town to the other at night, particularly from late-night spots, it is more sensible for solo women, and even men, to take a metered taxi or *xe om*.

Be wary of friendly strangers who want to take you out somewhere. All too often, travellers face an outrageous bill or downright extortion at the end of the night. This has happened to a number of gay men approached near Hoan Kiem Lake and kind-hearted people taken to restaurants by 'English students' supposedly looking for conversation practice. Whether travelling solo or with a local, always ask for prices beforehand, check the bill, and politely but firmly point out any discrepancies.

## SIGHTS

### Vietnam Museum of Ethnology

The wonderful **Vietnam Museum of Ethnology** (Bao Tang Toc Hoc Viet Nam; off Map pp826-7; ☎ 756 2193; Đ Nguyen Van Huynh; admission 33,000d; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) features an astounding collection of art and everyday objects from Vietnam, with maps, videos and dioramas supplementing the collection. Displays are labelled in Vietnamese, French and English. A number of hill-tribe homes are on the grounds behind the museum and visitors can climb inside.

The museum is in the Cau Giay district, about 7km from the city centre. The trip is 30 minutes by bicycle; a *xe om* ride costs around 20,000d, or you can catch local bus 14 from Hoan Kiem Lake (2500d) and get off at the junction between Đ Hoang Quoc Viet and Đ Nguyen Van Huynh.

### Temple of Literature

Hanoi's peaceful **Van Mieu** (Temple of Literature; Map pp826-7; P Quoc Tu Giam; admission 5000d; ☎ 8am-5pm) A

well-preserved jewel of traditional Vietnamese architecture in 11th-century style and the country's first national university, the temple is a must-visit.

Five courtyards are enclosed within the grounds. The front gate is inscribed with a request that visitors dismount from their horses before entering. There's a peaceful reflecting pool in the front courtyard, and the Khue Van pavilion at the back of the second courtyard.

### Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum Complex

In the tradition of Lenin, Stalin and Mao, the final resting place of Ho Chi Minh is a glass sarcophagus set deep within a monumental edifice. As interesting as the man himself are the crowds coming to pay their respects.

Built despite the fact that his will requested cremation, the **Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum Complex** (Map pp826-7; cnr P Ngoc Ha & P Doi Can; admission free; ☎ 8-11am Sat-Thu) was constructed between 1973 and 1975, using native materials gathered from all over Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh's embalmed corpse gets a three-month holiday to Russia for yearly maintenance, so the mausoleum is closed from September to early December.

All visitors must register and leave their bags and cameras at a reception hall (a free service); brochures (4000d) are optional. You'll be refused admission to the mausoleum if you're wearing shorts, tank tops or other 'indecent' clothing. Hats must be taken off inside the mausoleum building, and a respectful demeanour should be maintained at all times. Photography is absolutely prohibited inside the building. If it uses electricity, check it. Those who guess wrong will be ushered into a small room where they have to write their name and nationality to affirm that they tried to take a prohibited item into the glorious leader's final resting place.

After exiting the mausoleum, check out the following sights in the complex.

**Dien Huu Pagoda** One of the most delightful in Hanoi.

**Ho Chi Minh Museum** (Bao Tang Ho Chi Minh; admission 5000d; ☎ 8-11am & 1.30-4.30pm Sat-Thu) Displays each have a message, such as 'peace', 'happiness' or 'freedom'. It's probably worth taking an English-speaking guide, as some of the symbolism is hard to interpret.

**Ho Chi Minh's stilt house** Ho's residence, on and off, between 1958 and 1969.

**One Pillar Pagoda** (Chua Mot Cot) Built by Emperor Ly Thai Tong (r 1028-54) and designed to represent a lotus blossom, a symbol of purity, rising out of a sea of sorrow.

**Presidential Palace** (admission 5000d; ☎ 8-11am & 2-4pm Sat-Thu) Constructed in 1906 as the palace of the governor general of Indochina.

### Old Quarter

The following are all on the Old Quarter map (p830).

**Hoan Kiem Lake** is the liquid heart of the Old Quarter, and a good orientation landmark. Legend has it that, in the mid-15th century, Heaven sent Emperor Ly Thai To a magical sword, which he used to drive the Chinese out of Vietnam. One day after the war he happened upon a giant golden tortoise swimming on the surface of the water; the creature grabbed the sword and disappeared into the depths of the lake. Since that time, the lake has been known as Ho Hoan Kiem (Lake of the Restored Sword) because the tortoise restored the sword to its divine owners. A respected Vietnamese scientist has been crusading since 1991 for the protection of the very few real giant turtles that live in the lake, but the most recent turtle sighting was in 2006. There's a monument to Ly Thai To on the west side of Hoan Kiem.

**Ngoc Son Temple** (Jade Mountain Temple; admission 2000d; ☎ 8am-5pm), which was founded in the 18th century, is on an island in the northern part of Hoan Kiem Lake. It's a meditative spot to relax, but also worth checking out for the embalmed remains of a gigantic tortoise supposedly from the lake itself.

Tiny **Thap Rua** (Tortoise Tower), on an islet in the southern part of the lake, is often used as an emblem of Hanoi.

**Memorial House** (87 P Ma May; admission 5000d; ☎ 9-11.30am & 1-5pm) is worth a visit. Thoughtfully restored, this traditional Chinese-style dwelling gives you an excellent idea of how local merchants used to live in the Old Quarter. Unusual souvenirs, such as compasses made from ox bones (48,000d), are for sale.

**Bach Ma Temple** (cnr P Hang Buom & P Hang Giay; ☎ 8-11.30am & 2.30-5.30pm) is the oldest temple in Hanoi and resides in a shred of Chinatown. Legend has it that Emperor Ly Thai To prayed at this temple for assistance in building the city walls because they continually collapsed, no matter how many times he rebuilt them. His prayers were finally answered when a white horse appeared out of the temple and guided him to the site where he eventually built his walls. Inside the Pagoda is a statue of the honoured white horse. Admission is free,

but you might drop a few thousand dong in the box for maintenance and preservation.

Stepping inside **St Joseph Cathedral** (P Nha Tho; ☎ 5-7am & 5-7pm) is like being transported to medieval Europe. Around Christian holidays there is quite the scene in front of the church – Easter sees a re-enactment of the crucifixion with actors speaking their lines into microphones.

### Other Attractions

The **Women's Museum** (Bao Tang Phu Nu; Map p830; 36 P Ly Thuong Kiet; admission 10,000d; ☎ 8am-4pm Tue-Sun) was under renovation with only one exhibit open at the time of research. The museum usually includes the predictable tribute to women soldiers, balanced by some wonderful exhibits from the international women's movement protesting the American War. Exhibits have Vietnamese, French and English explanations.

**Hoa Lo Prison Museum** (Map p830; ☎ 934 2253; 1 P Hoa Lo; admission 33,000d; ☎ 8-11.30am & 1.30-4.30pm Tue-Sun) is all that remains of the former Hoa Lo prison, ironically nicknamed the 'Hanoi Hilton' by US POWs during the American War. Famous prisoners included Pete Peterson, who later became the first US ambassador to a unified Vietnam in 1995, and Senator John McCain, who cannot raise his arms above his head because of his torture here and tried to commit suicide twice while imprisoned. Some exhibits have explanations in English and French.

## ACTIVITIES

Feel like a dip? There are several places for swimming in Hanoi. Some of the nicer hotels charge a US\$10 day-use fee.

### MAKE THAT COMPLAINT COUNT...

We get a lot of letters complaining about hotels, guesthouses, travel companies and more. We're not complaining – it's great to get your feedback about all these things, as it helps us work out which businesses care about their customers and which don't. However, as well as telling us, make sure you tell the **Vietnam National Administration of Tourism** (Map p830; ☎ 824 7652; 3 P Le Lai); its Hanoi office is reasonably helpful and needs to know about the problems before it can do anything about them. In time your effort might well pressure the cowboys into cleaning up their act.



**Army Hotel** (Khach San Quan Doi; Map pp826-7; ☎ 825 2896; 33C P Pham Ngu Lao; day use US\$3.50) Big enough to do laps, the pool is open all year.

**Hanoi Water Park** (off Map pp826-7; ☎ 753 2757; ☎ 9am-9pm Wed-Mon Apr 15-Nov) About 5km from the city centre, it features a variety of pools and slides.

**Thang Loi Hotel** (Cuban Hotel; off Map pp826-7; ☎ 829 4211; thangloihl@hn.vnn.vn; Đ Yen Phu; day use 30,000đ; ☎ May-Oct) Near Ho Tay (West Lake).

**COURSES**

**Cooking**

**Highway 4** (Map p830; ☎ 926 0639; 5 P Hang Tre) is a popular restaurant and bar that also has cooking classes. Prices range from US\$19 to US\$32 per class.

**Old Hanoi** (Map p830; ☎ 824 5251; www.hanoicooking.com; 106 P Ma May, ) has half-day classes for US\$19 that include a trip to the market. Students can usually share their culinary creation with a guest if they ask in advance.

**Language**

**Hanoi Foreign Language College** (Map pp826-7; ☎ 826 2468; 1 P Pham Ngu Lao) is a branch of Hanoi

National University housed in the History Museum compound. Vietnamese-language tuition varies with class size, but shouldn't cost more than US\$7 per lesson.

**Yoga**

**Zenith Yoga** (Map pp826-7; ☎ 464 1171; 31A P Van Mieu), upstairs from Maison des Arts Spa, charges 100,000đ for a drop-in class.

**TOURS**

Not many travellers are happy after taking a budget tour. Those willing to spend extra for quality or get around on their own usually rave about their trips. It's easy enough to do Halong Bay solo by using Cat Ba Island as a starting point and booking excursions from there. The same goes for Sapa.

It is not advisable to book trips or tickets through guesthouses and hotels. Dealing directly with tour operators gives you a much better idea of what you'll get for your money. Seek out tour operators that stick to small groups and use their own vehicles and guides.

<b>INFORMATION</b>	Old Hanoi.....	26 C3	St Joseph Cathedral.....	27 A4	Thap Rua (Tortoise Tower).....	28 C5	Women's Museum.....	29 C6			
American Club.....	1 C6	Centre Culturel Française de Hanoi.....	2 D6	Citibank.....	(see 16)	Domestic Post Office.....	(see 5)	Federal Express.....	3 C5		
Footprint Travel.....	4 B2	Handspan Adventure Travel.....	(see 60)	International Post Office.....	5 C5	International SOS.....	6 B6	Love Planet.....	7 C3		
Map & Photo Shop.....	8 C3	New Zealand Embassy.....	9 D5	Ocean Tours.....	10 B3	ODC Travel.....	11 C2	Onbike Tours.....	12 C3		
Post Office.....	13 B3	Sinh Café 1.....	14 C3	Sinh Café 2.....	15 B3	Tourist Information Center.....	16 C3	UK Embassy.....	17 B6		
UPS.....	(see 3)	Vega Travel.....	18 C3	Vietcombank.....	19 C5	Vietcombank.....	20 D5	Vietnam National Administration of Tourism.....	21 D5		
<b>SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>	Bach Ma Temple.....	22 B2	Highway 4.....	(see 69)	Hoa Lo Prison Museum.....	23 A5	Memorial House.....	24 C2	Ngoc Son (Jade Mountain) Temple.....	25 C4	
Camellia Hotel 12.....	30 A4	City Gate Hotel.....	31 B1	Dong A Hotel.....	32 C2	Especen.....	33 A4	Hanoi Backpacker's Hostel.....	34 A4		
Hanoi Spirit House.....	35 C3	Real Darling Café.....	36 B3	Rose Hotel.....	37 A4	Sports Hotel.....	38 B3	Tam Thuong Guesthouse.....	39 A3		
Thu Giang Guesthouse.....	(see 39)	Viet Fun Hotel.....	(see 32)	<b>EATING</b>	69 Bar-Restaurant.....	40 C2	Baan Thai Restaurant.....	41 B2	Baguette & Chocolat.....	42 B2	
Bay Restaurant and Café.....	43 C2	Bodha Café.....	44 B3	Cha Ca La Vong.....	45 B2	Com Chay Nang Tam.....	46 A6	Cyclo Bar & Restaurant.....	47 A4	Dong Xuan Market.....	(see 78)
Fanny.....	48 B5	Fivimart.....	49 D5	H Silk Restaurant.....	50 C3	Intimex.....	51 B5	La Place.....	52 B4	Linh Phung.....	53 B3
Little Hanoi 1.....	54 C2	Old Day Restaurant.....	55 C2	Pepperoni's Pizza & Café.....	56 B4	Pho.....	57 B4	Saigon Sakura.....	58 B5	San Xuan.....	59 C3
Tamarind Café.....	60 C2	Tandoor.....	61 C3	<b>DRINKING</b>	1/2 Man, 1/2 Noodle.....	62 C2	Balcony Bar and Café.....	63 B4	Bia Hoi Ha Noi.....	64 A3	
Bia Hoi Hanoi.....	65 B4	Camellia Café & Bar.....	66 D6	Gambrinus.....	67 D4	GC Pub.....	68 B4	Highway 4.....	69 C3	Le Pub.....	70 C3
Mao's Red Lounge.....	71 B2	Red Beer.....	72 C3	<b>ENTERTAINMENT</b>	Club Opera.....	73 D5	I-Box.....	74 B5	Jazz Club by Quyen Van Minh.....	75 B3	
Municipal Water Puppet Theatre.....	76 C3	R&R Tavern.....	77 C3	<b>SHOPPING</b>	Dong Xuan Market.....	78 B1	Hai Van.....	79 A4	Hang Da Market.....	80 A3	
<b>TRANSPORT</b>	Airport Minibus.....	81 B5									

Successful tour operators often have their names cloned by others looking to trade on their reputations, so check addresses and websites carefully. Consider the following places in the Old Quarter (Map p830):

**Footprint Travel** (☎ 826 0879; www.footprintsvietnam.com; 16 P Hang Bac) Highly capable Vietnamese management and guides arrange trips that emphasise doing over seeing: Halong Bay outings, bicycle trips and 18-day eco-adventure tours.

**Handspan Adventure Travel** (☎ 926 0581; www.handspan.com; 80 P Ma May) At the Tamarind Café. Offers kayaking and sleep-aboard boat tours on a refurbished junk in Halong Bay. We've heard nothing but good reports.

**Ocean Tours** (☎ 926 0463; www.oceantours.com.vn; 16 P Hang Bac) This operator, specialising in Halong Bay, has been earning a good name for itself.

**ODC Travel** (☎ 824 3024; www.camellia-hotels.com; Camellia Hotel, 13 P Luong Ngoc Quyen) Formerly Old Darling Café, this is one of the most established names in the business for budget tours.

**Onbike Tours** (☎ 914 1539; www.onbikevietnam.com; 16 P Hang Bac) Bicycle tours to the craft villages outside of Hanoi and further for one or more days.

**Sinh Café 1 & 2** (☎ 828 7552; 18 P Luong Van Can & 52 P Hang Bac) At two locations, and with every service a traveller could need, ranging from visa extensions to travel arrangements to tours.

**Vega Travel** (☎ 926 2092; www.vega-travel.com; 24A P Hang Bac) Formerly known as Fansipan Tours, the company decided to change its name after as many as 10 copycats sprung up. Despite the address, enter on P Ma May. Specialises in Halong Bay and Sapa trips, but also has a good selection of sporty and cultural adventures through the north.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

**Tet** (Tet Nguyen Dan/Vietnamese Lunar New Year) A flower market is held on P Hang Luoc during the week preceding Tet, in late January or early February. In addition, there's a colourful two-week flower exhibition and competition, beginning on the first day of the Lunar New Year, which takes place in Lenin park (Cong Vien Le Nin; Map pp826–7) north of Bay Mau Lake.

**Quang Trung Festival** On the 15th day of the first lunar month (February or March) wrestling matches, lion dances and chess games are played at Dong Da Mound (Map pp826–7) in west Hanoi – Dong Da is the site of the uprising against Chinese invaders led by Emperor Quang Trung (Nguyen Hué) in 1788.

**Vietnam's National Day** Celebrated at Ba Dinh Sq (Map pp826–7) – in front of the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum Complex – with a rally and fireworks on 2 September; boat races are also held on Hoan Kiem Lake in the Old Quarter.

## SLEEPING

Head to the Old Quarter once you land in Hanoi; the majority of Hanoi's budget accommodation lies within 1km of Hoan Kiem Lake. Most of the budget hotels are near P Hang Bac or St Joseph Cathedral. The following places are all on the Old Quarter map (p830).

**Dong A Hotel** (☎ 828 2249; www.dongahotels.com; 50 P Ma May, dm US\$3; ☹ ☹) It offers nice dorm beds. A long thin room with a line of bamboo bunks, the layout of the place means that yes, the bunks are close, but since travellers can't see each other they'll *finally* stop staring at you while you sleep.

**Hanoi Backpackers' Hostel** (☎ 828 5372; www.hanoibackpackershostel.com; 48 P Ngo Huyen; dm US\$7, r US\$25; ☹ ☹) This Aussie-style backpackers' pad offers smart and secure dorms and a couple of expensive dedicated rooms. The rooftop bar is a sort of country club for the backpack set and has unusually expensive beers, but it's the best spot in Hanoi to get good travel advice from fellow travellers.

**Tam Thuong Guesthouse** (☎ 828 6296; three\_men\_on\_business@yahoo.com; 10A1 P Yen Thai; r US\$7–8; ☹ ☹) Run by warm and friendly people, visitors leave feeling good about their stay. This guesthouse is in the narrow alley between P Yen Thai and P Hang Gai, near Hong Da Market.

**Real Darling Café** (☎ 826 9386; darling\_café@hotmail.com; 33 P Hang Quat; r US\$8–10) An old standby that's cheap and centrally located, it advertises dorm rooms in Japanese but only wanted to give us prices for regular rooms. Inquire within.

**Viet Fun Hotel** (☎ 926 2353; vietfunhotels@yahoo.com; 48 P Ma May; r US\$8–15; ☹ ☹) This place should appeal to those for whom size matters almost as much as money. Enthusiastic service and helpful advice ensure a fun stay.

**City Gate Hotel** (☎ 828 0817; www.citygatehotel.com.vn; 10 P Thanh Ha; r US\$8–18; ☹ ☹) Hidden down a small lane near the old East Gate, this smart minihotel offers a warm welcome and friendly service. Rooms are super clean.

**Hanoi Spirit House** (☎ 826 7356; hanoispirit house@yahoo.com; 50 P Hang Be; r US\$10–14 ☹ ☹) With a restaurant, massive internet café that charges US\$1 per hour, cheap Tiger beer on draft (10,000d), and small but clean rooms, spirits and bank balances fly high here.

**Thu Giang Guesthouse** (☎ 828 5734; thugiangn@hotmail.com; 5A P Tam Thuong; r US\$10–15; ☹ ☹) Spitting distance from Tam Thuong Guesthouse, it's another friendly place that gets good reviews.

**Rose Hotel** (☎ 26 0471; bonghonghotel.@Pt.vn; 56 P Ngo Huyen; d US\$12; ☹ ☹) A good place to get some peace and quiet. The hot water doesn't last forever but the staff are pleasant and the rooms are comfy, if a little retro.

**our pick! Especen** (☎ 824 4401; www.especen.net; 28 P Tho Xuong St; d US\$13–15; ☹ ☹) Free wi-fi and nice big rooms that look brand new even though the owners say this is one of the first minihotels in the area. The hotel is often full; there's an Especen 2 right next door.

**Sports Hotel** (☎ 926 0154; carmelia12cc@yahoo.co.uk; 96 P Hang Bac; d US\$13–17; ☹ ☹) One of the few places where quiet, windowless rooms away from the street don't have that musty smell that soon turns tired travellers into bloodhounds when sniffing around for a good night's sleep.

**Camellia Hotel 12** (☎ 828 5936; carmelia12cc@yahoo.co.uk; 12 P Chan Cam; d US\$15–20; ☹ ☹) One of the many Camellia incarnations that are fairly similar, this one is decent value on a quieter street.

## EATING

What's on the menu in Hanoi? Everything, ranging from the famous local speciality of *cha ca* (filleted fish slices grilled over charcoal) to the less appealing option of Fido over an open fire. In between, if it comes from a Vietnamese kitchen, it's here. And, there's a wide choice of international cuisine.

Finding good budget eats at a sit-down restaurant can be a tad more challenging here than in other cities, but street vendors and tiny sidewalk eateries are cheaper than cheap.

A number of speciality food streets dot the city like so many sprinkles on a cup cake (see Map pp826–7). Cam Chi, 500m northeast of Hanoi train station, is an alley crammed full of street stalls serving delicious budget-priced food. P Mai Hac De, in the south-central area east of Bay Mau Lake, has several blocks of restaurants running south from the northern terminus at P Tran Nhan Tong. Đ Thuy Khue, on the south bank of West Lake, features a strip of 30-odd outdoor seafood restaurants with pleasant lakeside seating. P To Hien Thanh, east of Bay Mau Lake, also specialises in small seafood restaurants. P Nghi Tam, 10km north of central Hanoi, has 1km of dog-meat restaurants.

It's also easy to self-cater thanks to the supermarkets and outdoor markets inside the usual backpacker neighbourhoods.

## Vietnamese

The following listings are all on the Old Quarter map (p830) unless otherwise noted.

**Pho** (10 P Ly Quoc Su; pho 15,000d; ☹) breakfast, lunch & dinner) When a restaurant does one thing very well there's really no need for a fancy name.

**Little Hanoi 1** (☎ 926 0168; 9 P Ta Hien; mains 25,000d; ☹) breakfast, lunch & dinner) A big sign declaring its move up the street and a pointed warning about impostors is all that's left at the old location. The new spot does not disappoint with authentic fare that draws a lively crowd of travellers most nights of the week.

**New Day Restaurant** (☎ 828 0315; 72 P Ma May; mains from 15,000d; ☹) breakfast, lunch & dinner) This place is packed with foreigners and locals alike for good reason; the setting is cafeteria but the Hanoi specialities are first-class. If you can't get enough of this goodness, next door is a buffet with take-away boxes.

**Linh Phung** (☎ 926 0592; 7 P Dinh Liet; seafood 25,000d; ☹) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Great prices on seafood and two small fish in a pond near the counter give diners a cheap taste of nature in the big city. Open until midnight or so depending on business.

**Nem en Nem** (House of Nem; Map pp826–7; ☎ 943 3152; 43 P Mai Hac De; mains 25,000d; ☹) breakfast, lunch & dinner) A spring-roll lover's dream, *nem* variations here include sweet corn and shrimp rolls, Singapore-style rolls, preserved pork rolls, and crab rolls; they're all guaranteed to melt in your mouth, not in your hand.

**69 Bar-Restaurant** (☎ 926 0452; 69 P Ma May; meals from 40,000d; ☹) lunch & dinner) Set in a restored Vietnamese house built in the 19th century, this is one of the most charming spots in the Old Quarter for a meal or to watch life go by.

**Highway 4** (☎ 926 0639; www.highway4.com; 5 P Hang Tre; ☹) lunch & dinner; mains 50,000–150,000d) Highway 4 is good at explaining a particular dish and its place in Vietnamese culture. It also has sampler sets of their signature Son Tinh rice wine and it's perfectly fine to just sit with a drink and appetisers.

**Cha Ca La Vong** (☎ 825 3929; 14 P Cha Ca; cha ca 70,000d; ☹) lunch & dinner) The *cha ca* capital of the Old Quarter has been family-run for five generations. The succulent fish is all that's on the menu.

**Cyclo Bar & Restaurant** (☎ 828 6844; 38 P Duong Thanh; set lunch 80,000d; ☹) lunch & dinner) Sipping a Singapore Sling in the seat of a converted *cyclo* while nibbling on French and Vietnamese

food – here is where *Indochine* day dreams come to life. Good for drinks or a meal.

## Other Asian

Asian cuisine, especially Japanese, can be pricey in Hanoi but these offer some decent deals. All are on the Old Quarter map (p830).

**Baan Thai Restaurant** (☎ 828 1120; 3B P Cha Ca; mains from 30,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) One of the longer-running, central Thai restaurants in the Old Quarter, Baan Thai is popular with the growing Thai community in Hanoi. There's also a photo-illustrated menu.

**Tandoor** (☎ 824 5359; 24 P Hang Be; mains around 50,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) The reasonably priced *thali* (set meal) is a good deal, and it's a cosy place in the Old Quarter.

**Saigon Sakura** (☎ 825 7565; 17 P Trang Thi; mains around 60,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) More than just sushi, the extensive menu features noodle soups, grilled fish and seaweed salads.

## International

These are all on the Old Quarter map (p830).

**our pick H Silk Restaurant** (☎ 825 0804, 17 P Hang Bac; mains from 25,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) To find this place look for a silk shop, not a restaurant; the food is upstairs. At night, balcony tables have candles but the real love affair will be with the food, especially the fish.

**Bodha Café** (38 Cafe; ☎ 828 6052; 36-38 P Hang Hanh; mains from 25,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A little smoky because of all the Vietnamese guys (and only guys, it seemed) eating and drinking here, this dimly lit hot spot has good Western fare and above-average Vietnamese food for the price.

**Bay Restaurant and Café** (☎ 928 0736; 36 P Ma May; mains from 30,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) It serves some of the best pizza and pasta around and good Italian coffee to wash it down. Northern Vietnamese specialties are also on the menu.

**La Place** (☎ 928 5859; 4 P Au Trieu; mains from 30,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) There is no shortage of hip little places near St Joseph Cathedral but this is a traveller favourite with iced shakes, savoury crepes and big windows with a perfect view of the cathedral.

**Pepperoni's Pizza & Café** (☎ 928 5246; 29 P Ly Quoc Su; pizzas from 40,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) A US\$2 all-you-can-eat weekday lunchtime pasta and salad bar – that's *amore*. It also has authentic pizza and takeaway.

## Vegetarian

**Com Chay Nang Tam** (Map p830; ☎ 942 4140; 79A P Tran Hung Dao; mains 10,000d) Famed for veggie creations named for, and remarkably resembling, meat dishes; try the 'fried snow balls'. It can be hard to find this place but it really is on the microscopic alley off P Tran Hung Dao – ask a local if need be.

**Tamarind Café** (Map p830; ☎ 926 0580; tamarind\_cafe@yahoo.com; 80 P Ma May; mains from 60,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The cushion-laden chill atmosphere helps take the sting out of the prices. Dishing out Asian-style vegetarian dishes and rejuvenating fresh-fruit smoothies. Handspan Adventure Travel (p832) is set in the rear of the restaurant.

## Cafés

For a much-needed respite from pounding the pavement or simply to get up to speed with the Vietnamese via *caffeine*, check the following.

**Kinh Do Café** (Map pp826-7; ☎ 825 0216; 252 P Hang Bong; pastries 7000d; ☺ breakfast & lunch) This is where Catherine Deneuve took her morning coffee during the filming of *Indochine*; unlike the movie this place is unassuming and good.

**Fanny** (Map p830; ☎ 828 5656; 48 P Le Thai To; ice cream from 10,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) Serves delicious French ice cream across from Hoan Kiem's lakefront. It has unusual seasonal flavours such as *com* (sticky rice), *khoai mon* (taro) or *mang cau* (custard apple).

**KOTO on Van Mieu** (Map pp826-7; ☎ 747 0338; www.streetvoices.com.au; 59 P Van Mieu; mains 30,000-50,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner; 📺) This spot offers local specialties, home comforts, delicious sandwiches and cakes, and free wi-fi. Standing for 'Know One, Teach One', KOTO is a nonprofit grassroots project providing opportunities for former street kids.

**Baguette & Chocolat** (Map p830; ☎ 923 1500; 11 P Cha Ca; quiche 40,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) From the same people behind KOTO; just like a café in Paris, there are French newspapers on the tables and the tastiest quiche sell out quickly.

## Self-Catering

The following listings are all on the Old Quarter map (p830).

**Dong Xuan Market** (P Dong Xuan) Swing by for fresh fruits and veggies and baguettes.

**San Xuan** (71 P Hang Bac) A 24-hour bakery with sweets, sandwiches and beer.

**Fivimart** (☎ 826 0167; P Tong Dan) East of Hoan Kiem Lake, it's a very well stocked supermarket.

**Intimex** (☎ 825 6148; 22-32 P Le Thai To) Enter at the narrow driveway next to the Clinique shop, on the western side of the lake. It sells everything you need to make sandwiches or a full meal, and the 1st level has Vietnamese take-away dishes that are a little less expensive than at a restaurant. The 2nd level has the cheapest rain ponchos in town.

## DRINKING

There's a good selection of pubs for everyone, but beer drinkers will especially like Hanoi. Not only are there *bia hoi* places scattered everywhere, there are also a number of micro-breweries and beer bars in town. Thirsty travellers will find these drinking places within stumbling distance of each other in the Old Quarter (Map, p830).

**Mao's Red Lounge** (☎ 926 3104; 7 P Ta Hien) This funky two-level bar is standing room only on weekend nights when local expats come to get their groove on and backpackers join the impromptu booty-shaking.

**GC Pub** (☎ 825 0499; 7 Bao Khanh) Bars come in and out of fashion in Hanoi, and GC has swung right back into favour with Hanoi residents. There's a popular pool table and very friendly staff.

**Bia Hoi Hanoi** (☎ 824 6754, 1 P Bao Khanh) Cheap *bia hoi* and an eccentric selection of fish, ostrich eel and frog. On a street full of nightlife, it's a good place to start or end the evening.

**Red Beer** (☎ 826 0247; 97 P Ma May) One of the first microbreweries in town and still one of the best, its signature brew is red but there are a few others on tap.

**Gambrinus** (☎ 935 1114; 198 P Tran Quang Khai) Czech yourself before you wreck yourself; Gambrinus is a mellow Czech beer that goes down easier with each fresh mug. It's a vast, impressive *brauhaus* with shiny vats of freshly brewed Czech beer that's very popular with the Vietnamese.

**½ Man, ½ Noodle** (☎ 926 1943; 52 P Dao Duy Tu) Staff often play '70s and '80s rock classics and their motto is 'Drink here or we shoot the puppy'. The only evidence of canines we saw was hair of the dog the next morning, but, it's probably best to follow orders just in case.

**Balcony Bar and Café** (☎ 928-8608; 4 P Le Thai To) On the loungey side, the balcony overlooking Hoan Kiem Lake is full most nights of the

week. Share a hookah pipe (80,000d) with friends or groove out to DJ Zcool's House and hip hop.

**Le Pub** (☎ 926 2104; 25 P Hang Be) A good place to drink anything you could imagine from back home, and there is a special US\$1 beverage all day long most days of the week. It's like happy hour, all the time.

## CLUBBING

The shelf life of Hanoi's discos is short, so ask around about what's hot or not during your visit. Unlike other cities, there's really not a backpacker mainstay since Apocalypse Now changed locations.

**Apocalypse Now** (Map pp826-7; P Dong Thac; Dong Da District; ☺ 8pm-late) Dropping its old digs and downscale demeanour, Apocalypse continues to pack in the pretty people. There's no cover but the drinks and taxi ride will cost you, and the taxi drivers outside are wily. Loud, thumping and open late, it's worth the trek if you want to dance the night away.

**I-Box** (Map p830; ☎ 828 8820; 32 P Le Thai Tho; 📺) Café-bar by day, with luxurious drapes and free wi-fi, at night it feels like a whole new place as it turns club with decent DJs and an ear-throbbing sound system.

## ENTERTAINMENT

### Water Puppetry

**Municipal Water Puppet Theatre** (Roi Nuoc Thang Long; Map p830; ☎ 825 5450; 57B P Dinh Tien Hoang; admission 20,000-40,000d; ☺ performances 4pm, 5.15pm, 6.30pm, 8pm & 9.15pm) The higher admission buys better seats and a cassette of the music; you must pay extra fees to take photos and video. Programmes are multilingual, making it easier to follow the action.

### GAY & LESBIAN HANOI

There's a thriving gay scene in Hanoi, with cruising areas such as the cafés on P Bao Khanh and around Hoan Kiem Lake. Gay guys should take care not to fall victim to the organised extortion scam going on around the lake (see p825).

Gay and lesbian venues tend to maintain a low profile; Mao's Red Lounge (left) is a gay-friendly place with good Friday and Saturday night parties. There's a healthy gay presence at Apocalypse Now (above), but watch out for hustlers.

## Live Music

There is traditional live music performed daily at the Temple of Literature (p828).

**Jazz Club By Quyen Van Minh** (Cau Lac Bo; Map p830; ☎ 825 7655; 31-33 P Luong Van Can; 🎷 performances 9-11.30pm) *The* place in Hanoi to catch live jazz.

**R&R Tavern** (Map p830; ☎ 934 4109; 47 P Lo Su) A reliable little venue for live music, the Vietnamese band here knows all the counter-culture '60s classics. Drinks are very reasonably priced given the free soundtrack.

**Club Opera** (Map p830; ☎ 824 6950; 59 P Ly Thai To) Splash out for good food and traditional tunes, in the same building as the Terrace Bar.

## Cinemas

**Megastar Cineplex** (Map pp826-7; ☎ 974 3333; 6th fl, Vincom Tower, 191 Ba Trieu) This is a serious place, complete with the latest international films.

**Centre Culturel Français de Hanoi** (Map p830; ☎ 936 2164; all@hn.vnn.vn; 24 P Trang Tien) For French flicks.

**Fanslands Cinema** (Map pp826-7; ☎ 825 7484; 84 P Ly Thuong Kiet) It shows mainstream Western movies but be sure to make sure they're subtitled, not dubbed.

## SHOPPING

Your first shopping encounter will likely be with the kids selling postcards and books. They're notorious overchargers (asking about triple the going price), so a reasonable amount of bargaining is called for. The Old Quarter (Map p830) is crammed with appealing loot; price tags signal set prices.

## Handicrafts & Souvenirs

If you don't make it up to Sapa, you can find a wide selection of ethnic-minority garb and handicrafts in Hanoi; a stroll along P Hang Bac or P To Tich will turn up a dozen places.

Local artists display their paintings at private art galleries, the highest concentration of which is on P Trang Tien, between Hoan Kiem Lake and the Opera House. The galleries are worth a browse even if you're not buying.

**Craft Link** (Map pp826-7; ☎ 843 7710; www.craftlink-vietnam.com; 43 P Van Mieu) Make socially conscious purchases at Craft Link, near the Temple of Literature. It is a nonprofit organisation that buys tribal handicrafts at fair-trade prices.

**Hai Van** (Map p830 ☎ 826 0028; 2C P Ly Quoc Su) It specialises in made-to-order T-shirts, and let's just say the custom-made 'Hello, motorbike?' apparel went over well.

## Markets

**Dong Xuan Market** (Map p830; P Dong Xuan) With hundreds of stalls that sell everything under the sun, this three-storey market is 600m north of Hoan Kiem Lake.

**Hom Market** (Map pp826-7; P Hué) On the north-eastern corner of P Hué and P Tran Xuan Soan, this is a good general-purpose market with lots of imported food items.

**Hang Da Market** (Map p830; Yen Thai) West of Hoan Kiem Lake, Hang Da is relatively small, but good for imported food and drink. The 2nd floor is good for fabric and ready-made clothing.

## Silk Products & Clothing

P Hang Gai, about 100m northwest of Hoan Kiem Lake, and its continuation, P Hang Bong, is a good place to look for embroidery such as tablecloths, T-shirts and wall hangings. This is also the modern-day silk strip, with pricey boutiques offering tailoring services and selling ready-to-wear clothing. It's a good place to look for silk ties, scarves and other threads.

Other fashionable streets are near St Joseph Cathedral, west of the lake.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

For details of international flights to Hanoi, see p820. For domestic flights, see p821.

### Bus

Hanoi has several bus stations, each with services to a particular area. It's a good idea to arrange travel a day or two before you want to leave. The stations are well organised with ticket offices, printed schedules and prices.

**Gia Lam bus station** (☎ 827 1529; Đ Ngoc Lam), 2km northeast of the city centre, is the place for buses to points north and northeast of Hanoi. These include Halong Bay (40,000d, 3½ hours), Haiphong (35,000d, two hours), and Lang Son (50,000d, three hours) and Lao Cai (53,000d, nine hours), both near the Chinese border. To get to the bus station, cross the Song Hong (Red River). *Cyclos* can't cross the bridge, so take a taxi (around 30,000d) or motorbike.

**Kim Ma bus station** (Ben Xe Kim Ma; Map pp826-7; ☎ 845 2846; cnr P Nguyen Thai Hoc & P Giang Vo) has buses to the west of Hanoi, including Hoa Binh (25,000d, two hours) and Dien Bien Phu (120,000d, 16 hours).

**Son La bus station** (Ben Xe Son La; off Map pp826-7; Km 8, P Nguyen Trai) destinations include Son La (63,000d, 12 to 14 hours), Dien Bien Phu (100,000d, 16 hours) and Lai Chau. It's southwest of Hanoi, near Hanoi University.

