

II jade TRAVEL

wonderful vietnam

MURLIMENON discovers that a visit to Vietnam between September and November is a value-for-money proposition for the Indian tourist who plans to squeeze value out of the last rupee!





The anticipation of travel is almost like falling in love! You choose a destination and an adventure that makes your heart leap and your pulse race. When you arrive, you do not know how it will turn out to be, a casual flirtation, a torrid affair, a long-term relationship or, if, after all the planning and expectation, there is just no chemistry! Vietnam, the country conjures up a hundred wonderful images. The easiest way to reach Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) from India is via Bangkok and Phnom Penh.

CRUISING ALONG

After spending the morning enjoying the sights and smells of HCMC, one can spend the afternoon visiting the botanical gardens, followed by a sunset cruise on the Mekong. The next day, one can visit the Cu Chi caves which is a three-hour drive from the city centre. On the third morning, take a bus from HCMC to Hanoi with a stopover at Da Nang. Visit Hoi An, the Marble Mountains and Cham Towers during your stay at Da Nang. After reaching Hanoi, a cruise around Halong Bay is a must. One can observe limestone mountains scattered around the bay in

shapes resembling animals and birds. Halong Bay is a four-hour drive from Hanoi. Spend at least two days exploring Halong Bay and then proceed to the tourist attractions in the North-East of Vietnam including the Ba Ba National Park and Ba Be Lake, the historic Pac Po Cave and the Ban Gioc Waterfall.

At HCMC, a big blue bus awaits departure at 9 am. It is an antique army truck modified into a bus by propping up two long wooden planks on the sides and a small canopy to protect people from the rain. As the bus is open from the sides, one can get a panoramic view of the surroundings. The lumbering bus is unable to go faster than 20 km per hour or perhaps the laidback driver is too lazy to press his foot on the accelerator any harder.

The trip to Hanoi is, however, by a semi-deluxe bus. Moto-taxis are a convenient mode of travel in Vietnam. It's a drive that looks endless as more and more of the Mekong River is uncovered with every passing minute. After about 15 minutes, the bus starts making belching sounds as it attempts to climb a steep cliff! One makes progress like a snail scaling Mount Everest while the amused

passengers smile slyly at each other, in jest. The view from the top of the hill is majestic.

VALUE-FOR-MONEY

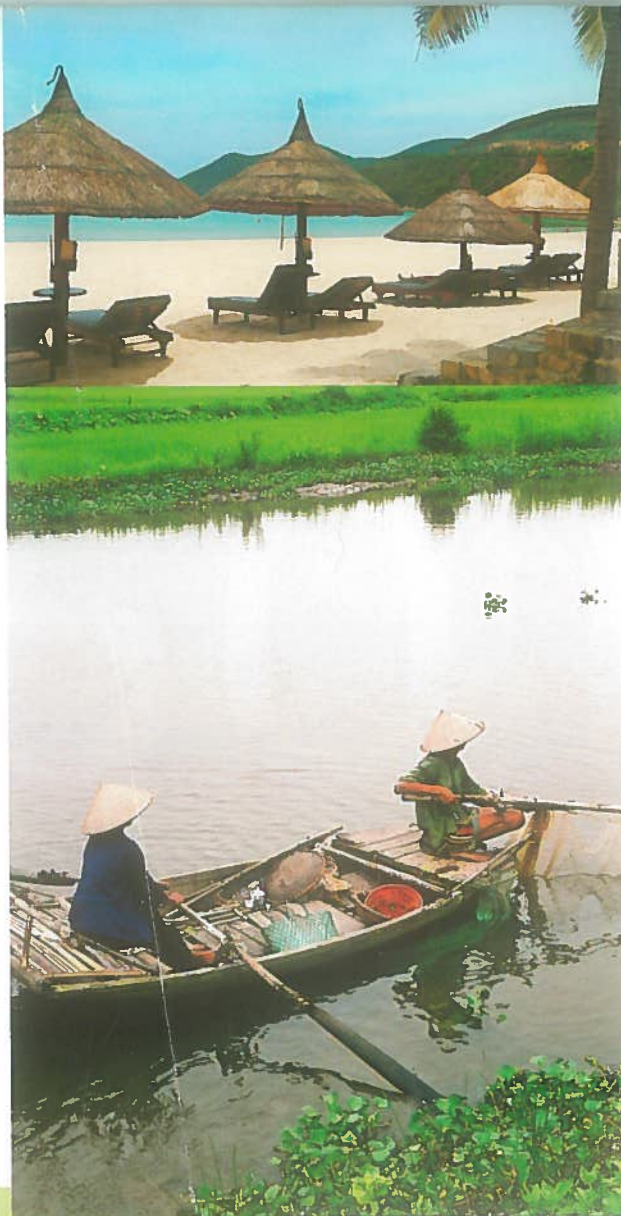
There are budget accommodations at every city in Vietnam ranging from US\$20 to 40 for clean and airy rooms with bed and breakfast. The unique feature of these budget hotels is that they are family-run and service is personal with a professional touch. Almost everyone in Vietnam is extremely courteous to foreign tourists. Most of these smaller hotels are located on the beaches and are 10- to 15-room affairs on the ground floor alone.

