

# Vietnam Travel Guide

The best things to see and do



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## 1. Why you should visit Vietnam

Vietnam is fantastic travel destination, and it is getting more popular by the year. Regardless if you are drawn to bustling cities, peaceful countryside, or dramatic coastal landscapes, Vietnam with its unique blend of ancient traditions, resilient spirit, and stunning natural beauty, delivers a rich and rewarding travel experience for every traveler. The country stretches over 1,000 miles (1600 km) from north to south, and each region brings its own character, flavors, weather, and stories. A journey through places like Ho Chi Minh City, the Mekong Delta, Hoi An, Hanoi, Ninh Binh, and Lan Ha Bay near Ha Long Bay offers a powerful glimpse into the country's depth and diversity.





Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon, is often the first stop for travelers arriving in the south. It is a place where history and modernity collide in the most energetic way possible. Towering skyscrapers and neon-lit cafes sit next to colonial-era buildings and centuries-old pagodas. The city pulses with life, from the constant flow of scooters weaving through traffic to the aroma of street food stalls offering banh mi and freshly brewed Vietnamese coffee. Despite its rapid development, Ho Chi Minh City still holds onto its past, especially in sites like the War Remnants Museum or the Reunification Palace, which offer sobering and insightful perspectives on Vietnam's 20th-century history.



A few hours southwest lies the Mekong Delta, a world away from the city's chaos. The region has a lush, watery landscape where rivers replace roads and boats serve as daily transport. In towns like Ben Tre and Can Tho, visitors can float through palm-shaded canals, visit vibrant floating markets, and get a feel for rural Vietnamese life that remains closely tied to the rhythm of the river.



Moving north to Hoi An, the atmosphere shifts again. This town's ancient downtown area feels almost frozen in time, with its lantern-lined streets, well-preserved architecture, and riverside setting. Once a bustling trading port, Hoi An now welcomes visitors with its relaxed pace, artistic charm, and culinary richness. It is a place where you can wander without a plan, or simply watch the lanterns glow after sunset. Hoi An is the epicenter of the colorful Lantern Festival in Vietnam – do not miss this. Nearby beaches and the ruins of My Son add even more layers to the experience.





Then comes Hanoi, the capital and cultural heart of the country. Hanoi offers a different kind of energy: less commercial than Ho Chi Minh City, but equally alive. While the Old Quarter with its elegant French colonial buildings, and the tranquil Hoan Kiem Lake are rightfully the city's main tourist draws, over the years, Hanoi's very instagrammable Train Street and Long Bien Bridge have become tourist magnets, too.



Just east of Hanoi is Lan Ha Bay, the quieter cousin of the more famous Ha Long Bay. With the same surreal limestone formations and emerald waters, Lan Ha offers all the beauty without the crowds. It is the kind of place that begs to be explored by boat. It is a peaceful and awe-inspiring highlight to any journey through Vietnam.





Finally there is Ninh Binh, sometimes called ‘the Halong Bay on land’, though that comparison does not do it full justice. Towering limestone karsts rise dramatically from lush rice paddies and winding rivers. The region offers some of the most cinematic scenery in Vietnam, with highlights like the Trang An grottoes, the ancient capital of Hoa Lu, and peaceful Bich Dong Pagoda tucked into a hillside. Ninh Binh is quieter and more rural than many other stops, and that is part of its magic: it gives travelers the chance to slow down and take in the landscape in a more personal way.



Each of these destinations reveals a different side of the country, and together they create a mosaic of unforgettable experiences. Whether you are in the middle of a crowded market or gliding through a quiet bay, Vietnam invites you to engage, reflect, and connect. It is not just a place you visit – it is a place that stays with you. We love Vietnam.

This is not an in-depth Vietnam guide. You can buy Vietnam guides from the big travel guide companies. Our goal is to help you Make Memorable Moments on a relaxing Vietnam trip and help you build the perfect itinerary for your trip. For that purpose, we have added lots of photos so that you see what you will experience and make an educated decision if these places are for you.

Please also check out the other exciting destinations and travel guides on our **Backpack and Snorkel [website](#)**.

## 2.1 Disclaimer

In this guide we are doing our best to give you the most accurate information. Over time, however, prices, times, and even attractions are subject to change. Therefore, I and backpackandsnorkel.com cannot be held responsible for the experiences of users while traveling. I strongly suggest that you write or call the attractions you plan to visit for confirmation when you make your travel plans.

Also, please stay alert, be aware of your surroundings and keep an eye on your belongings. Pickpockets and other criminals can easily ruin even the best planned vacation.

## 2.2 Copyright

This website and its content are copyright of “Rudy at Backpack and Snorkel”. All rights reserved. Any redistribution or reproduction of part or all of the contents in any form is prohibited. The content on this site (including photos) may not be sold, reprinted, or used for commercial purposes without the written consent of “Rudy at Backpack and Snorkel”. You may not, except with our express written permission, distribute or commercially exploit the content. Nor may you transmit it or store it in any other website or other form of electronic retrieval system.

## 3. General Information about Vietnam

### 3.1 Visa Requirements for Vietnam

Visa requirements for Vietnam vary depending on your nationality. Many travelers can apply for an e-visa online, which is valid for 90 days and allows for single or multiple entries. Countries such as the United States, Canada, the UK, Australia, and most EU nations are eligible for the e-visa system.

Vietnam also offers visa exemptions for citizens of certain countries, including some ASEAN members and a few European nations, for stays ranging from 14 to 45 days. Travelers entering by air can sometimes obtain a visa on arrival, but this usually requires a pre-approval letter and is only valid at select airports. It is important to check the latest requirements on the official Vietnam immigration website or consult with your local Vietnamese embassy before traveling.

Here are resources that you should check:

- [Vietnam National Electronic Visa system website](#)
- [iVisa](#)

***Extremely Important: You will be turned away at the border if there is a typo or any mistake in your visa. Therefore, please double- and triple check the information you enter and the visa that is issued to you. If there is any mistake, apply for a new visa.***

## 3.3 Climate and Best Time to Visit Vietnam

Vietnam has a tropical to subtropical climate, and due to its north-south expansion of over 1,000 miles (1600 km), it experiences a range of weather patterns depending on the region. You can have snow in the north and a heat wave in the south at the same time.

**Northern Vietnam** has four distinct seasons, including chilly winters from December to February and hot, humid summers from May to August.

**Central Vietnam** is typically hot and dry from January to August but sees heavy rains from September to December. In recent years, heavy rains and flooding have been reported at around June.

**Southern Vietnam** is consistently warm and humid, with a wet season from May to October and a dry season from November to April.

The best time to visit Vietnam depends on where you are going. For **Northern Vietnam**, spring (March to April) and fall (September to November) offer mild weather and clear skies.

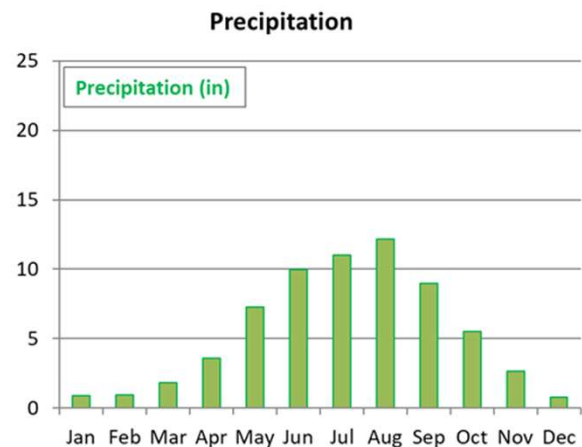
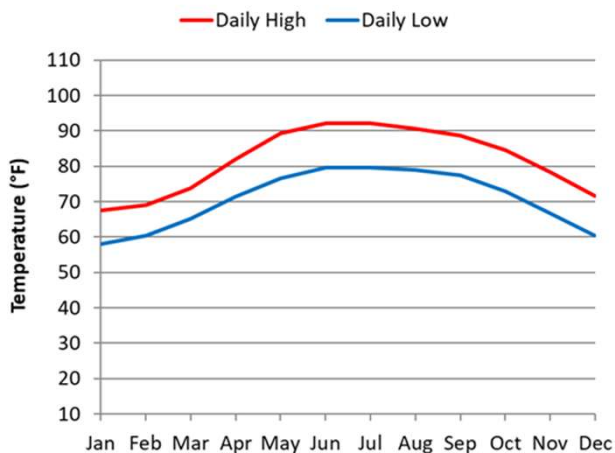
**Central Vietnam** is ideal in the early months of the year, while **Southern Vietnam** is most pleasant during its dry season from December to April.

Planning your trip according to the regional climate will ensure a more comfortable and enjoyable experience.

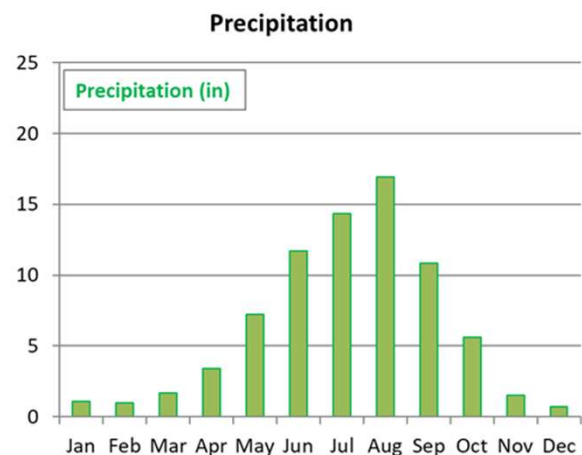
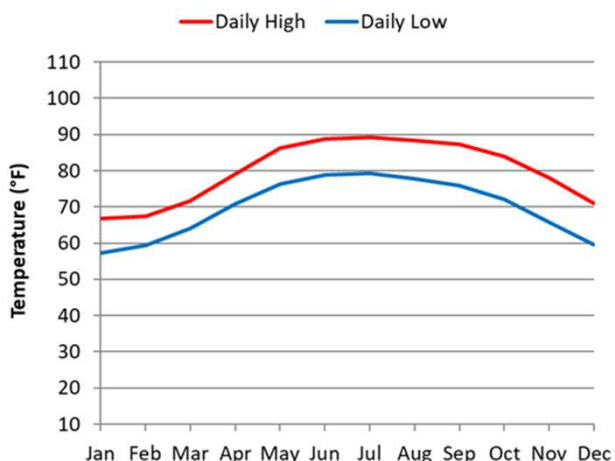


If you plan to visit the whole country, then **March** is often a sweet spot. March sees warm climate in **Southern Vietnam**, warm and dry conditions in **Central Vietnam**, and comfortable weather in Northern Vietnam.

