

VIETNAM

An everyday guide to expatriate life and work.



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GERMANY COUNTRY GUIDE

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Quick facts¹

Capital: Hanoi

Population: 92 million

Major language: Vietnamese

Major religions: Vietnamese folklore and Buddhism

Currency: Vietnamese đồng

Time zone: GMT +7

Emergency number: 113, 114 and 115

Electricity: 220 volts, 50Hz. Flat two-pin plugs and round two-pin plugs are both used.

Drive on the: Right



Overview

AVietnam is an exotic and enticing destination, and is becoming increasingly popular with expats. Its fast-paced and exhilarating cities contrast with the untouched interior, where lush mountains meet thousands of miles of tropical beaches. With friendly locals, good weather and low costs, Vietnam can provide expats with a wonderful quality of life.

Finding a place to stay is easy enough, from luxury apartment blocks in city centers to townhouses in the quieter suburbs. The country is also incredibly family friendly, with plenty of international schools in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Modern and progressive, these cities are vibrant hives of activity, replete with delicious street foods, chaotic traffic, loads of bars and a thriving café scene.

Having said this, those used to a Western way of life may have to contend with some cultural adjustments, especially if living outside of a tourist hotspot, with the language barrier particularly difficult to overcome.

This guide will give expats a basic understanding of life in Vietnam, from its transport services, accommodation options, costs of living and healthcare, to its cuisine, education, social and business etiquette, and visa requirements.

Getting Started

Climate and weather

Vietnam is renowned for its warm weather and extreme levels of humidity, often clocking in at around 80%. The higher regions of the sub-tropical north are far milder than the tropical central and southern areas of the country. In fact, the north can experience some fairly chilly winters, which makes for a stark contrast to the often sweltering temperatures further south. Floods can be expected throughout the country, both in the north and the south, especially during the rainy seasons when the lands are blanketed with heavy downpours.¹

¹ <http://www.vietnamtourism.com/en/index.php/about/items/1752>

Visas

Most nationals will need a visa to enter Vietnam, unless their home country is on a visa-waiver list. A normal tourist visa lasts for a month while three-month multiple-entry visas are also available. Business visas, lasting for a year, are granted, but require official entry clearance from the expat's sponsor, which is usually their employer.

Expats looking to work in Vietnam longer than three months will need a work permit. Potentially lasting up to two years, regulations are changing constantly so it's best to check with the nearest consulate. Extensions are granted if one meets existing stipulations.¹

Accommodations

Expats will find a wide variety of accommodation in Vietnam, depending on where they are based. Expat families may enjoy the larger spaces of townhouses and detached properties in the wealthier areas, while affordable and good quality apartments can be found just about anywhere, and are ideal for the young professional.

Townhouses are normally extremely narrow, many rising more than five floors above a street or alleyway. Sometimes, the first level will be an office or a shop. Detached houses are pleasant, usually with a fence, driveway and garden.

¹ <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/vietnam/visas>

Most expats don't buy property, as assignments to Vietnam are often short-term. Accommodation can be found through online property portals, real estate agents or newspapers. Rental agreements can range from six months to three years. Usually, a deposit equivalent to one to three month's rent is required and the tenant also pays for utilities. The water bill, however, is paid by the landlord.²

Schools

With an incredibly high literacy rate, Vietnamese society stresses the importance of education. From as early as 18 months, children will go to a public kindergarten to learn the basics of the alphabet and arithmetic. Primary education at public schools is free, but there are some costs, including textbooks, stationery and uniforms. Students attend public schools six days a week, Monday through Saturday.³

With a growing population of expats, the country has seen a boom in international schools, the oldest only being founded in the early 1990s. They are primarily found in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. These schools follow the British, American, French, or Australian curriculum, among others, and most of the teaching staff come from the associated country of the school. It's best to get a child's application sorted in advance, as competition is high and there are often long waiting lists.⁴



² <http://www.expatarrivals.com/vietnam/accommodation-in-vietnam>

³ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/04/2013441131475898.html>

⁴ <http://www.expatarrivals.com/vietnam/education-and-schools-in-vietnam>



Culture

The cultural landscape of Vietnam is fascinating, with influences from Buddhism and Confucianism, along with nearby China and a French colonial past.

