

# Vietnam



Welcome to another world, a world where the colours are more vivid, where the landscapes are bolder, the coastline more dramatic, where the culture is richer, the history more compelling, where the tastes are more divine, where life is lived faster. This is the world of Vietnam, the latest Asian dragon to awake from its slumber.

Nature has blessed Vietnam with a bountiful harvest: with soaring mountains, a killer coastline and radiant rice fields, it is simply stunning. After more than 4000 dramatic kilometres, the mighty Mekong spills into Vietnam, blanketing the landscape in a patchwork of emerald-green rice paddies, timelessly tended by peasant women in conical hats. This is Cuu Long, or the river of nine dragons, a water world of floating markets and bobbing boats.

Vietnam is a nation of determined optimists who have weathered war upon war; survived colonialism, a closed society and communist rule; and come out alive and kicking as an intact culture. Fiercely protective of their independence and sovereignty, the Vietnamese are graciously welcoming of foreigners who come as guests not conquerors.

Don't believe the hype. Or the propagandist party billboards that are as common as statues of 'Uncle Ho'. Believe your senses, as you discover one of the most enriching, enlivening and exotic countries on earth.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Discover a stunningly situated former hill station hemmed in on all sides by rugged mountains at **Sapa** (p376), home to a dizzying mix of minority people
- Explore the captivating capital **Hanoi** (p351), steeped in history, pulsating with life, bubbling with commerce, buzzing with motor-bikes and rich in exotic scents
- Experience nature at its outrageous best in **Halong Bay** (p369), where hundreds of limestone peaks tower above the shimmering seas; it's a karst system with a difference
- Fall in love with the old-world atmosphere of **Hoi An** (p387), a place to savour slowly
- Enter the **Mekong Delta** (p419), a world of water, a carpet of dazzling greens in the rice basket of the country, a place for slow boating, markets floating and delicious fish



## HISTORY

Vietnam has a history as rich and evocative as anywhere on earth. Sure, the American War in Vietnam captured the attention of the West, but centuries before that the Vietnamese were scrapping with the Chinese, the Khmers, the Chams and the Mongols. Vietnamese civilisation is as sophisticated as that of its mighty northern neighbour China, from where it drew many of its influences under a thousand-year occupation. Later came the French and the humbling period of colonialism from which Vietnam was not to emerge until the second half of the 20th century. The Americans were simply the last in a long line of invaders who had come and gone through the centuries and, no matter what was required or how long it took, they too would be vanquished. If only the planners in Washington had paid a little more attention to the history of this proud nation, the trauma and tragedy of a brutal war might have been avoided.

## Early Vietnam

The sophisticated Indianised kingdom of Funan flourished from the 1st to 6th centuries AD in the Mekong Delta area. Archaeological evidence reveals that Funan's busy trading port of Oc-Eo had contact with China, India, Persia and even the Mediterranean. Between the mid-6th century and the 9th century, the Funan empire was absorbed by the pre-Angkorian kingdom of Chenla.

Around the late 2nd century when the Hindu kingdom of Champa was putting down roots in the Danang area, the Chinese conquered the Red River Delta near Hanoi.

Thus began a thousand-year pattern of the Vietnamese resisting the yoke of Chinese rule, while at the same time adopting many Chinese innovations to evolve into today's rice-growing society. The most famous act of resistance during this period (c 200 BC–AD 938) was the rebellion of the two Trung sisters (Hai Ba Trung), self-declared queens of the Vietnamese state, who drowned themselves rather than surrender to the Chinese.

By the 10th century, Vietnam had declared independence from China and so began almost one thousand years of a dynastic tradition. During this era, the Vietnamese successfully repulsed attacks by foreign invaders, eventually absorbing the kingdom of Champa as they expanded south.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 329,566 sq km
- **Capital** Hanoi
- **Country Code** ☎ 84
- **Population** 84 million
- **Money** US\$1 = 16,035d (dong)
- **Seasons** south hot & wet Apr-Sep, hot & dry Oct-Mar; north hot & dry Apr-Sep, cool & wet Oct-Mar; central coast typhoons Jul-Nov
- **Phrases** *xin chào* (hello), *tam biệt* (good-bye), *cam ơn* (thank you)

## Contact with the West

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

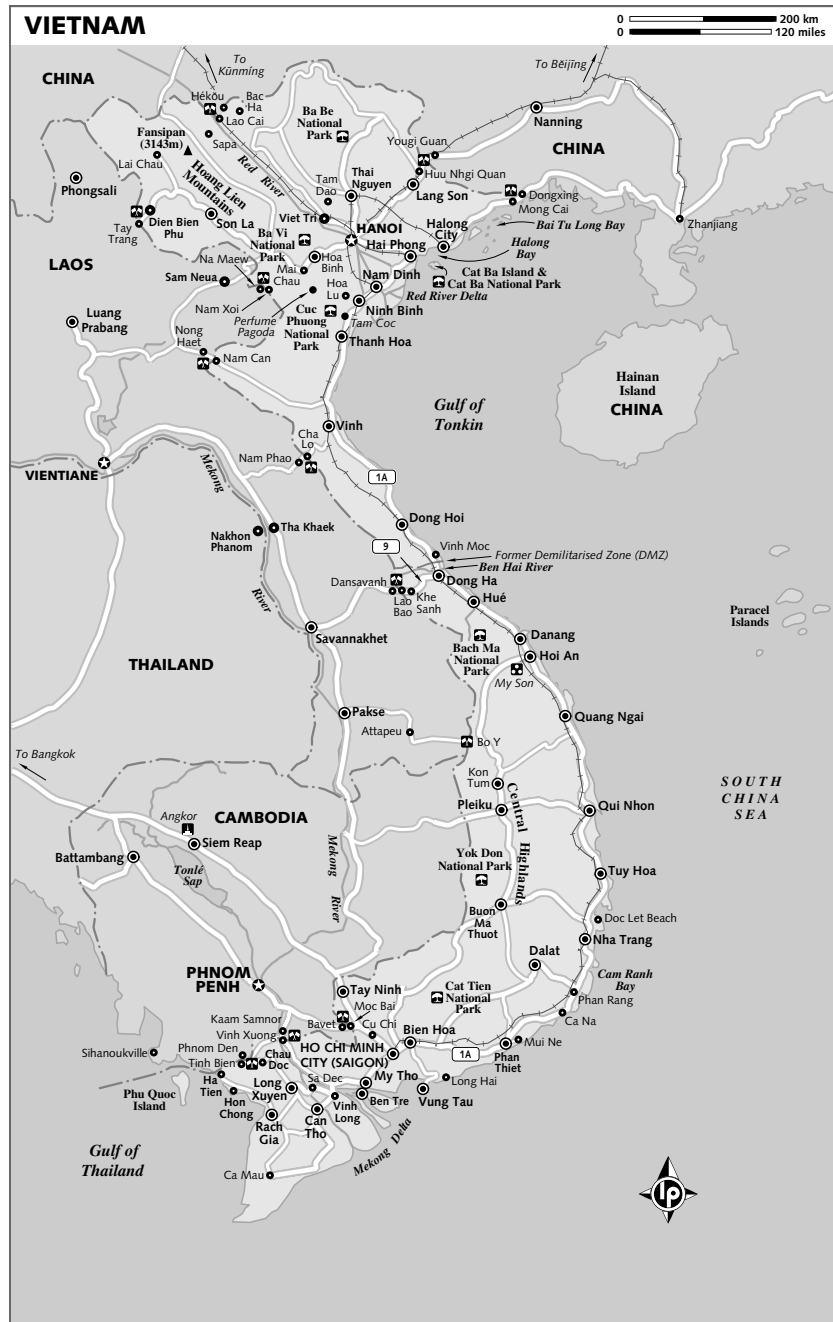
During WWII, the only group that significantly resisted the Japanese occupation was the communist-dominated Viet Minh. When WWII ended, Ho Chi Minh – whose Viet Minh forces already controlled large parts of the country – declared Vietnam independent. French efforts to reassert control soon led to violent 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 1956 elections, the Ben Hai line became the border between North and South Vietnam.

## The American War in 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 National Liberation Front (NLF), a communist guerrilla group better known as the Viet Cong (VC), was founded to fight against Diem.

A brutal ruler, Diem was assassinated in 1963 by his own troops. After Hanoi ordered



North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units 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 in an effort to bring global legitimacy to the conflict – sound familiar?

As Vietnam celebrated the Lunar New Year in 1968, the VC launched a surprise attack, known as the Tet Offensive, marking a crucial turning point in the war. Many Americans, who had for years believed their government's insistence that the USA was winning, started demanding a negotiated end to the war. 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 was soon followed by large-scale internal repression. Hundreds of thousands of southerners fled Vietnam, 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.

### Vietnam Today

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 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) membership. The USA established diplomatic relations with Vietnam in 1995, and in 2000 Bill Clinton became the first US president to visit northern Vietnam. George W Bush followed suit in 2006, as Vietnam was welcomed into the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Relations have also improved with the historic enemy China. China still secretly thinks of Vietnam as a renegade province, but Vietnam's economic boom has caught Beijing's attention.

Vietnam's economy is growing at more than 8% a year and tourists just can't get

enough of the place. The future is bright, but ultimate success depends on how well the Vietnamese can follow the Chinese road to development: economic liberalisation without political freedom. With only two million paid-up members of the Communist Party and 80 million Vietnamese, it is a road they must tread carefully.

### PEOPLE & THE POPULATION

The Vietnamese are battle-hardened, proud and nationalist, as they have earned their stripes in successive skirmishes with the world's mightiest powers. But that's the older generation, who remember every inch of the territory for which they fought. For the new generation, Vietnam is a place to succeed, a place to ignore the staid structures set in stone by the communists, and a place to go out and have some fun.

As in other parts of Asia, life revolves around the family; there are often several generations living under one roof. Poverty, and the transition from a largely agricultural society to that of a more industrialised nation, sends many people seeking their fortune to the bigger cities and is changing the structure of the modern family unit. Women make up 52% of the nation's workforce but are generally not in high positions of power.

Vietnam's population is 84% ethnic Vietnamese (Kinh) and 2% ethnic Chinese; the rest is made up of Khmers, Chams and members of more than 50 ethnolinguistic groups known as Montagnards (French for 'highlanders').

### 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 has a significant percentage of Catholics (8% to 10% of the total population), second in Southeast Asia only to the Philippines.

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

## ARTS Contemporary Arts

It's sometimes possible to catch modern dance, classical ballet and stage plays in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). The work of contemporary painters and photographers covers a wide swathe of styles and gives a glimpse into the modern Vietnamese psyche. Check the *Guide* or *Time Out* for current theatre or dance listings in Hanoi and HCMC.

## Traditional Arts

### ARCHITECTURE

The Vietnamese were not great builders like their neighbours the Khmer, who erected the Angkor temples in Cambodia. Most early Vietnamese buildings were made of wood and other materials that proved highly vulnerable 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 (p392) are a major tourist draw.

### 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. The largest single collection of Cham sculpture is at the Museum of Cham Sculpture (p385) in Danang.

### 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. There are also performances in HCMC.

## ENVIRONMENT

Environmental consciousness is low in Vietnam. Rapid industrialisation, deforestation and pollution are major problems facing the country.

Unsustainable logging and farming practices, as well as the USA's extensive spraying of defoliants during the American War, have contributed to deforestation. This has resulted not only in significant loss of biological diversity, but also in a harder existence for many Montagnard groups.

The country's rapid economic and population growth over the last decade – demonstrated by the dramatic increase in motorbike numbers and helter-skelter construction – has put additional pressure on the already-stressed environment.

## The Land

Vietnam stretches over 1600km along the east coast of the Indochinese peninsula. The country's land area is 329,566 sq km, making it slightly larger than Italy and a bit smaller than Japan.

As the Vietnamese are quick to point out, it resembles a *don ganh*, or the ubiquitous bamboo pole with a basket of rice slung from each end. The baskets represent the main rice-growing regions of the Red River Delta in the north, and the Mekong Delta in the south.

Of several interesting geological features found in Vietnam, the most striking are the karst formations (limestone regions with caves and underground streams). The northern part of Vietnam has a spectacular assemblage of karst areas, particularly around Halong Bay (p369) and Tam Coc (p367).

## Wildlife

Because Vietnam has such a wide range of habitats, its fauna is enormously diverse; its forests are estimated to contain 12,000 plant species, only 7000 of which have been identified. Vietnam is home to more than 275 species of mammal, 800 species of bird, 180 species of reptile and 80 species of amphibian. In the 1990s, one species of muntjac (deer) and an ox similar to an oryx were discovered in Vietnam – the only newly identified large mammals in the world in the last 60 years.

Tragically, Vietnam's wildlife is in precipitous decline as forest habitats are destroyed and waterways become polluted. Illegal hunting has also exterminated the local populations of certain animals, in some cases eliminating entire species. Officially, the Vietnamese government recognises 54 mammal species and 60 bird species as endangered.

The trade in wildlife for export and domestic consumption goes largely unregulated by the government, though laws are in place to protect the animals. Poachers continue to profit from meeting the demand for exotic animals for traditional medicinal purposes and as pets.

Animal welfare is not a priority in the Vietnamese culture, evidenced by the appallingly inadequate conditions for caged wildlife throughout Vietnam.

## National Parks

The number of national parks in the country has been rapidly expanding and there are now almost 30, about 3% of Vietnam's total territory. The most interesting and accessible are: Cat Ba (p371), Bai Tu Long (see the boxed text, p371), Ba Be (p374) and Cuc Phuong (p368) National Parks in the north; Bach Ma National Park (p382) in the centre; and Yok Don National Park (see the boxed text, p402) in the south.

With the help of NGOs, including the UN Development Programme and the World Wildlife Federation, the Vietnamese government is taking steps to expand national park boundaries, crack down on illegal poaching and educate and employ people living in national park buffer zones.

Flora and Fauna International produces the excellent *Nature Tourism Map of Vietnam*, which includes detailed coverage of all the national parks in Vietnam. All proceeds

from sales of the map go towards supporting primate conservation in Vietnam.

## HANOI

📍 04 / pop 3.5 million

Hanoi is where the exotic chic of old Asia blends seamlessly with the dynamic face of new Asia. Where the medieval and modern coexist. It's a city with a quixotic blend of Parisian grace and Asian pace, an architectural museum piece evolving in harmony with its history, rather than bulldozing through it like many of the region's capitals.

A mass of motorbikes swarms through the tangled web of streets that is the Old Quarter, a cauldron of commerce for almost 1000 years and still the best place to check the pulse of this resurgent city. See the bold and beautiful dine at designer restaurants and cut the latest moves on the dance floor. Hanoi has it all, the ancient history, a colonial legacy and a modern outlook. There is no better place to untangle the paradox that is contemporary Vietnam.

Known by many names down the centuries, Thanh Long (City of the Soaring Dragon) is the most evocative, and let there be no doubt that this dragon is on the up once more.

## 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, characterised by narrow streets whose names change every block or two. Most visitors prefer to base themselves in this part of town.

Along the western periphery of the Old Quarter, the Hanoi Citadel was originally constructed by Emperor Gia Long. It's now a military base. Further west 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* (abbreviated on maps only) or Đ for *duong* (both meaning street).

There are decent city maps for sale at bookshops in Hanoi for around US\$1. There is also an excellent bus map (*Xe Buyt Ha Noi*;

## THE NORTH-SOUTH DIVIDE

The north-south divide lingers on. The war may be history, but prejudice is alive and well. Ask a southerner what they think of northerners and they'll say they have a 'hard face', that they are too serious and don't know how to have fun. Ask a northerner what they think of southerners and they will say they are too superficial, obsessed by business and, well, bling.

When it comes to the older generation, the South has never forgiven the North for bulldozing their war cemeteries, imposing communism and blackballing whole families. The North has never forgiven the South for siding with the Americans against their own. Luckily for Vietnam, the new generation seems to have less interest in their harrowing history and more interest in making money. Today there is only one Vietnam and its mantra is business.



5000d), an essential companion to get about on the improved bus network.

## INFORMATION

### Bookshops

**Bookworm** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 943 7226; bookworm@fpt.vn; 15A Pho Ngo Van So; ☎ 10am-7pm Tue-Sun) Hanoi's best selection of new and used English-language books.

**Love Planet** (Map p358; ☎ 828 4864; 25 Pho Hang Bac) Trade in used books for other secondhand reads.

**Thang Long Bookshop** (Map p358; ☎ 825 7043; 53-55 Pho Trang Tien) One of the biggest bookshops in town with English and French titles, plus some international press.

### Cultural Centres

**American Club** (Map p358; ☎ 824 1850; amclub@fpt.vn; 19-21 Pho Hai Ba Trung)

**British Council** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 843 6780; www.britishcouncil.org/vietnam; 40 Pho Cat Linh) Next to the Hanoi Horizon Hotel.

**Centre Culturel Française de Hanoi** (Map p358; ☎ 936 2164; alli@hn.vnn.vn; 24 Pho Trang Tien) In the L'Espace building, a modernist venue near the Opera House.

### Emergency

**Ambulance** (☎ 115)

**Fire** (☎ 114)

**Police** (☎ 113)

### Internet Access

There are countless internet cafés in Hanoi, notably along Pho Hang Bac in the Old Quarter. Rates start as low as 3000d, but overcharging isn't unheard of in some places. Most budget and midrange hotels offer free internet access as standard.

Wi-fi has come to Hanoi with a vengeance and lots of hotels, cafés and bars offer free access for laptop users.

### Internet Resources

There are several good websites to help you get the most out of Hanoi. Try the following:

**New Hanoian** (www.newhanoian.com) This is the place to get the rub on what Hanoi expats get up to in the city.

**Sticky Rice** (http://stickyrice.typepad.com) The website for foodies in Hanoi, this has the lowdown on dozens of places to dine and drink in the city.

### Medical Services

**Dental Clinic** (☎ 846 2864; thedental@netnam.vn) The tooth hurts? Deal with it here, part of the Hanoi Family Medical Practice.

**Hanoi Family Medical Practice** (☎ 24hr emergency 843 0748, 0903-401 919, 0913-234 911; www.vietnammedicalpractice.com; Van Phuc Diplomatic Compound, 298 Pho Kim Ma, Ba Dinh District) Has a team of international physicians; service is pricey, so make sure your insurance is up-to-date.

**Institute of Acupuncture** (☎ 853 3881; 49 Pho Thai Tinh) Holistic medicine? Well, very small holes anyway.

**National Hospital of Traditional Medicine** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 826 3616; 29 Pho Nguyen Binh Khiem) Check out some Vietnamese solutions to what might be Vietnamese problems.

**SOS International Clinic** (Map p358; ☎ 24hr emergency 934 0555, 934 0555; Central Bldg, 31 Pho Hai Ba Trung; initial consultations US\$55-65) Has a 24-hour clinic with international physicians speaking English, French and Japanese; house calls available for an additional fee.

**Vietnam-Korea Friendship Clinic** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 843 7231; 12 Chu Van An; initial consultations US\$5) Nonprofit clinic reputed to be the least-expensive medical facility in Hanoi; maintains a high international standard.

### Money

**ANZ Bank** (Map p358; ☎ 825 8190; 14 Pho Le Thai To) Has cash-advance facilities and a 24-hour ATM, churning out four-million dong per hit.

**Industrial & Commercial Bank** (Map p358; ☎ 825 4276; 37 Pho Hang Bo) Cashes travellers cheques, exchanges US dollars and also gives credit-card cash advances.

**Vietcombank** Pho Hang Bai (Map p358; ☎ 826 8031; 2 Pho Hang Bai); Pho Tran Quang Khai (Map p358; ☎ 826 8045; 198 Pho Tran Quang Khai) The towering headquarters is located a few blocks east of Hoan Kiem Lake and it has an ATM and offers most currency services. Several smaller branches with ATMs are in the centre, including the handy one on Pho Hang Bai, near Hoan Kiem Lake.

### Post

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

**Domestic post office** (Map p358; ☎ 825 7036; 75 Pho Dinh Tien Hoang; ☎ 7am-8.30pm)

**International post office** (Map p358; ☎ 825 2030; cnr Pho Dinh Tien Hoang & Pho Dinh Le)

International courier services in Hanoi:

**DHL** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 733 2086; 49 Pho Nguyen Thai Hoc)

**Federal Express** (☎ 824 9054; 63 Pho Yen Phu)

### Telephone

For domestic telephone calls, the post offices throughout town are as good as anywhere. Guesthouses and internet cafés are also a con-

venient option for local calls within Hanoi. For international telephone calls, the cheapest option is usually guesthouses or internet cafés as they offer cheaper internet services.

### Tourist Information

Even though this is the capital, forget anything really useful like a helpful tourism office that dishes out free information. The best source of tourism information in Hanoi is asking around at different guesthouses, travel agencies and bars, and talking to your fellow travellers.

### Travel Agencies

Hanoi has heaps of budget travel agencies. 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, and of how many other people you'll be travelling with. Seek out tour operators that stick to small groups, and use their own vehicles and guides.

New travel agencies open all the time and existing places have a tendency to change, so shop around. 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:

**ET Pumpkin** (Map p358; ☎ 926 0739; www.et-pumpkin.com; 89 Pho Ma May) Tours throughout the north, plus it operates its own private carriage on the night train to Sapa.

**Ethnic Travel** (Map p358; ☎ 926 1951; www.ethnictravel.com.vn; 35 Pho Hang Giay) A newer company offering an innovative selection of adventures that ensures you meet the real Vietnamese.

**Handspan Adventure Travel** (Map p358; ☎ 926 0581; www.handspan.com; 80 Pho Ma May) A deservedly popular company offering Halong Bay, Bai Tu Long Bay and jeep tours in the far north. The walk-in office is in the Tamarind Café.

**Ocean Tours** (Map p358; ☎ 926 1294; www.oceantoursvietnam.com; 7 Pho Dinh Liet) This operator has been earning a good name for itself by specialising in Halong Bay.

**ODC Travel** (Map p358; ☎ 824 3024; www.odctravel.com; Camellia Hotel, 13 Pho Luong Ngoc Quyen) Formerly Old Darling Café, this is one of the most established names in the business for budget tours.

For a list of nationwide operators, see p437. For more on specialist companies offering

motorbike tours of the north, see the boxed text, p369.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The biggest scams in town are inextricably intertwined. The taxi and minibus mafia at the airport shuttle unwitting tourists to the wrong hotel. Invariably, the hotel has appropriated the name of another popular property and will then attempt to appropriate as much of your money as possible. Keep your antennae up. We have heard several substantiated reports of verbal aggression and physical violence towards tourists when deciding against a hotel room or tour. Stay calm and back away slowly or things could quickly flare up.

Western women have reported being hassled by young men around town who follow them home. Women walking alone at night are generally safe in the Old Quarter but should always be aware of their surroundings. Catching a *xe om* (motorbike taxi) is a good idea if it's late and you have a long walk home.

Gay men should beware of a scam going on around Hoan Kiem Lake. Scenario: friendly stranger approaches foreigner, offering to take him out. They end up at a karaoke bar, where they're shown into a private room for a few drinks and songs. When the bill is brought in, it's often upwards of US\$100. The situation deteriorates from there, ending in extortion. Exercise caution and follow your instincts.

## SIGHTS

### Vietnam Museum of Ethnology

The wonderful **Vietnam Museum of Ethnology** (☎ 756 2193; Đ Nguyen Van Huyen; admission 20,000d; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) should not be missed. Designed with assistance from Musée de l'Homme in Paris, it features a fascinating collection of art and everyday objects gathered from Vietnam and its diverse tribal people. From the making of conical hats to the ritual of a Tay shamanic ceremony, the museum explores Vietnam's cultural diversity. Displays are labelled in Vietnamese, French and English.

The museum is in the Cau Giay District, about 7km from the city centre. The trip takes 30 minutes by bicycle. Other options include *xe om* (20,000d one way) or a metered taxi (40,000d one way). The cheapest way to get here is to take bus 14 (3500d) from Hoan Kiem Lake and get off at the junction

between Đ Hoang Quoc Viet and Đ Nguyen Van Huyen.

### Temple of Literature

Hanoi's peaceful **Van Mieu** (Temple of Literature; Map pp352-3; Pho Quoc Tu Giam; admission 5000đ; ☎ 8am-5pm) was dedicated to Confucius in 1070 by Emperor Ly Thanh Tong, and later established as a university for the education of mandarins. A well-preserved jewel of traditional Vietnamese architecture in 11th-century style with roofed gateways and low-eaved buildings, this temple is an absolute must.

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

In 1484, Emperor Le Thang Tong ordered the establishment of stelae honouring the men who had received doctorates in triennial examinations dating back to 1442. Each of the 82 stelae that stands here is set on a stone tortoise.

The Temple of Literature is 2km west of Hoan Kiem Lake.

### Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum Complex

This is the holiest of the holies for many Vietnamese. 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 contrary to his last will to be cremated, the **Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum Complex** (Map pp352-3; Pho Ngoc Ha & Pho 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 through early December. Some sceptics have suggested Madame Tussaud's has the contract these days.

All visitors must register and leave their bags, cameras and mobile phones at a reception hall. 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.

Photography is absolutely prohibited inside the building.

After exiting the mausoleum, check out the following nearby sights.

**Ho Chi Minh Museum** (Bao Tang Ho Chi Minh; Map pp352-3; admission 5000đ; ☎ 8-11am & 1.30-4.30pm Sat-Thu) Displays each have a message, such as 'peace', 'happiness' or 'freedom'. Find an English-speaking guide, as some of the symbolism is hard to interpret on your own.

**Ho Chi Minh's Stilt House** (Nha San Bac Ho; Map pp352-3; admission 5000đ; ☎ 8-11am & 2-4pm) Supposedly Ho's official residence, on and off, between 1958 and 1969, its simplicity reinforces his reputation as a man of the people.

**One Pillar Pagoda** (Chua Mot Cot; Map pp352-3) 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** (Map pp352-3; admission 5000đ; ☎ 8-11am & 2-4pm Sat-Thu) In grand contrast to Ho's stilt house, this grand building was constructed in 1906 as the palace of the governor general of Indochina.

### Other Museums

The terrific **Women's Museum** (Bao Tang Phu Nu; Map p358; 36 Pho Ly Thuong Kiet; admission 20,000đ; ☎ 8am-4pm) includes the predictable tribute to women soldiers, balanced by some wonderful exhibits from the international women's movement protesting the American War. The 4th floor displays costumes worn by ethnic-minority groups in Vietnam. Exhibits have Vietnamese, French and English explanations.

**Hoa Lo Prison Museum** (Map p358; ☎ 824 6358; 1 Pho Hoa Lo; admission 5000đ; ☎ 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. The bulk of the exhibits focus on the Vietnamese struggle for independence from France. Tools of torture on display include an ominous French guillotine used to behead Vietnamese revolutionaries; some exhibits have explanations in English and French.

One block east of the Opera House, the **History Museum** (Bao Tang Lich Su; Map pp352-3; 1 Pho Pham Ngu Lao; admission 15,000đ; ☎ 8-11.30am & 1.30-4.30pm Fri-Wed) is one of Hanoi's most stunning structures. Ernest Hebrard was among the first in Vietnam to incorporate design elements from Chinese and French styles in his architecture; this building was completed in 1932. Collections here cover the highs more than the lows of Vietnamese history.

The **Army Museum** (Bao Tang Quan Doi; Map pp352-3; Pho Dien Bien Phu; admission 20,000đ; ☎ 8-11.30am &

1.30-4.30pm Tue-Sun) displays Soviet and Chinese equipment alongside French- and US-made weapons captured during years of warfare.

### Old Quarter

This is the Asia we dreamed of from afar. Steeped in history, pulsating with life, bubbling with commerce, buzzing with motorbikes and rich in exotic scents, the Old Quarter is Hanoi's historic heart. Hawkers pound the streets, sizzling and smoking baskets hiding a cheap meal for the locals. *Pho* (noodle soup) stalls and *bia hoi* (draught beer) dens hug every corner, resonant with the sound of gossip and laughter. Modern yet medieval, there is no better way to spend some time in Hanoi than walking the streets, simply soaking up the sights, sounds and smells.

Hoan Kiem Lake is the liquid heart of the Old Quarter, a good orienting landmark. Legend has it that in the mid-15th century, heaven gave Emperor Ly Thai To (Le Loi) a magical sword that he used to drive the Chinese out of Vietnam. One day after the war, while out boating, he came upon a giant golden tortoise; 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 returned the sword to its divine owners.

**Ngoc Son Temple** (Jade Mountain Temple; Map p358; admission 2000đ; ☎ 8am-7pm), 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 of the species said to still inhabit the lake.

**Memorial House** (Map p358; 87 Pho Ma May; admission 5000đ; ☎ 9-11.30am & 2-5pm) is well worth a visit. Thoughtfully restored, this traditional Chinese-style dwelling gives you an insight into how local merchants used to live in the Old Quarter.

**Bach Ma Temple** (Map p358; cnr Pho Hang Buom & Pho Hang Giay; ☎ 8-11.30am & 2.30-5.30pm) is the oldest temple in Hanoi and resides in a shred of Chinatown in the Old Quarter.

Stepping inside **St Joseph Cathedral** (Map p358; Pho Nha Tho; ☎ 5-7am & 5-7pm) is like being transported to medieval Europe. The cathedral (inaugurated in 1886) is noteworthy for its square towers, elaborate altar and stained-glass windows. The main gate is open when mass is held.

## ACTIVITIES Massage & Spa

The government has severely restricted the number of places licensed to give massages because of the concern that naughty 'extra services' might be offered (as indeed they are at many places). At present, you can get a good legitimate massage at the **Hoa Binh Palace Hotel** (Map p358; per hr US\$8) and the **Sofitel Metropole Hotel** (Map p358; US\$32).

**QT Salon** (Map p358; ☎ 928 6116; 28 Pho Le Thai To; ☎ 10am-8pm) For a spa splurge on facials or body treatments, head to this place overlooking Hoan Kiem Lake.

**SF Salon & Spa** (Map p358; ☎ 926 2032; 16 Pho Hang Buom; ☎ 8.30am-11pm) A newer spa offering Swedish and Thai massage (US\$10), plus the full range of spa treatments, including wraps, scrubs and polishes.

## Swimming

Feel like a dip? There are several places for swimming in Hanoi and most upmarket hotels let nonguests swim or use the gym for a fee.

**Army Hotel** (Khach San Quan Doi; Map pp352-3; ☎ 825 2896; 33C Pho Pham Ngu Lao; day use US\$3.50) Big enough to do laps, the pool is open all year.

**Hanoi Water Park** (☎ 753 2757; admission 30,000-50,000đ) Open from 15 April to November, 5km from the city centre; features a variety of pools and slides.

**Thang Loi Hotel** (Cuban Hotel; ☎ 829 4211; thangloihl@hn.vnn.vn; Đ Yen Phu; 30,000đ) Near Ho Tay (West Lake), the pool is open from May to October.

## COURSES Language

**Hanoi Foreign Language College** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 826 2468; 1 Pho Pham Ngu Lao), housed in the History Museum compound, is a branch of Hanoi National University where foreigners can study Vietnamese for about US\$7 per lesson.

## Cooking

**Hoa Sua** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 824 0448; www.hoasuaschool.com; 28A Pho Ha Hoi) Offers classes for a cause to raise funds for its training programme for disadvantaged youth. Costs vary depending on the dishes cooked.

**Highway 4** (Map p358; ☎ 926 0639; 5 Pho Hang Tre) This popular restaurant-bar also has cooking classes. Prices range from US\$19 to US\$32 depending on numbers.

## SLEEPING

Most visitors makes for the Old Quarter. There is an excellent range of accommodation within 1km of Hoan Kiem Lake.



## Budget

**our pick City Gate Hotel** (Map p358; ☎ 828 0817; www.citygatehotel.com.vn; 10 Pho Thanh Ha; r US\$8-18; 🏠 📶) Hidden away down a small lane near the old East Gate, this smart minihotel offers a warm welcome. Rooms are superclean, bathrooms include a bath, there's free internet downstairs and even a lift.

**Hanoi Backpackers Hostel** (Map p358; ☎ 828 5372; www.hanoibackpackershostel.com; 48 Pho Ngo Huyen; dm US\$6, r US\$20; 🏠 📶) This Aussie-style backpackers pad offers smart and secure dorms and a couple of dedicated rooms. There's always plenty of action on the rooftop bar.

**Hotel Thien Trang** (Map p358; ☎ 826 9823; thientranghotel24@hotmail.com; 24 Pho Nha Chung; r US\$10-20;

## INFORMATION

American Club.....	1	C5
ANZ Bank.....	2	B3
Centre Culturelle Française de Hanoi.....	3	D5
Domestic Post Office.....	4	C4
ET Pumpkin.....	5	C2
Ethnic Travel.....	6	B2
Handspan Adventure Travel... (see 56)		
Industrial & Commercial Bank.....	7	B2
International Post Office... (see 4)		
Love Planet.....	8	C2
Ocean Tours.....	9	B2
ODC Travel.....	10	C2
SOS International Clinic.....	11	B5
Thang Long Bookshop.....	12	C5
UK Embassy... (see 11)		
Vietcombank.....	13	D4
Vietcombank.....	14	C5

## SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Bach Ma Temple.....	15	B1
Highway 4... (see 62)		
Hoa Lo Prison Museum ('Hanoi Hilton').....	16	A5
Memorial House.....	17	C2
Ngoc Son Temple.....	18	C3
QT Salon... (see 50)		
SF Salon & Spa.....	19	C1
St Joseph Cathedral.....	20	B4
Women's Museum.....	21	B5

## SLEEPING 🏠

Artist Hotel.....	22	C5
Church Hotel.....	23	B4
City Gate Hotel.....	24	C1
Classic Street Hotel.....	25	C2
Golden Lotus Hotel.....	26	B3
Hanoi Backpackers Hostel.....	27	A3

Hanoi Elegance Hotel.....	28	C2
Hilton Hanoi Opera.....	29	D5
Hoa Binh Palace Hotel.....	30	C2
Hotel Thien Trang.....	31	B4
Manh Dung Guesthouse.....	32	A3
Queen Hotel.....	33	C2
Sofitel Metropole Hotel.....	34	D5
Thu Giang Guesthouse.....	35	A3

## EATING 🍴

69 Bar-Restaurant.....	36	C2
Al Fresco's.....	37	C5
Baan Thai Restaurant.....	38	B1
Baguette & Chocolat.....	39	B2
Café des Arts.....	40	B3
Cha Ca La Vong.....	41	B1
Culi Café.....	42	B2
Cyclo Bar & Restaurant.....	43	A3
Dakshin.....	44	B3
Fanny.....	45	B4
Fivimart.....	46	D4
Green Tangerine.....	47	C2
Hanoi Garden.....	48	A3
Hapro Coffee Kiosk.....	49	B4
Intimex.....	50	B4
La Place.....	51	B3
La Salsa.....	52	B4
Mocca Café.....	53	B4
Pepperoni's Pizza & Café... (see 14)		
Restaurant Bobby Chinn.....	55	B5
Tamarind Café.....	56	C2
Tandoor.....	57	C2
Thuy Ta Café... (see 68)		

## DRINKING 🍷

Amazon Bar.....	58	B3
Funky Monkey.....	59	B3
Gambrinus.....	60	D4
GC Pub.....	61	B3

Highway 4.....	62	C2
Le Pub... (see 30)		
Polite Pub.....	63	B3
Quan Bia Minh.....	64	B2
Toilet Pub.....	65	C1

## ENTERTAINMENT 🎭

Centre Culturelle Française de Hanoi... (see 3)		
Cinematheque.....	66	C5
Club Opera.....	67	D5
Dinh Lang Restaurant.....	68	B3
Hanoi Opera House.....	69	D5
Jazz Club By Quyen Van Minh..	70	B2
Municipal Water Puppet Theatre.....	71	C3
New Century.....	72	A4
R&R Tavern.....	73	C3
Solace.....	74	D1
Terrace Bar.....	75	D5

## SHOPPING 🛍️

Chi Vang.....	76	D5
Dong Xuan Market.....	77	B1
Hadong Silk.....	78	B3
Hang Da Market.....	79	A3
Shoe Market.....	80	C3
Vietnamese House.....	81	B2

## TRANSPORT 🚗

Air France.....	82	B5
Airport Minibus.....	83	B4
Buffalo Tours.....	84	C2
Cathay Pacific.....	85	A5
Cuong's Motorbike Adventure..	86	C2
Free Wheelin' Tours.....	87	C2
Malaysia Airlines.....	88	D4
Singapore Airlines.....	89	C5
Thai Airways International.....	90	B5
Vietnam Airlines... (see 83)		

🏠 📶) Close enough to the trendy Nha Tho to live the dream, but cheap enough not to break the budget, the spacious rooms are great value given the location.

**our pick Artist Hotel** (Map p358; ☎ 825 3044; vietcultour@hnn.vnn.vn; 22A Pho Hai Ba Trung; s/d US\$18/21; 🏠 📶) The rooms here might be more appropriate accommodation for the struggling artiste, but they are set around a lovely leafy courtyard. Rooms include satellite TV, but who needs it when there is the Cinematheque (p363) downstairs?

A couple more old favourites include the following:

**Thu Giang Guesthouse** (Map p358; ☎ 828 5734; www.tgguesthouse.com; 5A Pho Tam Thuong; r US\$5-10; 🏠 📶) The taste of old Hanoi, a small, friendly, family-run place with cheap yet cheerful rooms.

**Manh Dung Guesthouse** (Map p358; ☎ 826 7201; tranmanhdungvn@yahoo.com; 2 Pho Tam Thuong; r US\$5-10; 🏠 📶) Opposite the Thu Giang, the family here really look after their guests.

## Midrange

**Hanoi Elegance Hotel** (Map p358; ☎ 825 3740; www.hanoi-elegancehotel.com; 8 Pho Hang Bac; r US\$18-30; 🏠 📶) The friendly staff here make it feel like a home away from home. Rooms are large and each includes a computer for personal internet access.

**Classic Street Hotel** (Map p358; ☎ 825 2421; www.classicstreet-phochotel.com; 41 Pho Hang Be; r US\$25-30; 🏠 📶) Hang Be is one of the liveliest streets in the Old Quarter and this hotel is a stylish base from which to explore it. All rooms have air-con and satellite TV.

**Army Hotel** (Khach San Quan Doi; Map pp352-3; ☎ 825 2896; armyhotel@fpt.vn; 33C Pho Nam Ngu Lao; r US\$30-40; 🏠 📶) Owned by the army, operated by the army, but it's a world away from boot camp. The uninspiring décor may be military bland, but it's the cheapest place in town with a pool.

**our pick Queen Hotel** (Map p358; ☎ 826 0860; www.azquentravel.com; 65 Pho Hang Bac; r US\$35-65; 🏠 📶) The Zen lobby sets the standard for one of

Hanoi's most atmospheric properties. The rooms include wooden furnishings, silk lamps and DVD players. Book ahead.

**our pick Golden Lotus Hotel** (Map p358; ☎ 928 8583; www.goldenlotushotel.com.vn; 32 Pho Hang Trong; r incl breakfast US\$40-50; 🍷 🍷) A rich blend of Eastern flavours and Western chic, rooms at the Golden Lotus have wooden floors, silk trim, art aplenty and broadband internet connections.

**Church Hotel** (Map p358; ☎ 928 8118; churchhotel@vnn.vn; 9 Pho Nha Tho; r US\$40-70; 🍷 🍷) Looking for a hotel with a holistic touch? Look no further, the Church has elegant rooms with decorative flair, plus the functional extras such as in-room internet.

**Hoa Binh Palace Hotel** (Map p358; ☎ 926 3646; www.hoabinhpalacehotel.com.vn; 27 Pho Hang Be; s/d US\$50/60; 🍷 🍷) An unlikely intruder in the heart of backpackersville, this smart new property brings new-world comforts to old-world Hanoi.