**Giap Bat bus station** (Ben Xe Giap Bat; ☎ 864 1467; Đ Giai Phong) serves points south of Hanoi, including Ninh Binh (28,000d, two hours), Hué (80,000d, 12 hours) and further. It is 7km south of the Hanoi train station.

Tourist-style minibuses can be booked through most hotels and cafés. Popular destinations include Halong Bay and Sapa.

Many open-ticket tours through Vietnam start or finish in Hanoi – for more details see p822.

## Car & Motorcycle

To hire a car or minibus with driver, contact a traveller café or travel agency (see p831). The main roads in the northeast are generally OK, but in parts of the northwest they're awful (you'll need a high-clearance vehicle or 4WD).

A six-day trip in a 4WD can cost US\$200 to US\$400 (including 4WD, driver and petrol). You should inquire about who is responsible for the driver's room and board – most hotels have a room set aside for drivers, but work out ahead of time what costs are included.

## Train

For trains to Lao Cai, gateway to Sapa, buy tickets as early as possible, especially if travelling over the weekend or if you're set on a soft sleeper. For short-distance trains, though, sometimes it's only possible to purchase tickets 30 minutes to one hour before departure, and room for baggage is severely limited.

**Hanoi train station** (Gad Hang Co; Map pp826-7; ☎ 825 3949; 120 Đ Le Duan; 🎫 ticket office 7.30-11.30am

& 1.30-7.30pm) is the terminus for most trains and is at the western end of P Tran Hung Dao. Trains from here go to destinations south. It's best to buy tickets at least one day before departure to ensure a seat or sleeper. Look for the sign for foreign travellers – this agent, and the person at the information booth in the next room, usually speak some English.

If arriving early in the morning from Sapa, know that a line of coffee and food stalls across from the station will be open.

The place you purchase your ticket is not necessarily where the train departs, so be sure to ask exactly *where* you need to catch your train.

**Tran Quy Cap station** (B station; Map pp826-7; ☎ 825 2628; P Tran Qui Cap) is just two blocks south of the main station on Đ Le Duan. Northbound trains leave from here. It's considered a sub-station of the main Hanoi station.

**Gia Lam station** (Nguyen Van Cu, Gia Lam District), east of the Red River, has some northbound (Yen Bai, Lao Cai, Lang Son) and eastbound (Haiphong) trains.

To make things complicated, some of the same destinations served by Gia Lam can also be reached from **Long Bien station** (Map pp826-7; ☎ 826 8280).

## GETTING AROUND Bicycle

Peddalling around the city is invigorating, to say the least. Some hotels and cafés offer cycles to rent for US\$1 to US\$3 per day.

If you want to purchase your own set of wheels for a big trip, P Ba Trieu and P Hué are the best places to look for bicycle shops.

## Bus

Public buses are clean and comfortable, and the fare is just 3500d. Pick up a copy of the *Xe Buyt Hanoi* (Hanoi Bus Map; 5000d)

## GETTING TO CHINA

The busiest border crossing to China is near Dong Dang (open 7am to 5pm), 20km north of Lang Son in northeastern Vietnam. The border post itself is at Huu Nghi Quan (Friendship Gate), 3km north of Dong Dang. You need to organise your Chinese visa before reaching the border; Hanoi is the easiest place to do this.

Catch a bus from Hanoi to Lang Son (50,000d, 2½ hours), a small minibus (5000d) to Dong Dang and a *xe om* (20,000d) to the border. On the Chinese side, it's 20 minutes from the border to Pingxiang by bus or a shared taxi. Pingxiang is connected by train and bus to Nanning.

Trains from Hanoi to Beijing (US\$125) via the Friendship Gate depart the capital at 6.30pm on Tuesday and Friday, a 48-hour journey that involves a three-hour stop for border formalities.

## GETTING TO LAOS

Be aware that unscrupulous travel agencies sell bus tickets purportedly going to various destinations in Laos, when in fact they drop travellers at the Lao border without onward transport. Talk to other travellers before booking through an agency.

### To Kaew Neua

The Cau Treo–Kaew Neua border (open 7am to 6pm) is 96km west of Vinh. While it's one of the most travelled routes, especially by tour buses making the Hanoi–Vientiane run (US\$25, 24 hours), there are still many horror stories arising from the trip.

If you're eschewing the Vientiane-bound bus (available from guesthouses and traveller cafés in Hanoi), the *Reunification Express* train is a good way to get to Vinh (124,000d, five to seven hours, six daily) from Hanoi. Buses from Vinh to Tay Son (formerly Trung Tam; 10,000d) leave 10 times a day between 6am and 2pm; a lot of travellers have reported bad experiences on this bus, including chronic overcharging and being kicked off in the middle of nowhere. From Tay Son it's a further 25km to the border through some spectacular forested country. Take a minibus or hire a motorbike to cover this last stretch; both cost 50,000d. There is absolutely nothing at the border except the border post itself, so stock up on water and snacks in Tay Son.

The Vietnamese border guards have been known to close the country for lunch any time from 11.30am to 1.30pm. It's also quite common for them to ask for a US\$1 to stamp your visa.

From the Vietnamese side it's a short walk to the Laos border, where 30-day Lao visas (US\$30) are available. Once in the country there's a decent amount of transport options.

See p362 for information on travelling from Laos to Vietnam.

### To Nam Khan

The Nam Can–Nam Khan border crossing (open 7am to 6pm) to Phonsavan in Laos can be a marathon trip – and you must have your visa arranged beforehand. From Hanoi, the first order of business is to get to Vinh. The *Reunification Express* train (124,000d, five to seven hours, six daily) is the most reliable method. On Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday it's possible to catch a bus at 6am from Vinh to Phonsavan (US\$12, 11 hours); book through **Mr Lam** (☎ 038-383 5783). Otherwise catch a morning bus from Vinh to Muang Xen (29,000d, seven hours), which departs when full.

from almost any bookshop with a decent map selection.

## Cyclo

Around the city centre, most *cyclo* rides should cost around 10,000d. Realize that the asking price can be two or three times higher than the final, and fair, price. If it sounds like too much, start walking. Longer rides – from the Old Quarter to the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum Complex – are in the 20,000d to 30,000d range.

The *cyclo* drivers in Hanoi are less likely to speak English than the ones in HCMC, so take a map, paper and pencil.

## Motorcycle

Walk 5m down any major street and you'll be bombarded by offers for *xe om*. They should cost about the same as a *cyclo* and are infinitely quicker. Insist on getting to your final destination, as occasionally to save time drivers like to drop people off a few blocks early.

If you fervently desire to ride by yourself in Hanoi, make absolutely sure to closely observe driving patterns before revving up.

## Taxi

Flag fall is around 10,000d to 15,000d, which takes you 1km to 2km; every kilometre thereafter costs about 8000d. Bear in mind that there are dodgy operators with high-speed meters. Try to use the more reliable companies:

**Airport Taxi** (☎ 873 3333)

**Hanoi Taxi** (☎ 853 5353)

**Mai Linh Taxi** (☎ 822 2666)

**Taxi CP** (☎ 824 1999)

## AROUND HANOI

It takes only a short journey before the city soon falls away and is replaced with a scenic countryside filled with handicraft villages and ancient pagodas. The area also has two stand-

Grab a motorbike for the spectacular 25km uphill run to the border (50,000d) and get ready to wait around for infrequent public transport on the Laos side.

See p380 for information on doing the trip in the opposite direction.

### To Na Maew

The crossing at Nam Xoi–Na Maew (open 7am to 6pm) in Thanh Hoa province is the most remote crossing into Laos, set in a mountainous area 175km northwest of Thanh Hoa city and 70km east of Sam Neua in Laos.

Trains between Hanoi and Thanh Hoa city (67,000d, three to four hours, six daily) are quick and reliable, but we've heard reports of minibus drivers demanding 300,000d for the long, bumpy journey from Thanh Hoa to Na Maew – over six times the going rate. The best thing to do is to buy a ticket at Thanh Hoa bus station (40,000d), but last we heard this bus ran irregularly, sometimes only once a week. Needless to say, travellers are advised to consider a different crossing into Laos.

See p383 for information on doing the trip in the opposite direction.

### To Tay Trang

The Lao border at Tay Trang, gateway to Phongsali province, is only 34km from Dien Bien Phu. It opened in April 2007, and there was a collective cheer from travellers who had been hearing for years that this crossing was on the verge of opening.

At the time of writing it was possible to get Laos visas on arrival, but double-check with the Laos embassy before making the trek. **Vietnam Airlines** (code VN; ☎ in Hanoi 04-943 9660; www.vietnamairlines.com) operates a daily service between Hanoi and Dien Bien Phu; otherwise, take a bus to Dien Bien Phu from Hanoi's Kim Ma or Son La bus stations (100,000d to 120,000d, 16 hours). It's also possible – but not easy – to piece together bus rides to Dien Bien Phu from Lao Cai if you're prepared to sleep a night or two in small towns so you can catch public transport in the early morning.

From Dien Bien Phu, there's a bus at 5.30am on Monday, Wednesday and Friday to the transit hub (relatively speaking) of Muang Khua, 75km inside Laos (60,000d). Travellers say there's no other public transport on the Laos side of the border, so unless you're travelling under your own steam – the crossing is already much loved by cyclists and motorcyclists – this bus is the only option.

See p384 for details on crossing the border in the reverse direction.

out national parks – including one of Ho Chi Minh's personal favourites – and the karst formations that seemingly dropped from the sky into Tam Coc are a must-see.

## HANDICRAFT VILLAGES

There are numerous villages surrounding Hanoi that specialise in particular cottage industries. Visiting these villages can make a rewarding day trip, though you'll need a good guide to make the journey worthwhile. Traveller cafés in Hanoi (p832) offer day tours covering several handicraft villages.

**Bat Trang** is known as the ceramic village. You can watch artisans create superb ceramic vases and other masterpieces in their kilns. Bat Trang is located 13km southeast of Hanoi.

You can see silk cloth being produced on a loom in **Van Phuc**, a silk village that is 8km southwest of Hanoi in Ha Tay province. There's also a small produce market every morning.

**So**, known for its delicate noodles, is where the yam and cassava flour for noodles are milled. It is in Ha Tay province, about 25km southwest of Hanoi.

The locals in **Le Mat** raise snakes for the upmarket restaurants in Hanoi, and for producing medicinal spirits. Le Mat is 7km northeast of central Hanoi.

**Dong Ky** survives by producing beautiful, traditional furniture inlaid with mother-of-pearl. It is 15km northeast of Hanoi.

Other handicraft villages in the region produce conical hats, delicate wooden bird cages and herbs.

## PERFUME PAGODA

The **perfume Pagoda** (Chua Huong; boat journey & admission 35,000d), about 60km southwest of Hanoi by road, is a complex of pagodas and Buddhist shrines built into the limestone cliffs of **Huong Tich Mountain** (Mountain of the Fragrant Traces). The pagoda is

a highlight of the area; the scenery resembles that of Halong Bay, though you're on a river rather than by the sea.

Vast numbers of Buddhist pilgrims come here during a festival that begins in the middle of the second lunar month and lasts until the last week of the third lunar month. These dates usually end up corresponding to March and April. Also keep in mind that weekends tend to draw large crowds, with the attendant litter, vendors and noise.

If you want to do the highly recommended scenic river trip, you need to travel from Hanoi by tour or car to My Duc (two hours), then take a small boat rowed by two women to the foot of the mountain (1½ hours).

The main pagoda area is about a 4km walk up from where the boat lets you off. Two bits of advice: be in decent shape, and bring good walking shoes. The path on this two-hour-plus climb to the top is very steep in places, and when wet, the ground can get very slippery. Shorts are considered disrespectful at the pagoda; wear long pants and long-sleeved shirts.

Hanoi's travel agencies and traveller cafés (see p832) offer day tours to the pagoda for as little as US\$9, inclusive of transport, guide and lunch (drinks excluded). If you're going with a group tour, prices start at around US\$15. Private small group tours start at around US\$80 per person. You can also rent a motorbike to get there on your own; it takes around two to three hours to drive.

## BA VI NATIONAL PARK

☎ 034 / elev 1276m

Centred on scenic Ba Vi Mountain (Nui Ba Vi), **Ba Vi National Park** (☎ 881 205; admission per person/motorbike 10,000/5000d) boasts more than 2000 flowering plants. There are trekking opportunities through the forested slopes of the mountain, and those who climb up to the summit will be rewarded with a spectacular view of the Red River valley – at least between April and December, when the mist doesn't hide the landscape.

**Ba Vi Guesthouse** (☎ 881 197; r 120,000-150,000d; ☺ ☹) spreads over several blocks in the heart of the park. Prices are an extra 50,000d per room on weekends and there's a big swimming pool that is chaos in the summer months. Go for one of the less-noisy guesthouses away from the pool and restaurant area if you're here on a weekend. You *must*

have your passport with you to check into the guesthouse here.

The park restaurant serves good, cheap, fresh-cooked food; a tasty meal for two costs around 50,000d, so make this your lunch stop if you're on a day trip. The toilets are terrible – pee behind a tree.

Ba Vi National Park is about 65km west of Hanoi, and is not served by public transport. Make sure your driver knows you want to go to the park rather than Ba Vi town.

## NINH BINH

☎ 030 / pop 53,000

Although it started as a travel hub due to its proximity to Tam Coc (9km away; opposite), Hoa Lu (12km; opposite) and Cuc Phuong National Park (45km; opposite), it has evolved into a slow-paced destination in its own right – a welcome respite if you've just escaped the bustle of Hanoi.

The surrounding countryside is gorgeous, with water buffalos, golden-green rice paddies, majestic limestone formations and more. There are plenty of sights in the vicinity to justify a stay of several days. While not a difficult place to visit, Ninh Binh seems to attract interesting travellers with a zest for new experiences. It's a great place to make travel buddies.

## Sleeping & Eating

Folks who run guesthouses in Ninh Binh have a reputation for honest, friendly service, although we've had reports of a tout at the train station (claiming to be a guesthouse owner) becoming abusive if travellers chose to ignore his offer. All the places listed here can arrange tours and hire motorbikes and bicycles. And in case you're headed that way, tours to Sapa (p849) can be booked more cheaply here than in Hanoi.

**Queen Mini-Hotel** (☎ 871 874; 21 Đ Hoang Hoa Tham; dm US\$3; r US\$5-15; ☺) Though only 30m from Ninh Binh train station, it's a quiet place to stay with a good restaurant.

**our pick** **Xuan Hoa Hotel** (☎ 880 970; 31D P Minh Khai; dm US\$3; r US\$8-15; ☺) Mr Xuan has received great reports from readers for his fatherly manner and the cooking from his wife has thrilled some people so much they swear it's the best food in Vietnam. Find the hotel 350m south of the main bridge intersecting Hwy 1, on the other side of a small reservoir.

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

**Thuy Anh Hotel** (☎ 871 602; 55A P Truong Han Sieu; r US\$15-40; ☺ ☹) A long-time family-run backpacker favourite, this place has grown into a busy, clean hotel that pulls in the tour groups. It has a large restaurant, rooftop bar and diversions including a dart board and pool table.

## Getting There & Away

The bus station in Ninh Binh is located near the Lim Bridge, just below the overpass to Phat Diem. Regular public buses leave almost hourly for the Giap Bat bus station in Hanoi (28,000d, 2½ hours, 93km). Ninh Binh is also a stop for open-tour buses between Hanoi (US\$4, two hours) and Hué (US\$6, 10 hours), which drop off and pick up passengers at some of the hotels. If it's not a scheduled stop, friendly pleading usually works on drivers.

Ninh Binh's **train station** (☎ 673 619; 1 Đ Hoang Hoa Tham) is a scheduled stop for the *Reunification Express* trains, with destinations including Hanoi (40,000d, two to 2½ hours, three daily), Thanh Hoa (20,000d, one to 1½ hours, two daily, 60km) and Hué (205,000d, 12½ to 13½ hours, two daily).

## AROUND NINH BINH

### Tam Coc

Known as 'Halong Bay on the Rice Paddies' for its huge rock formations jutting out of vibrant green rice paddies, Tam Coc definitely gives Halong Bay a run for its money.

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

The boat trip takes about two hours and tickets are sold at the small booking office by the car park. Even on cloudy days, bring sunscreen and a hat or umbrella, as there's no shade in the boats. It pays to arrive early in the morning or around mid-afternoon to avoid the day-tripping crowds from Hanoi.

Restaurants are plentiful at Tam Coc, and if you want to see where all the embroidery comes from, you can visit **Van Lan village**, famous for its embroidery. Here local artisans

make napkins, tablecloths, pillowcases and T-shirts.

About 2km past Tam Coc is **Bich Dong**, a cave with a built-in temple. Getting there is easy enough by river or road.

Tam Coc is 9km southwest of Ninh Binh. Follow Hwy 1A south and turn west at the Tam Coc turn-off. Ninh Binh hotels run day tours, but it is more fun to make your own way by bicycle or motorbike; there is a 2000d parking fee. Hotel staff can also advise you on some beautiful back roads that link Tam Coc with Hoa Lu. Traveller cafés in Hanoi book day trips to Tam Coc and Hoa Lu; the fast-food version goes for about US\$15, but it's closer to US\$20 with a smaller group, comfortable vehicle and professional guide.

### Hoa Lu

The scenery here resembles nearby Tam Coc, though Hoa Lu has an interesting historical twist. Hoa Lu was the capital of Vietnam under the Dinh dynasty (968–80) and the Le dynasties (980–1009). The site was a suitable choice for a capital city due to its proximity to China and the natural protection afforded by the region's bizarre landscape.

The **ancient citadel** (admission 10,000d) of Hoa Lu, most of which, sadly, has been destroyed, once covered an area of about 3 sq km. The outer ramparts encompassed temples, shrines and the palace where the king held court. The royal family lived in the inner citadel.

There is no public transport to Hoa Lu, which is 12km northwest of Ninh Binh. Most travellers get here by bicycle, motorbike or car; guesthouses in Ninh Binh can provide basic maps for guidance. Hanoi's traveller cafés (p832) organise day tours combining visits to Hoa Lu and Tam Coc.

## CUC PHUONG NATIONAL PARK

Ho Chi Minh personally took time off from the war in 1963 to dedicate **Cuc Phuong National Park** (☎ 848 006; www.cucphuongtourism.com; adult/child 40,000/20,000d), one of Vietnam's first and most important reserves. The hills are laced with grottos and the climate is subtropical at the park's lower elevations.

Excellent trekking opportunities abound in the park, including a trek (8km around) to an enormous **1000-year-old tree** (*Tetrameles nudiflora*, for botany geeks), and to a **Muong village** where you can also go rafting. A guide is not essential for short walks, but is

recommended for long trips and mandatory for longer treks.

During the wet season (July to September) leeches are common in the park; the best time to visit is between December and April. Try to visit during the week, as weekends and Vietnamese school holidays get hectic.

One marvellous organisation based in the park is the **Endangered Primate Rescue Center** (☎ 848 002; www.primatocenter.org; admission free; 🕒 9-11am & 1-4pm), run by German biologists. The centre is home to around 120 rare monkeys bred in captivity or confiscated from illegal traders. These gibbons, langurs and lorises are rehabilitated, studied and, whenever possible, released back into their native environments or into semiwild protected areas.

Guided tours of the primate centre are free but must be arranged from the main park office. Consider making a donation, or buying some postcards or a poster to support this critical conservation project.

### Sleeping & Eating

The best place to stay, if you want to wake up and trek, is in the centre of the park at the **Bong Substation** (18km from the gate). Besides a restaurant and snack shop, there are rooms in a concrete, cold-water **stilt house** (s/d with shared bathroom US\$6/12) and a few rooms with hot water in the **bungalows** (r US\$25 🏠); electricity is an evening-only affair. Nearby is a huge river-fed swimming pool.

There's another **stilt house** (r US\$5) near the park headquarters. **Camp sites** (US\$2) are also offered here, but you need to bring your own gear. Rooms in the park's **guesthouse** (d US\$10-25; 🏠) or detached **bungalows** (r US\$20; 🏠) can be reserved by contacting **Cuc Phuong National Park** (☎ 848 006; www.cucphuongtourism.com; Nho Quan District, Ninh Binh province), or its **Hanoi office** (off Map pp826-7; ☎ 04-829 2604; 1P Doc Tan AP, Hanoi). All the accommodation here has hot water. There's a stilt house dorm exclusively for large groups and detached bungalows 2km from the park headquarters on **Mac Lake** with similar pricing.

### Getting There & Away

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

## NORTHERN VIETNAM

This is where the magic happens. Here in the head of this dragon-shaped country are many of Vietnam's best sights; limestone cliffs looming in Halong Bay like so many ancient guardians, terraced rice paddies stepping up the side of mountains and colourful gangs of hill-tribe women jogging towards you with warm hellos.

A highly recommended journey from Hanoi is the 'northwest loop'. Head first for Mai Chau, followed by Son La and Dien Bien Phu, then north to Lai Chau, Sapa, Lao Cai, Bac Ha and back to Hanoi. This loop route requires a 4WD or motorbike on many sections, and you should allow at least a week for the trip.

### HALONG BAY

With more than 3000 islands rising from the emerald waters of the Gulf of Tonkin, Halong Bay is a Unesco World Heritage site and one of the country's natural marvels. The vegetation-covered islands are dotted with innumerable grottos created by the wind and the waves, and visits to the caves – which ones depends on the weather – are a part of almost every visit here.

From February to April, the weather is often cold and rainy, and the ensuing fog can cause low visibility, although the temperature rarely falls below 10°C. Tropical storms are frequent during the summer months.

To see the islands and grottos, a boat trip is mandatory. Travellers can either book a two- or three-day Halong Bay tour at a traveller café in Hanoi (p832), or can head to Haiphong or Halong City themselves and book a day tour, or head to Cat Ba Island (p845) and explore the bay at their leisure.

Organised trips are reasonably priced, starting as low as US\$15 per person on a jam-packed 45-seat bus, and rising to US\$40 or more for small-group tours where you can sleep on a junk (recommended!). Most tours include transport, meals, accommodation and boat tours.

If you book a tour package, there is always a small chance that the boat trip may be cancelled due to bad weather. This may entitle you to a partial refund, but remember that the boat trip is only a small portion of the cost of the journey.

### Halong City

☎ 033 / pop 149,900

This is one of those travel hubs that stays a travel hub because it doesn't have a whole lot to offer besides access to Halong Bay. It does have a flourishing Thai massage and karaoke scene (read: prostitution).

### ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The town is bisected by a bay – the western side is called Bai Chay and in official schedules is usually treated as a separate city. It's just a short ferry ride (5000d) from the eastern side, known as Hon Gai. Accommodation can be found on both sides but Bai Chay has the bus and boat stations (300m south of the ferry pier), and has a better choice of hotels and restaurants.

**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.

### TOURS

You can wrangle a tour the day you arrive in Halong City, at the marina. If you catch a morning bus to Bai Chay from Hanoi, you can easily grab some lunch before heading to the docks to hire a boat (100,000d). You'll find a lot of Vietnamese and foreign travellers milling around the harbour trying to arrange afternoon tours around the bay.

The **booking office** (🕒 8.30am-5.30pm; 3-4hr tour 30,000d) at the marina (1.5km west of Bai Chay), offers a range of tours at fixed prices. Tickets usually include admission to several caves and grottos on the bay. Day tours are fine, but staying overnight on a boat is recommended.

### GETTING TO CHINA

In the far northeast, the Mong Cai border crossing (open 7.30am to 4.30pm) is just opposite the Chinese city of Dongxing. To use this border, your Chinese visa *must* be issued in Hanoi. Hydrofoils (US\$12, three hours) to Mong Cai leave Bai Chay in Halong City at 8am and 1pm. Haiphong has a fast boat (200,000d, four hours) and an economical slower boat (70,000d); see p846 for details.

### SLEEPING

In Bai Chay, the heaviest concentration of hotels is in the 'hotel alley'. Expect to pay US\$10 to US\$15 for a double room with private bathroom and air-con. Up the hillside from Đ Halong, a couple of hotels with views of the bay provide an interesting alternative.

**Bong Lai Hotel** (☎ 845 658; d US\$10; 🏠) Clean, cheap and friendly.

**Thanh Hué Hotel** (☎ 847 612; 17 Đ Vuon Dao; r US\$10-12; 🏠) On the same hill as the Hoang Lan, the climb up is worth it.

**our pick Hoang Lan Hotel** (☎ 846 504; 17 Đ Vuon Dao; r US\$10-18; 🏠) Friendly hosts and the usual amenities: hot water, satellite TV and fridge, with the added bonus of a free breakfast.

**Hai Long Hotel** (☎ 846 378; d US\$12; 🏠) Of a slightly higher standard, this place is a bit bigger with more great views from the rooftop.

### EATING

The area just west of central Bai Chay contains a solid row of cheap restaurants. Over in Hon Gai, check out the string of local eateries along P Ben Doan. If you're on a tour, meals should be included in the price.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses from Hanoi leave the Gia Lam station for Bai Chay (35,000d, three hours). From Bai Chay to Hanoi, buses leave from Mien Tay bus station until 2.30pm. Buses to Haiphong (18,000d, two hours) leave from across the road of Mien Tay station. Buses bound for Mong Cai (35,000d, six hours) on the Chinese border leave from Hon Gai bus station.

Slow boats connecting Hon Gai with Haiphong (30,000d, three hours) leave at 6.30am, 11am and 4pm daily. Schedules are prone to change, so always check the times beforehand.

A slow boat connects Hon Gai to Cat Hai Island (30,000d, two hours) but departure times vary. At Cat Hai you can hop on another small ferry to get to Cat Ba Island (30,000d, two hours).

For China-bound travellers, there are hydrofoils to Mong Cai; see left for details.

### Cat Ba Island

☎ 031 / pop 7000

Laid-back and oddly endearing, the only populated island in Halong Bay is a nice

destination on its own but the location makes it a must-visit. Half of the island was declared a national park in 1986 in order to protect the diverse ecosystems and wildlife here. There are long beaches, lakes, waterfalls and grottos set in the spectacular limestone hills.

The most famous native here is the endangered Cat Ba langur; a golden-haired little monkey that has a punk-rock hairdo. The island's human population is concentrated in the southern part of the island, around the town of Cat Ba.

### INFORMATION

There are no banks in Cat Ba town, but there are a few jewellery stores north of the harbour that exchange dollars.

**Pacific Internet Café** (Per min 200d; ☎ 8am-7pm) Has a roomful of terminals.

**Post office** (☎ 7.30am-9pm Mon-Fri) Near the ferry landing on the main drag; international calls can be made from here.

**Tourism Information & Development Centre** (☎ 688 215; D 1-4) The staff here can bring you up to speed on transport options on and around Cat Ba, plus they have *Cat Ba Biosphere Reserve* maps.

### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Home to 32 species of monkey, wild boar and hedgehog, **Cat Ba National Park** (☎ 216 350; admission 15,000d, guide per day US\$5; ☎ dawn-dusk) has a myriad trekking opportunities. Even though a guide is not mandatory, it's recommended.

There's a very challenging 18km trek (five to six hours) through the park that many enjoy. You need a guide, transport to the trailhead and a boat to return, all of which can be arranged in Cat Ba town.

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).

**Hospital Cave** (Admission 30,000d) was used as a secret hospital during the American War – an amazing example of Vietnamese engineering born of necessity. It's best to ask the hotel or motorbike driver to call ahead to the colourful guardian of the cave, Vu Dinh Khoi, who served here during the American War.

The white-sand **Cat Co beaches** (called simply Cat Co 1, Cat Co 2 and Cat Co 3) are perfect places to lounge around for the day; however,

Cat Co 1 and 3 are being transformed into big resorts. Cat Co 2 is the least busy and the most attractive beach, also offering simple accommodation and camping (see right). To get there, take the wooden cliffside walkway connecting it to Cat Co 1.

The beaches are about 1km from Cat Ba town and can be reached on foot or by motorbike for about 10,000d.

### TOURS

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 town. Typical prices are US\$10 per person for day trips and US\$20 for a two-day/one-night trip.

### SLEEPING

Most of the island's hotels are concentrated along the bayfront in Cat Ba town. Room rates fluctuate greatly between high-season summer months (May to September) and the slower winter months (October to April). Listed here are winter prices, which you can often bargain down; high season rates are anywhere from two to six times as much as the low season rates.

**Giang Son Hotel** (☎ 888 214; d US\$45-15; ☎) On the western side of town, some rooms have great views of the rocky outcrop across the harbour and there's a decent restaurant downstairs.

**our pick Hoang Huong Hotel** (☎ 888 274; d US\$6-12; ☎) The front rooms of this family-run place have enormous windows looking out on the water.

**Tra My Hotel** (☎ 888 650; d US\$6-12) Right next to the Hoang Huong Hotel, the rooms look sparkling new and there are some rather oddly decorated tiles in some of the bathrooms – there was a topless woman in blue jeans above our tub.

**Quang Duc Family Hotel** (☎ 888 231; d US\$8; ☎) Cat Ba's original family-run hotel keeps quacking away, with rooms equipped with satellite TV.

**Tien Thang Hotel** (☎ 888 568; tienthanghotel@yahoo.com; r US\$10; ☎) It offers midrange standards at budget prices with satellite TV, big bathrooms and private sea-view balconies.

**Noble House** (☎ 888 363; www.hihostels.com, do a country search; D 1-4; r US\$10-30; ☎) Small in size, big in character, it has a 2nd-floor bar and a good restaurant downstairs that spills into the street.

If the town gets too busy, try a night in the rustic **guesthouse** (r 120,000d) over on Cat Co 2. The national park also has a **guesthouse** (r US\$10) offshore on Hon Cat Dua (Pineapple Island). If you want to camp here, you'll have to bring your own gear and plan on being self-sufficient for the night. Private boats (90,000d) and accommodation on the island can be arranged at Quang Duc Family Hotel.

### EATING & DRINKING

There are a number of small markets along the two small streets that intersect the main drag. A cheap beer stall opens up in the evening on the western side of the strip.

**Hoang Y** (mains 35,000d; ☎ lunch & dinner) Serves a variety of fantastic seafood and vegetarian dishes.

**Phuong Phuong** (☎ 888 254; meals 45,000d; ☎) Dinner is swimming in large tanks near the tables and sometimes the staff put up a large screen for sporting events.

**Green Mango** (☎ 887 151; D 1-4; mains 50,000-100,000d) The birth of cool in Cat Ba; if you don't want to cough up the price of dinner here, the outdoor patio is good for a drink and a long hour of smoking tobacco in hookahs (60,000d).

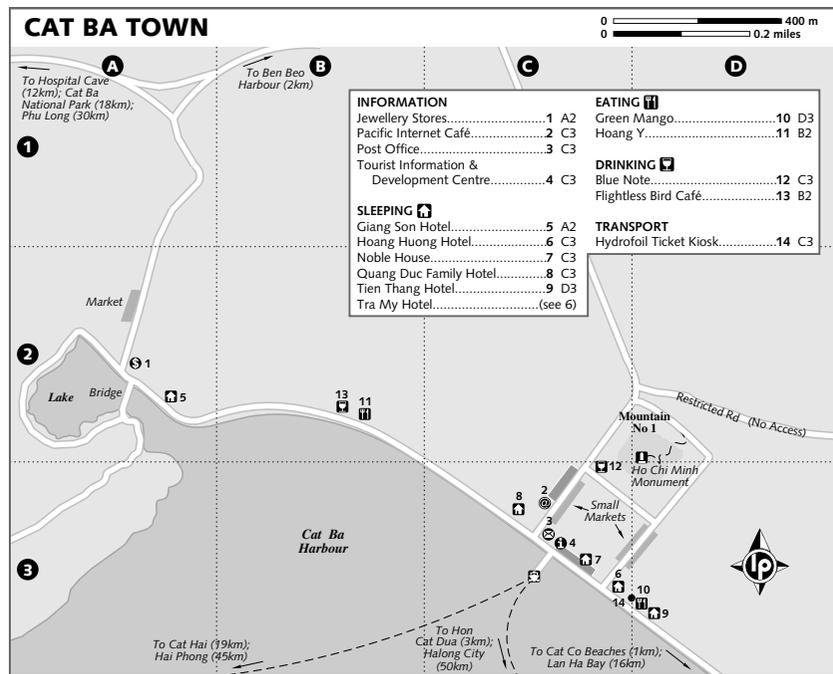
**Flightless Bird Cafe** (☎ 888 517; ☎ from 6.30pm) A hip waterfront spot that has darts, movies, music, books and Australian wine (20,000d a glass). The Kiwi owner is a good source of local information, and he'll even make you a packed lunch if you order ahead.

**Blue Note** (Đ Nui Ngoc) The place to rock the Cat Ba; besides a bar that stays open late it has a stage for karaoke and a big selection of English-language hits.

### GETTING THERE & AROUND

Cat Ba Island is 45km east of Haiphong, and 20km south of Halong City. Hydrofoils (70,000/90,000d, 45/75 minutes) travel daily between Cat Ba town and Haiphong; the longer boat trips provide lots of sightseeing on the way. Ask locally about departure times, which change frequently, and show up early if travelling during the high season. On Cat Ba there's a hydrofoil ticket kiosk about 100m east of the ferry landing, but you can also buy tickets at the landing a few hours before departure.

Another way to get from Halong City to Cat Ba is to hop on one of 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 hotels can help.

Most hotels can find you a cheap Chinese bicycle; inquire at Flightless Bird Cafe (p845) about mountain-bike rentals.

Motorbike rentals (with or without driver) are available from most of the hotels. If you're heading to the beaches or national park, pay the 2000d parking fee to ensure your vehicle isn't stolen or vandalised.

## Haiphong

☎ 031 / pop 1.67 million

Vietnam's third-most populous city retains a relaxed feel with its tall colonial-style buildings and tree-lined avenues. An important seaport and a major industrial centre, Haiphong is mostly used as a stepping-stone by travellers on their way to Cat Ba Island and Halong Bay. But, people who sit a spell find that it's a charming place to spend a day.

## INFORMATION

A number of ATMs and internet cafés line P Dien Bien Phu near the main tourist highlights.

**Main post office** (3 P Nguyen Tri Phuong) It's easy to spot, standing on a corner in dignified yellow.

**Vietcombank** (11 P Hoang Dieu; ☒ closed Sat) Cashes travellers cheques, does cash advances and has an ATM.

**Vietnam-Czech Friendship Hospital** (P Nha Thuong) In emergencies, get medical help here; otherwise head for Hanoi.

## SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The slow-paced appeal is enhanced by the **French colonial architecture** along the streets between the ferry landing and the Tam Bac bus station. The tree-shaded avenues in this neighbourhood make for a nice stroll if you've got time to kill.

**Du Hang Pagoda** (Chua Du Hang; 121 P Chua Hang; ☒ 7-11am & 1.30-5.50pm), founded three centuries ago and rebuilt several times since, has architectural elements that look Khmer-influenced. Just as cool is meandering along the narrow alley it's on, **P Chua Hang**, which is bustling with Haiphong street life.

## SLEEPING

**Hotel du Commerce** (☎ 384 2706; 62 P Dien Bien Phu; r US\$10-18; ☒) Housed in an old French Colonial building, basics include satellite TV, fridge and hot water.

**Duyen Hai Hotel** (☎ 384 2134; 6 Đ Nguyen Tri Phuong; r 200,000-300,000d; ☒) This is a good deal with a central location. The cheaper rooms are small but clean. All rooms come with TV and bathtubs.

**Khach San Thang Nam** (☎ 374 7216; vntourism.hp@bdvn.vnmail.vnd.net; 55 P Dien Bien Phu; r US\$15-18; ☒) This is one of the best all-rounders in town, with bright, clean rooms and modern conveniences.

## EATING

P Minh Khai offers a good selection of cheap eateries; and most hotel restaurants dish up variations on the fresh seafood available in Haiphong. Also check out P Quang Trung with its many cafés and *bia hoi*.

**Galaxy Cafe** (☎ 382 3530; 91 Dien Bien Phu; mains from 15,000d; ☒ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A friendly little place, the red wine *pho* with succulent chunks of beef (18,000d) is a winner.

**Com Vietnam** (☎ 384 1698; 4 P Hoang Van Thu; mains from 20,000d; ☒ lunch & dinner) It's consistently popular with locals thanks to affordable local seafood and Vietnamese specialities. It sometimes waits for the dinner crowd before it opens.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Be careful of the touts near the Haiphong ferry pier. They've been known to give misinformation on transport options to try to make a commission.

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

**Transtour** (☎ 384 1009) runs the *Mekong Express* (100,000d), which is the safest and most comfortable boat to Cat Ba; it also has a daily fast boat to Mong Cai (200,000d, four hours). **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. All boats leave from the **ferry Pier** (Đ Ben Binh), 10 minutes' walk from the centre of town.

Haiphong has three long-distance bus stations. Buses to Hanoi (35,000d, two hours) leave from **Tam Bac bus station** (P 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** (P Cu Chinh Lan) has buses to Bai Chay (Halong City; 25,000d, 1½ hours), and to/from Hanoi.