One need not climb stairs, with ramps everywhere for accommodating disabled or wheelchair-bound tourists. Though the Vietnamese dong is the official currency of Vietnam, US dollars are accepted everywhere including government-run hotels; the exchange rate being one dollar equal to 13,000 dong. However, cents are not accepted. So it is advisable to carry dollars in denominations of one, five and 20 during your visit there. In interior Vietnam, it is often difficult to get change for \$100 or even \$50. The small change is always returned in Vietnamese dong and one

How to get there?

By bus: First, fly to Phnom Penh via Bangkok and then take the bus from Phnom Penh to Ho Chi Minh City. The 900 km bus trip takes about six hours. The one-way ticket is priced at US\$12. Buses leave at regular intervals.

By air: Several high-cost international airlines operate direct flights from Bangkok to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. But the cheapest option for budget-conscious Indian tourists is to take the midnight Indian Airlines flight from Mumbai to Bangkok and the connecting Air Asia flight from there to Phnom Penh in the morning. One can reach Ho Chi Minh City by bus before sunset. If booked two weeks in advance, the Bangkok-Phnom Penh-Bangkok two-way fare should not exceed



SOME OF THE OTHER MUST-DO ACTIVITIES DURING A VISIT TO VIETNAM INCLUDE:

Visit the Saigon Zoological and Botanical Garden in Ho Chi Minh City which is the oldest cultural and historical park in Vietnam and has the country's largest collection of plants and animals. It was established in 1865 in an area close to the Rach Lang River, north-east of the city.

Visit the submerged forests in Ca Mau. The shape of Vietnam's southernmost area is similar to a ship headed out to sea. Over time, the Mekong River has formed a unique submerged ecology. Take a boat trip from Ca Mau City (Ca Mau Province) to the beautiful mangrove forests there.

Visit the Cai Rang Floating Market in Can Tho City which is one of the three biggest in the Mekong Delta. The main items sold there are farm products and specialties of Cai Rang Town. Visit the ethnic minority villages situated in the thick forests that constitute the border between Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. There are several volcanic lakes, magnificent waterfalls and thick tropical rainforests hidden in this remote and inaccessible corner of Vietnam. The best part of this visit is the home-stay with the local tribes, a unique experience no doubt.

US\$100. At the time of going to press, Air Asia does not fly either Bangkok-Hanoi or Bangkok-Ho Chi Minh City sectors. The flight duration is approximately 90 minutes. Air Asia is a budget airline whose fares are extremely affordable even if booked at the last minute. However, Indian tourists who are sure about their itinerary in Vietnam can book Air Asia tickets using an international credit card in India and get early-bird promotional fares starting at US\$40. Avoid Thai Airways' Bangkok-HCMC or Bangkok-Hanoi direct flights.

Exchange Rate: 100 Indian Rupees = 30,000 Vietnamese Dong

Cambodia Visa: Sixty-day tourist visas are stamped on arrival for Indian passport holders. Two passport-size photographs are needed and the visa fee of US\$20 is payable in cash.

Vietnam Visa: Thirty-day tourist visas have to be collected at the Vietnamese embassy in Phnom Penh. Two passport-size photographs and a copy of confirmed return ticket from Phnom Penh to India is required. Most travel agents in Phnom Penh will deliver the Vietnamese visa to your hotel for US\$35.

Where to stay?

Even the smaller towns of Vietnam offer excellent value-for-money accommodation at less than US\$10 per night. Rooms are clean, airy and offer a French colonial ambience. One can get similar value bargains at Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City too. Hotel Indo-Chine is a good option for the budget traveller at HCMC.

Where to eat?

Many small restaurants serving Thai, Vietnamese and Chinese cuisine dot HCMC. Freshly steamed vegetables in red curry, served with steamed white rice is an appetising local dish decorated with carved tomatoes and coriander leaves.

The food at the high-profile hotels is only for the gastronomically adventurous who like greasy food. Fresh tropical fruit including durians, mangosteens, pineapples, tender coconuts and jackfruits are available at the local market. 