Here is the climate that you can expect in Hanoi:

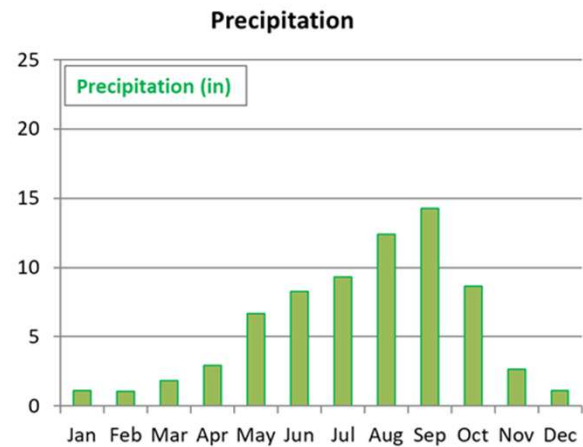
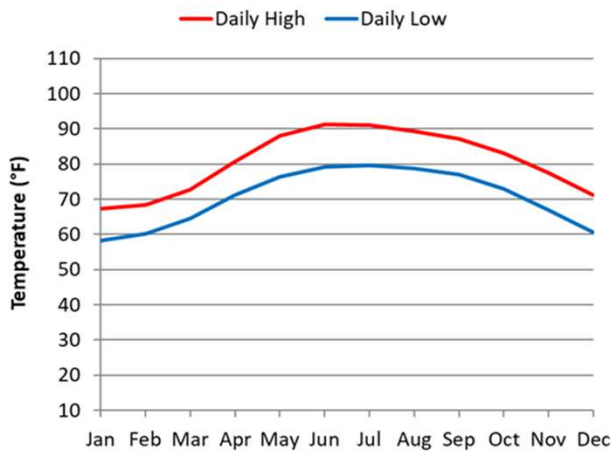


Here is the climate that you can expect in Lan Ha Bay:

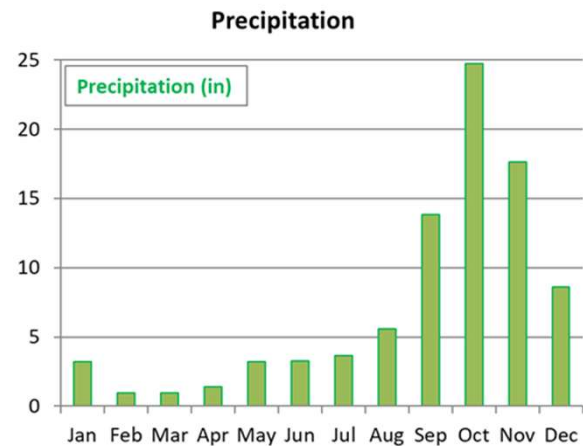
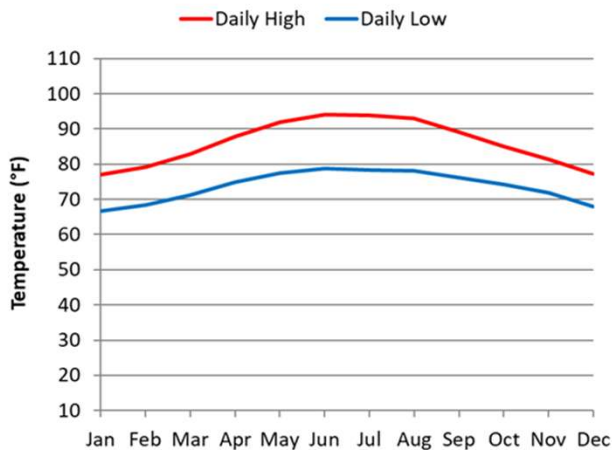


# Vietnam Travel Guide

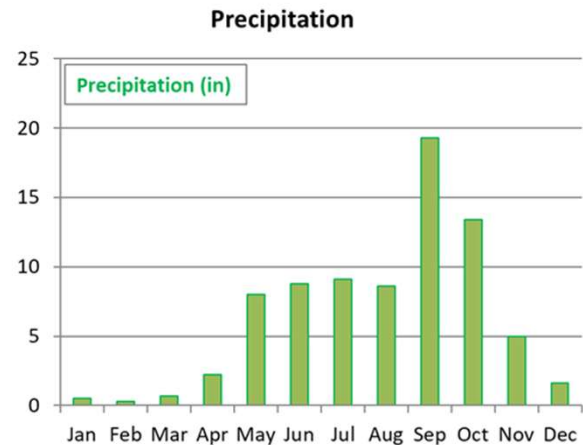
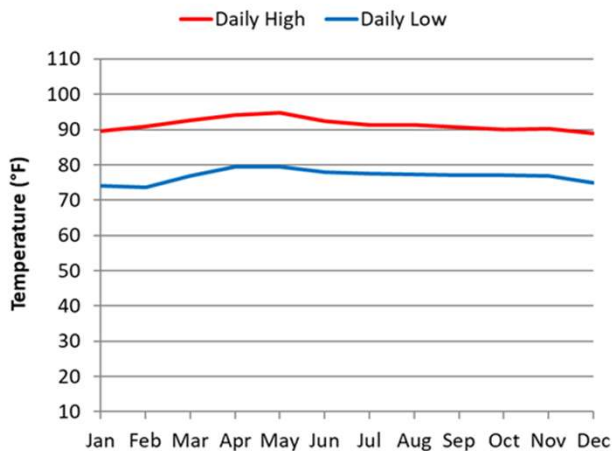
Here is the climate that you can expect in Ninh Binh:



Here is the climate that you can expect in Da Nang and Hoi An:



Here is the climate that you can expect in Ho Chi Minh City:



## 4.1.1 Fusion Original Saigon Centre

([map](#), [booking](#), [expedia](#), [agoda](#), [hotels](#), [kayak](#), [tripadvisor](#))

We loved **Fusion Original Saigon Centre**. It perfectly aligned with our desire for both central accessibility and modern comfort. The hotel is located directly within the prestigious Saigon Centre shopping mall in District 1's bustling Bến Nghé Ward, and surprisingly, it was very quiet – we heard no noise from the busy streets or the mall.

### **Location: Unbeatable Central Location**

The most striking advantage of Fusion Original Saigon Centre is undoubtedly its **prime location**. Situated on the busy Lê Lợi Boulevard (but the hotel entrance is on Rue Pasteur), it places you right at the epicenter of Ho Chi Minh City's most dynamic district. This means:

- **Direct Shopping Access:** Step out of the hotel and directly into the extensive high-class shopping offered by Saigon Centre and the connected Takashimaya Department Store.
- **Walkable Attractions:** Iconic landmarks like Ben Thanh Market, the Opera House, Nguyen Hue Walking Street, and the Notre Dame Cathedral are all within easy walking distance. This significantly cuts down on travel time, allowing you to immerse yourself in the city's energy.
- **Dining Hub:** The surrounding area is a veritable paradise for foodies, with countless restaurants, cafes, and street food options catering to every craving.

## **Design & Atmosphere: Bold and Inviting**

Fusion Original Saigon Centre immediately impresses with its bold and contemporary design. From the moment you enter, the hotel's aesthetic makes a statement, blending modern flair with subtle nods to Vietnamese culture. Vibrant colors, and unique artwork create an atmosphere that is both sophisticated and fun.

## **Rooms: Serene Retreats with Thoughtful Touches**

The rooms and bathrooms at Fusion Original Saigon Centre are beautifully designed as serene and sophisticated retreats above the city's buzz. We found them to be:

- **Spacious and Elegant:** For a hotel in the center of such a big city, the rooms are surprisingly spacious. The well-equipped rooms with modern furniture that shows almost no wear, and a matching wall color scheme, makes you feel welcome.
- **Views:** The rooms offer beautiful views over Ho Chi Minh City's ever-changing skyline, which is beautifully lit up at night, and offers a constant reminder of your central location.
- **Modern Amenities:** The room is equipped with a smart TV, high-speed Wi-Fi, and a minibar. The bathroom has a rainfall showerhead, bathrobes, and quality toiletries. Two bottles of water are provided every day.
- **Reload Pantry:** A unique feature that we highly appreciated is the 'Reload Pantry' on each floor. It is stocked daily with complimentary snacks, barista coffee, and a water menu. This is a fantastic perk for a quick bite or a caffeine fix anytime.

## Facilities: Elevating Your Stay

The hotel's facilities are designed to enhance both relaxation and productivity:

- **Rooftop Pool:** The hotel has an outdoor swimming pool which offers breathtaking panoramic views of the city, complete with sun loungers and a tranquil garden area. It is the perfect spot to unwind and escape the urban heat.
- **Wellness Centre & Gym:** Guests receive complimentary access to the state-of-the-art California Centuryon Fitness, featuring modern fitness equipment and even an additional pool. There is also a full-service spa available for pampering.
- **Restaurant:** The hotel has its own restaurant, which we did not use.
- **Breakfast:** Complimentary breakfast is served buffet-style, with an optional Vietnamese breakfast that the staff will prepare for you.

## Service: Attentive and Professional

The staff at Fusion Original Saigon Centre is fantastic. They are very friendly, super polite, and try to help as good as they can and as fast as possible. Also, the hotel is super clean.



## Overall Impression:

Fusion Original Saigon Centre is an excellent choice for travelers who prioritize location, modern amenities, and a stylish, engaging atmosphere in Ho Chi Minh City. Its integration within a major higher-end shopping mall and proximity to key attractions make it incredibly convenient for exploring the city. The rooms are high enough in the building so that you will not be bothered by any noise.