## Top End

**Hilton Hanoi Opera** (Map p358; ☎ 933 0500; www.hanoi.hilton.com; 1 Le Thanh Tong; r from US\$110; 🍷 🍷) Rubbing shoulders with the grand old dame that is Hanoi Opera House, this striking property is an indulgent base to discover the city.

**our pick Sofitel Metropole Hotel** (Map p358; ☎ 826 6919; sofitelhanoi@hn.vnn.vn; 15 Pho Ngo Quyen; r from US\$169; 🍷 🍷) Whispered in the same breath as Raffles in Singapore and the Oriental in Bangkok, this is one of Asia's great luxury hotels. This place has a French motif that just won't quit – close the curtains and you'll think you're in Paris.

## EATING

Hanoi is a gourmand's wonderland, full of restaurants serving regional specialties such as *cha ca* (fish braised in broth and served with noodles and fresh dill and peanuts) as well as a broad palette of international cuisine.

The real culinary treasures in Hanoi are its speciality food streets (Map pp352-3). Cam Chi, 500m northeast of Hanoi train station, is an alley crammed full of lively street stalls serving delicious budget-priced food. Đ Thuy Khue, on the south bank of West Lake, features a strip of 30-odd outdoor seafood restaurants with pleasant lakeside seating. Pho To Hien Thanh also specialises in small seafood restaurants, south of the city centre,

east of Bay Mau Lake. Pho Nghi Tam, 10km north of central Hanoi, has 1km of dog-meat restaurants. Dog lover has a whole different meaning in Hanoi!

For some of the tastiest, and certainly cheapest Vietnamese food, stroll up to some of the street stalls around town. The food is as fresh as it comes and the kitchen is right there in front of you. Try *bun cha gio* (rice vermicelli with spring rolls) on a street corner or venture into a tiny shopfront selling *chao vit* (rice porridge with duck). Check out how many locals are chowing down; the more, the merrier, as the food must be good. Overcharging is the norm rather than the exception at many places, so check the price before you order a spread.

## Vietnamese

**Pho 24** (Map p358; 1 Pho Hang Khay; meals 25,000d) Fast *pho*, Vietnamese-style, this place offers heavenly noodle soups. *Pho* is cheaper on the street, but rarely better.

**our pick 69 Bar-Restaurant** (Map p358; ☎ 926 0452; 69 Pho Ma May; meals 20,000-60,000d) Set in a beautifully restored old Vietnamese house, the predominantly Vietnamese menu includes succulent tuna steaks and a large vegetarian selection.

**our pick Quan An Ngan** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 942 8162; 15 Pho Phan Boi Chau; dishes 30,000-60,000d) Fancy that street food experience, but afraid to take the plunge? Build your courage with a meal here, the place that brings street and market food to the middle-class masses.

**Hanoi Garden** (Map p358; ☎ 824 3402; 36 Pho Hang Manh; mains from 40,000d) This restaurant is very popular with Vietnamese diners, always a positive sign, thanks to its southern Vietnamese and spicy Chinese dishes.

**Cha Ca La Vong** (Map p358; ☎ 825 3929; 14 Pho Cha Ca; cha ca 70,000d) The *cha ca* capital of the Old Quarter, this place has been family-run for five generations. The succulent fish is all that's on the menu, so it's great for indecisive types.

## Vietnamese Gourmet

**Wild Rice** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 943 8896; 6 Pho Ngo Thi Nham; mains 40,000-120,000d) Deceptively simple from outside, the elegant interior is a fine backdrop for the contemporary Vietnamese cuisine. Start with a spring roll selection, as there is a unique take on this most traditional of foods.

**Emperor** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 826 8801; 188 Pho Le Thanh Tong; mains 50,000-100,000d) Long considered one of

## DINING FOR A CAUSE

Combine food for the body with food for the soul at restaurants and cafés that run vocational training programmes for street kids. Good cause, good food, good idea.

- **KOTO on Van Mieu** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 747 0338; www.streetvoices.com.au; 59 Pho Van Mieu; mains 30,000-50,000d; 🍷) breakfast, lunch & dinner, except Mon dinner; 🍷) Recently relocated into a larger property, KOTO offers local specialities, home comforts, delicious sandwiches and cakes, real coffees, fruit shakes, plus free wi-fi. KOTO is a not-for-profit grassroots project providing opportunities for former street kids. KOTO stands for 'Know One, Teach One'.
- **Hoa Sua** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 824 0448; www.hoasuaschool.com; 28A Pho Ha Hoi; Vietnamese/French set lunch 35,000/75,000d; 🍷) 11am-10pm) A shady retreat by day, a dignified diner by night, this restaurant offers the perfect blend of East and West. Hoa Sua trains a steady stream of disadvantaged kids for culinary careers. It also offers cooking classes (p357).
- **Baguette & Chocolat** (Map p358; ☎ 923 1500; 11 Pho Cha Ca; cakes around 10,000d; 🍷) 7am-10pm) Another member of the extended Hoa Sua family, this is a bewitching bakery with divine (or devilish) cakes and pastries, depending on your calorie count.

the best Vietnamese restaurants in town, try and get a table overlooking the lively courtyard. Experience traditional music (7.30pm to 9.30pm) on Wednesday and Saturday.

**our pick Wild Lotus** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 943 9342; 55A Pho Nguyen Du; mains 50,000-150,000d) The ultimate designer restaurant, this is an art gallery as much as an eatery. The seafood is superb, including scallops and king crab.

**Brothers Café** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 733 3866; 26 Pho Nguyen Thai Hoc; lunch/dinner buffet US\$6.50/12) Located in the courtyard of a beautifully restored 250-year-old Buddhist temple, it's buffet only and the lunch is a snip.

## International

**Café des Arts** (Map p358; ☎ 828 7207; 11B Pho Bao Khanh; 🍷) lunch & dinner) Head to this casual café for couscous or cassoulet, and other French classics. Modelled on a Parisian brasserie, it lives up to its name with regular art exhibitions.

**Pepperoni's Pizza & Café** (Map p358; ☎ 928 5246; 29 Pho Ly Quoc Su; mains from 40,000d; 🍷) from lunch) A laudable lunch stop, thanks to the US\$2 all-you-can-eat weekday lunchtime pasta and salad bar.

**La Salsa** (Map p358; ☎ 828 9052; 25 Pho Nha Tho; 🍷) 10.30am-midnight) Specialising in paella, slabs of steak and tapas, this bar-restaurant has a prime position on the hip strip opposite St Joseph Cathedral.

**our pick Restaurant Bobby Chinn** (Map p358; ☎ 934 8577; www.bobbychinn.com; 1 Pho Ba Trieu; mains US\$10-20; 🍷) 10am-late) Owner-chef Bobby Chinn is part Chinese and part Egyptian, and the fusion is evident in the original menu. For

an apéritif or a coffee, move through the silk drapes to the chill-out cushions at the back where smokers can stoke up a *sheesha* (water pipe).

**our pick Green Tangerine** (Map p358; ☎ 825 1286; 48 Pho Hang Be; mains around US\$15) A beautifully restored 1928 house is the backdrop for this renowned French restaurant. Salmon steak in tamarind sauce and an impressive wine list.

Also try the following:  
**Cyclo Bar & Restaurant** (Map p358; ☎ 828 6844; 38 Pho Duong Thanh; mains around 60,000d; 🍷) lunch & dinner) Hop into one of its converted cyclos and have yourself some casual Vietnamese or French fare.  
**Al Fresco's** (Map p358; ☎ 826 7782; 23L Pho Hai Ba Trung; mains 80,000d; 🍷) lunch & dinner) Fantastic ribs, pizzas and salads, all in family-sized portions.

## Vegetarian

**Com Chay Nang Tam** (Map p358; ☎ 826 6140; 79A Pho Tran Hung Dao; meals from 30,000d) It is a mystery how this place can make simple vegetables and pulses look and taste like meat. Yes, it really is down that unlikely looking alley behind those buildings.

**our pick Tamarind Café** (Map p358; ☎ 926 0580; 80 Pho Ma May; meals US\$2-4; 🍷) 6am-midnight) Vegetarian heaven, there are some wonderful creations here blending together Asian and European elements. Impressive shakes and smoothies, plus free wi-fi.

**Dakshin** (Map p358; ☎ 928 6872; 94 Pho Hang Trong; meals 25,000-60,000d) Under the same ownership as Tandoor (p362), Dakshin is all-vegetarian and enjoys legendary status among the curry crew in Hanoi.



## Other Asian Cuisine

**Baan Thai Restaurant** (Map p358; ☎ 828 1120; 3B Pho Ca; mains 30,000-100,000d) An established Thai restaurant with a loyal following among the Thai community. There is a handy photo-illustrated menu of favourites at the door.

**Tandoor** (Map p358; ☎ 824 5359; 24 Pho Hang Be; mains 40,000-80,000d) Right in the thick of things in the Old Quarter, this is a place to spice up your life. Not surprisingly, the tandoor is tops here, plus there are good-value thalis.

## Cafés

Check out the slightly manic, fun Vietnamese coffee shops along Pho Hang Hanh, and watch the motorbikes come and go from the balconies upstairs.

**Kinh Do Café** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 825 0216; 252 Pho Hang Bong; pastries 7000d; ☕ breakfast & lunch) Where Catherine Deneuve took her morning cuppa during the filming of *Indochine* – don't mistake the flashier bakeries nearby for this unassuming place.

**Fanny** (Map p358; ☎ 828 5656; 48 Pho Le Thai To; ice cream 10,000d; ☕ lunch & dinner) Churns out the yummiest Franco-Vietnamese ice cream in the city. Sample alluring seasonal flavours such as *com* (sticky rice) or *mang cau* (custard apple).

**Moca Café** (Map p358; ☎ 825 6334; 14-16 Pho Nha Tho; espresso 20,000d; ☕ 7.30am-11pm) One of the most popular cafés in Hanoi, this the perfect spot for people-watching while you eat good-value Vietnamese, Western and Indian food.

**our pick La Place** (Map p358; ☎ 928 5859; 4 Pho Au Trieu; meals from 30,000d) Readers have been raving about this place. The menu is small but includes iced shakes with bite and delicious savoury crepes.

**Culi Café** (Map p358; ☎ 926 2241; 40 Pho Luong Ngoc Quyen; meals around 50,000d; ☕ 7.30am-11pm) Sangers, pies, burgers and more, this Australian-run café-bar is a popular stop for tasty tucker. Free wi-fi.

Other good lakeside cafés:

**Thuy Ta Café** (Map p358; ☎ 828 8148; 1 Pho Le Thai To; pastries 10,000d; ☕ 6am-11pm) Thuy Ta's shady garden is right on the northern shore of Hoan Kiem Lake.

**Hapro** (Map p358; Pho Le Thai Tho) At the opposite end of Hoan Kiem Lake, this café has a prime patio for leisurely drinks.

## Self-Catering

**Dong Xuan Market** (Map p358; P Dong Xuan; ☕ 6am-10pm) Swing by for fresh fruits and veggies and freshly baked baguettes (see p364).

If you want some comfort food from home, stop by the following supermarkets for imported treats and road-trip munchies:

**Fivimart** (Map p358; 210 Tran Quang Khai) One of the best-stocked supermarkets in the centre of town.

**Intimex** (Map p358; Pho Le Thai Tho) On the western side of Hoan Kiem Lake, tucked down a driveway behind the Clinique beauty shop.

## DRINKING

There is something for everyone in Hanoi, with sophisticated bars, congenial pubs and grungy clubs. Don't forget to warm up with some quality time drinking *bia hoi*, the world's cheapest beer. Busy Bao Khanh has a cool choice of bars and is a good starting or finishing point for a bar crawl.

**our pick Le Pub** (Map p358; ☎ 926 2104; 25 Pho Hang Be) The name says it all: the attitude of a British pub with the atmosphere of a Continental bar. It's a friendly place to drink and draws both expats and tourists.

**Quan Bia Minh** (Map p358; ☎ 934 5233; 7A Pho Dinh Liet) Bottled beer doesn't come much cheaper than this, a buzzing backpacker favourite with a blissful balcony terrace overlooking Dinh Liet.

**our pick Highway 4** (Map p358; ☎ 926 0639; 5 Pho Hang Tre) Discover the mystical, medicinal, not to mention intoxicating qualities of Vietnamese *xeo* (rice wine) – take it straight, fruity or 'five times a night'. It's a rallying point for members of Hanoi's infamous Minsk Club.

**Gambrinus** (Map p358; ☎ 935 1114; 198 Pho Tran Quang Khai) Czech beer lovers will be rubbing their hands in glee. It's a vast, impressive *brauhaus* (brewhouse) with shiny vats of freshly brewed Gambrinus beer.

**Toilet Pub** (Map p358; ☎ 928 7338; 10 Pho Bao Khanh) Spirits are displayed in urinals and toilets are everywhere here. Very trendy, the drinks are expensive (50,000d a beer).

**Amazon Bar** (Map p358; ☎ 928 7338; 10 Pho Bao Khanh) Reinforcing Bao Khanh's reputation as a drinkers' den, Amazon has nightly promotions that keep the crowds coming.

**Funky Monkey** (Map p358; ☎ 928 6113; 15B Pho Hang Hanh) An extension of the Bao Khanh beat, the action regularly spills over onto the dance floor at this hip bar-club.

Other places in the Bao Khanh strip include the following:

**Polite Pub** (Map p358; ☎ 825 0959; 5 Pho Bao Khanh) There is always a crowd here for big sporting events and drinks are affordable.

**GC Pub** (Map p358; ☎ 825 0499; 5 Pho Bao Khanh) GC has swung right back into favour with Hanoi residents.

## ENTERTAINMENT Cinemas

**Megastar Cineplex** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 974 3333; 6th fl, Vincom Tower, 191 Ba Trieu) The international multiplex arrives in Hanoi. This is a serious cinema, complete with the latest international films.

**Cinematheque** (Map p358; 22A Hai Ba Trung; ☎ 936 2648) The Cinematheque offers an adventurous choice of films.

**Centre Culturel Française de Hanoi** (Map p358; ☎ 936 2164; 24 Trang Tien) Set in the sublime L'Espace building near the Opera House, it offers a regular programme of French flicks.

## Classical Music

**Hanoi Opera House** (Nha Hat Lon; Map p358; ☎ 825 4312; Pho Trang Tien) This magnificent 900-seat venue, built in 1911, hosts occasional classical music performances and the atmosphere is incredible.

## Clubbing

The shelf life of Hanoi's discos is short, so ask around about what's hot or not during your visit.

**Apocalypse Now** (Map pp352-3; Pho Pham Ngoc Thach, Dong Da District; ☕ 8pm-late) Although it's now some way from the centre, Apo, as locals call it, continues to pack in the pretty people. There's no cover but the drinks will cost you.

**New Century Nightclub** (Map p358; ☎ 928 5285; 10 Pho Trang Thi) New places come and go, but the New Century remains the place to see and be seen for young Vietnamese. Dress sharp, as the beautiful people are out in force.

**Solace** (Map p358; ☎ 932 3244; Red River, Phuc Tan District) Floating in the Red River, many a drinker

## GAY & LESBIAN HANOI

There's a lively gay scene in Hanoi, with cruising areas such as the cafés on Pho Bao Khanh and around Hoan Kiem Lake. Gay boys should take care not to fall victim to a very organised extortion scam going on around the lake (see p355).

Funky Monkey (opposite) is gay-friendly and has wild Friday and Saturday nights. There's a healthy gay scene at Apocalypse Now (above), but watch for hustlers.

has found their night floats by here as well. It doesn't really warm up until after midnight and bobs along until daybreak.

## Live Music

**Jazz Club By Quyen Van Minh** (Cau Lac Bo; Map p358; ☎ 825 7655; 31-33 Pho Luong Van Can; ☕ performances 9-11.30pm) *The* place in Hanoi to catch live jazz. Owner Minh teaches saxophone at the Hanoi Conservatory and moonlights here.

**R&R Tavern** (Map p358; ☎ 934 4109; 47 Pho Lo Su) A reliable little venue for live music, the Vietnamese band here know all the counterculture '60s classics.

**Seventeen Saloon** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 942 6822; 98 Tran Hung Dao) Yee-haa! Welcome to the wild west. Cowboy bars are curiously popular in Asia and this place has live music every night.

**Terrace Bar** (Press Club; Map p358; ☎ 934 0888; 59A Pho Ly Thai To) A popular place to be on Friday, when half of Hanoi's high-flyers seem to descend here for the happy hour (6pm) and live music.

## Traditional Music

Some of the best places to catch live traditional music are upmarket Vietnamese restaurants in central Hanoi, such as **Club Opera** (Map p358; ☎ 824 6950; 59 Pho Ly Thai To), **Dinh Lang Restaurant** (Map p358; ☎ 828 6290; 1 Pho Le Thai Tho) and **Nam Phuong** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 928 5085; 16 Pho Bao Khanh). They might be aimed at tourists, but close your eyes and the music is hauntingly beautiful.

## Water Puppetry

**Municipal Water Puppet Theatre** (Roi Nuoc Thang Long; Map p358; ☎ 825 5450; www.thanglongwaterpuppet.org; 57B Pho Dinh Tien Hoang; admission 20,000-40,000d, still-camera fee 10,000d, video fee 50,000d; ☕ performances at 4pm, 5.15pm, 6.30pm, 8pm & 9.15pm) This fascinating art form originated in northern Vietnam, and Hanoi is the best place to catch a show. The higher admission buys better seats and a cassette of the music; you must pay extra fees to take photos and video.

## SHOPPING

The Old Quarter is brimming with temptation; price tags signal set prices. As you wander around you'll find clothes, cosmetics, fake sunglasses, luxury food, T-shirts, musical instruments, plumbing supplies, herbal medicines, jewellery, religious offerings, spices, woven mats and much, much more. And even

if you don't need new shoes, take a walk along Pho Hang Dau to gawk at the wondrous shoe market (Map p358). Larger Western sizes are rare, but for petite feet, bargains abound.

## Handicrafts

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

North and northwest of Hoan Kiem Lake around Pho Hang Gai, Pho To Tich, Pho Hang Khai and Pho Cau Go you'll be tripping over shops offering Vietnamese handicrafts (lacquerware, mother-of-pearl inlay, ceramics), as well as watercolours, oil paintings, prints and assorted antiques – real and fake.

Local artists display their paintings at private art galleries, the highest concentration of which is on Pho Trang Tien, between Hoan Kiem Lake and the Opera House (Map p358). The galleries are worth a browse even if you're not buying.

**Craft Link** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 843 7710; 39-45 Pho Van Mieu) Promote fair trade at Craft Link, across from the Temple of Literature. High-quality tribal handicrafts with profits funding community development initiatives.

**Vietnamese House** (Map p358; ☎ 826 2455; 92 Pho Hang Bac) This small, attractive shop deals in a hodge-podge of old and new treasures.

## Markets

**Dong Xuan Market** (Map p358; Pho Dong Xuan; ☎ 6am-10pm) With hundreds of stalls, the three-storey market, 600m north of Hoan Kiem Lake, is a tourist attraction in its own right.

**Hom Market** (Map pp352-3; Pho Hue) On the north-eastern corner of Pho Hue and Pho Tran Xuan Soan, this is a good general-purpose market with lots of imported food items.

**Hang Da Market** (Map p358; Yen Thai) West of Hoan Kiem Lake, Hang Da is relatively small, but good for imported foods, wine, beer and flowers. The 2nd floor is good for fabric and ready-made clothing.

## Silk Products & Clothing

Pho Hang Gai, about 100m northwest of Hoan Kiem Lake, and its continuation, Pho 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.

Other fashionable streets include the blocks around St Joseph Cathedral (Map p358): Pho Nha Tho, Pho Ly Quoc Su and Pho Hang Trong. Designer boutiques here sell silk clothing, purses, homewares and antiques.

Check out the following places:

**Hadong Silk** (Map p358; ☎ 928 5056; 102 Pho Hang Gai) Hillary Clinton shopped here during her visit with Bill in 2000.

**Ipa-Nima** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 933 4000; www.ipa-nima.com; 34 Pho Han Thuyen) This boutique promises 'smart humour, bright colours, subtle satire'.

**Chi Vang** (Map p358; ☎ 824 0933; 17 Pho Trang Tien) Exquisite lace creations, including clothing and homeware.

## 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 anywhere. For more on international flights in and out of Hanoi, see p433.

**Vietnam Airlines** (Map p358; ☎ 943 9660; www.vietnamair.com.vn; 25 Pho Trang Thi; ☎ 7am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 8-11.30am & 1.30-5pm Sat & Sun & holidays) links Hanoi to destinations throughout Vietnam.

**Pacific Airlines** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 974 5555; 193 Đ Ba Trieu) is rebranding as a budget carrier and currently has flights to Danang and HCMC.

### Bus

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

**Gia Lam bus station** (☎ 827 1569; Đ Ngoc Lam) is the place for buses to points northeast of Hanoi, including Halong Bay (40,000d, 3½ hours), Hai Phong (35,000d, two hours), and Lang Son (50,000d, three hours) and Lao Cai (53,000d, nine hours), both near the Chinese border. The bus station is 2km northeast of the centre – cross the Red River to get there. Cyclos can't cross the bridge, so take a taxi or motorbike. More convenient is the Loung Yen bus station in the southeast of town, serving the same places, plus Cao Bang (80,000d, eight hours) and Ha Giang (76,000d, seven hours).

**Kim Ma bus station** (Map pp352-3; cnr Pho Nguyen Thai Hoc & Pho Giang Vo) is for buses to the northwest regions, including Dien Bien Phu (120,000d, 16 hours).

**Son La bus station** (Km 8, Pho Nguyen Trai) is for buses to the northwest, including Son La

(63,000d, 12 to 14 hours) and Dien Bien Phu (120,000d, 16 hours). It's southwest of Hanoi, near Hanoi University.

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

**My Dinh bus station** (☎ 768 5549; Đ Pham Hung) is another option in the west of town, which serves a real range of destinations, including Halong City, Lang Son, Cao Bang, Ha Giang and Dien Bien Phu.

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

## Car & Motorcycle

To hire a car or minibus with driver, contact a travel agency or travellers café. The main roads in the northeast are generally OK, but in parts of the northwest they're pretty rough and require a 4WD.

A six-day trip in a 4WD can cost US\$250 to US\$500 (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.

For reliable Minsk rental, make for **Cuong's Motorbike Adventure** (Map p358; ☎ 926 1534; 1 Pho Luong Ngoc Quyen). Cuong rents out bikes for US\$5 a day, including spares and a repair manual.

## Train

The main **Hanoi train station** (Ga Hang Co; Map pp352-3; ☎ 825 3949; 120 Đ Le Duan; ☎ ticket office 7.30-11.30am & 1.30-7.30pm) is at the western end of Pho 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. To the right of the main entrance of the train station is a separate ticket office for northbound trains to Lao Cai (for Sapa) and China (counter 13).

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 pp352-3; ☎ 825 2628; Pho Tran Qui Cap) is just two blocks behind the main station on Đ Le Duan. Northbound trains leave from here.

**Gia Lam station** (Nguyen Van Cu, Gia Lam District) has some northbound (Yen Bai, Lao Cai, Lang Son) and eastbound (Hai Phong) trains departing from here, on the eastern side of the Red River.

To make things complicated, some of the same destinations served by Gia Lam can also be reached from **Long Bien station** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 826 8280).

Check with **Vietnam Rail** (www.vr.com.vn) for current timetables and prices.

## GETTING AROUND

### Bicycle

Pedalling around the city is a great way to cover lots of ground and it immerses you in Vietnamese daily life. Many of the hotels and cafés in the city rent bicycles for about US\$1 per day.

### Bus

There are now more than 60 public bus lines serving routes in and around Hanoi. The buses are clean and comfortable and the fare is just 3500d. Pick up a copy of the *Xe Buyt Hanoi* or *Hanoi* bus map (5000d) from recommended bookshops (p354).

### Cyclo

Cyclos in Hanoi are wider than the Ho Chi Minh City breed, making them big enough for two to share the fare. Around the city centre, most cyclo rides should cost around 5000d to 10,000d. Longer rides – from the Old Quarter to the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum Complex, for example – would cost double or more again. One common cyclo-driver's ploy when carrying two passengers is to agree on a price and then double it on arrival, saying the price was for one person, not two.

The cyclo drivers in Hanoi are even less likely to speak English than in HCMC, so take a map of the city with you. That said, many are wising up and now have a command of basic English.

### Motorcycle

Walk 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 advisable for longer distances.

For travellers well versed in the ways of Asian cities, Hanoi is a lot of fun to explore by motorbike. Most guesthouses and hotels can arrange motorbikes for around US\$5 a

day. However, for the uninitiated, it is *not* the easiest place to learn.

### Taxi

There are several companies in Hanoi offering metered taxi services. Flag fall is around 10,000d to 15,000d, which takes you 1km or 2km; every kilometre thereafter costs about 8000d. Bear in mind that there are lots of dodgy operators with high-speed meters. Try and use the more reliable companies, including:

**Airport Taxi** (☎ 873 3333)

**Hanoi Taxi** (☎ 853 5353)

**Mai Linh Taxi** (☎ 822 2666)

**Taxi CP** (☎ 824 1999)

## AROUND HANOI

### PERFUME PAGODA

North Vietnam's very own Marble Mountains, the **Perfume Pagoda** (Chua Huong; admission incl return boat trip 35,000d) is a striking complex of pagodas and Buddhist shrines built into the karst cliffs of Huong Tich Mountain (Mountain of the Fragrant Traces). This is a domestic drawcard and it is an interesting experience just to see the Vietnamese tourists at play.

If you want to do the highly recommended scenic river trip, travel from Hanoi by 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. The good news is that there is now a cable car to the summit, costing 30,000d one way. A smart combination is to use the cable car to go up and then walk down.

Hanoi's travellers cafés (see p355) offer day tours to the pagoda from US\$10, inclusive of transport, guide and lunch (drinks excluded). If you're going with a small-group tour, expect to spend around US\$15 to US\$20. You can also rent a motorbike to get here on your own.

### 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.

**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 13km southeast of Hanoi.

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

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

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

The locals in **Le Mat** raise snakes for the upmarket restaurants in Hanoi, and for producing medicinal spirits. Fresh snake cuisine and snake elixir is available at this village; for around 100,000d or so you can try a set meal of snake meat prepared 10 different ways. Le Mat is 7km northeast of central Hanoi.

### NINH BINH

☎ 030 / pop 53,000

Ninh Binh has evolved into a popular travel hub in recent years. Its sudden transformation from sleepy backwater to tourist magnet has little to do with Ninh Binh itself, but rather with its proximity to Tam Coc (9km; right), Hoa Lu (12km; p368) and Cuc Phuong National Park (45km; p368). Travel agencies and traveller cafés in Hanoi (p355) offer inexpensive day trips to the region that take in most of the sights.

The surrounding countryside is gorgeous, confirming all the postcard fantasies that Vietnam has to offer – water buffalos, golden-green rice paddies, majestic limestone formations and more.

### Information

Internet cafés are spread around town, with a cluster on Đ Luong Van Tuy, west of Đ Tran Hung Dao.

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

**Main post office** (Đ Tran Hung Dao)

### Sleeping & Eating

Folks who run guesthouses in Ninh Binh have a reputation for honest, friendly service. All the places listed can arrange tours and hire motorbikes and bicycles.

**Xuan Hoa Hotel** (☎ 880 970; 31D Pho Minh Khai; dm US\$3, r US\$4-12; ☺) The kind of guesthouse you wish existed in every town, the charming owners and staff make this a firm favourite.

**Thanhthuy's Guest House & New Hotel** (☎ 871 811; tuc@hn.vnn.vn; 128 Đ Le Hong Phong; r guesthouse US\$5-8, hotel US\$12; ☺) The central courtyard is a great place to meet other travellers over a meal or a beer. The New Hotel is set back from the street, while the guesthouse is basic and clean.

**Thuy Anh Hotel** (☎ 871 602; www.thuyanhhotel.com; 55A Đ Truong Han Sieu; US\$7-40; ☺) The smartest operation in town, the old wing offers spotless rooms, while the slick new wing, complete with lift, pulls in the tour groups. In addition to a large restaurant, there's a rooftop bar.

### Getting There & Away

Ninh Binh is 93km southwest of Hanoi. Regular public buses leave almost hourly from the Giap Bat bus terminal in Hanoi (28,000d, 2½ hours). The bus station in Ninh Binh is across the Van River from the post office.

Ninh Binh is also a hub on the north-south open-tour bus route (see p436). Ninh Binh is a scheduled stop for some *Reunification Express* trains travelling between Hanoi and HCMC, but travelling by road is faster.

### AROUND NINH BINH

#### Tam Coc

Known as 'Halong Bay on the Rice Paddies' for its huge rock formations jutting out of rice paddies, **Tam Coc** (admission 30,000d, boat 40,000d) boasts breathtaking scenery.

### CROSSING INTO LAOS: THE ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

All of the border crossings between North and Central Vietnam and Laos have a degree of difficulty. If you've got the time, you're much better to head south and cross at Lao Bao.

#### Nam Xoi to Na Maew

This is the most remote border in a mountainous area 175km northwest of Thanh Hoa city and 70km east of Xam Neua (Laos). Try to find a bus or take a motorbike from Thanh Hoa. However, we've heard reports of drivers demanding 300,000d for the journey from Thanh Hoa – more than six times the going rate. All in all, expect a 15-hour ordeal if you take this route. For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see p308.

#### Nam Can to Nong Haet

This crossing links Vinh with Phonsavan. Catch a morning bus from Vinh to Muang Xen (29,000d, seven hours) and grab a motorbike for the spectacular 25km uphill run to the border (50,000d). Local transport on to Nong Haet is about 5000 kip if anything shows up. From Nong Haet, there are several buses a day on to Phonsavan (20,000 kip, four hours). On Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday it's possible to catch a bus at 6am from Vinh to Phonsavan (US\$12, 11 hours, bookings Mr Lam ☎ 038-383 5782). For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see p305.

#### Cau Treo to Nam Phao

This border is 96km west of Vinh and about 30km east of Lak Sao in Laos. There are still lots of horror stories from travellers on this route. Catch a bus from Vinh to Tay Son (formerly Trung Tam; 10,000d). Chronic overcharging and being kicked off in the middle of nowhere are common. From Tay Son, it's 26km to the border. Take a minibus or hire a motorbike to cover the last stretch; both cost 50,000d.

The Vietnamese border guards have been known to close the country for lunch – any time from 11.30am to 1.30pm. From the Vietnamese side it's a short walk to the Laos border. Once in Laos, jumbo (three-wheeled taxis) and *sawngthaew* (pick-up trucks) to Lak Sao leave the border when full or cost about US\$10 to charter. For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see p318.

#### Cha Lo to Na Phao

Bus services link Dong Hoi and Tha Khaek (190,000d, 11 hours, twice weekly, bookings Mr Thang ☎ 828 939). The buses depart Dong Hoi at 6am on Monday and Friday, returning from Tha Khaek at 7am on Wednesday and Sunday. For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see p321.

The way to see Tam Coc is by rowboat on the Ngo Dong River. The boats row through karst caves on this beautiful trip, and take about three hours, including stops. Tickets are sold at the small booking office by the docks. One boat seats two passengers.

Tam Coc is 9km southwest of Ninh Binh. By car or motorbike, follow National Hwy 1 south and turn west at the Tam Coc turn-off, marked by a pair of tall stone pillars.

## 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.

There is no public transport to Hoa Lu, which is 12km north of Ninh Binh. Most travellers get here by bicycle, motorbike or car.

## CUC PHUONG NATIONAL PARK

☎ 030 / elev 150–648m

This **national park** (☎ 848 006; adult/child 40,000/20,000d) is one of Vietnam's most important nature preserves. Ho Chi Minh personally took time off from the war in 1963 to dedicate the area as a national park, Vietnam's first. The hills are laced with many grottoes, and the climate is subtropical at the park's lower elevations.

Excellent trekking opportunities abound in the park, including a trek (8km return) 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 mandatory for longer treks.

During the rainy 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 are hectic.

One marvellous organisation based in the park is the **Endangered Primate Rescue Center** (☎ 848 002; www.primaterecuecenter.org; admission free; ☎ 9-11am & 1-4pm). 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. Seeing them in full swing is quite a sight.

## Sleeping & Eating

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

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

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

## Getting There & Away

Cuc Phuong National Park is 45km from Ninh Binh. There is no public transport on this route, but it's a beautiful drive by car or motorbike. Ask for directions or pick up basic area maps at the hotels in Ninh Binh.

# NORTHERN VIETNAM

Welcome to the roof of Vietnam, where the mountains of the Tonkin Alps soar skyward, delivering some of the most spectacular scenery in the country. Forbidding and unforgiving terrain for lowlanders, the mountains have long provided a haven for an eclectic mix of hill tribes. Dressed in elaborate costumes, living as they have for generations, extending the hand of friendship to strangers, an encounter with the Montagnards is both a humbling and heart-warming experience.

Bizarre but beautiful, Halong Bay is geology gone wild, with hundreds and thousands of limestone pinnacles protruding from the waters. North of Halong Bay is the less-visited Bai Tu Long Bay, where nature's spectacular show continues all the way to the Chinese border. To the south of Halong Bay is Cat Ba Island, a 'lost world' landscape with hiking, biking or just hanging around the order of the day.

## HALONG BAY

Majestic and mysterious, inspiring and imperious, words alone cannot do justice to the natural wonder that is Halong Bay, where 3000 or more incredible islands rise from the emerald waters of the Gulf of Tonkin. Halong Bay is pure art, a priceless collection of unfinished sculptures hewn from the hand of nature. A Unesco World Heritage Site, the vegetation-covered islands are dotted with innumerable grottoes created by the wind and the waves. Besides the breathtaking vistas, visitors to Halong Bay come to explore the countless caves.

*Ha long* means 'where the dragon descends into the sea'. The legend says that the islands of Halong Bay were created by a great dragon that lived in the mountains. As it ran towards the coast, its flailing tail gouged out valleys and crevasses; as it plunged into the sea, the areas dug up by its tail became filled with water, leaving only pockets of high land visible.

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

Halong City is the gateway to Halong Bay but not the ideal introduction to this incredible site. Developers have not been kind to the city and most visitors sensibly opt for tours that include sleeping on a boat in the bay. In

short, Halong Bay is the attraction, Halong City is not.

All visitors must purchase a 30,000d entry ticket that covers all the sights in the bay. Tickets are available at the tourist boat dock in Bai Chay, but it is usually included for those on a tour. See the boxed text, p370 for more on organised trips out of Hanoi.

It's hard to do it any cheaper on your own, but if you prefer travelling independently it's simple enough to do so. Take a bus to Halong City from Hanoi (40,000d, 3½ hours) and book a passage on a Cat Ba tourist boat (130,000d including entry ticket, six hours). Chill out on Cat Ba before taking a hydrofoil to Haiphong and a bus to Hanoi. Alternatively, run the route in reverse and try and hook up with a tour boat in Cat Ba.

**Halong Bay Management Department** (☎ 033-846 592; http://halong.org.vn/; 166 Đ Le Thanh Tong), about 1.5km west of Halong City, regulates pricing for independent cruises on the bay. There is no need to rent a whole boat for yourself as there are plenty of other travellers, Vietnamese and foreign, to share with. The official prices are ridiculously reasonable at 30,000/40,000d for a four-/six-hour cruise.

If time is an issue, **Northern Airport Flight Service Company** (☎ 04-827 4409; fax 04-827 2780; 173 Pho Truong Chinh, Hanoi) offers a helicopter charter service from Hanoi to Halong Bay on Saturday from 8am, costing US\$175 per person.

## EXPLORING THE FAR NORTH

Motorcycling in Vietnam's wild northern territory is unforgettable. If you're not confident riding a motorbike yourself, it's possible to hire someone to drive you. Four-wheel drive trips in the north are also highly recommended, though the mobility of travelling on two wheels is unrivalled.

One of the most popular routes is the 'Northwest Loop', which follows Hwy 6 through the heart of the Tonkin Alps. There are many variations, but the standard route takes in a homestay in the **White Thai villages** around Mai Chau (p375), a stop in **Son La**, a visit to the historic battlefield of **Dien Bien Phu**, before finishing up at Sapa, the queen of the mountains. However, some companies also specialise in taking bikers right off the trail into the far north of **Ha Giang** or the beautiful northeast province of **Cao Bang** and the nearby lakes of Ba Be National Park (p374).

While it's possible to organise a motorcycling trip on your own, hiring a guide will certainly make the trip run smoothly and get you places you'd never discover from a cursory scan of a map.

The 125cc Russian-made Minsk is the best overall cycle for touring the north. The daily hire cost for a Minsk starts from US\$5. Foreign guides charge considerably more than local Vietnamese guides, but are worth every dong. Check out these outfits in Hanoi:

**Explore Indochina** (☎ 0913-524 658; www.exploreindochina.com) Run by Digby, Dan and Thuan, these guys have biked all over the country and can take you to the parts others cannot reach.

**Free Wheelin' Tours** (☎ 04-747 0545; www.freewheelin-tours.com) Run by Fredo, who speaks French, English and Vietnamese, this company has its own homestays in the northeast, plus 4WD trips.

### CRUISING THE KARSTS: TOURS TO HALONG BAY

Don't even think about a day trip to Halong, as the real beauty of the bay is best experienced from the deck of a junk over a gin and tonic, as the sun sinks into the horizon. Halong Bay is hard to explore properly without the services of an experienced tour company.

Budget trips sold out of Hanoi are very reasonably priced, starting from as little as US\$15 per person for a dodgy day trip and rising to as much as US\$100 for two nights on the bay with a bit of kayaking. Remember, you get what you pay for and the cheaper the tour, the more basic the boat, the meals and the service. Drinks are extra and are generally more expensive than on the mainland.

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

For a list of reliable operators offering two- and three-day tours of the bay, check out the travel agents listed in the Hanoi section (p355).

#### Boat Operators

There are hundreds of boats plying the waters these days. The following is just a selection of the most interesting. For more on the government-run boats that are available for charter, see the Halong Bay section (p369).

**Emeraude Classic Cruise** (☎ 04-934 0888; www.emeraude-cruises.com; s/d US\$245/290) A replica paddle steamer that cruises the waters of Halong Bay daily.

**Halong Ginger** (☎ 04-984 2807; www.cruisehalong.com; d from US\$373) A beautiful junk that is well finished throughout.

**Huong Hai Junks** (☎ 033-845 042; www.halongtravels.com; s/d US\$125/220) The leading boat company in Halong Bay, Huong Hai has a fleet of traditional junks.

**Tropical Sails** (☎ 04-923 2559; www.tropical-sails.com; s/d from US\$127/196) The only junks with working sails, allowing the boats to get up a head of steam on a windy day.

## HALONG CITY

☎ 033 / pop 149,900

If Halong Bay is heaven, Halong City can be hell. Overdeveloped but underloved, the hideous high-rise hotels come in every shade of pastel and the beaches are definitely not the region's best. This is sin city, with 'massage' promoted at every hotel.

### Orientation & Information

Halong is a tale of two cities. The western side is called Bai Chay, where all the tourist life-support systems are found. Across the bay on the eastern side is Hon Gai, a much more Vietnamese entity.

**Post office** (☎ 840 000; ☎ Halong; ☎ 7.30am-5pm) Internet access available.

**Vietcombank** (☎ Halong) Exchange services and an ATM.

### Sleeping & Eating

The heaviest concentration of hotels is in town, in the aptly named 'hotel alley' of Đ Vuon Dao. This is where you'll find more than 50 minihotels, most of them almost identical

(a guidebook author's nightmare). Expect to pay something between US\$8 and US\$12 for a double room with private bathroom and air-con.

