

Country Profile

Vietnam

Updated July 2016



PURPOSE

The purpose of this Country Brief is to provide information to volunteers across all Australian Business Volunteers (ABV) Programs that will assist in the safe and successful completion of volunteer assignments in Vietnam. The Brief provides information on important contacts, country background and history, cultural considerations, security guidelines, health and medical issues, transport and other information for daily living in Vietnam.

CONTACTS

Australian High Commission, Vietnam

8 Dao Tan Street

Ba Dinh District

Hanoi Vietnam

Telephone: +84-4 3774 0100

Fax: +84-4 3774 0111

Website: <http://vietnam.embassy.gov.au/>

Emergency Numbers

AHC afterhours 24-hour consular emergency helpline

Phone: +61 2 6261 3305

SMS: +61 421 269 080

AHI Assist

- *24/7 Emergency Hotline:* +61 2 9978 6666
- *Australian Business Volunteers Policy Number:* 32089

Any incidence of harm to your person or possessions should be immediately reported to the police and ABV (an In Country Manager contact, if any).

For other contacts specific to your program, please see supplement page at the end of this document.

COUNTRY PROFILE



Full country name:	Socialist Republic of Vietnam
Land Area:	331,210 sq km
Population:	89.71 million (2013)
People:	85% of Vietnam's ethnic-minority population belongs to indigenous groups, 3% ethnic Chinese
Language:	Vietnamese (Kinh)
Religion:	Buddhism (85%), Christian, Caodaism
Time:	Vietnam is 7 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT), which is three hours behind AEST
Climate:	Hot and temperate climate, with an average temperature range of 22 – 27 degrees Celsius. The wet season runs from May – October/November, with the dry season running from November – April.
GDP:	171.4 billion USD (2015)
GDP per Capita:	1,910.51 USD (2013)
Currency:	Vietnamese Dong

HISTORY

After a millennium as a Chinese province, the northern region of Vietnam gained independence in 938AD, following the dissolution of the Tang Empire. Vietnam continued to fight off attempts to reintegrate it into China until, in 1802, the country as it is presently known was united under a single ruler. The French increased their influence within the region over the next 60 years, and finally in 1887 Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia fell under a central French administration, forming the Union Indochina.

In the decades before the Second World War, a number of groups emerged that were opposed to colonial rule. The Communist Party of Indochina was established in 1930 and drew increasing support

from Moscow during the late 1930s. In 1941, the Revolutionary League for the Independence of Vietnam (Viet Minh) was formed under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh. During WWII the Japanese occupied the country and a pro-Japanese government was appointed. However, France had regained control over the south and negotiated the withdrawal of Chinese troops from the north by 1946.

From 1946 to 1954 the country was involved in a guerrilla war, known as the Indochina War with France; which finally ended with the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. The cease-fire agreement saw Vietnam divided at the 17th parallel; administered in the north from Hanoi by the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and in the south from Saigon by the government of the State of Vietnam. However, the cease-fire agreement did not bring peace to the Vietnamese people and the tensions increased between north and south, and between the government and pro-Communist factions in the south, and led to intervention in the conflict and support for the government of the south by the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, South Korea and the Philippines. The US economic and military aid to South Vietnam grew through the 1960s in an attempt to bolster the government, but the US armed forces were withdrawn following a cease-fire agreement in 1973. Two years later, North Vietnamese forces overran the South. After the return of peace, Vietnam has been a one-party communist state although the government is has been committed to economic liberalization since the doi moi reforms of the late 1980s.

ECONOMY

Vietnam's economic performance since the inauguration of new leaders has been impressive. Its GDP during 2000 to 2002 grew 6% to 7% despite the trend of global recession. According to the important for the country to transform itself into a market economy within the next five years, and the Vietnamese government, the country's GDP growth rate reached 7.7% for 2004 (while estimated to be 7.2% by CIA). Both the World Bank and the Vietnamese government have been optimistic about the country's economic performance in the near future. The government's target is to achieve countrywide 8.5% economic growth rate and 9% to 10% economic growth rate for the poor northwest region during year 2005. The implementation of a new five-year Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP) would be very successful accession to the WTO in the future would be key to sustaining its growth momentum. Moreover, a soundly regulated financial system, the enforcement of contracts and creditor rights, and the reduction of poverty are also critical tasks for Vietnam's long-term development. The major industries in Vietnam include rice, rubber, food processing, coffee, sugar, textiles and chemicals. Its major trading partners are China, Singapore, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan.