If you are a solo traveler, a couple, or a business professional, this hotel truly offers a unique and refined urban escape.

We highly recommend it!









# Vietnam Travel Guide



## 4.3.1 Bel Marina Hoi An Resort in Hoi An

([map](#), [booking](#), [expedia](#), [agoda](#), [hotels](#), [kayak](#), [tripadvisor](#))

### **Unbeatable Location: Steps from Hoi An's Magic**

The exquisite **Hoi An luxury resort** is our preferred hotel in Hoi An, because of its prime location: It is located in easy walking distance to the **Hoi An Lantern Festival**, the historic **Ancient Town**, and the lively atmosphere of the **Hoi An Night Market**.

Beyond its perfect location, the yellow painted Bel Marina Hoi An Resort impresses with a grand lobby, and elegant design that is beautifully blending European sophistication with Vietnamese heritage.

Our room was modern, spacious, and beautifully designed. The room had a balcony with views to the southern end of the island and the river.

The comfortable furnishings and attention to detail made it feel like a home away from home. The furniture showed very few signs of wear, Wi-fi was fast and the air conditioning was quiet and efficient.

The hotel provides two bottles of water per day.

The amenities at Bel Marina are excellent, too. The hotel has a popular two-level pool in the courtyard, and a roof-top pool, which is much quieter. You can rent bicycles, and take the electric shuttle to An Bang Beach.

Breakfast is served buffet-style in two locations with nearly identical offerings, and you can get an omelet or other dishes prepared by the staff.



# Vietnam Travel Guide

With its strategic spot, superb facilities, and consistently wonderful staff, we can confidently say that Bel Marina Hoi An Resort is a **top hotel in Hoi An** for an unforgettable Vietnamese getaway. We left feeling refreshed and already planning our return!









# Vietnam Travel Guide







## 4.6.1 Should you book a cruise for Ha Long Bay, Lan Ha Bay, or Bai Tu Long Bay?

When planning a **Vietnam cruise** through its iconic limestone karsts, you will need to decide which of the three bays you want to explore: **Ha Long Bay**, **Lan Ha Bay**, or **Bai Tu Long Bay**.

While all offer breathtaking scenery, they cater to different preferences. Understanding their unique characteristics is key to booking the **best bay for your cruise in Vietnam**.

### Ha Long Bay: The Iconic Classic

**Ha Long Bay** is, without a doubt, the most famous of the three, renowned globally for its dramatic limestone pillars jutting majestically from emerald waters. It is the image you have likely seen on postcards and travel brochures.

- **Pros:** As a UNESCO World Heritage site, it offers the quintessential **Halong Bay experience** with the most diverse range of **Ha Long Bay cruise** options, from budget-friendly day trips to opulent multi-day voyages. You will find a wide selection of itineraries, activities, and departure times.
- **Cons:** Its popularity means it can be incredibly crowded, especially in peak season. The sheer volume of boats can detract from the serene natural beauty, and environmental concerns due to over-tourism and trash in the water are ongoing.
- **Who it is for:** First-time visitors who want to see the most famous landmarks and don't mind sharing the experience with many other travelers.

## **Lan Ha Bay: The Active and more Serene Alternative**

Adjacent to Ha Long Bay and directly connected to Cat Ba Island, **Lan Ha Bay** offers similarly stunning karst landscapes but with significantly fewer crowds. This makes it an increasingly popular choice for those seeking a more tranquil and active adventure.

- **Pros:** You will experience pristine waters that are better suited for **swimming and kayaking** through hidden lagoons and caves. Some **Lan Ha Bay cruise** itineraries integrate activities like rock climbing and cycling on Cat Ba Island. The environment feels much cleaner and more secluded than central Ha Long. But you will still see around 10 other boats at the anchoring sites.
- **Cons:** While beautiful, some argue the karst formations are slightly less dramatic than Ha Long's most iconic spots. Being a newer tourism hub, there are slightly fewer options compared to Ha Long's vast selection.
- **Who it is for:** Travelers looking for a quieter, more eco-conscious **Vietnam cruise** experience, with ample opportunities for water activities and exploring Cat Ba Island, avoiding the busiest tourist routes.

## Bai Tu Long Bay: The Secluded Escape

Located northeast of Ha Long Bay, **Bai Tu Long Bay** is the most remote and least visited of the three. It is truly for those who want an exclusive, off-the-beaten-path journey into untouched nature.

- **Pros:** Expect much more tranquility, pristine waters, and a more secluded experience away from the tourist hordes. The karst formations here are unique and slightly less impressive than in the other two bays. **Bai Tu Long Bay cruise** options tend to focus on longer, more luxurious itineraries.
- **Cons:** Due to its remoteness, fewer cruise operators venture here, and the tours typically come with a higher price tag. Travel time to reach the departure points is also be longer.
- **Who it is for:** Discerning travelers prioritizing peace, quiet, exclusivity, and a deeper connection with untouched nature, willing to pay a premium for the unique experience.

## Choosing Your Ideal Bay Cruise

Ultimately, the best bay for your cruise depends on your travel style and priorities:

- Choose **Ha Long Bay** if seeing the absolute most famous sights is your top priority and you are comfortable with crowds.
- Opt for **Lan Ha Bay** for a more active, less crowded experience, perfect for kayaking, swimming, and exploring Cat Ba Island.
- Select **Bai Tu Long Bay** if tranquility, exclusivity, and an untouched natural environment are your ultimate goals, and budget is less of a concern.

No matter which you choose, a **cruise in Vietnam's bays** promises an unforgettable journey through some of the world's most spectacular landscapes.



## 1. The ‘Bait and Switch’ Scam (Most Common):

- **How it works:** You book a specific, often highly rated, luxury, or mid-range cruise through an online travel agent (OTA) or a seemingly legitimate local agency. A day or a few days before your departure, you receive a message (email, phone call, or even in-person if you booked at a local office) stating that your original cruise is unavailable due to ‘overbooking’, ‘technical issues’, ‘weather cancellation’ (even if the weather is fine), ‘sorry, we booked the wrong cruise’, or some other fabricated reasons. They then tell you they have ‘upgraded’ or ‘rebooked’ you on ‘another’ cruise. Sometimes they even offer you different cruises.
- **The reality:** The substitute cruise is almost always inferior to what you paid for – older boat, fewer amenities, less appealing itinerary, lower quality food, or even a different bay than you intended (e.g., sticking to crowded Halong Bay instead of the quieter Lan Ha Bay or Bai Tu Long Bay).
- **Why it happens:** Unscrupulous agents prioritize commission. They might book you on a high-commission boat, or they might not have a legitimate booking for the cruise you desired in the first place, or they might simply sell your confirmed spot on a better boat to someone else at a higher price and then move you. This happened to us with Hai Phong Tours.

## 2. Fake Websites / 'Copycat' Agencies:

- **How it works:** Scammers create professional-looking websites that closely mimic the official sites of reputable cruise lines or well-known travel agencies. They might use very similar names, logos, and even content. You book and pay, believing you are dealing with a legitimate company.
- **The reality:** Your booking may never be made, or if it is, it is on a much cheaper, lower-quality boat than advertised. The 'agency' then disappears or becomes unreachable once you realize you have been scammed.
- **Red flags:** URLs that are slightly off (e.g., an extra dash, a different domain extension), prices that are significantly lower than official sites, lack of clear contact information, or requests for payment via unusual methods (e.g., direct bank transfer to a personal account).

## 3. Hidden Fees / Unclear Inclusions:

- **How it works:** An initial low price is advertised to draw you in. However, the booking deliberately omits crucial details about what is included. Upon arrival or during the cruise, you are hit with unexpected charges for things like transfers, drinks (even water), kayaking, cave entry fees, tips, or even specific meals.
- **The reality:** The 'cheap' cruise ends up being far more expensive than a transparently priced, better-quality alternative.
- **How to avoid:** Always ask for a detailed breakdown of *all* inclusions and exclusions in writing before paying. Clarify if transfers from Hanoi, entrance fees, activities, all meals, and drinks (and what kind of drinks) are included.

## 4. 'Too Good to Be True' Deals:

- **How it works:** You encounter incredibly low prices for a 'luxury' or 'all-inclusive' cruise. This might be from street touts, pop-up ads, or even some small online agencies.
- **The reality:** These low prices are almost always a precursor to the bait-and-switch, hidden fees, or simply an experience that is far from what was promised (e.g., unsafe boat, unsanitary conditions, poor food, rude staff).
- **Rule of thumb:** If the price seems unrealistically low for what is advertised, it is almost certainly a scam or a significantly downgraded experience. Quality Halong Bay cruises are not cheap.

## 5. Overbooking / Forced Cabin Sharing:

- **How it works:** You book a private cabin or a specific cabin type (e.g., with a balcony). Upon boarding, you are told the cabin is unavailable due to overbooking and you are either downgraded to a smaller room, a room without the features you paid for, or even worse, told you have to share a cabin with strangers (though this is rarer for cruise scams, it is known in general accommodation scams).
- **The reality:** The cruise operator may have genuinely overbooked, but often, it is a way to squeeze more money out of customers or to fill lower-quality cabins.

## 6. Unlicensed / Unregistered Operators:

- **How it works:** You book through an agent or company that does not have the proper operating licenses from the Vietnamese government.
- **The reality:** If something goes wrong (e.g., cancellation, safety issue, poor service), you have very little recourse or legal protection. These operators are often difficult to trace or hold accountable.
- **How to avoid:** Reputable agencies and cruise lines will prominently display their business registration and international tour operator license numbers. You can even try to verify these on the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (VNAT) website (though checking is not always straightforward for tourists).

## 7. Weather Cancellation Misinformation:

- **How it works:** While legitimate cruise cancellations due to bad weather do happen (and are decided by the Halong Bay Management Authority for safety), some unscrupulous agents might falsely claim a cancellation to enact a 'bait and switch' or to charge exorbitant rebooking fees.
- **How to avoid:** Understand the legitimate cancellation policies before booking. If a cancellation is announced, try to verify it with the official Halong Bay Management Authority (if possible) or directly with the cruise line's official channels, not just the booking agent. Reputable companies will have clear refund or rebooking policies for weather cancellations.