The express local train (22,000d, two hours) goes to Hanoi from the **Haiphong train station** (cnr Đ Luong Khanh Thien & Đ Pham Ngu Lao) at 6.25pm daily. There is also a train at 8.55pm (22,000d, 2½ hours). From Hanoi, trains leave **Tran Quy Cap station** (B station; ☎ 04-825 2628; P Tran Qui Cap) at 5.50am; other trains leave from Long Bien train station several times daily.

## BA BE NATIONAL PARK

☎ 0281 / elev 145m

Boasting waterfalls, rivers, deep valleys, lakes and caves, **Ba Be National park** (Ba Be Lakes; ☎ 894 014; fax 894 026; admission per person/car 10,000/20,000d) is surrounded by steep mountains that reach up to 1554m high. In other words, this place has it all.

The surrounding area is home to members of the Tay minority, who live in stilt homes. The park is a tropical rainforest area with more than 400 named plant species. The 300 wildlife species in the forest include bears, monkeys, bats and butterflies.

Ba Be (Three Bays) is in fact three linked lakes, the largest freshwater lake system in the country. The Nang River is navigable for 23km between a point 4km above Cho Ra and the **Dau Dang Waterfall** (Thac Dau Dang), which is a series of spectacular cascades between sheer walls of rock. The interesting **Puong Cave** (Hang Puong) is about 30m high and 300m long, and passes completely through a mountain. A navigable river flows through the cave.

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, or a one-day tour combining motorboat, a 3km or 4km walk, and a trip by dugout canoe; longer treks can also be arranged.

## 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 two-room **cottages** (r 275,000d) with air-con. There's a reasonable **restaurant** (mains 10,000-30,000d) – note that you'll need to place your order an hour or so before you want to eat.

Homestays at the **stilt houses** (per person 60,000d) in Pac Ngoi village, on the lakeshore, are becoming quite popular. The park office can

help organise this onsite or call ahead. 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

The lakes are 240km north of Hanoi. Most visitors to the national park get here by chartered vehicle from Hanoi and 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. Some traveller cafés in Hanoi (see p832) offer tours to Ba Be starting at US\$60 per day. The longer the tour the lower the price per day, usually.

It's possible to get here solo. 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.

## MAI CHAU

Mai Chau is one of the closest places to Hanoi where you can visit a hill-tribe village. The modern village is an unappealing sprawl, but as you emerge on the rice fields and scenes of rural life it is transformed into a real paradise. Most people here are ethnic White Thai, distantly related to tribes in Thailand, Laos and China. Although most locals no longer wear traditional dress, the Thai women are masterful weavers. Polite bargaining is the norm rather than endless haggling.

## Information

Guides can be hired for around US\$5 for a 7km to 8km walk. There is a popular 18km trek from **Lac village** (Ban Lac) in Mai Chau to **Xa Linh village**, near a mountain pass (elevation 1000m) on Hwy 6. Lac village is home to the White Thai people, while the inhabitants of Xa Linh are Hmong. The trek is quite strenuous to undertake in a day, so most people spend the night in a village along the way. Arrange a local guide and a car to meet you at the mountain pass for the journey back to Mai Chau.

Staying overnight in White Thai stilt houses and trekking to minority villages further afield

can also be arranged. Ask around the Mai Chau villages of Lac or Pom Coong. Be aware that Mai Chau sees a lot of tourists and has all the modern comforts: TVs, toilets and all.

Tourists must pay an admission fee of 5000d to enter Mai Chau, but the booth where the fee is collected is rarely staffed.

### Sleeping & Eating

Most backpackers prefer to stay a few hundred metres back from the main road in **White Thai stilt houses** (per person 50,000d) in Lac or Pom Coong villages. Most of these homes serve meals for about 20,000d and travellers are usually very pleased with their stay and the food. Reservations are not necessary, but it's advisable to arrive before dark.

Villagers will sometimes organise traditional song-and-dance performances in the evenings and anyone is free to join in the fun. A mild word of warning about the showers: the doors may have fairly large gaps between the walls; use your towel to good effect.

### Getting There & Away

Mai Chau is 135km southwest of Hanoi and just 5km south of Tong Dau junction on Hwy 6. There's no direct public transport to Mai Chau from Hanoi; however, buses to nearby Hoa Binh (25,000d, two hours) are plentiful. From Hoa Binh there are several scheduled buses to Mai Chau (20,000d, two hours) daily. Usually these stop at Tong Dau junction; a *xé om* from there to Mai Chau proper will cost about 15,000d.

Many traveller cafés and travel agencies in Hanoi (p832) run inexpensive trips to Mai Chau.

### LAO CAI

☎ 020 / pop 100,000

Travellers can raise their arms on the back of a motorbike here à la *Titanic* and truthfully exclaim, 'I'm on top of Vietnam!' One could almost bump into China by accident – that giant looms just 3km from the train station. Lao Cai is now the main hub for travellers journeying between Hanoi, Sapa and Kunming.

### Information

There is internet access across from the train station.

**BIDV bank** (Đ Thuy Hoa) Does currency exchange and has an ATM; it's on the west side of the river, near Lao Cai's bus station.

**Post office** (☎ 7am-7pm) If you're facing the train station, the post office stands directly to the left.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Binh Minh Hotel** (☎ 830 085; 39 P Nguyen Hué; d US\$7-10; ☎) It has very friendly staff, and clean rooms with all the basics.

**Gia Nga** (☎ 830 459; P Moi; s & d US\$8-10, shower & soap 20,000d; ☎) Very clean, and closest to the train station, this is good value. There's also a shower and luggage room for groggy arrival and departure clean-ups.

**Friendly Cafe** (☎ 832 759; 322 Đ Nguyen Hué; meals 15,000d, ☎; breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is a popular café located near the entrance of the train station.

**our pick Hoang Hai** (☎ 835 437; 339 322 Đ Nguyen Hué; meals 15,000d; ☎; breakfast, lunch & dinner) Good food and very friendly staff who will let you leave bags here.

### Getting There & Away

Lao Cai is 340km northwest of Hanoi. Minibuses to Sapa (25,000d, 1½ hours) leave regularly until late afternoon. Minibuses to Bac Ha (28,000d, two hours) leave several times daily; the last at 1pm. Sometimes there's a table-top ticket booth right before the station exit. This is where the Vietnamese buy bus tickets; it's the usual price but the buses fill up and leave right away. Train tickets to Hanoi (10 hours) start at 79,000d for a hard seat to 223,000d for an air-conditioned soft sleeper, and rise by about 10% at weekends. A motorbike taxi to the Chinese border will cost about 10,000d.

### GETTING TO CHINA

The Lao Cai–Hekou crossing (open 7am to 5pm), northwest of Hanoi, is popular with travellers making their way between northern Vietnam and China's Yunnan province. China is separated from Vietnam by a bridge over the Red River that pedestrians pay a 3000d toll to cross. The border is about 3km from Lao Cai train station; the short motorbike journey costs 15,000d. To get to Kunming, take a train to Lao Cai (see above), cross the border into China, and catch a midmorning or overnight sleeper bus (US\$11, 12 hours) or train (US\$10, 16 hours) from the Chinese border town of Hekou.

### CHINA GUIDEBOOKS CONFISCATED

Travellers entering China by road or rail from Vietnam report that Lonely Planet *China* guidebooks have been confiscated by border officials. This is due to sensitivity regarding maps of China that do not include Taiwan. Travellers should consider putting a cover on the book to make it less recognisable or copying crucial details.

### SAPA

☎ 020 / pop 36,200

Sapa is the most heavily toured place in northwestern Vietnam for good reason. Originally a hill station built by the French in 1922 it still feels like a mountain town, albeit a busy one during weekend markets. Hill-tribe women with colourful head gear, and some with retro-looking leggings, dye and sell their fabrics on the sidewalk while their children chase tourists. Hill-tribe men have an out-of-this-world look as they run errands on motorbikes wearing black petticoats with high collars, leather tunics, silver chain-link necklaces and bubble-visor helmets. This city in the clouds is nestled in spectacular scenery and makes a great base for day trips or overnights in the many hill-tribe villages nearby. Don't forget your warm clothes – Sapa is known for its cold, foggy winters.

### Information

A minute on the internet will cost you about 100d at guesthouses and travel agencies around town. Most hotels will exchange dollars for dong (at worse exchange rates than in Hanoi). Tour agencies can arrange a visa to China here, but it's much less expensive and quicker in Hanoi.

There is an official **Railway Booking Office** (☎ 871 480; ☎ 7.30-11am & 1.30-4pm) on P Cau May, which charges a 7000d service booking fee for seats, and 10,000d for a sleeper. It's probably best to buy train tickets to Hanoi here. Travellers have reported bad experiences buying tickets through hotels.

**Sapa Tourism Information & Promotion Centre** (☎ 871 975; 2 Đ Phan Xi Pang; ☎ 8.30-11.30am & 1.30-5.30pm) is a ground-floor kiosk in a French Colonial house set back from the street that can arrange local tour guides, provide information on lodging and has information for short-term volunteer work at nearby villages.

**BIDV** (☎ 872 569; Đ Ngu Chi Son; ☎ 7-11.30 & 1.30-4.30pm) is currently the best all-rounder in town, with an ATM, plus it changes travellers cheques and cash. It is by the lake in the new part of town.

### Sights & Activities

Surrounding Sapa are the Hoang Lien Mountains, including **Fansipan**, which at 3143m is Vietnam's highest peak. The trek from Sapa to the summit and back usually takes two nights and three days, with an overnight in a base camp both nights. Treks can be arranged at guesthouses and travel agencies around town. Check these:

**Auberge Hotel** (☎ 871 243; auberge@sapadiscovery.com; P Cau May)

**Mountain View Hotel** (Ninh Hong Guesthouse; ☎ 871 334; ninhhong@hn.vnn.vn; 54A P Cau May)

**Topas Travel** (☎ 871 331; www.topas-adventure-vietnam.com; 28 P Cau May) Also offers half-day mountain-bike tours (US\$28) that are an absolute must for maniacs who love flying down big hills.

Some of the better-known sights around Sapa include **Tram Ton Pass**, **Thac Bac** (Silver Falls) and **Cau May** (Cloud Bridge), which spans the Muong Hoa River.

**Ham Rong Mountain** (P Ham Rong; admission 30,000d; ☎ 7am-7pm, open later for cultural events) is perfect for those who are eager to see a bit of nature but are too tired after the night train to commit to a full-day trek; this is more a manicured light-trekking area than a national park.

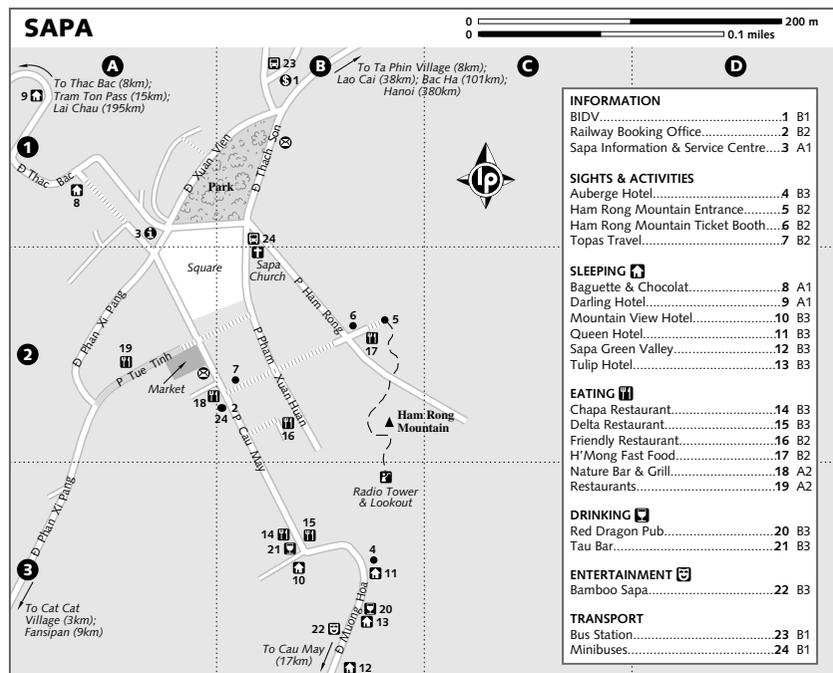
### Sleeping

**our pick Queen Hotel** (☎ 871 301; sapaqueenhotel@yahoo.com; Đ Muong Hoa; r US\$5-10) Has fun and friendly staff and all rooms have hot water and TV. Aim high for views.

**Sapa Green Valley** (☎ 872 164; sapawelcomes@vnn.vn; 45 29 Đ Muong Hoa; r US\$6-8) The rooms are less fresh than at other places but it doesn't get much cheaper than this.

**Mountain View Hotel** (☎ 871 334; hong64@yahoo.com; 54A P Cau May; s & d US\$6-15) The hotel has a great location in the centre of everything and lives up to its name with stunning views.

**Tulip Hotel** (☎ 871 914; 29 Đ Muong Hoa; r US\$7-8) The Tulip has small, simple, clean rooms and some have terrific views. One could do wind sprints on its huge terrace to train for hard-core trekking and it serves French and Vietnamese food in its restaurant.



**Darling Hotel** (☎ 835 463; Đ Thac Bac; r US\$10-12) A good deal considering that even the cheapest rooms are huge and have a working fireplace. There's satellite TV and real bathtubs, and shared balconies that have great views.

**Baguette & Chocolat** (☎ 871 766; Đ Thac Bac; r US\$18) Rents out four cosy rooms with names such as 'Cookies', but book well in advance. A favourite for couples and families, it has a pleasant restaurant, and your bill goes toward providing valuable career training for disadvantaged local kids.

## Eating

If none of the suggestions below work there are also several small family-run restaurants serving inexpensive Vietnamese food on P Tue Tinh in the market area.

**H'Mong Fast Food** (Ban H'Mohng; ☎ 216 651; P Ham Rong; mains 15,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The menu is outside and nothing is in English but it's easy to point to the simmering Hmong goodies on display. The soup with floating dumplings is very good.

**our pick Nature Bar & Grill** (☎ 872 094; 24 P Cau May; meals 15,000-50,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Offers

an extensive menu of Vietnamese food and a few Western dishes set in what feels like a mountain lodge.

**Friendly Restaurant** (P Cau May; mains 20,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Up some stairs off P Cau May and set between two other good and cheap eateries, what sets this place apart is the tastiness of the food.

**Chapa Restaurant** (☎ 871 045; 40 P Cau May; mains from 25,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The nicest of the traveller cafés that line P Cau May, it has the usual suspects on the menu and some slightly pricier Vietnamese specialities.

**Delta Restaurant** (☎ 871 799; P Cau May; mains US\$5; ☺ lunch & dinner) The taste of Italy in Sapa, Delta turns out the most authentic pizzas in town. It also boasts a good selection of wines and offers take-away and delivery.

## Drinking & Entertainment

Depending on the night of the week and season you may have the undivided attention of the barman; trekking seems to put a damper on late-night carousing. A number of new places are springing up but these two are your best bets for signs of life.

**Red Dragon Pub** (☎ 872 085; 21 Đ Muong Hoa) A veritable wee Britain, upstairs is the go-to place for backpackers of all ages to have a drink, a meal, or make a friend.

**Tau Bar** (☎ 871 322; 42 P Cau May) Claiming to be 'slightly lounge', Tau brings a different kind of cool to the mountains of the north. There is a DIY jukebox on the computer, the cocktails are mixed by a pro and there is a good pool table.

**Bamboo Sapa** (☎ 871 076; bamboosapa@hn.vnn.vn; P Cau May) Hosts a free traditional hill-tribe music-and-dance show from 8.30pm Friday and Saturday.

## Getting There & Away

The gateway to Sapa is Lao Cai, 38km away on the Chinese border. Buses to points west, such as Dien Bien Phu, pass through a few times a day from Lao Cai. Sapa's bus station (for minibuses in this case) is in the north of town.

Minibuses make the trip from the Lao Cai train station regularly between 5am and 5pm (25,000d, 1½ hours). In Sapa, minibuses wait in front of the church but do not run to any particular schedule. The advertised rate of hotel minibus services to Bac Ha (110km) for the Sunday market is around US\$10 per person.

For excursions out of Sapa, you can hire a self-drive motorbike for about US\$6 per day or take one with a driver for about US\$10. Renting a jeep with a driver is a fun way to tool around, and costs about US\$12 for a half-day for up to four people. Driving a motorbike from Hanoi to Sapa is feasible, but the distance is 380km. The last 38km are straight uphill – not advised on a bicycle unless you are a very serious and in-shape cyclist.

## Getting Around

Downtown Sapa can be walked in 20 minutes. Cat Cat village (3km) is an easy downhill walk through green fields and small houses along a winding path.

## BAC HA

☎ 020 / pop 70,200

A quieter and slightly less scenic alternative to Sapa, Bac Ha is a small highland town that becomes downright hectic during the Sunday market. Unless travellers are looking for a souvenir water buffalo or horse, the most interesting thing for sale here is moonshine – rice wine, cassava wine and corn liquor.

There's an entire area devoted to Bac Ha's famous hooch at the Sunday market.

Arriving midweek makes for a relaxing visit and good base to explore the surrounding highlands. Around 900m above sea level, it is noticeably warmer than Sapa. There are 10 Montagnard ethnic groups that live around Bac Ha and many of them sell their handicraft wares: the colourful Flower Hmong are the most visible.

## Sights & Activities

### BAN PHO VILLAGE

The Hmong villagers in Ban Pho are some of the kindest people you'll meet in Vietnam. Ban Pho is a 7km return trip from Bac Ha. You can take a loop route to get there and back.

Other nearby villages include **Trieu Cai** (8km return), **Na Ang** (6km return) and **Na Hoi** (4km return). Ask at your hotel for directions.

### MONTAGNARD MARKETS

Other than the colourful Sunday **Bac Ha market** in town, there are several interesting markets nearby, all within about 20km of each other.

**Can Cau market**, one of Vietnam's most exotic open-air markets, is 20km north of Bac Ha and just 9km south of the Chinese border. The market runs on Saturday.

**Coc Ly market** takes place on Tuesday, about 35km from Bac Ha. There's a pretty good road, or you can go by road and river; ask at hotels in Bac Ha to organise trips.

**Lung Phin market** is between Can Cau market and Bac Ha town, about 12km from the town. It's less busy, and runs on Sunday.

## Sleeping & Eating

There are quite a lot of hotels in Bac Ha but very few stand out from the pack. Room rates tend to increase on weekends when tourists flock to town for the Sunday market; it can be hard to find a room at these times.

**Dai Thanh Hotel** (☎ 880 448; r 60,000d) Rooms include hot water, TV, mosquito net and ceiling fan – a real steal.

**Toan Thang Hotel** (☎ 880 444; r 80,000d) Set in a sweet but solid wooden house, the rooms here are very good value. All include a fan, local TV and a hot-water bathroom.

**Minh Quan Hotel** (☎ 880 222; r 120,000-150,000d) Enjoy a bird's-eye view of the Sunday market from this comfortable hotel. Rooms include

smart bathrooms and some have immense views of the mountains beyond.

**Cong Phu Restaurant** (☎ 880 254; mains 15,000-30,000d) No, the waiters don't look like extras out of a Bruce Lee movie, but they do offer wholesome meals. Just tick the boxes on the photocopy menus and food will arrive.

### Getting There & Away

Minibuses depart from Lao Cai for Bac Ha (28,000d, two hours) around 6.30am and 1pm daily. Buses from Bac Ha leave for Lao Cai between 5.30am and 1pm. The road is well maintained and the rural scenery sublime.

Locals on motorbikes will do the Lao Cai-Bac Ha run for about US\$10, or even Sapa-Bac Ha (110km) for US\$15, but it's a long way to be on the back of a bike. Sunday minibus tours from Sapa to Bac Ha start at US\$10, including transport, guide and trekking to a minority village. On the way back to Sapa you can bail out in Lao Cai and catch the night train back to Hanoi.

Bac Ha is about 330km (10 hours) from Hanoi. Some cafés in Hanoi (see p832) offer four-day bus trips to Sapa, with a visit to Bac Ha included.

## CENTRAL COAST

Stretching from the former capital of Vietnam down to the ancient trading Port of Hoi An, the coast is sprinkled with the country's most cultured cities and sites that include Cham ruins and storeyed pagodas. The area also saw the fiercest fighting in the American War; battlegrounds where blood and sacrifice changed the course of a nation now lie desolate.

### HUÉ

Big enough to have plenty to see and do but not so big that it's overwhelming, Hué is one of Vietnam's cultural, religious and educational centres. Hué served as the political capital from 1802 to 1945 under the 13 emperors of the Nguyen dynasty. Today, Hué's decaying, opulent tombs of the Nguyen emperors and grand, crumbling Citadel comprise a Unesco World Heritage site. Most of these architectural attractions lie along the northern side of the Song Huong (Perfume River).

For rest, refreshment and recreation, the river's south side is where the action's at.

### Information

#### INTERNET ACCESS

There are plenty of internet cafés along the northern end of Đ Hung Vuong and around the intersection of Đ Nguyen Tri Phuong. Many hotels and traveller cafés also offer internet access for 6000d to 10,000d per hour.

#### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Hué Central Hospital** (Benh Vien Trung Uong Hué; ☎ 822 325; 16 Đ Le Loi) Close to Phu Xuan Bridge.

#### MONEY

It would take an effort miss the many ATMs here. Some safe bets for travellers cheques and money exchange:

**Industrial & Development Bank** (☎ 823 361; 41 Đ Hung Vuong) Same services as Vietcombank, sans ATM.

**Vietcombank** (54 Đ Hung Vuong) Exchanges travellers cheques, processes cash advances and has an ATM. Another convenient branch with a 24-hour ATM is on Đ Hung Vuong in front of Hotel Saigon Morin.

#### POST

**Branch post office** (18 Đ Le Loi) Near the river.

**Main post office** (8 Đ Hoang Hon Thiem; ☎ 6.30am-9.30pm) In an imposing building that's hard to miss, this post office offers international calling, phone cards, and processes domestic and international packages.

#### TRAVEL AGENCIES

See opposite for more travel-agency options.

**Mandarin Cafe** (☎ 821 281; mandarin@dng.vn.vn; 3 Đ Hung Vuong) Watched over by the eagle eyes of photographer Mr Cu, this place is great for information, transport and tours. You can also eat here (see p857).

**Sinh Café** (☎ 823 309; www.sinhcafevn.com; 7 Đ Nguyen Tri Phuong) Books open-tour buses and buses to Laos.

### Sights & Activities

#### CITADEL

Give yourself plenty of time to explore one of Vietnam's disintegrating treasures, Hué's **Citadel** (Kinh Thanh). A former imperial city on the northern bank of the Song Huong, and later heavily bombed by the Americans, much of it is now used for agriculture but its scope and beauty still impress.

Construction of the moated Citadel, by Emperor Gia Long, began in 1804. The emperor's official functions were carried out in the **Imperial Enclosure** (Dai Noi, or Hoang Thanh; admission 55,000d; ☎ 6.30am-5.30pm), a 'citadel within

the Citadel'. Inside the 6m-high, 2.5km-long wall is a surreal world of deserted gardens and ceremonial halls.

Within the Imperial Enclosure is the **Forbidden Purple City** (Tu Cam Thanh), which was reserved for the private life of the emperor. The only servants allowed inside were eunuchs, who posed no threat to the royal concubines. Nowadays, all are welcome.

#### ROYAL TOMBS

Set like gems on the banks of the Song Huong, the **Tombs of the Nguyen Dynasty** (☎ 8-11.30am & 1.30-5.30pm) are 7km to 16km south of Hué. Visiting several tombs can be expensive, with *xe om* (motorbike taxi) shuttles and individual admission – if you visit only one, make it Tu Duc or Minh Mang.

**Tomb of Tu Duc** (admission 55,000d), Emperor Tu Duc's tomb complex, is a majestic site, laced with frangipani and pine trees and set alongside a small lake. The buildings are beautifully designed. Near the entrance, the pavilion where the concubines used to lounge is a peaceful spot on the water.

Perhaps the most majestic of the Royal Tombs is the **Tomb of Minh Mang** (admission 55,000d), who ruled from 1820 to 1840. This tomb is renowned for its architecture, which blends into the natural surroundings.

The best way to visit the tombs is on a river cruise (see p856).

#### PLACES OF WORSHIP

**Thien Mu Pagoda** (Đ Le Duan; ☎ 7.30-11.30am & 1.30-5.30pm), an octagonal pagoda, is one of the most famous structures in Vietnam. Founded in 1601, it was the home pagoda of Thich Quang

Duc, who publicly burned himself to death in 1963 to protest the policies of president Ngo Dinh Diem. Thien Mu is on the banks of the Song Huong, 4km southwest of the Citadel.

Monks and students gather to study in the peaceful orchid-lined courtyard behind the sanctuary of **Bao Quoc Pagoda** (Ham Long Hill, Phuong Duc District; ☎ 7.30-11.30am & 1.30-4.30pm). To get here, head south from Đ Le Loi on Đ Dien Bien Phu and turn right immediately after crossing the railway tracks.

Surrounded by trees and with a big koi pond in the middle, one doesn't have to be a Buddhist to sense something special at **Tu Hieu Pagoda**. Occasionally Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh – nominated by American civil rights icon Martin Luther King Jr for a Nobel Peace prize – comes to give lectures. The pagoda is located at Duong Xuan Thuong III hamlet, in Thuy Xuan village, 4km southwest of Hué. Motorbike driver **Tran Van Thinh** (☎ 522 637, 0905 731 537; tranvanthinhcyclo@yahoo.com) studied Buddhism here and makes an excellent guide; he can often be found near the entrance to the Citadel.

**Notre Dame Cathedral** (Dong Chua Cuu The; 80 Đ Nguyen Hué; ☎ mass 5am & 5pm, Sun 7pm) is a blend of European and Asian architectural elements; this modern cathedral was built between 1959 and 1962.

#### Tours

Motorbike day tours of the city and environs start at around US\$6. If you have a specific agenda in mind, motorbike guides from local traveller cafés can do customised day tours of the Royal Tombs, the Citadel, the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) and surrounding countryside. Try:

#### PEACE TREES

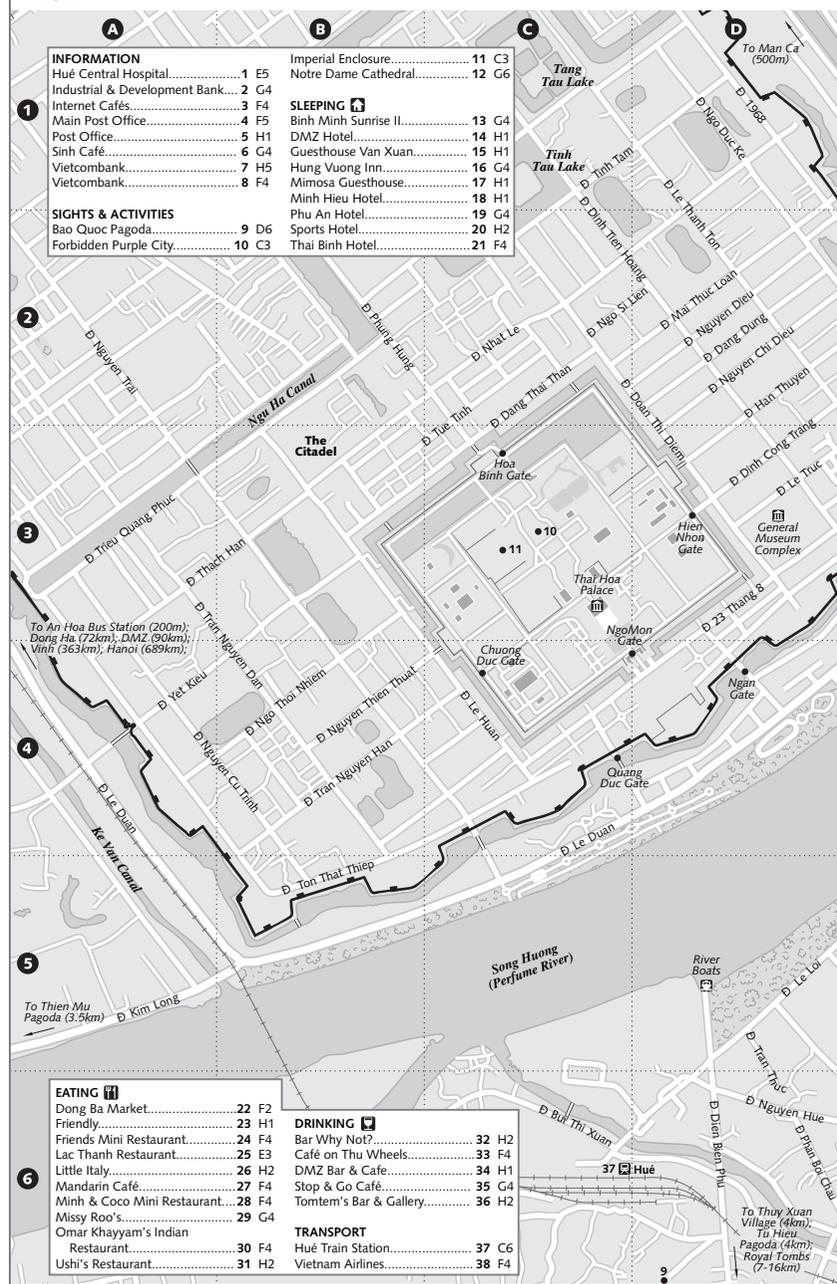
A nonprofit organisation in the war-torn Quang Tri province, the mission of PeaceTrees Vietnam is to remove landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) and then reforest the land with the help of former American soldiers and 'citizen diplomats' who volunteer from around the world.

Started in 1995 by the family of Daniel Cheney, a helicopter pilot who died in Vietnam in 1969, the first UXO-clearing and reforestation project was spearheaded by the late Danaan Parry, who co-founded the Earthstewards Network in 1980, and by his wife, Jerilyn Brusseau.

Brusseau, an American, recounts how Quang Tri province was devastated by war. For every resident of the province, there was 6.6 tonnes of ordinance dropped, and only three out of the 30 villages remained by war's end. Much of the area still have UXOs, which are still dangerous.

PeaceTrees Vietnam runs the Danaan Parry Landmines Education Center in Dong Ha (see boxed text, p858, for transport information to Dong Ha) and visitors are welcome; Brusseau notes that it's the only landmine education centre currently operating in Vietnam. Learn more at [www.peacetreesvietnam.org](http://www.peacetreesvietnam.org).

HUẾ



**Cafe on Thu Wheels** (☎ 832 241; minhthuhue@yahoo.com; 10/2 Đ Nguyen Tri Phuong) It offers great motorbike and cycling tours, and good drinking, too (see p858).

**Stop and Go Cafe** (☎ 827 051; 10 Đ Ben Nghe) Specialising in DMZ tours, another pack of superb motorbike guides is based here under the direction of silver-haired Mr Do.

For a riveting small-group tour (US\$10) that some people have termed 'Vietnam 101,' contact **Mr Phong** (tho147860@yahoo.com). The day-long tour includes visits to the homes of average Vietnamese people and travellers who have raved about it.

### DEMILITARISED ZONE (DMZ) TOURS

The DMZ, 90km west of Hué, saw some of the fiercest fighting in the American War. Most of what you can see here nowadays are places where historical events happened, and may not be worthwhile unless you're into war history. Day tours from Hué cost around US\$18. Because only the guides know where the unexploded ordinance still lies, it's a bad idea to visit solo.

Significant sites:

**The Sanh Combat Base** (admission 25,000d) The site of the American War's most famous siege, about 130km from Hué.

**Truong Son National Cemetery** (Nghia Trang Liet Si Truong Son) A memorial to the tens of thousands of North Vietnamese soldiers killed along the Ho Chi Minh Trail; about 105km from Hué.

**Vinh Moc Tunnels** (admission & guided tour 20,000d) Similar to the tunnels at Cu Chi (p894) but less touristic; 110km from Hué.

### SONG HUONG (PERFUME RIVER) CRUISES

Boat rides down the scenic Song Huong are the 'must-do' of a visit to Hué. Tours costing about US\$5 per person typically take in several tombs and Thien Mu Pagoda, and include lunch. Admission to the individual tombs is not included and adds up quickly, but you can choose which tombs to visit.

Many restaurants and hotels catering to foreigners arrange these boat tours, and the journey usually runs from 8am to 4pm daily.

### Sleeping

You can find heaps of cheap rooms in the narrow alley off Đ Le Loi between Đ Pham Ngu Lao and Đ Chu Van An, and on the main roads. Another cluster of inexpensive rooms

is in the narrow alley just west of Đ Hung Vuong, off Đ Nguyen Tri Phuong. A few good hotels are on the main roads.

**Mimosa Guesthouse** (☎ 828 068; tvhoang4@hotmail.com; 46/6 Đ Le Loi; r US\$5-7; ☺) A popular place run by a former French teacher with a good sense of humour, it's a touch basic but great for the price.

**Guesthouse Van Xuan** (☎ 826 567; 10 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; s US\$6, d US\$7-8; ☺) The atmosphere in this sweet little guesthouse with a lovely shared terrace makes up for the plain but serviceable rooms.

**Thai Binh Hotel** (☎ 828 058; www.thaibinhhotel-hue.com; 6/34 Đ Nguyen Tri Phuong; r US\$6-18; ☺) In the heart of backpacker alley, the rooms are basic but not ratty, and some have private balconies.

**DMZ Hotel** (☎ 826 831; 1A Đ Pham Ngu Lao; r US\$9-14; ☺) From the people behind the popular bar, this brand-new minihotel has a range of comfortable rooms of different sizes and facilities.

**Minh Hieu Hotel** (☎ 828 725; 3 Đ Chu Van An; r ind breakfast US\$10; ☺) Don't let the unremarkable exterior fool you; the basic rooms have hot-water bathrooms, IDD phone and satellite TV.

**Hung Vuong Inn** (☎ 821 068; 20 Đ Hung Vuong; r US\$10; ☺) Clean and bright, the French bakery goods downstairs may be the very best feature of the hotel; keep in mind that the lobby looks more like a restaurant than a hotel. Front rooms have balconies, and all are tidy and well kept.

**our pick Binh Minh Sunrise II** (☎ 849 007; 45 Đ Ben Nghe; r ind breakfast US\$10-15; ☺) Rooms are on the smallest side but the ones in the back are very quiet and have private balconies that overlook rooftops. The breakfast includes seemingly limitless cups of coffee.

**Sports Hotel** (☎ 828 096; www.huestays.com; 15 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; r US\$10-15; ☺) A relatively new minihotel with seven levels and an elevator, those who are looking for clean modern rooms with all the fixings will love it here. Credit cards are accepted.

**Phu An Hotel** (☎ 821 168; 42 Đ Nguyen Tri Phuong; d US\$12-15; ☺) The big rooms have comfy beds and the spacious lobby has a desk to ask about tours.

### Eating

#### SOUTH BANK

**Minh & Coco Mini Restaurant** (☎ 821 822; 1 Đ Hung Vuong; dishes 5000-50,000d; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Run by two gregarious sisters, this is a fun

### AN 'AMERICAN WAR' VETERAN RETURNS *As told to Josh Krist*

Rod lives in Northern California with his wife, Jean. The couple have travelled all over the world but in 2007 Rod decided to revisit the country where he fought as a young man.

**When did you first go to Vietnam?** I first knew I was off to 'Nam' as a 20-year-old kid back in '66. I last left the war in 1971.

**What was your experience there during the war?** As an army infantryman, officer and aviator I got to see a lot of the warring country, including the Central Highlands, the central coast, and too much of the DMZ. I was lucky enough to spend some time with nonmilitary Vietnamese and tribal people – in their space and on their terms. I also spent thousands of hours flying 'slow and low' over what even then was a beautiful piece of the world. I tried to keep my memories of the people and the country separate from the stain of the war.

**You've visited countries all over Asia, why not Vietnam until now?** I think I was avoiding it. Vietnam made me a different person, for sure. There's the pain of physical wounds, mental pain of losing friends – and memories of pants-peeing fear and gleefully inflicting death. The thought of returning to the sites of these memories brought up new fears. Would I face hatred or guilt, open old wounds, or even sink back into the depression I felt when I left Vietnam and was greeted by an indifferent country?

**What was your experience this time?** I sought out and found former enemies – they often work for the government. They are now older too. We traded stories, drinks and handshakes with lots of people who seem positive, prospering, and devoid of any ill-will. They were happy to meet me and we were happy to be there; good vibes.

**Would you recommend Vietnam to other veterans?** Well, it sure is a great tourist destination and it satisfied all the needs of my personal history lessons – and therapy sessions. People there look forward to a future that is far better than their past – a past that for them, and now me, is old history. Yeah, go for it.

place to eat a cheap lunch and watch life go by on busy Đ Hung Vuong.