A bilateral trade agreement signed by the US and Vietnam, rivals during the Vietnamese War, entered into force at the end of 2001 and is expected to significantly increase Vietnam's exports to the US. The US is assisting Vietnam with implementing the legal and structural reforms called for in the agreement.

DRESS AND APPEARANCE

Hanoi and Vietnam's rural areas are more conservative in their dress code compared with Ho Chi Minh City. Although it is generally accepted that tourists dress less conservatively than locals, you will be much better received if you are dressed more conservatively and not in singlets and short skirts.

PERSONAL BEHAVIOUR, CULTURE AND CUSTOMS

To be polite, one should always increase the respect given to the addressee and decrease the respect applied to oneself – by giving respect, one gains respect. Try not to use "thank you" and "please" too much as it becomes meaningless if you say it too often in the same conversation. However, if you

start sounding flowery, you've got it about right. When addressing or writing to Vietnamese, note that the family name comes first, and first names comes last. Vietnamese are addressed by their honorific and their first name, e.g. Mr Luong (for Tran Duc Luong).

Although the Vietnamese people are not shy to talk about history – the American War and the French War, and most of them are proud of their victories in both these wars, it is helpful to remember that the Vietnamese spent generations fighting for their right to independence and that the long standing US embargo made it hard for them to be involved in the world community as an equal entity. To be effective, volunteers and other aid workers should think of themselves as partners with their Vietnamese counterparts, and not as a donor.

Vietnamese seldom speak directly about a problem or issue; you are more likely to hear a story and details that will lead you to the main point of the discussion. Go with the flow. If you can speak in an indirect style, whatever advice you give is far more likely to be heard. Loss of face is unbearable in Vietnam. If an action by a volunteer causes loss of face to the counterpart, the relationship is damaged beyond repair and the volunteer may well have to return home. Never lose your temper, never shout, and never forget to let your counterpart know what you are doing or planning to do, never forget to consult with your partners in the project.

Walking across a street is an experience. Even if the traffic lights indicate you can proceed, and even if the street is one-way, check in ALL directions before proceeding. The best method is to step away from the pavement and walk steadily towards the other side. The approaching traffic will see you and will make allowances for your movement – they will not stop, but will simply drive around you. Do not lose faith and do not panic and stop – if you maintain your pace and direction all will be well.

Moreover, the following feedback from volunteers regarding their experiences in Vietnam may be helpful for you as well:

- Bargaining is accepted practice – starting prices are usually way above the real tourist price – there's another whole economy that exists for locals.
- People tend to comment on your physical stature.
- Everyone loves to sing and it's helpful to learn a song because you could be asked to sing.
- Try to learn a few words of Vietnamese – people really appreciate it.
- Sharing food is very important – although it is considered rude to talk extensively during a meal. The youngest person at the table will usually serve the rice and it is normal practice to choose and offer the best morsels of food for the elders. Soup comes at the end of the meal.

SECURITY RISKS AND PERSONAL SAFETY

The DFAT Smart Traveller website has up-to-date information regarding travelling in Vietnam and current risks to personal safety and security. The Smart Traveller website can be found at: <http://smartraveller.gov.au/Countries/asia/south-east/Pages/vietnam.aspx>

ABV volunteers should read this information prior to departure to Vietnam and check it regularly while in country. Australian citizens should register with Smart Traveller prior to departure. The link to do so is also available on the above web page. ABV volunteers are also advised to monitor local media reports while in country to keep abreast of any potential security risks.

Please take note of the following advice for personal safety whilst in country:

- Don't increase your vulnerability by consuming excess alcohol;

- As most crime is opportunistic, consider carrying fewer personal possessions in public, including cash and expensive jewellery/watches;
- Beware of snatch and grab crimes against pedestrians by thieves operating on foot or motorbikes. Bag slashing is also common in tourist areas, markets, on public transport and in supermarkets
- Beware of taxi scams and ensure that you always use a reputable taxi company, especially when catching taxis late at night;
- Gambling scams have been known to occur, and be aware of people who are overly friendly towards you and invite you back to their home. On previous occasions, these approaches have led to gambling scams, in which some Australians have lost thousands of dollars.

The Smart Traveller website link above also has further information, and is useful to become familiar with prior to travel – especially the ‘Safety and Security’, ‘Local Travel’ and ‘Laws’ tabs.

HEALTH AND MEDICAL

The standard of medical facilities and care across Vietnam varies, and there are private medical facilities in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang and Vung Tau, however, they may not meet Australian standards. In Hanoi, there are Western medical clinics as well as hospitals for treatment in emergencies. Road injuries – especially motorbike accidents are very common.

The medical facilities outside of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City are poor, and medical evacuation to a major centre may be required, even for relatively small procedures.