To ensure your **Vietnam cruise booking** is smooth and secure, follow these essential tips to avoid common pitfalls and secure the best experience.

- **Book through reputable travel sites:**

**Viator** and **GetYourGuide** are two reputable travel sites that sell tours globally. They do not operate those tours, but they work with reliable tour providers and they can help if there is any problem. Both also have consumer-friendly refund policies.

Both companies are our go-to sources for guided tours:

[Viator Ha Long Bay cruises](#)

[Viator Lan Ha Bay cruises](#)

[Viator Bai Tu Long Bay cruises](#)

[GetYourGuide Ha Long Bay cruises](#)

[GetYourGuide Lan Ha Bay cruises](#)

[GetYourGuide Ba Tu Long Bay cruises](#)

- **Book through the Official Websites of the Cruise Lines:** Identify the actual cruise lines you are interested in. You can book through the websites below – unfortunately, many of these websites are painfully slow.

Here is a list of cruise line websites that we believe are authentic (at the time of writing) in alphabetical order:

<https://alisapremiercruise.com/en>

<https://bhayacruises.com/>

<https://www.capellacruise.com/>

<https://www.emeraude-cruises.com/en/>

<https://www.peonycruises.com/>

<https://www.monchericruises.com/>

<https://www.indochina-junk.com/>

<https://signaturehalongcruise.com/>

Be advised that your contract will be directly with the cruise line. This may save you some money, but may be problematic if there are any problems or disputes.

- **Book through reputable travel agents:** If you have worked with a travel agency in your town, go and ask them.
- **Read Recent Reviews:** Use trusted platforms like TripAdvisor, Google Reviews, etc.. Pay attention to recent reviews regarding cleanliness, service, food quality, safety, and whether the actual experience matched the advertised one. Look for negative feedback and any signs of the above-mentioned scams.

- **Verify Licenses:** Reputable operators should clearly display their international tour operator license numbers. While this might be harder for an individual traveler to verify directly, major online travel agencies (OTAs) or reputable local agents will only work with licensed cruise lines.
- **Avoid Street Touts and Unsolicited Offers:** This is where many scams originate. Never book a **Ha Long Bay tour** or any cruise from someone approaching you on the street, at bus stations, or in unofficial 'travel agencies' with handwritten signs. Prices might seem incredibly low, but you risk getting a significantly downgraded experience, hidden fees, or a non-existent booking.
- **Get a Detailed Itinerary:** Insist on a clear breakdown of daily activities, specific caves, or islands to be visited (as itineraries can vary between bays), and the duration of each activity (e.g., kayaking time, swimming stops).

- **Clarify All Costs Upfront:** Ask about all potential extra charges. This includes:
  - **Transfers:** Is the round-trip transfer from Hanoi/Ninh Binh included? What type of vehicle (shuttle bus, limousine, private car)?
  - **Entrance Fees:** Are all national park and attraction entrance fees covered?
  - **Meals & Drinks:** How many meals are included? Are drinks (water, soft drinks, alcohol) included, or are they extra? What is the policy on bringing your own beverages?
  - **Activities:** Is kayaking, bamboo boat rides, cooking classes, tai chi, etc., included or at an additional cost?
  - **Tips/Gratuities:** Is service charge included, or are tips expected/required?
  - **Surcharges:** Are there any surcharges for specific dates (e.g., public holidays)?
- **Get It in Writing:** Always ask for a written confirmation or contract detailing all inclusions, the agreed-upon price, and cancellation policies. This provides a clear reference if disputes arise.

By taking these proactive steps and prioritizing reputable sources, you can ensure your **Ha Long Bay cruise**, **Lan Ha Bay cruise**, or **Bai Tu Long Bay cruise** is a magical and memorable experience, free from unwanted surprises. Enjoy the stunning beauty of Vietnam's iconic karst landscapes!

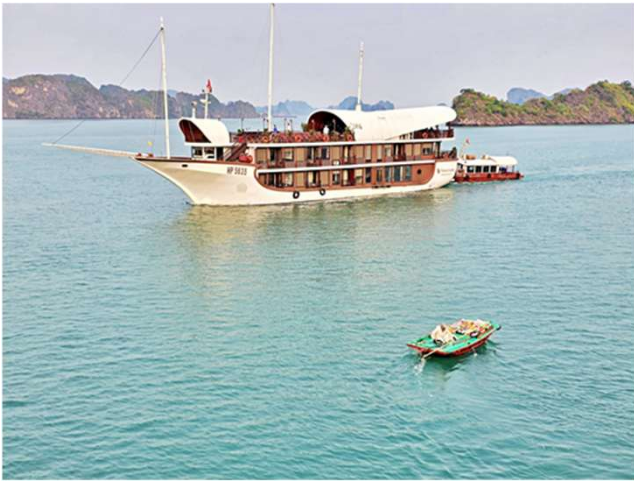


# Vietnam Travel Guide

Here are some photos of the Calypso that operates 2 Day 1 Night tours in Lan Ha Bay:







If you prefer to have a more relaxing time in Ha Long Bay/Lan Ha Bay/Bai Tu Long Bay, then you can substitute the original 1-day trip with this 2-day itinerary:

12	7-8am hotel pickup; Cruise of Ha Long Bay/Lan Ha Bay/Bai Tu Long Bay; transfer to Ninh Binh	Boat
13	Cruise of Ha Long Bay/Lan Ha Bay/Bai Tu Long Bay; afternoon: transfer to Ninh Binh	Ninh Binh

## Add-on 3: Adding a hiking trip in Sa Pa (Sapa) in the far northern part of Vietnam

If you have not traveled much in Asia and never seen rice terraces before, then you should definitely consider adding a trip to Sa Pa (Sapa).

If you have seen rice fields and rice terraces before, or if you are not interested in hours-long hiking trips, then you can skip Sa Pa. Historically, most western visitors have taken the overnight sleeper train from Hanoi to Sa Pa. This is still a good idea if you can sleep on a moving train, and if you want to save money on accommodation for one night.

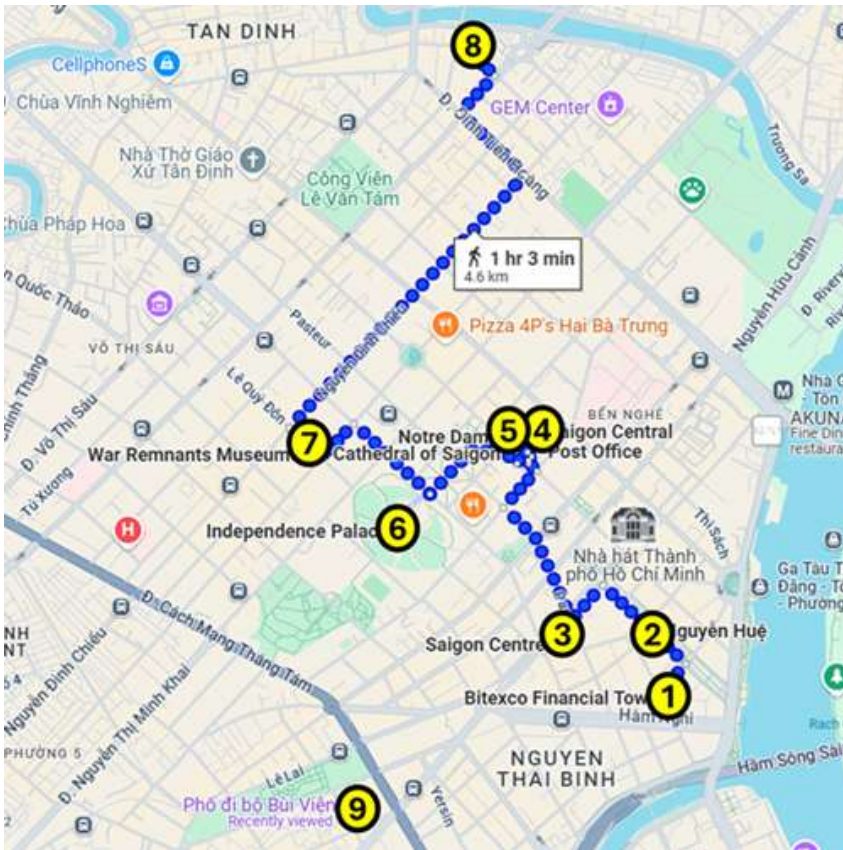
The more comfortable way, in our opinion, is to book a guided tour from Hanoi that includes a transfer by car on the new high-quality highway that connects Hanoi with Sa Pa.

Here you can find typical Sa Pa tours that include transfers by car: [Viator](#), [GetYourGuide](#).

If you want to do this, then you can add this to the above itinerary:

16	Transfer to Sa Pa; check into hotel; lunch; first hike; dinner	Sa Pa
17	Breakfast; second hike; check out of hotel, transfer back to Hanoi	Hanoi

Here is today's tour:



- 1 = [Bitexco Tower and Saigon Skydeck](#)
- 2 = [Nguyen Hue Promenade](#)
- 3 = [Saigon Centre](#)
- 4 = [Ho Chi Minh Central Post Office](#)
- 5 = [Saigon Cathedral of Notre Dame](#)
- 6 = [Reunification Palace](#)
- 7 = [War Remnants Museum](#)
- 8 = [Jade Emperor Pagoda](#)
- 9 = [Bui Vien Walking Street](#)

## 5.2.1 Bitexco Tower and Saigon Skydeck

([map](#), [reviews](#), [website](#))

Rising boldly above the skyline of **Ho Chi Minh City**, the **Bitexco Financial Tower** is a striking symbol of modern Vietnam. At 860 ft (262 m) tall, this 68-story skyscraper is one of the most recognizable landmarks in southern Vietnam and a must-visit attraction for those exploring **downtown Saigon**. Bitexco Tower is a fantastic place for architecture enthusiasts, photography, or simply for experiencing the city from above. A visit to the **Saigon Skydeck** on the 49th floor provides panoramic views and a unique perspective on Vietnam's dynamic urban landscape. In our opinion, visiting the Saigon Skydeck should be one of the very first attractions to visit in Ho Chi Minh city, as it provides fantastic views of the city and helps you orient yourself. Alternatively, you can visit it after sunset for views of the beautifully illuminated skyline.