**Mandarin Cafe** (☎ 821 281; mandarin@dng.vnn.vn; 3 Đ Hung Vuong; breakfast 10,000d; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner) The owner, Mr Cu, is helpful and cheery – and has consistently improved his services since the first LP mention, a rarity worth noting. The Mandarin also provides good information about tours. The BLTs, potato salad and banana pancakes are all good.

**Friends Mini Restaurant** (☎ 825 248; 30 Đ Nguyen Tri Phuong; mains from 15,000d; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner) A definite backpacker haunt with graffiti-filled walls with messages from travellers in all languages.

**Ushi Restaurant** (☎ 821 143; 42 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; mains from 15,000d; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Formerly known as Hien's Canteen, this place is popular with French travellers and has cheap food, a pool table, cold beer, local information and internet access.

**Missy Roo's** (☎ 284 945; 63 Đ Nguyen Tri Phuong; shakes 20,000d; ☺) breakfast & lunch) This takeaway-salad and juice bar serves some of the coolest, most refreshing concoctions in Hué.

**our pick Friendly** (☎ 851 548; 7 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; mains 20,000-25,000d; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner) The snappy

menu has a sampler plate of Hué specialities that's a good start to culinary adventures here. There's funky art on the walls and the place fills up quickly in the evenings.

**Omar Khayyam's Indian Restaurant** (☎ 821 616; 10 Đ Nguyen Tri Phuong; curries 30,000-60,000d; ☺) lunch & dinner) A vegetarian-friendly curry house that looks plain but the food is very good.

**Little Italy** (☎ 826 928; littleitalyhu@gmail.com; 2A Đ Vo Thi Sau; mains around 40,000d; ☺) lunch & dinner) Where else do you think you'll find Hué's best Italian food? The pizzas are respectable, while pastas are perfectly *al dente*.

#### NORTH BANK

**Lac Thanh Restaurant** (6A Đ Dinh Tien Hoang; mains from 17,000d; ☺) lunch & dinner) This restaurant owned by the deaf-mute Mr Lac is a great place to fuel up on Hué specialities before a day of sightseeing. Mr Lac truly cares about his customers; on hot days he'll make sure people drink a lot of water and wear a hat when venturing out.

**Dong Ba market** (Đ Tran Hung Dao; ☺) 6.30am-8pm) Although the dining conditions aren't ideal, the market is a good place to put together cheap meals and do some shopping.

**Duyen Que** (☎ 890 589; QL 49, Thon Ngoc Anh, Phu Thuong, Phu Vang; main 80,000d; ☎ dinner) At this delightful place, tables surround a small pond and diners can try to catch their own fish. To get here, head northeast on Pham Van Dong for 3km, look to the right for the restaurant sign and follow a dark little road for about 200m. Or, ask the staff at Missy Roo's (p857) – it's one of their favourite spots.

### Drinking

In the evenings, backpackers gather over Huda beers in the cafés along Đ Hung Vuong. If you're looking to party, try these spots.

**Tomtem's Bar & Gallery** (Đ Pham Ngu Lao) Vietnamese cocktails that pack a punch (15,000d), cool modern art on the walls, mellow tunes and a pool table make this place a winner.

**DMZ Bar & Cafe** (44 Đ Le Loi) The DMZ is a long-running pool-shooting and dance spot for expats and travellers. It stays open late and keeps the party going.

**Bar Why Not?** (☎ 824 793; 21 Đ Vo Thi Sau) This corner place mixes respectably potent cocktails and has outdoor seating to contemplate life over a drink. It also serves good bar food and has a pool table.

**Stop & Go Cafe** (☎ 889 106; 4 Đ Ben Nghe) Stop for a cold beer and a warm conversation with the tour guides and go for a ride – it's an excellent place to arrange motorbike tours (p856); it also has rooms for rent.

**Cafe on Thu Wheels** (☎ 832 241; 10/2 Đ Nguyen Tri Phuong) This is the most popular café to swap stories and throw back a few. Miss Thu can smell out new arrivals so be ready to hear about her good motorbike tours (p856).

### Shopping

Hué is known for producing the finest conical hats in Vietnam. The city is famous for its 'poem hats', which, when held up to the light, reveal black cut-out scenes sandwiched between the layers of translucent Palm leaves.

Hué is also a prime place to look for rice-paper and silk paintings, but the prices that are initially quoted are usually about four times the actual price. Walking away from a souvenir stall will often bring the bargaining down.

**Dong Ba market** (Đ Tran Hung Dao; ☎ 6.30am-8pm) Apart from its eateries (see earlier) you can buy everything from machetes to pyjamas at this market, a few metres north of Trang Tien Bridge on the northern bank of the river.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

The main office of **Vietnam Airlines** (code VN; ☎ 824 709; www.vietnamairlines.com; 23 Đ Nguyen Van Cu; ☎ 7.15-11.15am & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Sat) handles reservations. Several flights a day connect Hué to both Hanoi and HCMC.

Phu Bai airport is 13km south of the city centre and takes about 25 minutes by car. Taxi fares are typically around US\$8, although share taxis cost as little as US\$2 – inquire at hotels. Vietnam Airlines runs its own shuttle (20,000d) from its office to the airport, a couple of hours before flight times.

### BUS

The Au Cuu bus station is 4km to the southeast on the continuation of Đ Hung Vuong (it becomes Đ An Duong Vuong and Đ An Thuy Vuong). The first main stop south is Danang (40,000d, three hours, six daily). **An Hoa bus station** (Hwy 1A), 200m northwest of the Citadel, serves northern destinations, including Dong Ha (25,000d, 1½ hours).

Hué is also a regular stop on the open-tour bus routes. Traveller cafés (see p852 and p856) can arrange bookings.

### TRAIN

**Hué train station** (Ga Hué; ☎ 822 175; 2 Đ Bui Thi Xuan; ☎ ticket office 7.30am-5pm) is on the south bank of the river, at the southwestern end of Đ Le Loi. Many local services and some long-distance services operate both north and south from here daily.

### Getting Around

Bicycles (US\$1), motorbikes (US\$5) and cars (US\$30 per day, with driver) can be hired from hotels all over town. Both **Co Do Taxi** (☎ 830 830) and **Mai Linh** (☎ 898 989) have air-con vehicles with meters. *Cyclos* and *xe om* will find you when you need them, prices start at (10,000d) for rides in the central area and double or more for trips to the Citadel.

### BACH MA NATIONAL PARK

☎ 054 / elev 1450m

Forty-five kilometres southeast of Hué, **Bach Ma National Park** (Vuon Quoc Gia Bach Ma; ☎ 871 330; www.bachma.vnn.vn; admission 10,500d) is a French-era hill station known for its cool weather. Although relatively close to a major city, the steep road up to the park entrance feels like it is heading to a different world. Sometimes the mist is so thick it's hard to see more than 10m ahead, and on the many trekking trails scenes of raging waterfalls or lazy brooks suddenly materialize out of nowhere. From the peak of the summit trail there are sweeping 360-degree views across the stone remains of villas dotted around the nearby hills.

The national park is rich in flora and fauna and is a bird-watcher's paradise. The best time to visit is between March and June. It's a good idea to bring decent rain gear as they only sell very thin ponchos at the snack shop. If hiring an English- or French-speaking guide for the day (150,000d), they can sometimes loan out proper waterproof pants and jackets. Guides can also point out the many medicinal plants in the park. People walking around here with their pants tucked into their socks are not making a fashion statement, but are trying to avoid the many freeloading leeches.

Trails are marked on the national-park map, which you receive with your ticket. Further information is found in the *Bach Ma National Park* booklet, available for 12,000d at the park entrance.

### Sleeping & Eating

**National Park Guesthouse** (☎ 871 330; camp site per person 3000d, 6-person tents 80,000d, r 100,000-300,000d) The park authority has a small camping ground and four guesthouses near the summit and two more guesthouses near the entrance. One of the summit guesthouses has a 12-person dorm with a shared bathroom. The more expensive twin-bed rooms are a better bet for views and facilities. This is a prime spot, rebuilt from the ruins of Emperor Bao Dai's summer retreat. Bookings should be made at the visitor centre.

The snack shop and restaurant is rebuilt from one of the old French ruins and sits in the middle of the park. Because meals are prepared to order and require a trip to the market, give at least four hours advance notice.

There's a canteen near the visitors centre, and those wishing to dine at the summit can make advance orders to eat here.

### Getting There & Around

The entrance and visitors centre is at Km 3 on the summit road, which starts at the town of Cau Hai on National Hwy 1. It's another meandering 16km from the gate to the summit, and unless you are willing to walk it (three to four hours; bring lots of water and wear a hat), you'll need to hire private transport from the park.

Four-passenger jeeps/eight-passenger vans are available to hire (350,000/400,000d) from the park entrance for same-day return, with an additional 50,000d fee for next-day return.

### GETTING TO LAOS

The Lao Bao border is the most popular and least problematic crossing between Laos and Vietnam. You can get a 30-day Lao visa (US\$30) on arrival in Dansavanh, but Vietnamese visas still need to be arranged in advance; drop in on the Vietnamese consulate in Savannakhet. The border is open from 7am to 6pm.

The junction town for Lao Bao is Dong Ha, which has regular bus services to/from An Hoa bus station in Hué (25,000d, 1½ hours). The *Reunification Express* also links Hué to Dong Ha (25,000d, 1½ to 2½ hours, six daily). From Dong Ha, there are regular buses to Lao Bao town (20,000d, two hours). From the Lao Bao town bus station, the price for a *xe om* (motorbike taxi) to the border is 10,000d, or walk it in about 20 minutes. Between the Vietnam and Laos border posts is a short walk of a few hundred metres.

**Sepon Travel** (☎ 53-855 289; 1 Đ Phan Boi Chau) in Dong Ha has buses to Savannakhet (US\$12, 7½ hours), continuing on to Vientiane (13 hours); they leave Dong Ha at 8am every second day and return the next day. These buses also continue on to Hué (US\$14 to US\$15, add 1½ hours), and can be booked from the Mandarin and Sinh Cafés there (see p852).

If you're travelling across the border by tourist bus, expect a wait while documents are checked. When booking a tourist bus, make sure to confirm (preferably in writing) that the same bus carries on through the border. We've heard plenty of stories of tourists on this route being bundled off nice buses on the Vietnamese side and on to overcrowded local buses once they reach Laos.

See p394 for details on doing the trip in the opposite direction.

There are buses from Danang (US\$3, two hours) and Huế (US\$2, one hour) that will drop travellers on the main road near the entrance of the park, but arrange a pick-up from the guesthouse beforehand – or be ready for a half-day uphill hike. Numerous local buses stop at Cau Hai, where *xe om* drivers can ferry you to the entrance. Cau Hai also has a **train station** (☎ 871 362; Loc Dien village), but the one daily service in either direction is slow and departs in the middle of the night.

Hotels and traveller cafés in Huế can arrange all-inclusive one-night trips to Bach Ma starting at US\$55 per person.

## DANANG

☎ 0511 / pop 1.1 million

Danang is Vietnam's fourth-largest city and where the first US Marines landed for the American War; it forms a mere transit stop for most travellers who wish to visit the Museum of Cham Sculpture. Tour groups and their big buses are a common sight but there are very few independent travellers – whether or not people like Danang depends on whether they like to give a warm hello every few steps.

## Information

### INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés around town are plentiful; you can find several around Đ Tran Quoc Toan, between Đ Yen Bai and Đ Nguyen Chi Thanh. Most charge around 6000đ per hour.

## MEDICAL SERVICES

**Danang Family Medical practice** (☎ 582 700, 24-hr emergency 917 303; www.vietnammedicalpractice.com; 50-52 Đ Nguyen Van Linh) One of Vietnam's most trusted foreign-owned clinics comes to Danang.

**Hospital C** (Benh Vien C; ☎ 822 480; 35 Đ Hai Phong) The most advanced medical facility in Danang.

## MONEY

**VID Public Bank** (2 Đ Tran Phu)

**Vietcombank** (140 Đ Le Loi) The only place in town to cash travellers cheques, and it has an ATM.

## POST

**Danang domestic & international post offices** (Đ Bach Dang) On opposite sides of the road.

## TRAVEL AGENCIES

**Dana Tours** (☎ 825 653; danamarle@dng.vnn.vn; 76 Đ Hung Vuong) With an enlightened attitude compared with other state-run agencies, this is a great option.

**Trekking Travel** (☎ 843 122; trekking-travel@hn.vnn.vn; 4 Đ Tran Quoc Toan) Worth checking out for bus tickets and local tours.

## Sights & Activities

Danang's high point is the famed **Museum of Cham Sculpture** (Bao Tang Cham; cnr Đ Trung Nu Vuong & Đ Bach Dang; admission 30,000đ; ☎ 7am-5pm). This small, breezy museum with architecture that echoes a Cham structure houses the finest collection of Cham sculpture to be found anywhere. For a dose of kitsch see the cloth portraits – one is of Fidel Castro – at the gift shop outside.

Guides sometimes hang out at the museum's entrance but there's enough signage in French and English to get a good experience without one. Should you hire a guide, agree on a fee beforehand.

## Sleeping

While the budget options have been slow in coming, things are looking up for Danang lodging.

**Minh Travel Hotel** (☎ 812 661; mtjraymond@yahoo.ca; 105 Đ Tran Phu; r US\$3-9; ☎) This tiny place is developing a reputation among superbudget travellers for the friendliness and honesty of its owners and its rock-bottom prices.

**Hoa's Place** (☎ 969 216; hoasplace@hotmail.com; r US\$4-6) If you'd like easy access to the beach, consider this laid-back little gem. This famously cosy spot is near China Beach.

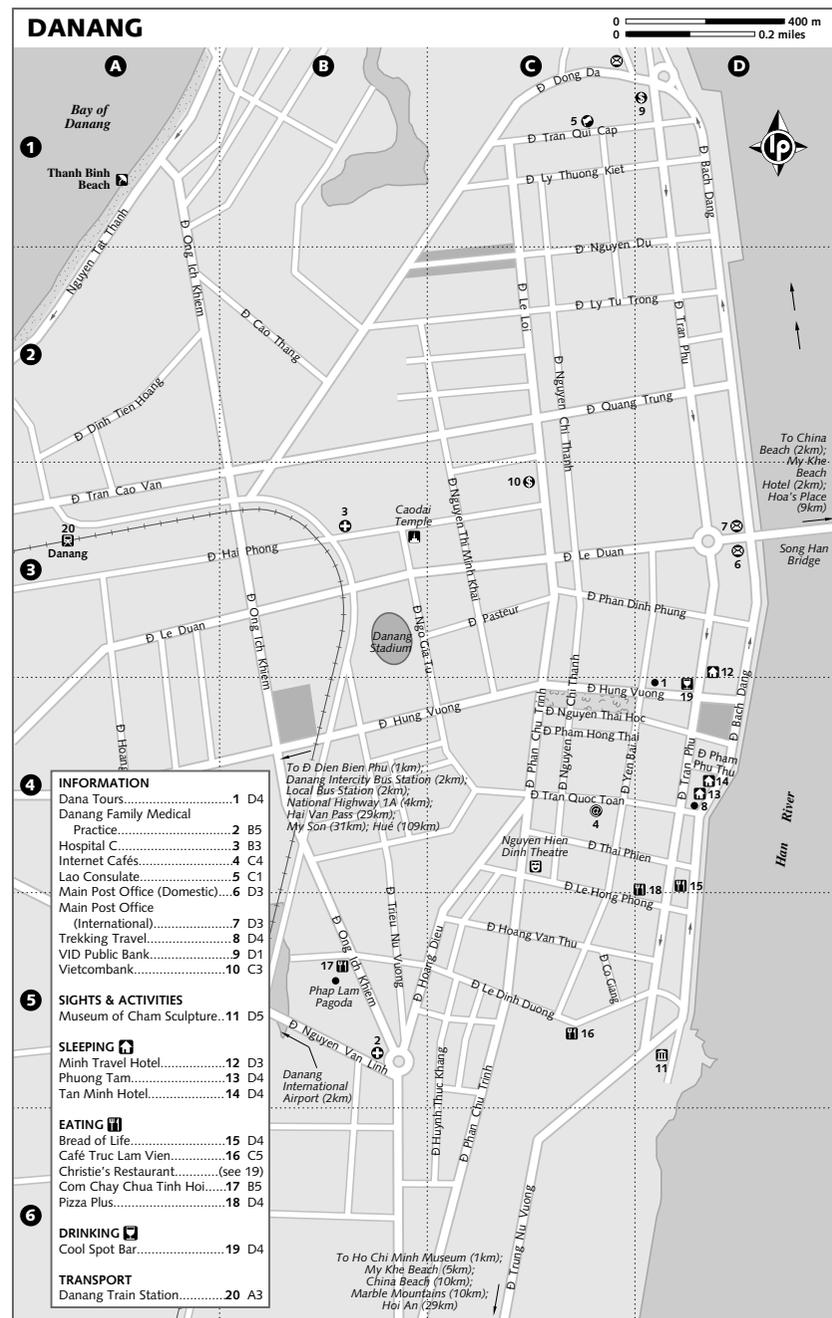
**Tan Minh Hotel** (☎ 827 456; tanminhhotel@dng.vnn.vn; 142 Đ Bach Dang; d US\$10-12; ☎) The best of the budget bunch, this small family-run place has clean good-sized rooms. Rooms with balconies look onto the river, and all rooms have air-con, satellite TV and hot water.

**Phuong Tam** (☎ 824 288; 174 Đ Bach Dang, r US\$16-25; ☎) Not too far from the Cham Sculpture Museum, this nice new minihotel faces the river and has all the basics.

## Eating & Drinking

**Com Chay Chua Tinh Hoi** (574 Đ Ong Ich Khiem; dishes from 3000đ) Known for the best vegetarian food in town, it's just inside the entrance gate to the Phap Lam Pagoda. In the streets near the pagoda, there are several other cheap vegetarian shops.

**Bread Of Life** (☎ 893 456; 215 Đ Tran Phu; cakes 10,000đ, breakfast 20,000đ; ☎) breakfast & lunch Mon-Sat) A great spot for a Western-style breakfast or a coffee and cake, this little café employs deaf staff and



gives a percentage of profits to charity. The owners also run Pizza Plus (☎ 565 185; 12 Đ Le Hong Phong; mains 15,000d; open breakfast and lunch, Monday to Saturday).

**Christie's Restaurant** (☎ 824 040; 112 Đ Tran Phu; meals around 35,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Christie's dishes up decent burgers, pizzas and pasta, as well as Japanese and Vietnamese food. The quiet Cool Spot Bar – the only traveller bar in town – is downstairs.

**our pick** **Cafe Truc Lam Vien** (☎ 582 428; 37 Đ Le Dinh Duong; snacks 35,000d; ☎ lunch & dinner) A perfect complement to a visit to the Museum of Cham Sculpture, sip a beer or shake in this little oasis of calm and try the very good fresh spring rolls.

## Getting There & Away

Danang international airport has flights to international destinations (see p820). **Vietnam Airlines** (code VN; ☎ 821 130; www.vietnamairlines.com) has an extensive domestic schedule serving Danang; **Pacific Airlines** (code BL; ☎ 886 799; www.pacificairlines.com.vn) also flies to Danang. Both **Airport Taxi** (☎ 27 27 27) and **VN Taxis** (☎ 52 52 52) provide modern vehicles with air-con and meters. It costs about 30,000d to the airport.

The **Danang intercity bus station** (Đ Dien Bien Phu; ☎ 7-11am & 1-5pm) is 3km from the city centre. Buses run to Hanoi (87,000d, 16 hours), Huế (22,000d, three hours) and Quy Nhon (65,000d, six hours).

To get to or from Hoi An, your best bet is to hire a car (around US\$10 one-way) from a local travel agency, or a friendly neighbourhood *xe om* (around US\$6). A stop at the Marble Mountains will cost a little extra. Travel agencies can also arrange passage on open-tour minibuses (US\$2) running between the two cities.

There are also regular buses to Hoi An (8000d, one hour) that depart from a local bus station 200m away from the intercity bus station, but foreigners tend to be overcharged, especially if you pick up the bus from the street. Check the price before boarding and stand your ground.

Danang train station (Ga Da Nang) is served by all *Reunification Express* trains. The train ride to Huế is one of the best in the country – worth taking as an excursion in itself.

It's possible to visit the nearby sites by bicycle.

## AROUND DANANG

About 10km south of Danang are the immense **Marble Mountains** (admission 15,000d; ☎ 7am-5pm) consisting of five marble outcrops that were once islands. With natural caves sheltering small Hindu and Buddhist sanctuaries, a picturesque pagoda and scenic landings with stunning views of the ocean and surrounding countryside, it's well worth the climb.

**China Beach** (Bai Non Nuoc), once a rest-and-relaxation post for US soldiers during the American War, is actually a series of beaches stretching 30km north and south of the Marble Mountains. Nearest to central Danang, **My Khe Beach** is well toured and accordingly has beachside restaurants and roving vendors. Opposite the Marble Mountains is the also-populous **Non Nuoc Beach**, and in between the two are countless spots to explore.

For surfers, China Beach's break gets a decent swell from mid-September to December. The best time for swimming is from May to July, when the sea is at its calmest. There's a mean undertow at China Beach, worst in the winter, so take care.

Buses and minibuses running between Danang and Hoi An can drop you off at the entrance to the Marble Mountains and China Beach, and it's easy to find a *xe om* for onward travel. From Danang, it's also possible to reach this area by bicycle.

## HOI AN

☎ 0510 / pop 75,800

The best example of Vietnam's yesteryear, Hoi An's charming Old Town is a nice place to stroll in the evenings when the glow of busy restaurants and cafés lights the streets. Set on the Thu Bon River, Hoi An – or Faifo, as early Western traders knew it – was an international trading Port as far back as the 17th century. Influences from Chinese, Japanese and European cultures are well preserved in local architecture and art. Roaming the narrow lanes, it's easy to imagine how it might have looked 150 years ago.

Hoi An's charms aren't limited to its exquisite architecture, though; it's the best place in the country to get affordable custom-made clothing and the nearby beach and Cham ruins make excellent expeditions out of town. The local cuisine is eminently good and affordable and nearly every spot has character.

## Information

### EMERGENCY

**Hoi An Hospital** (☎ 861 364; 10 Đ Tran Hung Dao)

Serious problems should be taken to Danang.

**Hoi An Police station** (☎ 861 204; 84 Đ Hoang Dieu)

### INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés are hard to miss in Hoi An. Popular places to check email over a cool drink include the following:

**Banana Split Café** (☎ 861 136; 53 Đ Hoang Dieu)

**Hai's Scout Café** (☎ 863 210; 98 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc)

### MONEY

There is a good number of ATMs in Hoi An, but they tend to be temperamental. Use the ATMs in front of a bank during business hours so that you can talk to a human being if there's a problem.

Many travel agencies will exchange cash and/or cash travellers cheques; count your money before leaving.

**Incombank** (☎ 861 261; 4 Đ Hoang Dieu, also 9 Đ Le Loi) These branches change cash and travellers cheques, give cash advances and have ATMs.

### POST

**Post office** (48 Đ Tran Hung Dao) Staff are used to travellers sending back a new wardrobe and can supply boxes and large envelopes for a fee.

### TRAVEL AGENCIES

Travel agencies are scattered throughout town with a concentration of places along Đ Tran Hung Dao. Since most agencies offer the same services and tours for similar costs, one cannot be recommended over the other. Competition is fierce, so if you want to book something expensive or complicated, check out a few options and then negotiate. One popular tour is to My Son (p867).

### Dangers & Annoyances

For the most part, Hoi An is very safe at any hour. However, late-night bag-snatchings in the isolated, unlit market are on the rise. Avoid walking around this area alone when the market day is over.

There have also been (extremely rare) reports of women being followed to their hotels and assaulted. Lone women should have a friend walk home with them at night (and don't underestimate the results of yelling your lungs out).

At the My Son ruins, there's a running scam involving motorbike vandalism and extortionist 'repairs' made by the vandals themselves. It's recommended that you hire a driver if you visit independently.

## Sights

### HOI AN OLD TOWN

Having been named a Unesco World Heritage site, **Hoi An Old Town** (admission 75,000d) ostensibly charges an admission fee, which goes towards funding the preservation of the town's historic architecture. But, this fee is not always enforced. Buying the ticket gives you a choice of heritage sites to visit, including an 'intangible culture' option, like a traditional musical concert or stage play.

Our list of sites is by no means comprehensive; buying a ticket at the Hoi An Old Town booths will also get you a tourist guide for all the sites.

**Tan Ky House** (☎ 861 474; 101 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-4.30pm) is a lovingly preserved 19th-century house that once belonged to a Vietnamese merchant. Japanese and Chinese influences are visible throughout the architecture. The house is a private home, and the owner – whose family has lived here for seven generations – speaks French and English.

The **Japanese Covered Bridge** (Cau Nhat Ban/Lai Vien Kieu; Đ Tran Phu & Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai) was constructed in 1593. The bridge has a roof for shelter and a small temple built into its northern side. According to one story, the bridge's construction began in the year of the monkey and finished in the year of the dog; thus one entrance is guarded by monkeys, the other by dogs (neither side is willing to talk).

Showcasing a collection of blue-and-white ceramics of the Dai Viet period, the **Museum of Trading Ceramics** (80 Đ Tran Phu; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-4.30pm) is in a simply restored house. It's delightful. In particular, notice the great ceramic mosaic that's set above the pond in the inner courtyard.

The **Old House at 103 Tran Phu** (103 Đ Tran Phu; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-4.30pm) is picturesque with its wooden front and shutters; inside is an eclectic shop where women make silk lanterns. There are also ornamental aquarium fish for sale, and you can buy shampoo.

### ARTS & CRAFTS VILLAGES

All those neat fake antiques sold in Hoi An's shops are manufactured in nearby villages.

**HOI AN**

**1 INFORMATION**

- 1 D4 Banana Split Café.....
- 2 C4 Hai's Scout Café.....
- 3 D3 Hoi An Hospital.....
- 4 D3 Hoi An Police Station.....
- 5 D3 Incobank.....
- 6 C3 Post Office.....
- 7 D3 Red Bridge School Meeting Point..... (see 2)

**2 SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES** (see 2)

- 8 C3 Hoi An Old Town Booth A.....
- 9 D3 Hoi An Old Town Booth B.....
- 10 B3 Japanese Covered Bridge.....
- 11 C3 Museum of Trading Ceramics.....
- 12 C3 Old House at 103 Tran Phu.....
- 13 C4 Rainbow Divers.....
- 14 C4 Tan Ky House.....

**3**

**4**

**5 SLEEPING**

- 15 C2 Hoi Pho Hotel.....
- 16 B2 Hop Yen Hotel.....
- 17 D4 Huy Hoang Hotel.....
- 18 D4 Minh A Ancient Lodging House.....
- 19 C3 Phu Thinh Hotel.....
- 20 E3 Sea Star Hotel.....
- 21 C2 Thuan Van Hotel.....
- 22 B2 Thien Nga Hotel.....

**6 DRINKING**

- 23 D3 Ba Le Well.....
- 24 D4 Blue Dragon.....
- 25 D4 Café des Amis.....
- 26 C4 Cargo Club.....
- 27 C4 For You.....
- 28 D3 Green Moss.....
- 29 C4 Han Huyen Restaurant.....
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- 31 C4 Restaurant Café 96.....
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**7 EATING**

- 33 C4 Ba Le Well.....
- 34 C3 Re-Treat Café.....
- 35 C4 Tam Tam Café & Bar.....
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**8 SHOPPING**

- 37 D4 Reaching Out Handicrafts..... (see 26)
- 38 A3 Hoi An Bus Station.....

**9 TRANSPORT**

- 37 D4 Hoi An Bus Station.....
- 38 A3 Hoi An Bus Station.....

Cross the An Hoi footbridge to reach the **An Hoi Peninsula**, noted for its boat factory and mat-weaving factories. South of the Peninsula is **Cam Kim Island**, where you see many people engaged in the woodcarving and boatbuilding industries (take a boat from the Đ Hoang Van Thu dock). Back in town, cross the Cam Nam bridge to **Cam Nam village**, a lovely spot also noted for arts and crafts.

## Activities

**Rainbow Divers** (☎ 911 123; www.divevietnam.com; 98 Đ Le Loi) has an office in the Old Town, where you can book dives at Cu Lao Cham Marine Park.

## Courses

Restaurants all over town advertise cooking courses where attendees learn how to make several dishes and then sit down to enjoy the meal they've made.

**Red Bridge** (☎ 933 222; www.visithoian.com) offers a reasonably priced half-day course (US\$16) that covers it all, beginning with a trip to the local market and including a boat trip down the river to the cooking class.

## Festivals & Events

The **Hoi An Legendary Night** takes place on the 14th day (full moon) of every lunar month from 5.30pm to 10pm. These festive evenings feature traditional food, song and dance, and games along the lantern-lit streets in the town centre.

## Sleeping

For a small place Hoi An has a big selection of accommodation options and with so many rooms to fill sometimes hoteliers are willing to make sweet deals.

**Hop Yen Hotel** (☎ 863 153; hopyenhotel@yahoo.com; Đ Ba Trieu; r US\$6-12; ☎ ☎) This is a humble hostel that has helpful staff. The cheapest rate will get you a small room with no air-con up four flights of stairs.

**Sea Star Hotel** (Sao Bien Hotel; ☎ 861 589; saobien\_hotel@yahoo.com; 15 Đ Cua Dai; r US\$7; ☎) On the road leading to Cau Dai Beach, this is as basic as it gets – no air-con – but the rooms are a nice surprise given the hotel's dowdy exterior.

**Hoi Pho Hotel** (☎ 916 382; hoiphohotel@yahoo.com; 627 Đ Hai Ba Trung; r US\$7-10; ☎ ☎) This modest family-owned minihotel offers straightforward value for money, with clean rooms and attentive service.

**Minh A Ancient Lodging House** (☎ 861 368; 2 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc; r US\$10-15; ☎ ☎) Staying in this family-owned historic home is like sleeping in a museum; for good reason its three rooms fill up fast.

**Huy Hoang Hotel** (☎ 861 453; kshuyhoang1@dng.vn.vn; 73 Đ Phan Boi Chau; r incl breakfast US\$10-15; ☎ ☎) With an airy riverside restaurant that just begs for leisurely lounging, the rooms are comfortable and the location is prime.

**our pick Thien Nga Hotel** (☎ 916 330; thienngahotel@gmail.com; 52 Đ Ba Trieu; r incl breakfast US\$10-20; ☎ ☎ ☎) An old favourite that keeps getting better, this great little place is terrific value, offering clean, comfortable rooms and free breakfast.

**Phu Thinh I Hotel** (☎ 861 297; www.phuthinhhotels.com; 144 Đ Tran Phu; r US\$10-20; ☎ ☎ ☎) Set back from a quiet but central block of Đ Tran Phu, this Chinese-style place has comfortable rooms, though some are windowless and on the small side. Still, this is one of the best value places in the historic heart of Hoi An.

**Thanh Van Hotel** (☎ 916 916; www.thanhvanhotel.com; 78 Đ Tran Hung Dao; r US\$15-20; ☎ ☎ ☎) With clean newish rooms and modern amenities, the owners will knock off a few dollars for guests who opt out of breakfast.

## Eating

There are three local specialties here but most famous is *cao lau*, doughy flat noodles mixed with croustons, bean sprouts and greens, topped with pork slices and served in a savoury broth. The real thing can only be had in Hoi An, as the water for *cao lau* noodles must come from Ba Le well. The other two culinary specialties are fried wonton, and 'white rose', a petite steamed dumpling stuffed with shrimp.

**Han Huyen Restaurant** (☎ 861 462; 35 Đ Nguyen Phuc Chu; mains 7000-20,000đ; ☎ ☎ ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The view and ambience here are nice and the sampler plate of Hoi An cuisine is worth the trip.

**For You** (☎ 081 460; 33 Đ Nguyen Phuc Chu; mains 7000-20,000đ; ☎ ☎ ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Besides some of the most affordable set menus in town the balcony is a nice place to enjoy the 5pm to 8pm happy hour with cheap (15,000đ) cocktails.

**Green Moss** (☎ 863 728; 341 Đ Nguyen Duy Hieu; mains 10,000-30,000đ) Housed in a lovely French colonial-era house, Green Moss serves a tasty mix of Asian dishes with plenty of vegetarian options cooked by the friendly Ms The Lee.

It has informal cooking classes; for the price of the dish you like plus US\$2.

**Ba Le Well** (☎ 864 443; 45/51 Đ Tran Hung Dao; mains 12,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) Near the famous well is this modest family restaurant of the same name. The house specialities include *thit nuong* (spiced, grilled rolls of pork) and *banh xeo* (stuffed rice crepe that you wrap in lettuce and herbs and dip in fish sauce).

**our pick Truc Vien** (☎ 917 310; 88 Đ Ba Trieu, mains 14,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Good for *pho* or *cao lau*. The grandmotherly cook is so sure of her food she responds to every order of her delicious soups with 'number one!'

**Blue Dragon** (☎ 910 742; www.bdcf.org; 46 Đ Bach Dang; mains 15,000 ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The usual local specialities are done right here and it's a good place to spy on the frantic riverside market stalls. A portion of the profits here go to the Blue Dragon Foundation to help disadvantaged kids stay in school.

**Restaurant Café 96** (☎ 910 441; 96 Đ Bach Dang; mains 15,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The food is sublime and the place has a certain tattered decadence – try the grilled fish in banana leaf.

**Mermaid Restaurant** (☎ 861 527; 2 Đ Tran Phu; mains 18,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A long-running favourite in a prime people-watching location, the Mermaid serves fabulous 'white rose' and has a nice atmosphere.

**Cargo Club** (☎ 910 489; 107 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc; mains 18,000-70,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) If you're chasing an omelette for breakfast or a baguette for lunch, this is your place. After dark it morphs into a groovy bar.

**Café des Amis** (☎ 861 616; 52 Đ Bach Dang; 5-course set menu 90,000d; ☺ dinner) A tribute to Georges Brassens, the late French singer's posters and music fill this riverside spot where dinner is whatever the chef, Mr Kim, says it is. There's always a vegetarian option.

## Drinking

There are a few *bia hoi* places scattered around Hoi An that serve ice cold brew for as cheap as 3000d. Look for the signs; a good bet is to look along Đ Bach Dang.

**Tam Tam Cafe & Bar** (☎ 862 212; 110 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc) The mainstay of nightlife in Hoi An is this thoughtfully restored tea warehouse. If the crowd on the balcony isn't a clue to where the action is, enter the ground floor restaurant and take the stairs.

**Before & Now** (☎ 910 599; 51 Đ Le Loi) The pool table, foosball and two-for-one drinks from

6pm to 9pm draw a healthy crowd. The walls are plastered in pop-art portraits of everyone from Marx to Gandhi.

**Treat's Café** (☎ 861 125; 158 Đ Tran Phu) The backpacker bar of old Hoi An, this place is regularly full to bursting. The oh-so-happy happy hours between 4pm and 9pm include two-for-one spirits and bargain beer.

**Re-Treat Café** (31 Đ Phan Dinh Phung) There are a few places on this street with similar and confusing names. This is the one closest to the budget lodging on Đ Ba Trieu, but all the incarnations have nice patio seating, a pool table, good drinks, and, well, tasty treats.

## Shopping

Yes, those backpackers from two cities ago are suddenly wearing collared shirts and looking quite spiffy. Tailor-made clothing is one of Hoi An's best trades, and there are more than 200 tailor shops in town that can whip up a custom-tailored *ao dai* (traditional Vietnamese tunic and trousers) or formal wear for the weddings and graduation ceremonies waiting back home. Bring your favourite clothes for cloning, or, just bring a picture from a magazine. Custom shoes are also popular, and those who want ready-to-wear duds will find a huge selection.

Bargaining has a place here, but basically you get what you pay for. The better tailors and better fabrics are more expensive. One of the hundreds of tailors will probably knock out a men's suit for US\$20, but a good quality, lined woollen suit is more likely to cost US\$40 to US\$70. Shirts, skirts and casual trousers hover around the US\$10 mark.

Hoi An also boasts a growing array of interesting art galleries, especially on the west side of the Japanese Covered Bridge, and does a thriving business in wood carvings, fake antiques, and reproductions of famous paintings.

**Reaching Out Handicrafts** (Hoa Nhap Handicrafts; ☎ 910 168; hoanhap@yahoo.com; 103 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc; ☺ 7.30am-7.30pm) sells handicrafts made by disabled craftspeople from all over Vietnam and profits support community programmes for disabled people locally and throughout Vietnam.

## Getting There & Away

All hotels in Hoi An book minibuses to Nha Trang (US\$8), Danang (US\$2) and Huế (US\$4). Buses to Danang via the Marble Mountains depart from the **Hoi An bus station** (Ben Quoc Doanh Xe

Khach; 74 Đ Huynh Thuc Khang), 1km west of the town centre. A taxi to the beach should cost around US\$2 and to Danang US\$10.