**Hoang Lan Hotel** (☎ 846 504; 17 Đ Vuon Dao; s US\$8-12, d US\$10-15; ☎) Right in the thick of the action on hotel alley, this family place has a friendly feel.

**Halong 1 Hotel** (☎ 846 320; fax 846 318; ☎ Halong; r US\$30-55; ☎) Set in a rambling old colonial-era building, splash the extra for the space of a suite. Catherine Deneuve stayed here during the filming of *Indochine*.

**Halong Plaza Hotel** (☎ 845 810; www.halongplaza.com; 8 Đ Halong; r from US\$140; ☎) A huge hotel where the 200 rooms are businesslike, but are packing four stars. Discounts are usually available.

Unsurprisingly, seafood is a serious feature of most menus. There are a couple of seafood strips in the centre of town, just south of the post office along Đ Halong. Aim for the places with fresh seafood in tanks out the front or gravitate to where the locals are dining.

### Getting There & Away

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

Most buses to northeastern destinations start from Mien Tay bus station before passing through **Hon Gai bus station** (Đ Le Loi). Buses for Mong Cai (42,000d, five hours) and Cai Rong (20,000d, 1½ hours) for Van Don Island (Dao Cai Bau) depart frequently during daylight hours.

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

The best way to get to Cat Ba Island is to hop onto the regular tourist boats (one way 100,000d, six hours) from Bai Chay tourist-boat dock, including a leisurely cruise through the most beautiful parts of the bay.

## CAT BA ISLAND

☎ 031 / pop 7000

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

Much of Cat Ba Island was declared a national park in 1986 in order to protect the island's diverse ecosystems and wildlife, including the endangered golden-headed langur, the world's rarest primate. There are beautiful beaches, numerous lakes, waterfalls and

grottoes in the spectacular limestone hills, the highest of which rises 331m above sea level.

The island's human population is concentrated in the southern part of the island, around the town of Cat Ba. A sleepy fishing village just a decade ago, it is now the Costa del Cat Ba. Since being 'discovered' by Hanoi residents, Cat Ba has turned into a highly popular summer getaway, filling up on weekends and holidays, when prices fluctuate accordingly.

### Information

There are no banks in Cat Ba town, but there are a few jewellery stores north of the harbour that exchange dollars. There are now several internet cafés in Cat Ba. Prices are higher than the mainland, at 15,000d an hour or more.

**Main post office** (Đ 1-4) A one-stop-shop for postal needs and telephone calls.

**Tourism Information & Development Centre** (☎ 688 215; ☎ 1-4) Located opposite the boat pier, the staff here can bring you up to speed on transport options around Cat Ba.

### Sights & Activities

Home to various species of monkey, wild boar and hedgehog, **Cat Ba National Park** (☎ 216 350; admission 15,000d, guide fee per day US\$5; ☎ dawn-dusk) has plenty of trekking opportunities. Even though a guide is not mandatory, it's definitely 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 trail-head and a boat to return, all of which can be arranged in Cat Ba town. If you're planning on doing this trek, equip yourself with proper trekking shoes, rainwear, a generous supply of water, plus some food.

### OFF THE BEATEN TRACK: BAI TU LONG BAY

There's more to northeastern Vietnam than Halong Bay. The sinking limestone plateau, which gave birth to the bay's spectacular islands, continues for some 100km to the Chinese border. The area immediately northeast of Halong Bay is part of **Bai Tu Long National Park** (☎ 033-793 365).

Bai Tu Long Bay is every bit as beautiful as its famous neighbour. Indeed, in some ways it's more beautiful, since it has scarcely seen any tourist development. This is good news and bad news. The bay is unpolluted and undeveloped, but there's little tourism infrastructure. Highlights include amazing karst formations, hidden beaches and a few surf breaks off **Quan Lan Island**.

Charter boats can be arranged to Bai Tu Long Bay from Halong Bay (five hours); boats range from 100,000d to 250,000d per hour depending on size and amenities. A cheaper alternative is to travel overland to Cai Rong and visit the remote outlying islands by boat from there.

To reach the national park headquarters at Trung Trang, take a minibus (15,000d, 30 minutes, 17km) from Cat Ba town. All restaurants and hotels should be able to sell you minibus tickets. Another option is to hire a motorbike (one way 30,000d).

**Hospital Cave** (admission 30,000d) is the intriguing site that was used as a secret hospital during the American War – another amazing example of Vietnamese engineering born of necessity.

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 have been taken over by big resorts. Cat Co 2 is the most attractive beach, also offering simple accommodation and camping.

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

## Sleeping

Most of the island's 40 or so hotels are concentrated along the bayfront in Cat Ba town. Room rates fluctuate greatly between

high-season summer months and the slower winter months. The following are low season prices.

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

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

**Sun and Sea Hotel** (☎ 888 315; sunseahotel@mail.ru; D Nui Ngoc; r US\$12-15; 🏠) This popular little hotel is a friendly place to rest a weary head. All rooms include satellite TV, fridge and hot water.

**Sunrise Resort** (☎ 887 366; catba-sunriseresort@vnn.vn; Cat Co 3; s/d from US\$79/89; 🏠 📺 📺) Occupying a private beach, this is the most sophisticated place on Cat Ba. Rooms are spacious and smart and facilities include a swimming pool and spa.

The small village of Hien Hao offers authentic homestays in local houses. For more

details contact **Mr Tuan** (☎ 888 737). Hien Hao is about 20km from Cat Ba town.

## Eating & Drinking

For a memorable dining experience in Cat Ba, try the floating seafood restaurants in Cat Ba or Ben Beo harbours, where you choose your own seafood from pens underneath the restaurant. A rowing boat there and back should cost about 30,000d with waiting time; a feast for two should cost around 100,000d. Overcharging is a possibility, so work out meal prices beforehand.

**Hoang Y** (mains 15,000-50,000d; 🍷 lunch & dinner) For a variety of delicious seafood and vegetarian dishes, check out Hoang Y, at the western end of town. This place is always busy.

**Green Mango** (☎ 887 151; D 1-4; mains 50,000-100,000d) The restaurant of choice in Cat Ba, the chef here learnt his tricks at Bobby Chinn's in Hanoi. The braised duck is superb but save some space for the delightful desserts. The interior is all drapes and candles, so customers often linger for cocktails.

As the night wears on, travellers gravitate to the **Flightless Bird Café** (☎ 888 517; 🍷 from 6.30pm). Little more than a hole in the wall, this small, welcoming place is a good option for those with their drinking boots on.

Other popular spots:

**Noble House** (☎ 888 363) As well as a popular restaurant downstairs, this spot has a great 2nd-floor bar.

**Blue Note** (D Nui Ngoc) The after-hours haunt in town, this is karaoke with kudos, including indie anthems from Oasis and Radiohead.

## Getting There & Around

Cat Ba Island is 133km from Hanoi, 45km east of Haiphong, and 20km south of Halong City. Hydrofoils link Cat Ba and Haiphong (45 minutes). There are three departures a day in the high summer season and just one a day the rest of the year. **Transtour** (☎ 888 314) runs the *Mekong Express* (100,000d, 2.45pm departure), which is the safest and most comfortable option.

Chartered private boats run trips between Cat Ba and Halong Bay (100,000d, five hours); make inquiries at the pier at either end.

Rented bicycles are a good way to explore the island. Most hotels can provide a cheap Chinese bicycle.

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 parking fee to ensure the bike isn't stolen or vandalised.

## HAIPHONG

☎ 031 / pop 1.67 million

Haiphong is a graceful city that has the flavour of Hanoi a decade ago. Bicycles are as common as motorbikes and the verdant tree-lined boulevards conceal some classic colonial-era structures. Stroll around the centre and soak up the atmosphere.

Despite being one of the country's most important seaports and industrial centres, and officially Vietnam's third-largest city, Haiphong today seems a somnolent place with clean streets and an understated air of prosperity.

## Information

There are a couple of internet cafés on Pho Le Dai Hanh near Pho Dien Bien Phu.

**Main post office** (3 Pho Nguyen Tri Phuong) Easy to spot, standing on a corner in dignified yellow.

**Vietcombank** (☎ 842 658; 11 Pho Hoang Dieu; 🏠 closed Sat) Cashes travellers cheques, does cash advances and has an ATM.

**Vietnam-Czech Friendship Hospital** (Benh Vien Viet-Tiep; ☎ 700 463; Pho Nha Thuong) In emergencies, seek help here; otherwise, head back to Hanoi.

## Sights & Activities

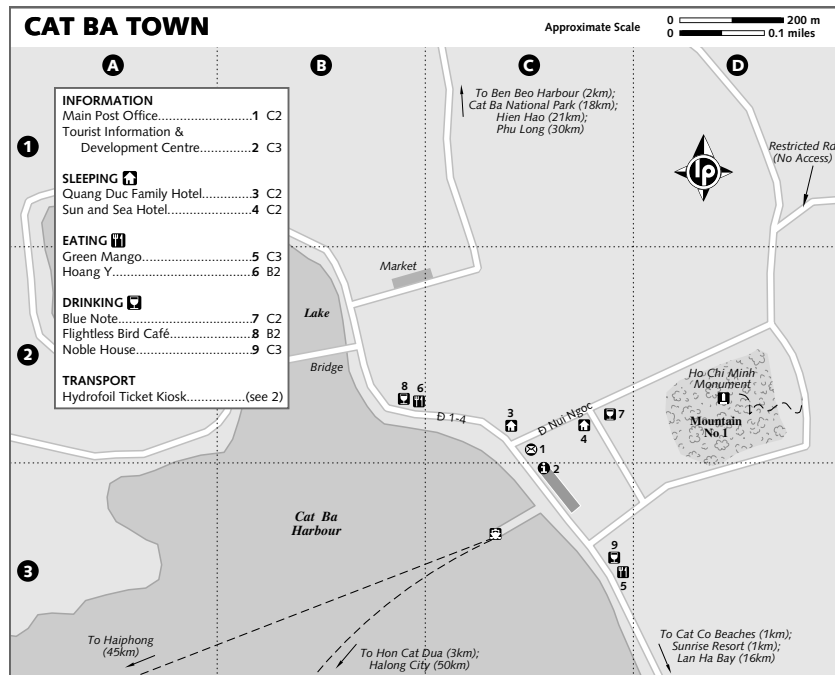
Though there isn't a whole lot to see in Haiphong, its slow-paced appeal is enhanced by the French-colonial architecture lining the streets.

**Du Hang Pagoda** (Chua Du Hang; 121 Pho Chua Hang; 🏠 7-11am & 1.30-5.50pm), founded three centuries ago and rebuilt several times since, has architectural elements that look Khmer. Equally enjoyable is wandering along the narrow alley to get here, Pho Chua Hang, which is buzzing with Haiphong street life.

## Sleeping

**Hotel du Commerce** (☎ 384 2706; fax 384 2560; 62 Pho Dien Bien Phu; r US\$10-18; 🏠) Located in a venerable old building from the French period, this remains a characterful place with high ceilings and gigantic bathrooms. Think atmosphere above amenities.

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



**Harbour View Hotel** (☎ 382 7827; www.harbourviewvietnam.com; 4 Pho Tran Phu; s/d US\$70/80; 🍽️ 📺 🚰) The leading address in Haiphong, rooms are smart and stylish, while the facilities include a swimming pool, gym and spa. Discounts are often available.

### Eating & Drinking

Pho 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 Pho Quang Trung with its many cafés and *bia hoi*.

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

**BKK** (☎ 382 1018; 22 Pho Minh Khai; mains 30,000-60,000d) The card says 'trendy Thai restaurant' and they're damn right. All the Thai favourites, plus a serious amount of seafood.

**La Villa Blanche** (Pho Tran Hung Dao) For a one-size-fits-all night stop, head to this old French mansion which has a shady garden housing several bargain *bia hoi* shops.

### Getting There & Away

**Vietnam Airlines** (☎ 9381 0890; www.vietnamair.com.vn; 30 Pho Hoang Van Thu) has flights to HCMC and Danang.

Haiphong is 103km from Hanoi; minibuses for Hanoi (35,000d, two hours) leave from the **Tam Bac bus station** (P Tam Bac), 4km from the waterfront. Buses heading south leave from **Niem Nghia bus station** (Đ Tran Nguyen Han). **Lac Long**

**bus station** (Pho Cu Chinh Lan) has buses to Halong City (25,000d, 1½ hours), plus Hanoi, convenient for those connecting with the Cat Ba hydrofoil.

A local express train heads to Hanoi (24,000d, two hours) from the **Haiphong train station** (Đ Luong Khanh Thien & Đ Pham Ngu Lao) at 6.10pm daily. From Hanoi, trains leave **Tran Quy Cap station** (B station; Map pp352-3; ☎ 04-825 2628; Pho Tran Qui Cap) at 5.50am; slower 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** (☎ 894 014; fax 894 026; person/car 10,000/20,000d) is set amid towering peaks. The surrounding area is home to members of the Tay minority, who live in stilt homes. This region is surrounded by steep mountains up to 1554m high. 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 and other insects.

Ba Be (Three Bays) is in fact three linked lakes, with a total length of 8km and a width of about 400m. The Nam 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.

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

### Sleeping & Eating

Not far from the park headquarters are two accommodation options.

**Guesthouse** (r 165,000d) Rooms in this newer guesthouse are fine, if a bit pricey. There are also comfy air-con two-room cottages (r 275,000d). There's a reasonable restaurant (dishes 10,000d to 30,000d) – you'll need to place your order an hour or so before you want to eat.

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

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

### Getting There & Around

Ba Be National Park is in Bac Kan Province not far from the borders of Cao Bang and Tuyen Quang Provinces. The lakes are 240km from Hanoi, 61km from Bac Kan and 18km from Cho Ra.

Most visitors to the national park get there by chartered vehicle from Hanoi. The one-way journey from Hanoi takes about six hours; most travellers allow three days and two nights for the trip.

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

### MAI CHAU

☎ 018 / pop 47,500

Mai Chau is one of the closest places to Hanoi where you can visit a hill-tribe village. The area is a beautiful collection of farms and stilt homes spread out over a large valley. Most of

the people here are ethnic White Thai, the majority of whom dress the same as Vietnamese. Traditional weaving is practised here and the beautiful results can be purchased direct from the weaver. Guides can be hired for around US\$5 for a 7km to 8km walk.

### Sleeping

There are two accommodation centres in Mai Chau: the village of Lac and the village of Pom Coong. Pom Coong is slightly more rural and less developed than Lac, so opt for it if you have the choice.

**Thai stilt houses** (per person 60,000d) Set just a few hundred metres back from the 'main' roadside, both villages offer a rustic experience in these traditional houses. 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 sometimes have fairly large gaps between the walls and the occasional opportunist guide or driver has taken the chance to observe proceedings. Use your towel to good effect.

### Getting There & Around

Mai Chau is 135km from 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 *xe om* from there to Mai Chau proper will cost about 15,000d.

Theoretically, foreigners must pay a 5000d entry fee to Mai Chau; there's a toll booth at the state-run guesthouse on the 'main' road. More often than not, there is nobody there to collect the fee.

### LAO CAI

☎ 020 / pop 100,000

One of the gateways to China, Lao Cai lies at the end of the train line on the Chinese border. The border crossing slammed shut during the 1979 war between China and Vietnam and remained closed until 1993. Lao Cai is now a major hub for travellers journeying between Hanoi, Sapa (38km away) and Kunming.

There is a post office next door to the train station, plus an internet café close by. **BIDV bank** (Đ Thuy Hoa) offers currency exchange and an ATM.

### CROSSING INTO CHINA: THE NORTHEAST BORDERS

There are two borders in northeast Vietnam where foreigners can cross into China.

#### Huu Nghi Quan to Youyi Guan

This is the most popular border crossing. The border post itself is at Huu Nghi Quan (Friendship Gate), 3km north of Dong Dang. 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 a 20-minute drive from the border to Pingxiang by bus or a shared taxi. Pingxiang is connected by train and bus to Nanning.

Trains from Hanoi to Běijīng via the Friendship Pass depart the capital on Tuesday and Friday at 6.30pm, a 48-hour journey that involves a three-hour stop for border formalities.

#### Mong Cai to Dongxing

Mong Cai is on the Chinese border in the extreme northeastern corner of Vietnam, but is rarely used by foreigners. See p371 for details of hydrofoils that run here.

## CROSSING INTO CHINA: LAO CAI TO HÉKÒU

The Lao Cai–Hékòu crossing (open 7am to 5pm) is popular with travellers making their way between northern Vietnam and Yünnán. China is separated from Vietnam by a bridge over the Red River that pedestrians pay a 10,000d toll to cross. The border is about 3km from Lao Cai train station; the short motorbike journey costs 10,000d.

The train service running directly from Hanoi to Künmíng in China has been suspended indefinitely since 2002. However, it's possible to take a train to Lao Cai, cross the border into China, and catch a midmorning or overnight sleeper bus (US\$11, 12 hours) from the Chinese border town of Hékòu to Künmíng. For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see p449.

There is no need to stay the night with Sapa just up the mountain, but **Gia Nga Guest House** (☎ 830 459; Pho Moi) offers showers (20,000d with towel and soap) to freshen up after the night train. **Nhat Linh Restaurant** (☎ 835 346; Pho Nguyen Hué) is a reliable little travellers café outside Lao Cai station with friendly staff and an extensive menu.

## Getting There & Around

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.

Lao Cai is 340km from Hanoi (85,000d, nine hours), but most travellers sensibly prefer the train.

When it comes to life on the rails, tickets to Hanoi (10 hours) start at 79,000d for a hard seat (bad choice!) to 223,000d for an air-conditioned soft sleeper, and rise by about 10% at weekends. There are also several companies operating special private carriages with comfortable sleepers, including the affordable **ET Pumpkin** (www.et-pumpkin.com) and the more expensive **Victoria Express** (www.victoriahotels-asia.com). There are two night trains and one day train in either direction.

The border is 3km from Lao Cai train station; a *xe om* will cost about 10,000d.

## SAPA

☎ 020 / pop 36,200

The Queen of the Mountains, Sapa sits regally overlooking a beautiful valley, lofty mountains towering over the town on all sides. The premier destination of northwestern Vietnam, Sapa is a French hill station that was built in 1922. The whole area is spectacular and frequently shrouded in mist. Hill-tribe people from surrounding villages don their most colourful costumes and head to the market on Saturday.

Don't forget your winter woollies – Sapa is known for its cold, foggy winters (down to 0°C). The dry season for Sapa is approximately January to the end of June – afternoon rain showers in the mountains are frequent.

## Information

Internet access is available in countless hotels and travel offices around town, usually at 5000d per hour.

**BIDV** (☎ 872 569; Đ Ngu Chi Son; ☎ 7-11.30am & 1.30-4.30pm) Offers an ATM, plus travellers cheques and cash can be exchanged.

**Post office** (Đ Ham Rong) Post things from Hanoi, as it is much faster.

## 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 can take several days. Treks can be arranged at guesthouses and travel agencies around town, including **Mountain View Hotel** (☎ 871 334; 54A Pho Cau May) and **Auberge Hotel** (☎ 871 243; Pho Cau May). **Topas Travel** (☎ 871 331; www.topas-adventure-vietnam.com; 24 Muong Hoa) is a reliable ecotourism operator which employs many guides from the local area. **Handspan Travel** (☎ /fax 872 110; www.handspan.com; 8 Pho Cau May) is a popular place to arrange treks with homestays and mountain biking in the area.

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

## Sleeping

**Lotus Hotel** (☎ 871 308; 5 Đ Muong Hoa; r US\$4-10) Occupying a strategic corner in the centre of town, this place is enticingly good value. Staff are friendly, the rooms are pretty spacious and all have hot water, TV and a fireplace.

**our pick Mountain View Hotel** (☎ 871 334; fax 871 690; r US\$8-18) Location, location, location. This hotel has it, with 180-degree views of the valley below. Invest in the US\$18 for doubly dramatic views from corner rooms.

**Cat Cat View Hotel** (☎ 871 946; www.catcatview.com; Đ Phan Si; r US\$10-30; ☎) D deservedly popular for its friendly and honest service, this is a sprawling complex draped over the hillside. It's worth the climb, as the views are breathtaking.

**Auberge Hotel** (☎ 871 243; auberge@fpt.vn; 7 Đ Muong Hoa; r US\$15-28; ☎) A Sapa institution, this place has been around as long as the mist over the valley. Wind your way up through the bonsai garden for clear views. Upper-floor rooms have fireplaces and fine furnishings.

**Topas Eco Lodge** (☎ 871 331; www.topas-eco-lodge.com; bungalows US\$25) Out on its own, with a striking setting overlooking the voluptuous valley below. Solar power, wastewater management and minority staff – let's hope this is the first of many such ventures.

**Victoria Sapa Hotel** (☎ 871 522; www.victoriahotels-asia.com; r from US\$165; ☎) This is a delightful mountain lodge with stylish service

and smart rooms. The hotel has sweeping views from the restaurant, two bars, a heated indoor swimming pool, a fitness centre and a tennis court.

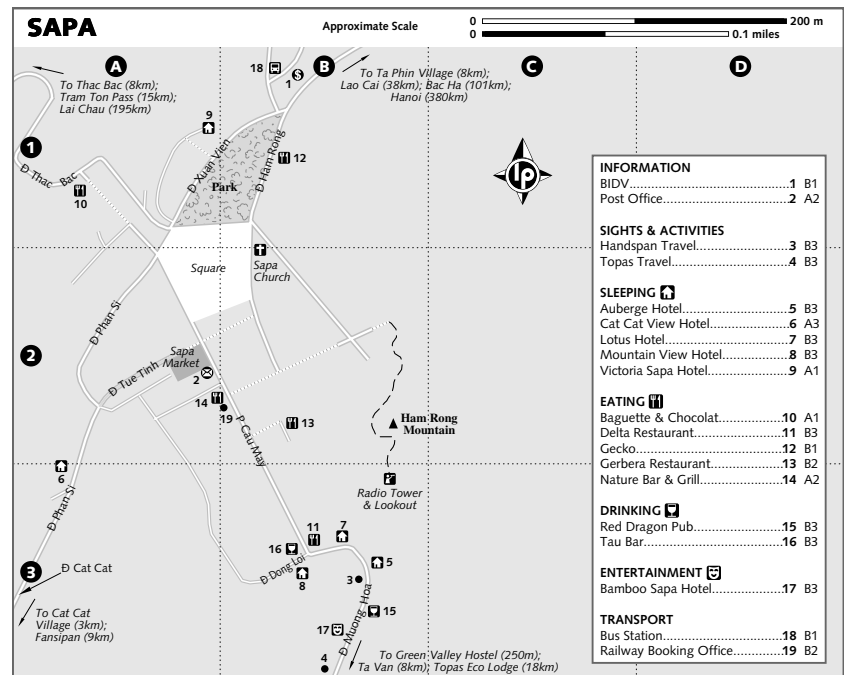
## Eating

**our pick Baguette & Chocolat** (Đ Thac Bac; cakes 6000-15,000d) On a cold and misty morning, this place is a welcome retreat for a warm cocoa and delectable cakes. The menu includes some Asian greatest hits or comfort food from home, with pizzas, salads and baguettes.

**Nature Bar & Grill** (Pho Cau May; meals 15,000-50,000d) The extensive menu includes some authentic Vietnamese cuisine and a few Western exiles for good measure. Speaking of measures, they also shake up a good cocktail.

**Gerbera Restaurant** (☎ 871 064; Pho Cau May; mains from 20,000d) This restaurant has an unending menu of Vietnamese favourites. From the upstairs panorama room, there are some great views over the mountains beyond.

**Gecko** (☎ 871 504; Đ Ham Rong; mains around US\$5) The original French restaurant in Sapa – not counting the 1920s of course – this is authentically housed in an old colonial-era property.





**Delta Restaurant** (☎ 871 799; Pho Cau May; mains US\$5) The taste of Italy in Sapa. Delta turns out the most authentic pizzas in town. Pastas and home-cooking complete the picture.

### Drinking

**Red Dragon Pub** (☎ 872 085; 23 Pho Muong Hoa) It may look like a quaint tearoom downstairs, but upstairs is a British-style pub that fills up most evenings.

**Tau Bar** (☎ 871 322; 42 Pho Cau May) As the night warms up, the only place to be is Tau Bar. Claiming to be 'slightly lounge', Tau brings a different kind of cool to the mountains of the north.

### Entertainment

**Bamboo Sapa Hotel** (☎ 871 075; Pho Muong Hoa) Take in free traditional hill-tribe music-and-dance shows here on Friday and Saturday from 8.30pm.

### Getting There & Away

Sapa's proximity to the border region makes it a possible first or last stop for travellers crossing between Vietnam and China.

The gateway to Sapa is Lao Cai, 38km away on the Chinese border. Minibuses (25,000d, 1½ hours) make the trip regularly until mid-afternoon. Locals are also willing to take you down the mountain by motorbike for US\$5.

A minibus to Bac Ha (110km) for the Sunday market is around US\$10 per person; departure from Sapa is at 6am and from Bac Ha at 1pm. It's cheaper to go to Bac Ha by public minibus, changing buses in Lao Cai.

Travel agencies and cafés in Hanoi offer weekend trips to Sapa, but DIY is straightforward and offers maximum flexibility.

There is an official **Railway Booking Office** (☎ 871 480; ☎ 7.30-11am & 1.30-4pm) situated on Pho Cau May in Sapa which charges a 7000d service fee for seats, 10,000d for a sleeper. For more information on trains to Hanoi, see Lao Cai (p376).

### Getting Around

Downtown Sapa can be walked in 20 minutes. If you've got a spare hour, follow the steps up to the radio tower; from here, the valley views are breathtaking.

For excursions further out, you can hire a self-drive motorbike from US\$5 per day, or take one with a driver from US\$8. 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

The Sunday market in Bac Ha is the place to stock up on water buffalo, pigs and horses. Once you're all set, you can also browse for bottles of local firewater (made from rice, cassava or corn), or handicrafts made by some of the 10 Montagnard groups living near here – Flower Hmong, Dzao, Giay (Nhang), Han (Hoa), Xa Fang, Lachi, Nung, Phula, Thai and Thulao.

Bac Ha is a less crowded alternative to Sapa, and arriving midweek makes for a relaxing visit. Around 700m above sea level, the highlands around Bac Ha are somewhat warmer than Sapa.

### Sights & Activities

Beyond the colourful Sunday Bac Ha market in town, lie 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 is held 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 is open on Sunday.

### Sleeping & Eating

Room rates tend to increase on weekends, when tourists arrive for a piece of the Sunday-market action.

**Dai Thanh Hotel** (☎ 880 448; r 60,000d) If you're counting the dong as much as the dollars, this hotel continues to be one of the cheapest in town. Rooms include hot water, TV and fan – a real steal.

**Minh Quan Hotel** (☎ 880 222; r 120,000-150,000d) Here for the market? So why not enjoy a bird's-eye view of the Sunday action from this comfortable hotel? Rooms include smart bathrooms and some have immense views of the mountains beyond.

**Sao Mai Hotel** (☎ /fax 880 288; r US\$10-25) This place offers the beds of choice for most tour groups. Life is much better in the newer wooden houses. The restaurant-bar here is

one of the leading watering holes in town, plus it holds dance shows for visiting groups.

**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 & Around

Buses make the 63km trip from Lao Cai to Bac Ha (28,000d, two hours) at 6.30am and 1pm daily. Buses from Bac Ha to Lao Cai leave between 5.30am and 1pm.

*Xe om* make the Lao Cai–Bac Ha run for US\$10, and Sapa–Bac Ha (110km) for around US\$15.

Sunday minibus tours from Sapa to Bac Ha cost around US\$10, including transport, guide and trekking to a minority village. On the way back to Sapa you can hop off in Lao Cai and catch the night train to Hanoi.

## CENTRAL COAST

Home to historical sites, fantastic food and the country's most iconic beach, Central Vietnam deserves to rate as a top priority for travellers. Tourists who want to avoid lengthy bus journeys will find Danang's airport the perfect gateway to a fascinating set of the country's most famous destinations, including three must-see Unesco World Heritage Sites – history-seeped imperial Hué, architecturally impressive Hoi An and the sacred ruins of ancient My Son.

### HUÉ

☎ 054 / pop 286,400

Hué is the intellectual, cultural and spiritual heart of Vietnam. 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 bank of the Song Huong (Perfume River).

For rest and recreation, plus a little refreshment, the south bank is where it's at.

### Information

#### INTERNET ACCESS

There are lots of internet cafés on the tourist strips of Đ Hung Vuong and Đ Le Loi.

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Hué Central Hospital** (Benh Vien Trung Uong Hué; ☎ 822 325; 16 Đ Le Loi)

### MONEY

**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. There's a 24-hour ATM by the Hotel Saigon Morin.

### POST

**Branch post office** (Đ Le Loi) Near the river. **Main post office** (14 Đ Ly Thuong Kiet) Has postal and telephone services.

### TRAVEL AGENCIES

**Café on Thu Wheels** (☎ 832 241; minhthuhue@yahoo.com; 10/2 Đ Nguyen Tri Phuong) Immensely popular cycling and motorbiking tours around Hué with a large dose of laughs.

**Mandarin Café** (☎ 821 281; mandarin@dng.vnn.vn; 3 Đ Hung Vuong) Watched over by the eagle eyes of photographer Mr Cu, this place is great for information, transport and tours.

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

### Sights & Activities

#### CITADEL

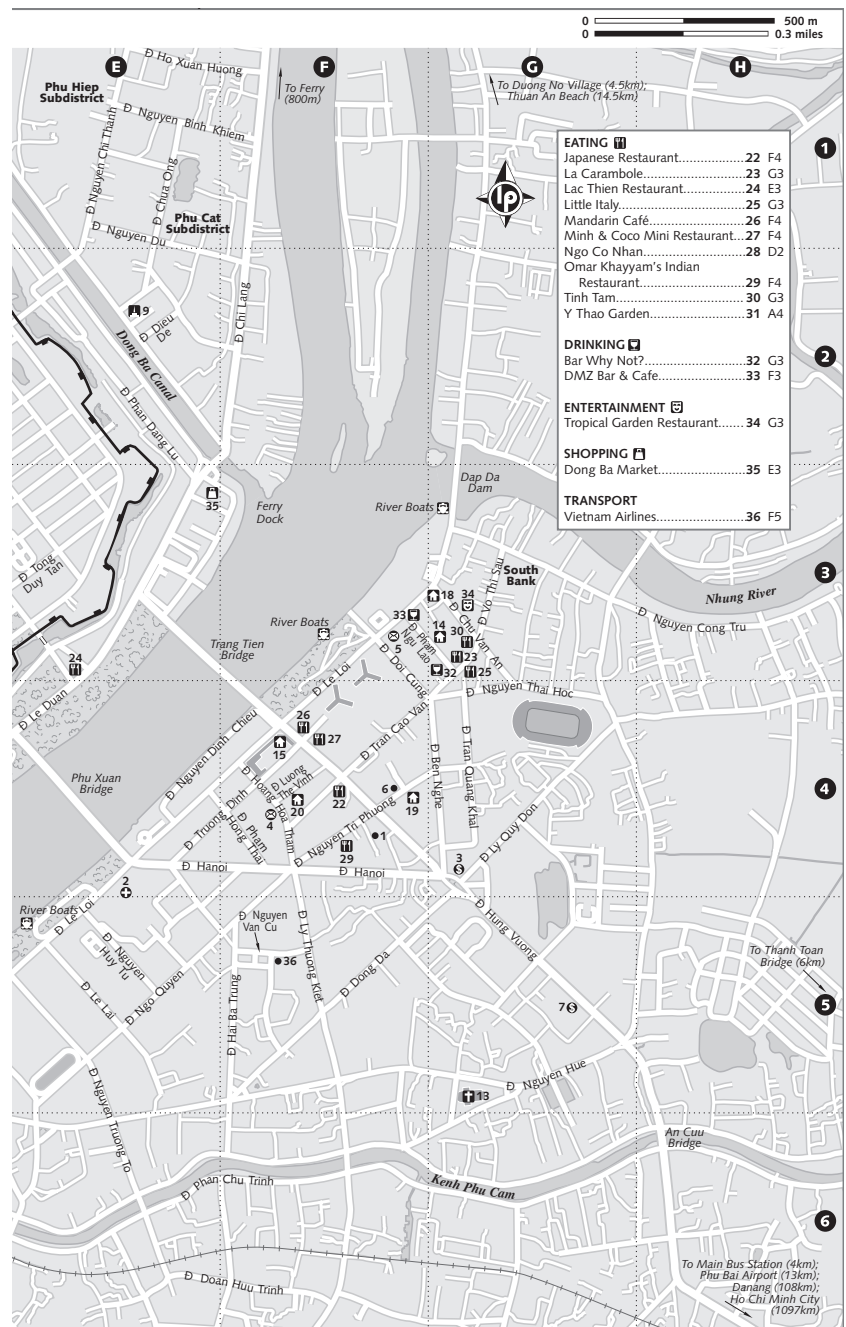
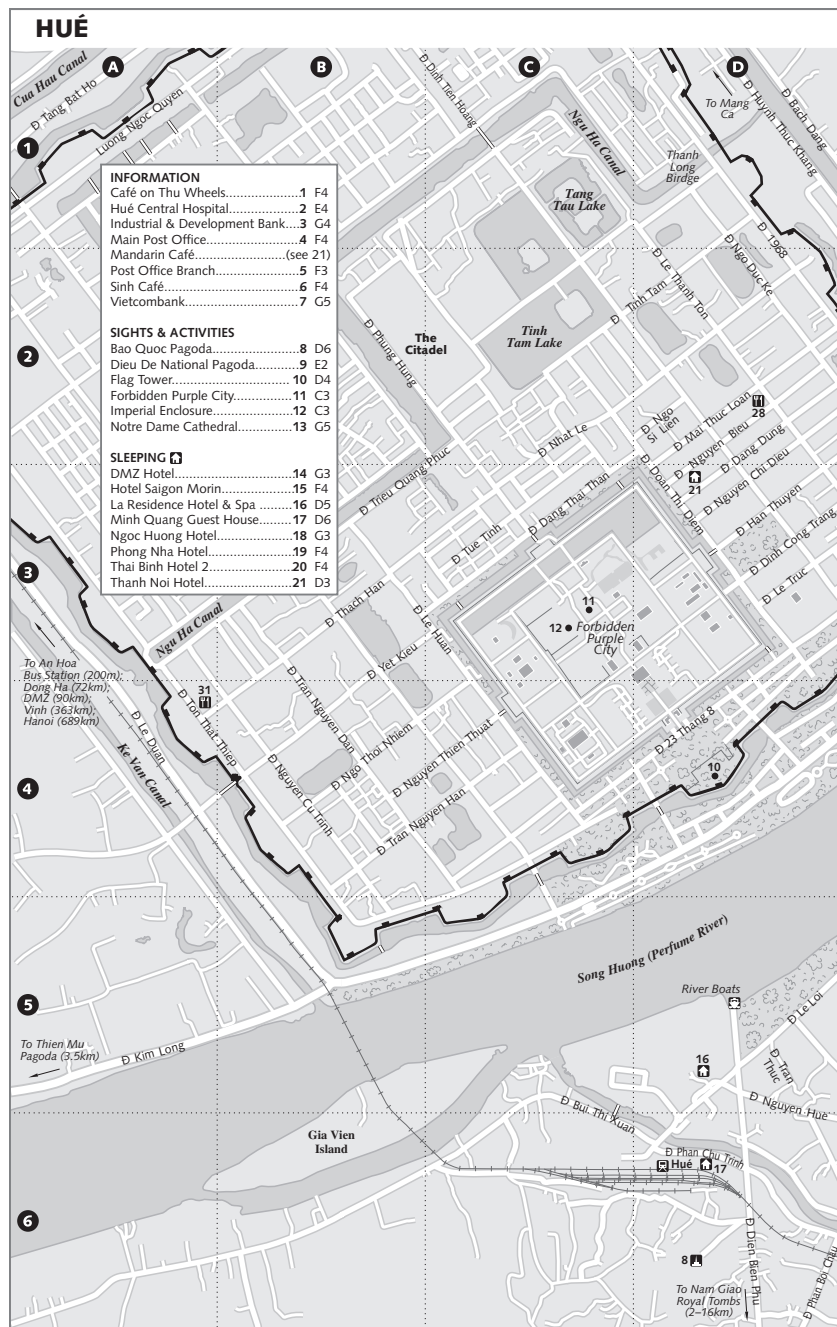
One of Vietnam's decaying treasures is Hué's Citadel (Kinh Thanh), the erstwhile imperial city on the northern bank of the Song Huong. Though it was heavily bombed by the Americans, and much of it now used for agriculture, its scope and beauty still impress.

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 royal crowns on the banks of the Song Huong, the **Tombs of the Nguyen Dynasty** (☎ 8-11.30am & 1.30-5.30pm) are 2km to 16km south of



Hué. If you visit only one tomb, 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.

The **Tomb of Dong Khanh** (admission 22,000d), built in 1889, is the smallest of the Royal Tombs. It's beautiful and doesn't get many visitors; find it about 500m behind the Tomb of Tu Duc.

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

The elaborate, hilltop **Tomb of Khai Dinh** (admission 55,000d), who ruled from 1916 to 1925, stands out from the other tombs for its unique structure. The buildings and statues reflect a distinct mix of Vietnamese and European features.

#### PLACES OF WORSHIP

**Thien Mu Pagoda** (Đ Le Duan; ☎ 7.30-11.30am & 1.30-5.30pm) is one of the most iconic structures in Vietnam. Founded in 1601, Thien Mu is on the banks of the Song Huong, 4km southwest of the Citadel.

**Bao Quoc Pagoda** (Ham Long Hill, Phuong Duc District; ☎ 7.30-11.30am & 1.30-4.30pm) was founded in 1670 by Giac Phong, a Chinese Buddhist monk. To get here, head south from Đ Le Loi on Đ Dien Bien Phu and turn right immediately after crossing the railway tracks.

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

**Dieu De National Pagoda** (102 Đ Bach Dang; ☎ 7.30-11.30am & 1.30-4.30pm) was built under Emperor Thieu Tri (r 1841-47). It is one of Hué's three 'national pagodas', once under the direct patronage of the emperor.

#### THUAN AN BEACH

**Thuan An Beach** (Bai Tam Thuan An), 15km northeast of Hué, is on a lovely lagoon near the mouth of the Song Huong.

#### Tours

If you have a specific agenda in mind, motorbike guides from local travellers cafés can do customised day tours of the Royal

Tombs, the Citadel, the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) and the surrounding countryside. But the best way to visit the tombs is on a river cruise.

#### SONG HUONG (PERFUME RIVER) CRUISES

A boat ride down the scenic Song Huong is a must in Hué. Tours costing about US\$2 per person typically take in several tombs and Thien Mu Pagoda, and include lunch. Admission to the individual tombs is not included, but you can pick and choose which tombs to visit.

Many restaurants and hotels catering to foreigners arrange these boat tours, and the journey usually lasts from 8am to 2pm daily.

#### DEMILITARISED ZONE (DMZ) TOURS

From 1954 until 1975, the Ben Hai River served as the dividing line between South Vietnam and North Vietnam. The DMZ, 90km west of Hué, consisted of an area 5km on either side of the line.

Many of the 'sights' around the DMZ are places where historical events happened, and may not be worthwhile unless you're really into war history. To make sense of it all, and to avoid areas where there is still unexploded ordnance, you should take a guide. Group day tours from Hué cost around US\$15.

Significant sites:

**Khe Sanh Combat Base** (admission 25,000d) The site of the American War's most famous siege, now on a barren plateau 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. Row after row of white tombstones stretch across the hillsides, about 105km from Hué.