The Vietnamese value duty, honor, loyalty and sincerity. Conducting oneself admirably in society is important, taking special care not to harm a person's reputation or dignity. Respect is especially given to age and status, with many social interactions and dynamics dictated by this deference.¹

Language

Vietnamese is the only official language of Vietnam. It has been influenced mainly by Chinese and French, a result of its long history of subjugation. There are three main dialects - one from the north, one from the south and one from the central regions. Expats should make an effort to at least learn some basic phrases of the local language, although it's possible to communicate in English in areas dominated by travelers or expats.²

Social etiquette and cultural faux pas

New arrivals in Vietnam may be in for a bit of culture shock. Nevertheless, by making an effort to discover more about subtle etiquette and social nuances, expats can make the transition to their new life in Vietnam that little bit easier.³

1 <http://www.commisceo-global.com/country-guides/vietnam-guide>

2 <http://www.commisceo-global.com/country-guides/vietnam-guide>

3 <http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/guides/guide-to-vietnam-etiquette-customs-culture-business/>

- The oldest person of a group will always be greeted or served first. Not doing so would be disrespectful to their position in society, causing serious offense in Vietnamese culture. The usual greeting is a handshake, especially in the corporate environment where efforts are constantly made to appear more Western.
- The communication style in Vietnam is not overly direct, favoring a lack of eye contact. Instead of saying exactly what they mean, people may rather imply their point from a different angle. Openly criticizing somebody would disrespect them, with the Vietnamese preferring to disagree politely until an agreement is reached.
- "Saving face" is an integral part of Vietnamese culture, meaning that there's a constant focus on acting admirably and with dignity. Never publicly embarrass or scold another person, as this causes them to lose face.
- Certain physical gestures can be interpreted as hostile or vulgar. Standing with arms folded or hands on hips is seen as threatening while crossing the index and middle finger is rude. Remember to accept items with both hands and always point with a flat palm.
- Don't pass an object over another person's head. It's considered sacrilegious, as the head is the most sacred part of the body.
- Expats should remove their shoes if entering a place of worship or Vietnamese home.



Eating

Vietnam's cuisine can roughly be divided into three regions: south, central and north. Southern Vietnam is close to the borders of China and India, resulting in a fusion of influences. It's also characterized by sweeter flavors, enjoying the land's plentiful fresh fruits, vegetables and livestock.

The central regions favor a spicier touch, commonly incorporating chili, black peppers and shrimp sauces. Many dishes in this region have roots in ancient Vietnamese royal cuisine, producing complex dishes decorated with flair and style. Signature foods include bún bò Hue, a type of beef soup prepared in the cooking style of the former royal court, and cao lau, thick noodles with barbequed pork, green beans and crunchy croutons.

Up north, locals aren't all that fussed with using large amounts of spices. It's best to see the region's gastronomy as a subtle balance of many different flavors. It's possible to find anything to suit almost any palate: sweet, sour, salty, bitter or spicy. Meats and crustaceans are popular ingredients, producing specialties like cha ca la vong and Vietnamese egg coffee.

While the Vietnamese prefer to socialize over drinks, food will always make an appearance at gatherings, whether at home or out on the town. Finding Western cuisine won't be an issue for those looking for a taste of home. But these establishments will be more expensive than local eateries.

When it comes to eating, there are certain manners that should be adhered to. Always sit only after the eldest takes their place. Sticking chopsticks straight up in one's food is offensive as they look similar to incense burners used in remembrance of the dead. Additionally, though expats may think it looks greedy, always bring the bowl close the face when eating.⁴

Drinking

The Vietnamese love to socialize, especially over a beverage or two, and bars become extremely popular once the sun sets. Draught beer, called bia hoi, is the most commonly enjoyed drink; light and refreshing, it's sold far cheaper than Western beers. Alternatively, bia chai is its bottled equivalent. There's even a culture of microbreweries, so those who love a refined pint will be happy indeed. Before refilling one's own drink, it's polite to top up those of one's companions first. Vietnamese

4 <https://wikitravel.org/en/Vietnam#Eat>

coffees, especially the iced coffee and egg coffee, are unique experiences in themselves, enjoyed in the country's numerous cafés. This café culture is big in Vietnam, due in part to its history under French colonial rule.⁵

Holidays

Tet Nguyên Đán, the celebration of the Vietnamese New Year, is the most culturally significant holiday in Vietnam. Most Tet holidays occur during February, while different regional observances, which don't qualify as paid holidays, also take place throughout the year. Most seasonal holidays, such as the Vietnamese New Year, are determined by the lunar calendar.⁶

New Year's Day – 1 January

Vietnamese New Year's Day

Hùng Kings' Temple Festival – usually around February

Reunification Day – 30 April

Labour Day – 1 May

National Day – 2 September

Transport

Traveling in Vietnam borders on the chaotic. While using a bicycle is easy enough in the smaller towns, the congestion and erratic driving habits found in the larger cities of Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi can come as quite a shock.