## Getting Around

It's extremely easy to get around on foot here but motorbike drivers wait to solicit business outside all the tourist hotels. Many hotels also offer bicycles for hire for around US\$1 to US\$2 per day.

## AROUND HOI AN My Son

Set within the jungle 35km from Hoi An are the enigmatic ruins of **My Son** (☎ 731 309; admission 60,000d; ☺ 6.30am-4.00pm), the most important remains of the ancient Cham empire and a Unesco World Heritage site. Although Vietnam has better preserved Cham sites, none are as extensive and few have such beautiful surroundings – clear streams run between the structures and past nearby coffee plantations.

Day tours to My Son can be arranged in Hoi An for about US\$3, not including admission. Some agencies offer the option of returning to Hoi An by boat, which adds an extra couple of hours to the trip. A hire car with driver from Hoi An to My Son costs around US\$15 to US\$20; a little expensive for sure but wandering around alone often seems to be the difference between disappointment and enchantment here.

## Cua Dai Beach

You can sometimes find this white-sand beach deserted on weekdays, though weekends tend to be a little crowded. Swimming is best between April and October. To get there, take Đ Cua Dai east out of Hoi An about 5km. As is the national standard, motorbike parking should cost 2000d.

## SOUTH-CENTRAL COAST

The 'fun zone' of Vietnam, this is the place for parties, adrenaline-junkies and sun worshippers – and that's just on land. Underwater, the diving is outstanding, with bright coral gardens galore.

## NHA TRANG

☎ 058 / pop 315,200

Anything a person wants in Vietnam is here; partying like a disco star around the clock,

snorkelling or diving reefs full of colourful fish, checking out Cham ruins and Buddhist pagodas with fabulous views, or sweating away bad juju in hot mineral mud. Roving vendors offer massage and lunch on the beaches where travellers frolic and soak up the sun, and boat trips range from booze cruises to mellow tours of nearby islands.

## Information BOOKSHOPS

**Shorty's Bar** (☎ 524 057; 1E Đ Biet Thu) Books in English, food, drink, a pool table and a happening atmosphere; the place to live out librarian fantasies.

## INTERNET ACCESS

Heaps of hotels, traveller cafés and internet cafés offer web access all over town.

**Hugo.net ADSL** (☎ 521 339; 41 Đ Hung Vuong; per min 50d; ☺ 9am-11pm) Beside fast connections, it offers internet phone service and burns photo CDs (10,000d).

## MEDICAL SERVICES

**Hon Chong Hospital** (☎ 831 103; Đ Hon Chong) About 1.5km northeast of the centre, it has a few English-speaking doctors.

**Pasteur Institute Center for preventative Medicine** (☎ 822 355; 10 Đ Tran Phu) Offers medical consultations and vaccinations.

## MONEY

Nha Trang is full of ATMs so finding one should be no problem.

**Vietcombank** (☺ Mon-Fri); Đ Quang Trung (☎ 822 720; 17 Đ Quang Trung); Đ Hung Vuong (☎ 524 500; 5 Đ Hung Vuong) Both branches exchange travellers cheques and have ATMs. The Đ Quang Trung branch processes cash advances; and the Đ Hung Vuong branch exchanges cash.

## POST

**Main post office** (☎ 823 866; 4 Đ Le Loi; ☺ 6.30am-10pm)

**Post office branch** (☎ 652 070; 50 Đ Le Thanh Ton; ☺ 7am-11pm)

## TRAVEL AGENCIES

**Hanh Cafe** (☎ 814 227; hanhcafe@dng.vnn.vn; 26 Đ Tran Hung Dao) Sells open-tour bus tickets, and for a fee can arrange train and air tickets.

**Khanh Hoa Tours** (☎ 526 753; www.nhatrangtourist.com.vn; 1 Đ Tran Hung Dao) Extensive offerings include maps, visas, tours, vehicle rental and guides.

**Sinh Café** (☎ 524 329; www.sinhcafevn.com; 10 Đ Biet Thu) Offers bargain-basement local tours as well as open-tour buses.



3320m-long cable-car ride is a great way to see Nha Trang and the surrounding islands from a bird's-eye view. A ride from Nha Trang proper to the 'capo,' as locals call it, should cost 10,000d to 20,000d on a motorbike.

## BEACHES

Coconut palms provide shelter for sunbathers and strollers along most of Nha Trang's 6km of beachfront; beach chairs are available for hire.

**Hon Chong promontory**, 1.8km north of central Nha Trang, is a scenic collection of granite rocks jutting into the South China Sea. The beach here has a more local flavour than Nha Trang Beach, but the accompanying refuse makes it a less attractive option for swimming or sunbathing.

## ISLANDS

The nine outlying islands of Nha Trang beckon offshore; hop on one of the boat tours sold all over town. For as little as US\$5, you can join a day tour visiting four islands (see opposite). Or, cobble together your own trips to various islands.

There's a working fish farm on **Hon Mieu** (Mieu Island) that's also a beautiful outdoor **aquarium** (Ho Ca Tri Nguyen). From there, you can rent canoes, or hire someone to paddle you out to **Hon Mun** (Ebony Island) or **Hon Yen** (Swallow Island). Rustic bungalows on the island rent for about 90,000d. Ferries to Hon Mieu (5000d) leave regularly throughout the day from Cau Da dock at the southern end of Nha Trang. Catch ferries back to Nha Trang at Tri Nguyen village on Hon Mieu.

Idyllic **Hon Tre** (Bamboo Island) is the largest island in the area. You can get boats to **Bai Tru** (Tru Beach) at the northern end of the island, but it's also recommended to take the day or overnight trips here offered by **Con Se Tre** (☎ 811 163; 1006 Đ Tran Phu), south of town. There's great snorkelling and diving off **Hon Mun**, **Hon Tam** and **Hon Mot**.

The cheapest way to get out on the water is to take the regular local ferry to Vinpearl on Hon Tre (adult/child 40,000/15,000d each way), leaving from Phu Quy harbour. Or, more expensive but more scenic, take the cable car across (see p869)

## THAP BA HOT SPRING CENTER

A good place for dirty fun is **Thap Ba Hot Spring Center** (☎ 834 939; 25 Ngoc Son; ☎ 8am-8pm). For

180,000d you can sit in a wooden bathtub full of hot thermal mud, or for 60,000d per person wallow in the mud with friends in a larger pool. To get here, follow the signpost on the second road to the left past the Po Nagar Cham Towers and take the twisting, bumpy road for 2.5km.

## Activities

### DIVING

Nha Trang is still Vietnam's premier diving locale, with around 25 dive sites in the area. Visibility averages 15m, but can be as much as 30m, depending on the season (late October to early January is the worst time of year).

A full-day outing, including two dives and sometimes a lunch, costs between US\$60 and US\$75. Dive operators also offer a range of courses, including a 'Discover Diving' programme for uncertified, first-time divers. Consider the following outfits, but shop around:

**Blue Diving Club** (☎ 527 034; www.vietnam-diving.com; 66 Đ Tran Phu) Owned and operated by French and British divers.

**Coco Dive Center** (☎ 812 900; www.cocodivecenter.com; 2E Đ Biet Thu) A friendly outfit where you can book directly with the dive masters to get your own read on them; has the nicest boat of the lot.

**Octopus Diving** (☎ 521 629; 62 Đ Tran Phu) See Sailing Club Diving.

**Rainbow Divers** (☎ 524 351; www.divevietnam.com; 90A Hung Vuong) Run by Briton Jeremy Stein, Rainbow Divers is the standard setter for diving in Vietnam, operating out of five centres nationwide. This, its head office, also includes a restaurant and bar.

**Sailing Club Diving** (☎ 522 788; www.sailingclubvietnam.com; 72-74 Đ Tran Phu) This and Octopus Diving are two names for the same operation that have separate locations on the same street. Get it?

## SWIMMING & WATER SPORTS

**Mana Mana Beach Club** (☎ 524 362; www.manamana.com; Louisiane Brewhouse, 29 Đ Tran Phu) offers windsurfing, sea kayaking, wakeboarding and sailing lessons. Mana Mana uses good equipment and has access to some great surfing spots in Cam Ranh Bay.

## MASSAGE

Despite what the name might imply to some people, **Lucky Foot Massage** (☎ 521 417; 1 Đ Hung Vuong; ☎ 9am-9pm) offers first-class massages. Find paradise in a 45-minute foot, leg and hand massage (US\$6).

## Tours

**Mama Linh's Boat Tours** (☎ 522 844; mamalinhvn@yahoo.com; 23C Đ Biet Thu) runs daily island-hopping party boats, stopping at Hon Mun, Hon Mot, Hon Tam and Hon Mieu (see opposite). Tickets (US\$6) are sold from the home office, but you can book almost anywhere around town for an additional commission.

**Con Se Tre** (☎ /fax 527 522; 100/16 Đ Tran Phu) offers tours to Hon Tre that include a visit to Vinpearl, a look around the village and lunch (US\$15), and snorkelling trips to Hon Mun (two people US\$44, group per person US\$12). It also charters speed boats (US\$35 to US\$50) and wooden boats (US\$30 to US\$45), including snorkels and a guide.

Travel agencies in town also offer various tours (see p867).

## Sleeping

The place is full of guesthouses and hotels that offer some of the best value for money in the country.

**Mai Huy** (☎ 527 553; 7H Đ Hung Vuong; r US\$5-7; ☎) Pronounced 'may we' (or 'mais oui!' if you're French), it's worth searching out this new family-run minihotel, hidden down a small laneway. The cost of a simple clean room with a fan, fridge, satellite TV and private bathroom with hot water, is unbelievable value.

**our pick** **Phong Lan Hotel** (Orchid Hotel; ☎ 522 647; orchidhotel2000@yahoo.com; 24/44 Đ Hung Vuong; r US\$5-10; ☎) This family-run place is in a quiet alley off Hung Vuong, with small clean rooms with TV and fridge. The owners speak French and English and seem to take personal responsibility for the happiness of guests.

**Hotel An Hoa** (☎ 524 029; anhoahotel@yahoo.com; 64B/6 Đ Tran Phu; r US\$6-11; ☎) One of the better options in the new, fabulously located, budget alley, rooms range from cheapies without windows or air-con, to larger pads with bathtubs and decks.

**Phu Quy Hotel** (☎ 521 609; Phuquyhotel@dng.vnn.vn; 54 Đ Hung Vuong; r US\$6-20; ☎) The highlight of this minihotel is its rooftop terrace – all the rooms are comfortable, and for US\$10 expect a balcony, bathtub and sea view.

**Nice Hotel** (☎ 527 379; nicehotel@vnn.vn; Đ Hung Vuong; r US\$7-10; ☎) Awesome views from the higher levels of this big new minihotel are only marred by the constant dinging of the elevator. But, with some ear plugs you'll sleep easy knowing that the rooms are truly

nice for the price. Rooms may be cooled by either fan or air-con.

**Sakura Hotel** (☎ 524 669; 1/32 Đ Tran Quang Khai; r US\$7-12; ☎) A comfy minihotel, the Sakura has rooms equipped with satellite TV, IDD phone and fridge. As an added bonus, it offers free transport to and from train or bus station.

**Thien Tan Hotel** (New Sky Hotel; ☎ 521 304; thientanhhotel@hotmail.com; 78 Đ Hung Vuong; r US\$7-18; ☎) This clean minihotel has comfortable, bright rooms with satellite TV and phone.

**Pho Bien** (☎ 524 858; phobienhotelint@yahoo.com; 64/1 Đ Tran Phu; r US\$8-12; ☎) The best of the budget alley minihotels, some of the cheapest rooms have views and large balconies, if you can handle the stairs.

## Eating

Central Nha Trang teems with dining choices. As always, taking a meal in the market is a cheap adventure, and **Dam market** (Đ Nguyen Hong Son) in the north end of town has lots of local food stalls, including *com chay* (vegetarian food). **A-Mart** (☎ 523 035; 17A Đ Biet Thu; ☎ 6am-10pm) has a food court outside with lots of Western treats and the ingredients to make snacks or a real meal should you have access to a kitchen.

Frozen treats don't get much better than at **Romy's Homemade Ice Cream** (☎ 527 677; 1C Đ Biet Thu; dessert 25,000d). The waffles laden with ice cream or fruit are a sweet way to start the day.

## VIETNAMESE

**Café des Amis** (☎ 521 009; 2D Đ Biet Thu; dishes 7000-40,000d) A popular cheapie focusing on seafood and vegetarian fare, the walls are covered with interesting works by Vietnamese painters.

**Lac Canh Restaurant** (☎ 821 391; 44 Đ Nguyen Binh Khiem; mains 10,000-85,000d; ☎ lunch & dinner) A Nha Trang institution; beef, squid, giant prawns, lobsters and the like are grilled at your table.

**Pho Cali** (☎ 525 885; 7G Đ Hung Vuong; mains 15,000-25,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The meals are delicious, and the set menu – comprising soup, rice and a hotpot – is outrageously good value at 20,000d.

**Hai Phong Restaurant** (☎ 521 771; 12B Đ Biet Thu; mains 15,000-30,000d; ☎ lunch & dinner) It looks like an average travellers café but the Vietnamese and seafood dishes are a very tasty surprise. It also has plenty of backpacker favourites on the menu.

**our pick Red Star** (☎ 524-980; 27A Đ Hung Vuong; mains from 16,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) All of their food is good, but the seafood *ben xeo* stands out as the best way to sample the sea's bounty on the cheap.

**Truc Linh 1** (☎ 526-742; 11 Đ Biet Thu; 30,000-80,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) With two other nearby locations, the Truc Linh restaurants nearly take over a city block with crates of fresh seafood on ice. Good presentation and service are just the warm-up to great food.

**Cyclo Café** (☎ 524 208; 130 Đ Nguyen Thien Thuat; mains about 30,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Run by a local couple with many years of experience in Nha Trang's restaurant business; it serves real Vietnamese food at local prices.

## INTERNATIONAL

**Cheers Café** (☎ 524 840; Đ Hung Vuong; mains from 7000-45,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Serving good French, Italian, and Vietnamese fare, this is the place (there's one in every city in South-east Asia) that always has at least one table full of beer bottles surrounded by older guys.

**Checkpoint Charlie's** (☎ 527 829; 1L Đ Hung Vuong; mains from 15,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) The owner, Charlie, is a German who serves great sauerkraut and other Teutonic favourites such as meatballs and black bread.

**Cool Kangaroo** (☎ 527 307; 116 Đ Nguyen Thien Thuat; mains from 16,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Come here for Vietnamese and Russian food in addition to the usual traveller favourites. The staff are friendly but the place has odd décor; plush toy kangaroos hang next to portraits of Russian Orthodox saints.

**El Coyote** (☎ 526 320; 76 Đ Hung Vuong; mains from 30,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) Great food. Guests are often treated to a shot of banana rum and the happy hour set menu runs from 5pm to 9pm; choose a burrito, nachos, or tacos as a main dish for 40,000d with a soft drink or 50,000d with a beer.

**Turkish Cuisine Kebab Restaurant** (☎ 525 328; 24B Đ Hung Vuong; mains 40,000-100,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) It serves kebabs, pizza and pasta. Hookah pipes add to the atmosphere.

## Drinking

**Shamrock Irish Pub** (☎ 527 548; www.raftingvietnam.com; 56A Đ Nguyen Thien Thuat) This is an ultrafrendly pub favoured by local expats.

**Tiny Bar Nghia** (☎ 527 011, 763 Đ Hung Vuong) 'Very good, very cheap, very Vietnam' is the motto at this *bia hoi* bar, and its definitely right.

Get there early because by the time the sun sets it's packed.

**Crazy Kim Bar** (☎ 523 072; www.crazykimbar.com; 19 Đ Biet Thu) A fun party spot run by the ebullient Kimmy Le, there's a permanent classroom for vulnerable street kids in an upstairs corner of the bar. Part of the proceeds from the food, booze and T-shirt sales go towards the cause. Sign up at the bar if you're interested in volunteering to teach English.

**Guava** (☎ 524 140; www.clubnhatrang.com; 17 Đ Biet Thu) A little lounge, a little sports bar, a lot of fun. The crowd is a hip mix of locals and tourists.

**Why Not Bar** (☎ 522 652; 24 Đ Tran Quang Khai; ☺ until 4am) Try the wicked 'Why not?' bucket of booze (30,000d), available all night long. Dancing in the big airy space and whatever else on the plush couches are sure to follow.

**Nha Trang Sailing Club** (☎ 826 528; www.sailingclubvietnam.com; 72-74 Đ Tran Phu; ☺ until 4am) This Aussie-run, open-air beach bar is where most of the party crowd ends up at some point in the evening; usually the latter half. It has thumping music, wild dancing, flowing shots, pool and general mayhem.

## Entertainment

**Vien Dong Hotel** (☎ 821 606; 1 Đ Tran Hung Dao; admission free; ☺ performances 7.30pm) Hosts nightly ethnic-minority song and dance performances.

## Shopping

Many restaurants and bars around town display the works of local photographers and artists, which are usually for sale. You'll find a lot of seashells and coral for sale, but their harvesting destroys the beauty and ecology of Nha Trang's reefs.

Check out the hand-painted T-shirts done by a friendly local painter named **Kim Quang** (☎ 0983 884 5397), who you can find between 2pm and 9pm working from his wheelchair at the Sailing Club (above).

**Andy's** (4 Đ Biet Thu) sells beach wear, maps, books and one-of-a-kind clothing. The best part of the shop is the chance to watch traditional fabric weaving on a small loom.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Vietnam Airlines** (code VN; ☎ 826 768; www.vietnamairlines.com; 91 Đ Nguyen Thien Thuat) has flights connecting Cam Ranh airport (35km south of Nha Trang) with HCMC, Hanoi and Danang. To

get to the airport, catch a shuttle bus (45,000d) from the old Nha Trang airport terminal (near 86 Đ Tran Phu), two hours before your flight. Taking a taxi to catch your flight should cost around US\$10, and it's a fairly scenic drive.

### BUS

About 500m west of the train station, **Lien Tinh bus station** (Ben Xe Lien Tinh; ☎ 822 192; Đ 23 Thanh 10) is Nha Trang's main intercity bus terminal. Buses from here head to Danang (120,000d, seven hours), HCMC (110,000d, 11 hours), and Dalat (60,000d, seven hours).

Nha Trang is a major stopping point on all of the tourist open-bus tours. These are the best option for accessing Mui Ne, which is not served by local buses. Open-tour buses also run to Dalat (six hours) and Hoi An (11 hours). The only buses to Hoi An are night buses, however. Prepare for a long night as this leg of a trip is usually described as 'prison' or 'hell.'

### CAR & MOTORCYCLE

A series of roughly parallel roads head inland from near Nha Trang, linking Vietnam's deltas and coastal regions with the Central Highlands.

### TRAIN

The **Nha Trang train station** (Ga Nha Trang; ☎ 822 113; Đ Thai Nguyen; ☺ ticket office 7-11.30am, 1.30-5pm & 6-10pm) is down the hill west of the cathedral. Destinations include Danang (203,000d, 8½ to 12½ hours, seven daily) and other points north, Thap Cham (35,000d, 1½ to 2½ hours, eight daily) and HCMC (160,000d, seven to 12½ hours, nine daily).

A relatively new upscale train service called **5-Star Express** (☎ 08-920 6868 HCMC main office; www.5starexpress.com.vn; one way 220,000d-450,000d) runs a private, comfy train that travels between Nha Trang and HCMC.

## Getting Around

There is no shortage of motorbikes, taxis and *cyclo* drivers looking for passengers. The old Nha Trang airport, from which buses shuttle passengers to Cam Ranh airport, is on the southern side of town. *Cyclos* go to both the old airport and the train station for about US\$1.

**Nha Trang Taxi** (☎ 824 000) and **Khanh Hoa Taxi** (☎ 810 810) have cars with air-con and meters.

Many hotels have bicycle rentals for around US\$1 per day.

## MUI NE

### ☎ 062

This 11km-stretch of beach outside the fishing village of Mui Ne is only three hours away from HCMC and is the place to ease into slow-motion beachside Zen. Or, take the other extreme and tear up the waves with wind and kite-surfing. There are a number of luxury resorts here but some budget deals are still available. Mui Ne is a long stretch of restaurants and hotels but not a proper town, so, wherever you sleep will probably become the centre or your universe.

## Orientation & Information

Local addresses are designated by a kilometre mark measuring the distance along Rte 706 from Hwy 1 in Phan Thiet. To mix things up a bit, Rte 706 is also known in town as Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu. Small restaurants along the road offer internet access; the going rate is about 300d per minute.

**Hanh Cafe/Ha Phuong Tourist** (☎ 847 347; Km 13)

Travel arrangements, backpacker grub and internet access can be found at this travellers café.

**Incombank** (68 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu; ☺ Sun-Fri) At Tropic Resort, this branch can exchange currency and travellers cheques.

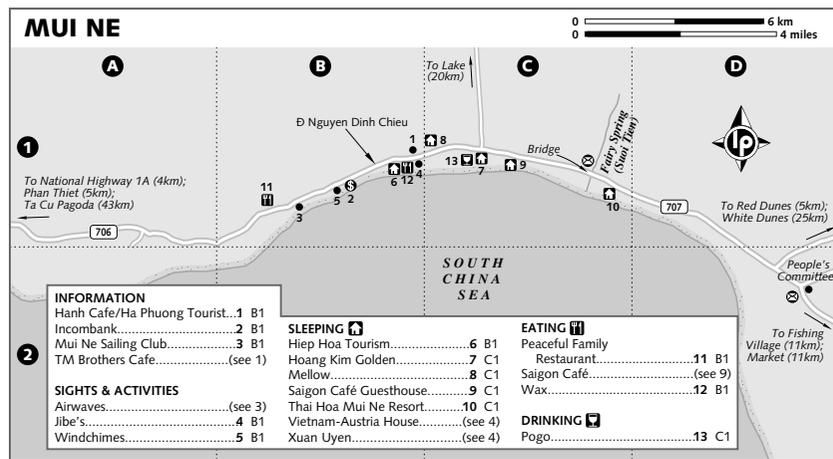
**Mui Ne Sailing Club** (☎ 847 440; www.sailingclubvietnam.com; 24 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu) Has a registered nurse. For serious medical problems, head to HCMC.

**TM Brothers Cafe** (☎ 847 359; Km 13) About 200m from Hanh Cafe, with similar services.

## Sights

Mui Ne is most famous for its fish sauce but the enormous **sand dunes** smell better and are a lot more fun. To get to the **red dunes** (sometimes called yellow) head east out of town and follow the signs to Pandasa Resort. Pass the resort and soon you'll see the dunes filled with little kids selling rides on plastic sheets down the sandy slopes. The **white dunes** are another 20km after that – definitely more impressive and worth a look. Wear real shoes because even in sandals the dunes are sizzling. Riding the dunes is an art, so try to rent a sheet of plastic from the kids rather than paying for each slide.

It's possible to cycle to the first dunes but start in a cool part of the day and bring plenty of sunscreen. A motorbike-taxi trip to both dunes (50,000d to 80,000d) is a better deal than a jeep tour (US\$10) because you get dropped off at the same place no matter how you get there.



If taking a jeep be careful to agree on an itinerary for the tour, preferably in writing. We've heard complaints, particularly about 'sunset tours' that cut short with the sun high in the sky and the drivers getting aggressive when challenged.

The **Fairy Spring** (Suoi Tien) is a stream that flows through a patch of the dunes and rock formations east of town. Also nearby are a **red stream, market** and **fishing village**.

## Activities

The season for windsurfers is from late October to late April. Ask at **Jibe's** (☎ 847 405; www.windsurf-vietnam.com; Km 13, 90 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu) for information. It rents state-of-the-art boards of all sorts, by the hour or day. It also offers kite-surfing and windsurfing lessons overseen by head instructor Armando, a friendly Lisbon native who is the utmost professional on the job and a barrel of fun once the sun goes down.

**Airwaves** (☎ 847 440; www.airwaveskitesurfing.com), based at Mui Ne Sailing Club, is another outfit offering lessons and equipment rentals.

**Windchimes** (☎ 0909 720 017; www.windsurfing-vietnam.com) is another watersports option, operating out of **Saigon Mui Ne Resort** (56 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu) and **Swiss Village** (44 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu).

## Sleeping

Mui Ne has two main clusters of hotels; at the 13km mark where some nice budget places loom in the shadow of resorts, and at the cheaper end of town around the 18km mark. Most open-tour buses stop at the first loca-

tion. Hop on a motorbike taxi to sniff around the other side if nothing suits your fancy.

**Saigon Cafe Guesthouse** (☎ 847 091; 168-170 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu; r US\$5; 📶) These bamboo and thatched-roof bungalows are as cheap and humble as it comes.

**Mellow** (☎ 743 086; 117C Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu; r US\$6-12) The cheaper rooms share bathrooms and toilets. A favourite hangout of kite-surfers, the rooms fill up quick and there's a nice crowd at the bar-restaurant.

**Hoang Kim Golden** (☎ 847 689; www.hoangkim-golden.com; 140 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu; r US\$6-25; 📶 📶) The cheapie rooms here are very basic – shared bathrooms and no air-con. The rest cover a range of prices from good, clean budget options to newer rooms with bathtubs and minibars. There are two restaurants.

**our pick** **Thai Hoa Mui Ne Resort** (☎ 847 320; dtP@hcm.vnn.vn; Km 18; US\$8-15; 📶 📶) The clean beachfront has chairs and umbrellas and there's a nice restaurant at this great spot. The least expensive rooms don't have hot water or air-con.

**Vietnam-Austria House** (☎ 847 047; ngothikimhong@hotmail.com; km13.5; r US\$8-20; 📶 📶) This established place has wooden bungalows and a block of simple rooms (the cheapest without hot water or air-con).

**Hiep Hoa Tourism** (☎ 847 262; hiephoatourism@yahoo.com; 80 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu; r US\$10-15; 📶) Hiep Hoa is sandwiched between big resorts but manages to retain its laid-back vibe. It has a beautiful clean beach and tiny café. It's often full, so call ahead.

**Xuan Uyen** (☎ 847 476; 78 Nguyen Dinh Chieu; r US\$10-15; 📶) Entering through a leafy walkway you'll soon see travellers lolling on the beach or hanging in hammocks at this cool little place. The basic bungalow rooms have hot water.

## Eating & Drinking

If you tire of your home café, Rte 706 is lined with small family restaurants serving similar dishes at comparable prices. Try the *com* shops for a plate of rice and fish for 6000d.

**Saigon Cafe** (☎ 847 091; 168-170 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu; dishes 12,000-45,000d) Great Vietnamese BBQ food is served in a basic setting, with profundities written on the walls in beautiful calligraphy.

**Wax** (☎ 847 001; 68 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu; mains from 20,000d; 📶) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Wax is an airy beachside restaurant during the day but transforms into the most happening spot in Mui Ne at night with lots of pick-up lines and the spontaneous wiggling of hips. Try the tasty seafood macaroni (35,000d).

**Peaceful Family Restaurant** (Yen Gia Quan; ☎ 741 019; 53 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu; dishes 30,000-70,000d; 📶) This friendly family eatery serves wonderful Vietnamese cuisine in a lovely open setting.

**Pogo** (☎ 0909 479 346; 138 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu) A fun, open-air bar decorated with colourful infantile paintings – it has a pool table, big sound system and bean bags.

## Getting There & Around

From HCMC, the 200km drive to Mui Ne takes three hours – in theory. Depending on traffic in HCMC it can take up to seven. Traveller cafés in HCMC and Mui Ne sell tickets on open-tour buses for about US\$5.

It's best to cruise around Mui Ne on bicycle, which most guesthouses rent for US\$1 to US\$3 a day. A motorbike should cost from US\$5 to US\$8 a day; almost all places to stay rent these, too. The roads are fairly quiet, but a German tourist on a motorbike was killed by a bus on this stretch in 2006, so be careful. There are plenty of *xe om* drivers to take you up and down the strip; no trip should cost more than 10,000d.

## CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

The Central Highlands covers the southern part of the Truong Son Mountain Range. This geographical region, home to many Montagnard ethnic groups, is renowned for its

cool climate, beautiful mountain scenery and innumerable streams, lakes and waterfalls. For those who can't make it to the far north of the country, this is the place for outdoor frolicking.

## DALAT

☎ 063 / pop 130,000

Kitschy sights, honeymooning Vietnamese and cool weather are the main attractions that visitors find in Dalat, but just outside the city limits is a mecca for outdoor activities that should not be overlooked. Dotted with lakes and waterfalls and surrounded by evergreen forests, Dalat is nicknamed the City of Eternal Spring. The days are fine and nights frosty at 1475m, and wool hats and scarves abound in the market if you're caught unprepared. Still, the cool temperatures make trekking or cycling easier.

## Orientation

Dalat's sights are spread out and the terrain in and around the city is hilly. The central market, set in a hollow, marks the middle of the town. To the southeast the 'Eiffel Tower' of the main post office is a useful landmark, rising above the southern shore of Xuan Huong Lake. Finding your way around can be frustrating in Dalat because of well-hidden street signs, roads that look like alleys at first glance, and sharp turns up and down hills that make navigation difficult.

## Information

### INTERNET ACCESS

There are several internet cafés along either side of Đ Nguyen Chi Thanh (Map p878). Rates for internet use are around 150d per minute.

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Lam Dong Hospital** (Map p878; ☎ 822 369; 4 Đ Pham Ngoc Thach)

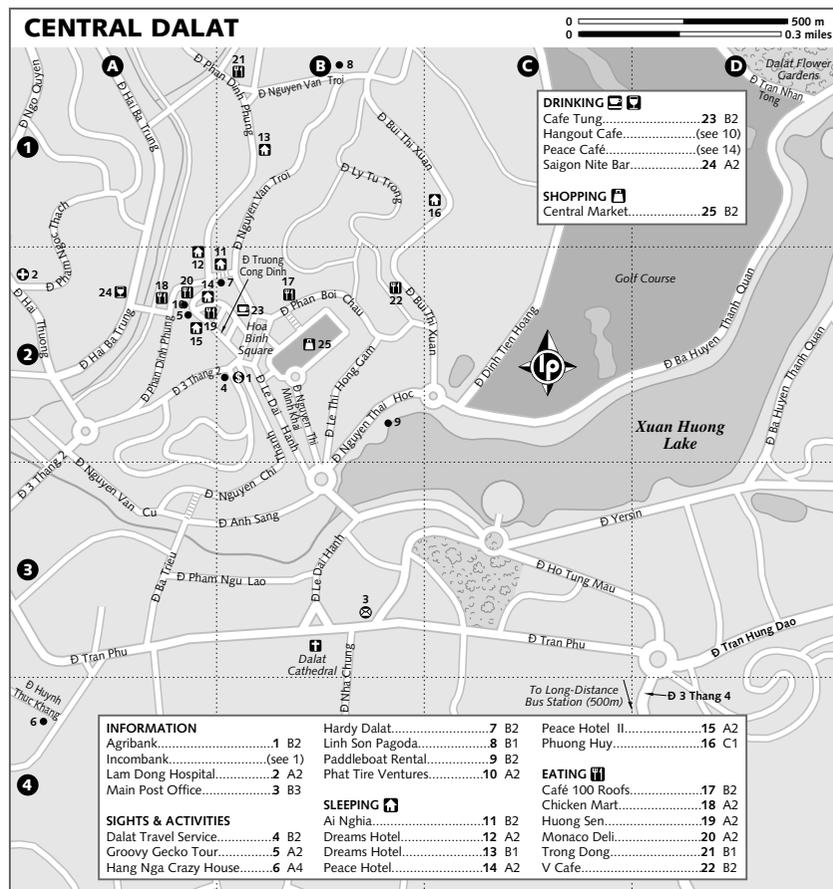
### MONEY

Though ATMs aren't as plentiful here as in other Vietnamese cities, getting more money is no problem. These downtown banks exchange cash and travellers cheques and do credit card-cash advances.

**Agribank** (Ngan Hang Nong Nghiep Viet Nam; Map p878; ☎ 827 740; 36 Hoa Binh Sq)

**Incombank** (Map p878; ☎ 822 586; 1 Đ Le Dai Hanh) No ATM, but this big branch exchanges travellers cheques and foreign currencies.





**Phat Tire Ventures** (Map p878; ☎ 829 422; www.phattireventures.com; 73 Đ Trường Công Định) Does mountain-biking tours around Dalat but it has the full range of adventure sports. It offers a few mainly downhill bicycle rides to the coast – the ride to Nha Trang (US\$67) sure beats the bus.

### Sleeping

**Phuong Huy** (Map p878; ☎ 520 243; 5 Đ Bùi Thị Xuân; r US\$5-8) This clean, new minihotel has good facilities and a wonderfully kitsch *Last Supper* reproduction and mirrored crucifix in reception.

**our pick Ai Nghia** (Map p878; ☎ 520 529, 80 Đ Đinh Phùng; r US\$5-8) Another sparkling new minihotel, which has quiet rooms towards the back and satellite TV.

**Hotel Binh Yen** (Map p876; ☎ 823 631; hotel.binhyen@yahoo.com; 7 Đ Hải Thuong; r incl breakfast US\$6-10; 🛏) A real gem, the rooms at this well-priced hotel are comfortable and spacious and guests can use the free internet in the lobby.

**Peace Hotel** (Map p878; ☎ 822 787; peace12@hcm.vnn.vn; 64 Đ Trường Công Định; r US\$7-15) Exuding well-worn charm, the Peace Hotel is a longtime favourite and the café downstairs is a popular gathering place. There's another villa-style branch across the street known as Peace Hotel II (Map p878; 67 Đ Trường Công Định). The rooms at this second location are big and a touch nicer than at the original.

**Dreams Hotel** (Map p878; ☎ 833 748; dreams@hcm.vnn.vn; 151 Đ Phan Đình Phùng; r incl breakfast US\$10-15; 🛏 📺) Highly recommended by travellers,

this is one of the best deals in Dalat. A welcoming place, it has tidy, comfortable rooms, some with balconies. There's free internet access in the lobby. You can pay with a credit card and, best of all, there is no pressure for taking tours. There's a slightly more upscale twin sister further north on the same street; it's also called Dreams Hotel (Map p878; ☎ 833 748; dreams@hcm.vnn.vn; 164B Đ Phan Đình Phùng; rooms US\$15 to US\$20).

### Eating

Along Đ Phan Đình Phùng (Map p878), across from the original Dreams Hotel are several good restaurants serving inexpensive Vietnamese, Chinese and Western food. At night, when the market area becomes festive, check out the food stalls on Đ Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai and the steps leading to the market. The stalls, and the other eateries listed following are on the Map p878.

**our pick Huong Sen** (☎ 510 236, 46 Đ Trường Công Định; mains from 10,000d; 🍴 breakfast & lunch & dinner) Huong Sen does good vegetarian and fake-meat dishes at great prices. Late-night diners are out of luck; it closes around 8pm.

**Café 100 Roofs** (Way to the Moon; ☎ 822 880; puppy@hcm.vnn.vn; 57 Đ Phan Bội Châu; ice creams 24,000d) More of Dalat's wacky sculptural architecture. Have some ice cream inside this labyrinthine café created by a friend and colleague of the Crazy House architect.

**Trong Dong** (☎ 821 889; 220 Đ Phan Đình Phùng; mains 24,000-55,000d; 🍴 lunch & dinner) This is a good place to sample superb Vietnamese food; house specialities include grilled shrimp paste on sugar cane and fish hotpot. It's a bit outside the centre, but well worth the walk.

**Monaco Deli** (☎ 510 820; 62 Đ Phan Đình Phùng; mains 40,000d; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Sometimes there's no taste like home; Monaco Deli has a long menu of Western treats. The daily specials such as grilled fish or fancy pizza are always good.

**V Cafe** (☎ 837 576; 1 Đ Bùi Thị Xuân; mains 40,000d; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) East meets West in a casual but refined setting. The friendly atmosphere has made it a longtime favourite rendezvous point for travellers.

**Chicken Mart** (☎ 521 153; 97 Đ Phan Đình Phùng; 🍴 breakfast & lunch) What is the Dalat fascination with the humble flightless bird? True to its name, Chicken Mart is a small cafeteria-style place that prepares chicken in nearly 20 different ways.

### Drinking

All these places are on Map p878.

**Cafe Tung** (6 Khu Hoa Binh Sq) This famous hangout of Saigonese intellectuals during the 1950s now has a less lively atmosphere, but it's a good place to have a jolt of coffee on a cold Dalat evening.

**Peace Café** (☎ 822 787; 64 Đ Trường Công Định) The de facto backpacker hangout in Dalat, it also serves food. Depending on the amount of customers, it sometimes closes on the early side (10pm).

**Saigon Nite Bar** (☎ 820 007; 11A Đ Hải Ba Trưng) Open later than many places in Dalat, this is the place to go to shoot pool with expats.

**Hangout Cafe** (☎ 510 822; 71 Đ Trường Công Định) We didn't see anyone hanging out, but with a pool table, movie nights and a full bar the place has promise.