**Vinh Moc Tunnels** (admission & guided tour 20,000d) Similar to the tunnels at Cu Chi (p418), but less adulterated for tourists; 110km from Hué.

#### BACH MA NATIONAL PARK

A French-era hill station known for its cool weather, **Bach Ma National Park** (☎ 054-871 330; www.bachma.vnn.vn; admission 10,500d) is 45km southeast of Hué. There are abundant trekking opportunities through beautiful forests to cascading waterfalls. There is a guesthouse and camp site here for those who want to stay. It is not possible to drive up by motorbike, so arrange a vehicle in Hué or charter a jeep at the park office.

#### Festivals

**Festival Hué** is a biennial cultural festival, to be next held in June 2008. It lasts about a week and features traditional dance and music from Vietnam and other participating countries. Hotels are jammed during this time, so plan ahead.

#### Sleeping

**Phong Nha Hotel** (☎ 827 729; phongnha\_hotel@yahoo.com; 10/10 Đ Nguyen Tri Phuong; r US\$6-15; ☎ ☎) The facilities in this spotless minihotel differ from room to room, but what don't change are the good reports we hear about the friendly staff.

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

**Minh Quang Guest House** (☎ 824 152; 16 Đ Phan Chu Trinh; r US\$10; ☎) Located near the train station, a long way from the tourist traps, this friendly family offers new, clean rooms with TVs, fridges and bathtubs.

**Thai Binh Hotel 2** (☎ 827 561; www.thaibinhhotel-hue.com; 2 Đ Luong The Vinh; r US\$12-15; ☎ ☎) Excellent value for money, the attractive bedrooms have mother-of-pearl inlaid furniture, while the bathrooms have tubs.

**Thanh Noi Hotel** (Imperial Garden, ☎ 522 478; thanhnoi@dng.vnn.vn; 57 Đ Dang Dung; r US\$18-45; ☎ ☎) Located in a quiet street in the heart of the Citadel, near the Imperial Enclosure, the residential surroundings offer a very different view of Hué. The peaceful tree-shaded compound includes a fair-sized swimming pool.

**Ngoc Huong Hotel** (☎ 830 111; www.ngochuonghotels.com; 8-10 Đ Chu Van An; r US\$30-40, ste US\$80; ☎ ☎) In a popular part of town, this is a smart, friendly hotel. The large rooms include all the creature comforts, plus there's a Jacuzzi and sauna for winding down.

**Hotel Saigon Morin** (☎ 523 526; www.morinhotel.com.vn; 30 Đ Le Loi; r US\$50-500; ☎ ☎) Occupying a prime corner opposite the Trang Tien Bridge, this grand hotel exudes historical charm. Along with the four-star comforts of its guest rooms, the hotel has restaurants, bars and a gourd-shaped swimming pool.

**La Residence Hotel & Spa** (☎ 837 475; www.la-residence-hue.com; 5 Đ Le Loi; r US\$95-135, ste US\$150-165; ☎ ☎) Housed in the former French Governor's residence, this chic boutique hotel has lovely river views, lush gardens and beautiful rooms.

#### Eating

We have famed fussy-eater Emperor Tu Duc to thank for the culinary variety of Hué. While the elaborate decoration of imperial cuisine may seem excessive, the degustation-style banquets are sublime – well worth the indulgence. The best restaurants aren't necessarily easy to find, and many tourists sadly settle for the Western-oriented eateries of the budget ghettos.

#### SOUTH BANK

**Mandarin Café** (☎ 821 281; mandarin@dng.vnn.vn; 3 Đ Hung Vuong; dishes 5000-40,000d; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) A magnet for travellers, the cheerful owner, Mr Cu, speaks English and French and serves big dollops of travel advice along with *pho*, BLTs, salads and pancakes.

**Minh & Coco Mini Restaurant** (☎ 821 822; 1 Đ Hung Vuong; mains 10,000-30,000d; ☎) lunch & dinner) Run by two lively sisters, this humble joint is a fun place to get an inexpensive feed.

**Tinh Tam** (☎ 823 572; 12 Đ Chu Van An; mains from 10,000d; ☎) lunch & dinner) This family place serves excellent and inexpensive vegetarian food. Dishes made with mock meat, such as 'deer' with black pepper and lemon grass, are delicious but the noodle soups are also worth trying.

**Japanese Restaurant** (☎ 834 457; 34 Đ Tran Cao Van; dishes US\$1-8; ☎) 11am-2pm & 6.30-9.30pm Mon-Sat) There are no prizes for guessing the cuisine on offer. What's more surprising is that it's all for a good cause, namely helping street children. The food is excellent and the service exceptionally polite.

**La Carambole** (☎ 810 491; 19 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; mains 25,000-90,000d; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Extravagantly decorated, this place has a good range of French dishes. There are also Vietnamese dishes and pizza to keep everyone happy, plus a healthy wine list.

**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? Pizzas are respectable, pastas are perfectly *al dente*.

#### A RIGHT ROYAL FOOD CRITIC

Emperor Tu Duc (1848-83) expected 50 dishes to be prepared by 50 cooks to be served by 50 servants at every meal. And his tea had to be made from the dew that accumulated on leaves overnight. Not too demanding then!

**Omar Khayyam's Indian Restaurant** (☎ 821 616; 10 Đ Nguyen Tri Phuong; curries 30,000-60,000d; 🍴 lunch & dinner) This vegetarian-friendly curry house is low on atmosphere, but high on flavour.

#### NORTH BANK

**Lac Thien Restaurant** (6 Đ Dinh Tien Hoang; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Be deceived not by neighbouring copycats – this is the original deaf-mute restaurant serving up a variety of Hué specialities.

**Ngo Co Nhan** (☎ 513 399; 47 Đ Nguyen Bieu; dishes 15,000-35,000d; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Sitting on stilts in a quiet Citadel street, this open-sided dining platform serves excellent grilled seafood and crates of beer to a local clientele.

**Y Thao Garden** (☎ 523 018; 3 Đ Thach Han; set-course meal US\$8; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Tucked in a quiet corner of the Citadel, a seven-course set menu is served among the huge palms on the garden terrace of a traditional Hué home.

#### Drinking

In the evenings, travellers gather over Huda beers in the cafés along Đ Hung Vuong. If you're looking to party and play a bit of pool, try these spots.

**DMZ Bar & Cafe** (44 Đ Le Loi) Long the leading late-night spot in town, the beer flows into the night, the tunes match the mood and there is a popular pool table in the middle of things.

**Bar Why Not?** (☎ 824 793; 21 Đ Vo Thi Sau) Loud rock music, cheap cocktails and a pool table make for a winning formula. Why not, indeed.

#### Entertainment

**Tropical Garden Restaurant** (☎ 847 143; 27 Đ Chu Van An; dishes 22,000-85,000d; 🍴 from 6.30pm) This popular place offers romantic dining in a lush, leafy garden setting. It's the best place in Hué to

catch a traditional music performance (from 7pm nightly).

#### Shopping

Hué produces the finest conical hats in Vietnam. The city's speciality is 'poem hats', which, when held up to the light, reveal shadowy scenes of daily life. It's also home to one of the largest and most beautiful selections of rice-paper and silk paintings available in Vietnam, but the prices quoted are usually inflated to about four times the real price.

**Dong Ba Market** (Đ Tran Hung Dao; 🕒 6.30am-8pm) On the north bank of the Song Huong a few hundred metres north of Trang Tien Bridge, this is Hué's largest market, where anything and everything can be bought.

#### Getting There & Away

##### AIR

The main office of **Vietnam Airlines** (☎ 824 709; 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 centre and takes about 25 minutes by car. Taxi fares are around US\$8, although share taxis cost as little as US\$2 – ask at hotels. Vietnam Airlines runs a shuttle (20,000d) from its office to the airport, a couple of hours before flight times.

##### BUS

The main bus station is 4km to the south-east 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), northwest of the Citadel, serves northern destinations, including Dong Ha (25,000d, 1½ hours).

#### CROSSING INTO LAOS: LAO BAO TO DANSAVANH

The **Lao Bao border** (🕒 7-11am & 1-6pm) is the most popular and least problematic land crossing between Laos and Vietnam. **Sepon Travel** (☎ 855 289; www.sepon.com.vn; 189 Đ Le Duan) in Dong Ha has buses to Savannakhet (US\$12, 7½ hours), leaving Dong Ha at 8am every second day and returning the next day. These buses also pass through Hué (US\$14 to US\$15, add 1½ hours), and can be booked from the Mandarin and Sinh Cafés (see p379).

Travelling independently is possible but hefty overcharging will likely make it more expensive in the long run. Catch a bus to Lao Bao and then a *xe om* (motorbike taxi) to the border (10,000d). Once in Laos, there is only one public bus a day direct to Savannakhet, which leaves when full. *Sawngthaew* (pick-up trucks) leave fairly regularly to Sepon, from where you can get a bus or further *sawngthaew* to Savannakhet. For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see p324.

Hué is also a regular stop on the open-tour bus routes. Mandarin and Sinh Cafés (see p379) can arrange bookings for the bus to Savannakhet, Laos (see the boxed text, opposite).

#### 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.

#### Getting Around

Bicycles (US\$1), motorbikes (US\$5) and cars (US\$25 per day, with driver) can be hired from hotels all over town. **Co Do Taxi** (☎ 830 830) and **Mai Linh** (☎ 898 989) both have air-con vehicles with meters. Cyclos and *xe om* will find you when you need them.

#### DANANG

☎ 0511 / pop 1.1 million

While most tourists neglect Vietnam's fourth-largest city in favour of nearby Hué and Hoi An, Danang has considerable charm in its own right. The economic powerhouse of central Vietnam, it combines the buzz of a bigger city with beautiful beaches and fine dining. A lot of money has recently been poured into tree-lined boulevards, bridges and beachside resorts.

#### Information

##### INTERNET ACCESS

There are internet cafés scattered all over Danang, including several by the river on Đ Bach Dang.

##### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Danang Family Medical Practice** (☎ 582 700; 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

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

##### POST

**Danang domestic & international post offices** (Đ Bach Dang)

##### TRAVEL AGENCIES

**Dana Tours** (☎ 825 653; www.vietnamwelcomes.com; 76 Đ Hung Vuong; 🕒 Mon-Sat) Offers car hire, boat trips, visa extensions and treks in nearby Ba Na or Bach Ma.

#### Sights & Activities

Danang's jewel is the famed **Museum of Cham Sculpture** (Bao Tang Cham; cnr Đ Trung Nu Vuong & Đ Bach Dang; admission 30,000d; 🕒 7am-5pm). This small, breezy building houses the finest collection of Cham sculpture to be found anywhere on earth. These intricately carved sandstone pieces come from Cham sites all over Vietnam, and it's worth the detour to Danang just for this.

Guides hang out at the museum's entrance; should you hire one, agree on a fee beforehand.

#### Sleeping

**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.

**Bao Ngoc Hotel** (☎ 817 711; baongochotel@dng.vnn .vn; 48 Đ Phan Chu Trinh; r US\$15-16; 📶) With an inexplicable kiwi logo and excessively floral sheets, this inner-city hotel offers good-value clean rooms.

**Binh Duong** (☎ 821 930; fax 827 666; 32-34 Đ Tran Phu; r US\$15-25; 📶) Popular with longer-term stayers, the friendly staff at Binh Duong speaks excellent English and some of the ample rooms have large corner bathtubs.

**Bamboo Green Harbourside** (☎ 822 722; bamboo green2@dng.vnn.vn; 177 Đ Tran Phu; r US\$25-30, ste US\$40; 📶) In a good location opposite Danang Cathedral and near the river, many of the rooms have good views and breakfast is included in the prices.

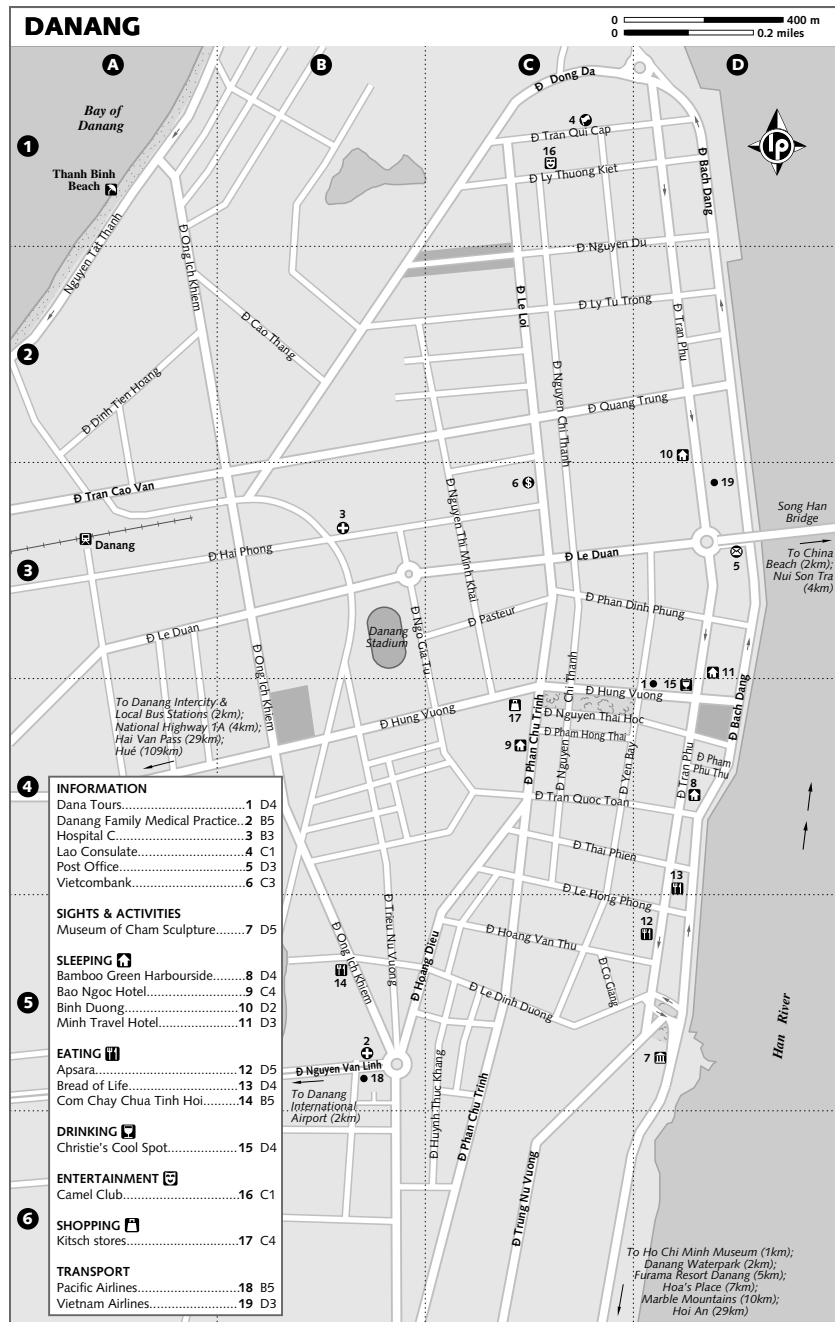
If you'd like easy access to nearby China Beach, consider one of the following places.

**Hoà's Place** (☎ 969 216; My An Beach; hoasplace@hotmail.com; r US\$6) Small-scale, low-key and laid-back, Hoà and his wife ensure their home is your home. Take the second turning on the left past Furama heading south.

**Furama Resort Danang** (☎ 847 888; www.furamavi etnam.com; 68 Đ Ho Xuan Huong, My An Beach; s US\$207-299, d US\$230-322, ste US\$575-690; 📶) For many years, this was Vietnam's only luxury resort. Perched on a private slice of China Beach, it features a diving facility, golf driving range, gym and two pools.

#### Eating

**Com Chay Chua Tinh Hoi** (574 Đ Ong Ich Khiem; dishes from 3000d) Known for the best vegetarian food in town; it's just inside the entrance gate to the Phap Lam Pagoda.



**Bread of Life** (☎ 893 456; 215 Đ Tran Phu; cakes 10,000d, breakfast 20,000d; ☺ 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.

**Apsara** (☎ 561 409; www.apsara-danang.com; 222 Đ Tran Phu; meals US\$15; ☺ lunch & dinner) The best dining experience in Danang, Apsara has excellent food, great service, a good wine list and an atmospheric setting – with Cham-influenced décor and live traditional music.

### Drinking & Entertainment

**Christie's Cool Spot** (☎ 824 040; 112 Đ Tran Phu) The downstairs bar is the place to meet US war veterans and join their debates about whether the Iraq war is even more pointless than the American War in Vietnam. Christie's also serves Western comfort food.

**Camel Club** (☎ 887 462; 16 Đ Ly Thuong Kiet; admission 20,000d; ☺ 7pm-1am) This is where Danang's beautiful people come for heavy beats.

### Getting There & Away

Danang international airport has connections to Bangkok, Hong Kong and Singapore.

**Vietnam Airlines** (☎ 821 130; www.vietnamairlines.com; 35 Đ Tran Phu) has an extensive domestic schedule serving Danang. **Pacific Airlines** (☎ 886 799; www.pacificairlines.com.vn; 6 Đ Le Loi) also has a booking office situated in town. Both **Airport Taxi** (☎ 272 727) and **VN Taxis** (☎ 525 252) provide modern vehicles with air-con and meters. It costs about 20,000d for the trip 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 Hoi An, your best bet is to hire a car (around US\$10), from a local travel agency, or a friendly neighbourhood *xé 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 Hoi An and Danang.

Danang train station (Ga Da Nang) is about 1.5km from the city centre on Đ Hai Phong at Đ Hoang Hoa Tham. Danang 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.

### 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 an R'n'R hang-out 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 Non Nuoc Beach, and in between the two are countless spots to explore or spread your beach towel.

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 onward transport in either location.

### HOI AN

☎ 0510 / pop 75,800

Step back in time and discover the living museum that is Hoi An. 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 at night, it's easy to imagine how it might have looked 150 years ago.

Hoi An's charms aren't limited to its exquisite architecture alone; the nearby beach and Cham ruins make excellent expeditions out of town, plus Hoi An is a gastronomic treat.

### Information

#### EMERGENCY

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

Serious problems should be addressed in Danang.

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

**INFORMATION**

Hoi An Hospital.....	1	D2
Hoi An Police Station.....	2	D3
Incombank.....	3	C2
Main Post Office.....	4	D2
Min's Computer.....	5	E3

**SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES**

Assembly Hall of the Fujian Chinese Congregation.....	6	D3
Hoi An Old Town Booth A.....	7	C3
Hoi An Old Town Booth B.....	8	D3
Japanese Covered Bridge.....	9	B3
Museum of Trading Ceramics.....	10	C3
Old House at 103 Tran Phu.....	11	C3
Quan Cong Temple.....	12	D3
Rainbow Divers.....	13	C3
Tan Ky House.....	14	C3

**SLEEPING**

Green Field Hotel.....	15	F2
Ha An Hotel.....	16	E3
Life Resort Hoi An.....	17	E3
Minh A Ancient Lodging House.....	18	D3
Pho Hoi Riverside Resort.....	19	E4
Thien Nga Hotel.....	20	B2
Thien Thanh Hotel.....	21	B1
Vinh Hung 1 Hotel.....	22	C3

**EATING**

Brothers Café.....	23	E3
Café des Amis.....	24	D4
Cargo Club.....	25	C3
Dac San Hoi An.....	26	C3
Good Morning Vietnam.....	27	C3
Green Moss.....	28	E3

Mango Rooms.....	29	C3
Mermaid Restaurant.....	30	D3
Omar Khayyam's Indian Restaurant.....	31	C2
Restaurant Café 96.....	32	C3

**DRINKING**

Before & Now.....	33	C3
Club Salsa.....	34	B4
Lounge Bar.....	35	C3
Tam Tam Cafe & Bar.....	36	C3
Treat's Café.....	37	C3

**SHOPPING**

Reaching Out.....	(see 25)
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**TRANSPORT**

Hoi An Bus Station.....	38	A2
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**INTERNET ACCESS**

**Min's Computer** (☎ 914 323; 125 Đ Nguyen Duy Hieu; per hr 4000đ) Access is slow throughout Hoi An, but this is as good as any.

**INTERNET RESOURCES**

**Hoi An Old Town** ([www.hoianworldheritage.org](http://www.hoianworldheritage.org)) A handy little website on the ins and outs of Hoi An.

**MONEY**

**Incombank** (☎ 861 261; 4 Đ Hoang Dieu & 9 Đ Le Loi) These branches change cash and travellers cheques, make credit-card cash advances and have ATMs.

**POST**

**Main post office** (48 Đ Tran Hung Dao) At the corner of Đ Ngo Gia Tu.

**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. By night, avoid walking around this area on your own. 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.

**Sights****HOI AN OLD TOWN**

Having been named a Unesco World Heritage Site, **Hoi An Old Town** (admission 75,000đ) now charges an admission fee, which goes towards funding the preservation of the town's historic architecture. Buying the ticket gives you a choice of heritage sites to visit, including an 'intangible culture' option, such as a traditional musical concert or stage play. You can

also visit these sites, paying as you go, without buying the ticket.

This list of sites is by no means comprehensive; buying a ticket at the Hoi An Old Town booths will also get you an introductory guide to all the sites.

**Quan Cong Temple** (24 Đ Tran Phu) is dedicated to Quan Cong and has some wonderful papier-mâché and gilt statues, as well as carp-shaped rain spouts on the roof surrounding the courtyard. Shoes should be removed before mounting the platform in front of Quan Cong.

**Tan Ky House** (☎ 861 474; 101 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-4.30pm) is a lovingly preserved house from the 19th century, which once belonged to a Vietnamese merchant. Japanese and Chinese influences are evidenced 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 pair will confirm or deny this story).

The **Assembly Hall of the Fujian Chinese Congregation** (☎ 7.30am-noon & 2-5.30pm) was founded for community meetings; the hall later became a temple to worship Thien Hau, a deity born in Fujian Province in China. Check out the elaborate mural, the unhealthy red or green skin of the statuary, and the replica of a Chinese boat.

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.

**Chuc Thanh Pagoda** (Khu Vuc 7, Tan An; ☎ 8am-6pm) was founded in 1454, making it the oldest pagoda in Hoi An. Among the antique ritual objects still in use are a stone gong, which is two centuries old, and a carp-shaped wooden gong, said to be even older. To get here, go all the way to the end of Đ Nguyen Truong To and turn left. Follow the sandy path for about 500m.

## ARTS & CRAFTS VILLAGES

All those neat fake antiques sold in Hoi An's shops are manufactured in nearby villages. 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 boat-building industries (take a boat from the Đ Hoang Van Thu dock). Cross the Cam Nam bridge to Cam Nam village, a lovely spot also noted for arts and crafts.

## Activities

### DIVING

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

### Courses

Hoi An is foodie heaven, and budding gourmands who want to take a step further into Vietnamese cuisine will find ample opportunity here. Many of the popular eateries offer cooking classes, and the best part is that you then get to sit down and enjoy the fruits of your labour.

**Red Bridge Cooking School** (☎ 933 222; www.visithoian.com) runs a course that starts with a trip to the market, and is followed by a cruise down the river to its relaxing retreat about 4km from Hoi An. The class costs 235,000d per person; it starts at 8.45am and finishes at 1pm.

More informal classes can be found at Restaurant Café 96 (per person 50,000d), Green Moss (choose off the menu and pay a US\$2 supplement) and Café des Amis (US\$20); see opposite.

## Festivals & Events

**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

Little Hoi An is awash with accommodation options after a building boom over the past few years.

**Minh A Ancient Lodging House** (☎ 861 368; 2 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc; r US\$8-12; ☎) Brimming with character, this splendid 180-year-old traditional wooden home is a cross between a B&B and a museum. Book ahead, as there are only three rooms.

**Thien Nga Hotel** (☎ 916 330; thiennga\_hotel@pmail.vn.vn; 52 Đ Ba Trieu; r US\$10-20; ☎) An old favourite that keeps getting better, this little place is terrific value, offering clean, comfortable rooms, a swimming pool and free breakfast.

**Thien Thanh Hotel** (☎ 916 545; www.bluesky-hoian.com; 16 Đ Ba Trieu; r US\$15-35; ☎) Most of the rooms have breezy balconies at the back with views over the rice paddies at this smart, laid-back and friendly hotel. Plus wi-fi.

**Green Field Hotel** (Dong Xanh Hotel; ☎ 863 484; www.greenfieldhotel.com; 423 Đ Cua Dai; dm US\$5, r US\$15-40; ☎) Painted a lurid rice-paddy green, the rooms here are comfortable and perks include a free 'happy hour' cocktail, free wi-fi, a pool table and a swimming pool.

**Vinh Hung 1 Hotel** (☎ 861 621; quanghuy.ha@dng.vn.vn; 143 Đ Tran Phu; r US\$15-45; ☎) Set in a classic Chinese trading house, the atmospheric rooms are decorated with antiques and beautiful canopy beds. Michael Caine used two of these rooms while filming scenes in *The Quiet American*. If this hotel's full, there are several other branches with swimming pools.

**Pho Hoi Riverside Resort** (☎ 862 628; www.phoioi-riversidehoian.com; T1, Cam Nam Village; r US\$15-65, bungalow US\$60-70; ☎) This sprawling place on the south bank of the river has the best views in town. The cheaper rooms are in the old block behind, but the majority have a picturesque setting.

**Ha An Hotel** (☎ 863 126; tohuong@fpt.vn; 6-8 Đ Phan Boi Chau; r US\$30-50; ☎) A French Quarter hotel, with a dose of decorative flair. This strip of buildings is built in Hoi An style (one French, one Chinese and so on), all set in a lush garden.

**Victoria Hoi An Resort** (☎ 0510-927 040; www.victoriahotels-asia.com; r US\$121-202, ste US\$242; ☎) Sitting on a huge slice of beach, this resort boasts all the stylish facilities you'd expect for the price, including a large pool and free wi-fi.

**Life Resort Hoi An** (☎ 914 555; www.life-resorts.com; 1 Đ Pham Hong Thai; r US\$159, ste US\$182-308; ☎) The most luxurious option in central Hoi An, Life Resort has a prime French Quarter riverside frontage, lush gardens and a stunning infinity pool.

## Eating

Hoi An's restaurants burst with gastronomic delights, three of which are town specialties. Be sure to try *cao lau*, doughy flat noodles mixed with croutons, bean sprouts and greens, topped with pork slices and served in a savoury broth. The real deal is only available 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.

**Dac San Hoi An** (☎ 861 533; 89 Đ Tran Phu; dishes 7000-60,000d) True to its name (translating as Hoi An specialties), this place does great *banh xeo* (Vietnamese rice-flour crepe), *cao lau* and 'white rose'. The upstairs balcony has a view of one of Hoi An's nicest streets.

**Green Moss** (☎ 863 728; 155 Đ Nguyen Duy Hieu; dishes 10,000-30,000d) Housed in a lovely French-colonial-era house, Green Moss serves a tasty mix of Asian dishes with plenty of vegetarian options.

**Restaurant Café 96** (☎ 910 441; 96 Đ Bach Dang; dishes 10,000-35,000d) This riverside restaurant has the perfectly decrepit look Western interior designers so crave. The food is sublime – try the grilled fish wrapped in banana leaf.

**Mermaid Restaurant** (☎ 861 527; 2 Đ Tran Phu; dishes 18,000-68,000d) One of the original Hoi An eateries, this is still a favourite for its fried spring rolls with noodles and herbs, and its excellent 'white rose'.

**Cargo Club** (☎ 910 489; 107 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc; dishes 18,000-70,000d) Choose from mouth-watering pastries downstairs and distinguished dining

upstairs, with a balcony terrace overlooking the river. The menu's an eclectic mix of French, Italian, Vietnamese and Thai.

**Café des Amis** (☎ 861 616; 52 Đ Bach Dang; 5-course set menu 90,000d; ☎ dinner) This little riverside eatery has earned a loyal following over the past decade. There's no menu. Five-course dinner is whatever the chef, Mr Kim, feels like cooking that day. It's always delicious and there's a vegetarian option.

**Mango Rooms** (☎ 910 839; 111 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc; mains 85,000-145,000d) This restaurant's reputation for lively modern Vietnamese cuisine has spread far and wide – with even Mick Jagger seeking culinary satisfaction here. Tropical fruits and fresh herbs feature prominently in the food, as well as in the inventive cocktails.

**Brothers Café** (☎ 914 150; 27-29 Đ Phan Boi Chau; dishes US\$6-12) Looking like a film set, in one of the finest French-colonial buildings in town, the attention to designer detail is perfect. Drop by for a drink in the gorgeous riverside garden.

Other international spots:  
**Omar Khayyam's Indian Restaurant** (☎ 864 538; 24 Đ Tran Hung Dao; dishes 30,000-80,000d) The place for curry connoisseurs, with plenty of vegetarian options.  
**Good Morning Vietnam** (☎ 910 227; 34 Đ Le Loi; mains 38,000-105,000d) Italian owners and chefs, they serve the best pizzas and pastas in town.

## Drinking

**Tam Tam Cafe & Bar** (☎ 862 212; 110 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc) The mainstay of nightlife in Hoi An is this thoughtfully restored tea warehouse. Hoi An's best margaritas are made here, which you can enjoy over a game of pool or an intimate chat on the balcony.

**Lounge Bar** (☎ 910 480; 102 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc) Stylish silk-cushioned seating and a cool upstairs terrace accent this converted ancient house.

**Before & Now** (☎ 910 599; 51 Đ Le Loi) This swanky bar wouldn't be out of place in London, particularly given the Britpop playlist. The walls are plastered in pop-art portraits of everyone from Marx to Marilyn Monroe.

**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 hour between 4pm and 9pm includes two-for-one spirits and bargain beer.

**Club Salsa** (Pho Nguyen Phuc Chu) As much of Hoi An goes to sleep, Club Salsa awakens, the late-night bar in town. Cool cocktails and top

tunes ensure this place always draws a lively crowd. An alternative sunrise awaits.

## Shopping

Before you even get your bearings in Hoi An, you may find yourself strong-armed with sweetness by a young girl taking you to her 'auntie's' tailor shop, despite periodic clampdowns on touts. 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). Other hot items include handmade shoes and silk lanterns.

Hoi An also boasts a growing array of interesting art galleries, especially on the west side of the Japanese Covered Bridge.

**Reaching Out** (☎ 862 460; 103 Đ Nguyễn Thái Học; ☎ 7.30am-9.30pm) This is a great place to spend your dong. It's a fair-trade gift shop with profits going towards assisting disabled artisans.

## Getting There & Away

The main **Hoi An bus station** (☎ 861 284; 96 Đ Hùng Vương) is 1km west of the centre of town. Buses from here go to Danang (8000d, one hour) and other points north.

A regular stop on the open-bus route, it's easy to pick up a service to or from Huế (US\$3, four hours) or Nha Trang (US\$6 to US\$8, 11 to 12 hours).

The nearest airport and train station are both in Danang.

## Getting Around

Metered taxis are available to get to the beach. Motorbike drivers wait to solicit business outside all the tourist hotels. Prices without/with a driver are around US\$6/10 per day. Many hotels also offer bicycles for hire for around US\$1 per day.

## AROUND HOI AN

### Cua Dai Beach

This beautiful stretch of sand runs all the way to Danang where it's marketed as the legendary China Beach. Palm-thatch huts give shelter and roaming vendors sell drinks and fresh seafood. Swimming is best between April and October. Weekends can get a little crowded.

To get here, take Đ Cua Dai east out of Hoi An for about 5km.

## My Son

The ancient Cham city of **My Son** (☎ 0501-731 309; admission 60,000d; ☎ 6.30am-4pm) is one of the most stunning sights in the area, and another Unesco World Heritage Site. The ruins are nestled in a lush valley surrounded by hills and the massive Hon Quap (Cat's Tooth Mountain). My Son became a religious centre under King Bhadravarman in the late 4th century and was occupied until the 13th century – the longest period of development of any city in the Mekong region.

The ruins are a scenic 35km trip southwest of Hoi An. Day tours to My Son can be arranged in Hoi An for about US\$3, not including admission, and there are also trips back to Hoi An by boat. If you want to visit on your own, hire a motorbike, *xe om* or car. Get here early (preferably predawn) to beat the tour groups, or later in the afternoon.

## SOUTH-CENTRAL COAST

Undeniably, the beach is the big attraction in this part of Vietnam. Nha Trang and Mui Ne have become the favoured destinations for those whose idea of paradise is reclining by the water, cocktail in hand, contemplating whether to have a massage or a pedicure before hitting the bars later.

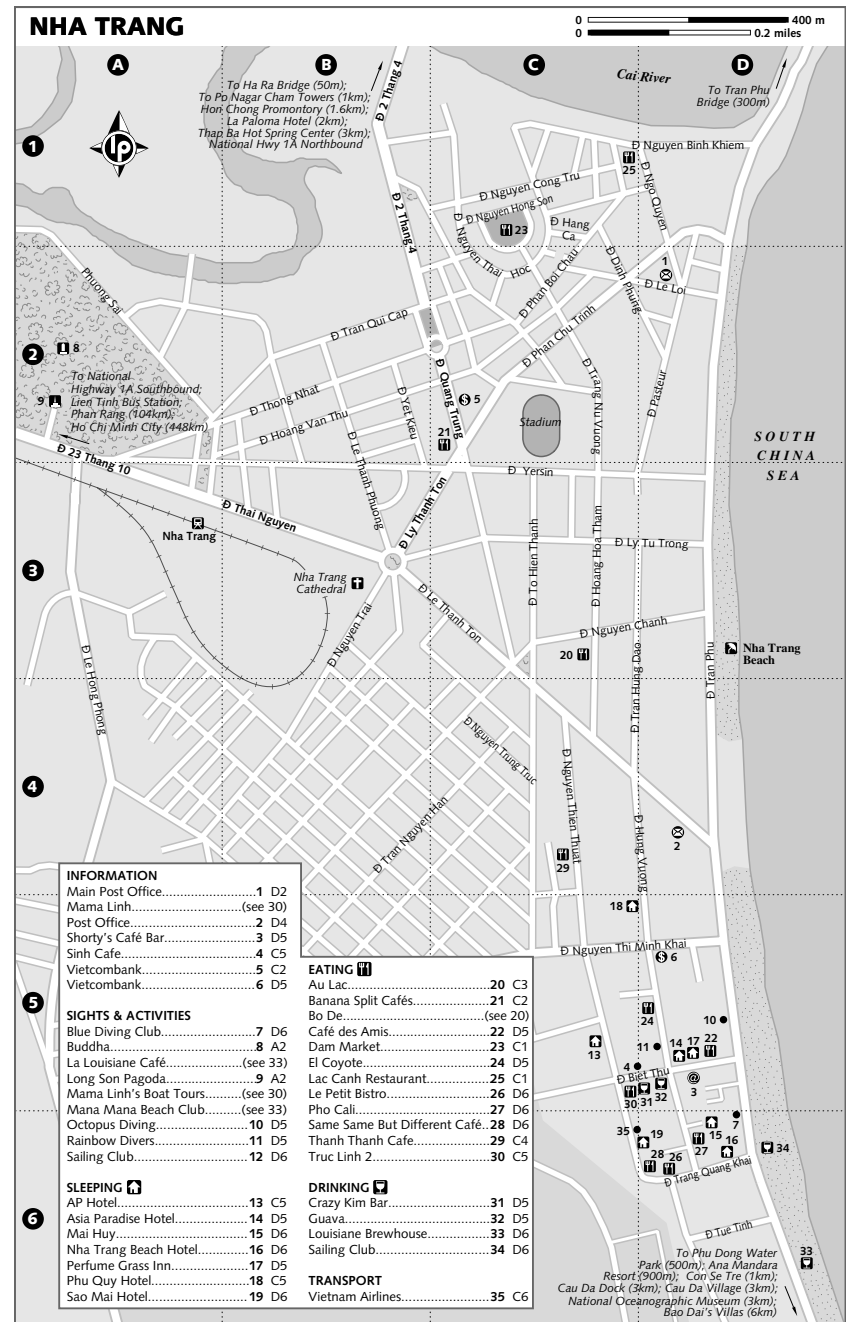
With most visitors not venturing outside of these two main enclaves, the rest of the beautiful coast is wonderfully overlooked – leaving empty beaches to be explored by the more independently minded.

## NHA TRANG

☎ 058 / pop 315,200

Nha Trang has a split personality. One half is a bustling Vietnamese city humming with commerce but blessed with access to a beautiful beach. The other is a Western resort town encompassing several blocks of hotels, tourist shops, bars and international restaurants. Entering this sheltered enclave you could be anywhere in the world, if it weren't for the constant hassles from *xe om* drivers, many of whom seem to moonlight as pimps and dealers.

Nha Trang offers plenty to keep tourists occupied – from island-hopping boat trips and scuba diving, to mud baths and historic sites. But undeniably, the main attraction for most visitors is lounging around on deckchairs at





a beachfront bar and drinking cocktails in Western-style comfort.

## Information

### BOOKSHOPS

**Shorty's Café Bar** (☎ 524 057; 1E Đ Biet Thu) Second-hand books, mostly in English, plus a bar.

### INTERNET ACCESS

Nha Trang has dozens of designated internet cafés all over town, and you can also get online in many hotels and travellers cafés.

### MONEY

**Vietcombank** Đ Hung Vuong (☎ 524 500; 5 Đ Hung Vuong; ☎ Mon-Fri); Đ Quang Trung (☎ 822 720; 17 Đ Quang Trung; ☎ Mon-Fri) Both branches exchange travellers cheques and have ATMs.

### POST

**Main post office** (☎ 821 271; 4 Đ Le Loi)

**Post office** (☎ 823 866; 50 Đ Le Thanh Ton)

### TRAVEL AGENCIES

**Mama Linh** (☎ 522 844; fax 522 845; 23C Đ Biet Thu) Known for its boat tours, Mama Linh can also arrange trips around the province and into the highlands.

**Sinh Café** (☎ 524 329; sinhcafé@dng.vnn.vn; 10 Đ Biet Thu) Offers bargain basement local tours as well as open-tour buses.

## Dangers & Annoyances

Though Nha Trang is generally a safe place, be very careful on the beach at night. The best advice is to stay off the beach after dark. We've heard countless reports of rip-offs, mostly instigated by quick-witted working girls who cruise the coast.

## Sights

Built between the 7th and 12th centuries on a site used by Hindus for *linga* (phallic symbols) worship, the **Po Nagar Cham Towers** (Đ 2 Thang 4; admission 4500đ; ☎ 6am-6pm) are 2km north of central Nha Trang on the left bank of the Cai River. The hill offers blue views of the harbour below.

The impressively adorned **Long Son Pagoda** (Chua Tinh Hoi Khanh Hoa; Đ 23 Thang 10; admission free; ☎ sunrise-sunset) is decorated with mosaic dragons covered with glass and ceramic tile. Founded in the late 19th century, the pagoda still has resident monks. At the top of the hill, behind the pagoda, is the Giant Seated Buddha visible from town. Seated near the Buddha, you too can contemplate the view of

Nha Trang. The pagoda is about 500m west of the train station.

Swimming in the **Oceanographic Institute** (Vien Nghiem Cuu Bien; ☎ 590 036; adult/child 10,000/5000đ, English-speaking guide 30,000đ; ☎ 7.30am-noon & 1-4.30pm), a French-colonial building, are colourful representatives of squirming sea life.

**Bao Dai's Villas** (Biet Thu Cau Da; ☎ 590 148; ☎ 8am-10pm) are worth roaming on a slow afternoon, with a scenic lunch spot overlooking the South China Sea. The villas are several hundred metres north of the Oceanographic Institute.

### BEACHES

Coconut palms provide shelter for sunbathers and strollers along most of Nha Trang's 6km beachfront.

