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Saturday 10 December 2011
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Vietnam



Today the first non-stop flight from the UK to Vietnam touches down in the capital, Hanoi, and opens up a nation. By **Iain Stewart**

Loaded with historic interest, majestic mountains and national parks, ravishing sandy beaches and fascinating cities, and boasting a stupendous national cuisine, Vietnam is a compelling destination.

Vietnam was a French colony from the mid-19th century until about 100 years later, and a lingering Gallic influence is still evident in the sweeping boulevards and grand state architecture of Hanoi, Hai Phong and Ho Chi Minh City. Bakeries in every corner of the nation continue to pump out crusty baguettes, which locals munch with pâté. However, it's rare to find anyone under 80 who still speaks French. English (and increasingly Chinese) are the languages everyone wants to learn today.

Feel free to mention the war. For the West it may have been the Vietnam War, but for the Vietnamese it was the American War. Such has been Vietnam's recent economic recovery; the war's impact and resulting poverty is far less obvious today than a decade ago. But it has certainly not been forgotten. Three million Vietnamese died during the conflict, and thousands are still injured or killed every year by unexploded ordnance – always stick to established trails if you're hiking.

Virtually every provincial town's museum is loaded with war reminders and the rusting remains of US tanks, aircraft and GI memorabilia. It's possible to tour battle sites like Khe Sanh and Hamburger Hill around the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) between North and South Vietnam) and take in subterranean villages like Vinh Moe, which the Vietnamese built to avoid US carpet bombing.

Given its appeal, and the fantastic value for money, it's easy to see why tourist arrivals have

soared from a few thousand in 1991, when the country reopened its doors to travellers, to more than five million this year.

One reason that few of these have been British has been the difficulty of access. But this morning the first non-stop flight from the UK to Vietnam touches down in the capital, Hanoi, with the maiden flight to Ho Chi Minh City departing Gatwick at noon today. Vietnam Airlines (020-3263 2062; vietnamairlines.com) is selling seats for £650 return. Previously, options were limited to lengthy journeys on

airlines such as Malaysia (0871 423 9090; malaysiaairlines.com), Singapore (0844 800 2380; singaporeair.co.uk), Cathay Pacific (020-8834 8888; cathaypacific.com), Thai (0844 561 0911; thaiairways.co.uk), LOT Polish (0845 601 0949; lot.com) and Aeroflot (020-7355 2233; aeroflot.com).

Tour operators offering packages include Virgin Holidays (0844 573 0088; virginholidays.co.uk), Hayes & Jarvis (0844 855 4488; hayesandjarvis.co.uk), Wexas (020-7838 5892; wexas.com) and Travel Indochina (01865 268 940; trav

elindochina.co.uk). A two-week trip with Travel Indochina between Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi costs from £1,925, with flights from London.

Officially the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, this is one of the world's few remaining communist countries. There is also a fair amount of red tape – notably organising your visa in advance, either by post or in person at the Embassy of Vietnam in London (020-7937 1912; vietnamembassy.org.uk). Visa cost £44 for British passport-holders.

On the ground, the country feels rampantly capitalist, its booming economy propelled by Vietnamese industriousness and a palpable appetite for commerce, evident everywhere from village market places to blue-chip boardrooms. And yet, behind the emerging new city skylines studded with gleaming corporate towers, there's little sign that the Communist Party is relaxing its grip on power. The state still controls swathes of the economy and an army of bureaucrats polices the internet. For travellers this means that Facebook and other social media sites are regularly blocked.

Vietnam is long and slim, stretching about 1,650km from north to south. Travel is slow, so consider booking internal flights to get around, which are inexpensive. Vietnam Airlines (see above) and Jetstar (00 84 8 3845 0092; jetstar.com.vn/en/home) are the main domestic airlines. A single ticket from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City will cost about £45.

Trains are also good for covering long distances, with sleeper carriages on the main north-south "Reunification" line and the northern spur to the Chinese border. The website seat61.com dispenses vital information. Timetables are available on vr.com.vn. Hue to Hanoi takes about 13 hours and costs 833,000d (£25) in a sleeper.

Many travellers use the Open Tour bus network, which are private buses that connect the main centres and run on a hop-on hop-off basis. Sinh Tourist (00 84 8 3838 9563; thesinhtourist.vn) is an efficient company.

In cities, metered taxis (including the reliable nationwide Mai Linh cabs) are cheap and typically cost 50,000d (£1.50) to 100,000d (£3) for a journey of a few miles.

On the whole Vietnam is a remarkably safe place, there's little in way of serious trouble (with the



Bar life: locals enjoy bia hoi, a draft beer, in Hanoi ILLUSTRATION

Nothing but noodles?

Far from it. Vietnamese food is nothing short of exceptional and dining out is a treat. The bottom line is freshness, be it vegetables straight from the field or same-day caught seafood. Unlike the cuisine of its westerly neighbours, Vietnamese food is subtly spiced, favouring market-fresh herbs rather than red-hot chillies.

The cuisine varies from region to region, with numerous specialties unique to particular provinces. A typical meal blends multiple influences and tastes, comprising sweet, sour, crispy, smooth, spicy and mellow flavours and textures.

Vietnamese people often describe each other as either "soy sauce" or "fish sauce" – those from the north opting for the former in their hearty soups such as pho bo, the classic beef and noodle broth that built a nation, while southerners blend their curry-style dishes with co-

conut, lemongrass (and lashings of fish sauce), in central Vietnam the food gets incredibly refined and regional dishes of Hue and Hoi An are fiendishly complicated to make but exquisite to taste (see The Centre box, right).

To wash it down, look out for a bia hoi (fresh beer) sign. Bia hoi is lager-style beer (said to have been introduced by the Czechs) that is brewed to be consumed that day. It's incredibly refreshing and cheap, from 5,000d (£5p) a glass. Rice wine is the other national tipple, which is downed in shots. It can come in hundreds of different flavours; Hanoi restaurant Highway 4 (00 84 4 3926 4200; highway4.com) has a superb selection.

Coffee culture was introduced by the French in the 1850s and is deeply ingrained. The preferred choice is a treacle-thick espresso-style cup (which percolates before you on the table), to which you add sickly sweet condensed milk. It's much better than it sounds.



exception of the frenzied traffic) to worry about. The Party keeps a tight control on security, and crimes against tourists are rare.

That said, be aware that there are many scams operating in Hanoi, mostly involving touts, taxis and dodgy tour operators. Stick to recognised, reputable operators such as Ocean Tours (00 84 4 3926 0463; oceantours.com.vn), which runs a two-day sailing trip on Halong Bay (from US\$155/£103 per person) or Handspan Travel Indochina (00 84 4 3926 2828; handspan.com) which offers many innovative tours such as a three-day trip to the idyllic Moc Chau plateau (from US\$277/£183 per person).