### Shopping

If you can't make it further into the Central Highlands, this is the place to buy tasty Vietnamese coffee. Hoa Binh Sq (Map p878) and the market building adjacent to it are the places to go for purchasing ethnic handicrafts from the nearby Montagnard villages and kitschy knick-knacks.

### Getting There & Around

**Vietnam Airlines** (code VN; Map p878; ☎ 833 499; www.vietnamairlines.com) runs daily flights connecting Dalat with HCMC and Hanoi. Dalat's Lien Khuong Airport is located 30km south of the city.

Long-distance bus services leave from the **bus station** (Map p876; Đ 3 Tháng 2), about 1km south of the city centre. Buses here travel to most of the country, including to HCMC (60,000d, six to seven hours), Nha Trang (60,000d, seven hours) and Buon Ma Thuot (65,000d, four hours).

Open-tour minibuses between Dalat and HCMC, Mui Ne and Nha Trang are plentiful. Any travellers café or hotel can arrange a ticket.

Mountain roads connect Dalat with other Central Highlands towns. Dalat Travel Service (see p877) can arrange daily car rentals (with a driver) for around US\$25.

Full-day tours with local motorbike guides (p877) are a great way to see the area, as many of the sights lie outside Dalat's centre. Expect to pay between US\$10 and US\$12 for a day tour.

Many hotels offer bicycle and motorbike hire.

## BUON MA THUOT

☎ 050 / pop 186,600

The biggest town in the Central Highlands, Buon Ma Thuot is surrounded by coffee plantations and sells superb coffee at lower prices than in Hanoi or HCMC.

**Dam San Tourist** (☎ 851 234; damsantour@dng.vnn.vn; 212-214 Đ Nguyen Cong Tru), attached to the Dam-san Hotel, and **Daklak Tourist** (☎ 852 108; www.daklaktourist.com.vn; 3 Đ Phan Chau Trinh), can arrange tours and your travel permits for the Ede, M'ngong and Bahnar villages nearby.

Other sights of interest include the **Ethnographic Museum** (☎ 850 426; 4 Đ Nguyen Du; admission 10,000đ; ⌚ 7.30-11am & 2-5pm), which has exhibits covering some of the 31 ethnic groups from Dac Lac province. For amazing views from the hills head to **Lak Lake**, near a M'ngong village. Nearby **Yok Don National park** (Vuon Quoc Gia Yok Don; ☎ 783 049; yokdon@dng.vnn.vn) is home to 38 endangered mammal species.

## Sleeping

In town, good budget choices include the following three places, all of which are clean and central. The more expensive rooms have air-con and private toilet.

**Thanh Binh Hotel** (☎ 853 812; 24 Đ Ly Thuong Kiet; r US\$8-10; 🏠) Probably the best deal in town.

**Duy Hoang Hotel** (☎ 858 020; 30 Đ Ly Thuong Kiet; r US\$10; 🏠) The rooms here vary in size and quality, so choose carefully.

**Cao Nguyen Hotel** (☎ 851 913; www.daklaktourist.com/english/hotels/info.html; 65 Đ Phan Chu Trinh; r US\$15-45; 🏠 📺) Faded grandeur and on-site karaoke and dancing – a beautiful combination.

At the national park headquarters, **Yok Don Guesthouse** (☎ 853 110; r 150,000đ; 🏠) has four basic rooms (cold water only), each with two beds.

## Eating

**Thanh Loan** (☎ 818 464; 14-16 Đ Ly Thuong Kiet; meals 12,000đ) Roll your own stuffed rice paper here. Delicious.

**Dac Biet Bun Bo** (☎ 810 135; 10 Đ Le Hong Phong; meals 12,000đ) Big hunks of meat are served in a spicy broth over white noodles, served with a plate of fresh herbs.

## Getting There & Away

**Vietnam Airlines** (code VN; ☎ 955 055; www.vietnamairlines.com; 65-67 Đ Nguyen Chi Thanh) connects Buon Ma

Thuot with HCMC and Danang. The airport is about 8km west of town. A taxi should cost less than 20,000đ.

Buon Ma Thuot is served by buses from HCMC, Nha Trang, Dalat, Pleiku, Kon Tum and Danang. National Hwy 27 from Dalat is best travelled by motorbike or 4WD.

## PLEIKU

☎ 059 / pop 141,700

Most travellers prefer to skip the market town of Pleiku in favour of Kon Tum, 49km to the north. Authorities are worried about further unrest among the local ethnic minorities (see p815); you need a permit to visit villages in the area and you'll also be required to hire a guide.

**Gia Lai Tourist** (☎ 874 571; www.gialaitourist.com; 215 Đ Hung Vuong) Located beside the Hung Vuong Hotel, staff can arrange a permit and guide as part of one of its packages.

**Incombank** (☎ 871 054; 12 Đ Tran Hung Dao) Branch offering foreign currency and travellers cheque exchanges, and credit-card advances.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Thanh Lich Hotel** (☎ 824 674; 86 Đ Nguyen Van Troi; r US\$6-15; 🏠) Backpackers tend to gravitate towards this centrally located, but ageing, hotel. Some rooms have small terraces and some of the staff speak OK English.

**Ialy Hotel** (☎ 824 843; 89 Đ Hung Vuong; r 220,000-400,000đ; 🏠) Also on the shabby side, but the Ialy still remains a solid choice. The more expensive rooms are large and suitelike, fitted with new furniture including a desk and lounge area.

**Tamba** (☎ 826 774; 5-7 Đ Tran Phu) is a cross between a bakery and a supermarket, while **Nem Ninh Hoa** (80 Đ Nguyen Van Troi; mains 15,000đ) turns out Pleiku's best spring rolls.

## Getting There & Away

**Vietnam Airlines** (code VN; ☎ 824 680; www.vietnamairlines.com; 55 Đ Quang Trung; ⌚ 7.30-11am & 1.30-4.30pm) has flights between Pleiku and HCMC and Danang.

Buses run from HCMC, Buon Ma Thuot and most coastal towns between, and including, Nha Trang and Danang.

## KON TUM

☎ 060 / pop 89,800

Kon Tum seems to hold the most thrall for travellers in the area, especially for cyclists,

as motorised traffic is light, the scenery fine and the climate pleasant. No matter how you get around here, the people are among the warmest in Vietnam.

Around the edges of town are a couple of **Bahnar villages** within walking distance. Along Đ Nguyen Hué, there's a ceremonial *rong* house – a community hall on stilts – and a **Catholic seminary with a hill-tribe museum** on the 2nd floor.

A short walk from the town centre, the **Vinh Son 1** and **Vinh Son 2** orphanages welcome visitors who come to share some time with the adorable multiethnic resident children. Donations, canned food, clothing or toys for the kids are much appreciated.

Exchange dollars for dong at **BIDV** (☎ 862 340; 1 Đ Tran Phu; ⌚ closed Sat). The terrific **Kon Tum Tourist** (☎ 861 626; www.kontumtourist.com.vn; 2 Đ Phan Dinh Phung; ⌚ 8-11am & 1-4.30pm) has its booking office in Dakbla Hotel.

## Sleeping

**Viet Tram** (☎ 869 269; fax 869 334; 162 Đ Nguyen Hué; r US\$8-10; 🏠 📺) A friendly minihotel with basic but clean and comfortable rooms.

**Dakbla Hotel** (☎ 863 333; 2 Đ Phan Dinh Phung; r incl breakfast US\$15-24; 🏠) The plushiest of the bunch, the Dakbla is near the river. You have to ask for the cheapest room or staff quote US\$20 as the lowest rate.

**Quang Trung Hotel** (☎ 862 249; 168 Đ Ba Trieu; r US\$15-30; 🏠) The cheapest rooms are Spartan, fan-only cells.

## Eating & Drinking

**Nghia II** (72 Đ Le Loi; mains 10,000đ) There's good vegetarian food here.

**Dakbla's** (☎ 826 584; 168 Đ Nguyen Hué; mains from 25,000đ) If you're after local fare, try this popular place.

**Eva Cafe** (☎ 862 944; 1 Đ Phan Chu Trinh) For hot coffee or cold beer, stop by Eva's atmospheric garden. There's a fantastic sculpture of a soldier fashioned from a large bomb, wearing a peace sign around its neck.

## Getting There & Away

Buses from Ho Chi Minh City take 12 hours along scenic National Hwy 14. Kon Tum's bus station is 13km north of town, but buses often drive through Kon Tum, where they can drop you instead. Kon Tum buses connect with Pleiku, Buon Ma Thuot and Danang.

# HO CHI MINH CITY (SAIGON)

☎ 08 / pop 5.38 million

Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) – still Saigon to everyone who lives here – is a city on constant fast-forward with the volume cranked all the way up. Everything is quick here; people are quick to make a deal, quick to laugh and quick to let you know that this is the best place in Vietnam. Although it may appear like absolute chaos at first, Saigon works a slow magic on visitors that is in marked contrast to the pace of life. With all the comforts of home in a setting where just watching the street is more fascinating than any film, it's easy to fall in love with the city.

## ORIENTATION

A sprawl of 16 urban and five rural *quan* (districts) make up the vast geography of HCMC, though most travellers stick to the centre around the Dong Khoi and Phan Ngu Lao neighbourhoods. Cholon, the city's Chinatown, lies southwest of the centre, and the Saigon River snakes down the eastern side.

The heart of central HCMC beats in Districts 1 and 3, where stately tamarind trees shade fading French colonial buildings and narrow Vietnamese shophouses. High-rise hotels jostle with towers of commerce near the Saigon River.

Street labels are shortened to Đ for *duong* (street), and ĐL for *dai lo* (boulevard).

## INFORMATION

### Bookshops

To find a good read for the bus or beach, just sit down at any traveller hangout and wait for what looks like an escaped library shelf gone vertical to lumber towards you. For reference, Vietnamese literature or how-to books in French or English consider **Fahasa Bookshop** Đ Dong Khoi (Map p890; ☎ 822 4670; 185 Đ Dong Khoi); ĐL Nguyen Hué (Map p890; ☎ 822 5446; 40 ĐL Nguyen Hué; ⌚ 8am-5pm).

### Cultural Centres

**British Council** (Map p886; ☎ 823 2862; www.britishcouncil.org/vietnam; 25 ĐL Le Duan)  
**Institute of Cultural Exchange with France** (Idecaf; Map p890; ☎ 829 5451; 31 Đ Thai Van Lung) Has French-language films and videos (see p892).

**Emergency****Ambulance** (☎ 115)**Fire** (☎ 114)**Police** (☎ 113)**Internet Access**

Hundreds of internet cafés thrive in HCMC – in Pham Ngu Lao (Map p892) you can't swing a dead cat without hitting one. Rates are generally a cheap 100d per minute with a minimum charge of 2000d.

**Media**

Hotels, bars and restaurants around HCMC carry the free entertainment magazines the *Guide* and *Time Out* (see p907).

Especially in the morning there are vendors who visit traveller cafés to sell newspapers and magazines. Give the papers a close look before buying; often the original price is bleached out and replaced with highway robbery.

**Medical Services**

**Cho Ray Hospital** (Benh Vien Cho Ray; Map pp884-5; ☎ 855 4137; fax 855 7267; 201 ĐL Nguyen Chi Thanh, District 5; consultations from US\$4; ☎ 24hr) The largest medical facility in Vietnam, with 24-hour emergency services and excellent, inexpensive care. About one-third of the physicians speak English.

**International Medical Center** (Map p890; ☎ 827 2366, 24hr emergency 865 4025; fac@hcm.vnn.vn; 1 Đ Han Thuyen; consultations US\$40-80; ☎ 24hr) This nonprofit organisation may be the least expensive Western health-care centre in the city.

**Maple Dental Clinic** (Map p886; ☎ 820 1999; 72 Đ Vo Thi Sau; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat) Dental care by experienced English-speaking dentists.

**GETTING INTO TOWN**

Tan Son Nhat international airport (Map pp884-5) is 7km northwest of the city centre. The going rate for taxis between central Ho Chi Minh and the airport is US\$5. In theory you could ask for a metered ride but the trip is magically faster when there's a flat fee. There are literally hundreds of taxi drivers waiting outside the airport so be prepared.

Most economical is the air-conditioned airport bus 152 (10000d). Buses leave the airport about every 15 minutes, stopping briefly at both the international and domestic terminals before heading to the city centre. They then make regular stops along Đ De Tham (Pham Ngu Lao area) and international hotels along Đ Dong Khoi, such as the Caravelle and the Majestic. Buses are labelled in English, but you might also look for the words 'Xe Buyt San Bay'.

From the Saigon train station (Ga Sai Gon; Map pp884-5), a *xe om* (motorcycle taxi) to Pham Ngu Lao should cost around 15,000d.

From Saigon's intercity bus stations, most fares on a *xe om* should be between 15,000d and 25,000d. Public buses (30000d) from the stations stop near Ben Thanh Market, but these cease midafternoon.

**Money**

Finding an ATM to get money from is the easy part; keeping the cash in this free-spending city is another issue. The following all exchange money and most exchange travellers cheques.

**Sacombank** (Map p892; ☎ 836 4231; 211 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc) In backpacker central, it also has an ATM.

**Sasco** (Map pp884-5; ☎ 848 7142) Just inside the airport exit, gives the official exchange rate but keeps irregular hours. In case it's closed, have sufficient US dollars in small denominations to get into the city centre.

**Vietcombank** (Map p886; ☎ 829 7245; 29 Đ Ben Chuong; ☎ closed Sun & last day of the month) The eastern building is for foreign exchange only, but is also worth a visit just to see the stunningly ornate interior.

**Post**

**Main post office** (Buu Dien Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh; Map p890; ☎ 829 6555; 2 Cong Xa Paris; ☎ 7am-9.30pm) Saigon's French-era post office is next to the Notre Dame Cathedral and offers long-distance and domestic calls in addition to the usual post and parcel services. It's an impressive structure that merits a peek.

**Tourist Information**

**Tourist Information Center** (Map p890; ☎ 822 6033; www.vntourists.com; 4G Le Loi; ☎ 8am-8pm) It has free city maps and brochures and can give limited advice about goings-on in Saigon. There are a few computers for free internet access and there's also currency exchange.

**Travel Agencies**

You will find the following budget agencies in the backpacker area of Pham Ngu Lao (Map p892).

**A DAY IN SAIGON**

Downtown HCMC can be walked in a day, making a loop from **Pham Ngu Lao** (Map p886) going via **Ben Thanh Market** (p893), and then walking to the **Reunification Palace** (right) and the nearby **War Remnants Museum** (right). Head back to pulsing **Pham Ngu Lao** to enjoy the nightlife.

A day tour on a *xe om* to points further afield such as **Cholon** (p886) should cost US\$5 to US\$10.

Unless otherwise noted, the following places all offer train, plane and bus bookings for Vietnam and beyond; visa assistance; city and Cu Chi Tunnel tours; and open-tour bus tickets.

**Delta Adventure Tours** (☎ 836 8542; www.deltaadventuretours.com; 187A Đ Pham Ngu Lao) Great Mekong Delta tours, many of which can take travellers by boat all the way to Phnom Penh.

**Kim Travel** (☎ 920 5552; www.kimtravel.com; 270 Đ De Tham)

**Linh Cafe** (☎ 836 0643; www.linhtravelvn.com; 291 Đ Pham Ngu Lao)

**Sinh Cafe** (☎ 836 7338; www.sinhcafevn.com; 246 Đ De Tham)

**Sinhbalo Adventures** (☎ 837 6766, 836 7682; www.sinhbalo.com; 283/20 Đ Pham Ngu Lao) More upmarket, long-running and eminently reliable operator for custom tours, especially in the Mekong Delta and Central Highlands.

**STA Travel** (Orient Star Travel; 920-6951; www.statravel.com.vn; 230 Đ De Tham) A franchise of the well-known student travel company.

**TM Brothers** (☎ 837 8394; huuhanhnguyen@yahoo.com; 288 Đ De Tham)

**TNK Travel** (☎ 920 4766; www.tnktravelvietnam.com; 216 Đ De Tham)

**DANGERS & ANNOYANCES**

Although travellers very rarely face any physical danger in HCMC (besides the traffic), the city has the most determined thieves in the country. Drive-by crooks on motorbikes – especially along the riverfront – can steal bags off your arm and pickpockets work all crowds. Some of the worst perpetrators are the cute children crowding around you, wanting to sell postcards and newspapers with one hand and helping themselves to your valuables with the other. Tourist police in bright green uniforms are increasingly patrolling the

streets and are a source of help if anything goes wrong.

While it's generally safe to take *cyclos* during the day, it is not always safe at night – take a metered taxi or motorbike taxi instead.

Sometimes *cyclo* and motorbike drivers will demand more than the agreed price after a trip. Be sure to be crystal clear beforehand about whether the fee is per person or the total.

**SIGHTS****Reunification Palace**

Built in 1966 to serve as South Vietnam's presidential palace is the **Reunification Palace** (Hoi Truong Thong Nhat; Map p886; ☎ 829 4117; 106 Đ Nguyen Du; admission 15,000d; ☎ 7.30-11am & 1-4pm). This is where the communist tank crashed the gate on 30 April 1975, the day Saigon surrendered. Apart from a repaired front entrance, the building has been left just as it looked on that momentous day.

Enter on Đ Nam Ky Khoi Nghia, where English- and French-speaking guides are on duty.

**War Remnants Museum**

Documenting the atrocities of war, the **War Remnants Museum** (Bao Tang Chung Tich Chien Tran; Map p886; ☎ 930 5587; 28 Đ Vo Van Tan; admission 15,000d; ☎ 7.30-noon & 1.30-5pm) is the kind of place that even the museum-adverse will appreciate; but it's not for the faint of heart. The museum displays the relics of war and a heartbreaking array of photographs of the victims of war. Exhibits are labelled in Vietnamese, English and Chinese.

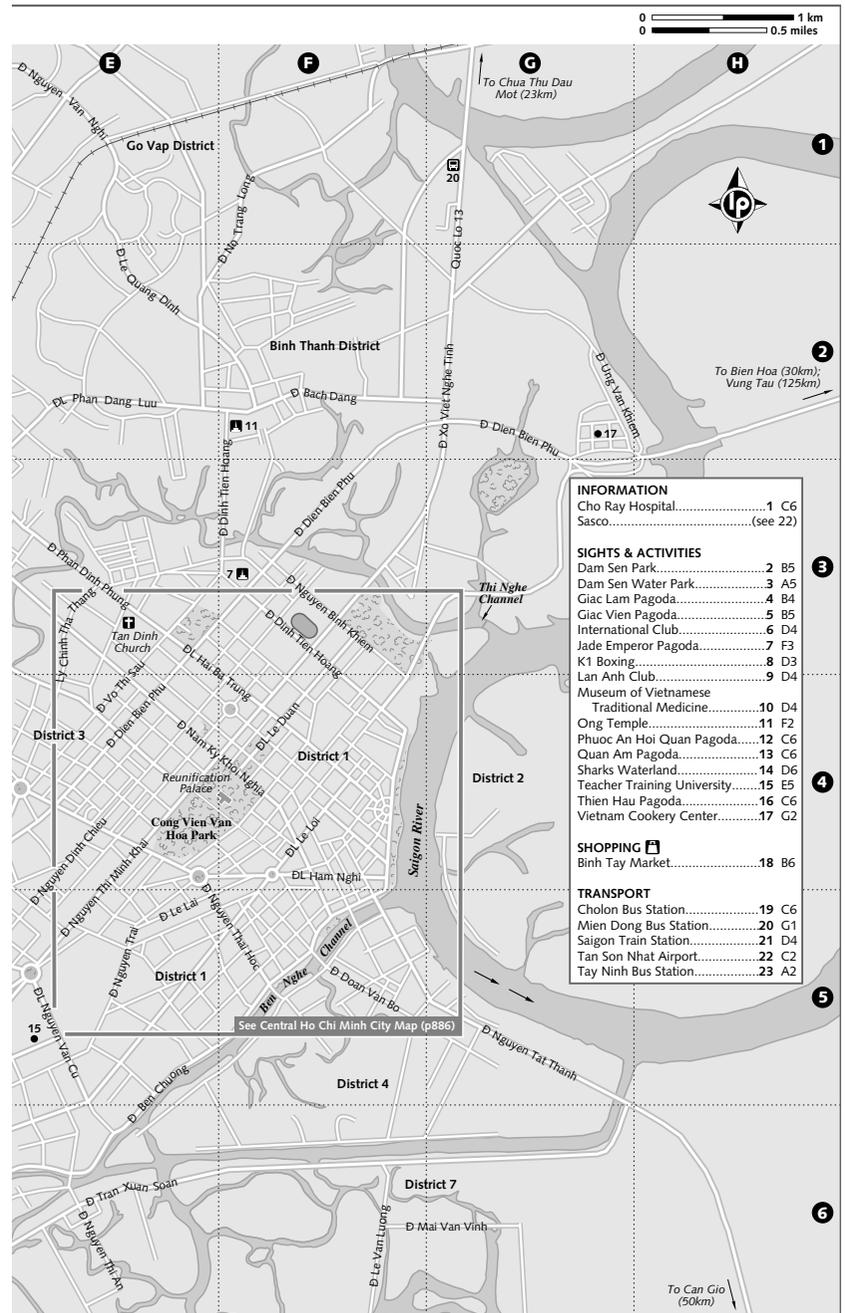
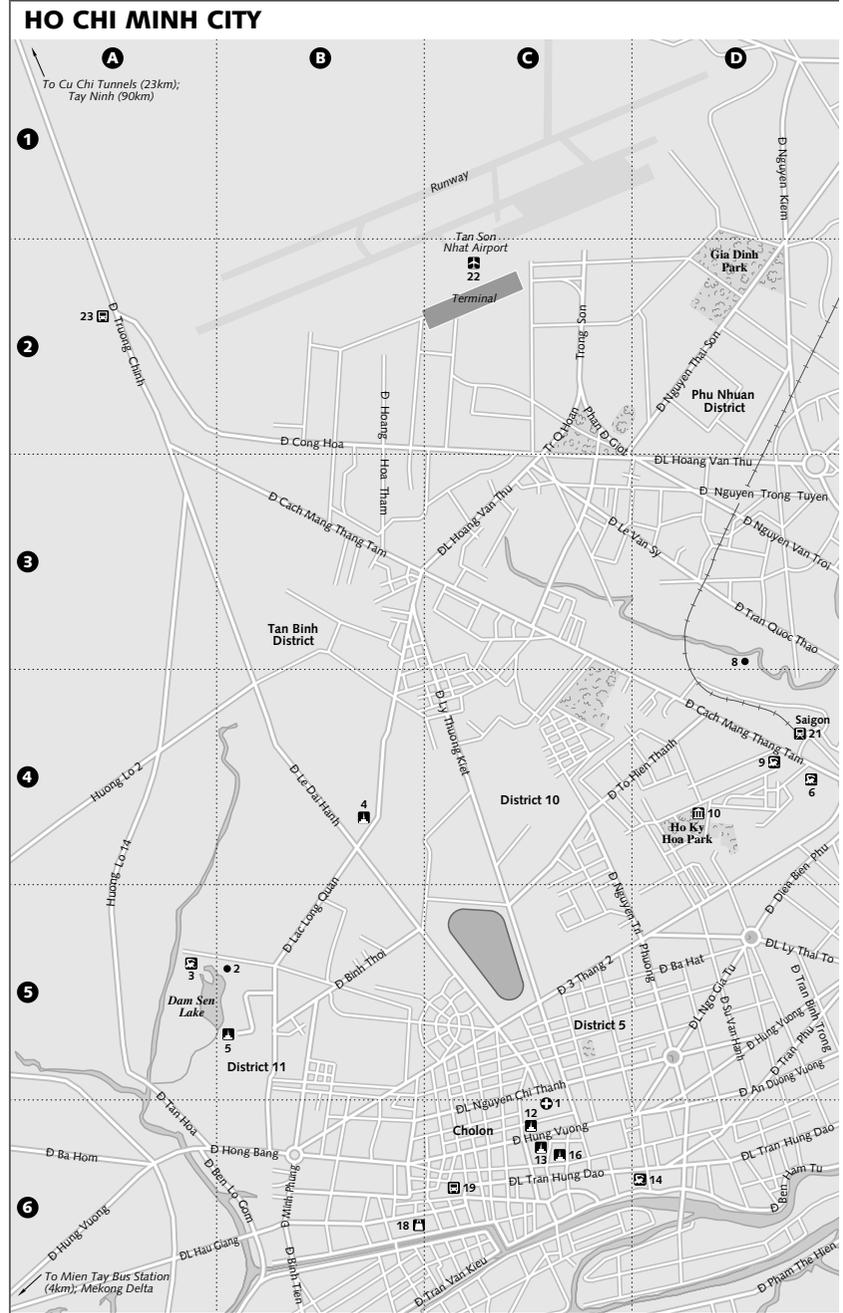
**Pagodas, Temples & Churches**

Whether the traffic has inspired a new religious streak or travellers are just seeking some relative peace, places of worship here tend towards the colourful and architecturally impressive.

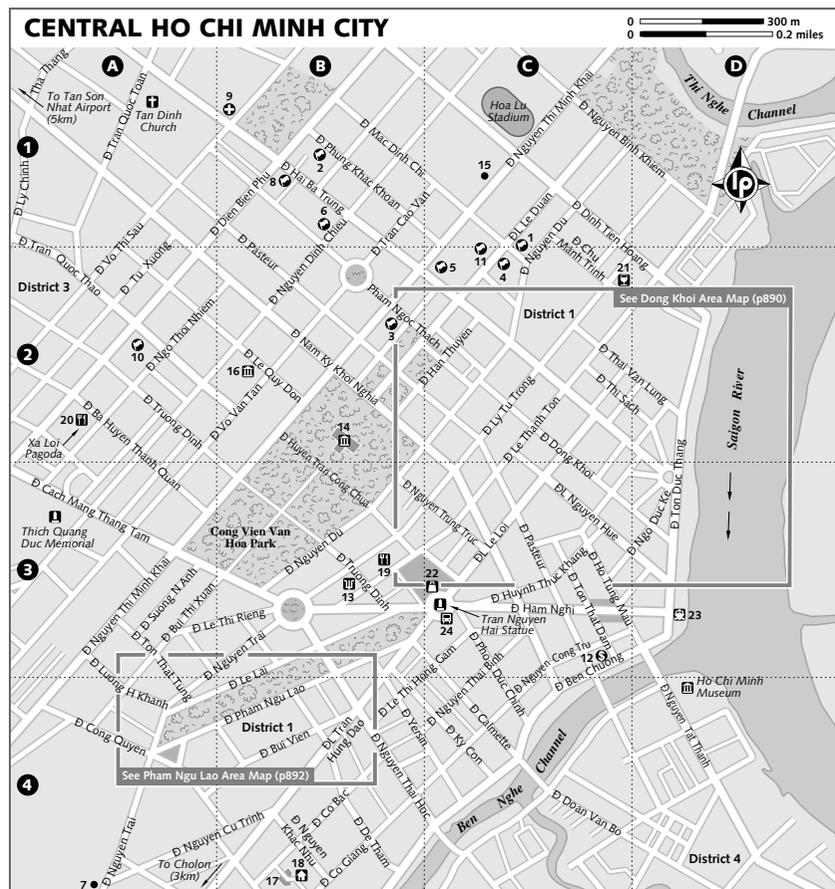
**CENTRAL HCMC**

**Notre Dame Cathedral** (Map p890; Đ Han Thuyen; ☎ mass 9.30am Sun), built between 1877 and 1883, stands regally in the heart of the government quarter. Its red-brick neo-Romanesque form and two 40m-high square towers tipped with iron spires dominate the skyline. Inside, there are neon lights around some of the religious statues.

A splash of southern India's colour in Saigon, **Mariamman Hindu Temple** (Chua Ba Mariamman;



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Map p886; 45 Đ Trưng Dĩnh; ☎ 7am-7pm) was built at the end of the 19th century and is dedicated to the Hindu goddess Mariamman.

Constructed by south Indian Muslims in 1935 on the site of an earlier mosque, **Saigon Central Mosque** (Map p890; 66 Đ Dong Du; ☎ 9am-5pm) is an immaculately clean and well-kept island of calm in the middle of bustling central Saigon. As at any mosque, remove your shoes before entering.

### CHOLON

Cholon (Map pp884-5) has a wealth of wonderful Chinese temples including **Quan Am Pagoda** (12 Đ Lao Tu; ☎ 8am-4.30pm), founded in 1816 by the Fujian Chinese congregation. The roof is decorated with fantastic scenes, rendered in

ceramic, from traditional Chinese plays and stories. As at most Chinese temples, anyone can buy a packet of incense at the inside counter and burn an offering.

Nearby, **Phuoc An Hoi Quan Pagoda** (184 Đ Hung Vuong; ☎ 7am-5.30pm) stands as one of the most beautifully ornamented constructions in the city. To the left of the entrance is a life-size figure of the sacred horse of Quan Cong. Before leaving on a journey, people make offerings to the horse, then stroke its mane and ring the bell around its neck. Behind the main altar is Quan Cong, to whom the pagoda is dedicated.

One of the most active in Cholon, **Thien Hau Pagoda** (Ba Mieu or Pho Mieu; 710 Đ Nguyen Trai; ☎ 6am-5.30pm) is dedicated to Thien Hau, the Chinese

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goddess of the sea. As she protects fisherfolk, sailors, merchants and any other maritime travellers, you might stop by to ask for a blessing for your next boat journey.

### GREATER HCMC

The towering **Giac Lam Pagoda** (Map pp884-5; 118 Đ Lac Long Quan; ☎ 6am-9pm) dates from 1744 and is believed to be the oldest in the city. The architecture and ornamentation have not changed since 1900, and the compound is a very meditative place to explore; strains of classic Vietnamese music waft over the adjacent park where old men stroll slowly in walking meditation.

In a semirural setting next to Dam Sen Lake, serene **Giac Vien Pagoda** (Map pp884-5; 247 Đ Lac Long Quan; ☎ 7am-7pm) was founded by Hai Tinh Giac Vien about 200 years ago and there

are literally hundreds if not thousands of Buddha statues inside the well-shaded main building.

**Jade Emperor Pagoda** (Phuoc Hai Tu or Chua Ngoc Hoang; Map pp884-5; 73 Đ Mai Thi Luu; ☎ 7.30am-6pm) is a gem of a Chinese temple, filled with colourful statues of phantasmal divinities and grotesque heroes. Built in 1909 by the Cantonese congregation, it is one of HCMC's most spectacular pagodas.

### Other Attractions

Housed in a beautiful grey neoclassical structure, the **Museum of Ho Chi Minh City** (Bao Tang Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh; Map p890; ☎ 829 9741; 65 Đ Ly Tu Trong; admission 15,000d; ☎ 8am-4pm) was built in 1885 and has displays of artefacts from the various periods of the communist struggle for power in Vietnam. Some of the French-language communist newspapers on display saw Ho Chi Minh as a contributor when he was going under the name of Nguyen Ai Quoc during his days in Paris.

The beautiful **Museum of Vietnamese Traditional Medicine** (Fito Museum; Map pp884-5; ☎ 846 2430; www.fitomuseum.com.vn; 41 Đ Hoang Du Khong St, District 10; admission 32,000d; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm) traces the history of Vietnamese natural remedies from the 2nd century to now. English-speaking guides come with the admission price and the inside of the building is stunning with massive wood tableaux of scenes from medicinal history. There's a re-creation of a traditional medicine shop and visitors can try their hand (or foot) at the tools used to pulverize healing plants. A short film is the only time the corporate sponsorship of the museum becomes apparent.

Boat tours around the Mekong Delta are offered by many travel agencies (see p882).

### ACTIVITIES Massage

Most upmarket hotels offer massage service (some more legitimate than others); the cheapest option is the **Vietnamese Traditional Medicine Institute** (Map p892; ☎ 839 6697; 185 Đ Cong Quynh; per hr 40,000d, sauna 20,000d; ☎ 9am-9pm). It offers no-nonsense, muscle-melting massages performed by blind masseurs.

If you're so sore you can't even make it to a real massage place, in the evenings listen for the metallic clacking sound that signals roving masseurs. They'll massage you right in your chair after dinner (30,000d to 40,000d) for 20 minutes or so. Add another 10,000d

for 'cupping,' the art of applying heated glass cups to the skin that form a seal to supposedly suck out disease. The circular marks last for a long time.

## Swimming & Exercise

Nonguests can pay an admission fee of US\$5 to US\$13 per day to use the swimming pools at plush hotels. Local clubs with lower fees: **International Club** (Map pp884-5; ☎ 865 7695; 285B Đ Cach Mang Thang Tam; admission 25,000d; 🕒 9am-midnight) pool, sauna, steam rooms and gym. It also offers massage.

**K1 Boxing Centre** (Map pp884-5; ☎ 0918 337 111; www.teamminetti.com; 11th fl, 159/52/21B Đ Tran Van Dang; per class 200,000d; 🕒 9am-9.30pm Mon-Fri) It offers a full range of martial-arts and fitness classes including lessons in Viet Vo Dao, the martial art of Vietnam.

**Lan Anh Club** (Map pp884-5; ☎ 862 7144; 291 Đ Cach Mang Thang Tam; admission gym/pool 40,000/25,000d; 🕒 6am-9pm) There's also a good gym here.

**Saigon Yoga** (Map p886; ☎ 910 5181; www.saigon.yoga.com; 10F Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai; price per class/month US\$12/90; 🕒 8am-7pm) A small yoga studio (tucked down a narrow alley) where short-term visitors can take advantage of seven days of unlimited yoga for US\$20.

## Water Parks

**Dam Sen Water Park** (Map pp884-5; ☎ 858 8418; www.damsenwaterpark.com.vn; 3 Đ Hoa Binh; adult/child 45,000/30,000d; 🕒 9am-6pm) It has water slides, rivers with rapids (or slow currents) and what is advertised as a new sunbathing area 'for foreigners'.

**Sharks Waterland** (Map pp884-5; ☎ 853 7867; 600 Đ Ham Tu, District 5; admission 20,000-45,000d; 🕒 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 10am-9pm Sat & Sun) It may sound like a shark aquarium but it's a waterpark.

## COURSES

**Bi Saigon** (Map p892; ☎ 836 0678; www.bisaigon.com; 185/26 Đ Pham Ngu Lao, District 1; per person per dish US\$15) Organises private cooking classes on request.

**Vietnam Cookery Center** (☎ 512 2764; www.vietnamcookery.com; 362/8 Đ Ung Van Kiem, Binh Thanh District 1; 2½hr class per person US\$30; 🕒 9.30am & 4.30pm Mon-Fri) offers two sessions daily where students learn to prepare a five-course meal.

## Language

**Teacher Training University** (Dai Hoc Su Pham; Map pp884-5; ☎ 835 5100; ciecer@hcm.vnn.vn; 280 Đ An Duong Vuong; private/group class US\$4/2.50)

**Utopia Café** (Map p890; ☎ 824 2487; shop@utopia

-cafe.com; 17/6A Đ Le Thanh Ton, District 1; private lessons per 60/90 min 70,000/90,000d; 🕒 8.30am-9pm) A less formal option with one-on-one instruction. Utopia can also arrange visa extensions.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

**Saigon Cydo Race** In mid-March, professional *cydo* drivers find out who's fastest; the money raised is donated to local charities.

**Festival at Lang Ong** On the 30th day of the 7th lunar month, people pray for happiness and the health of the country at the Ong Temple (Map pp884-5) in HCMC's Binh Thanh district; plays and musical performances are staged.

## SLEEPING

Saigon's backpacker central is known as Pham Ngu Lao. Good deals abound, but some of the sweetest places are on the many little alleys off the main roads.

### Pham Ngu Lao

The following hotels are all on the Pham Ngu Lao map (p892).

**Yellow House** (☎ 836 8830; yellowhousehotel@yahoo.com; 31 Đ Bui Vien; dm/s/d US\$5/9/12; 🍷 🍺 🍻) Yellow House has two dorms (a mixed seven-bed and a three-bed for men or women – whoever arrives first) as well as private rooms. Rooms are basic but acceptable, and breakfast is included.

**Ngoc Minh** (☎ 837 6407; ngocminhhotel@vnn.vn; 283/11 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; r US\$10-15; 🍷 🍺 🍻) The airy lobby here feels like a living room decorated with dark lacquered wood. The clean rooms come with all the amenities.

**Queen Thanh Hotel** (☎ 836 8570; queen Thanhhotel@hcm.vnn.vn; 212 Đ De Tham; r US\$10-15; 🍷 🍺 🍻) The big bright rooms with vaulted ceilings look down on the all-night bars on Đ De Tham. For those about to rock, it doesn't get more central than this. There's a souvenir shop downstairs.

**Faifo Guesthouse** (Hoai Pho; ☎ 920 3268; hoai pho hotel@yahoo.com; 28/9 Đ Bui Vien; r US\$12-15; 🍷 🍺 🍻) The basic rooms with satellite TV are a good bargain.