Stylish **La Louisiane Café** (☎ 812 948; 29 Đ Tran Phu; ☎ 7am-midnight) resembles a Western-style beach club. Guests can use the swimming pool and beach chairs here in exchange for patronising the restaurant, bakery or bar.

Hon Chong Promontory, 1.8km north of central Nha Trang, is a scenic collection of granite rocks jutting into the South China Sea. The promontory borders a rustic beach cove lacking the pedicures and massages, but compensating with island views and local colour.

### ISLANDS

The nine outlying islands of Nha Trang beckon offshore. For as little as US\$6, you can join a day tour visiting four 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 the nearby islands of Hon Mun (Ebony Island) or Hon Yen (Swallow Island).

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 trips or overnight trips here offered by **Con Se Tre** (☎ /fax 527 522; 100/16 Đ Tran Phu). There's great snorkelling and diving off Hon Mun, Hon Tam and Hon Mot.

## Activities

### DIVING

Nha Trang is 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). There are

## SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR DIVING

Before embarking on a scuba-diving, skin-diving or snorkelling trip, carefully consider the following points to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience:

- Get a current diving certification card from a recognised scuba diving instructional agency (if scuba diving).
- Be sure you are healthy and feel comfortable diving.
- Obtain reliable information about physical and environmental conditions at the dive site (eg from a reputable local dive operation).
- Be aware of local laws, regulations and etiquette about marine life and the environment.
- Dive only at sites within your realm of experience; if available, engage the services of a competent, professionally trained dive instructor or dive master.
- Be aware that underwater conditions vary significantly from one region, or even site, to another. Seasonal changes can significantly alter any site and dive conditions. These differences influence the way divers dress for a dive and what diving techniques they use.
- Ask about the environmental characteristics that can affect your diving and how local, trained divers deal with these considerations.

some good drop-offs and small underwater caves to explore, and an amazing variety of corals. Among the colourful reef fish, stingrays are occasionally spotted.

A full-day outing, including two dives and lunch, costs between US\$40 and US\$70. 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.

**Octopus Diving** (☎ 521 629; 62 Đ Tran Phu)

**Sailing Club Diving** (☎ 522 788; www.sailingclubvietnam.com; 72-74 Đ Tran Phu) This is the same operation, but a separate office, as Octopus Diving.

**Rainbow Divers** (☎ 524 351; www.divevietnam.com; 90A Hung Vuong) Run by Brit Jeremy Stein, Rainbow Divers sets the standard for diving in Vietnam.

### WATER-BASED FUN

Right on the beach front, **Phu Dong Water Park** (Đ Tran Phu; admission 20,000đ; ☎ 9am-5pm Sat & Sun) has slides, shallow pools and fountains if salt water is not your thing.

If salt water is your thing, check out **Mana Mana Beach Club** (☎ 524 362; www.manamana.com; Louisiane Brevhous, 29 Đ Tran Phu). Offering wind-surfing, sea kayaking, wakeboarding and sailing lessons, Mana Mana uses state-of-the-art equipment.

Perhaps hot muddy water might be your thing? **Thap Ba Hot Springs** (☎ 834 939; 25 Ngoc

Son; ☎ 8am-8pm) is a fun experiences. To get here, follow the signpost on the second road to the left past the Po Nagar Cham Towers for 2.5km.

## Tours

**Mama Linh's boats** (☎ 522 844; 23C Đ Biet Thu) are the hottest ticket for island-hopping, guzzling fruit wine at the impromptu 'floating bar', and deck-side dancing.

## Sleeping

**Mai Huy** (☎ 527 553; 7H Đ Hung Vuong; r US\$5-7; ☎) Pronounced 'may we' (or 'mais oui!' if you're French) this new family-run minihotel is hidden down a small laneway. At US\$5 for a room with a fan, fridge, satellite TV and private bathroom, it's a bargain.

**Sao Mai Hotel** (☎ 526 412; saomaiht@dng.vnn.vn; 99 Đ Nguyen Thien Thuat; r US\$5-8; ☎) With its pretty rooftop terrace adorned with potted plants, this friendly older place is a solid budget option.

**Phu Quy Hotel** (☎ 521 609; phuquyhotel@dng.vnn.vn; 54 Đ Hung Vuong; r US\$6-20; ☎) Pronounced Foo-Wee, the highlight of this minihotel is its rooftop terrace – it has awesome views and is great for dining, sunning or hanging around in a hammock. All the rooms are quite comfortable, and for US\$10 expect a balcony, bathtub and sea view.

**Perfume Grass Inn** (☎ 524 286; www.perfume-grass.com; 4A Đ Biet Thu; r US\$10-25; ☎) The best rooms at this inviting inn have wooden floors,

wood-panelled walls, and bathtubs. Even the US\$10 fan rooms have great sea views. Plus free internet access and breakfast.

**AP Hotel** (☎ 527 544; fax 527 268; 34 Đ Nguyen Thien Thuat; r 200,000-400,000d; 📶 📺) This wonderful new minihotel has had an expensive fit-out above and beyond the reasonable rates. Pricier rooms have king-size beds, huge bathtubs and balconies with sea glimpses.

**Nha Trang Beach Hotel** (☎ 524 469; www.nhatrangbeachhotel.com.vn; 4 Đ Tran Quang Khai; r US\$13-23; 📶 📺) This multistorey hotel has a cool granite lobby and friendly, efficient staff. Despite its central location, it's refreshingly quiet in the upper floors, where most of the rooms have great views and internet access.

**La Paloma Hotel** (☎ 831 216; datle@dng.vnn.vn; 1 Đ Hon Chong; r US\$15-35; 📶 📺) This is a commendable little family-run oasis on the northern outskirts of town. Fronting the hotel is a palm garden, where meals (included in the price) are served family-style. Plus free jeep rides into town.

**Bao Dai's Villas** (☎ 590 148; www.vngold.com/nt/baodai; Cau Da Village; r US\$25-80; 📶 📺) There can't be too many places where the former lodgings of an emperor fall into the midrange category. The only possible reason to stay here is historical interest, or the peace and quiet afforded by the parklike setting.

**Asia Paradise Hotel** (☎ 524 686; www.asiaparadiseho.com; 6 Đ Biet Thu; r US\$46-78, ste US\$99-124; 📶 📺) This new business-style hotel has elegant décor, comfy beds and friendly switched-on staff and is scrupulously clean. Extras include a small rooftop pool, gym and spa centre.

**Ana Mandara Resort** (☎ 522 522; www.evasonresorts.com; Đ Tran Phu; villa US\$236-438, ste US\$450-513; 📶 📺) This gorgeous complex of open timber-roofed beach villas is hands-down Nha Trang's classiest accommodation offering. The luxuries here include two excellent restaurants, two swimming pools and a serene spa area.

## Eating

Central Nha Trang teems with dining choices too numerous to list here. As always, taking a meal in the market is a culinary adventure, and Dam market on Đ Nguyen Hong Son in the north end of town has lots of local food stalls, including *com chay* (vegetarian food).

Ice-cream fiends will want to make for Nha Trang's own original-versus-copycat rivals, the Banana Split Cafés along the roundabout

where Đ Quang Trung meets Đ Ly Thanh Ton. Banana splits cost 10,000d.

## VIETNAMESE

**Café des Amis** (☎ 521 009; 2Đ 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.

**Pho Cali** (☎ 525 885; 7G Đ Hung Vuong; dishes 15,000-25,000d) Meals at this clean, modern eatery are absolutely delicious, and the set menu – comprising soup, rice and a hot pot – is outrageously good value at 20,000d.

**Lac Canh Restaurant** (☎ 821 391; 44 Đ Nguyen Binh Khiem; dishes 10,000-85,000d) A Nha Trang institution, Lac Canh is one of the busiest local eateries in town. Here beef, squid, giant prawns, lobsters and the like are grilled at your table.

**Truc Linh 2** (☎ 521 089; 21 Đ Biet Thu; dishes 15,000-83,000d) With three restaurants dotted around the neighbourhood, popular Truc Linh offers a festive garden setting for diners. In the evening you can choose fresh seafood from a table in front of the restaurant and enjoy a beer while you wait.

Two places serving excellent vegetarian food of the I-can't-believe-it's-not-meat variety are **Au Lac** (☎ 813 946; 28C Đ Hoang Hoa Tham; meals 10,000d) and **Bo De** (☎ 810 116; 28A Đ Hoang Hoa Tham; meals 10,000d), neighbouring restaurants near the corner of Đ Nguyen Chanh.

## INTERNATIONAL

**Same Same But Different Café** (☎ 524 079; 11 Đ Nguyen Thien Thuat; mains 12,000-50,000d; 📶 📺) breakfast, lunch & dinner) A good travellers café, this place serves Vietnamese and Western food at reasonable prices.

**Thanh Thanh Cafe** (☎ 824 413; 10 Đ Nguyen Thien Thuat; meals 15,000-75,000d) Another travellers café, serving wood-fired pizza, Vietnamese dishes and other standard traveller fare, Thanh Thanh has a pretty terracotta patio surrounded by plants.

**El Coyote** (☎ 526 320; 76 Đ Hung Vuong; mains 40,000-103,000d) Authentic Tex-Mex food including delicious fajitas served on a sizzling plate. The owner is more fusion than the menu, a mixture of French, Vietnamese, Lao and Cheyenne Indian.

**Le Petit Bistro** (☎ 527 201; 26Đ Đ Tran Quang Khai; mains 45,000-180,000d; 📶 📺) lunch & dinner) The best French restaurant in town, Le Petit Bistro has

a fantastic wine selection, as well as sourcing quality cheese and *charcuterie* (sausage).

## Drinking

**Sailing Club** (☎ 826 528; 72-74 Đ Tran Phu) The hippest place in town, this open-air beach bar is where most of the party crowd ends up at some point in the evening. Thumping music, wild dancing, flowing shots, pool sharks and general mayhem.

**Louisiane Brewhouse** (☎ 521 948; 29 Đ Tran Phu; 📶) This upmarket restaurant cum micro-brewery has a swimming pool and beautiful beachfront setting that make this one of the best places to laze the day away.

**Crazy Kim Bar** (☎ 523 072; crazykimbar.com; 19 Đ Biet Thu) This great party spot is also home base for the commendable 'Hands off the Kids!' campaign, which works to prevent paedophilia. Sign up at the bar if you're interested in volunteering to teach English.

**Guava** (☎ 524 140; www.clubnhatrang.com; 17 Đ Biet Thu) Cool, clean-lined and atmospheric, this lounge bar is superstylish but never seems particularly busy. Outside is a patio shaded with trees; inside, pillow-laden sofas and a pool table.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Vietnam Airlines** (☎ 826 768; www.vietnamairlines.com; 91 Đ Nguyen Thien Thuat) has flights out of Cam Ranh airport (35km south of Nha Trang) to HCMC, Hanoi and Danang. To get to the airport, catch a shuttle bus (25,000d, 40 minutes) from the old Nha Trang airport terminal, two hours before your flight. A taxi should cost about 150,000d, although agree on the price beforehand.

### BUS

Minibuses from HCMC to Nha Trang (11 to 12 hours) depart from Mien Dong bus station in HCMC. **Lien Tinh bus station** (Ben Xe Lien Tinh; ☎ 822 192; Đ 23 Thang 10), Nha Trang's main intercity bus terminal, is 500m west of the train station.

Open-tour buses to and from HCMC, Dalat and Hoi An are easy to book at travellers cafés and hotels.

### TRAIN

The **Nha Trang train station** (Ga Nha Trang; ☎ 822 113; 📶) ticket office (7am-2pm) is conveniently located in the middle of town.

## Getting Around

Cyclos and *xe oms* can get you to the old airport or the train station for about US\$1. Many hotels have bicycle rentals for around US\$1 per day.

**Nha Trang Taxi** (☎ 824 000) and **Khanh Hoa Taxi** (☎ 810 810) have air-con cars with meters.

## MUI NE

### ☎ 062

Far from the madding crowd of HCMC, yet only three hours away, lies an 11km-stretch of beach outside the fishing village of Mui Ne. In the last few years, this out-of-the-way resort strip has quickly transformed from an isolated stretch of beautiful white sand to one long row of resorts.

Mui Ne is developing a reputation as the action capital of the coast. There's no scuba diving, but when Nha Trang and Hoi An get the rains, Mui Ne gets the waves. Surf's up from August to December. Kite-surfing is also very popular.

## 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 as Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu.

A great resource for information on Mui Ne is www.muinebeach.net. Small restaurants along the road offer internet access.

**Hanh Café/Ha Phuong Tourist** (☎ 847 597; 125A Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu) Local day tours, open-tour bookings, fast food and internet access.

**Incobank** (68 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu; 📶 Sun-Fri) At Tropico Resort, this branch can exchange currency and travellers cheques.

**Sinh Café** (☎ 847 542; 144 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu) Operates out of its Mui Ne Resort, booking open-tour buses and offering credit-card cash advances.

## Sights

You'll smell Mui Ne as soon as you arrive, and you'll see the pungent source in clay vats along the palm-lined road. This is *nuoc mam* (fish sauce), for which Mui Ne is famous. But Mui Ne is even better known for its enormous sand dunes. Be sure to try the sand-sledding. The Fairy Spring (Suoi Tien) is a stream that flows through a patch of the dunes and rock formations near town. Also nearby are a red stream, market and fishing village. Four-wheel-drive tours of the dunes are popular.

On Rte 706 heading towards Phan Thiet, the small **Po Shanu Cham tower** (Km 5; admission 2000d; ☎ 7.30-11.30am & 1.30-4.30pm) occupies a hill with sweeping views of Phan Thiet, the river mouth filled with boats and a cemetery filled with candylike tombstones.

Further afield lies Vietnam's largest reclining Buddha (49m) at Ta Cu Pagoda. Most visitors take the cable car (55,000d return) to the base of the pagoda, from where the Buddha is a short, but steep, hike. Ta Cu Mountain is just off Hwy 1, 28km south of Phan Thiet.

## Activities

**Jibes** (☎ 847 405; www.windsurf-vietnam.com; 90 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu; ☎ 7.30am-6pm) is surfer's heaven, offering lessons and renting state-of-the-art gear such as sailboards, surfboards, kite-surfers and kayaks. Insurance costs extra.

**Airwaves** (☎ 847 440; airwaveskitesurfing.com; 24 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu), based at the Sailing Club, is another outfit offering kite-surfing, wind-surfing and sailing lessons and equipment rentals.

## Sleeping

**Kim Ngan Guesthouse** (☎ 847 046; kimnganvilla@yahoo.com; Km 13; r US\$10-15; ☎) The bungalows have tiled balconies jutting over the water, making this friendly family-run place a good choice.

**Hiep Hoa Resort** (☎ 847 262; hiephoatourism@yahoo.net; 80 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu; r US\$12-16; ☎) This is a great spot with a lovely garden and clean, attractive rooms – albeit with few frills such as TVs, fridges and phones.

**Sunshine Beach** (☎ 847 788; www.sunshine-beach.com; 82 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu; r US\$15-30; ☎) Friendly and welcoming, this hotel has a large open lawn area. The rooms are immaculately clean and comfortable. Free wi-fi.

**Indochina Dreams** (☎ 847 271; fax 08-8322 174; 74 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu; r US\$20-25; ☎) This dreamy place is on a small scale, but the big stone bungalows are very comfortable. Rooms are cool and well appointed, and there's a good restaurant in front, serving the complimentary breakfast.

**Little Mui Ne Cottages** (☎ 847 550; www.littlemuine.com; 10B Huynh Thuc Khang; r US\$50-85; ☎) These comfortable cottages are set in spacious

## OFF THE BEATEN TRACK: BEAUTIFUL BEACHES

It may be Mui Ne and Nha Trang that are the beach babes of the region, but there are many pristine stretches of sand along this coast, some that see very few tourists. Here's our very own top five from north to south:

- **My Khe** Located near the site of the infamous My Lai Massacre, My Khe (not to be confused with the other My Khe Beach near Danang) is a superb beach, with fine white sand and clear water.
- **Quy Nhon** This major transit town between Hoi An and Nha Trang is fast earning a name as an up-and-coming beach destination. Live cheap at **Barbara's Backpackers** (☎ 056-892 921; nzbarb@yahoo.com; dm 40,000d, r US\$6-10) or live it up at **Life Resort** (☎ 056-840 132; www.life-resorts.com; r US\$152-175).
- **Whale Island** Off the coast to the north of Nha Trang, Whale Island is a tiny speck on the map, home to the lovely and secluded **Whale Island Resort** (www.whaleislandresort.com) and a great spot for diving.
- **Doc Let** Within commuting distance of busy Nha Trang, the beachfront is long and wide, with chalk-white sand and shallow water.
- **Ninh Van Bay** This place doesn't really exist – except in an alternate reality populated by European royalty, film stars and the otherwise rich and secretive. Home to the **Evason Hide-away** (www.sixsenses.com).

grounds and the pool is big enough to do laps. Free internet access and bicycles.

**Sailing Club** (☎ 847 440; www.sailingclubvietnam.com; 24 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu; r US\$55, bungalows US\$70-100; ☎) Popular for its panoramic bar and restaurant overlooking the sea, the Sailing Club has spacious rooms in a lush garden setting.

**Cham Villas** (☎ 741 234; www.chamvillas.com; 32 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu; r US\$95-120; ☎) Set in a beautiful tropical garden with an exquisite swimming pool, this luxury boutique resort only has 14 villas, so book ahead.

Other recommendations:

**Xuan Uyen** (☎ 847 476; 78 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu; r US\$6-12; ☎) Big on atmosphere, these cute bamboo bungalow rooms are simple and clean.

**Sunsea Resort** (☎ 847 700; www.sunsearesort-muine.com; 50 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu; r US\$50-70; ☎) The traditionally inspired bungalows are dotted around a beautiful garden and pool.

## Eating

**Saigon Café** (☎ 847 091; 168-170 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu; dishes 12,000-45,000d) Great Vietnamese barbecue food in a basic setting, with profundities written on the walls in beautiful calligraphy – although we suspect 'It is still very good if you can learn by your mistake to like butter' may have lost something in translation.

**Hoang Vu** (☎ 847 525; Km 12.2 & 121 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu; dishes 25,000-52,000d) Like most successful businesses in Vietnam this one's cloned itself into two restaurants. Staff provide casually

attentive service and delicious, beautifully presented Asian food with a French twist.

**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.

**Good Morning Vietnam** (☎ 847 585; www.goodmorningviet.com; Km 11.8; mains 60,000-105,000d) This is another in the popular chain of Italian eateries. Free hotel pick-ups bridge the distance of the strip.

## Drinking

No surfer town would be complete without a smattering of beachside bars and Mui Ne doesn't disappoint. Pretty much all the following places have a pool table:

**Pogo** (138 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu) A fun, open-air bar with a big sound system and bean bags.

**Mellow** (117C Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu) Popular with the backpacking/kite-surfing fraternity.

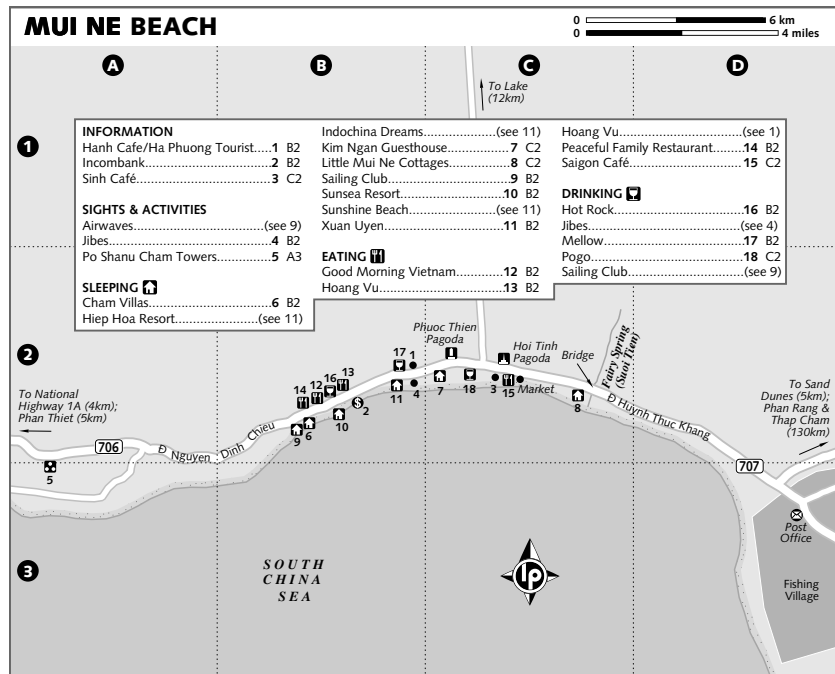
**Jibes** (90 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu) Decorated with surfboards, this one's an old favourite.

**Hot Rock** (12.5km) The Hot Rock also serves good food and plays some excellent music.

**Sailing Club** (24 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu) Not as raucous as its sister in Nha Trang, the Mui Ne incarnation is a stylish place to hang out.

## Getting There & Around

Mui Ne is now connected to the main coastal highway to the north as well as the south, making it easier to access. Open ticket buses



are the best option for Mui Ne, and Sinh Café and Hanh Café (see Orientation & Information, p397) both have daily services to/from HCMC (US\$6, four hours), Nha Trang (US\$6, five hours) and Dalat (US\$7, 5½ hours). The best way to reach the beach from the highway in Phan Thiet is by *xe om* (50,000d).

There are plenty of *xe om* drivers to take you up and down the strip.

## CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

The Central Highlands covers the southern part of the Truong Son Mountain Range. This geographical region, home to many Montagnards, is renowned for its cool climate, beautiful mountain scenery and innumerable streams, lakes and waterfalls.

In early 2001 the government forbade travellers from visiting the central highlands because of unrest among the local tribes. In 2004, there was another brief closure of the area, so check the latest situation before heading to the hills.

### DALAT

☎ 063 / pop 130,000

Dalat is quite different from anywhere else you'll visit in Vietnam. You would almost be forgiven for thinking you'd stumbled into the French Alps in springtime. This was certainly how the former colonists treated it – escaping to their chalets to enjoy the cooler climate.

Dalat is small enough to remain charming, and the surrounding countryside is blessed with lakes, waterfalls, evergreen forests and gardens; temperate Dalat is nicknamed the City of Eternal Spring. Honeymooners and kitsch-seekers love the place. Days are fine and nights can get cold at an elevation of 1475m.

### Information

#### INTERNET ACCESS

The main post office has fast, cheap connections, plus there are several internet cafés situated along either side of Đ Nguyễn Chi Thanh.

#### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Lam Dong Hospital** (☎ 822 154; 4 Đ Phạm Ngọc Thạch)

### MONEY

The following downtown banks exchange cash and travellers cheques and offer credit-card cash advances:

**Incombank** (☎ 822 496; 46-48 Hoa Binh Sq; ☒ closed Sat)

**Vietcombank** (☎ 510 478; 6 Đ Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai) There's a 24-hour ATM here.

### POST

**Main post office** (☎ 822 586; 14 Đ Trần Phú; ☒ 6.30am-9pm) International phone calls and internet access are available here.

### TRAVEL AGENCIES

For information on guided tours by motorbike, see Tours, p402.

**Dalat Travel Service** (☎ 822 125; ttdhd@hcm.vnn.vn; 7 Đ 3 Tháng 2) Offers tours and vehicle rentals.

**Groovy Gecko Tours** (☎ 836 521; ggctour@yahoo.com; 65 Đ Trường Công Định; ☒ 7.30am-8.30pm) Offers tours, trekking and mountain biking.

**Phat Tire Ventures** (☎ 829 422; www.phattireventures.com; 73 Đ Trường Công Định) This ecotourist outfit offers adrenaline activities, plus cycling tours of the Dalat area (US\$30 to US\$38).

**Sinh Café** (☎ 822 663; www.sinhcafe.vn.com; 4A Đ Bùi Thị Xuân) Tours and open-tour bus bookings.

### Sights

Perhaps there's something in the cool mountain air that fosters the distinctly bohemian vibe and cute kitsch in Dalat. Whatever the reasons, Dalat has attractions you won't find elsewhere in Vietnam.

The **Crémalière** (☎ 834 409; return 70,000d; ☒ departs 8am, 9.30am, 2pm & 3.30pm) is a cog railway, about 500m east of Xuan Huong Lake that linked Dalat and Thap Cham Phan Rang from 1928 to 1964. The line has now been partially repaired and is a tourist attraction. You can ride 8km down the tracks to Trai Mat village, where you can visit the ornate Linh Phuoc Pagoda.

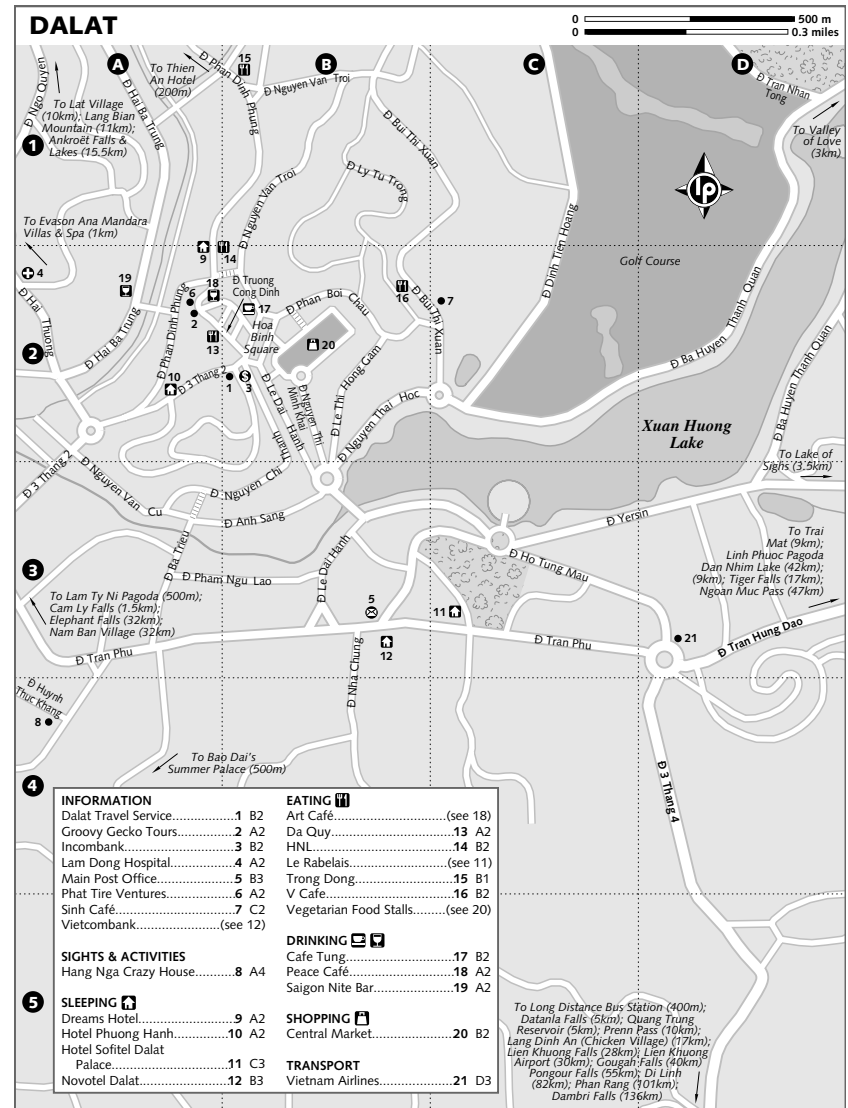
Bao Dai's **Summer Palace No 3** (Đ Lê Hồng Phong; admission 5000d; ☒ 7-11am & 1.30-4pm) is a sprawling villa constructed in 1933. The palace is surrounded by landscaped grounds and decked out in the royal colour yellow.

**Lam Ty Ni Pagoda** (Quan Am Tu; 2 Đ Thiên My; ☒ 8-11.30am & 1-6.30pm) was founded in 1961; this small pagoda is less famous than Mr Thuc, the 'Crazy Monk' who lives here. He's not so much crazy as artistic, and in fact some call him the 'Business Monk' for the brisk sales of his voluminous collection of self-brushed artwork.

Southeast of central Dalat, **Hang Nga Guesthouse & Art Gallery** (☎ 822 070; 3 Đ Huỳnh Thúc Khang; admission 8000d; ☒ 8am-7pm) is a funky place that's earned the moniker Crazy House from local residents. It's notable for its *Alice in Wonderland* architecture, where you can perch inside a giraffe or get lost in a giant spider web. You can also stay in one of the kooky,

slightly spooky rooms (US\$19 to US\$84), but book in advance.

At the **Valley of Love** (Thung Lung Tinh Yeu; Đ Phú Đông Thiên Vương; adult/child 6000/3000d; ☒ 8am-8pm) you can pose for photos on a pony accompanied by a Vietnamese cowboy. It's about 3km from Xuan Huong Lake, where you can rent a paddleboat shaped like a giant swan.



**Lake of Sighs** (Ho Than Tho; admission 5000d) was enlarged by a French-built dam. The sentimentally named natural lake is 6km northeast of Dalat. Hire **horses** (per hr 80,000d) near the restaurants.

### WATERFALLS

Dalat's waterfalls are obviously at their gushing best in the rainy season but still flow during the dry season. We advise skipping Prenn Falls, which is overdeveloped and includes an appalling collection of caged animals on-site.

**Datanla Falls** (admission 5000d) is southeast of Dalat off Hwy 20, about 200m past the turn-off to Quang Trung Reservoir. It's a nice walk through the rainforest and a steep hike downhill to the falls. Butterflies and birds are abundant.

If you feel that you must have Vietnamese cowboys and stuffed jungle animals in your holiday photos, look no further than **Cam Ly Falls** (admission 5000d). This is a popular stop for domestic visitors to Dalat and is notable more for the circus-style ambience than for the waterfall itself.

### LANG BIAN MOUNTAIN

With five volcanic peaks ranging in altitude from 2100m to 2400m, **Lang Bian Mountain** (Nui Lam Vien; admission 5000d) makes a scenic trek (three to four hours from Lat Village). You might spot some semiwild horses grazing on

the side of the mountain, where rhinoceros and tigers dwelt only half a century ago. Views from the top are tremendous.

The nine hamlets of Lat Village, whose inhabitants are ethnic minorities, are about 12km northwest of Dalat at the base of Lang Bian Mountain.

### Tours

Witty and knowledgeable, the Easy Riders are an informal crew of local motorbike guides who can whirl you around Dalat on their vintage motorbikes. This is a great way to explore the region, and having a friendly and articulate guide provides a new perspective on the sights. Some travellers get on so well with their guides that they adopt their drivers for the longer haul – it's highly recommended that you test-drive with a day tour before committing to a longer trip. Most speak great English and/or French.

The Easy Riders can be found hanging around the hotels and cafés in Dalat, but they're likely to find you first. Check out their guestbooks full of glowing testimonials from past clients.

### Sleeping

**Dreams Hotel** (☎ 833 748; dreams@hcm.vnn.vn; 151 Đ Phan Dinh Phung; r US\$10-15; 📶) We get constant fan mail about this superfriendly spot, offering tidy rooms and a family-style breakfast.

## OFF THE BEATEN TRACK IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

It's easy to get off the beaten track in this wonderfully scenic part of the country. Only Dalat makes it onto most tourists' radars, meaning that the rest of the region still offers adventure in abundance. This is a great part of the country to see on the back of a motorbike – stopping at will to admire an amazing mountain view, explore a wild waterfall or to interact with villagers from the local hill tribes.

The upgrading of the historic **Ho Chi Minh Trail** has made it easier than ever to visit out-of-the-way places such as **Kon Tum**, one of the friendliest cities in Vietnam. So far Kon Tum remains largely unspoiled and the authorities remain blessedly invisible. It remains to be seen whether increased tourism will leave these delightful backwaters unchanged. There's still an openness and friendliness in the highlands that is becoming harder to find in the tourist traps of the coast.

**Buon Ma Thuot** is the major city in the region, but the biggest buzz you'll get is from the coffee beans. Nearby **Yok Don National Park** is home to 38 endangered mammal species, including plenty of elephants and a handful of tigers. Stunning waterfalls in this area include **Gia Long** and **Dray Nur Falls** along the Krong Ana River.

One of the outstanding gems of the region, **Cat Tien National Park** comprises an amazingly biodiverse region of lowland tropical rainforest. The hiking, mountain biking and bird-watching are easily the best in southern Vietnam, plus there are lots of animals. Many of these creatures are listed as rare and endangered, including the Javan rhinoceros, considered one of the rarest mammals in the world.

**Thien An Hotel** (☎ 520 607; thienanhotel@vnn.vn; 272A Đ Phan Dinh Phung; r US\$12-15; 📶) Owned by the same family as Dreams, with the same winning formula – great breakfasts, modest rates, sincere friendliness and no hassling for tours. Free bicycles.

**Hotel Phuong Hanh** (☎ 828 213; fax 838 839; 80-82 Đ 3 Thang 2; r US\$7-30) A larger place on the side of a killer hill, the better rooms are spacious and have balconies while the very cheapest are windowless and basic.

**Novotel Dalat** (☎ 825 777; www.novotel.com; 7 Đ Tran Phu; s US\$49-64, d US\$55-70, ste US\$79-85; 📶) Constructed in 1932 as the Du Parc Hotel, the Novotel retains much of the original French-colonial feel, with an old lift, sombre wooden corridors and period light fittings.

**Hotel Sofitel Dalat Palace** (☎ 825 444; www.sofitel.com; 12 Đ Tran Phu; s US\$148-178, d US\$160-190, ste US\$258-310; 📶) This grand old place was built between 1916 and 1922. Check out the claw-foot tubs, working fireplaces, 1920s desk lamps and faux period telephones.

**Evason Ana Mandara Villas & Spa** (☎ 520 558; www.sixsenses.com/evason-dalat/index.php; Đ Le Lai; r US\$179-224, ste US\$322-460; 📶 📶) This luxury hillside compound encompasses a collection of unique French villas nestled among the pine trees. Each unique villa has its own butler and kitchen.

### Eating

#### VIETNAMESE

**Trong Dong** (☎ 821 889; 220 Đ Phan Dinh Phung; mains 24,000-55,000d; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Another good place to sample superb Vietnamese food, house specialities include grilled shrimp paste on sugar cane and fish hotpot.

**Da Quy** (Wild Sunflower; ☎ 510 883; 49 Đ Truong Cong Dinh; dishes 25,000-70,000d) With an upmarket ambience and great service, this newcomer has won lots of fans. The traditional clay pots are excellent.

**HNL** (☎ 835 505; 94 Đ Phan Dinh Phung; dishes 25,000-75,000d) Painted in pastels and with a classic motorbike as its centrepiece, HNL serves interesting Vietnamese dishes.

**Art Café** (☎ 510 089; 70 Đ Truong Cong Dinh; dishes 30,000-45,000d) Owned by an artist whose work adorns the walls, the menu features Vietnamese dishes with a twist, including plenty of vegetarian options.

#### VEGETARIAN

There are vegetarian food stalls in the market area. All serve up delicious 100% vegetarian

## CROSSING INTO LAOS: BO Y TO ATTAPEU

This new crossing at Bo Y–Attapeu links Pleiku and Qui Nhon with Attapeu and Pakse. Three Vietnamese-run buses link Attapeu and Pleiku (US\$10, 12 hours), departing Attapeu at 9am Monday, Wednesday and Friday, coming the other way Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. There are direct buses from Qui Nhon to Pakse (250,000d, 12 hours, four per week), but Lao visas are not available at this border. For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see p334.

food, some prepared to resemble and taste like traditional Vietnamese meat dishes.

### INTERNATIONAL

**Le Rabelais** (☎ 825 444; 12 Đ Tran Phu; set dinner US\$23-33) For fine French dining, the signature restaurant at the Sofitel cannot be beaten – but bring a wheelbarrow full of dong.

**V Cafe** (☎ 837 576; 1 Đ Bui Thi Xuan; dishes 25,000-59,000d) A longtime travellers favourite, this cute place serves a mix of Eastern and Western mains, along with a tempting chocolate pie.

### CAFÉS

**Cafe Tung** (6 Hoa Binh Sq) During the 1950s, Cafe Tung was a famous hang-out for Saigonesse intellectuals. Old-timers swear that the place remains exactly as it was when they were young.

### Drinking

**Saigon Nite** (☎ 820 007; 11A Đ Hai Ba Trung) The best late-night place to shoot pool and share a drink with expats and visitors.

**Peace Café** (☎ 822 787; 64 Đ Truong Cong Dinh) A popular gathering point for travellers and Easy Riders, it also serves food.

### Shopping

Hoa Binh Sq and the market building adjacent to it are the places to go for purchasing ethnic handicrafts from the nearby Montagnard villages. You can find Lat rush baskets that roll up when empty, as well as gourds for carrying water. Nonhandicraft items at rock-bottom prices include quilted, fake-fur-lined alpine jackets imported from China, and lacquered alligators holding light bulbs in their mouths.

## Getting There & Around

**Vietnam Airlines** (☎ 822 895; www.vietnamairlines.com; 40 Đ Ho Tung Mau) has daily connections with HCMC and Hanoi. Lien Khuong Airport is 30km south of the city. Vietnam Airlines operates a shuttle bus (20,000d, 30 minutes) timed around flights. Private taxis cost about US\$10.

Long-distance buses leave from the **station** (Đ 3 Thang 2) about 1km south of the city centre. Services are available to most of the country, including HCMC (60,000d, six to seven hours), Nha Trang (60,000d, seven hours) and Buon Ma Thuot (65,000d, four hours). Open-tour minibuses to Dalat can be booked at travellers cafés in Saigon, Mui Ne and Nha Trang.

Car rental with a driver starts from about US\$25 a day. Full-day tours with local motorbike guides are a great way to see the area, as many of the sights lie outside Dalat's centre. Depending on how far you want to go, expect to pay between US\$6 and US\$10 for a day tour. Many hotels offer bicycle and motorbike hire.

## AROUND DALAT

The largest waterfall in the Dalat area, **Pongour Falls** (admission 5000d) is about 55km in the direction of HCMC. The stepped falls are beautiful any time but most spectacular during the rainy season when they form a full semicircle.

**Dambri Falls** (admission 10,000d), 75km from Dalat, are the tallest falls in the area – walking down to feel the spray from the bottom is divine on a hot day. You can take a lift down and trek back up. There's also a good restaurant with mimosa-framed views near the parking lot.

Waterfalls in the Dalat region are best accessed with your own wheels. Those doing long-haul journeys with motorbike drivers can easily detour to the falls on the way to or from Dalat.

# HO CHI MINH CITY (SAIGON)

☎ 08 / pop 5.38 million

Boasting an electric, near palpable energy, Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) is Vietnam's largest metropolis and its undisputed capital of commerce. For the casual visitor, Saigon – as it's still called by all but the city officials

who live here – can seem a chaotic collage of traffic-clogged roads and urban bustle, with nary a green space in sight. Yet thousands of expats and Vietnamese immigrants couldn't imagine living anywhere else. They've long since fallen prey to the hidden charms of one of Southeast Asia's liveliest cities. Stick around this complicated city long enough and you might even find yourself smitten by it, too. HCMC is nonstop, a city full of pilgrims seeking fortune, and open 24 hours a day for the next big thing.

If every town had a symbol, Saigon's would surely be the motorbike. More than three million of them fly along streets once swarming with bicycles. Cruising along boulevards and back alleys astride a *xe om* is the quickest way to sensory overload – daily fare in this tropical town. Teeming markets, sidewalk cafés, acupuncture clinics, centuries-old pagodas and sleek skyscrapers all jockey for attention against the bustling backdrop. Yet the city hasn't forgotten its past. The ghosts live on in the churches, temples, former GI hotels and government buildings that one generation ago witnessed a city in turmoil.

