



Vietnam: History, People, Food

From Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh

27 February–11 March 2027 (MN 284)

13 days

Lecturer: Dr Dana Healy

The entire length of the country in 13 days, featuring several unesco World Heritage Sites.

Several arrangements specially made to avoid the crowds, and more time spent in each city than most mainstream tours.

Stay in some of the best hotels in Asia, in Vietnam's most lively and enchanting cities.

Covers diverse aspects of Vietnamese culture and history: dynastic kingdoms, colonialism, socialism, ethnology, gastronomy, society.

Combine this tour with *Cambodia by River*, 12–26 March 2027.

'A thousand years enslaved by China/A hundred years trampled by France/Twenty years of civil war day by day'. The words of the revered 20th-century poet and songwriter Trịnh Công Sơn encapsulate the tribulations of the Vietnamese nation; it is impossible to understand Vietnam without first reflecting on its turbulent past.

The country's strategic location has made it vulnerable to millennia of invasions. In 111 BC, Vietnam fell to the Han dynasty and became a colonial vassal of China until 938; it was colonised by the French in the mid-1800s. Following the declaration of independence in 1945, the Vietnamese fought the First Indochina War until 1954, eventually defeating the French in the battle of Dien Bien Phu. Divided in 1954 into a communist state in the North and the Republic of South Vietnam, it fell victim to the polarized ideological struggle of the Cold War and was not reunified until 1975, after another protracted war – referred to in the West as the Vietnam War.

Yet today's visitors find a dynamic country, respectful of its traditions but eager to move forward. Its economic growth rate is currently among the highest in the world, while its society remains firmly anchored by its customs and beliefs. Vietnamese culture is further enriched by the indigenous traditions of the 54 ethnic minorities that share the territory with the main Viet (Kinh) people. The intertwining of various creeds – Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism – has resulted in Tam giao dong nguyễn (The Three Teachings from one source), a doctrine of tolerance and peaceful coexistence.



Royal Tomb of Emperor Minh Mang, Hue.

The tour starts in North Vietnam, the cradle of Vietnamese civilisation with its fertile Red River delta. The capital, Hanoi, was established in 1010 and has remained a political and administrative centre ever since. The aesthetic charm of the city derives from its blend of ancient monuments, pagodas and temples, alongside the 19th-century colonial buildings.

The city of Hue, in central Vietnam, is often regarded as the intellectual and spiritual centre of Buddhism. The Nguyen lords, the last feudal dynasty of Vietnam, made Hue their capital in 1802, leaving a complex of impressive monuments.

To the south of Hue, along the majestic Hai Van pass, lies the ancient port of Hoi An, one of the most delightful and vibrant towns in southeast Asia. Once an important trading post, it reflects a blend of indigenous and foreign cultural influences, with its well-preserved communal houses, ancient wells and a unique Japanese roof-covered bridge.

In South Vietnam lies the country's largest metropolis, Ho Chi Minh City. Under its old name, Sai Gon, it was the capital of French Cochinchina and later of the Republic of South Vietnam. As the country's main commercial hub, it is dizzying and captivating. North of the city, to the casual eye, the landscape barely seems scarred by the Resistance War against the USA that shattered the region over half a

century ago, but beneath this serene landscape the immense network of tunnels dug by the Viet Cong at Cu Chi remains astonishingly intact.

Itinerary

Day 1: Hanoi. Rooms are available from 3.00pm on 26th February, allowing for early check-in today (international flights are not included – see Practicalities). The tour begins with lunch at the hotel, and an afternoon cyclo-tour offers a gentle introduction to the city. Hanoi's Old Quarter and the 36 guild streets represent the traditional commercial heart of the city: most street names start with the word hang (goods, merchandise), for example hang bac (silver); hang mam (fish sauce); hang bong (cotton). First of three nights in Hanoi.

Day 2: Hanoi. The National Museum of History offers an excellent overview, encompassing Vietnam's prehistory up to the 1947 Revolution and the founding of the Democratic Republic. On the Hoan Kiem Lake (Lake of the Returned Sword) is the Turtle Tower Pagoda and the Temple of the Jade Mountain, connected to the city by the iconic red Huc Bridge. The Temple of Literature was built in 1070 and is dedicated to Confucius. It is the site of Vietnam's first university (1076). See also the Presidential Palace and Ho Chi Minh's House (exteriors).

Vietnam: History, People, Food
continued

Day 3: Hanoi. Eating on the street is a typical activity for Hanoians and makes up an important part of the city's unique culture. This morning we explore the Old Quarter from this gastronomic perspective. We also pass a number of French colonial buildings, such as the cathedral and the Post Office. In the afternoon there is a visit to the Museum of Ethnology, which houses an extensive collection of traditional costumes and artefacts from Vietnam's 54 ethnic minority groups.

Day 4: Ha Long Bay, Lan Ha Bay. Drive to Ha Long Bay (Bay of the Descending Dragon) (c. 3 hours), a vast area characterised by thousands of towering limestone islands rising dramatically from the sea. It was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1994 – a justified accolade for a place of sublime natural beauty. We board our ship at the busy Tuan Chau port, but then divert to the less-visited (but no less spectacular) Lan Ha Bay. Overnight in Lan Ha Bay.

Day 5: Ha Long Bay, Hue. See a fishing village from the vantage point of a bamboo boat, where the residents live in remarkably spacious floating houses. The monolithic islands also hide numerous caves, adorned with stalactites and stalagmites. Disembark the boat mid morning and drive back to Hanoi. Fly to Hue (Vietnam Airlines), and transfer to the hotel, arriving in time for dinner. First of two nights in Hue.