**Peace Hotel** (☎ 837 2025; 272 Đ De Tham; d US\$10-12; 🍷 🍺 🍻) Another good well-established place; the least expensive rooms are fan-only.

**Hotel 127** (☎ 836 8761; madamecuc@hcm.vnn.vn; 127 Đ Cong Quynh; r US\$12-20; 🍷 🍺 🍻) Madam Cuc and her staff consistently give a warm and welcoming reception and constantly get raves from readers; her places are clean and outfitted with

satellite TV, bathrooms and fridges. Madam Cuc's happy dominion also includes Hotel 64 (☎ 836 5073; 64 Đ Bui Vien) and MC Hotel (☎ 836 1679; 184 Đ Cong Quyen); both offer the same facilities and same prices as the original.

**Hong Hoa Hotel** (☎ 836 1915; www.honghoavn.com; 185/28 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; r US\$13-20; 🍷 🍺 🍻) The Hong Hoa has it all: clean rooms, shuttles to and from the airport, free internet, a convenience store and amiable, helpful staff.

**Hotel Anh Phuong** (☎ 836 9248; 295 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; r US\$15-20; 🍷 🍺 🍻) Prominently advertising its double-glazed windows, this hotel delivers peace and quiet in its range of tidy rooms; the best are spacious, with heavy wooden furniture and Eastern décor.

**Saigon Comfort Hotel** (☎ 837 6516; www.saigoncomfort.com; 175/21 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; r US\$17-25; 🍷 🍺 🍻) Attracting more flashpackers (older backpackers with decent-paying jobs on short trips) than backpackers, this quiet and classy place has free but weak in-room wi-fi, free internet stations, a small book library and friendly staff. Credit cards are accepted.

## Co Giang

About 10 minutes on foot from the Pham Ngu Lao area is a string of guesthouses on a quiet alley connecting Đ Co Giang and Đ Co Bac. To reach the guesthouses, walk southeast on Đ Co Bac and turn left after you pass the *nuoc mam* (fish sauce) shops. The following are on the Central Ho Chi Minh City map (p886).

**Ngoc Son** (☎ 836 4717; ngocsonguesthouse@yahoo.com; 178/32 Đ Co Giang; r US\$7-11; 🍷 🍺 🍻) A quiet, eight-room guesthouse, Ngoc Son is a family-style place that rents motorbikes and offers breakfast for US\$1 extra.

**Miss Loi's Guesthouse** (☎ 837 9589; missloi@hcm.fpt.vn; 178/20 Đ Co Giang; r incl breakfast US\$10-20; 🍷 🍺 🍻) Miss Loi cultivates a family atmosphere with her warm staff and homy set-up. The breakfasts in the open lobby are a great way to start the day.

**our pick Guest House California** (☎ 837 8885; guesthousecalifornia-saigon@yahoo.com; 171A Đ Co Bac; r US\$13-16; 🍷 🍺 🍻) Boasting modern rooms, it's low-key, neat and clean and also rents out reliable bicycles and motorbikes.

## EATING

Ranging from dirt-cheap but tasty meals from street stalls and markets to upscale dining dreams come true, this city has it all.

Markets always have a vast dining area, often on the ground floor or in the basement. Clusters of food stalls can be found in Ben Thanh (Map p886) and Thai Binh (Map p892) Markets. A large bowl of beef noodles costs 10,000d to 16,000d. Just look for the signs with the words *pho* or *hu tieu*. Don't eat meat? Look for the magic word *chay* (vegetarian) tacked on the end of the sign.

Đ Pham Ngu Lao and Đ De Tham form the axis of Saigon's budget eatery haven, where traveller cafés dish out cuisine that ranges from acceptable to exceptional and book tours on the side.

## Vietnamese

**Quan An Ngon** (Map p890; ☎ 825 7179; 138 Đ Nam Ky Khoi Nghia; mains 17,000-60,000d; 🕒 lunch & dinner) Poke around the outside edge of the garden-style patio first, where cooks at individual stations make traditional dishes. It's a dining experience you won't soon forget.

**banh cuon LA** (Map p886; ☎ 822 8213; 221 Đ Ly Tu Trong; mains 20,000d; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This new, hip spot specialises in steamed rice-flour rolls. The menu is made for à la carte sampling.

**Pho 24** (Map p892; 271 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; mains 24,000d; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Part of an ever expanding chain, this polished noodle shop serves fantastic bowls of high-quality *pho* – along with fresh juices and spring rolls.

**Bunta** (Map p890; ☎ 822 9913; 136 Đ Nam Ky Khoi Nghia; mains 30,000d; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Fuel up Vietnam's tastiest take on vermicelli salad in this classic house that's been converted into a restaurant.

**Black Cat Cafe 13** (Banh Mi 13; Map p890; ☎ 829 2055; 13 Đ Phan Van Quan; mains from 30,000d; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Thanks in part to an on-site bakery the Vietnamese sandwiches here are mind-blowingly good.

**Café Zoom** (Map p892; 169A Đ De Tham; mains 32,000d; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This busy little place has lots of Vespa-type style and serves Vietnamese and foreign fare to an equally eclectic crowd.

## Other Asian

**our pick Asian Kitchen** (Map p892; ☎ 836 7397; 185/22 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; mains 18,000d; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Offers budget-priced Indian, Japanese and vegetarian, in Minihotel Alley. There's a great bar upstairs called the Hideaway that was closed during research.





**Mien Dong bus station** (Ben Xe Mien Dong; Map pp884-5; ☎ 829 4056) Buses from here go as far as Hanoi (320,000d, 49 hours); it's in Binh Thanh district, about 5km north of central Saigon on National Hwy 13.

**Mien Tay bus station** (Ben Xe Mien Tay; ☎ 825 5955) Even more buses to points south of HCMC, but located about 10km southwest of Saigon in An Lac.

**Tay Ninh bus station** (Ben Xe Tay Ninh; Map pp884-5; ☎ 849 5935) Buses to Tay Ninh, Cu Chi and points northeast of HCMC, located in Tan Binh district.

## Car & Motorcycle

Traveller cafés can arrange car rentals (US\$45 per day with driver) or motorbike rentals (US\$7 to US\$10 per day); those in the Pham Ngu Lao area generally offer the lowest prices. For long-haul motorcycle treks, it is probably best to buy one. Look for posters at traveller and internet cafés from foreign motorcyclists who want to unload their machine.

## Train

**5-Star Express** (Map p892; ☎ 920 6868; www.5star.express.com.vn; 296 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; one-way 220,000d-450,000d) Comfy train between HCMC and Nha Trang.

**Saigon Railways Tourist Services** (Map p892; ☎ 836 7640; 275C Đ Pham Ngu Lao) A convenient place to purchase tickets.

**Saigon train station** (Ga Sai Gon; Map pp884-5; ☎ 824 5585; 1 Đ Nguyen Thong; ☞ 7.15-11am & 1-3pm) Has trains that chug north along the coast to Hanoi.

## GETTING AROUND

### Bicycle

Bicycles are available for hire from many budget hotels and cafés, especially around Pham Ngu Lao. To deal with HCMC's traffic, glide along the edge of the action and steer clear of big trucks and buses.

### Cyclo

*Cyclos* are the most interesting way of getting around town, but avoid them at night and always agree on fares beforehand. In the eyes of the authorities they slow down traffic – probably true, but a good thing overall – and are being phased out completely.

### Motorcycle & Motorbike Taxi

Motorbikes are available for hire around Pham Ngu Lao for US\$7 to US\$10 per day. Make sure to do a test drive before plunking down your cash; you'll usually be asked to leave your passport or yellow customs slip as collateral. We'd advise having good health insurance as well.

There are more than enough motorbike drivers at all times ready to give a ride if you're not ready to take a few years off your life. Trips in the city centre start at around 10,000d and a trip between the sites in Dong Khoi and Pham Ngu Lao is usually around 15,000d.

## Taxi

On the street simply hail a taxi. If you don't find one straight away, ring one up and your ride will be there in no time. Companies include the following:

**Ben Thanh Taxi** (☎ 842 2422)

**Mai Linh Taxi** (☎ 822 2666)

**Red Taxi** (☎ 844 6677)

**Saigon Taxi** (☎ 842 4242)

**Vina Taxi** (☎ 811 1111)

## AROUND HO CHI MINH CITY

This area is home to Vietnam's most popular tourist attraction related to the American War and the most popular beach resort – for the Vietnamese, at least – and there are more peaceful sites as well. For a dose of calm visit the birthplace of the country's homegrown religion or soak up the charm of Long Hai.

## CU CHI TUNNELS

The ground around the **tunnel network** (admission 70,000d) is marked by shallow craters – some have become small ponds – made by American bombs in a futile attempt to dislodge the Viet Cong from the tunnel network here. This subterranean web of hospitals, kitchens and armouries once stretched from Saigon to the Cambodian border. In the district of Cu Chi alone, there were more than 200km of tunnels.

Even though some parts have been enlarged for Westerners, it's a hot, claustrophobic experience to duck walk for 40m underground. For an extra charge travellers can fire real machine guns at a shooting range.

Day tours operated by traveller cafés charge around US\$5 per person (transport only); most include a stop at the Caodai Great Temple in Tay Ninh. Public buses going to Tay Ninh can drop you in Cu Chi; however, since the tunnel complex is about 15km outside town, you'll have to hire a motorbike to get to the tunnels.

## TAY NINH

☎ 066 / pop 41,300

Tay Ninh town, capital of Tay Ninh province, is 96km northwest of HCMC and serves as the headquarters of one of Vietnam's most interesting indigenous religions, Caodaiism (see p818). The **Caodai Great Temple** was built between 1933 and 1955. Victor Hugo is among the Westerners especially revered by the Caodai; look for his likeness in the Great Temple.

The Caodai Holy See complex is situated 4km east of Tay Ninh. One-day tours from Saigon, including Tay Ninh and the Cu Chi Tunnels, cost around US\$5. Public buses to Tay Ninh leave from the Mien Tay station in HCMC.

## VUNG TAU

☎ 064 / pop 161,300

A resort town since the French holidayed here, this quick getaway from HCMC is full of bass-thumping action on the weekends as Saigoneses visitors pour into town. Weekdays are much quieter and there are long stretches of lonely beach. Oil-drilling is big here and there's the expat population to prove it. It's a commercialised beach resort – with a few mega-developments in the works including a theme park – but it's easy enough to escape the seedy karaoke scene.

## Information

**International SOS** (☎ 858 776; Đ Le Ngoc Han; consultations US\$55-65; ☞ 24hr) A Babel of foreign languages are spoken here, including English.

**Main post office** (8 Đ Hoang Dieu) This is located on the ground level of the Petrovietnam Towers building.

**OSCVietnam Travel** (☎ 852 008; www.oscvn.com; 9 Đ Le Loi) Vung Tau's biggest travel agency sells a decent city map (20,000d) and offers a host of unique tours, including an old battlefield tour (US\$49 per person).

**Vietcombank** (☎ 852 024; 27-29 Đ Tran Hung Dao) Exchanges cash, travellers cheques and gives credit-card advances. You'll also find an ATM at the Rex Hotel at 1 Đ Le Quy Don.

## Sights & Activities

Atop Nui Nho (Small Mountain), a **giant Jesus** (admission free, parking 2000d; ☞ 7.30-11.30am & 1.30-5pm) waits with arms outstretched to embrace the South China Sea – showing off the swallows' nests in his armpits. At his foot is a sad collection of monkeys and snakes in small cages.

The nearby **lighthouse** (admission 2000d; ☞ 7am-5pm) boasts a spectacular 360-degree view. From the ferry dock on Đ Ha Long, take a sharp right on the alley north of the Hai Au Hotel, then roll on up the hill.

Pagodas dot the length of Đ Ha Long, but prim **Hon Ba Pagoda** sits offshore on an islet accessible only at low tide.

## Sleeping & Eating

There's a guesthouse strip at Back Beach. On weekends, lodging gets very pricey – rates can be two or three times those charged on weekdays. Below are the weekday rates.

**Thien Nhien** (☎ 853 481; 145A Đ Thuy Van; d 100,000-200,000d; ☞) On the main drag, this airy place has clean rooms, some with balconies, air-con and ocean views.

**Song Bien** (☎ 523 311; 131A Đ Thuy Van; d 120,000-150,000d; ☞) The Chinese-style décor brightens this fairly comfortable place; although there are no ocean views, there's a shared terrace on the top floor.

**our pick** **My Tho Guesthouse** (☎ 832 035; 47 Đ Tran Phu; r US\$8-14) With simple rooms, this is the sweetest little guesthouse on the Peninsula, about 2km north of central Vung Tau in a quiet area called Mulberry Beach (Bai Dau). The warm couple running the guesthouse serve delicious, cheap home-cooked meals on the cosy terrace. From the centre, take Đ Quang Trung going north, which turns into Đ Tran Phu.

The road along Back Beach, Đ Thuy Van, is crammed with *com* shops and seafood restaurants. A good bet on Back Beach is **Dai Loc** (☎ 858 124; 170 Đ Hoang Hoa Tham; mains 15,000d; ☞ lunch & dinner), which serves both Vietnamese and Western food in a friendly atmosphere.

Mulberry Beach's main road has several good seafood places down on the water. Go to local favourite **Cay Bang** (☎ 838 522; 69 Đ Tran Phu; mains 45,000d; ☞ 11am-10pm) for fresh seafood and a happening weekend atmosphere. For nightlife and good Western food, local expats head to **BB Bar/Whispers Restaurant** (☎ 856 028; 13-15 Nguyen Trai; ☞ until midnight).

## Getting There & Away

From Mien Dong bus station in HCMC, air-conditioned minibuses (25,000d, two hours, 128km) leave for Vung Tau throughout the day until around 4.30pm.

Should convenience outweigh cost, catch a **Petro Express hydrofoil** (☎ HCMC 08-821 0650, Vung Tau

816 308) or **Vina Express hydrofoil** (☎ in HCMC 08-829 7892, Vung Tau ☎ 856 530) to Vung Tau (US\$10, 80 minutes) at Bach Dang jetty in HCMC. Boats leave every two hours starting at 6.30am, but check in HCMC for the latest schedule. In Vung Tau, the boat leaves from Cau Da Pier, across from the Hai Au Hotel.

## Getting Around

Vung Tau is easily traversed on two wheels. Guesthouses can arrange bicycle hire (per day US\$2); motorbikes cost US\$5 to US\$10 per day. Or, just make eye contact with that *cyclo* or motorbike driver on the corner.

A *xe om* from the **Vung Tau bus station** (192A Đ Nam Ky Khoi Nghia) to Mulberry Beach or Back Beach should cost around 10,000d.

## LONG HAI

☎ 064

A rustic beach and a quick getaway from HCMC are the two main draws for the fishing village of Long Hai. If you want social interaction with fellow travellers head to Mui Ne (p873) instead. Although it has more character than Vung Tau, Long Hai is also mobbed on weekends.

Outside Long Hai are a few interesting sights, although you'll likely need to hire a guide from Vung Tau to find them. **Chua Pháp Hoa**, a peaceful pagoda set in a forest with lots of wild monkeys, has some good trails nearby for short treks.

At Minh Dam, 5km from Long Hai, there are **caves** with historical connections to the Franco-Viet Minh and American Wars. Nearby there's a **mountaintop temple** with great panoramic views of the coastline.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Huong Bien Hotel** (☎ 868 356; bungalows 120,000-180,000d; ☹) Down a signposted dirt driveway off Rte 19, the Huong Bien has simple concrete bungalows among palms and casuarinas. Most have private bathroom and fan, some have air-con, and all nestle right on the beach.

**Military Guesthouse 298** (Doan an Dieu Duong 298; ☎ 868 316; Rte 19; r 150,000-200,000d; ☹) At the dead end of Rte 19, this guesthouse is run by the navy, which may help explain its prime beachfront location. Rooms here are clean and comfortable, with tile floors and hot water; the cheapest rooms are fan only.

There's a cluster of beachside restaurants called **Can Tin 1, 2, 3** and **4** (mains around 15,000-

70,000d; ☎ 7am-7pm) located near Military Guesthouse 298. These serve decent Vietnamese meals – including good, simple seafood dishes. Apart from these relaxed places, there aren't many other eating options in Long Hai.

## Getting There & Around

Long Hai is 124km southeast of HCMC and takes about two hours to reach by car. To get there by public transport, get to Vung Tau and take a 30km *xe om* for about 50,000d.

Motorbike-taxi drivers hang around all the likely tourist spots in the area.

# MEKONG DELTA

The Mekong Delta is where the countryside comes alive. Tilling the ground with buffalo-drawn ploughs, planting rice, harvesting by hand and waiting for the murky Mekong to flood and renew the soil is the wheel of life that has been rolling here for centuries. There are too many shades of electric green to count and the hellos are rarely followed by invitations to buy something.

After winding its way from its source in Tibet, the Mekong River meets the sea in southernmost Vietnam. Once part of the Khmer kingdom, the Mekong Delta was the last part of modern-day Vietnam to be annexed and settled by the Vietnamese.

## MY THO

☎ 074 / pop 169, 300

My Tho is an easy day trip from Saigon and acts as the gateway to the Mekong Delta for most visitors. Everything moves a little slower and the warmth of southern Vietnam – in the people and in the temperature – is readily apparent.

In My Tho, river-boat tours can be booked at the main riverfront office of **Tien Giang Tourist** (Cong Ty Du Lich Tien Giang; ☎ 873 184; 8 Đ 30 Thang 4; ☎ 7am-5pm). Depending on what you book, destinations usually include a coconut-candy workshop, a honey-bee farm and an orchid garden. Also of interest are several islands in the area.

Hiring a boat with a big group makes these local-government tours economical; on your own, they're expensive at US\$25 for two to three hours, though it is possible to bargain down to US\$20 in slower (read hot or wet)

seasons. Significantly cheaper independent guides may approach you on the riverfront near **Cuu Long Restaurant** (☎ 870 779; Đ 30 Thang 4; mains 25,000d). Keep in mind that these guys operate illegally and, though enforcement is erratic and unlikely, there's a small risk that you or they may be fined by zealous river cops.

## Sleeping & Eating

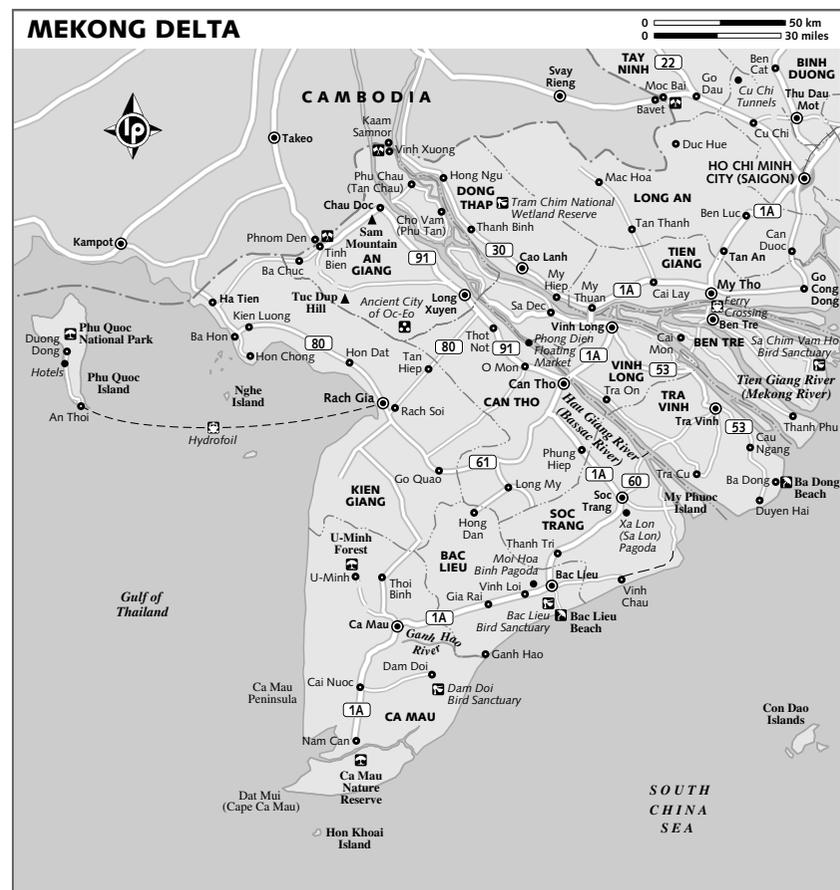
**Huong Duong** (☎ 872 011; huongduonghotel2005@yahoo.com; 33 Đ Thien Ho Duong; 100,000-200,000d; ☹) Huong Duong has decent, large rooms near the channel and cheap breakfasts at the rooftop Galaxy Coffee Bar.

**Rang Dong Hotel** (☎ 874 400; 25 Đ 30 Thang 4; r 130,000-150,000d; ☹) Rang Dong is centrally

located along the waterfront, with sidewalk cafés and *xe om* galore. The original is becoming a little rundown but it recently birthed a nicer sister hotel (see below).

**Song Tien Hotel** (☎ 872 009; 101 Đ Trung Trac; r US\$10-20 ☹) The Song Tien has clean, comfortable rooms with TV, fridge and shared balconies overlooking both town and channel. It has an onsite restaurant.

**Our pick** **Rang Dong (II)** (☎ 970 085; www.rangdonghotel.net; 4 Đ Duong Le Thi Hong Gam; r 200,000-300,000d; ☹) The rooms are sparkling clean, spacious and many have river views. There's a (seemingly legitimate) karaoke bar and riverside restaurant. The caterwauling is sometimes accompanied by live traditional music and usually stops at 11pm.



Try My Tho's speciality, *hu tieu my tho*, a rice-noodle soup full of fresh vegetables, pork, chicken and dried seafood in a rich broth.

**Hu Tieu Chay 24** (24 Đ Nam Ky Khoi Nghia; soups 3000d; ☺ breakfast & lunch) Happily, there's a delicious vegetarian version, too.

**Hu Tieu 44** (44 Đ Nam Ky Khoi Nghia; soups 6000d; ☺ breakfast & lunch)

### Getting There & Around

Buses leaving from the Cholon bus station in HCMC (19,000d, two hours) drop you at the My Tho bus station (Ben Xe Khach Tien Giang), several kilometres west of town. From My Tho's centre, take Đ Ap Bac westward and continue on to National Hwy 1.

To get to Ben Tre, head west for 1km on Đ 30 Thang 4 – which turns into Đ Le Thi Hong Gam – to the Ben Tre ferry terminal. Passengers used to pay 1000d but now foot traffic is waved on for free and the especially honest will get a pitying smile if they try to buy a ticket – this could change. Motorbikes pay 1500d and cars 5000d. A new bridge under construction (due for completion in early 2009) will link My Tho with Ben Tre by road, greatly diminishing travel time between the two towns.

My Tho is small and walkable; expeditions out of town can be arranged on boat or *xe om*.

### BEN TRE

☎ 075

Famous for its *keo dua* (coconut candy), Ben Tre is a bucolic 20-minute ferry ride from My Tho. Located away from the main highway, it receives far fewer visitors than My Tho and makes a lovely stop on a Mekong tour. Freelance boat operators ply their trade on either side of the bridge to Phoenix Island. Prices here hover around 60,000d per hour for groups of up to four people. For more formal arrangements for Mekong tours and a variety of other services, contact **Ben Tre Tourist** (☎ 829 618; ttdhbulichbt@hcm.vnn.vn; 65 Đ Dong Khoi), near the main strip of budget hotels.

On Phoenix Island there's a concrete path across from the bridge worth wandering down.

### Sleeping & Eating

Your best bet for cheap eats is at the market near the waterfront, where you'll find a myriad food stalls. There are also a few cafés near the minihotels on Đ Hai Ba Trung. These

hotels and family-run restaurants face the tiny Truc Giang Lake:

**Cong Doan Hotel** (☎ 852 083; 36 Đ Hai Ba Trung; d 100,000-170,000d; ☺) Cong Doan is a no-frills but clean place to lay your weary head.

**Dong Khoi Hotel** (☎ 822 501; dongkhoihotelbtre@vnn.vn; 16 Đ Hai Ba Trung; r 150,000-200,000d; ☺) The Dong Khoi is as good as it gets in Ben Tre; it has spotless rooms with bathrooms, and offers boat and canoe rentals in addition to the standard Mekong tours. Credit cards are accepted.

**Phuong Hoang Hotel** (☎ 821 385; 28 Đ Hai Ba Trung; r US\$10; ☺) This 10-room minihotel is decent value.

### Getting There & Around

HCMC-bound minibuses leave daily from the petrol station on Đ Dong Khoi, but they don't run on a fixed schedule. Ask at a local hotel for the latest word.

The ferry between Ben Tre and My Tho was free for passengers without vehicles at the time of research. To get to or from the Ben Tre ferry terminal and the centre of town, the cheapest option is the public bus (5000d). They leave every 15 minutes from the ferry terminal; look for the small buses parked on either side of the road after exiting the terminal. From the town centre, look for the bus stop in front of the Vinaphone building, to the right of the main post office as you face it. If in doubt, ask. Locals are very helpful here.

### CAN THO

☎ 071 / pop 330,100

The riverfront is buzzing with activity well into the evening; while enjoying some ice cream at a riverfront eatery you can gaze lovingly at the Ho Chi Minh Tin Man statue, a towering likeness of Uncle Ho that glints blinding silver on sunny days. Can Tho is a major Mekong hub and a prime base for exploring some **floating markets**.

**Cai Rang** is the biggest floating market in the Mekong Delta, 6km southeast of Can Tho towards Soc Trang. Though the lively market goes on until around noon daily, show up before 9am for the best photo opportunities. You can hire boats on the river near the Can Tho market. Cai Rang is one hour away by boat, or you can drive to Cau Dau Sau boat landing, where you can get a rowed **boat** (per hr around 50,000d) to the market, 10 minutes away.

Less crowded and less motorised is the **Phong Dien** market, with more stand-up rowboats. It's best between 6am and 8am. Twenty kilometres northwest of Can Tho, it's easy to reach by road and you can hire a boat on arrival. There will be plenty of offers for US\$3 tours that hit both markets and stop at a local orchard for good measure.

The **Muniransyaram Pagoda** (36 Đ Hoa Binh) is the one must-see in the city for the impressive Khmer-style architecture.

Tours of the markets and canals in the area can be arranged by the friendly staff at **Cantho Tourist** (☎ 821 852; canthotour@hcm.vnn.vn; 20 Đ Hai Ba Trung). It also has bicycle tours (360,000d) to the markets and staff will help you to book transport.

There are a few ATMs on the riverfront.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Phuong Hang Hotel** (☎ 814 978; 41 Đ Ngo Duc Ke; d 70,000-120,000d; ☺) The rooms aren't brand new but they are clean and big; the bathrooms are so large a small regiment of soldiers could tidy up inside.

**Hien Guesthouse** (☎ 812 718; hien\_gh@yahoo.com; 118/10 Đ Phan Dinh Phung; r US\$8-9; ☺) Tucked down a narrow and quiet alley a few minutes' walk from the city centre, some rooms in the new wing (down the alley, though reception is at the original location) have private balconies but pick a room on the top floor for views. The friendly owner is an excellent source of local travel information and rents out dependable motorbikes.

**Tan Phuoc Hotel** (☎ 816 822; 9 Đ Ngo Quyen; r 150,000-200,000d; ☺) The staff doesn't speak a word of English but this new minihotel near the riverfront has big new rooms with satellite TV and a minibar. You can pay by credit card.

**Our pick** **Tay Ho Hotel** (☎ 823 392; kstayho-ct@hcm.vnn.vn; 42 Đ Hai Ba Trung; r US\$12-16; ☺) The only budget hotel on the riverfront, this bargain is across from the Tin Man statue has a friendly staff, clean modern rooms and satellite TV.

If self-catering, head to **Co-op Mart** (☎ 763 585; 1 Đ Dai Hoa Binh), a multilevel supermarket and department store.

There are a dozen local restaurants on both sides of **Restaurant alley** (Đ Nam Ky Khoi Nghia), situated in an alley between Đ Dien Bien Phu and Đ Phan Dinh Phung.

You'll find several other popular eateries along the riverfront strip, across from the huge silver Uncle Ho statue.

**Mekong** (☎ 821 646; 38 Đ Hai Ba Trung; mains 20,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) One of the main traveller hangouts, the Mekong is always packed and stays open late.

**Nam Bo** (☎ 823 908; 50 Đ Hai Ba Trung; mains 25,000-50,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) Housed in a restored French villa, it serves excellent European and Vietnamese food, desserts and drinks. The upstairs balcony is prime people-watching territory.

### Getting There & Around

Buses and minibuses from HCMC leave from the Mien Tay station (65,000d, five hours). The Can Tho bus station is at Đ Nguyen Trai and Đ Tran Phu, about 1km north of town. Buses and private minibuses between other Mekong Delta destinations are cheap and plentiful; ask at restaurants or hotels.

*Xe loi* (motorbikes with two-seater carriages on the back) cost 3000d for rides around town. Most guesthouses also hire out bicycles. **International Hotel** (☎ 822 080; ksquoctc-ct@hcm.vnn.vn; 12 Đ Hai Ba Trung) rents good mountain bikes (10,000/40,000d per hour/day).

### CHAU DOC

☎ 076 / pop 100,000

A major transit point for Cambodia because of the popular river-crossing here (p893), shyly charming Chau Doc houses mosques, pagodas and temples, including the cave temples at **Sam Mountain**.

War remnants near Chau Doc include **Ba Chuc**, the site of a Khmer Rouge massacre with a bone pagoda similar to that of Cambodia's Choeng Ek memorial; and **Tuc Dup Hill**, where an expensive American bombing campaign in 1963 earned it the nickname Two Million Dollar Hill. It's also possible to visit fish farms set up underneath floating houses on the river.

Get cash or exchange foreign currency at **Incombank** (☎ 866 497; 68-70 Đ Nguyen Huu Canh). A good place to start for local travel information is the tourist desk at the Vinh Phuoc Hotel.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Vinh Phuoc Hotel** (☎ 866 242; 12 Đ Quang Trung; r US\$6-15; ☺) A good budget deal, this place is run by an amiable Brit who is an excellent source of local travel information. There's a good in-house restaurant serving Vietnamese and Western food (mains around 30,000d).

**Thuan Loi Hotel** (☎ 866 134; hotelthuanloi@hcm.vnn.vn; 18 Đ Tran Hung Dao; r 100,000-190,000d; ☺)

## GETTING TO CAMBODIA

Numerous agencies in Chau Doc sell boat tickets taking you from Chau Doc to Phnom Penh via the Vinh Xuong–Kaam Samnor border. One-month visas are issued on arrival (US\$20, although some overcharging is common), but bring a passport photo.

Slow boats for the trip cost around US\$8 to US\$10 (leaving around 8am and arriving in Phnom Penh at 4pm). There are also several companies offering faster boats between the two cities; **Hang Chau** (☎ in Phnom Penh 012-883 542) departs Chau Doc at 7am and costs US\$15. It takes about four hours, including a slow border check.

See p79 for details on doing the trip in reverse.

Overlooking the riverside, this pleasant place with a communal terrace has friendly staff and a relaxed atmosphere. The fan rooms are very basic, with cold-water bathrooms, while the air-conditioned rooms are bright and airy.

**Delta Adventure Inn** (Nha Khach Long Chau; ☎ 861 249; deltaadventureinn@hotmail.com; r 120,000-240,000d; 🍽) This cosy terracotta-tiled compound sits amid the rice paddies about 4km from Chau Doc. The views of Sam Mountain are lovely from the island café-restaurant on the grounds.

Good local eateries include **Mi Vach Tuong**, (Đ Thu Khoa Nghia; noodles 7000d; 🍽 breakfast & dinner) and **Thanh Tinh** (☎ 865 064; 13 Đ Quang Trung; mains 15,000d; 🍽 breakfast, lunch & dinner).

## Getting There & Around

Cargo boats run twice weekly between Chau Doc and Ha Tien on the coast via the Vinh Te Canal (150,000d, eight to 12 hours), which straddles the Cambodian border; it's an interesting trip. Departures are at 5am from a tiny pier (near 60 Đ Trung Hung Dao). Cargo boats also travel to/from Vinh Long, to the east.

The buses from HCMC to Chau Doc leave from the Mien Tay bus station; the express bus can make the run in six hours and costs around 84,000d.

*Xe loi* can be hired for a few thousand dong to get around town.

## RACH GIA

☎ 077 / pop 172,400

The place to catch a high-speed ferry for Phu Quoc Island, Rach Gia is the prosper-

ous capital of Kien Giang province and a prime smuggling hub due to its proximity to Cambodia, Thailand and the great wide ocean. The centre of town sits on an islet embraced by the two arms of the Cai Lon River; the north side has your getaway options out of town.

## Information

**Kien Giang Tourist** (Du Lich Lu Hanh Kien Giang;

☎ 862 081; dlluhanhkg@hcm.vnn.vn; 5 Đ Le Loi;

🕒 7am-5pm) The provincial tourism authority.

**Rach Gia Internet Cafe** (152 Đ Nguyen Trung Truc) Has a pretty fast connection.

**Vietcombank** (☎ 863 178; 2 Đ Mac Cuu) Has a 24-hour ATM.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Phuong Hong Hotel** (☎ 866 138; 5 Đ Tu Do; r 80,000-180,000d; 🍽) Near the port, this friendly place offers clean, small rooms. Some bathrooms are cold-water only.

**Kim Co Hotel** (☎ 879 610; 141 Đ Nguyen Hung Son; r 150,000-200,000d; 🍽) Kim Co is the best deal for budget travellers in Rach Gia and it comes with a prime location in the centre of town. The rooms are spacious, colourful and look brand new.

**Hong Nam Hotel** (☎ 873 090; fax 873 424; Đ Ly Thai To; r 150,000-250,000d; 🍽) It's a nice minihotel across from the Rach Gia Trade Centre – a market with food stalls – the staff are friendly and the clean rooms have all the modern conveniences.

Cheap, tasty Vietnamese food is sold from food stalls along Đ Hung Vuong between Đ Bach Dang and Đ Le Hong Phong and there are also food stalls outside the Rach Gia Trade Centre.

Other places to try, all with English menus:

**Ao Dai Moi** (☎ 866 295; 26 Đ Ly Tu Trong; soups 8000d; 🍽 breakfast) *Ao dai* is the traditional Vietnamese tunic and trousers, and *moi* means new – this place is run, fittingly, by a tailor. It serves very good morning *pho* and won ton soup.

**Ao Dai Moi (II)** (☎ 866 272; 18 Đ Nguyen Hung Son; soups 8000d; 🍽 dinner) The latest from the friendly family that runs the original Ao Dai Moi, around the corner.

**Hung Phat** (☎ 867 599; 7 Đ Nguyen Du; meals 25,000d; 🍽 breakfast, lunch & dinner) It does excellent sweet-and-sour soups and a good vegetarian fried rice.

## Getting There & Away

**Vietnam Airlines** (code VN; www.vietnamairlines.com) flies once daily between HCMC and Rach Gia; reserve well ahead. There's also a daily morning flight from Rach Gia to Phu Quoc Island. You'll have to catch a *xe om* or *xe loi* from the airport to Rach Gia.

Hydrofoils (180,000d, 3½ hours), leaving at 8am and 1.30pm, zip from Rach Gia to An Thoi on Phu Quoc Island. Stop by the Rach Gia office of **Duong Dong** (☎ 879 765) or **Bien Xanh** (☎ 254 234), both at the ferry terminal, to buy tickets at least a day beforehand. In the slow season it may be possible to book same-day tickets.

Buses from HCMC to Rach Gia leave from the Mien Tay bus station; the express bus takes six to seven hours (around 90,000d). Night buses leave Rach Gia for HCMC between 7pm and 11pm.

The **central bus station** (Đ Nguyen Binh Khiem) is in town, near the Rach Gia New Trade Center, and has daily express services to other cities in the region. There's also a bigger **Rach Gia bus station** (Ben Xe Rach Soi; 78 Đ Nguyen Trung Truc), 7km south of the city (towards Long Xuyen and Can Tho). Buses here link Rach Gia with Can Tho, Dong Thap, Ha Tien, Long Xuyen and HCMC.

## PHU QUOC ISLAND

☎ 077 / pop 52,700

Phu Quoc is the place to take a vacation from your vacation. Deserted white-sand beaches wrap around the island and just offshore the untouched reefs will have divers and snorkellers thinking that they have the ocean to themselves. Renting a motorbike and exploring long stretches of empty dirt road through the untouched forest is another way to lose yet one more day to the beauty of this place. However, mass tourism is just ramping up

here, with big plans or megaresorts and maybe even an international airport on the horizon. Get here before they pave paradise.

Addresses outside of Duong Dong's centre are designated by the kilometre mark south of town. Bring a torch (flash light or burning stick) to navigate the road and beach at night.

