

# GUIDE TO VIETNAM

A twisting ribbon of land winding along the South China Sea from the border with Yunnan, past Laos and Cambodia, all the way down to the Gulf of Thailand, Vietnam presents a stunning tapestry of natural beauty, phenomenal cuisine, neon-lit cities and seemingly never-ending white-sand beaches. Just four decades after the devastating Vietnam War, this is very much a country on the rise, one infused with hope and welcoming visitors with open arms. Access to all this excitement grows easier by the day, with roads and airports being rapidly upgraded, luxury hotels shooting up quicker than bamboo and bright young things adding a creative spark to the country's complex culture.

by Lee Cobaj



## MUST DOS

### TRAVEL HALONG BAY IN STYLE

There's a brand-new highway linking Hanoi and Halong Bay, but there's no better way to take in the full majesty of the 'Descending Dragon' than arriving by seaplane and viewing the squiggly coast and limestone karsts looming out of the jade-green sea from above. Hop on a flight in Hanoi, then spend a couple of days on board the *Paradise Peak*, the jewel of Halong Bay's junks. She is available for private charter and has a spa, library and fitness room to enjoy. [paradisecruise.com](http://paradisecruise.com)

### BIKE AND BOAT THE CU CHI TUNNELS

Take a deep dive into Saigon's riveting history with a cycling and speedboat tour of the Vietnam War-era Cu Chi Tunnels with Grasshopper Adventures. Set out in the morning and sail upriver, passing from newly constructed skyscrapers to suburban villages to rambling hills and banana plantations. From here, decamp into the Viet Cong's intricate network of tiny tunnels, have lunch, then take a leisurely cycle back to the city. [grasshopperadventures.com](http://grasshopperadventures.com)

### COOK UP A STORM

Can't get enough of that exquisite Vietnamese food? Sign up with chef and cookbook author Tracey Lister at the Hanoi Cooking Centre. Full- and half-day experiences encompass tours of lively morning fish-and-vegetable markets, sampling the city's top street-food vendors, as well as cooking classes, which teach traditional techniques so you can whip up classic Vietnamese dishes — such as chicken *pho*, *bun cha* and spicy prawn cakes — when you get back home. [hanoicookingcentre.com](http://hanoicookingcentre.com)

### SEE THE OTHER HALONG BAY

The set location for the 2017 movie *Kong: Skull Island*, Ninh Binh echoes the looming, mist-licked otherworldly landscape of Halong Bay — except it's inland, cut by deep caves and wide rivers rather than the open sea — and crowd free. Stay at gorgeous little Tam Coc Garden Hotel, set between dramatic mountains and glowing green rice paddies and, from there, explore ancient blue-stone Taoist temples, gothic Catholic cathedrals and river caves. [tamcocgarden.com](http://tamcocgarden.com)



### Something special... Go off grid

If you're looking for something a bit more adventurous, and most definitely off the tourist trail, consider a sojourn around the wondrous Vietnamese Highlands, land of vertiginous rice fields, rippling mountains and dozens of ethnically diverse hill tribes. Local high-end tour operator Journeys to the East can arrange bespoke trips commandeering luxury vehicles, employing chefs and arranging stops in spruced-up homestays in the remote wilds of Ha Giang, Vietnam's northern-most province. [journeys-to-the-east.com](http://journeys-to-the-east.com)



## TOP SUITES



### THE SAIGON SUITE Reverie Saigon

The finest suite at the most expensive hotel in Ho Chi Min City brings eye-popping Versailles-level luxury to Vietnam. A dining table originally designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, Philippe Stark-designed sofa and Le Corbusier lounge chair are just a few of the extraordinary pieces scattered across the two-story penthouse. A mirrored staircase links the glittering crystal-and-marble living area to a calmer creamy master suite and second bedroom.