Vietnam has had sporadic outbreaks of the Zika Virus, and mosquito borne illnesses such as Japanese Encephalitis, Dengue Fever and Malaria occur within Vietnam. Japanese Encephalitis and Dengue Fever can be found throughout Vietnam, while Malaria is found more in the remote mountainous areas of Vietnam.

Rabies is also common in Vietnam and is spread by saliva/bite from a rabid animal.

There are plenty of pharmacies in most places. The In-Country Manager and Australian High Commission Post will be able to provide information on the best health and medical care in Vietnam.

TRANSPORT

Flying and Airport Information

Ho Chi Minh’s Tan Son Nhat Airport is 7km from the city centre and you can catch metered taxis from the airport. Hanoi has fewer international flights than Ho Chi Minh City. The Noi Bai International airport is 35km from the city and the trip takes 45m – 1 hour.

Local Transport

Ultra-cheap buses and minibuses criss-cross the country in an impressive network of routes but you should think long and hard before taking one. Apart from being ramshackle, extremely slow and hugely overcrowded, the notion of safety on Vietnam's roads is a loose and hazy concept that doesn't bear too much investigating. There are 'express' buses, but even these rarely average more than 50kmh (31mph). The alternative, used by many foreigners, is to charter a minibus. They cost more but are much more comfortable; ask at budget hotels and cafes for details. Tourist buses go between Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. You pay for the whole or part of the trip and get on and off at any stop along the way.

While sometimes train travel can be slower than bus travel, it is safer and more relaxed, and you're likely to have decent legroom. There are several types of train, including the famous Reunification Express; but think twice before you take a crowded, snail-paced local train. Petty theft can be a problem on trains, especially in budget class. Children throwing things at carriages, everything from rocks to cow dung, is another problem, and you're advised to keep the metal shield on the window in place.

Travelling through Vietnam, and around the towns and cities, by bicycle is worth considering, though the traffic is still a hazard on highways without wide shoulders. Trains and buses will carry your bike when you want a break.

Other than a few ancient and infrequent buses, local transport is by taxi (some metered, some not) or cyclo (pedal-powered vehicles that are cheap and plentiful). Motor bike taxis are generally the quickest and cheapest way to get around town, otherwise if you're in a hurry, and fearless, try flagging down any passing motorbike. Many people will be happy to give you a lift for a fee less than the equivalent cyclo fare.

Work Travel

ABV volunteers must advise the In Country Manager (ICM)/Project Manager of any work and leisure travel in a timely manner, and ensure that any required travel forms are completed prior to the trip. Information required should include:

- Date of travel;
- Destination, accommodation and route;
- Details of any travel companions; and
- Contact details whilst travelling (e.g. travel accommodation telephone numbers and mobile telephone numbers).

Host organisations are to provide transport, accommodation and visa arrangements for all field trips.

ACCOMMODATION

ABV volunteers may be accommodated in a hotel, a furnished apartment or a furnished house. All accommodation has been security reviewed against a set standard by ABV (DFAT for AVID volunteers). In all cases, accommodation will be secure, clean and waterproof with sound walls and floors. The following items are the standard volunteers can expect from their accommodation at their location, unless otherwise advised by the ICM or Project Manager:

- Beds with mattress, pillows, sheets and towels;
- Bathroom with running water in the shower or bath and a toilet;
- Air conditioning or ceiling fans;
- Lockable windows with insect screens and curtains;
- Some form of electricity;
- A small refrigerator;
- Table and chair;
- Cooking facilities where available.

Personal charges such as international telephone calls, mini bar or room service are the responsibility of the volunteer.

You should be aware of the difference in living standards between a country like Australia and a developing country like Vietnam. Through our hosts or ICM teams, we ensure that accommodation provided is secure and clean, however, many facilities taken for granted in Australia, such as air conditioning, hot water, television and western food, are not a given.

In addition, roads are generally of poorer quality, footpaths are uncommon, power supplies may be disrupted from time to time and, domesticated livestock may be kept in streets and around your buildings and near accommodation.

DAILY LIFE

Vietnamese cuisine is especially varied, and you can get meat and vegetarian dishes. The staple of Vietnamese cuisine is plain white rice dressed up with a plethora of vegetables, fish, meat, spices and sauces.

Spring rolls, noodles and steamed rice dumplings are popular snacks, and the ubiquitous soups include eel and vermicelli, shredded chicken and bitter soups. Beef or Chicken noodle soup (Pho) is a delicious broth made up of meat, noodles, bean sprouts and other vegetables. Fruit is abundant; some of the more unusual ones include green dragon fruit, lychees, jujube, khaki, longan, mangosteen, pomelo, three-seed cherry and water apple.