## ORIENTATION

A sprawl of 16 urban and five rural *quan* (districts) make up the vast geography of HCMC, though most visitors stick to the centre around the Dong Khoi and Pham Ngu Lao neighbourhoods. Cholon, the city's Chinatown, lies southwest of the centre, and the Saigon River snakes down the eastern side.

Street labels are shortened to Đ for *duong* (street), and ĐL for *dai lo* (boulevard).

## INFORMATION

### Bookshops

**Fahasa Bookshop** (☎ 8am–10pm) Dong Khoi (Map p412; ☎ 822 4670; 185 Đ Dong Khoi); ĐL Nguyen Hue (Map p412; ☎ 822 5796; 40 ĐL Nguyen Hue) One of the best government-run bookshops, with good dictionaries, maps and general books in English and French.

**Phuong Nam Bookshop** (Map p409; ☎ 822 9650; 2A ĐL Le Duan; ☎ 8am–9.30pm) Carries imported books and magazines in English, French and Chinese.

## Cultural Centres

**British Council** (Map p409; ☎ 823 2862; www.britishcouncil.org/vietnam; 25 ĐL Le Duan)

**Idecap** (Institute of Cultural Exchange with France; Map p412; ☎ 829 5451; 31 Đ Thai Van Lung) French culture, language and arts centre.

## Emergency

**Ambulance** (☎ 115)

**Fire** (☎ 114)

**Information** (☎ 1080)

**Police** (☎ 113)

## Internet Access

Hundreds of internet cafés thrive in HCMC – in Pham Ngu Lao (Map p411) you can't swing a dead cat without hitting one. Rates run between 5000d and 15,000d per hour.

## Medical Services

**Cho Ray Hospital** (Map pp406–7; ☎ 855 4137; 201 ĐL Nguyen Chi Thanh, District 5; ☎ 24hr) The largest medical facility in Vietnam, with 24-hour emergency services and excellent, inexpensive care.

**HCMC Family Medical Practice** (Map p412; ☎ 822 7848, 24hr emergency 0913-234 911; www.vietnammedicalpractice.com; Diamond Plaza, 34 ĐL Le Duan; ☎ 24hr) One of the best international clinics in Vietnam, with prices to match.

**International Medical Center** (Map p412; ☎ 827 2366, 24hr emergency 865 4025; fac@hcm.vnn.vn; 1 Đ Han Thuyen; ☎ 24hr) This nonprofit organisation may be the least expensive Western healthcare centre in the city. Most doctors are English-speaking French physicians.

**International SOS** (Map p412; ☎ 829 8424, 24hr emergency 829 8520; 65 Đ Nguyen Du; ☎ 24hr) An international team of docs speaking English, French, Japanese and Vietnamese.

## Money

Just inside the airport terminal, there's an exchange counter run by **Sasco** (☎ 848 7142), which gives the official exchange rate. Opening hours are irregular, so carry sufficient US-dollar notes in small denominations in case it's closed.

**ANZ Bank** (Map p412; ☎ 829 9319; 11 Me Linh Sq) Has a 24-hour ATM.

**HSBC** (Map p412; ☎ 829 2288; 235 Đ Dong Khoi) Offers a secure 24-hour ATM.

**Sacombank** (Map p411; ☎ 836 4231; www.sacombank.com; 211 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc) Conveniently located in the budget-traveller zone, with 24-hour ATM.

**Vietcombank** (Map p409; ☎ 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 p412; 2 Cong Xa Paris) Saigon's striking French-era post office is next to Notre Dame Cathedral.

## Tourist Information

**Tourist Information Center** (Map p412; ☎ 822 6033; www.vntourists.com; 4G Le Loi; ☎ 8am–8pm) This sleek, new information centre distributes city maps and brochures, plus offers advice about goings-on in Saigon.

## Travel Agencies

There are lots of travel agents offering tours of the Mekong Delta and other jaunts from HCMC. Some of the better ones include the following:

**Delta Adventure Tours** (Map p411; ☎ 920 2112; www.deltaadventuretours.com; 267 Đ De Tham) Great Mekong Delta tours.

**Handspan Adventure Travel** (Map p411; ☎ 925 7605; www.handspan.com; F7, Titan Bldg, 18A Đ Nam Quoc Cang) A new branch brings the high-quality Handspan touch to the south.

**Innoviet** (Map p411; ☎ 295 8840; www.innoviet.com; 158 Đ Bui Vien)

**Sinh Cafe** (Map p411; ☎ 836 7338; www.sinhcafevn.com; 246 Đ De Tham; ☎ 6.30am–11pm)

**Sinhbalo Adventures** (Map p411; ☎ 837 6766, 836 7682; www.sinhbalo.com; 283/20 Đ Pham Ngu Lao) More upmarket, long-running and eminently reliable, Sinhbalo specialises in cycling trips.

## 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 'cowboys' on motorbikes can steal bags off your arm and sunglasses off your face, and pickpockets work all crowds. Beware, too, of the cute children crowding around you, wanting to sell postcards and newspapers.

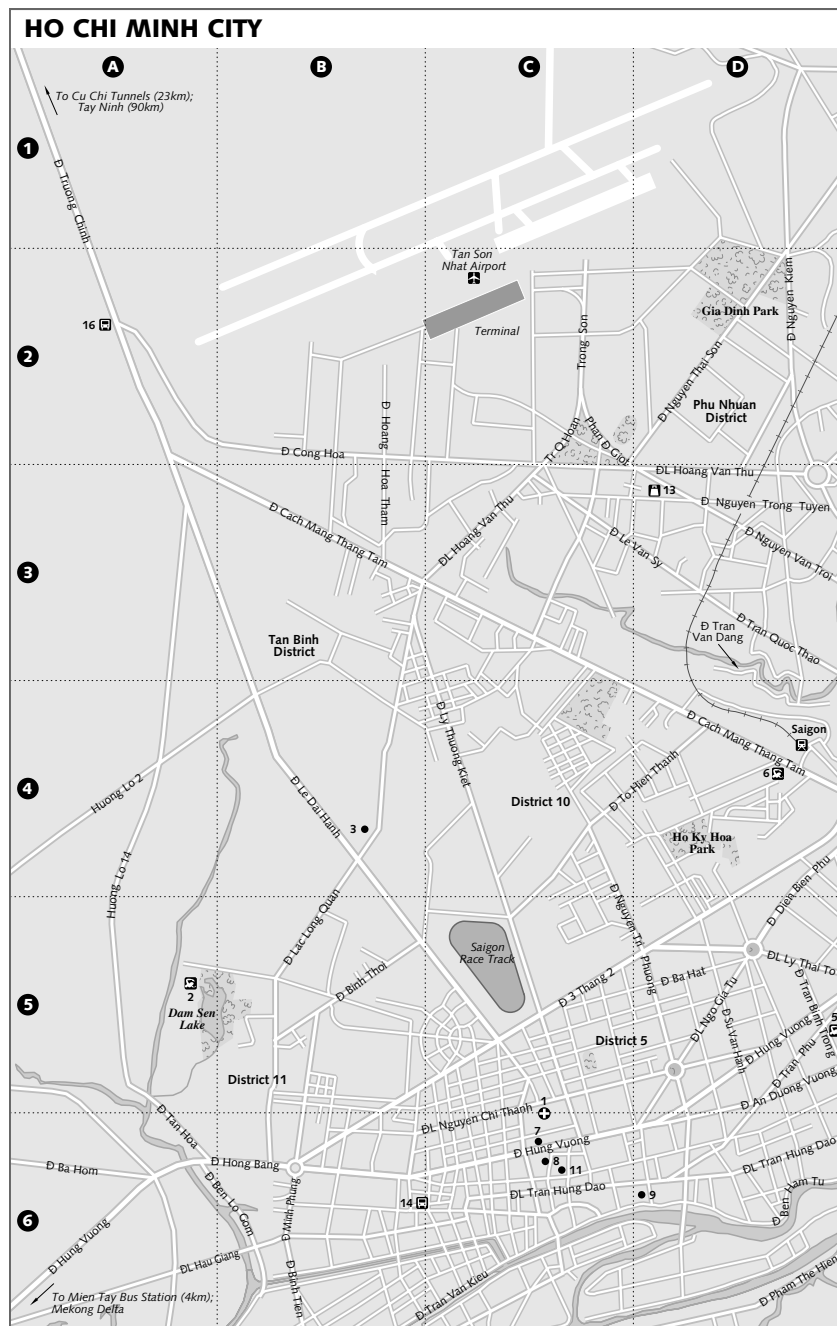
While it's generally safe to take cyclos during the day, it is not always safe at night – take a metered taxi instead.

## SIGHTS

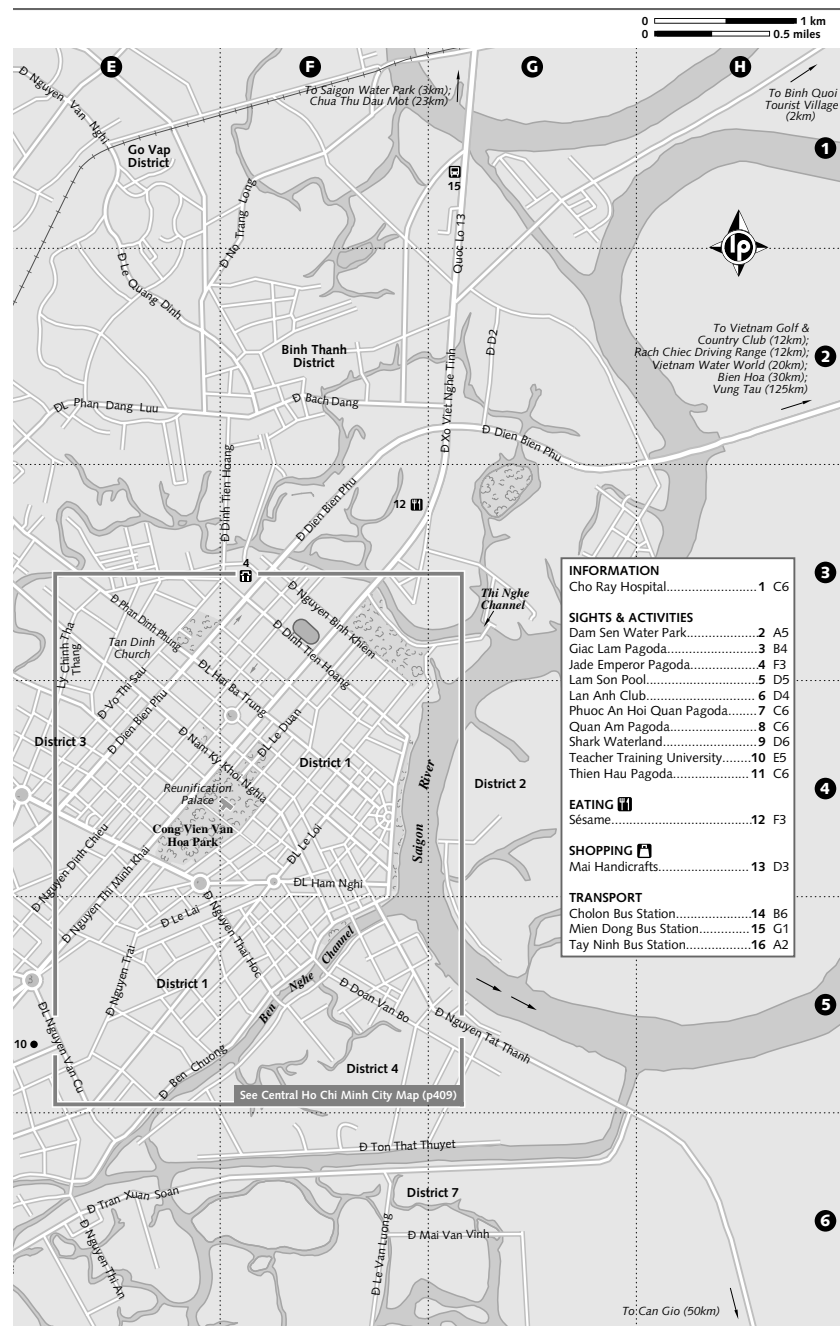
### Reunification Palace

Built in 1966 to serve as South Vietnam's Presidential Palace is the **Reunification Palace** (Hoi Trung Thong Nhat; Map p409; ☎ 829 4117; 106 Đ Nguyen Du; admission 15,000d; ☎ 7.30–11am & 1–4pm). It was through the gates of this building that the first communist tanks in Saigon crashed on the morning of 30 April 1975, the day Saigon surrendered. 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.



VIETNAM



INFORMATION	
Cho Ray Hospital.....	1 C6
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	
Dam Sen Water Park.....	2 A5
Giac Lam Pagoda.....	3 B4
Jade Emperor Pagoda.....	4 F3
Lam Son Pool.....	5 D5
Lan Anh Club.....	6 D4
Phuoc An Hoi Quan Pagoda.....	7 C6
Quan Am Pagoda.....	8 C6
Shark Waterland.....	9 D6
Teacher Training University.....	10 E5
Thien Hau Pagoda.....	11 C6
EATING	
Sesame.....	12 F3
SHOPPING	
Mai Handicrafts.....	13 D3
TRANSPORT	
Cholon Bus Station.....	14 B6
Mien Dong Bus Station.....	15 G1
Tay Ninh Bus Station.....	16 A2

VIETNAM

### THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL

This legendary route was not one but many paths that formed the major supply link for the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong during the American War. Supplies and troops leaving from the port of Vinh headed inland along inhospitable mountainous jungle paths, crossing in and out of neighbouring Laos, and eventually ending up in southern Vietnam. It's hard to imagine what these soldiers endured – thousands were lost to malaria and American bombs.

While the nature of the trail means that there's no one official route, a widely accepted section follows Hwy 14 north from Kon Tum to Giang, not far from Danang. This exceptionally beautiful track is now served by an excellent road winding along the edge of steep mountains. If you catch a bus between Danang and Kon Tum you'll be following this historic path – albeit in considerably more comfort than the men who first trod it.

### War Remnants Museum

Documenting the atrocities of war, the **War Remnants Museum** (Bao Tang Chung Tich Chien Tranh; Map p409; ☎ 930 5587; 28 Đ Vo Van Tan; admission 15,000d; ☎ 7.30-noon & 1.30-5pm) is unique, brutal and an essential stop. On display are retired artillery pieces, a model of the tiger cages used to house VC prisoners, and a heartbreaking array of photographs of the victims of war – those who suffered torture as well as those who were born with birth defects caused by the USA's use of defoliants. The exhibits are labelled in Vietnamese, English and Chinese.

### History Museum

The impressive collection of HCMC's **History Museum** (Bao Tang Lich Su; Map p409; ☎ 829 8146; Đ Nguyen Binh Khiem; admission 15,000d; ☎ 8-11am & 1.30-4.30pm Tue-Sun) is housed in a stunning Sino-French building constructed in 1929 by the Société des Études Indochinoises. Displaying artefacts from 3300 years of human activity in what is now Vietnam, it's just inside the main entrance to the zoo.

### Other Museums

Housed in a beautiful grey neoclassical structure, the **Museum of Ho Chi Minh City** (Map p412; ☎ 829 9741; 65 Đ Ly Tu Trong; admission US\$1; ☎ 8am-4pm) was built in 1886 and has displays of artefacts from the various periods of the communist struggle for power in Vietnam.

The city's **Fine Arts Museum** (Map p409; ☎ 829 4441; 97A Đ Pho Duc Chinh; admission 10,000d; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Tue-Sun) covers art from Vietnam's earliest civilisations, the Oc-Eo and Cham, to contemporary work. The collection represents a good overview of the evolution of Vietnamese aesthetics.

### Pagodas, Temples & Churches

For a dose of peace, fortified with architectural appreciation, seek out these places of worship.

#### CENTRAL HO CHI MINH CITY

**Notre Dame Cathedral** (Map p412; 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.

A splash of southern India's colour in Saigon, **Mariamman Hindu Temple** (Chua Ba Mariamman; Map p409; 45 Đ Truong Dinh; ☎ 7am-7pm) was built at the end of the 19th century and is dedicated to the Hindu goddess Mariamman. The temple is also considered sacred by many ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese.

Constructed by South Indian Muslims in 1935 on the site of an earlier mosque, **Saigon Central Mosque** (Map p412; 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 has a wealth of wonderful Chinese temples including **Quan Am Pagoda** (Map pp406-7; 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. The front doors of the pagoda are decorated with very old gold-and-lacquer panels.

Nearby, **Phuoc An Hoi Quan Pagoda** (Map pp406-7; 184 Đ Hung Vuong; ☎ 7am-5.30pm) stands as one of the most beautifully ornamented constructions in the city. Of special interest are the many small porcelain figures, the elaborate

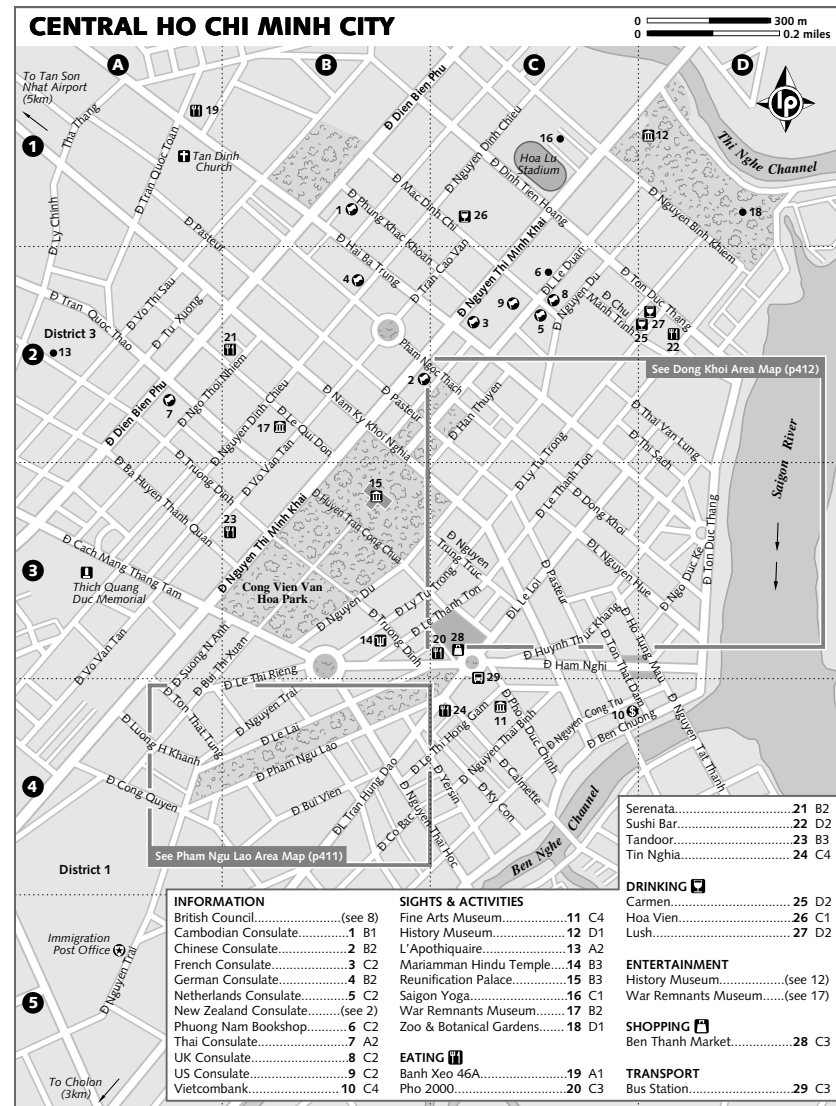
brass ritual objects and the fine woodcarvings on the altars, walls and hanging lanterns. This pagoda was built in 1902, also by the Fujian Chinese congregation.

One of the most active in Cholon, **Thien Hau Pagoda** (Ba Mieu or Pho Mieu; Map pp406-7; 710 Đ Nguyen Trai; ☎ 6am-5.30pm) is dedicated to Thien Hau, the Chinese 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 Mekong Delta trip.

#### GREATER HO CHI MINH CITY

Beautiful **Giac Lam Pagoda** (Map pp406-7; 118 Đ Lac Long Quan; ☎ 6am-9pm) dates from 1744 and is believed to be the city's oldest. The architecture hasn't





changed since 1900, and the compound is a meditative place to explore.

**Jade Emperor Pagoda** (Phuoc Hai Tu or Chua Ngoc Hoang; Map pp406-7; 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. The statues, which represent characters from both the Buddhist and Taoist traditions, are made of reinforced papier-mâché. To get to the pagoda, go to 20 Đ Dien Bien Phu and walk half a block in a northwest direction.

### Zoo & Botanical Gardens

Founded by the French in 1864, and a lovely place for a stroll under giant tropical trees, is the **Zoo & Botanical Gardens** (Thao Cam Vien; Map p409; ☎ 829 3901; 2 Đ Nguyen Binh Khiem; admission 8000đ; ☎ 7am-8pm). Although the animal enclosures are better than the usual standard in Vietnam, we would suggest sticking with the gardens and giving the zoo a miss.

### ACTIVITIES

#### Massage

HCMC offers some truly fantastic settings for pampering – the perfect antidote to a frenetic day dodging motorbikes. While many mid-range and upmarket hotels offer massage service, some are more legitimate than others. **L'Apothiquaire** (Map p409; ☎ 932 5181; www.lapothiqaire.com; 64A Đ Truong Dinh; 1hr massage US\$20; ☎ 9am-9pm; ♿) The city's most elegant spa is housed in a pretty white mansion tucked down a quiet alley, with body wraps, massages, facials, foot treatments and herbal baths.

**Vietnamese Traditional Massage Institute** (Map p411; ☎ 839 6697; 185 Đ Cong Quynh; per hr 35,000-45,000đ, sauna 25,000đ; ☎ 9am-9pm) This place offers inexpensive, no-nonsense massages performed by well-trained blind masseurs.

#### Swimming

Most of HCMC's finer hotels have fitness clubs with attractive swimming pools attached. You needn't stay there to swim, but you'll have to pay a fee of US\$8 to US\$18 per day.

**Caravelle Hotel** (Map p412; 823 4999; 19 Lam Son Sq; admission US\$13)

**Lam Son Pool** (Map pp406-7; ☎ 835 8028; 342 Đ Tran Binh Trong, District 5; per hr 5000đ, after 5pm 6000đ; ☎ 8am-8pm) An Olympic-sized pool.

**Lan Anh Club** (Map pp406-7; ☎ 862 7144; 291 Cach Mang Thang Tam, District 10; admission gym/pool 40,000/25,000đ; ☎ pool 6am-9pm) There's a good gym here.

### Water Parks

**Saigon Water Park** (☎ 897 0456; Đ Kha Van Can, Thu Duc District; adult/child 60,000/35,000đ; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 9am-6pm Sun & public holidays) has slides and a wave pool in the suburbia of Thu Duc, north of the centre; shuttle buses (5000đ) leave every half-hour from Ben Thanh Market station.

Other water parks:

**Dam Sen Water Park** (Map pp406-7; ☎ 858 8418; www.damsenwaterpark.com.vn; 3 Đ Hoa Binh; adult/child 45,000/30,000đ; ☎ 9am-6pm)

**Shark Waterland** (Map pp406-7; ☎ 853 7867; 600 Đ Ham Tu, District 5; admission 20,000-45,000đ; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 10am-9pm Sat & Sun)

### Yoga

Drop in for yoga classes at **Saigon Yoga** (Map p409; ☎ 910 5181; www.saigonyoga.com; 10F Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai; per session US\$12; ☎ 8am-7pm). Check the website for class times.

### COURSES

#### Language

The majority of foreign-language students enrol at **Teacher Training University** (Dai Hoc Su Pham; Map pp406-7; ☎ 835 5100; ciecer@hcm.vnn.vn; 280 An Duong Vuong, District 5; private/group class US\$4.50/3), which is a department of Ho Chi Minh City University.

More informal study is available at **Utopia Café** (Map p412; ☎ 824 2487; shop@utopia-café.com; 17/6A Đ Le Thanh Ton, District 1; private lesson per 60/90min 70,000/90,000đ; ☎ 8.30am-9pm), with one-on-one instruction.

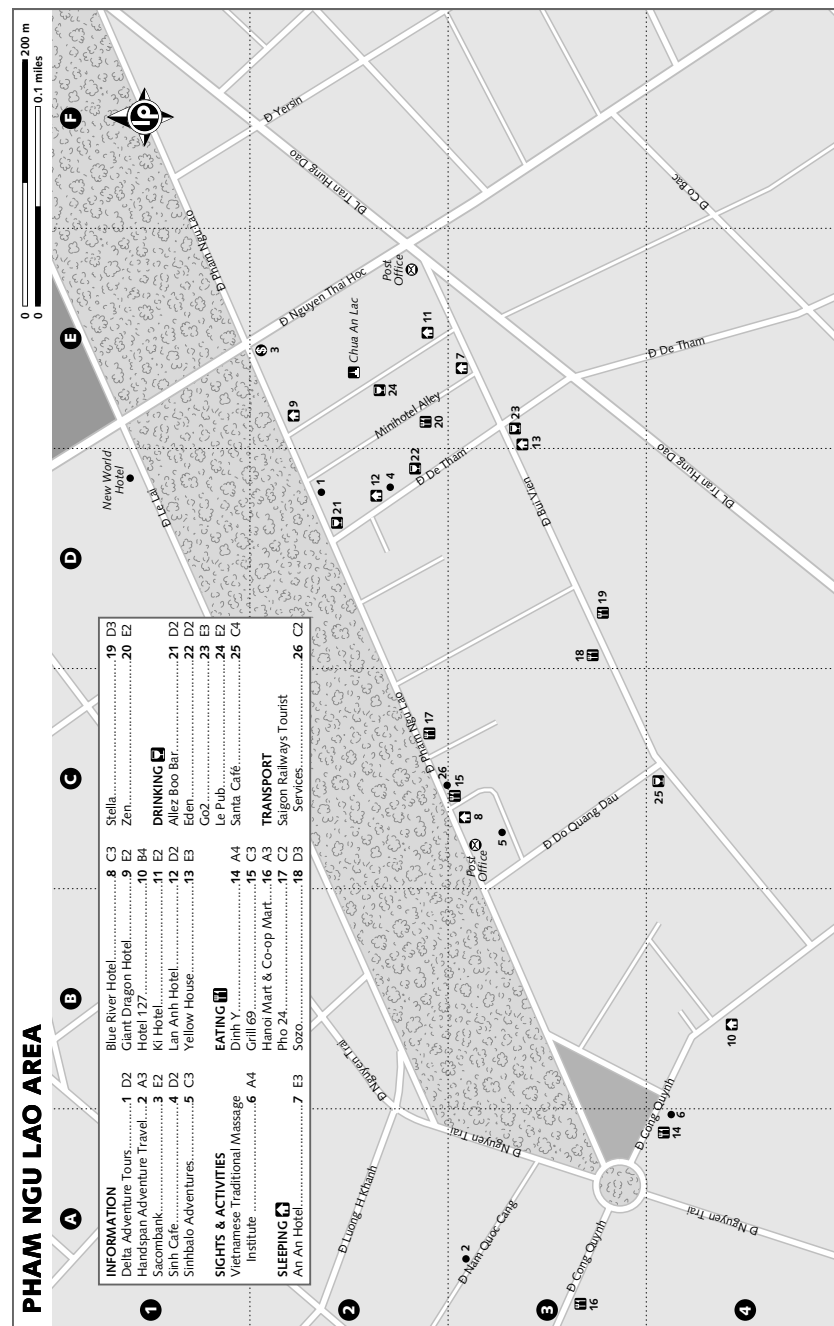
### SLEEPING

District 1 is the undisputed lodging capital of HCMC, though whether to go east (fancy) or west (cheap) depends on what you're after. Budget travellers often head straight to the Pham Ngu Lao area, where thrifty hotels and backpacker-filled cafés line the streets. Those seeking upscale digs go to Dong Khoi area, home to the city's best hotels, restaurants and bars.

### Pham Ngu Lao

Three streets – Đ Pham Ngu Lao, Đ De Tham and Đ Bui Vien – along with intersecting alleys form the heart of this backpacker ghetto, with more than 100 places to stay.

**Yellow House** (Map p411; ☎ 836 8830; yellowhouse hotel@yahoo.com; 31 Đ Bui Vien; dm/s/d incl breakfast US\$5.25/9/12; ♿) One of the cheapest options in town if you don't mind bunking with



strangers, Yellow House has two dorms, as well as private rooms.

**Blue River Hotel** (Map p411; ☎ 837 6483; blueriver1126@yahoo.com; 283/2C Đ Phạm Ngũ Lão; s/d incl breakfast from US\$10/12; 🏠) This extra-friendly place has clean, spacious rooms with simple neat furnishings. Free internet.

**Hotel 127** (Map p411; ☎ 836 8761; madamcuc@hcm.vnn.vn; 127 Đ Công Quỳnh; r US\$12-20; 🏠) One of a trio of superb hotels run by the affable Madam Cuc. This place features well-appointed rooms and the staff provides a most welcoming reception, including free local dinners.

**Giant Dragon Hotel** (Map p411; ☎ 836 1935; gd-hotel@hcm.vnn.vn; 173 Đ Phạm Ngũ Lão; r/stc US\$20/25; 🏠) The immaculate rooms at this lift-equipped

place have satellite TV, international direct dial (IDD) phones, tubs and hair dryers. Superdeluxe rooms have sitting areas and city views.

**Ki Hotel** (Map p411; ☎ 837 5582; www.tamsonco.com; 28/2 Đ Bui Vien; r US\$28-38; 🏠) This new hotel offers stylish quarters with organic elements (bamboo, paper lanterns), thoughtful extras (robe and slippers) and room enough to stretch out.

Other options in this popular area include the following:

**Lan Anh Hotel** (Map p411; ☎ 836 5197; lan-anh-hotel@hcm.vnn.vn; 252 Đ De Tham; r US\$10-18; 🏠) Offering a lift, free breakfast and comfortable rooms, this is a good central choice.

**An An Hotel** (Map p411; ☎ 837 8087; www.ananhotel.com; 40 Đ Bui Vien; r US\$22-35; 🏠) TV and minibar

in the clean rooms, plus internet, at this slick, newish place.

**Dong Khoi Area**

If you want to base yourself in the city centre, you'll find a good number of well-appointed hotels along Đ Dong Khoi or near the Saigon River.

**our pick Spring Hotel** (Map p412; ☎ 829 7362; springhotel@hcm.vnn.vn; 44-46 Đ Le Thanh Ton; s/d with breakfast from US\$32/40; 🏠) This trim and nicely designed place has a subtle Japanese feel to it. The rooms here are somewhat small and carpeted but are excellent value for the neighbourhood.

**Bong Sen Annexe** (Map p412; ☎ 823 5818; bongsen2@hcm.vnn.vn; 61-63 ĐL Hai Ba Trung; s/d with breakfast from US\$40/46; 🏠) The BS, as it's affectionately known by business travellers, is an attractive choice, with friendly management and staff. Rooms are good value for the neighbourhood.

**Asian Hotel** (Map p412; ☎ 829 6979; asianhotel@hcm.vnn.vn; 150 Đ Dong Khoi; s/d with breakfast from US\$45/50; 🏠) In the centre of town, this contemporary hotel has well-designed rooms and wi-fi access. Book the superior or deluxe for a balcony and natural light.

**Grand Hotel** (Map p412; ☎ 823 0163; www.grandhotel.com.vn; 8-24 Đ Dong Khoi; s/d from US\$75/85; 🏠) Aptly named, the Grand's renovated landmark building is notable for its old-fashioned

lift and spacious suites. There's also an indoor pool and a gym.

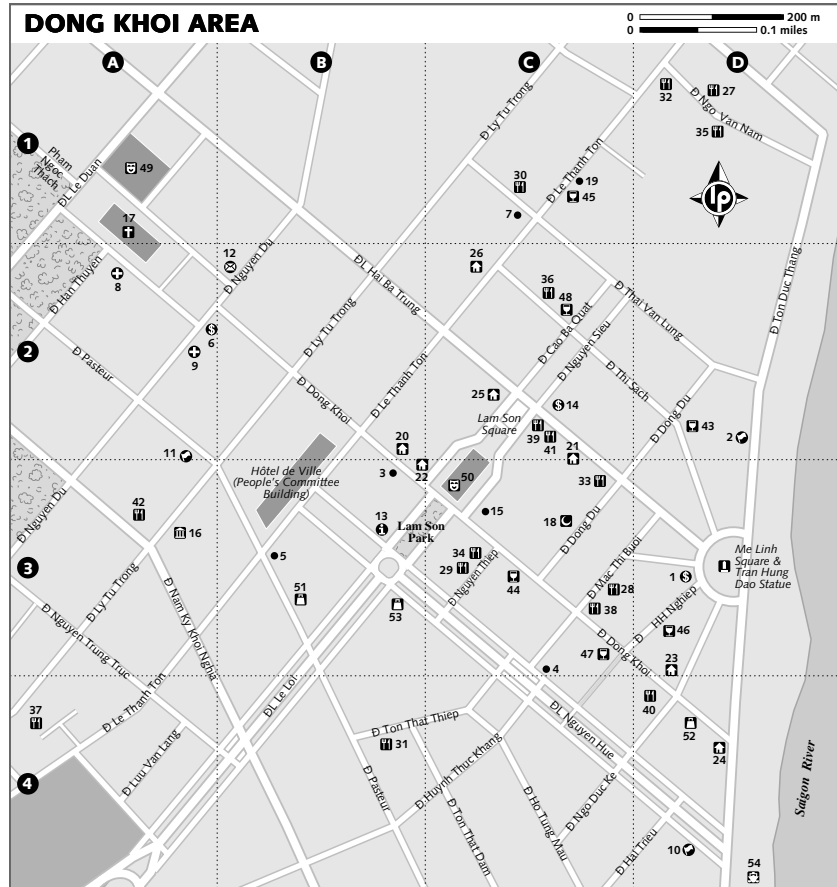
**Continental Hotel** (Map p412; ☎ 829 9252; www.continentalvietnam.com; 132-134 Đ Dong Khoi; r US\$75-135; 🏠) One of the city's most historic lodgings, the Continental was the setting for much of the action that occurred in Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American*. Panelled wood ceilings accent the carpeted, cavernous rooms.

**our pick Majestic Hotel** (Map p412; ☎ 829 5517; www.majesticsaigon.com.vn; 1 Đ Dong Khoi; s/d from US\$135/150; 🏠) Dating back to 1925, the Majestic is situated right on the Saigon River. It has a colonial charm and unique atmosphere, setting it apart from more modern behemoths.

**Park Hyatt Saigon** (Map p412; ☎ 824 1234; saigon.park.hyatt.com; 2 Lam Son Sq; d from US\$210; 🏠) The Park Hyatt is easily Saigon's finest hotel. Occupying a fine position in the heart of the city, this hotel has an elegant white façade and offers beautifully appointed guest rooms.

**EATING**

Hanoi may have more lakes and colonial charm, but HCMC is the reigning culinary king of Vietnam. Restaurants here range from dirt-cheap sidewalk stalls to atmospheric villas, each serving a unique interpretation of Vietnamese decadence. Besides brilliant



<b>INFORMATION</b>	<b>SLEEPING</b> 🏠	Quan An Ngon.....42 A3
ANZ Bank.....1 D3	Asian Hotel.....20 B2	Temple Club.....(see 31)
Australian Consulate.....2 D2	Bong Sen Annexe.....21 C2	<b>DRINKING</b> 🍷
Canadian Consulate.....(see 6)	Continental Hotel.....22 B3	Apocalypse Now.....43 D2
DHL.....(see 12)	Grand Hotel.....23 D3	Saigon Saigon Bar.....(see 15)
Fahasa Bookshop.....3 B3	Majestic Hotel.....24 D4	Samsara.....44 C3
Fahasa Bookshop.....4 C3	Park Hyatt Saigon.....25 C2	Sheridan's Irish House.....45 C1
Federal Express.....5 B3	Spring Hotel.....26 C2	Tropical Rainforest
HCMC Family Medical	<b>EATING</b> 🍴	Disco.....46 D3
Practice.....(see 49)	Angkor Encore Plus.....27 D1	Underground.....47 C3
HSBC.....6 A2	Annie's Pizza.....28 C3	Vasco's.....48 C2
Idecaf.....7 C1	Augustin.....29 C3	<b>ENTERTAINMENT</b> 🎬
International Medical	Center.....(see 48)	Diamond Plaza Cinema.....49 A1
Center.....8 A2	Camargue.....30 C1	Idecaf.....(see 7)
International SOS.....9 A2	Fanny.....31 B4	Municipal Theatre.....50 C3
Japanese Embassy.....10 D4	Hoi An.....32 D1	<b>SHOPPING</b> 🛍️
Laos Consulate.....11 A2	Indian Canteen.....(see 18)	Chi Chi.....51 B3
Main Post Office.....12 B2	Java Coffee Bar.....33 C3	Lotus.....52 D4
Tourist Information Center.....13 B3	Lemon Grass.....34 C3	Russian Market
Vietcombank.....14 C2	Mandarine.....35 D1	(Tax Department Store).....53 B3
<b>SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>	Mogambo.....36 C2	<b>TRANSPORT</b>
Caravelle Hotel.....15 C3	Nam Giao.....37 A4	Bach Dang Jetty
Museum of Ho Chi Minh City...16 A3	Nam Kha.....38 C3	(Hydrofoils to Vung Tau)...54 D4
Notre Dame Cathedral.....17 A1	Pacharan.....39 C2	
Saigon Central Mosque.....18 C3	Pho Oso.....40 D4	
Utopia Café.....19 C1	Pomodoro.....41 C2	

regional fare, Saigon offers a smattering of world cuisine, with Indian, Japanese, Thai, French, Italian and East–West fusions well represented.

Good foodie neighbourhoods include the Dong Khoi area, with a high density of top-quality restaurants, as well as nearby District 3. Pham Ngu Lao's eateries, attempting to satisfy every possible culinary whim, are generally less impressive.

## Vietnamese

**Nam Giao** (Map p412; ☎ 825 0261; 136/15 Đ Le Thanh Ton; mains 10,000–15,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) Tucked away in an alley near Ben Thanh Market, Nam Giao serves superb Huế-style mains and is always packed.

**our pick** **Quan An Ngon** (Map p412; ☎ 825 7179; 138 Đ Nam Ky Khoi Nghia; mains 17,000–60,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) Surrounding the garden-style patio is a ring of cooks at individual stations, mixing up softly spiced creations in the open air. An excellent selection of traditional Vietnamese dishes.

**Pho Oso** (Map p412; ☎ 829 6415; 37 Đ Dong Khoi; mains 18,000–80,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) This tiny noodle shop serves delectable bowls of *pho* in a cosy setting. And remember the Oso mantra: 'no delicious, no pay'.

**Banh Xeo 46A** (Map p409; ☎ 824 1110; 46A Đ Dinh Cong Trang; mains 20,000–30,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) *Banh xeo* has been known to induce swoons of gastronomic delight among certain visitors. Come here to try some of the best *banh xeo* in HCMC.

**Pho 24** (Map p411; 271 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; mains 24,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This polished noodle shop serves fantastic bowls of quality *pho* – along with fresh juices and spring rolls. Visit [www.pho24.com.vn](http://www.pho24.com.vn) for other locations throughout Vietnam.

## QUIRKY SAIGON

**Dam Sen Park** (Map pp406-7; ☎ 855 4963; 3 Đ Hoa Binh; admission 10,000d; ☺ 9am–9pm) offers a dose of slightly bizarre fun. Giant animals made of coconut shells are on display outside only by those made of CDs. Venture inside the park's landscaped gardens embellished with lakes, bridges and pagodas to find an ice-block wonderland inside an enormous freezer-room, cafés and gift shops, and a roller coaster.