### **Bitexco Tower - An Icon of Modern Architecture in Ho Chi Minh City**

The building was designed by Venezuelan architect **Carlos Zapata** and completed and inaugurated in October in 2010. Bitexco Tower briefly was the tallest building in Vietnam, until it was surpassed by Keangnam Hanoi Landmark Tower in January 2011.

One of its most distinctive features is the **cantilevered helipad** that extends from the 52nd floor — a futuristic addition that enhances its dynamic silhouette.



## **Bitexco Tower - An Award-Winning Architectural Landmark**

The tower's striking design, inspired by Vietnam's national flower — the lotus — has gained international recognition. In **2013**, **CNN** named Bitexco Financial Tower one of the '**25 Great Skyscraper Icons of Construction**'. In **2015**, **Thrillist** ranked it the **#2 Coolest Skyscraper in the World**, applauding its bold structure and modern symbolism.

## **Saigon Skydeck: Best Viewpoint in Ho Chi Minh City**

The **Saigon Skydeck**, located on the 49th floor, offers **360-degree views** of Ho Chi Minh City's skyline, including the **Saigon River**, historic landmarks, and bustling city streets. It is widely regarded as one of the **top places for sunset views in Ho Chi Minh City** and a prime spot for travel photography.

Maps, and binoculars enhance the visitor experience, helping you identify key sights across the city. Tickets are affordable and available at the entrance or online, and combo deals often include a visit to **EON51**, the rooftop bar and restaurant with an even higher vantage point.

**Skydeck Opening hours:** Daily from 9:30 AM – 9:30 PM

**Skydeck tickets:** Available at the entrance or online; at the time of writing, admission is 240,000 VND per person

**EON51 restaurant/bar ([website](#)):** Located on the 50–52nd floors, ideal for dining with a view, open from 11am - 11pm

## Home of the HCMC Skyrun: Vietnam's Premier Vertical Race

Since **2011**, the Bitexco Financial Tower has hosted the annual **HCMC Skyrun**, Vietnam's longest-running vertical stair climbing race. This extreme fitness challenge starts on the ground floor and ends at the helipad on the 52nd floor.

In the inaugural race, **Thomas Dold** of Germany set the **men's course record** at **4 minutes 51 seconds**, while **Valentina Belotti** of Italy set the **women's record** at **6 minutes 19 seconds**. The Skyrun attracts international athletes and adventurous locals alike, further cementing the tower's status as a cultural and athletic landmark.

Here are some photos that we took:





# Vietnam Travel Guide



## 5.2.2 Nguyen Hue Promenade

([map](#), [reviews](#), [website](#))

Located few feet from [Bitexco Tower](#), **Nguyen Hue Walking Street** (often called **Nguyen Hue Promenade**) is one of **Ho Chi Minh City's** most popular public spaces and cultural hubs. Stretching from the **Saigon River** to the historic **People's Committee Building**, this wide pedestrian boulevard is a lively urban gathering point that hosts some of the city's most important **festivals, art exhibits, and public celebrations**.

Very few guidebooks or travel blogs even mention it – but we found it to be a very good use of our time due to the beautiful exhibits. And we think you will like it too – just look at the photos we took below.

### **Nguyen Hue Promenade - A Modern Pedestrian Boulevard in the Heart of Saigon**

**Nguyen Hue Walking Street** was officially opened in **2015** after being transformed from a busy traffic corridor into a spacious, landscaped pedestrian-only zone. The promenade is **2,200 ft (670 m) long and 210 ft (64 m) wide**, flanked by stylish cafes, high-rise buildings, shopping centers, and historical landmarks like the **Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee Hall**, the **Rex Hotel**, and the famous **Cafe Apartment Building (42 Nguyen Hue)**.



The street is fully open to pedestrians, making it one of the best places in the city for a leisurely walk, casual photos, or evening entertainment. Interactive light displays, fountains, benches, flower beds, and free Wi-Fi make the experience even more enjoyable.

Here are some photos that we took:





# Vietnam Travel Guide



## 5.2.6 Reunification Palace / Independence Palace

([map](#), [reviews](#), [website](#), [palace\\_map](#))

*Pro Tip: There are two ticket booths, each with their own entrance to the palace grounds in the buildings to the left and right of the large lawn in the center. If you want to rest, or just get a refreshment, the building on the right has a small café behind the ticket booth where you can get coffee and various other hot and cold drinks. You can access the café without a ticket. There is additional seating upstairs, with good views of the street and the people in front of the palace. We found it very relaxing to rest here for a while.*

The **Reunification Palace**, also known as the **Independence Palace**, is one of the most historically significant and iconic landmarks in **Ho Chi Minh City**. This former presidential residence played a pivotal role in modern Vietnamese history. It is famously known as the site where the **Vietnam War ended on April 30, 1975**, when North Vietnamese tanks crashed through its gates — marking the fall of Saigon and the reunification of the country.

Today, the palace is preserved as a museum and memorial that offers visitors a fascinating look into Vietnam's political past, complete with original furnishings, war relics, underground bunkers, and commanding 1960s architecture.



## Reunification Palace: A Presidential Palace with a Complex History

The Reunification Palace stands on the site of the former **Norodom Palace**, built by the French colonial government in the 1860s to house the Governor-General of Cochinchina. After the French departure and the division of Vietnam, the palace became the residence of **President Ngo Dinh Diem**, the leader of South Vietnam.

In **1962**, after an attempted coup and bombing damaged the original structure, Diem ordered it to be demolished and replaced with a more modern building. The current palace was designed by Vietnamese architect **Ngô Viết Thụ**, who won the prestigious **Prix de Rome** for architecture, and completed in **1966**.

It served as the presidential headquarters for South Vietnam until 1975. The tank that crashed through the gates — **Tank 843** — is now on display on the palace grounds and remains one of the most iconic images of the **end of the Vietnam War**.

Here are some photos:





## What to See Inside Reunification Palace

A visit to the Reunification Palace is like stepping into a time capsule of 1960s Vietnam. The palace has been preserved almost exactly as it was on the day it fell. Key highlights include:

- **Official Reception Rooms**

These formal spaces were used to host foreign dignitaries, ambassadors, and state events. Featuring mid-century furniture, wood-paneled walls, chandeliers, and Vietnamese art, the reception halls reflect the Republic of Vietnam's attempt to project prestige and diplomatic legitimacy. Look for the Cabinet Room, where state policy was shaped, and the Credentials Room, used for receiving new ambassadors.

- **Presidential Office and War Room**

President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's office remains just as it was in the 1970s, complete with a large desk, national flags, and South Vietnam's coat of arms. The adjacent war room features **maps, old communication equipment, and strategy boards**, giving insight into how military decisions were made during the final years of the Vietnam War. It is a sobering space filled with the atmosphere of high-stakes decision making.

- **Underground Bunker**

Beneath the palace is a fortified **command bunker** with **concrete blast-proof walls** and narrow corridors. Inside are rotary phones, typewriters, telex machines, and wall maps from the wartime era. This secure facility was designed to allow South Vietnam's leaders to continue operations in case of attack. The conditions are stark and utilitarian, offering a gritty contrast to the elegance above.

- **Helipad**

The rooftop features a **helipad**, once part of the president's evacuation plan. On display is a **UH-1 Huey helicopter**, symbolizing the U.S. military's deep involvement in the conflict. The rooftop also provides sweeping views of District 1 and is the spot from which **President Thiệu fled in 1975**.

- **Screening Room and Private Quarters**

The palace includes a **cinema room** used by the presidential family and VIP guests, complete with retro red seats and a projection booth. The nearby **residential quarters** are surprisingly homey, with period-specific furnishings including bedrooms, a private dining room, and leisure spaces such as a game room with a circular sofa and roulette table. These areas show the human side of those who governed here.

- **Historic Tank and Helicopter Displays**

Outside, on the lush front lawn, you will see **Tank 843**, a North Vietnamese Army tank that famously crashed through the palace gates on April 30, 1975. A second tank and a U.S. Huey helicopter are also on display. These are among the most photographed artifacts in Ho Chi Minh City and offer dramatic reminders of the moment South Vietnam fell and Vietnam was reunified.

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Here are some photos that we took:





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Fresh juices, smoothies, and traditional Vietnamese iced coffee (**cà phê sữa đá**) are also widely available, offering a cool break from the heat.

## **Night Market: Ben Thanh After Dark**

As the sun sets, the area around Ben Thanh transforms into a lively **night market**. Vendors set up stalls outside the main building, selling clothing, souvenirs, and street food late into the evening. This is a great time to shop in cooler temperatures and enjoy a more festive atmosphere. The **Ben Thanh Night Market** is one of the top evening attractions in Ho Chi Minh City, ideal for those looking to experience Saigon's nightlife in a safe and local setting.

## **Practical Information**

- **Opening Hours:** 7:00 AM – 6:00 PM (main market), 6:00 PM – 10:00 PM (night market)
- **Tips:**
  - The fresh food sections opens at 4am. Arrive early in the morning for the freshest produce and best shopping experience, or for the night market.
  - Carry cash (Vietnamese Dong), as many vendors do not accept cards.
  - Watch your belongings; like any busy market, it can get crowded.

Here are some photos that we took:



## 5.3.2 Mariamman Hindu Temple

([map](#), [reviews](#))

**Mariamman Hindu Temple** is one of the most visually striking and spiritually unique landmarks in **Ho Chi Minh City**. Known locally as **Chùa Bà Ân**, this temple is dedicated to **Mariamman**, a South Indian goddess associated with rain, fertility, and protection from disease.

As the only active **Hindu temple in Ho Chi Minh City**, it stands out not just for its colorful **Dravidian architecture** but also for its welcoming atmosphere that draws devotees of multiple faiths (including Hindus, Buddhists, and Vietnamese locals). making it a powerful symbol of **cultural fusion in Vietnam**.

### A Living Relic of Indian-Vietnamese History

The **Mariamman Temple** was built in the late **19th century** by the **Tamil trading community** from **Pondicherry, India**, during the French colonial era. At the time, Indian merchants, laborers, and civil servants migrated to Saigon for economic opportunities, and they brought their religious traditions with them.