Locals and expats tend to gravitate towards motorcycles. They are cheap to hire but new arrivals will probably endure a few close shaves on the road before getting used to it. In order to join the swarms, expats need to acquire a temporary Vietnamese motorcycle license. Not wearing a helmet is illegal.

Taxis are available, although it's advisable to only use the major companies and agree on a rate beforehand. Alternatively, a cheap and fairly safe form of transport is the xe om, the motorcycle taxi. As with traditional taxis, it's recommended to agree on a fee beforehand as drivers have been known to take advantage of foreigners.

Using a bus to get around town is surprisingly efficient, and there are also intercity bus services. Buses are often quite crowded, and drivers don't wait long for passengers to get off at stops. The Reunification Express is the main train line between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, while both cities also boast metro systems.⁷

5 <https://wikitravel.org/en/Vietnam#Eat>

6 <https://publicholidays.vn/>

7 <http://www.expatarrivals.com/vietnam/transport-and-driving-in-vietnam>

Getting in touch

Keeping in touch with friends and family is easy to do in Vietnam. While the standard of communication infrastructure may not be up to what many expats are used to, accessing the internet is nonetheless simple, and it's very affordable to buy mobile phones.⁸

Telephone

Landlines aren't as popular as mobile phones in Vietnam. However, there are reasonably inexpensive options offered by operators such as Vietnam Post and Telecommunications Group (VNPT) and Viettel. While there are a fair number of mobile service providers, the most popular are Viettel, Mobiphone and Vinaphone. These companies provide both contract and pay-as-you-go packages.

Internet

Expats will find it easy to access the internet in the major cities, especially areas frequented by tourists. Rates are cheap, with the main providers being VNPT, FPT and Viettel. While the state used to censor a lot of online information, recent regulations have lessened this and expats should be able to browse and keep in touch comfortably.

Postal Services

The postal service of Vietnam is operated by VNPT. Known for being reliable and relatively efficient, getting deliveries is pretty straightforward, whether one is at home or at work.⁹

Employment

The job market

There are a lack of skilled workers in Vietnam, with subsequent opportunities for expats. Ho Chi Minh City is growing fast, with potential openings in the finance, information technology and engineering sectors. It's a great place to look for work, for expats and locals alike, and serves as a gateway to the rest of Southeast Asia. The northern city of Hanoi, while less cosmopolitan, is known for being a great place to teach English.

Vietnam has a high demand for expats who teach English as a foreign language. While the salaries are not high, the low costs of living allow for a comfortable lifestyle, especially among younger foreigners. Due to the growth in tourism, learning English is becoming an increasingly popular option for locals.¹⁰

Income tax

Foreigners from countries that don't have double-taxation treaties with Vietnam and live in the country for more than 183 days each year are considered residents for tax purposes and are taxed on both their local and international income.

The tax rate is progressive from 10 to 35%, depending on one's level on income. The tax situation in Vietnam is subject to change at short notice and expats should hire a tax specialist to navigate these tricky waters.¹¹

Business etiquette

Respect and hierarchy are integral facets of the Vietnamese business world. Appropriate titles are important and it's commonplace to bow slightly when talking to older colleagues. Shaking hands is the main form of greeting, sometimes followed by placing the left hand over the right wrist. Male colleagues should wait for their female counterparts to extend their hand, or forego the gesture.

Vietnamese is the main business language, but foreigners aren't expected to become fluent in a short time. Instead, the courtesy of learning a few words or phrases is appreciated. It shows that one is at least embracing and respectful towards Vietnamese customs and culture.

Punctuality is valued and a small gift at the end of a meeting is appropriate, with something from one's home country being an ideal option. Business cards should be printed with one English and one Vietnamese side. Lastly, first meetings are often more about getting to know one's associates, rather than getting straight down to business.¹²

Retirement

For many, the low cost of living, warm weather and gorgeous scenery in Vietnam equate to the perfect end to a long career. Whether it's choosing between city life and a more rural retreat, there are many different options for expat retirees. There's no retirement visa for Vietnam, however, with expats having to enter either on a five-year multi-entry visa or a regular tourist visa. Those expats looking to retire in Vietnam will need to reapply once their single or multiple-entry tourist visa expires.¹³

¹¹ <http://www.expatarrivals.com/vietnam/banking-money-and-taxes-in-vietnam>

¹² http://guide.culturecrossing.net/basics_business_student_details.php?Id=8&CID=223

¹³ <http://www.investopedia.com/articles/personal-finance/042115/retire-vietnam-200000-savings.asp>

Finance

Currency

The official currency is the Vietnamese đong (VND), which is divided into 100 xu or 10 hào. The American Dollar is also widely accepted throughout the country.