**Grill 69** (Map p411; ☎ 836 7936; 275H Đ Pham Ngu Lao; mains 35,000–80,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) Sizzling barbecued kangaroo, ostrich and more pedestrian fare (pork, squid, beef) go nicely with the wine selections.

## Gourmet Vietnamese

Compared with what you would pay for fine Vietnamese food abroad, HCMC's better Vietnamese restaurants are a bargain. It's possible to eat like royalty in a lavish restaurant for around US\$10 for lunch – or US\$25 for dinner – per person.

**Mandarine** (Map p412; ☎ 822 9783; 11A Đ Ngo Van Nam; mains 60,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) The fine selection of traditional dishes on offer draws on all regions. The food is superb, and the traditional music performances make it an all-round good bet.

**our pick** **Temple Club** (Map p412; ☎ 829 9244; 29 Đ Ton That Thiep; mains 70,000–130,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) On the 2nd floor of a beautifully restored colonial villa, Temple Club serves delectable Vietnamese plates such as fish with tamarind or shrimp in coconut milk.

**our pick** **Sésame** (Map pp406-7; ☎ 899 3378; tri.anglevhn@hcmc.netnam.vn; 153 Đ Xo Viet Nghe Tinh, Binh Thanh District; set meals 90,000–120,000d; ☺ 11.30am–2pm Tue–Fri & 7–10pm Fri & Sat) A hospitality training school for disadvantaged children, French-Vietnamese dishes made with fresh local ingredients are delicious and beautifully presented.

**Nam Kha** (Map p412; ☎ 828 8309; 46 Đ Dong Khoi; mains around US\$10; ☺ lunch & dinner) The setting here consists of a reflecting pool flanked by gold-leaf-covered pillars, with tables scattered around the outside. Savoury Vietnamese dishes match the surrounds.

Delectable dining is also available at the following places:

**Lemon Grass** (Map p412; ☎ 822 0496; 4 Đ Nguyen Thiep; mains 50,000–70,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) Despite the simple décor, this is one of the best Vietnamese restaurants in the city centre.

**Hoi An** (Map p412; ☎ 823 7694; 11 Đ Le Thanh Ton; mains 70,000–120,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) Run by the same team as Mandarine, the speciality here is imperial Huế-style dishes.

## International

**Mogambo** (Map p412; ☎ 825 1311; 208 Đ Thi Sach; mains 30,000–50,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) Noted for its Polynesian décor and juicy burgers, Mogambo is a restaurant, pub and hotel.

**Augustin** (Map p412; ☎ 829 2941; 10 Đ Nguyen Thiep; mains 60,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon–Sat) Many

consider Augustin the city's best casual French restaurant. It serves tasty bistro-style food.

**Pacharan** (Map p412; ☎ 825 6824; 97 Đ Hai Ba Trung; tapas 75,000–90,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) This colourful Spanish tapas restaurant and wine bar is one of Saigon's trendiest spots to meet up over a drink.

**Pomodoro** (Map p412; ☎ 823 8998; 79 Đ Hai Ba Trung; mains 80,000–160,000d; ☺ 10am–10pm) This small Italian restaurant has a cosy setting for good pizzas, pastas and tiramisu.

**Camargue** (Map p412; ☎ 824 3148; 16 Đ Cao Ba Quat; mains US\$15; ☺ lunch & dinner) Housed in a beautiful restored villa, Camargue is also home to trendy Vasco's bar. The menu includes a variety of gourmet dishes complemented by a well-appointed wine list.

Other restaurants to try:

**Annie's Pizza** (Map p412; ☎ 823 9044; 45 Đ Mac Thi Bui; pizzas 40,000–70,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) Great pizzas and free delivery.

**Stella** (Map p411; ☎ 836 9220; 121 Đ Bui Vien; mains 75,000–125,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) Stella serves excellent risotto, lasagne and gnocchi in a stylish, Zenlike trattoria.

## Other Asian

**Indian Canteen** (Map p412; ☎ 823 2159; 66 Đ Dong Du; dishes 7000d) For really cheap Indian food, seek out this place behind the Saigon Central Mosque. The fish curry (21,000d) is superb.

**Angkor Encore Plus** (Map p412; ☎ 829 8814; 28 Đ Ngo Van Nam; mains around 35,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) Wonderful Khmer cuisine, now cooking in a little haven of pretty décor and authentic flavours.

**Chao Thai** (Map p412; ☎ 824 1457; 16 Đ Thai Van Lung; mains around 45,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) Lunch sets are good value, with some of Saigon's best Thai food.

**Sushi Bar** (Map p409; ☎ 823 8042; shige@hcm.vnn.vn; 2 Đ Le Thanh Ton; sushi 45,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) Bristling with life, this sushi bar is usually packed with Japanese and has a fun view of a frenzied intersection.

**our pick** **Tandoor** (Map p409; ☎ 930 4839; 103 Đ Vo Van Tan, District 3; set lunch 58,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) Tandoor serves outstanding North Indian food, and the set lunch is particularly good value.

## Vegetarian

**Dinh Y** (Map p411; ☎ 836 7715; 171B Đ Cong Quynh; mains 7000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Across the road from Thai Binh Market, Dinh Y serves inex-

pensive and delicious veggie fare, and has an English menu.

**our pick** **Tin Nghia** (Map p409; ☎ 821 2538; 9 Đ Tran Hung Dao; mains 8000d; ☺ 7am–8.30pm) The owners are strict Buddhists who turn out delicious traditional Vietnamese food, prepared with tofu, mushrooms and other vegetables.

**Zen** (Map p411; ☎ 837 3713; 185/30 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; mains 10,000–15,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This casual travellers' favourite serves cheap veggie food in a mellow, family atmosphere.

## Cafés

**Serenata** (Map p409; ☎ 930 7436; 6Đ Đ Ngo Thoi Nhien; ☺ closed Sun) Tables here are scattered around a lush, pond-filled courtyard and inside a charming villa. Popular with couples after dark with live music some nights.

**Sozo** (Map p411; ☎ 095-870 6580; 176 Đ Bui Vien; 3 cookies US\$1) This lovely café serves coffees, cinnamon rolls, homemade cookies and sandwiches. There's wi-fi access, and more importantly, it trains and employs poor, disadvantaged Vietnamese.

**Java Coffee Bar** (Map p412; ☎ 823 0187; 38–42 Đ Dong Du) With espresso bar, excellent café fare and even smoothies (35,000d) made with silken tofu, Java is chic and relaxed.

**Fanny** (Map p412; ☎ 821 1633; 29–31 Đ Ton That Thiep; ice cream scoop 6000–15,000d) Set in an attractive French villa, Fanny creates excellent Franco-Vietnamese ice cream in fruity flavours (dare to try the durian). Has wi-fi.

## Food Stalls

Noodle soup is available all day at street stalls everywhere. A large bowl of delicious beef noodle soup usually costs between 8000d and 15,000d. Just look for the signs that say '*pho*'.

**Pho 2000** (Map p409; ☎ 822 2788; 1–3 Đ Phan Chu Trinh; pho 20,000d) Near the Ben Thanh Market, this is a good place for your first *pho* – former US president Bill Clinton stopped in for a bowl.

Markets always have a side selection of food items, often on the ground floor or in the basement. Clusters of food stalls can be found in Thai Binh, Ben Thanh and An Dong Markets.

## Self-Catering

Simple, dirt-cheap meals can be cobbled together from street stalls and markets with fresh fruits and vegetables, baguettes baked daily and soft French cheese.

**Co-op Mart** (Map p411; Đ Cong Quynh; ☎ 8am-8pm) A good supermarket west of the traffic circle near Thai Binh Market.

Another good supermarket, just down the street from the Co-Op Mart, is Hanoi Mart.

## DRINKING

Wartime Saigon was known for its riotous nightlife. Liberation in 1975 put a real dampener on evening activities, but the bars and clubs have staged a comeback. However, periodic 'crack-down, clean-up' campaigns continue to calm the fun.

### Pham Ngu Lao Area

**Le Pub** (Map p411; ☎ 837 7679; www.lepub.org; 175/22 Đ Pham Ngu Lao) This attractive bar is the new expat fave in the Pham Ngu Lao area. Take a front seat to watch the action in backpacker central.

**Allez Boo Bar** (Map p411; ☎ 837 2505; 187 Đ Pham Ngu Lao) Watch the world scooter by at this bamboo-decked bar that always packs a (foreign) crowd, with a handful of prostitutes thrown in for good measure.

**Eden** (Map p411; ☎ 836 8154; 185/22 Đ De Tham; mains 30,000-60,000đ) This multilevel spot has red lanterns over the bar, a cosy, inviting vibe and staff dressed in *red ao dai*.

**Santa Café** (Map p411; cnr Đ Bui Vien & Đ Do Quang Dau) Divey little place with outdoor seating that's a favourite of the traveller crowd.

**Go2** (Map p411; ☎ 836 9575; 187 Đ De Tham) Above an open, airy street-level bar, this popular little club gathers a good mix of expats and Saigon party people. DJs spin the tunes and it's open late.

### Dong Khoi Area

These bars are generally a notch or two up in price from other parts of town.

**Hoa Vien** (Map p409; ☎ 829 0585; www.hoavien.com; 28 Đ Mac Dinh Chi) Notable for being HCMC's only Czech restaurant, the real drawcard is the freshly brewed draught Pilsner Urquell.

**Underground** (Map p412; ☎ 829 9079; 69 Đ Dong Khoi; ☎ 10am-midnight) Named after the London tube, Underground is a popular gathering spot for expats and travellers alike.

**Vasco's** (Map p412; ☎ 824 3148; 16 Đ Cao Ba Quat) Much loved by expats, hip Vasco's draws a bigger crowd on weekends when there's live music.

**Lush** (Map p409; 2 Đ Ly Tu Trong) Lush is an animé-themed bar that gathers an attractive, mixed

crowd. The wraparound bar takes centre stage and is great for people-watching.

**Carmen** (Map p409; ☎ 829 7699; 8 Đ Ly Tu Trong) Carmen has a stone wall exterior and a cosy wine cellarlike interior (duck your head when you enter), with live music nightly.

**Q Bar** (Map p412; ☎ 823 3479; 7 Lam Son Sq) Attracting a cool clientele for cocktails, Q Bar is where HCMC's fashion-conscious, alternative crowd hangs out.

Other good spots:

**Saigon Saigon Bar** (Map p412; ☎ 823 3479; 10th fl, Caravelle Hotel, 19 Lam Son Sq) For excellent views over the city centre, stop by Saigon Saigon for a drink around dusk.

**Sheridan's Irish House** (Map p412; ☎ 823 0973; 17/13 Đ Le Thanh Ton) This traditional Irish pub is beamed in straight from the backstreets of Dublin. Good pub grub.

## ENTERTAINMENT

**History Museum** (Map p409; ☎ 829 8146; Đ Nguyen Binh Khiem; admission 30,000đ; ☎ 8-11.30am & 1-4pm Tue-Sun) This museum hosts water-puppetry performances. Schedules vary, but shows tend to start when about five or more people show up.

Also check out the schedule of performances at the **War Remnants Museum** (Map p409; ☎ 930 5587; 28 Đ Vo Van Tan; admission 30,000đ; ☎ 7.30-11.45am & 1.30-5.15pm Tue-Sun).

Theatre, live music and films around the Dong Khoi area:

**Diamond Plaza Cinema** (Map p412; ☎ 825 7751; Diamond Plaza, 163 Đ Dong Khoi; tickets 30,000-40,000đ) English-language films.

**Idecaf** (Map p412; ☎ 829 5451; 31 Đ Thai Van Lung) Screens French-language films.

**Municipal Theatre** (Nha Hat Thanh Pho; Map p412; ☎ 829 9976; Lam Son Sq) Plays and musical performances.

### GAY & LESBIAN HO CHI MINH CITY

Although there are few openly gay venues, Saigon's popular bars and clubs are generally gay-friendly. In Dong Khoi area, Lush (left) attracts a good, mixed crowd with danceable music but no dance floor. Apocalypse Now (opposite) attracts a small gay contingent among an otherwise straight crowd, with solid grooves and a spacious dance floor. **Samsara** (Map p412; ☎ 862 2630; 2nd fl, 131 Đ Dong Khoi), above the Brodard Café, is a mostly gay affair.

## Clubbing

**Apocalypse Now** (Map p412; ☎ 824 1463; 2C Đ Thi Sach) Dance clubs in Vietnam have a tendency to change with the wind, but 'Apo' is the exception to the rule. It's been around forever and gives a good eyeful of the seamier side of international relations.

**Tropical Rainforest Disco** (Mua Rung; Map p412; ☎ 825 7783; 5-15 Đ Ho Huan Nghiep; cover US\$4) This popular nightspot in the city centre attracts a younger crowd. The cover charge includes one free drink.

## SHOPPING

Among the tempting wares to be found in Saigon are embroidered-silk shoes, knock-off Zippo lighters engraved with fake soldier poetry and toy helicopters made from beer cans. Boutiques along Đ Le Thanh Ton and Đ Pasteur sell handmade ready-to-wear fashion. In Pham Ngu Lao, shops sell ethnic-minority fabrics, handicrafts, T-shirts and various appealing accessories.

Ben Thanh Market (Cho Ben Thanh; Map p409) is the best place to start. Part of the market is devoted to normal everyday items, but the lucrative tourist trade also has healthy representation. This means you need to be alert to sticky fingers.

Đ Dong Khoi (Map p412) is one big arts-and-crafts tourist bazaar, but prices can get outrageous – negotiate if no prices are posted.

**Russian Market** (Map p412; cnr Đ Le Loi & Đ Nguyen Hue) No longer the dowdy but charming cavern of vendors and bargains it was before its face-lift, there are still a few deals here. Worth a look for clothes in Western sizes without the boutique mark-ups.

Check out the following shops around town:

**Chi Chi** (Map p412; ☎ 824 7812; anhxuanvn@hcm.fpt.vn; 138 Đ Pasteur; ☎ 8am-8pm) Features well-chosen, lovely fabrics and fine designs; custom tailoring is also offered.

**Lotus** (Map p412; ☎ 098-908 4449; lotus.hochiminh@yahoo.com; 25 Đ Dong Khoi) For vintage propaganda posters (from the 1960s and '70s), this place is a goldmine. Expect to pay upwards of US\$85 for an original.

**Mai Handicrafts** (Map pp406-7; ☎ 844 0988; maivn@hcm.vnn.vn; 298 Đ Nguyen Trong Tuyen, Tan Binh District) Fair-trade shop dealing in ceramics, ethnic fabrics and other gift items, to support poor families and street children.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

Tan Son Nhat Airport was one of the busiest in the world in the late 1960s. For more details on international air travel, see p433.

Most domestic flights are operated by Vietnam Airlines. See the map (p435) for details on routes and schedules.

### Boat

Cargo ferries serving the Mekong Delta depart from the **Bach Dang jetty** (Map p412; Đ Ton Duc Thang). Costs for these ferries are negotiable. Also departing from this location are hydrofoils to Vung Tau (US\$10, one hour 20 minutes, nine daily). For more information on the services contact **Petro Express** (☎ 821 0650) at the jetty.

### Bus

Intercity buses depart from and arrive at several bus stations around HCMC. Local buses (3500đ) travelling to the intercity bus stations leave from the station situated opposite Ben Thanh Market (Map p409). There are four useful bus stations located around the city:

**Cholon bus station** (Map pp406-7; Đ Le Quang Trung) Convenient buses to My Tho and other Mekong Delta towns; the station is located one street north of Binh Tay Market.

**Mien Dong bus station** (Map pp406-7; ☎ 829 4056) Buses to places north of HCMC; in Binh Thanh District, about 5km from central Saigon on National Hwy 13.

**Mien Tay bus station** (☎ 825 5955) Even more buses to points south of HCMC, but about 10km southwest of Saigon in An Lac.

**Tay Ninh bus station** (Map pp406-7; ☎ 849 5935) Buses to Tay Ninh, Cu Chi and points northeast of HCMC, in Tan Binh District.

### INTERNATIONAL BUS

There are international bus services connecting HCMC and Phnom Penh touted around the Pham Ngu Lao area. Better are the direct services with **Phnom Penh Sorya Transport** (Map p411; ☎ 920 3624; 309 Pham Ngu Lao). Services depart in either direction five times a day between 6.30am and 1pm, costing US\$12. This service avoids a change of bus at the border.

### Car & Motorcycle

Hotels and travellers cafés can arrange car rentals from about US\$25 per day and up, depending on the destination. Pham Ngu Lao is the neighbourhood to look for motorbike rentals (US\$5 to US\$10 per day).

## Train

**Saigon Railways Tourist Services** (Map p411; ☎ 836 7640; 275C Đ Pham Ngu Lao) A convenient place to purchase tickets.

**Saigon train station** (Ga Sai Gon; Map pp406-7; ☎ 824 5585; 1 Đ Nguyen Thong; 🕒 7.15-11am & 1-3pm)

## GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

Tan Son Nhat Airport is 7km northwest of central HCMC. Metered taxis are your best bet and cost around 75,000d (US\$5). **Sasco Taxi** (☎ 844 6448), just beyond the baggage carousels, has a counter where you can prepay for a taxi.

The driver may try to claim your hotel of choice is closed, burned down, is dirty and dangerous, or anything to steer you somewhere else.

A motorbike taxi (50,000d) is an option for getting to/from the airport, but you're not saving much for a lot of stress.

Most economical is the air-conditioned **airport bus** (3500d), No 152, departing every 15 minutes. It stops at both the international and domestic terminals before making regular stops along Đ De Tham (Pham Ngu Lao area) and international hotels along Đ Dong Khoi.

## Bicycle

Bicycles are available for hire from many budget hotels and cafés, especially around Pham Ngu Lao.

## Car & Motorcycle

If you're brave souls or experienced bikers, it's a thrill a minute driving here. Motorbikes are available for hire around Pham Ngu Lao for US\$5 to US\$10 per day. Make sure to give it a test drive first; you'll usually be asked to leave your passport as collateral.

## Cyclo

Cyclos are the most interesting way of getting around town, but avoid them at night. Overcharging tourists is the norm, so negotiate a price beforehand and have the exact change. You can rent a cyclo from 20,000d per hour.

## Taxi

Hail taxis on the street. If you don't find one straight away, ring up and one will be dispatched in less time than it takes to say 'Ho

Chi Minh'. Note that faulty meters are much less common here than in Hanoi.

Try the following:

**Ben Thanh Taxi** (☎ 842 2422)

**Mai Linh Taxi** (☎ 822 6666)

**Red Taxi** (☎ 844 6677)

**Saigon Taxi** (☎ 842 4242)

**Vina Taxi** (☎ 811 1111)

## Xe Om

Far more prevalent than a traditional taxi is the *xe om* or moto taxi. The accepted rate is 10,000d to 15,000d for short rides.

# AROUND HO CHI MINH CITY

## CU CHI TUNNELS

The **tunnel network** (admission 70,000d) at Cu Chi was the stuff of legend during the 1960s for its role in facilitating Viet Cong control of a large rural area only 30km from Saigon. At its height, the tunnel system stretched from Saigon to the Cambodian border. In the district of Cu Chi alone, there were more than 200km of tunnels. After ground operations targeting the tunnels claimed large numbers of casualties and proved ineffective, the Americans turned their artillery and bombers on the area, transforming it into a moonscape.

Parts of this remarkable tunnel network have been reconstructed and two sites are open to visitors; one near the village of Ben Dinh and the other at Ben Duoc. During guided tours of the tunnel complex, it's possible to actually descend into tunnel entrances as well as into the tunnels themselves. Although some sections have been widened, others remain in their original condition. If you can fit into the narrow passageways, you'll gain an empathetic, if claustrophobic, awe for the people who spent weeks underground.

Day tours operated by travellers cafés charge around US\$5 per person (transport only); most include a stop at the Cao Dai Great Temple in Tay Ninh. Private tours with a guide are also available through hotels and travel agencies.

## TAY NINH

☎ 066 / pop 41,300

Tay Ninh town, capital of Tay Ninh Province, serves as the headquarters of one of Vietnam's most interesting indigenous religions

(see the boxed text, p80). The Cao Dai Great Temple was built between 1933 and 1955. Victor Hugo is among the Westerners especially revered by the Cao Dai; look for his likeness at the Great Temple.

Tay Ninh is 96km northwest of HCMC. The Cao Dai Holy See complex is 4km east of Tay Ninh. One-day tours from Saigon, including Tay Ninh and the Cu Chi Tunnels, cost around US\$5 and private tours are also available through hotels and travel agencies.

## BEACHES AROUND HO CHI MINH CITY

There are several beach resorts within striking distance of downtown Saigon, although most visitors make for Mui Ne (p397). If time is pressing and you want a quick fix, consider Vung Tau or Long Hai.

A short hop from HCMC, **Vung Tau** drones with bass-thumping action on the weekends as Saigonese visitors motor into town. Weekdays, however, are blissfully quiet, with kilometres of empty beaches. The business of oil-drilling here means the azure horizon is marred by oil tankers, and the population flecked with expats. There are stacks of hotels to choose from. Back Beach has the best choice of budget digs, while Front Beach has a row of slick midrange hotels. If you've never been to Rio di Janeiro, Small Mountain (Nui Nho), has a giant **Jesus** (admission free; 🕒 7.30-11.30am & 1.30-5pm) waiting with arms outstretched to embrace the South China Sea.

If you want to escape the mass tourism soullessness of Vung Tau, press on to **Long Hai**, a less-commercialised seaside retreat within a couple of hours' drive (30km) of HCMC. It has a pretty white-sand beach and the area benefits from a microclimate that brings less rain than other parts of the south. Its natural beauty persuaded Bao Dai, the last emperor of Vietnam, to build a holiday residence here (now the Anois Beach Resort).

From Mien Dong bus station in HCMC, air-con minibuses (25,000d, two hours) leave for Vung Tau. **Petro Express hydrofoil** (☎ in HCMC 08-821 0650, Vung Tau 816 308) has services to Vung Tau (120,000d, 90 minutes) from Bach Dang jetty in HCMC. Boats leave roughly every two hours from 6.30am. In Vung Tau the boat leaves from Cau Da pier, opposite the Hai Au Hotel.

Long Hai is 124km from HCMC, about a two-hour journey by car. The 30km road between Vung Tau and Long Hai is not served by any public transport; a *xe om* ride should cost around 50,000d.

# MEKONG DELTA

Vietnam's 'rice basket', the Mekong Delta is a watery landscape of green fields and sleepy villages, crisscrossed by the chocolaty brown canals and rivulets fed by the mighty Mekong River. Its inhabitants – stereotyped as an extremely friendly and easy-going lot – have long toiled on the life-sustaining river, with their labours marked by the same cycles governing the waterways.

After winding its way from its source in Tibet, the Mekong River meets the sea in southernmost Vietnam. This delta-plain is lush with rice paddies and fish farms. 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.

Those seeking an idyllic retreat will find it in Phu Quoc, a forested island dotted with pretty beaches, freshwater springs and empty roads. Good diving and silicon-sand beauty have put it on the map, but it's still possible to find peace along the relatively uncrowded coastline.

By far the easiest and cheapest way to see the Delta is by taking a tour (one to three days) with a travel agency in Ho Chi Minh City (p405). Private tours are available through travel agencies, including driver and guide. It is also possible to travel independently. Although sometimes confusing and time-consuming, this option gives you maximum flexibility.

## MY THO

☎ 074 / pop 169, 300

My Tho, the quiet capital city of Tien Giang Province, is the traditional gateway to the delta, owing to its proximity to HCMC. Visitors on a whirlwind Vietnam tour often take a day trip here to catch a glimpse of the famous river. In order to visit floating markets, however, you'll need to continue on to Cantho (p421).

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). Boat tours cruise past picturesque rural villages and are the highlight of a visit to My Tho. Depending on what you book, destinations usually include a coconut-candy workshop, a honey-bee farm and an orchid garden. Getting a group together to hire a boat

makes these tours economical; otherwise it's US\$25 for two hours on the water.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Rang Dong Hotel** (☎ 874 400; 25 Đ 30 Thang 4; r 130,000-150,000d; 🍴) Privately run, this decent, friendly spot remains popular with budget travellers.

**Song Tien Hotel** (☎ 872 009; fax 884 745; 101 Đ Trung Trac; r/ste 160,000/260,000d; 🍴) The comfortable rooms here include red-and-white tile floors, TV and fridge. Suites are spacious with polished lacquer furniture. There's also a lift.

**Chuong Duong Hotel** (☎ 870 875; cdhotelmlytho@hcm.vnn.vn; 10 Đ 30 Thang 4; r US\$25-35; 🍴) My Tho's most luxurious accommodation, this place boasts a prime riverside location and respectable in-house restaurant. All rooms overlook the Mekong River.

**Chi Thanh** (☎ 873 756; 279 Đ Tet Mau Than; mains 20,000-40,000d) A tidy spot for delicious Chinese and Vietnamese fare, Chi Thanh has several locations, with menus in English.

My Tho is known for a special vermicelli soup, *hu tieu my tho*, which is richly garnished with fresh and dried seafood, pork, chicken and fresh herbs. Carnivores will enjoy **Hu Tieu 44** (44 Đ Nam Ky Khoi Nghia; soups 7000d), while vegetarians should look for **Hu Tieu Chay 24** (24 Đ Nam Ky Khoi Nghia; soups 4000d).

### Getting There & Around

Buses leaving from the Cholon bus station in HCMC drop you right in My Tho (18,000d, two hours). Buses to other Mekong destinations depart from My Tho bus station (Ben Xe Khach Tien Giang), several kilometres west of town. From the city centre, take Đ Ap Bac westward and continue on to National Hwy 1.

*Sloow* cargo ferries depart from HCMC's Bach Dang jetty. Bring your own food and water and negotiate a price with the ferry captain.

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 (passengers/motorbikes 1000d/5000d).

My Tho is small and walkable; expeditions out of town can be arranged on a 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.

Ben Tre has a few **internet cafés** (per hr 4000d), including one on Đ Hung Vuong. There's also internet access at the **main post office** (3/1 Đ Dong Khoi; per hr 4000d). Get cash at **Incombank** (☎ 822 507; 42 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu).

A few hotels and family-run restaurants face the tiny Truc Giang Lake.

**Thao Nhi Guesthouse** (☎ 860 009; thaonhitours@yahoo.com; Hamlet 1, Tan Thach Village; r 80,000-250,000d; 🍴) is a friendly, rustic place amid abundant greenery, 11km north of town, and offers a range of comfortable rooms. The in-house restaurant serves excellent elephant-ear fish, plus there's free bike rental. **Dong Khoi Hotel** (☎ 822 501; dongkhoihotelbtre@vmm.vn; 16 Đ Hai Ba Trung; r 196,000-255,000; 🍴) is popular for wedding parties; its lift is the best of the three on the lakefront. It has clean, carpeted rooms, plus there's a decent restaurant (mains 20,000d to 40,000d) on the ground floor.

**Nam Son** (☎ 822 873; 40 Đ Phan Ngoc Tong; mains 15,000-30,000d) is usually packed with locals feasting on roast chicken and drinking draught beer.

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.

### VINH LONG

☎ 070 / pop 130,000

A bit more chaotic than other Mekong towns of its size, Vinh Long has noisy, motorbike-filled streets, though its riverfront makes for a fine escape from the mayhem. Despite the lack of in-town attractions, Vinh Long is the gateway to river islands and some worthwhile sites, including the Cai Be floating market and homestays – which can be a highlight of a Mekong journey.

**Cuu Long Tourist** (☎ 823 616; cuulongtourist1@hcm.vnn.vn; 1 Đ 1 Thang 5; 🍴 7am-5pm) is one of the more capable state-run tour outfits.

**Vietcombank** (☎ 823 109; 143 Đ Le Thai To) has two branches in town and can exchange cash and travellers cheques.

What makes a trip to Vinh Long worthwhile are the beautiful islands in the river. Charter a boat through Cuu Long Tourist for around US\$10 per person or pay substantially less for a private operator (US\$3 to US\$4 per hour).

The bustling **river market** (🍴 5am-5pm) is worth including on a boat tour from Vinh

Long. Wholesalers on big boats moor here, each specialising in one or a few types of fruit or vegetable.

Don't stay in town, but opt for a homestay: see the boxed text, below for more.

**Thien Tan** (☎ 824 001; 56/1 Đ Pham Thai Buong; mains 30,000-50,000d; 🍴 lunch & dinner), specialising in barbecued dishes, is the best eatery in town. Recommended is the *ca loc nuong tre* (fish cooked in bamboo) and *ga nuong dat set* (chicken cooked in clay).

Frequent buses go between Vinh Long and HCMC (50,000d, three hours). You can also get to Vinh Long by bus from Can Tho (25,000d), My Tho and other points on the Mekong Delta. Vinh Long's bus station is right in the middle of town.

### CANTHO

☎ 071 / pop 330,100

The largest city in the Mekong, Cantho is a buzzing town with a lively waterfront. The political, economic, cultural and transportation heart of the Mekong Delta, Cantho hums with activity. Access to nearby floating markets makes it a major draw for tourists.

**Cai Rang** is the biggest floating market in the Mekong Delta, 6km from Cantho 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 Cantho market. Cai Rang is one hour away by boat, or you can drive to Cau Dau Sau boat landing, where

you can get a **rowing 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 southwest of Cantho, it's easy to reach by road and you can hire a boat on arrival.

### Information

**Cantho Tourist** (☎ 821 852; fax 822 719; 20 Đ Hai Ba Trung; 🍴 7am-5pm & 6-8pm) Helpful staff speak English and French. Tours available.

**Vietcombank** (Ngan Hang Ngoai Thuong Viet Nam; ☎ 820 445; fax 820 694; 7 Đ Le Hoa Binh) Has foreign-currency exchange and 24-hour ATM.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hien Guesthouse** (☎ 812 718; hien\_gh@yahoo.com; 118/10 Đ Phan Dinh Phung; r with fan/air-con US\$5/8; 🍴) This friendly, family-run guesthouse is tucked down a narrow alley near the city centre.

**Ninh Kieu Hotel** (☎ 821 171; 2 Đ Hai Ba Trung; r old wing US\$25-30, new wing r US\$40-80; 🍴) Boasting a terrific location on the riverfront, rooms in the new wing are carpeted and have balconies. Old-wing rooms are clean but dated.

**Victoria Can Tho Hotel** (☎ 810 111; www.victoria-hotels-asia.com; r US\$161-282; 🍴 📺 📺) This lovely place sits right on the riverfront and is Cantho's *crème de la crème*. Lavish rooms have garden or river views and guests have access to the fine restaurant, open-air bar, tennis courts and swimming pool.

### A NIGHT ON THE MEKONG

One of the highlights of any Vietnam trip is a homestay with one of the friendly Mekong families. The following places all charge around US\$10 per night, which includes a night's sleep, dinner and breakfast the next morning. Vinh Long is the best place to arrange a homestay.

- **Nha Co Tran Tuan Kiet** (☎ 073-824 498; 22 Phu Hoa hamlet, Dong Hoa Hip Village, Cai Be District) This traditional wooden house has beautiful ornate details and a history dating back 150 years. The cooking here is excellent. It's in Cai Be, 25km west of My Tho.
- **Sau Giao** (☎ 070-859 910; Binh Thuan 2 Hamlet, Hoa Ninh Village, Long Ho District) A few kilometres outside of Vinh Long along the river, Sau Giao is a beautiful traditional wooden house. It serves excellent cuisine. Bicycle hire available (per day US\$1).
- **Song Tien** (☎ 070-858 487; An Thanh Hamlet, An Binh Village, Long Ho District) Across the Co Chien River from Vinh Long, this friendly place offers accommodation in small bungalows with squat toilets. The owner and his wife, both former Viet Cong soldiers, are known to bust out the mandolin for a bit of traditional singing for their guests.
- **Tam Ho** (☎ 070-859 859; info@caygiong.com; Binh Thuan 1 Hamlet, Hoa Ninh Village, Long Ho District) About 1.5km from Vinh Long, Tam Ho is a working orchard run by a friendly, welcoming family – one of the hosts bears a striking resemblance to Ho Chi Minh. Private rooms available.

### OFF THE BEATEN TRACK IN THE MEKONG DELTA

It's not hard to get off the beaten track in the Mekong Delta, as most tourists are on hit-and-run day trips from HCMC or passing through the major centres on their way to or from Cambodia. Here are some of the lesser-known gems in the Mekong Delta.

Don't have time to visit Cambodia? Check out some Khmer culture in **Soc Trang**, home to a significant population of Cambodians and their beautiful temples.

Speaking of Cambodia, the Khmer kingdom of Funan once held sway over much of the lower Mekong and the principal port was at **Oc Eo**. Located near Long Xuyen, archaeologists have found ancient Persian and Roman artefacts here.

Birding enthusiasts will want to make a diversion to **Tram Chin Reserve** near Cao Lang, a habitat for the rare eastern sarus crane. These huge birds are depicted on the bas reliefs at Angkor and only found here and in northwest Cambodia.

The small and secluded beach resort of **Hon Chong** has the most scenic stretch of coastline on the Mekong Delta mainland. The big attractions here are Chua Hang Grotto, Duong Beach and Nghe Island.

**Restaurant alley** (Đ Nam Ky Khoi Nghia) Want to slip away from the tourist scene on the riverfront? Situated in an alley between Đ Dien Bien Phu and Đ Phan Dinh Phung, this alley has about a dozen local restaurants scattered on both sides of the street.

**Nam Bo** (☎ 823 908; nambo@hcm.vnn.vn; 50 Đ Hai Ba Trung; mains 25,000-50,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) Housed in a thoughtfully restored, classic French villa, Nam Bo offers excellent European and Vietnamese cuisine in a delightful atmosphere.

**Cappuccino** (☎ 825 296; 2 Đ Hai Ba Trung; mains 35,000-70,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) For a break from *pho*, head to this popular Italian restaurant near the riverfront. You'll find a decent selection of pizzas and pastas.

### Getting There & Around

Buses and minibuses from HCMC leave the Mien Tay station (65,000d, five hours). The **Cantho bus station** (Đ Nguyen Trai & Đ Tran Phu) is about 1km north of town.

*Xe loi* (motorbikes with two-seater carriages on the back) cost 5000d or so for rides around town. Most guesthouses also hire out bicycles.

### CHAU DOC

☎ 076 / pop 100,000

Perched on the banks of the Bassac River, Chau Doc is a charming town near the Cambodian border with sizable Chinese, Cham and Khmer communities. Thanks to the popular river crossing between Vietnam and Cambodia (see the boxed text, p424), many travellers pass through Chau Doc. Nearby

Sam Mountain is a local beauty spot with terrific views over Cambodia.

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 Choeung 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.

There's **internet access** (per hr 4000d; ☺ 7am-9pm) in the courtyard of Chau Doc's **main post office** (☎ 869 200; 2 Đ Le Loi). Foreign currency can be exchanged at **Incombank** (☎ 866 497; 68-70 Đ Nguyen Huu Canh).

### 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 info. There's a good restaurant.

**Delta Adventure Inn** (Nha Khach Long Chau; ☎ 861 249; deltaadventureinn@hotmail.com; r 120,000-240,000d; ☺) This cosy 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.

**Victoria Chau Doc Hotel** (☎ 865 010; www.victoria-hotels-asia.com; 32 Đ Le Loi; r US\$115-196, internet rates US\$92-144; ☺ ☎ ☎) Perched on the riverside, the Victoria is the swishest place in town. All rooms have wooden floors, bathtubs and gorgeous décor. The hotel's Bassac Restaurant is superb.

Good local eateries in Chau Doc include **Bay Bong** (☎ 867 271; 22 Đ Thuong Dang Le; mains from

35,000d) with excellent hotpots and soups, and **Mekong** (☎ 867 381; 41 Đ Le Loi; mains 35,000-45,000d), set in the grounds of a decaying villa opposite the Victoria.

### Getting There & Around

Buses to Chau Doc depart HCMC's Mien Tay station (84,000d, six hours). For more on the border crossing to Cambodia, see the boxed text, p424.

### RACH GIA

☎ 077 / pop 172,400

Rach Gia's port is perched on a river mouth opening onto the Gulf of Thailand, making it a jumping-off point for Phu Quoc Island. It's 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** (Cong Ty Du Lich Kien Giang;

☎ 862 081; 12 Đ Ly Tu Trong) The provincial tourism authority.

**Rach Gia Internet Café** (152 Đ Nguyen Trung Truc) Has a pretty fast connection.

**Vietcombank** (☎ 863 178; 2 Đ Mac Cuu) There's a 24-hour ATM here.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hong Nam Hotel** (☎ 873 090; fax 873 424; Đ Ly Thai To; r 150,000-250,000d; ☺) This minihotel offers sparkly, spacious rooms decked out with all the modern comforts. It's near the Rach Gia Trade Centre. Some have balconies.

**Kim Co Hotel** (☎ 879 610; fax 879 611; 141 Đ Nguyen Hung Son; r 160,000-200,000d; ☺) This friendly place has colourful rooms (mint walls, orange curtains) and tubs in some bathrooms. Try to get a room with a window.

**Hoang Gia 2 Hotel** (☎ 920 980; tuananggia@vnn.vn; 31 Đ Le Than Thon; r 180,000-250,000d; ☺) Set with nice wood furnishings and bathtubs, the rooms here are in good shape, but some could use more light. There's a lift.

**Ao Dai Moi** (☎ 866 295; 26 Đ Ly Tu Trong; soups 8,000d; ☺ breakfast) The name means 'new *ao dai*' and Ao Dai Moi is run by a local tailor. The simple place has very good *pho* and wonton soup in the morning.

**Tan Hung Phat** (☎ 867 599; 118 Đ Nguyen Hung Son; mains 15,000-30,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This

friendly place has a good selection of fish and seafood dishes.

**Quan F28** (☎ 867 334; 28 Đ Le Than Thon; mains 30,000-50,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) With sidewalk seating and a popular night-time buzz, Quan F28 is the place to go for molluscs – crab, shrimp, snails, blood cockles and the like.

### Getting There & Away

Vietnam Airlines flies once daily between HCMC and Rach Gia, continuing to Phu Quoc Island. You'll have to catch a *xe om* or *xe loi* from the airport to Rach Gia.

For details on getting to Phu Quoc by hydrofoil, see p425. Stop by the **Rach Gia hydrofoil terminal** (☎ 879 765) the day before, or phone ahead to book a seat.

Buses from HCMC (90,000d, six to seven hours) leave for Rach Gia from Mien Tay bus station in An Lac. Night buses leave Rach Gia between 7pm and 11pm. The **main bus station** (Ben Xe Rach Soi; 78 Đ Nguyen Trung Truc) in Rach Soi, 7km south of Rach Gia, has connections to Cantho and HCMC.

### PHU QUOC ISLAND

☎ 077 / pop 52,700

One of Vietnam's star attractions, mountainous and forested Phu Quoc is a splendid tropical getaway set with beautiful white-sand beaches and quaint fishing villages. Adventure comes in many forms here – from motorbiking the empty dirt roads circling the island to sea kayaking its quiet inlets or scuba diving the coral reefs. Plans are afoot to develop the island à la Phuket style.

The tear-shaped island lies in the Gulf of Thailand, 15km south of the coast of Cambodia. Phu Quoc is Vietnam's largest island but is also claimed by Cambodia; its Khmer name is Ko Tral.

The main shipping port is An Thoi at the southern tip of Phu Quoc Island with connections to Rach Gia. Most beachside accommodation options are south of Duong Dong town on the western side of the island. Addresses outside of Duong Dong's centre are designated by the kilometre mark south of town.

### Information

The post office is in downtown Duong Dong. There are several internet cafés in town including **Net Café** (5 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu; per hr 10,000d; ☺ 7am-10pm). Some of the hotels offer internet access.