Despite being over a century old, the temple remains **active and well-preserved**, serving not only as a religious site but also as a **cultural bridge** between India and Vietnam.

## Architectural Highlights and Symbolism

The temple's facade immediately captures the eye with its **vibrant tower (gopuram)** adorned with **detailed sculptures of Hindu deities**, mythological figures, and celestial guardians. The architecture is typical of South Indian Hindu temples, featuring:

- **Goddess Mariamman** seated in the main sanctum, flanked by statues of Ganesha, Vishnu, and other key Hindu deities
- **Gopuram (gateway tower)** decorated with brightly painted carvings of gods and goddesses in traditional poses
- **Inner courtyard** with shrines to **Murugan, Shiva, Lakshmi**, and **Kali**
- Sacred symbols like **tridents, lotus flowers**, and **lingams** scattered throughout the temple

## A Place of Devotion for All Faiths

What makes the Mariamman Temple particularly fascinating is its **multi-faith appeal**. Although it is a Hindu temple, many **Vietnamese Buddhists** and **Chinese-Vietnamese residents** come here to pray, especially women seeking blessings for fertility, health, or family harmony. Mariamman, a **goddess of rain and protection**, is revered across cultures in Saigon for her perceived powers to cure illness and bring good fortune. Offerings often include **flowers, incense, fruit**, and even **coconuts**, left by worshippers in hopes of receiving divine favor.



## Visitor Information

- **Opening Hours:** Daily from 7am to 7pm
- **Admission:** Free (donations welcome)
- **Dress Code:** Modest clothing is required; shoes must be removed before entering the inner sanctum
- **Photography:** Allowed outside and in the areas that you as a tourist are allowed to enter, but please be discrete; ask for permission when unsure

Here are some photos that we took:





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## 5.3.8 Saigon River Dinner Cruise

([map](#))

A **Saigon River dinner cruise** is one of the most romantic and relaxing ways to experience the Ho Chi Minh City's skyline, and vibrant energy. As the sun sets and the lights of **District 1** begin to shimmer, boarding a **dinner cruise on the Saigon River** offers travelers the perfect mix of **sightseeing, fine dining, and live entertainment**.

Whether you are on a honeymoon, celebrating a special occasion, or just want to unwind after a day of sightseeing, a **Saigon River cruise at night** offers a unique perspective of the city that is both enchanting and unforgettable.

### Why Choose a Saigon River Dinner Cruise?

The **Saigon River** flows through the heart of the city, offering striking views of both **modern skyscrapers** and **historic French colonial architecture**. Cruising along its waters at night allows you to escape the bustling streets and experience a more serene side of **Ho Chi Minh City nightlife**.

### Highlights of a Typical Dinner Cruise:

- Boarding on a traditional wooden boat or luxury yacht
- Multi-course Vietnamese or international dinner
- Live music, dance performances, or traditional cultural shows
- Panoramic views of District 1, Landmark 81, Bitexco Tower, and illuminated bridges
- Intimate, candle-lit dining setting with gentle river breezes

## Types of Saigon River Dinner Cruises

There are several options available, catering to different budgets and tastes:

### 1. Traditional Dragon Boats

These elegant wooden vessels are inspired by ancient Vietnamese riverboats. They typically feature:

- Buffet-style Vietnamese cuisine
- Live traditional music
- Airy decks and open-air seating
- A cozy, authentic atmosphere

Popular options: *Indochina Queen*, *Bonsai Legacy*, *Saigon Princess*

### 2. Luxury Yacht Cruises

Perfect for a romantic evening or upscale experience:

- Fine dining with à la carte menus
- Fusion cuisine (Vietnamese–Western)
- Full bar with cocktails and wine
- Air-conditioned dining rooms and rooftop decks
- High-end service and privacy

Popular operators: *Saigon Sensation*, *Le Perle d'Orient*, *Elisa Floating Restaurant*



## Typical Itinerary for a Dinner Cruise

- **6:00–6:30 PM:** Pick up from your hotel
- **6:30–7:00 PM:** Arrival and check-in at the pier (usually near Bach Dang Wharf or Nha Rong Port)
- **7:15 PM:** Departure and welcome drink on board
- **7:30–9:00 PM:** Dinner service with live music or cultural performance
- **8:00 PM onward:** Cruise past key landmarks including the **Bitexco Financial Tower, Saigon Bridge, Thu Thiem New Urban Area, and Nha Rong Wharf**
- **9:15 PM:** Return to dock

[Viator](#) and [GetYourGuide](#) have multiple Saigon River Dinner Cruises for you to enjoy.

We particularly loved this [Saigon River Dinner Cruise](#).

This cruise offers a unique experience with three distinct classes, each on its own exclusive deck. We chose the **luxury option on the top deck**, which truly enhanced our evening. This premium choice includes a **private table**, a delicious **three-course dinner**, and lively **music and dancing**.

If you book using the [provided link](#), your tour guide will reach out to you to present the menu options, which you must select ahead of time. Once on board, you can order a variety of alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. Payments for drinks are settled before the cruise ends, and you can pay with either cash (VND) or credit card.

The food was good, though if you have a hearty appetite, you might consider bringing a few extra snacks.

Overall, the cruise was absolutely fantastic! The music was wonderful, and seeing Ho Chi Minh City and its bridges beautifully illuminated was a highlight. Many buildings and bridges even featured animated lights, creating a truly spectacular view. It was an absolutely fantastic experience.

Here are some photos from our fantastic Dinner Cruise:

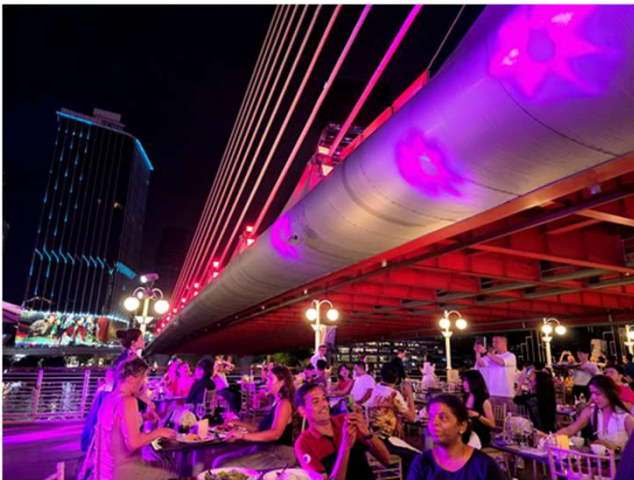








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The serene **boat ride** will carry you through a tranquil tributary of the Mekong River. You might spot an occasional fisherman and perhaps one or two other tourist boats, but for most of the journey, it will just be your group immersed in nature. Keep an eye out for kingfishers and other beautiful birds, and observe the water coconuts – you might even get to taste one! As you go, the canals will narrow, eventually forming a breathtaking, solid canopy over your boat. It is truly beautiful.









After your sampan ride, you will hop back on the motorcycles for a short trip to the starting point, where a **traditional and colorful Vietnamese lunch** awaits. Following lunch, you will learn how **coconut candy** is made. Then, you will have some time to relax in a hammock, chat with your tour guide and locals, or explore the surrounding area.







The afternoon continues with a longer motorcycle ride, featuring multiple fascinating stops:





- A **drink shop**, where you can make your own ice-cold cumquat sugar cane juice.



- A **coconut processing factory**.





## 5.4.4 Exploring the Waterfront in Can Tho

If you stay at [TTC-Hotel – Can Tho](#), then you can start right there. Here you can [find hotel options in Can Tho](#).

Across the street from TTC-Hotel are a park and a promenade that stretch along the Can Tho River for about 2,000 ft (600 m). At its northern end lies the **Can Tho Love Bridge** ([map](#)), which is beautifully illuminated at night. You can [find more information about the bridge here](#).



Walking along the promenade southwards, you will pass the **Ninh Kiều Wharf** with its two large river boats offering dinner cruises.

Here are some photos that we took:









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The promenade is beautifully illuminated at night. End your walk at the **Ho Chi Minh Monument** ([map](#)), or keep walking further if you like.

Surprisingly, there are only few restaurants across the street from the promenade between Can Tho Love Bridge and the Ho Chi Minh Monument. But you will find more restaurants if you keep walking south.



A little over 2h later, you will arrive at [Phong Điền Floating Market](#).

Your boat will stop near the boats of this small floating market for about 15min. In these 15 min you will see everything there is to see.









Afterwards, you will go on land and be treated to hot breakfast. From your vantage point you can see the market which will likely dissolve while you watch. [As mentioned earlier, this is a dying market that will likely cease to exist in a few years.](#)



Then you will get back to the boat and start heading back towards Can Tho. After about 1.7 miles (2.8 km) your boat will turn left (north) into a canal, which we believe is part natural and part manmade.

Part of this canal looks similar to what we experienced yesterday during the [Day 4 Mekong tributary itinerary in Ben Tre](#). But you will always know that there are people only a few steps away.







After the canal ends, you will continue your trip towards Can Tho for about 2.2 miles (3.5 km). Then you will see the [Cái Răng Floating Market](#) that you passed earlier on your way to Phong Điền Floating Market.





## 5.6.2 Exploring the Hoi An Lantern Festival

After you have settled in your hotel, come to **Hoi An Ancient town** near the **Japanese Covered-Bridge** ([map](#)).

Feel free to explore the Ancient Town on foot before the sun sets (marked green in the [map below](#)), and maybe even do part of tomorrow's in detail [Self-Guided Walking tour of Hoi An's Ancient Town](#).

Hoi An is absolutely gorgeous at any time of the year, but nothing beats it during Lantern festival. The [Hoi An Lantern Festival takes place on the 14th day of each lunar month](#), when the moon is at its fullest. During this night, Hoi An's Ancient Town turns off its electric lights and relies solely on lanterns to create an atmosphere that feels like stepping back in time. There is something almost otherworldly about Hoi An on the night of the **Lantern Festival**. As the sun sets over the **Thu Bồn River**, the soft glow of thousands of lanterns begins to illuminate the ancient streets and the water below.