**From \$12,000 per night. Contact Christina von Wrede, hotel manager, [christina.vonwrede@thereveriesaigon.com](mailto:christina.vonwrede@thereveriesaigon.com), +84 283 823 6688, [thereveriesaigon.com](http://thereveriesaigon.com)**



### THE ROCK RETREAT Six Senses Ninh Van Bay

Set on a secluded corner on the vast empty beaches of Nha Trang, the romantic Rock Retreat perfectly complements the timeless landscape. A series of thatched-roofed villas housing a master bedroom, spa suite and living *sala* are linked by zigzagging walkways; chic interiors feature sun-bleached wood, canopy beds and oversized sofas; and there's a dramatic asymmetric plunge pool hewn out of stone — *the* place to take in the sensational sunsets.

**From \$2,780 per night. Contact Ateeb Shrestha, general manager, [reservations-ninhvan@sixsenses.com](mailto:reservations-ninhvan@sixsenses.com), +84 258 352 4268, [sixsenses.com](http://sixsenses.com)**



### FIVE-BEDROOM POOL VILLA Four Seasons Resort The Nam Hai

The Nam Hai's Five-Bedroom Pool Villa stands directly on the beach, framed by rustling coconut palms, an opal-blue infinity pool and diamond-white sands. Inside, vaulted ceilings, teak floors and traditional Vietnamese artworks combine with clean-lined contemporary furniture and billowing white curtains to create a bright and breezy feel. In the evening, retire to the lawn, surrounded by the glow of paper lanterns and the *shush shush shush* of the South China Sea.

**From \$5,429 per night. Contact Anthony Gill, general manager, +84 235 395 9879, [fourseasons.com](http://fourseasons.com)**



### PRESIDENTIAL SUITE Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi

The Presidential Suite, located in the historic Opera Wing, harks back to the hotel's early-20th-century glory days. Every aspect reflects the best of French colonial-era design, from the crystal chandeliers to the oriental rugs and red velvet swags. The master bedroom has a massive mahogany sleigh bed and marble bathroom with slipper tub. Wake to your butler presenting a breakfast of tropical fruits and buttery pastries served on silver trays.

**From \$5,200 per night. Contact Anthony Slewka, director of sales and marketing, [anthony.slewka@sofitel.com](mailto:anthony.slewka@sofitel.com), +84 243 826 6920, [sofitel.com](http://sofitel.com)**

## ASIAN FLAVOR

### CUC GACH QUAN, HO CHI MIN CITY

From the huge menu, order the light and summery zucchini flower soup and *tit kho to*, or clay-pot stewed pork belly, a rich aromatic caramelized pork braised in coconut juice. Owned by a local architect and his French-Vietnamese wife, Cuc Gach Quan's dreamy setting is almost as memorable as the food; antique armoires, aged maps, 1960s movie reels, all wrapped inside two greenery-filled French villas. A popular spot since Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie dined here, it's best to book ahead. [cucgachquan.com.vn](http://cucgachquan.com.vn)

### BUN CHA HUONG LIEN, HANOI

One of Hanoi's best-loved family-run cafes, Bun Cha Huong Lien slingshotted to international fame after the late, great Anthony Bourdain dined here with President Barack Obama in 2016 (the owners were so enthralled they preserved the table and chairs used by their illustrious guests in a glass case). On the menu? *Bun cha*, strips of grilled pork tossed in lemongrass and garlic served on a pillow of vermicelli. You'll probably have to get in line, but we promise it'll be worth the wait. **24 Le Van Hu'u**

### LA BADIANE, HANOI

This atmospheric restaurant is housed in a beautifully restored French villa with high ceilings, checkerboard floors and flowery balconies. With its smooth service, Edith Piaf soundtrack and French-leaning menu, it offers one of the most refined dining experiences in Hanoi. Gastronomic highlights include the six-course degustation menu featuring the likes of foie gras terrine with banana-orange chutney, saffron-seared scallops with cauliflower mousseline, and black-pepper-and-five-spice lacquered Iberico pork. [labadiane-hanoi.com](http://labadiane-hanoi.com)

La Badiane's tiramisù