Day 6: Hue. Take a Dragon Boat down the Perfume river to the 17th-century Thien Mu Pagoda (Pagoda of the Celestial Lady), which is Hue's best-preserved religious monument and still functions as a monastery. Visit a private garden house, the former home of a Princess, and see the collection of artefacts from the days of the former Royal Empire with one of her direct descendants. In the afternoon, see several Royal Tombs, including that of the second Nguyen Emperor Minh Mang, which is renowned for its symmetry and grandeur.

Day 7: Hue, Hoi An. Rise before dawn for an out-of-hours visit to the Imperial Citadel, built in accordance with the principles of ancient oriental philosophy when Hue became the capital of unified Vietnam in 1802 CE. Return to the hotel for breakfast, then depart by coach for Hoi An in the late morning, via a working pagoda where the nuns prepare a Buddhist (vegetarian) lunch. First of three nights in Hoi An.

Day 8: Hoi An. In the morning, explore the atmospheric old town on foot. It has been more or less safeguarded from the modern curse of motorised vehicles, and its riverside charm adds to the appeal. The colourful architecture has been exceptionally well preserved and reflects influences from China and Japan as well as its indigenous heritage. The afternoon is free to relax or take part in an optional cooking class (details available at a later stage).

Day 9: My Son, Hoi An. The Cham civilisation ruled central Vietnam between the fourth and 13th centuries, and the Hindu sanctuary at My Son (c. 40 km inland from Hoi An) contains the most extensive temple remains to survive – and was once the capital of the Champa Kingdom. The temples are partially ruined, and only 20 remain where c. 70 once stood, but the site's setting in a tropical valley surrounded by mountains and streams is nonetheless beguiling. In the evening we explore the street food scene of Hoi An.

Day 10: Hoi An, Ho Chi Minh City. Visit the Museum of Cham Sculpture in Da Nang, which houses the world's largest collection. Fly from Da Nang to Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam Airlines), arriving early afternoon. Late-afternoon visit to a contemporary art space in a restored French colonial building. First of three nights in Ho Chi Minh City.

Day 11: Ho Chi Minh City. Explore Ho Chi Minh City's architectural cocktail of colonial-era buildings, pagodas, merchants' residences, modern buildings and vernacular houses. We see the Opera House, Notre Dame Cathedral – a red brick edifice with twin spires constructed from materials imported from France – the Central Post Office, completed 1891, and the Reunification Palace, the headquarters of the Saigon Government during the American War. Also visit the War Remnants Museum.

Day 12: Cu Chi, Tay Ninh. Travel to Ben Duoc by speed boat to visit the Cu Chi tunnels, a vast and elaborate underground network used by the Viet Cong during the Second Indochina War. We visit the more extensive but less-busy site, which is slightly further from the city.

Day 13: Ho Chi Minh City. The tour ends after breakfast.

If combining this tour with Cambodia by River, the night of 11th March is included in Ho Chi Minh City.

Lecturer

Dr Dana Healy. Senior lecturer in Vietnamese studies at SOAS, University of London. Dana specializes in modern Vietnamese cultural studies, including literature, film, religion and gender. She studied Vietnamese Studies at Charles University in Prague, where she also completed her PhD. She first visited Vietnam as a student in 1983 and has been engaged in teaching and research relating to the country ever since. Her academic work embraces a broad spectrum of topics: she lectures on Vietnamese language, literature and culture and has published widely on modern and contemporary literature and cinema, literary representation of war, gender and the Vietnamese diaspora.

Practicalities

Included: domestic flights (economy class) with Vietnam Airlines (Airbus 321): Hanoi to Hue, Da Nang to Ho Chi Minh City; transport by air-conditioned coach; airport transfers to meet your chosen international flights; accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 9 lunches and 8 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes the services of the lecturer, tour manager and local guides.

Flights: international flights to Hanoi and from Ho Chi Minh City are not included in the price of the tour. We will send recommended flight options from London with your booking confirmation, which will be available to book in March 2026. The cost of an economy seat at the time of going to press is c. £850.

Additional nights and airport transfers. It is possible to arrange additional nights at the hotels before or after the tour. The night of 26th February 2027 is included in the price of the tour to allow for early check-in on Day 1. Airport transfers are included in the price of the tour – we will ask for your flight details at a later date.

Visas are not required for UK citizens for stays of 15 days or fewer. Most other foreign nationals require a visa, which is not included in the tour price. We will advise on the process.

Accommodation. Sofitel Legend Metropole, Hanoi (sofitel-legend-metropole-hanoi.com): a Hanoi institution and one of the finest hotels

Vietnam: History, People, Food
continued

in Asia: 5-star luxury blending French and Vietnamese influences. **Orchid Cruises, Ha Long Bay** (orchidcruises.com): a traditional wooden junk, not luxurious yet authentic and adequately comfortable. **La Residence, Hue** (azerai.com/azerai-la-residence-hue): 5-star riverside hotel in the former residence of the French Governor, exceptionally restored in an Art Deco style. **Anantara Hoi An Resort, Hoi An** (hoi-an.anantara.com): a peaceful 5-star resort on the banks of the Thu Bon river and a stone's throw from the historic centre. **Hotel des Arts, Ho Chi Minh City** (hoteldesartssaigon.com): 5-star boutique hotel in the city centre, modern but authentically Vietnamese. Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.

How strenuous? The tour involves a lot of walking in town centres, where coach access is restricted, and a lot of standing in museums and at sites. Uneven ground and irregular paving are standard. A good level of fitness is essential. Unless you enjoy entirely unimpaired mobility, cope with everyday walking and stair-climbing without difficulty and are reliably sure-footed, this tour is not for you. There are some long coach journeys during which facilities are limited and may be of poor quality. The tour spans over 1,500 km from north to south, and the weather varies accordingly: it can be chilly in the north and very hot in the south. Average distance by coach per day: 42 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 23 participants.

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