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One popular activity during the Lantern Festival after sunset is the release of **small paper lanterns**, each holding a single candle, into the river. These delicate lanterns can be purchased along the riverbanks or directly from boat vendors, usually for a modest fee of 10,000 to 20,000 VND (about \$0.50 to \$1 USD). You will see children and adults sell them in woven baskets, each one available in different colors and shapes. It is customary to light your lantern, make a silent wish, and gently place it on the water, where it joins hundreds of others drifting downstream like glowing petals.



Another very popular activity during the festival after sunset is to enjoy the Lantern Festival by taking a [Lantern Boat Ride \(map\)](#).



And, of course, explore the lantern-filled streets and alleys of the Ancient Town (marked in green on the [map below](#)). They are beautiful and very different by day and by night.

Here are some photos that we took:











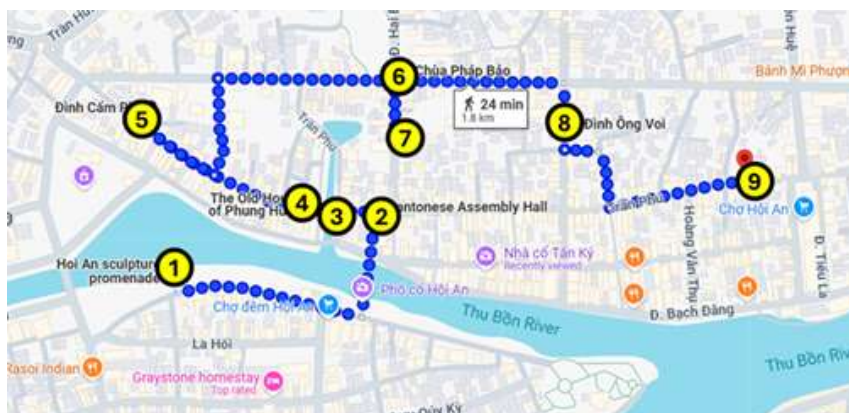
## 5.7.4 Self-Guided Tour of Hoi An Ancient Town

This Self-Guided Tour of Hoi An Ancient Town contains some attractions for which you need the [Ancient Town Entrance Ticket](#). You can go everywhere without the ticket, but you will not be able to enter those attractions. As mentioned earlier, we encourage you to review [all 24 attractions in Ancient Hoi An](#), and decide for yourself which you like to visit.



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Our Self-Guided Tour of Hoi An Ancient Town has these stops:



- 1 = [Hoi An Sculpture Promenade](#)
- 2 = [Cantonese Assembly Hall](#)
- 3 = [Japanese Covered-Bridge](#)
- 4 = [The Old House of Phung Hung](#)
- 5 = [Cam Pho Communal House](#)
- 6 = [Pháp Bảo Temple](#)
- 7 = [Ba Mu Temple](#)
- 8 = [Đình Ông Voi Village Hall](#)
- 9 = [Fukian Assembly Hall / Hội Quán Phước Kiến](#)
- 10 = [Central Market Food Hall](#)
- 11 = [Museum of Folk Culture](#)
- 12 = [Hoi An Traditional Art Performance House](#)
- 13 = [Old House of Tan Ky](#)



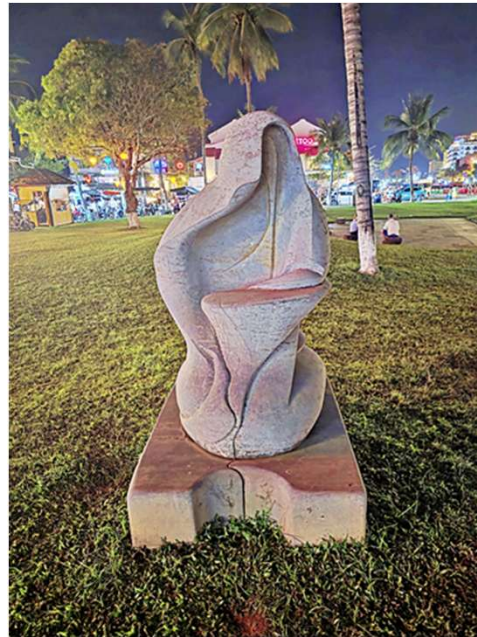
## 5.7.4.1 Hoi An Sculpture Promenade

([map](#), [reviews](#))

The **Hoi An Sculpture Promenade**, which stretches along the southern banks of the **Thu Bồn River**, is a scenic walkway that is home to a curated collection of **contemporary stone sculptures**. It starts near the southern end of the Đường Cao Hồng Lãnh car and pedestrian bridge ([map](#)), and goes all the way east to behind the Châu Thượng Văn pedestrian bridge ([map](#)).

It is a good place for art lovers, photographers, and anyone in search of a serene riverside stroll — and it is completely free to explore.

Here are some photos that we took:









Visitors to Cam Pho Communal House may also notice **lingering influences of Japanese architecture and iconography** inside nearby historic buildings.

Here are some photos that we took:





## Architectural Highlights

The Cam Pho Communal House is a beautiful example of **Vietnamese architectural design**, influenced by Chinese decorative motifs and Confucian spatial planning. The structure is built mostly from **wood and brick**, with a traditional three-part layout: the **ceremonial hall**, the **middle hall**, and the **front hall**, all aligned along a central axis.



Key features include:

- **Curved rooflines** with stylized dragons and phoenixes
- **Intricately carved wooden beams** and altars adorned with gold leaf
- A peaceful **courtyard** surrounded by bonsai trees and incense urns
- Altars dedicated to **founding ancestors, military heroes, and local spirits**

Despite its understated exterior, the interior is rich in symbolic detail. You will find traditional **red and gold lacquerwork**, hanging lanterns, and calligraphy scrolls that embody **Confucian ideals of loyalty, righteousness, and filial piety**.

## What Makes It Special

Unlike the more tourist-frequented **assembly halls** of Hoi An, the **Cam Pho Communal House** is **less commercialized** and often very quiet, allowing for a more **introspective visit**. It is one of the few places in the Ancient Town where you can experience the ambiance of a **local place of worship** without the crowds. Because it remains **active in community life**, you may encounter **local ceremonies, ancestor worship rituals**, or incense offerings during your visit, especially around the **Lunar New Year (Tết)** or the **Mid-Autumn Festival**.

## Practical Information

- **Opening hours:** Typically from **7:00am to 5:00pm**, daily
- **Entry:** Included in the **Hoi An Ancient Town ticket**, which grants access to multiple cultural sites

## 5.7.4.9 Fukian Assembly Hall / Hội Quán Phước Kiến

([map](#), [reviews](#))

To enter, you need to have purchased the Hoi An Ancient Town Ticket.

**Fukian Assembly Hall** (Vietnamese: *Hội quán Phúc Kiến*) is one of Hoi An's **highlights and cultural landmarks** that captivates with its vivid architecture, rich symbolism, and fascinating history. Originally established by Chinese merchants from Fujian province, this historic site reflects the deep-rooted **cultural and commercial exchanges between Vietnam and China** during the 17th and 18th centuries.

### What is the Fukian Assembly Hall?

The **Fukian Assembly Hall** is a **Chinese clan temple and community center**, built in the late 17th century by the **Fujian (Phúc Kiến) Chinese community** in Hoi An. It was created as a place where Chinese immigrants could gather, worship, and conduct social and business activities while preserving their cultural identity.

Today, it stands as one of the most **iconic historical attractions in Hoi An**, renowned for its **colorful architecture, elaborate shrines**, and strong spiritual ambiance.

We think that Fukian Assembly Hall is the most beautiful of all attractions that are included in the Hoi An Ancient Town Ticket. The architecture and skillfully artistic decorations are fantastic.



Here are some photos that we took:







## History of Fukian Assembly Hall

The original structure was a thatched temple built in 1690. It was later reconstructed in brick and wood by Chinese settlers from **Fujian Province**, who had arrived in Hội An — then one of Southeast Asia's busiest ports — for trade and new opportunities. Like other **Chinese assembly halls in Hoi An**, the Fukian Hall served multiple functions: as a place of **worship**, a **meeting hall**, and a **mutual aid society** for new arrivals.



Over time, it became an important center for the **Fujian diaspora** and their descendants in Vietnam. Its most sacred altar is dedicated to **Thiên Hậu Thánh Mẫu (Mazu)**, the **Goddess of the Sea**, who is deeply revered by seafaring communities for providing **protection during ocean voyages**. Other deities worshipped here include **Thần Tài (God of Wealth)**, **12 Midwife Goddesses**, and **Quan Âm (Bodhisattva of Compassion)**.

## Architectural Highlights

The **Fukian Assembly Hall** is a feast for the senses, showcasing the exuberant style of **southern Chinese temple architecture**. It is one of the best-preserved and most colorful Chinese temples in Vietnam.

Key features include:

- **A grand triple-arched gate** (Tam Quan) with ceramic dragons and phoenixes perched on the roof
- **Courtyard gardens** with bonsai trees, stone statues, and incense burners
- A **central ceremonial hall** with richly carved woodwork, red lacquer altars, and gold inscriptions
- **Intricate bas-reliefs** and **ceramic frescoes** depicting mythological scenes and protective talismans
- A sacred statue of **Mazu**, housed in the main shrine, surrounded by ancestral tablets and offerings

Don't miss the stunning **dragon fountain** in the courtyard, which is one of the most photographed spots in the assembly hall. Also, make sure to marvel at the elaborately painted **ceiling panels**, and **guardian door gods** flanking the entrance.

## Dong Duong Style vs. Dong Duong Transitional Style: Key Differences

Feature	Dong Duong Style	Dong Duong Transitional Style
Architectural Scale	Taller, more slender, monumental	Smaller, heavier, more compact
Ornamentation	Highly detailed, ornate	Simplified, less intricate
Sculpture	Highly expressive, dynamic	Simpler, more abstract, less expressive
Iconography	Predominantly Buddhist, with dynamic deities	Hybrid (Buddhist and Shaivite influences)
Aesthetic	Refined, complex, spiritual	Simpler, more transitional



## Importance and Legacy

- The Dong Duong style represents **the peak of Mahayana Buddhist influence in Champa** before the kingdom returned to predominantly Shaivite worship.
- It had a lasting impact on **subsequent Cham sculpture and architecture**, particularly in the **transitional styles** seen in My Son.