There is a useful ATM at Saigon-Phu Quoc Resort.

### Sights & Activities

Deserted white-sand beaches ring the island. Bai Sao and Bai Dam are beautiful beaches on the south end of the island. Long Beach (Bai Truong) is a spectacular stretch of sand from Duong Dong southward along the west coast, almost to An Thoi.

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 forest reserve (Khu Rung Nguyen Sinh). You'll need a motorbike to get into the reserve, and as there are no real trekking trails, you'll need a guide anyway. In the centre of the island, just east of the guesthouse coast, are two hot springs, **Suoi Da Ban** (admission 1000d) and **Suoi Tranh**. In the dry season they're more moonscape than watery.

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 crowds and a more pristine marine environment than along the coast. Stop by the **Rainbow Divers** (☎ 0913-400964; www.divevietnam.com; Km 1.5) desk at the Saigon-Phu Quoc Resort.

There are several places to rent **kayaks** along Bai Sao beach, and its protected waters make for a smooth ride. Expect to pay around 60,000d per hour.

### Sleeping

**Lam Ha Eco Resort** (☎ 847 369; Long Beach; r/bungalow US\$12/15; 🍷) Friendly, family-run Lam Ha is excellent value for the money, with trim and tidy rooms and bungalows scattered around a lush garden.

**Tropicana Resort** (☎ 847 127; www.reservation@tropicnavietnam.com; Long Beach; d US\$15, bungalows US\$35-70; 🍷 🍷 🍷) The pretty Tropicana is the kind of oasis you might need after a rough ferry ride. Attractive, handsomely furnished bungalows, all with veranda, face the garden or the sea.

**Nhat Lan** (☎ 847 663; Km 1.7; d US\$8-12) Another nice family-run place offering comfortable concrete bungalows that come with excellent hammocks.

**Beach Club** (☎ 980 998; www.beachclubvietnam.com; Long Beach; r/bungalow US\$15/20) Run by an English-Vietnamese couple, this laid-back spot provides great value for the money. The owner is a great source of local information.

**Mango Bay** (☎ 0903-382 207; www.mangobayphuquoc.com; Ong Lan Beach; bungalows US\$25-50) This attractive, relaxed resort offers stylish rooms and bungalows, all with terraces. It's eco-friendly, using solar panels and organic and recycled building materials.

### CROSSING INTO CAMBODIA: MEKONG DELTA BORDERS

One of the most enjoyable ways of entering Cambodia is via this crossing just west of Chau Doc along the Mekong River. Numerous agencies in Chau Doc sell boat tickets taking you from Chau Doc to Phnom Penh via the Vinh Xuong border. Slow boats for the trip cost around US\$8 to US\$10 and take eight hours (leaving around 8am and arriving in Phnom Penh at 4pm).

There are several companies offering fast boats. **Hang Chau** (☎ in Phnom Penh 012-883 542) departs Chau Doc at 7am and Phnom Penh at noon and costs US\$15. The more upmarket **Blue Cruiser** (☎ in Phnom Penh 023-990 441, in Chau Doc 091-401622) pulls out at 8.30am and at 1.30pm respectively, costing US\$35. Both take about four hours including a slow border check. More expensive again is the **Victoria express boat** (www.victoriahotels-asia.com), but at US\$75 per person, it tends to be exclusive to Victoria hotel guests.

Some adventurous travellers like to plot their own course. Catch a minibus from Chau Doc to the border at Vinh Xuong (US\$1, one hour). Once officially in Cambodia at Kaam Samnor, arrange a speedboat to Neak Luong (US\$2.50 per person, US\$15 for the boat, one hour). Once in Neak Luong, change to a local bus (4500r, regular departures) to Phnom Penh.

For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see p228.

Also nearby is the little used Tinh Bien-Phnom Den border crossing, which connects Chau Doc to Takeo Province in Cambodia. Cambodian visas are not currently available on arrival. For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see p247.

**Saigon-Phu Quoc Resort** (☎ 846 510; www.vietnamphuquoc.com; 1 Đ Tran Hung Dao, Long Beach; r US\$95-190; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Attractive rooms here are in villa-type houses, with good views overlooking the beach. Book through the website for deals.

### Eating & Drinking

Most guesthouses have their own lively cafés or restaurants in-house; wander along the beach until you find somewhere appealing.

**Gop Gio** (☎ 847 057; 78 Đ Tran Hung Dao; mains 30,000-50,000d) On the main road into Duong Dong, this casual indoor-outdoor eatery has excellent seafood, with fresh, tasty dishes such as shrimp with mango and steamed grouper with ginger.

**Ai Xiem** (☎ 990 510; Bai Sao; mains 40,000-60,000d) Set on the lovely white sands of Bai Sao beach, this is a great, low-key place for fresh seafood. Tables are on the sands, a few metres from lapping waves.

**Rainbow Bar** (☎ 0903-177 923) The hottest place to hang after dark. It's open-air, with a pool table and good music in a garden setting.

### Getting There & Around

Vietnam Airlines has several daily flights (one way US\$46) to Phu Quoc from HCMC, plus connections to Rach Gia (one way US\$32).

Numerous companies operate speedy hydrofoils sailing between Rach Gia and Phu Quoc. Boats leave the mainland daily between 7am and 8.30am, and return from Phu Quoc between 12.30pm and 1.30pm. Ticket prices for the 2½-hour journey range from 150,000d to 200,000d. Hydrofoil companies include **Super Dong** (☎ Rach Gia 077-878 475, Phu Quoc 980 111), **Duong Dong Express** (☎ Rach Gia 077-879 765, Phu Quoc 990 747) and **Hai Au** (☎ Rach Gia 077-879 455, Phu Quoc 990 555).

*Xe om* rides from An Thoi harbour to Duong Dong cost about 30,000d. The island's middle road from An Thoi to Duong Dong is paved, but dirt is the colour of the island's other roads. Motorbike rentals are available through guesthouses and hotels for about US\$7 per day.

## VIETNAM DIRECTORY

### ACCOMMODATION

Vietnam has something for everyone – from dives to the divine. Most hotels in Vietnam quote prices in a mix of Vietnamese dong and US dollars. Prices are quoted in dong or dol-

### PRACTICALITIES

- The usual voltage is 220V, 50 cycles, but sometimes you encounter 110V, also at 50 cycles, just to confuse things. Electrical sockets are usually two-pin.
- Most guesthouses and hotels have cheap laundry services, but check they have a dryer if the weather is bad.
- *Vietnam News* and the *Saigon Times* are popular English-language dailies. Good magazines include the *Vietnam Economic Times*, plus its listings mag, the *Guide*, and the *Vietnam Investment Review*.
- *Voice of Vietnam* hogs the airwaves all day and is pumped through loudspeakers in many smaller towns. There are several TV channels and a steady diet of satellite.
- The Vietnamese use the metric system for everything except precious metals and gems, where they follow the Chinese.

lars throughout this chapter based on the preferred currency of the particular property.

Family-run guesthouses are usually the cheapest option; they often have private bathrooms and rates range from around US\$5 to US\$15. A step up from the guesthouses, minihotels typically come with more amenities: satellite TV, minibridges and IDD phones. Rates often go down the more steps you have to climb; that is, upper floors are cheaper.

When it comes to midrange places, flash a bit more cash and three-star touches are available, such as access to a swimming pool and a hairdryer hidden away somewhere.

At the top end are a host of international-standard hotels and resorts that charge from US\$75 a room to US\$750 or more a suite. Some of these are fairly faceless business hotels, while others ooze opulence or resonate with history.

Be aware that some budget and midrange hotels apply a 10% sales tax. Check carefully before taking the room to avoid any unpleasant shocks on departure.

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 can rise by 25%. Christmas and New Year represent another high season, but things aren't quite as crazy as at Tet.

### Homestays

Homestays are a popular option in parts of Vietnam, but some local governments are more flexible than others about the concept. Homestays were pioneered in the Mekong Delta (see the boxed text, p421). At the opposite end of the map, there are also homestays on the island of Cat Ba (p372).

Many people like to stay with ethnic minority families in the far north of Vietnam. Sapa (p376) is the number-one destination to meet the hill tribes in Vietnam and it is possible to undertake two- or three-day treks with an overnight in a Hmong or Dzao village.

### ACTIVITIES

Vietnam's roads and rivers, sea and mountains, provide ample opportunity for active adventures. Travel agencies and travellers 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 p358; ☎ 04-926 0581; www.handspan.com; 78 Pho Ma May, Hanoi); or stop by **Sinhbalo Adventures** (Map p411; ☎ 08-837 6766; www.sinhbalo.com; 283/20 Đ Pham Ngu lao) in HCMC to meander the Mekong Delta or further afield.

### Dividing & Snorkelling

Vietnam has several great dive destinations for underwater exploration. Long established, with many dive sites, is the beach resort of Nha Trang (p392). A notable emerging dive destination is Phu Quoc Island (p423), with fewer visitors and a more pristine environment.

### Golf

The best golf courses in Vietnam are located in Dalat and Phan Thiet, but there are also plenty of courses in and around Hanoi and HCMC.

### Kayaking

For an even closer look at those limestone crags, it's possible to paddle yourself around Halong Bay. Talk to travel agencies in Hanoi to arrange Halong Bay kayaking trips.

### Trekking

The most popular region for trekking is the northwest, notably around Sapa (p376), which includes Vietnam's tallest mountain, Fansipan. There's also good trekking in the jungles of Cat Ba (p371) and Cuc Phuong (p368) National Parks. The trekking trails in Bach Ma National Park (p382) are also a good bet.

### Water Sports

Mui Ne (p397) is Vietnam's best shoreline for kite-surfing and windsurfing fiends. Nha Trang (p392) is another good locale for windsurfing, sailing or wakeboarding. The area around China Beach (p387), 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.

### BUSINESS HOURS

Offices and other public buildings are usually open from 7am or 8am to 11am or 11.30am and from 1pm or 2pm to 4pm or 5pm. Banks tend to be open during these hours, and until 11.30am on Saturday. Post offices are generally open from 6.30am to 9pm. Government offices are usually open until noon on Saturday and closed Sunday. Most museums are closed on Monday. Temples are usually open all day, every day.

Many small, privately owned shops, restaurants and street stalls stay open seven days a week, often until late at night.

### 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.

See the Hanoi climate chart (p485).

### COURSES Cooking

Cooking courses are really taking off in Vietnam. Hone your culinary skills in Hanoi, Hoi An or HCMC.

### Language

If you want to brush up on your Vietnamese, there are courses offered in HCMC, Hanoi and elsewhere. Lessons usually cost from US\$3 to US\$10 per hour. Decide whether you want to study in northern or southern Vietnam, because the regional dialects are very different. For more details, see under language courses in Hanoi (p357) and Ho Chi Minh City (p410).

### CUSTOMS

Bear 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 rockets, artillery shells, mortars, mines and other ordnance left over from the war. *Never* touch any war relics you come across – such objects can re-

main lethal for decades, and one bomb can ruin your whole day.

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 strong 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.

### EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Visas can be obtained in your home country through the Vietnamese embassy or consulate. See p432 for more details.

### Embassies & Consulates in Vietnam

With the exception of those for Cambodia, China and Laos, the embassies in Hanoi and consulates in HCMC do very little visa business for non-Vietnamese.

**Australia** (www.ausinvn.com) Hanoi (☎ 04-831 7755; 8 Duong Dao Tan, Ba Dinh District); HCMC (Map p412; ☎ 08-829 6035; 5th fl, 5B Đ Ton Duc Thang)

**Cambodia** Hanoi (Map pp352-3; ☎ 04-825 3788; 71A Pho Tran Hung Dao); HCMC (Map p409; ☎ 08-827 7696; cambocg@hcm.vnn.vn; 41 Đ Phung Khac Khoan)

### VIETNAM IN WORDS

- *Catfish and Mandala* (1999) Part memoir and part travel narrative, this is Andrew X Pham's fascinating account of his escape from the war-torn Vietnam of 1977 and his subsequent return two decades later, equipped with a bicycle and a desire to sort out his mixed-up cultural identity.
- *Dispatches* (1977) For a behind-the-scenes look at the American War, hitch a ride with Michael Herr. A correspondent for *Rolling Stone* magazine, Herr tells it how it is as some of the darkest events of the war unfold around him, including the siege of Khe Sanh.
- *Shadows and Wind* (1999) Journalist Robert Templer explores contemporary Vietnam, from Ho Chi Minh personality cults to Vietnam's rock-and-roll youth.
- *The Sorrow of War* (1996) For a human perspective on the North Vietnamese experience during the war, Bao Ninh's poignant tale of love and loss shows the boys from the North had the same fears and desires as most American GIs.
- *The Quiet American* (1955) Graham Greene's classic novel is the perfect introduction to Vietnam in the 1950s, as the French disengaged and the Americans moved in to take their place. If only the American politicians had shared his foresight.

**Canada** ([www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/vietnam](http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/vietnam)) Hanoi (Map pp352-3; ☎ 04-823 5500; 31 Pho Hung Vuong); HCMC (Map p412; ☎ 08-827 9899; 10th fl, 235 Đ Dong Khoi)

**China** Hanoi (Map pp352-3; ☎ 04-845 3736; Pho Hoang Dieu); HCMC (Map p409; ☎ 08-829 2457; chinaconsul\_hcm\_vn@mfa.gov.cn; 39 Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai)

**France** Hanoi (Map pp352-3; ☎ 04-943 7719; Pho Tran Hung Dao); HCMC (Map p409; ☎ 08-829 7231; 27 Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai)

**Germany** Hanoi (Map pp352-3; ☎ 04-845 3836; 29 Đ Tran Phu); HCMC (Map p409; ☎ 08-822 4385; 126 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu)

**Japan** Hanoi (☎ 04-846 3000; 27 Pho Lieu Giai, Ba Dinh District); HCMC (Map p412; ☎ 08-822 5314; 13-17 ĐL Nguyen Hue)

**Laos** Danang (16 Đ Tran Qui Cap); Hanoi (Map pp352-3; ☎ 04-825 4576; 22 Pho Tran Binh Trong); HCMC (Map p412; ☎ 08-829 7667; 93 Đ Pasteur)

**Netherlands** HCMC (Map p409; ☎ 04-823 5932; hcm-ca@minbuza.nl; 29 ĐL Le Duan, HCMC)

**New Zealand** Hanoi (☎ 04-824 1481; nzembhan@fpt.vn; Level 5, 63 Pho Ly Thai To); HCMC (Map p409; ☎ 08-822 6907; Ste 909, 235 Đ Dong Khoi)

**Singapore** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 04-823 3965; 41-43 Đ Tran Phu, Hanoi)

**Sweden** (☎ 04-726 0400; 2 Đ Nui Truc, Hanoi)

**Thailand** Hanoi (Map pp352-3; ☎ 04-823 5092; 63-65 Pho Hoang Dieu); HCMC (Map p409; ☎ 08-932 7637; 77 Đ Tran Quoc Thao)

**UK** ([www.uk-vietnam.org](http://www.uk-vietnam.org)) Hanoi (Map p358; ☎ 04-936 0500; Central Bldg, 31 Pho Hai Ba Trung); HCMC (Map p409; ☎ 08-829 8433; 25 ĐL Le Duan)

**US** (<http://usembassy.state.gov/vietnam>) Hanoi (☎ 04-772 1500; 7 Pho Lang Ha, Ba Dinh District); HCMC (☎ 08-822 9433; 4 ĐL Le Duan)

## Vietnamese Embassies & Consulates Abroad

**Australia** Canberra (☎ 02-6286 6059; [www.vietnamembassy.org.au](http://www.vietnamembassy.org.au); 6 Timbarra Cres, O'Malley, ACT 2606); Sydney (☎ 02-9327 2539; [tlsyd@auco.net.au](mailto:tlsyd@auco.net.au); 489 New South Head Rd, Double Bay, NSW 2028)

**Cambodia** (☎ 023-362531; 436 Monivong Blvd, Phnom Penh)

**Canada** (☎ 613-236 1398; [www.vietnamembassy-canada.ca](http://www.vietnamembassy-canada.ca); 470 Willbrod St, ON K1N 6M8, Ottawa)

**China** Beijing (☎ 010-6532 1125; [vnaemba@mailhost.cinet.co.cn](mailto:vnaemba@mailhost.cinet.co.cn); 32 Guanghua Lu, 100600); Guangzhou (☎ 020-8652 7908; Jin Yanf Hotel, 92 Huanshi Western Rd)

**France** (☎ 01 44 14 6400; 62-66 Rue Boileau, 75016, Paris)

**Germany** (☎ 030-509 8262; Konigswinter St 28, D-10318, Berlin)

**Hong Kong** (☎ 22-591 4510; 15th fl, Great Smart Tower, 230 Wan Chai Rd, Wan Chai)

**Italy** (☎ 06-6616 0726; 156 Via di Bravetta, 00164, Rome)

**Japan** Osaka (☎ 06-263 1600; 10th fl, Estate Bakurocho Bldg, 1-4-10 Bakurocho, Chuo-ku); Tokyo (☎ 03-3466 3311; 50-11 Moto Yoyogi-Cho, Shibuya-ku, 151)

**Laos** Savannakhet (☎ 41-212 239; 418 Sisavang Vong); Vientiane (☎ 21-413 409; That Luang Rd)

**Thailand** (☎ 2-251 7202; 83/1 Wireless Rd, 10500, Bangkok)

**UK** (☎ 020-7937 1912; [www.vietnamembassy.org.uk](http://www.vietnamembassy.org.uk); 12-14 Victoria Rd, W8 5RD, London)

**USA** San Francisco (☎ 415-922 1707; [www.vietnamconsulate-sf.org](http://www.vietnamconsulate-sf.org); 1700 California St, Ste 430, CA 94109); Washington (☎ 202-861 0737; [www.vietnamembassy-usa.org](http://www.vietnamembassy-usa.org); 1233 20th St NW, Ste 400, DC 20036)

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Vietnam's major festival is Tet – see opposite for details.

**Ngay Mot & Ngay Ram** Pagodas are packed with Buddhist worshippers on the first and 15th days of the lunar month. Tasty vegetarian meals are served.

**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 fifth day of the fifth lunar month.

**Trung Nguyen** (Wandering Souls Day) On the 15th day of the seventh 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 excellent value...and you never have to go very far to find it. For more on dining in the Mekong region, see p86.

### FRUIT

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.

### MEALS

*Pho* is the noodle soup that built a nation and 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 Hué* 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.

### SNACKS

Street stalls or roaming vendors are everywhere, selling steamed sweet potatoes, rice porridge and ice-cream bars even in the wee hours. There are also 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.

### SWEETS

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, like *banh it nhan dau*, made with sugar and bean paste and sold wrapped in banana leaf.

Most foreigners prefer *kem* (ice cream) or *yaourt* (yogurt), which is generally of good quality.

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

#### ALCOHOLIC DRINKS

Memorise the words *bia hoi*, which mean 'draught beer', probably the cheapest beer in the world. Starting at just 2000d a glass, anyone can afford a round and you can get 'off yer heed' for just US\$1! Places that serve *bia hoi* usually also have cheap food.

Several foreign labels brewed in Vietnam under licence include Tiger, Fosters, Carlsberg and Heineken. National and regional brands include Halida and Hanoi in the north, Huda and Larue in the centre, and BGI and 333 (*ba ba ba*) in the south.

## THERE'S SOMETHING FISHY AROUND HERE...

*Nuoc mam* (fish sauce) is the one ingredient that is quintessentially Vietnamese and it lends a distinctive character to Vietnamese cooking. The sauce is made by fermenting highly salted fish in large ceramic vats for four to 12 months. Connoisseurs insist the high-grade rocket fuel has a much milder aroma than the cheaper variety. Dissenters insist it is a chemical weapon. It is very often used as a dipping sauce, and takes the place of salt on a Western table.

### NONALCOHOLIC DRINKS

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 *cà phê* (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 in Vietnam. 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. Some of the interesting content includes details on the legality of homosexuality in Vietnam and local gay terminology.

## HOLIDAYS

The Lunar New Year is Vietnam's most important annual festival. The Tet holiday officially lasts three days, but many Vietnamese take the following week off work, so

**BEWARE YOUR BLEND**

Some consider *chon* to be the highest grade of Vietnamese coffee. It is made of beans fed to a certain species of weasel and later collected from its excrement.

hotels, trains and buses are booked solid – and most everything else shuts down. If visiting Vietnam during Tet, memorise this phrase: *Chúc mừng năm mới!* (Happy New Year!). Big smiles and new friends are guaranteed. Vietnamese public holidays include the following:

**Tet** (Tet Nguyen Dan) 7 February 2008 (Year of the Rat), 26 January 2009 and 14 February 2010.

**Liberation Day** 30 April, the day the South surrendered to the North in 1975.

**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, even in the most out-of-the-way backwaters. Faster ADSL connections are becoming more widespread.

The cost for internet access ranges from as little as 2000d to 20,000d per minute. Many budget and midrange hotels now offer free internet access, but international hotels charge a hefty fee. Wi-fi access is spreading fast. Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and other big towns have plenty of cafés and bars offering free access.

**INTERNET RESOURCES**

The website [www.vietnamadventures.com](http://www.vietnamadventures.com) is full of practical travel information and features monthly adventures and special travel deals.

**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. Otherwise, it's better not to bother.

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**

A *must* for its detailed road maps of every province is the *Viet Nam Administrative Atlas* (68,000d), published by Ban Do. Basic road maps of major cities such as Hanoi, Saigon, Huế and Nha Trang are readily available. For most other destinations, it's slim pickings.

**MONEY**

Vietnam's official currency is the dong (d). Banknotes come in denominations of 200d, 500d, 1000d, 2000d, 5000d, 10,000d, 20,000d, 50,000d, 100,000d, 200,000d and 500,000d. Now that Ho Chi Minh has been canonised (against his wishes), his picture is on *every* banknote. There are also small-denomination coins (from 200d to 5000d). US dollars and euros are the easiest currencies to exchange.

**ATMs**

ATMs can be found in most bigger cities nowadays, with Vietcombank having the widest network. All ATMs dispense cash in dong only. The limit per withdrawal is usually two million dong, but multiple withdrawals are allowed. Most banks charge 20,000d a pop.

**Bargaining**

For *xe om* and cyclo trips, as well as anywhere that prices aren't posted, bargaining is possible. In tourist hotspots, 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 but you can still bargain a little bit.

**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 1.6 million dong). For this reason, we quote some prices in US dollars. For the best deal, pay in dong.

**Credit Cards**

Visa, MasterCard and Amex are accepted in most cities at top hotels, restaurants and shops. Getting cash advances on credit cards is also possible, but a 3% commission is common.

**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 are as follows:

Country	Unit	Dong
Australia	A\$1	13,360
Cambodia	1000r	4020
Canada	C\$1	14,430
China	Y1	2090
euro zone	€1	21,700
Japan	¥100	13,340
Laos	1000 kip	1680
New Zealand	NZ\$1	11,820
Thailand	100B	48,877
UK	£1	31,800
USA	US\$1	16,035

**Tippling**

Tippling isn't expected in Vietnam, but it's enormously appreciated. For someone making under US\$100 per month, the cost of your drink can equal half a day's wages. Many guests take up a collection for tour guides and drivers, after multiday tours or for outstanding service.

**Travellers Cheques**

Travellers cheques in US dollars can be exchanged for local dong at certain banks; Vietcombank is usually a safe bet, although it will charge a commission of 0.5% if you exchange cheques for dong. Most hotels and airline offices will not accept travellers cheques.

**PHOTOGRAPHY**

Vietnam's gorgeous scenery and unique character make prime subject matter for memorable photographs.

Inspiration will surely strike when you see a row of colourfully dressed hill-tribe women walking to market, but remember to maintain an appropriate level of respect for the people and places you visit. Please use common courtesy and ask permission before snapping a photo of someone; if permission is refused, respect that person's wishes.

Photo-processing shops and internet cafés in bigger cities can burn digital photos onto CDs or DVDs, plus memory cards are widely available in big cities. Colour-print film can be found virtually everywhere; slide film is available in HCMC and Hanoi. Processing is

fairly cheap, from around US\$3 per roll for prints. Process slide film elsewhere.

**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 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 be dissected on the table.

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**

'When in Rome...' the saying goes, but if Romans are tossing plastic bags into the ocean it doesn't mean you should, too. You can make a difference with your example: pack out your own trash and pick up what you can of others.

Buying coral, limestone or dried sea life encourages harvestation to meet the demand, meanwhile 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.

Do not remove or buy 'souvenirs' that have been taken from historical sites and natural areas.

When travelling in hill-tribe areas, refrain from giving candy and pens to children, which only encourages a reliance on begging. Instead, donate school supplies to local schools or support the local economy by purchasing goods from the craftspeople themselves.

For more information on responsible trekking, see p484 and p138.

**SHOPPING**

Vietnam has some fantastic shopping opportunities so it is well worth setting aside half a day or more to properly peruse. Hotspots include Hanoi, Hoi An and HCMC, each of which has a tempting selection of everything from avant-garde art to sumptuous silk suits. Some of the best buys on the block include

gorgeous glazed pottery, classic lanterns, 'almost' antiques, embroidered tablecloths, fine furnishings, and lavish silk and linen creations in designer boutiques.

## TELEPHONE

Charges for international calls from Vietnam have dropped significantly and cost a flat rate of just US\$0.50 per minute to most countries. The service is easy to use from any phone in the country; just dial ☎ 17100, the country code and the number.

International and domestic long-distance calls can be made at hotels, but they're expensive at the smarter places. Many of the cheaper places offer Voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services which are very cheap. Another option is to make these calls from the post office.

Phone numbers in Hanoi, HCMC and Hai Phong have seven digits. Elsewhere around the country phone numbers have six digits.

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 your phone has roaming, it is easy enough, if expensive, to make calls in Vietnam. Another option is to buy a SIM card with a local number to use in Vietnam. Mobile-phone service providers such as VinaPhone and MobiFone sell prepaid phone-cards in denominations of 30,000d and up.

Be aware that mobile-phone numbers in Vietnam start with the prefix ☎ 09 and cost more to call than a local number.

## 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 it's wise to keep a stash of toilet paper while on the road: 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 interests are booking tours and turning a profit.

Travel cafés, travel agencies and your fellow travellers are a much better source of information than any of the so-called 'tourist offices'.

## VISAS

Tourist visas allow visitors to enter and exit Vietnam at Hanoi, HCMC and Danang airports or at any of its 12 land borders, three each with Cambodia and China, and six with Laos. 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.

It is possible to arrange a visa on arrival through a Vietnamese travel agent. They will need passport details in advance and will send a confirmation for the visa to be issued at your airport of arrival.

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 cost around US\$30 to US\$60. Cambodia is the fastest and cheapest option in the region. Bangkok is another popular place, as many travel agents offer cheap packages including both air ticket and 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\$95 in Cambodia.

## Business Visas

Business visas are usually valid for three or six months, allow multiple entries and the right to work. Getting a business visa has now become cheap and easy, although prices are about double those of a tourist visa. It is generally easier to apply for a business visa once in Vietnam.

## Visa Extensions

If you've got the dollars, they've got the rubber stamp. Visa extensions cost around US\$20, 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 (one photo 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

**15 May School** ([www.15mayschool.org](http://www.15mayschool.org)) A school in HCMC for disadvantaged children, which provides free education and vocational training.

**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 restaurant (see the boxed text, p361); check its website to see what you can do to help in Vietnam or Australia.

## 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 leave to 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.

## WORK

At least 90% of foreign travellers seeking work in Vietnam end up teaching English, though there is some demand for French teachers too. Pay can be as low as US\$2 per hour at a university and up to US\$15 per hour at a private academy.

Jobs in the booming private sector or with NGOs are usually procured outside of Vietnam before arriving.

It's best to arrange a business visa if you plan to job hunt (see opposite).

# TRANSPORT IN VIETNAM

## GETTING THERE & AWAY Entering Vietnam

It's possible to enter Vietnam by train, plane, automobile and other forms of transport. Air is popular for those holidaying in Vietnam, while bus is the most common route for those travelling extensively in the region. Entering from Cambodia, the boat ride down the Mekong from Phnom Penh to Chau Doc is memorable.

Formalities at Vietnam's international airports are generally smoother than at land borders, as the volume of traffic is greater.

## Air

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.

All phone numbers for the following airlines are in Hanoi unless otherwise stated.

**Air Asia** (airline code AK; [www.airasia.com](http://www.airasia.com); hub Kuala Lumpur) Daily budget flights connecting Hanoi and HCMC to Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok.

**Air France** (airline code AF; ☎ 04-825 3484; [www.airfrance.fr](http://www.airfrance.fr); hub Paris) Regular connections from Hanoi and HCMC to Paris via Bangkok.

**Asiana Airlines** (airline code OZ; ☎ 04-831 5141; [www.us.flyasiana.com](http://www.us.flyasiana.com); hub Seoul) Daily connections from Hanoi and HCMC to Seoul.

**Cathay Pacific** (airline code CX; ☎ 04-826 7298; [www.cathaypacific.com](http://www.cathaypacific.com); hub Hong Kong) Has daily connections from both Hanoi and HCMC to Hong Kong.

**China Airlines** (airline code CI; ☎ 04-824 2688; [www.china-airlines.com](http://www.china-airlines.com); hub Taipei) Daily flights from Hanoi and HCMC to Taipei.

**China Southern Airlines** (airline code CZ; ☎ 04-771 6611; [www.cs-air.com](http://www.cs-air.com); hub Guangzhou) Regular flights from Hanoi and HCMC to Guangzhou.

**Japan Airlines** (airline code JL; ☎ 04-826 6693; [www.jal.co.jp](http://www.jal.co.jp); hub Tokyo) Regular services from Hanoi and HCMC to Tokyo and Osaka.

**Jetstar Asia** (airline code 3K; [www.jetstarasia.com](http://www.jetstarasia.com); hub

Singapore) Daily budget flights from Hanoi and HCMC to Singapore.

**Lao Airlines** (airline code QV; ☎ 04-822 9951; www.laoairlines.com; hub Vientiane) Regular flights from Hanoi and HCMC to Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

**Lufthansa** (airline code LH; ☎ in HCMC 08-829 8529; www.lufthansa.com; hub Frankfurt) Several flights a week to Frankfurt.

**Malaysia Airlines** (airline code MY; ☎ 04-826 8820; www.malaysiaairlines.com; hub Kuala Lumpur) Daily connections from Hanoi and HCMC to Kuala Lumpur.

**Philippine Airlines** (airline code PR; ☎ in HCMC 08-822 2241; www.philippineair.com; hub Manila) Regular flights from HCMC to Manila.

**Qantas** (airline code QF; ☎ 04-933 3025; www.qantas.com.au; hubs Sydney & Melbourne) Regular connections from Hanoi and HCMC to Sydney, Melbourne and other major cities.

**Singapore Airlines** (airline code SQ; ☎ 04-826 8888; www.singaporeair.com; hub Singapore) Daily flights linking Hanoi and HCMC with Singapore.

**Thai Airways** (airline code TG; ☎ 04-826 6893; www.thair.com; hub Bangkok) Daily flights connecting Bangkok to Hanoi and HCMC, plus regular services to Danang.

**Tiger Airways** (airline code TR; www.tigerairways.com; hub Singapore) Budget flights connecting both Hanoi and HCMC to Singapore.

**United Airlines** (airline code UA; ☎ in HCMC 08-823 1833; www.unitedairlines.com; hub Seattle) Regular flights connecting Hanoi and HCMC with the west coast of the US.

**Vietnam Airlines** (airline code VN; ☎ 04-943 9660, in HCMC 08-832 0320; www.vietnamair.com.vn; hub HCMC) Global reach including the rest of Asia, Australia, Europe and the US.

## Border Crossings

Vietnam shares land border crossings with Cambodia, China and Laos. See the table, p101. Vietnam visas are not currently available at any land borders.

There are currently three crossings with Cambodia, although most people exit Vietnam via Moc Bai or Vinh Xuong, taking the road from HCMC to Phnom Penh or the boat from Chau Doc to the Cambodian capital. The third crossing at Tinh Bien is not so popular, plus there are no visas available on arrival in Cambodia. There are also three crossings into China in the north, all of which are relatively straightforward to use as there are towns on both sides of the border.

There are currently six border crossings with Laos and these borders tend to cause travellers the most headaches, with poor

transport links, bad roads, petty corruption and rampant overcharging. The easiest way to exit is via Lao Bao, the most established crossing. Many use Cau Treo when travelling between Hanoi and Vientiane, but it's no picnic: in fact it's a set menu from hell. The other four crossings are in remote areas and rarely used by travellers. Only use these crossings if you are willing to expect the unexpected and are prepared to pay over the odds to do so. Lao visas are not currently available at the more remote borders.

## GETTING AROUND

### Air

Air travel within Vietnam is dominated by **Vietnam Airlines** (www.vietnamairlines.com), while its newly relaunched budget offshoot **Pacific Airlines** (www.pacificairlines.com.vn) offers limited routes between Ho Chi Minh City, Danang and Hanoi. Reasonably priced domestic flights can trim precious travel time off a busy itinerary.

### 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 the Mekong region, 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 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. The Mekong Delta is a rewarding option for those who prefer the flat.

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.

Bicycles can also be hired locally from guesthouses for US\$1 per day, and are a great way to get to know a new city.

### INTERNATIONAL DEPARTURE TAX

There is an international departure tax of US\$14 from the main airports at Hanoi, HCMC and Danang.

## Boat

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 (p423).

In the country's northeast, hydrofoils connect Haiphong with Cat Ba Island (near Halong Bay), and cruises on Halong Bay are extremely popular. In the south, a trip to the islands off the coast of Nha Trang is popular.

## Bus

Vietnam has an extensive network of dirt-cheap buses that reach the far-flung corners of the country. Until recently, few foreign travellers used them because of safety concerns and overcharging, but the situation has improved dramatically with modern buses and fixed-price ticket offices at most bus stations.

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.

### DOMESTIC DEPARTURE TAX

Domestic departure tax is 25,000d, but is included when you buy the ticket.

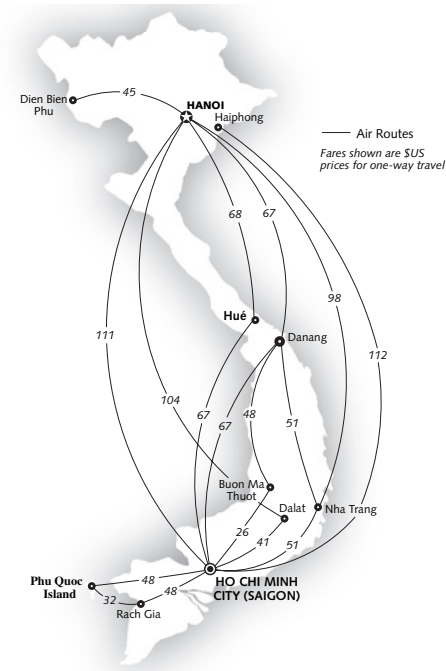
### LOCAL BUS & MINIBUS

Travelling on the backroads, you'll see local buses of every vintage, packed to the gills. You can travel on these rattletaps, but expect breakdowns, lots of stops and overcrowded conditions. You'll rub shoulders with everyday people, giving you a slice of life many foreigners don't experience.

Most buses pick up passengers along the way until full. It's a good idea to try buying 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 buses (and the public ones) is around Tet when drivers are working overtime and routes are dangerously overcrowded.

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



routes will often leave at intervals throughout the day.

Costs are negligible, though on rural runs foreigners are typically charged anywhere from twice to 10 times the going rate. As a benchmark, a typical 100km ride is between US\$2 and US\$3.

### OPEN-TOUR BUS

For the cost of around US\$23, the ubiquitous open ticket can get you from HCMC to Hanoi at your own pace, in air-con 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. All of the lunch stops and hotel drop-offs give monetary kickbacks to the bus companies. But you're never obligated to stay at the hotel you've been dropped at; if you don't like it, find another.

Although it's convenient and cheap, the open-tour ticket isolates you from experiencing Vietnam. These vehicles rarely see Vietnamese passengers, since they're tailored to foreign travellers.

An alternative to the open-tour ticket is to buy individual, point-to-point tickets along the way; though this will cost more, you have the flexibility to take local buses, trains or flights, or to switch open-tour companies.

All companies offering open-tour tickets have received both glowing commendations and bitter complaints from travellers. As a general guide, Sinh Café still has some of the best buses, closely followed by Hanh Café.

### Car & Motorcycle

Self-drive rental cars have yet to make their debut in Vietnam, which is a blessing in disguise given traffic conditions, but cars with drivers are popular and plentiful.

For sightseeing trips around HCMC or Hanoi, a car with driver can be rented by the day. It costs about US\$25 to US\$50 per day, depending on the car.

For the really bad roads of northwestern Vietnam, the only reasonably safe vehicle is a 4WD. The cheapest (and least comfortable) are Russian made, while more cushy Japanese vehicles are about twice the price. Expect to

pay about US\$80 to US\$100 a day for a decent 4WD in the far north of Vietnam.

Motorbikes can be hired for US\$5 to US\$10 per day, depending on the make of the cycle and what region you're in. Prices with a driver start at about US\$8 for day tours around town. In smaller towns and cities, observe how people drive and go with the flow. In HCMC or Hanoi, consider hiring a driver unless you're used to driving in the region. Fifteen minutes on a bus travelling National Hwy 1 should convince you to leave the long-distance driving to a local.

Hiring a motorbike guide leaves you free to observe the kaleidoscope of daily life and scenery, and guides are experts on their own turf. Many travellers hit it off so well with their guides that they hire them for the long haul. It's a wonderful way to travel, and you'll get an insider's perspective on the country.

### 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 foreign residents and visitors drive without a licence.

### ROAD RULES

The road rule to remember: size matters and small vehicles get out of the way of big vehicles. Vehicles drive on the right-hand side, but there is an invisible middle lane many like to use. Traffic cops are fastidious and usually require a pay off. Horrendous accidents are frequent.

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, use the guarded parking and don't lose the ticket.

### Local Transport

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

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. Generally, cyclo rides should cost 5000d per kilometre, or US\$5 to US\$8 for a day tour.

*Xe om* or *Honda om* (literally, 'Honda hug'; motorcycle taxi) are faster – made up of a motorbike, a driver and you. Short rides around town typically start at 5000d.

Metered taxis are abundant and comfortable, but check the meter before you get in and make sure the driver uses it.

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

### Tours

The following are Vietnam-based travel agencies that offer premium tours throughout Vietnam:

**Buffalo Tours** (Map p358; ☎ 04-828 0702; www.buffalotours.com; 11 Pho Hang Muoi, Hanoi)

**Destination Asia** (☎ 08-844 8071; www.destination-asia.com; 143 Đ Nguyen Van Troi, Phu Nhuan District, HCMC)

**Exotissimo** (☎ 04-828 2150; www.exotissimo.com; 26 Tran Nhat Duat, Hanoi)

**Phoenix Voyages** (☎ 04-716 1956; www.phoenixvietnam.com; 52 Pho Nguyen Khac Hieu, Hanoi)

**Tonkin Travel** (☎ 08-747 3239; www.tonkintravel.com; 8, 34A Đ Tran Phu, Hanoi)

### 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. Odd-numbered trains travel south; even-numbered trains go north.

The *Reunification Express* chugs along the 1726km journey between Hanoi and HCMC at an average speed of 48km per hour, and takes from 30 to 41 hours. 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, even less comfortable than the bus.

Prices change, but at the time of writing, a ticket for an air-con soft sleeper for the 30-hour fast train from Hanoi to Huế was around US\$30. Check out the website for the latest fares.

Theft can be a problem, especially on overnight trains. 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. Although trains are sometimes slower than the bus, they're a terrific way to meet local people.

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