Money is available in the following denominations:

- Notes: 1,000, 2,000, 5,000, 10,000, 20,000, 50,000, 100,000, 200,000 and 500,000 VND
- Coins: 200, 500, 1,000, 2,000, 5,000 VND

*Note that coins are rare

Cost of living

It's quite easy to maintain a decent standard of living in Vietnam without splashing the cash. The biggest hit to one's budget will be accommodation. Outer suburbs are naturally more affordable, with more luxury accommodation options popping up closer to the main city centers.

Transportation costs are not a pressing issue, as hiring a motorcycle or taxi is hardly expensive. Most expats don't buy a car, as driving conditions can be stressful and chaotic. If one embraces the local food culture, especially the delicious street food, then eating out shouldn't be too costly. Expats can also save by shopping at markets and avoiding Western restaurants and food items.

Because of small businesses clustering together for competition, bargaining within reason is recommended. Expats with families will also likely find that education becomes one of the biggest costs, with international schools charging a small fortune for enrollment.¹⁴

Banking

Banking in Vietnam is very efficient, making managing one's finances a relatively simple task. The State Bank of Vietnam oversees various state-owned banks in the country, with the biggest being Agribank, VietinBank, Vietcombank and BIDV. There is also a large presence of international institutions, such as HSBC, ANZ and Asia Commercial Bank.

Opening a bank account is a straightforward process, with most Vietnamese banks having at least one English-speaking representative. There is normally a choice to have either a US Dollar or Vietnamese đong account. Officials will require a passport, work contract for Vietnam and a minimum deposit, which changes depending on the bank. A letter from the landlord proving that the customer is legally living in Vietnam may also be requested.¹⁵

14 <http://www.expatarrivals.com/vietnam/cost-of-living-in-vietnam>

15 <http://www.expatarrivals.com/vietnam/banking-money-and-taxes-in-vietnam>

Health

Most expats in Vietnam take out private health insurance. The private healthcare facilities in the major cities, while variable, are far superior to state-owned hospitals and clinics. Having said this, expats will often choose to travel outside Vietnam for more serious procedures. While English is spoken in most private hospitals, many public and rural clinics will only have Vietnamese-speaking staff.¹⁶

Health Insurance

'Private hospitals normally accept international health insurance, so it's a popular and recommended investment for expats. Additionally, expats are advised to ensure that treatment outside the country is covered, in case of requiring specialist or emergency treatments that are available in nearby Singapore and Bangkok.¹⁷

Emergencies

Expats can dial 113 for the police, 114 for the fire department and 115 for ambulance services. Because of potential language barriers, expats should consider phoning their embassy in the case of an emergency. Traffic doesn't always move out of the way for emergency vehicles, so it may be best to get a taxi if one needs to get to hospital quickly.¹⁸

Pharmacies

Pharmacies are common throughout Vietnam and are especially easy to find in major cities such as Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City. Buying drugs over the counter is simple. There are often cases of counterfeit medicine, however, and expats should also check the expiry dates. Many expats bring medicine from their home country while others choose to use pharmacies inside private hospitals and clinics.¹⁹

16 <http://www.expatarrivals.com/vietnam/healthcare-in-vietnam>

17 <http://www.expatarrivals.com/vietnam/healthcare-in-vietnam>

18 https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/vietnam?s_cid=ncezid-dgmq-travel-single-001

19 <http://www.expatarrivals.com/vietnam/healthcare-in-vietnam>

Health Risks

Health risks in Vietnam include malaria, typhoid and dengue fever. Avoid drinking tap water, and be aware that the heat can cause dehydration, sunburn and sunstroke. Air pollution is also a major concern, especially in the bigger cities.²⁰

Vaccinations

It's recommended that travelers are vaccinated for hepatitis A, hepatitis B and typhoid, along with routine vaccinations for measles, mumps, rubella, diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, chickenpox, polio and a yearly flu shot. If traveling from a yellow fever zone, expats will require a yellow fever vaccination certificate.²¹



20 https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/vietnam?s_cid=ncezid-dgmq-travel-single-001

21 https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/vietnam?s_cid=ncezid-dgmq-travel-single-001