Vietnamese coffee (ca phe phin) is very good; it's usually served very strong and very sweet. The baguettes, pastries and ice-cream are wonderful. However, the milk used for ice creams on the street cannot be guaranteed. Buy from the shops to be safe.

In Hanoi, there are several supermarkets which offer a limited selection of "western" goods not generally available in the more general street markets. They are: Fivimart (10 Tran Vu St and 210 Tran Quang Khai St), Citimart (49 Hai Ba Trung), Intimex (22 – 32 Le Thai To St and 135 Hao Nam St).

Shops generally stay open until 2100 hours. Fruit and vegetable markets are open from dawn to dusk with the best shopping done early in the morning.

Tap water is NOT safe to drink. Bottled mineral water is widely available and should be used for both drinking and brushing teeth. Ice used in drinks in most restaurants is usually safe.

The currency of Vietnam is the dong (pronounced 'dom' and abbreviated by a 'd' following the amount). Bank notes are in denominations from 500d to 500,000d (less than AUD 1cent to about \$32 AUD) so large wads of money are common.

US Dollars are often used by foreigners and accepted by airlines, hotels, and some taxi drivers though not in large denominations. However, the Vietnamese Government has tightened its policy and it is expected that instances where USD can be used are likely to be more limited. It is therefore recommended that dong be used where possible.

Banking

The ANZ Bank at 14 Le Thai To Street, Hanoi (Tel: 844-8258190, Fax: 844-8258188) is open from 8:30 am to 4:00 pm Monday to Friday, and from 8:30 am to 12:00 noon on Saturday and the staff speak English. The bank also maintains an ATM and cash advances are available for customers of most Australian banks. ANZ also has a branch in Ho Chi Minh City in Le Duan st.

An alternative in Hanoi is the Vietcom Bank: Its head office is located at 198 Tran Quang Khai Street. (Tel: 844-8248921, Fax: 844-265548), and there is also a branch office at Hang Bai Street (Tel: 844-8268031) and Tran Quang Khai Street (Tel: 844-8268045). The opening hours are from 8:00-11:30 am and 1:00-3:30 pm. They will cash travellers cheques into US Dollars for a 1% commission and into Vietnamese dong for a 0.5% commission. No commission is charged for American Express.

Vietcom Bank has offices in all major centres.

In Hanoi, other ATMs can be found at: 198 Tran Quang Khai St, 110 Cau Go St, 23 Phan Chu Trinh St, 49 Hai Ba Trung St and 75 Dinh Tien Hoang St.

Most major credit cards are accepted in Vietnam. Visa and Mastercard charge 3% commission and AMEX charges 4%. You can pay by credit card at most shops and hotels in the major centres.

TIPPING

Tipping is not customary in Vietnam, but if you wish to even a small amount is appreciated.

ELECTRICITY

220V, 50Hz. European power connection plugs work everywhere.

COMMUNICATION

Vietnam is putting considerable effort into modernisation and expansion of its telecommunication system, but its performance continues to lag behind that of its more modern neighbours.

Telephone: Prices for international calls from Vietnam have dropped significantly in the last few years. With VOIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) international calls to most countries are charged at a rate of US\$0.50 per minute. International Direct Dial (IDD) calls can also be made via internet phones available in most internet cafes. These are particularly common in tourist areas throughout the country. If you are in the rural areas and it's not possible to use cheap international phone cards, international calls can be also made from the post office.

New regulations necessitate all SIM cards to be registered so you must apply at the phone company office

Emailing: Access to online services is widely available in the major cities and you may easily find internet cafes in those major tourist centres.

Post: The domestic postal rates are cheap and the international postages are similar to what you pay in the European countries. Air mail service from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City takes approximately 5 to 10 days to most Western countries, while it could take as little as 4 days through EMS. However, the mails sent from anywhere other than large towns could take much longer time. Mail delivery in Vietnam is mostly reliable and fast. However, receiving a parcel could cause a headache since the parcel might need to pass the customs inspection and you could need to be present in the customs office.

PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

New Year's Day	1 January
TET/Lunar Calendar New Year	Late January – Mid February
Hung King Celebration	Mid April
Liberation of Saigon	30 April
International Workers Day	1 May
National Day	2 September

PREVIOUS VOLUNTEER CONTACTS

Volunteer	Contact
Peter Button	catpet@hotmail.com
Gillian Morgan	gdmorgs@iinet.net.au
Robert Eadie	robeadie@optusnet.com.au
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