The most famous English-speaking guide in Phu Quoc is **Tony Anh** (☎ 0913 197 334), who speaks with a Brooklyn accent thanks to growing up with American GIs in Huế.

Because almost everything is shipped from the mainland and the island supports very little agriculture, this is one of the pricier destinations in Vietnam but deals can be found; sun bathing is free.

## Sights & Activities

About 90% of Phu Quoc Island is protected forest. The mountainous northern half of the island, where the trees are most dense, has been declared a **national park** (Khu Rung Nguyen Sinh). You'll need a motorbike to get into the reserve and there are no real trekking trails.

The **An Thoi Islands** – 15 islands and islets at the southern tip of Phu Quoc – can be visited by chartered boat (US\$40 per day), and it's a fine area for swimming, snorkelling and fishing.

Diving and snorkelling in Phu Quoc are just taking off, with few people and a more pristine marine environment than along the mainland coast. A two-tank dive costs around US\$65; snorkelling trips cost US\$25. The following shops usually close from late April to September, when the water off the western shore is too murky. There is talk of opening up new sites on the eastern shore for year-round diving.

**Rainbow Divers** (☎ 0913 400 964; www.divevietnam.com) has a desk at the Rainbow Bar (see p902)

## GETTING TO CAMBODIA

The Tinh Bien–Phnom Den border (open 8am to 4pm) is remote but, because the roads are in better shape than they used to be, this crossing may appeal to cyclists. It's necessary to arrange a Cambodian visa before showing up here – Ho Chi Minh City travel agencies can easily arrange one.

There are a few daily buses to Ha Tien from the Rach Gia bus station. From Ha Tien, take a local bus or haggle with a motorbike driver to make the 50km trip to Tinh Bien; it'll cost somewhere in the order of US\$7 to US\$10.

Another way to get to Ha Tien is to take a slow boat from Chau Doc (150,000d, eight to 12 hours). The twice-weekly boats leave at 5am from a tiny pier near 60 Đ Trung Hung Dao.

See p79 for information on making the journey from Cambodia to Vietnam.

on the beach and an office near the Saigon-Phu Quoc Resort, just after the road becomes paved.

**Coco Dive Center** (☎ 982 100; cocodive@dng.vnn.vn; 5Đ Tran Hung Dao) has friendly dive masters.

### Sleeping

All of these places are on the western shore and have great views of the sunset.

**Mai Phuong Beach Resort** (☎ 0918 288 647; maiphuongmanager@maiphuongbeachresort.com; Vung Au Beach; bungalow US\$10) An hour-and-a-half motorbike ride from An Thoi, Mai Phuong Beach Resort capitalises on its remoteness with plenty of space to lounge beside the tranquil bay and the bungalows are set far apart. The resort also offers canoe snorkelling and fishing trips. It has an on-site restaurant.

**Phu Quoc Resort Thang Loi** (☎ 985 002; www.phu-quoc.de; bungalows US\$10-30) On Ong Lang Beach, north of Duong Dong, the Thang Loi is a secluded enclave of 12 basic bungalows overlooking a stretch of pristine beach. The staff are friendly and the restaurant is good.

**Lam Ha Eco Resort** (☎ 847 369; r/bungalow US\$12/15; ☺) This friendly, family-run place on Long Beach is excellent value for money, with trim and tidy rooms and bungalows (some with verandas) scattered around a lush setting.

**our pick Beach Club** (☎ 980 998; www.beachclubvietnam.com; Km 2.7; r US\$15-20) Towards the southern end of the strip of hotels on Long Beach, the place lives up to its name with bungalows and a restaurant that are literally on the beach. It's one of the best places to stay on the island.

**Tropicana Resort** (☎ 847 127; reservation@tropicanavietnam.com; d US\$15, bungalows US\$35-70; ☺ ☺ ☺) Travellers who are trying to avoid big resorts might be surprised how much they like this beautiful, unpretentious place on Long Beach. Rates include breakfast.

### Eating & Drinking

Most guesthouses have their own lively cafés or restaurants in-house; wander along Long Beach until you find somewhere appealing. There are cheap food stalls near the Duong Dong market.

**Rainbow Bar** (☎ 0903 177 923; mains from 20,000đ; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) An established party spot, this is also the place to book trips with Rainbow Divers after the main office closes. It's near the Tropicana Resort.

**Eden** (☎ 994 208; 118/10 Đ Tran Hung Dao; mains 20,000-60,000đ; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) An open-air restaurant-bar on the beach plus a live DJ equals a new traveller favourite. The menu is like a small phone book and the cooks here actually wear white hats. The Eden also rents rooms for US\$10.

**Buddy Info Cafe** (☎ 994 181; 26 Đ Nguyen Trai; desserts 30,000đ; ☺ lunch & dinner; ☺) Sweet treats with New Zealand ice cream and free internet for patrons.

**German Biergarten** (50 Đ Tran Hung Dao; mains 30,000-80,000đ; ☺ lunch & dinner) A favourite meeting spot of expats, there's all the German food and beer the name implies. There's bench-style seating and Johnny Cash singing overhead. In possible tribute to the sorrowful singer, there are some good deals on mixed drinks (25,000đ).

### Getting There & Around

Phu Quoc is often a last stop on a Delta visit and travellers can fly back to HCMC to avoid back-tracking. **Vietnam Airlines** (code VN; www.vietnamairlines.com) has five daily flights between Ho Chi Minh City and Phu Quoc; reserve early. A *xe om* from the airport to guesthouses south of town should be around 15,000đ.

Hydrofoils (see p901) shuttle between Rach Gia and Phu Quoc twice per day. Hydrofoil companies include **Super Dong** (☎ in Rach Gia 077-878 475, Phu Quoc 980 111), **Duong Dong** (☎ in Rach Gia 077-879 765, Phu Quoc 990 747; www.duongdongexpress.com.vn) and **Hai Au** (☎ in Rach Gia 077-879 455, Phu Quoc 990 555). All have offices by the dock in Rach Gia, and in Phu Quoc there are many offices near the An Thoi dock and in Duong Dong. Most travel agents can book tickets as well.

Some hydrofoil companies have cheap (15,000đ) buses from their Duong Dong offices to An Thoi for passengers. In Duong Dong, arrange transport at the hydrofoil office; in An Thoi ask on the boat before disembarking or just look for the small minibuses waiting near the dock. Be ready for a swarm of motorbike touts.

Slow boats between Phu Quoc and mainland Ha Tien are very risky; don't take them if you value your life.

*Xe om* rides from An Thoi ferry port on the southern tip of the island to Duong Dong cost about 40,000đ. Almost all places to stay rent motorbikes for 100,000đ per day. Most of the roads are dirt, so cover up for potential spills and to keep the fine red sand off your skin.

## VIETNAM DIRECTORY

### ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation is at a premium during Tet (late January or early February), when the country is on the move and overseas Vietnamese flood back into the country. Prices at this time can rise by 25%. Christmas and New Year represent another high season, but to a lesser extent than Tet.

Family-run guesthouses are usually the cheapest option, ranging from around US\$6 to US\$15 per person with private bathroom. Some places offer dorm beds for US\$3 to US\$4 per person, with shared bathroom. Guesthouse accommodation is generally plentiful, and discounts are negotiable if you plan to stay for a few days or are travelling alone.

A step up from the guesthouses, minihotels typically come with more amenities: satellite TV, minifridges and IDD phones. Rates sometimes include breakfast, and as with smaller guesthouses, some discounts can be negotiated. Although minihotel rates can be as high as US\$20 to US\$25, it's still fairly easy to find rooms for around US\$12. Rates often go down the more steps you have to climb. Many places now offer free internet for guests in the lobby.

Unless otherwise noted, prices in this chapter include private bathrooms.

### ACTIVITIES

Vietnam's roads and rivers, sea and mountains provide ample opportunity for active adventures. Travel agencies and traveller cafés all over the country can arrange local trips, from kayaking on Halong Bay to trekking up Fansipan to kite-surfing in Mui Ne.

### Cycling

The flatlands and back roads of the Mekong Delta are wonderful to cycle through and observe the vibrant workaday agricultural life. Another spot well away from the insane traffic of National Hwy 1 is Hwy 14, winding through the Central Highlands. Arrange mountain-biking tours in the northern mountains at **Handspan Adventure Travel** (Map p830; ☎ 04-926 0581; www.handspan.com; 80 P Ma May, Hanoi); or stop by **Sinhbalo Adventures** (Map p892; ☎ 08-837 6766, 08-836 7682; www.sinhbalo.com; 283/20 Đ Pham Ngu Lao) in HCMC if you wish to meander the Mekong Delta or further afield.

### Diving & Snorkelling

Vietnam has several great dive destinations. Long established, with many dive sites, is the beachside town of Nha Trang. A notable emerging dive destination is Phu Quoc Island, with fewer visitors and a more pristine environment, and even Hoi An has got in on the underwater action.

### Kayaking

For an even closer look at those limestone crags, it's possible to paddle yourself around Halong Bay. Inquire at travel agencies in Hanoi (p832) for more details.

### Trekking

The most popular region for trekking is the northwest – notably around Sapa, which includes Vietnam's tallest mountain, Fansipan. There's also good trekking in the jungle of Cuc Phuong National Park, and the trekking trails in Bach Ma National Park are very nice. The trek up Lang Bian Mountain (p877) near Dalat also gets good reviews.

### Water Sports

Mui Ne has Vietnam's best shoreline for kite-surfing and windsurfing fiends. Nha Trang is another good locale for windsurfing, sailing or wakeboarding. The area around China Beach (p862), south of Danang, also gets passable surf between September and December.

### BOOKS

Lonely Planet's *Vietnam* guide provides the full scoop on the country. If you're interested in cuisine and the culture behind it, sink your teeth into *World Food Vietnam*. The *Vietnamese Phrasebook* is practical and helps pass the time on long bus rides. If you prefer cycling it, put *Cycling Vietnam, Laos & Cambodia* into your panniers.

For insight into the country's history and juicy stories about political leaders, Robert Temple's *Shadows and Wind* (1999) is a compelling read. *Catfish & Mandala* (1999), by Andrew X Pham, is the author's bicycle journey that wheels from HCMC (Saigon) to Hanoi and far beyond. It's exquisitely intimate but broadly illuminating.

One of the finest books about the American War written by a Vietnamese is *The Sorrow of War: A Novel of North Vietnam* (1996) by Bao Ninh.

## BUSINESS HOURS

Many small, privately owned shops, restaurants and street stalls stay open seven days a week, often until late at night. Restaurants tend to open very early and serve food all day long.

We only specify business hours in this chapter if they differ from the hours given below; keep in mind the hours given below may vary an hour or so each way.

**Banks** 8am to 11am and 2pm to 4pm Monday to Friday, 8am to 11.30am Saturday

**Government offices** 7.30am to 4.30pm Monday to Friday (with a long lunch from noon), 7.30am to noon Saturday

**Museums** 8am to 11am and 2pm to 4pm; closed Monday  
**Offices and public buildings** 8am to 11am and 2pm to 4pm

**Post offices** 6.30am to 9pm

**Temples** All day, every day

## CLIMATE

Vietnam's south is tropical but the north can experience chilly winters – in Hanoi, an overcoat can be necessary in January.

The southwestern monsoon blows from April or May to October, bringing warm, damp weather to the whole country, except those areas sheltered by mountains, namely the central part of the coastal strip and the Red River Delta.

Typhoons can strike the central coast especially hard between August and November, and can cause flooding that closes roads for a day or two and delays flights.

Also see the climate charts (p916).

## CUSTOMS

Though you're probably not travelling on a shoestring in order to support your antique-collection mania, keep in mind that customs may seize suspected antiques or other 'cultural treasures', which cannot legally be taken out of Vietnam. If you do purchase authentic or reproduction antiques, be sure to get a receipt and a customs clearance form from the seller.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Since 1975 many thousands of Vietnamese have been maimed or killed by unexploded rockets, artillery shells, mortars, mines and other ordnance left over from the war. *Never* touch any war relics you come across – such objects can remain lethal for decades, and one bomb can ruin your whole day.

## SCAMS

Most of the scams in Vietnam are based in a particular town or area, from train-ticket cheats in Sapa to 'English students' in Hanoi. But they all involve either surprise costs, or charging for one thing and delivering another. The best thing to do is to buy directly from the source (especially for transport and tours) and to make sure everything is negotiated upfront. The best approach is to stay firm, fair and friendly when doing business.

Violent crime is still relatively rare in Vietnam, but petty theft is definitely not. Drive-by bag snatchers on motorbikes are not uncommon, and thieves on buses, trains and boats stealthily rifle through bags or haul them off altogether. Skilled pickpockets work the crowds.

One important suggestion, in particular for HCMC, is to not have anything dangling off your body that you are not ready to part with. This includes cameras and any jewellery. When riding a *xe om*, sling shoulder bags across the front of your body. On public buses, try to stow your bag where you're sitting; on trains, secure it to something if you have to leave it.

## DRIVING LICENCE

International driving licences are not valid in Vietnam. If you have a motorcycle licence, you must have the document translated into a Vietnamese equivalent in order for it to be officially recognised. In practice, most foreigners drive without a licence.

## EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Visas can be obtained in your home country through the Vietnamese embassy or consulate. See p923 for more information.

### Embassies & Consulates in Vietnam

**Australia** Hanoi (Map pp826-7; ☎ 04-831 7755; 8 Duong Dao Tan, Ba Dinh District); HCMC (Map p890; ☎ 08-829 6035; 5th fl, 5B Đ Ton Duc Thang)

**Cambodia** Hanoi (Map pp826-7; ☎ 04-942 4789; arch@fpt.vn; 71A P Tran Hung Dao); HCMC (Map p886; ☎ 08-829 2751; cambocg@hcm.vnn.vn; 41 Đ Phung Khac Khoan)

**Canada** (www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/vietnam) Hanoi (Map pp826-7; ☎ 04-734 5000; 31 P Hung Vuong); HCMC (Map p890; ☎ 08-827 9899; 10th fl, 235 Đ Dong Khai)

**China** Hanoi (Map pp826-7; ☎ 04-845 3736; eossc@hn.vnn.vn; 46 P Hoang Dieu); HCMC (Map p886; ☎ 08-829 2457; 39 Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai)

**France** Hanoi (Map pp826-7; ☎ 04-943 7719; www.ambafrance-vn.org; 57 P Tran Hung Dao); HCMC (Map p886; ☎ 08-829 7231; www.consulfrance-hcm.org; 27 Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai)

**Germany** Hanoi (Map pp826-7; ☎ 04-845 3836; www.hanoi.diplo.de; 29 P Tran Phu); HCMC (Map p886; ☎ 08-829 1967; 126 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu)

**Indonesia** (Map pp826-7; ☎ 04-825 3353; komhan@hn.vnn.vn; 50 P Ngo Quyen, Hanoi)

**Japan** Hanoi (☎ 04-846 3000; www.vn.emb-japan.go.jp; 27 P Lieu Giai, Ba Dinh District); HCMC (Map p890; ☎ 08-822 5314; 13-17 ĐL Nguyen Hué)

**Laos** Hanoi (Map pp826-7; ☎ 04-825 4576; 22 P Tran Binh Trong); HCMC (Map p886; ☎ 08-829 7667; 181 Đ Hai Ba Trung); Danang (☎ 0511-821 208; 12 Đ Tran Quy Cap)

**Malaysia** Hanoi (Map pp826-7; ☎ 04-831 3400; mwahanoi@hn.vnn.vn; 16th fl, 6B P Lang Ha, Ba Dinh District); HCMC (Map p890; ☎ 08-829 9023; Ste 1208, Me Linh Point Tower, 2 Đ Ngo Duc Ke)

**Myanmar** (Map pp826-7; ☎ 04-845 3369; Bldg A3, Van Phuc Diplomatic Quarter, P Kim Ma, Ba Dinh District, Hanoi)

**Netherlands** (Map p886; ☎ 08-823-5932; 29 Đ Le Duan, HCMC)

**New Zealand** Hanoi (Map p830; ☎ 04-824 1481; nzembhan@fpt.vn; 5th fl, 63 P Ly Thai To); HCMC (Map p886; ☎ 08-822 6907; 5th fl, 41 Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai)

**Philippines** (Map pp826-7; ☎ 04-943 7873; hanoipe@dfa.gov.ph; 27B P Tran Hung Dao, Hanoi)

**Singapore** (Map pp826-7; ☎ 04-823 3965; www.mfa.gov.sg; 41-43 P Tran Phu, Hanoi)

**Thailand** Hanoi (Map pp826-7; ☎ 04-823 5092; thaconho@hcm.vnn.vn; 63-65 P Hoang Dieu); HCMC (Map p886; ☎ 08-932 7637; 77 Đ Tran Quoc Thao)

**UK** (www.uk-vietnam.org) Hanoi (Map p830; ☎ 04-936 0500; 4th fl, 31 P Hai Ba Trung); HCMC (Map p886; ☎ 08-829 8433; 25 ĐL Le Duan)

**USA** (http://usembassy.state.gov/vietnam) Hanoi (☎ 04-772 1500; 7 P Lang Ha, Ba Dinh District); HCMC (Map p886; ☎ 08-822 9433; 4 ĐL Le Duan)

### Vietnamese Embassies & Consulates Abroad

**Australia** Canberra (☎ 02-6286 6059; vembassy@webone.com.au; 6 Timbarra Cres, O'Malley, ACT 2606); Sydney (☎ 02-9327 2539; tllsyd@auco.net.au; 489 New South Head Rd, Double Bay, NSW 2028)

**Canada** (☎ 613-236 0772; www.vietnamembassy-canada.ca; 470 Wilbrod St, Ottawa, ON K1N 6M8)

**China** Beijing (☎ 010-6532 1125; vnaemba@mailhost.p.cinet.co.cn; 32 Guanghua Lu, 100600); Guangzhou (☎ 020-8652 7908; Jin Yanf Hotel, 92 Huanshi Western Rd)

**France** (☎ 01 44 14 64 00; 62-66 rue Boileau, 75016 Paris)

**Germany** (☎ 228-357 021; Konstantinstrasse 37, 5300 Bonn 2)

**Hong Kong** (☎ 22-591 4510; 15th fl, Great Smart Tower, 230 Wan Chai Rd, Wan Chai)

**Japan** Tokyo (☎ 03-3466 3311; 50-11 Moto Yoyogi-Cho, Shibuya-ku, 151); Osaka (☎ 06-263 1600; 10th fl, Estate Bakurocho Bldg, 1-4-10 Bakurocho, Chuo-ku)

**UK** (☎ 020-7937 1912; 12 Victoria Rd, London W8 5RD)

**USA** Washington (☎ 202-861 0737; www.vietnam embassy-usa.org; Ste 400, 1233 20th St NW, DC 20036); San Francisco (☎ 415-922 1707; www.vietnamconsulate-sf.org; Ste 430, 1700 California St, CA 94109)

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Vietnam's major festival is Tet – see p906 for details.

**Ngay Mot & Ngay Ram** Pagodas are packed with Buddhist worshippers on the 1st and 15th days of the lunar month; and tasty, cheap vegetarian meals are served around them.

**Tiet Doan Ngo** (Summer Solstice) Human effigies are burnt to satisfy the need for souls to serve in the God of Death's army, on the 5th day of 5th lunar month.

**Trung Nguyen** (Wandering Souls Day) On the 15th day of the 7th lunar month, offerings are presented to the ghosts of the forgotten dead.

**Mid-Autumn Festival** On the night of 15 August, children walk the streets carrying glowing lanterns, and people exchange gifts of mooncakes.

## FOOD & DRINK

One of the delights of visiting Vietnam is the cuisine; there are said to be nearly 500 traditional Vietnamese dishes. Generally, food is superbly prepared and very cheap... and you never have to go very far to find it.

Aside from the usual delightful Southeast Asian fruits, Vietnam has its own unique *trai thanh long* (green dragon fruit), a bright fuchsia-coloured fruit with green scales. Grown mainly along the coastal region near Nha Trang, it has white flesh flecked with edible black seeds, and tastes something like a mild kiwifruit.

*Pho* is the Vietnamese name for the noodle soup that is eaten at all hours of the day, but especially for breakfast. *Com* are rice dishes. You'll see signs saying *pho* and *com* everywhere. Other noodle soups to try are *bun bo Hue* and *hu tieu*.

Spring rolls (*nem* in the north, *cha gio* in the south) are a speciality. These are normally

dipped in *nuoc mam* (fish sauce), though many foreigners prefer soy sauce (*xi dau* in the north, *nuoc tuong* in the south).

Because Buddhist monks of the Mahayana tradition are strict vegetarians, *an chay* (vegetarian cooking) is an integral part of Vietnamese cuisine.

Street stalls or roaming vendors are everywhere, selling steamed sweet potatoes, rice porridge and ice-cream bars even in the wee hours. There are many other Vietnamese nibbles to try:

**Bap xao** Fresh, stir-fried corn, chillies and tiny shrimp.

**Bo bia** Nearly microscopic shrimp, fresh lettuce and thin slices of Vietnamese sausage rolled up in rice paper and dipped in a spicy-sweet peanut sauce.

**Hot vit lon** For the brave. Steamed, fertilised duck egg in varying stages of development (all the way up to recognisable duckling), eaten with coarse salt and bitter herb.

**Sinh to** Shakes made with milk and sugar or yogurt, and fresh tropical fruit.

Vietnamese people don't usually end meals with dessert, which isn't to say they don't have a sweet tooth. Many sticky confections are made from sticky rice, such as *banh it nhan dau*, made with sugar and bean paste and sold wrapped in banana leaf.

Try *che*, a cold, refreshing sweet soup made with sweetened black bean, green bean or corn. It's served in a glass with ice and sweet coconut cream on top.

## Drink

Memorise the words *bia hoi*, which mean 'draught beer'. Similar to this is *bia tuoi*, or 'fresh beer'. Quality varies but it's generally OK and supercheap (3000d per litre!). Places that serve *bia hoi* usually also have cheap food.

Several foreign labels brewed in Vietnam under licence include BGI, Tiger, Fosters, Carlsberg and Heineken. National and regional brands – cheaper, and typically lighter than light – include Halida, Huda, Saigon and Bia 333 (*ba ba ba*).

Whatever you drink, make sure that it's been boiled or bottled. Ice is generally safe on the tourist trail, but not guaranteed elsewhere.

Vietnamese *ca phe* (coffee) is fine stuff and there is no shortage of cafés in which to sample it. Try seeking out the fairy-lit garden cafés where young couples stake out dark corners for smooch sessions.

Foreign soft drinks are widely available. An excellent local treat is *soda chanh* (carbonated mineral water with lemon and sugar) or *nuoc chanh nong* (hot, sweetened lemon juice).

## GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Vietnam is pretty hassle-free for gay travellers. There's not much in the way of harassment, nor are there official laws on same-sex relationships (although the government considers homosexuality a 'social evil'). Vietnamese same-sex friends often walk with arms around each other or holding hands, and guesthouse proprietors are unlikely to question the relationship of same-sex travel companions. But be discreet – public displays of affection are not socially acceptable whatever your sexual orientation.

Check out **Utopia** ([www.utopia-asia.com](http://www.utopia-asia.com)) to obtain contacts and useful travel information.

## HOLIDAYS

The Lunar New Year (Tet) is Vietnam's most important annual festival. The Tet holiday officially lasts three days, but many Vietnamese take the following week off work, so hotels, trains and buses are booked solid – and most everything else shuts down. If visiting Vietnam during Tet, memorise this phrase: *Chuc mung nam moi!* (Happy New Year!). Smiles in response are guaranteed. Vietnamese public holidays:

**Tet** (Tet Nguyen Dan) 7 February 2008 (Year of the Rat), 26 January 2009 (Year of the Buffalo)

**Liberation Day** 30 April; in 1975 Saigon surrendered to the Hanoi-backed forces on this date.

**International Workers' Day** 1 May

**Ho Chi Minh's Birthday** 19 May

**National Day** 2 September; commemorates the proclamation of the Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam by Ho Chi Minh in 1945.

## INTERNET ACCESS

Internet access is available throughout Vietnam, sometimes in the most surprising backwaters. Faster ADSL connections are becoming more widespread and wi-fi is becoming common in the bigger cities. USB drives are often available at photography shops and most computers have USB inputs in Vietnam. Travellers can put portable web browsers on their USB drives with all their saved passwords to bypass potential spysware at internet cafés.

The cost for internet access ranges from about 100d to 500d per minute.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

**Economist.com** ([www.economist.com/countries/Vietnam/index.cfm](http://www.economist.com/countries/Vietnam/index.cfm)) A great news source with an in-depth country profile.

**Travelfish.org** ([www.travelfish.org](http://www.travelfish.org)) Well-written and in-depth articles and reviews on the region.

**Vietnam Adventures** ([www.vietnamadventures.com](http://www.vietnamadventures.com)) Full of practical travel information, and features monthly adventures and specials.

## LEGAL MATTERS

Most Vietnamese never call the police, preferring to settle legal disputes on the spot (either with cash or fists). If you lose something really valuable such as your passport or visa, you'll need to contact the police. For incidents on the street, seek out the tourist police that patrol the main tourism (and theft) spots in the biggest cities.

The Vietnamese government is seriously cracking down on the burgeoning drug trade. You may face imprisonment and/or large fines for drug offences, and drug trafficking can be punishable by death.

## MAPS

Basic road maps of Vietnam and major cities such as Hanoi, HCMC (Saigon), Huế and Nha Trang are readily available. Vietnam Tourism publishes a handy travel atlas (*ban do du lich*), available at bigger bookshops.

## MEDIA

### Magazines & Newspapers

The English-language *Vietnam News* is published daily and will do at a pinch.

Of more interest are the monthly *Vietnam Economic Times* (VET) and the weekly *Vietnam Investment Review* (VIR). VET's free insert, the *Guide*, is an excellent source of leisure information and can be picked up in hotels, bars and restaurants in larger cities. VIR's free supplement, *Time Out*, is another good rag for finding what's on in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi.

## Radio & TV

Foreign radio services such as the BBC World Service, Radio Australia and Voice of America can be picked up on short-wave frequencies.

Vietnamese TV broadcasts little of interest to foreigners, but satellite dishes are eve-

rywhere, and many hotels now offer Hong Kong's Star TV, BBC, CNN and other channels.

## MONEY

Vietnam's official currency is the dong (d). Banknotes come in denominations of 200, 500, 1000, 2000, 5000, 10,000, 20,000, 50,000, 100,000 and 500,000. Plastic banknotes are now in circulation, so in addition to the new 500,000 notes, there are two different types each of 50,000 and 100,000 notes. Adding even more confusion, the government has also begun minting small-denomination coins (from 200 to 5000).

US dollars and euros are the easiest currencies to exchange.

Needless to say, for your own security try to avoid carrying large wads of cash.

## ATMs

ATMs are almost everywhere now. All ATMs dispense cash in dong only.

## Bargaining & Tipping

For *xe om* and *cyclo* trips, as well as anywhere that prices aren't posted, you'll be expected by the locals to bargain. In high-tourist areas, you may be quoted as much as five times the going price, but not everyone is trying to rip you off. In less-travelled areas, foreigners are often quoted the Vietnamese price (you'll still want to bargain a little bit).

Bargaining politely usually invites reciprocal good-faith negotiation; getting belligerent gets you nowhere. If you can't agree on a price, thanking the vendor and walking away sometimes brings about a change of heart. When it's a matter of just a few thousand dong, don't drive too hard a bargain.

Tipping isn't expected in Vietnam, but it's enormously appreciated. Many travellers take up a collection (each contributing a few dollars) for their tour guides and drivers, after multiday tours or for outstanding service. For someone making under US\$50 per month, the cost of your drink can equal half a day's wages.

## Cash

The US dollar acts as a second local currency. Hotels, airlines and travel agencies all normally quote their prices in dollars, due in part to unwieldy Vietnamese prices (US\$100 is around 1,600,000d). For this reason, we

quote some prices in US dollars. For the best exchange rate, you should pay in dong.

### Credit Cards

Visa, MasterCard and American Express (Amex) credit cards are accepted in most cities at a growing number of hotels, restaurants and shops. Getting cash advances on credit cards is also possible, but you'll be charged between 1% and 5% commission.

### Exchanging Money

If you need to exchange money after hours, jewellery shops will exchange US dollars at rates comparable to, or even slightly better than, the banks.

Exchange rates at the time of press were as follows:

Country	Unit	Dong (d)
Australia	A\$1	13,482
Cambodia	1000r	4012
Canada	C\$1	15,735
Euro zone	€1	22,425
Japan	¥100	14,072
Laos	1000 kip	1690
New Zealand	NZ\$1	11,417
Thailand	10B	5,054
UK	UK£1	32,245
USA	US\$1	16,177

### Travellers Cheques

Travellers cheques in US dollars can be exchanged for local dong at certain banks; Vietcombank is usually a safe bet, although staff will charge a commission of 1% if you exchange cheques for dong. Most hotels and airline offices will not accept travellers cheques.

### POST

International postal service from Vietnam is not unreasonably priced when compared with most countries, though parcels mailed from smaller cities and towns may take longer to arrive at their destinations. Be aware that customs will inspect the contents before you ship anything other than documents, so don't show up at the post office with a carefully wrapped parcel ready to go. It will get eviscerated on the table.

Take your letters to the post office yourself and make sure that the clerk franks them

while you watch so that someone for whom the stamps are worth a day's salary does not soak them off and throw your letters away.

Poste restante works in the larger cities but don't count on it elsewhere. There is a small surcharge for picking up poste restante letters. All post offices are marked with the words *buu dien*.

### RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

The tourism industry in Vietnam is very responsive to the desires of travellers; if you make it clear that you'll vote with your dong for businesses and tour operators who do what they can to pick up trash, not harm wildlife, treat animals humanely and act in a generally responsible manner then hopefully 'ecotourism' and 'responsible travel' will become more than marketing buzz words.

Buying coral, limestone or dried sea life encourages such harvesting to meet the demand, meanwhile destroying or killing the living ecosystems that travellers visit to enjoy. In the same vein, sampling 'exotic' meats such as muntjac, seahorse or bat may seem culinarily adventurous, but many of these species are endangered. Help preserve vulnerable species by not eating them.

Beggars, especially young ones, are often part of an organised operation run by shady characters. Giving money only perpetuates the exploitation. If nothing else, giving handouts encourages a reliance on begging. Donating to a country-specific development organisation or patronising businesses that provide job training to those in need is a better use of good intentions.

A growing crisis in Vietnam is the accelerating spread of HIV/AIDS. For the protection of others and yourself, please practise safe sex.

### STUDYING

To qualify for a student visa, you need to study at a bona fide university (as opposed to a private language centre or with a tutor). Universities require that you study 10 hours per week. Lessons usually last for two hours per day, for which you pay tuition of around US\$5.

Decide whether you want to study in northern or southern Vietnam, because the regional dialects are very different. See Courses in Hanoi (p831) or HCMC (p888) for school listings.

### TELEPHONE

The cheapest and simplest way to make an International Direct Dial (IDD) call is to dial ☎ 17100 plus the country code and phone number. These calls cost about 20,000d per minute to most countries. Vietnam's country code is ☎ 84.

In HCMC and Hanoi, it's possible to make reverse-charge calls at the main post offices. The telephone booking desk has a list of toll-free numbers you can call for a nominal fee, to connect with an international operator or long-distance service.

Useful numbers:

**Directory assistance** (☎ 116)

**General information** (☎ 1080)

**International operator** (☎ 110)

**International prefix** (☎ 00)

**Time** (☎ 117)

For mobile phones, Vietnam uses GSM 900/1800, which is compatible with most of Southeast Asia, Europe and Australia but not with North America. If you have a compatible phone, you can buy a SIM card with a local number in Vietnam. Mobile-phone service providers such as Vinaphone and MobiFone sell prepaid phonecards in denominations of 30,000d and up.

Calls to mobile phones cost more than those to local numbers. Mobile-phone numbers start with the digits ☎ 0903, ☎ 0913 or ☎ 0908.

### TOILETS

Most hotels have the familiar Western-style sit-down toilets, but squat toilets in varying states of refinement exist in some cheap hotels and public places such as restaurants and bus stations. Hotels usually supply a roll, but you'd be wise to keep a stash of toilet paper with you while travelling.

As public toilets are scarce, ask and ye shall usually receive the blessing to use the toilet at a nearby hotel, restaurant or shop – again, BYOTP (bring your own toilet paper).

### TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist offices in Vietnam have a different philosophy from the majority of tourist offices worldwide. These government-owned enterprises are really travel agencies whose primary interest is turning a profit.

Though traveller cafés have a similar agenda, they're generally a better source of

information and offer cheaper ways of getting to where you're going. Hitting up your fellow travellers for information is an excellent way to get the latest, greatest scoop on the where and how.

### TRAVELLERS WITH DISABILITIES

Vietnam poses many technical challenges for the disabled traveller, some of which include the lack of lifts; a steeplechase of kerbs, steps and uneven pavements, where they exist; plus problematic squat toilets in narrow stalls.

Nonambulatory Vietnamese people get around in hand-pumped vehicles or tricked-out motorbikes, while the poorest of the poor are simply hand-pulled or self-propelled on boards outfitted with wheels. Foreigners can get around in a hired car with driver and/or guide, which is not prohibitively expensive.

Travellers with crutches or canes should do OK, and can usually find ground-floor rooms. Those who have vision, hearing or speech impairments might want to hire a guide or travel with a companion in order to get around.

Check out Lonely Planet's **Thorn Tree** (<http://thorntree.lonelyplanet.com>) to connect with other travellers; search under the Southeast Asia branch.

Vietnam-veteran groups that organise tours to Vietnam might also have some good travel tips, or seek advice from the organisations listed in the Southeast Asia Directory (p923).

### VISAS

People of all nationalities require a visa to enter the country, and while Vietnamese bureaucracy is legendary, completing the visa application is pretty painless. You'll need at least one passport-sized photo to accompany the visa application. Travellers shouldn't arrive at a Vietnamese border or airport without a visa; it's necessary to get one in advance from a Vietnamese embassy or consulate abroad.

Tourist visas are valid for a single 30-day stay and enable you to enter and exit the country via any international border (make sure to specify this when arranging your visa). Depending on where you acquire it, prices for single-entry tourist visas vary from US\$30 to US\$60. Cambodia, where your visa application can be processed on the same day, is the most convenient place in Southeast Asia to get a Vietnamese visa. Bangkok is another

popular place, as many travel agents offer cheap packages including both an air ticket and a visa.

If you plan to spend more than a month in Vietnam or travel overland between Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, it's possible to get a three-month multiple-entry visa. These are not available from all Vietnamese embassies but can be picked up for US\$70 in Cambodia and for US\$85 in the USA.

### Business Visas

There are several advantages in having a business visa: such visas are usually valid for three or six months; they can be issued for multiple-entry journeys; you are permitted to work in Vietnam; and the visas can be extended with relative ease. The notable disadvantage is cost, which is about four times as much as a tourist visa.

Getting a business visa tends to be easier once you've arrived in Vietnam; most travel agencies can arrange one for you, sponsor and all.

### Visa Extensions

If you've got the dollars, they've got the rubber stamp. Visa extensions cost around US\$30, but go to a travel agency to get this taken care of – turning up at the immigration police yourself usually doesn't work. The procedure takes one or two days (your passport is needed) and is readily accomplished in major cities such as Hanoi, HCMC, Danang and Huế.

Official policy is that you are permitted one visa extension only, for a maximum of 30 days. Be on the lookout for sudden changes to these regulations.

## VOLUNTEERING

Some good options:

**15 May School** (☎ 08-837 7591; [www.15mayschool.org](http://www.15mayschool.org); 245 Đ Nguyen Trai) A school in HCMC for disadvantaged children, which provides free education and vocational training.

**Idealist.org** ([www.idealist.org](http://www.idealist.org)) Look up volunteer opportunities with nonprofit organisations worldwide.

**Street Voices** ([www.streetvoices.com.au](http://www.streetvoices.com.au)) Donate your skills, time or money to help give street children career opportunities. Street Voices' primary project is KOTO on Van Mieu restaurant (see p834); check its website to see what you can do to help in Vietnam or Australia.

**United Nation's Development programme** ([www.undp.org.vn](http://www.undp.org.vn)) Information on development issues in Vietnam and a limited selection of volunteer and internship opportunities.

## WOMEN TRAVELLERS

While it always pays to be prudent (avoid dark lonely alleys at night), foreign women have rarely reported problems in Vietnam. Most Vietnamese women do not frequent bars on their own; be aware that you may receive unwanted – though usually harmless – advances if drinking or travelling alone. When travelling on overnight trains it's a good idea to travel with a companion to keep an eye on your bags when you use the toilet, and on each other if you have any overly friendly strangers sharing your compartment.

Some Asian women travelling with Western men have occasionally reported verbal abuse from Vietnamese people who stereotype them as prostitutes. However, with the increase of foreign tourists visiting the country, locals are becoming more accustomed to seeing couples of mixed ethnicity.