Group	Style	Date Range
A	Partially Dong Duong Style	Mixed (some 9th c.)
B	Mỹ Sơn A1 Style	7th–8th c.
C	Dong Duong Transitional Style	Late 8th–early 9th c.
D	Dong Duong Transitional Style	Early 9th c.
E	Dong Duong Style	Late 9th–early 10th c.
F	Dong Duong Style	Late 9th–early 10th c.
G	Dong Duong Transitional Style	Late 8th–early 9th c.

- Much of the Dong Duong monastery was destroyed or looted during the colonial period, but its surviving fragments (now in the Da Nang Museum of Cham Sculpture and elsewhere) remain among the **finest examples of early Southeast Asian Buddhist art**.

## 5.8.3.6 What Is the Bình Định Style?

### Historical Context

- Developed during the **11th–13th centuries**, when Champa's religious and political center shifted from My Son to the **Vijaya region (modern Bình Định Province)**.
- It reflects the **mature phase** of Cham architecture, and some consider it a **late classical style**.
- While My Son continued to see limited building activity, the large-scale temple construction of the earlier Mỹ Sơn A1 and [Dong Duong periods](#) had largely concluded.

### Architectural Features

- **Compact, solid towers:** Compared to the taller, more ornate towers of earlier periods, Bình Định style towers are **shorter and squatter**, with a **sturdier, fortress-like feel**.
- **Thicker walls and stronger vertical profiles**, often with pronounced corners and minimal projections.
- **Simplified decoration:** Ornamentation becomes more restrained. You may find occasional pilasters and false doors, but without the rich sculptural layering of earlier phases.
- **Focus on durability:** This period emphasizes **technical mastery and longevity** over ornate flourishes.



## Sculptural Characteristics

- **Figures are less expressive:** The sculptures exhibit **stiff, symmetrical postures**, with a formal, often impersonal tone.
- **Fewer Buddhist images:** A return to a **more Shaivite religious focus**, though occasional Buddhist motifs still appear.
- **Reduced narrative friezes:** Unlike Dong Duong, Bình Định temples usually lack complex storytelling panels.

## H1 and the Bình Định Influence

Though located at My Son, the spiritual heart of Champa, **H1 in Group H** is thought to have been built in the **11th–12th century**, a time when **My Son's role had diminished**, and newer styles like Bình Định were beginning to spread southward.

Here's how H1 reflects **Bình Định style tendencies**:

Feature	H1 (Group H)	Bình Định Style
Form	Square plan, compact proportions	Compact, solid towers
Decoration	Minimal or missing	Simplified, austere ornamentation
Material	Fired brick with minimal stone	Same
Verticality	Lower, less vertical emphasis	Same
Style Period	Late phase of My Son, 11th–12th century.	Same general period, centered further south

## 5.8.5.1 Group A – The Core Sanctuary

This is the **primary and most restored section**. It contains several red-brick **kalan towers** dedicated to Shiva, with a prominent **gate tower (gopura)** and front worship hall (mandapa). These structures feature elegant brick carvings and reflect the pinnacle of Cham architectural achievement.

**What can you see in Group A?**





- **[A1 Kalan](#)**: Once the tallest and most impressive tower, emblematic of the 9th–10th century [My Son A1 architectural style](#). It was destroyed by bombing in 1969, now in ruins, but historic sketches by Henri Parmentier help piece together its former glory.
- **[A2–A7 – Subsidiary Shrines and Ritual Structures](#)**: Fragmentary remains of minor shrines, mandapas, or platforms surrounding A1. Likely used for offerings, secondary deities, or ceremonial flow within the Group A complex.
- **[A8 - Gopura \(gate tower\) with Mandapa Halls](#)**: Served as ceremonial entry. Decorated with apsaras, elephants, and refined carvings typical of the A1 style, leading into the sanctum complex.
- **[A9–A13 Smaller Towers](#)**: Include gopuras, mandapas, and ritual spaces. Built in the Mỹ Sơn A1 style, they reflect refined brickwork and sacred Shaivite functions, not Buddhist influence.
- **[A10](#)**: Brick sanctuary with a sandstone linga-yoni pedestal. Decorated with priest carvings and vermiculation patterns, it shows [Dong Duong style](#) influence, not fully Dong Duong style.
- **[A12–A13](#)**: Brick shrines with early [Dong Duong transitional features](#). Notable for decorative sandstone elements and possible Buddhist-Hindu iconographic overlap.

[Jump to Group B](#)

## A1 Kalan – The Lost Masterpiece of My Son

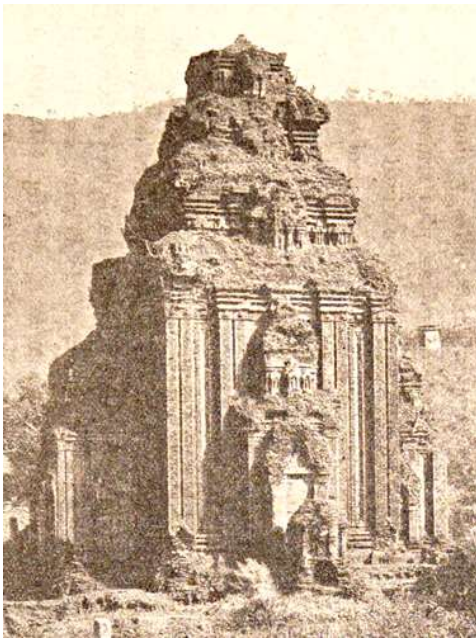
**A1 Kalan** is arguably the most significant, and most tragic, structure at My Son Sanctuary.

### Historical Significance and Original Grandeur:

- **Pinnacle of Cham Architecture:** A1 was considered the tallest and most architecturally refined structure in the entire My Son complex. Its majestic proportions, antiquity of style, and richness of decoration set it apart.
- **'My Son A1 Style':** Such was its influence and beauty that it gave its name to an entire stylistic period in Cham art, the **My Son A1 style of the 10th century**. Many other surviving temples at My Son, including the relatively well-preserved B5 Kosagrha, belong to this stylistic period, praised for its light, graceful, and elegant carvings.
- **Dedication to Sambhubhadresvara:** Although the deity Sambhubhadresvara was first honored in the 7th century by King Sambhuvarman, the A1 temple itself was constructed later, around the 10th century. It may have been rededicated to this composite deity, formed from the king's name and the term *Ishvara* (lord), commonly used to refer to Shiva. Inscriptions on steles celebrated Sambhubhadresvara as the creator of the world and destroyer of sin.
- **Central Sanctuary (Kalan):** Like other kalans, A1 housed the main deity of Group A. It likely contained a yoni-lingam altar at its center for the worship of Shiva. Remnants of this altar and a yoni have been found among the ruins.



- **Unique Entrances:** A1 was unique among Cham sanctuaries in having two doors, one facing east, toward the rising sun and Hindu deities, and another facing west, toward Groups B, C, and D, believed to be the burial sites of ancestor kings.
- **Subsidiary Temples:** The base of A1 was surrounded by six smaller temples ([A2–A7](#)), likely dedicated to the gods of the eight directions. This arrangement emphasized A1's centrality in both spatial and symbolic terms.



From: Henri Parmentier, 1909, 'Inventaire descriptif des monuments čams de l'Annam', page 521.

## Destruction and Current State:

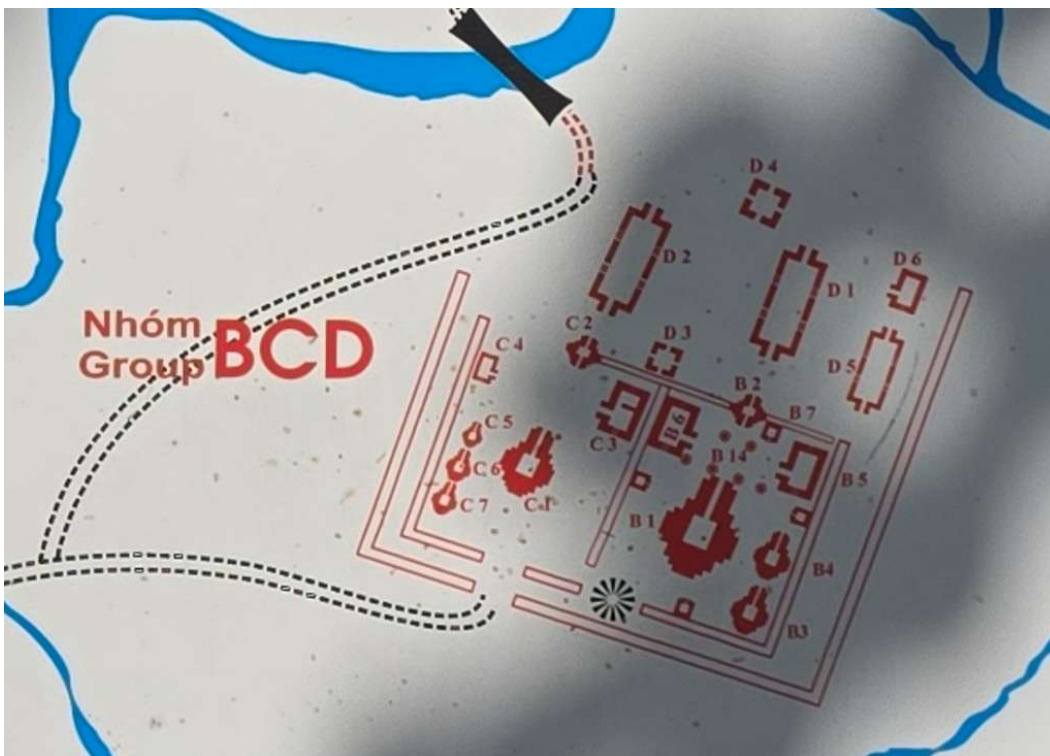
- **Devastation in the Vietnam War:** A1 was nearly completely destroyed by U.S. aerial bombing in August 1969, during the Vietnam War, as My Son was used as a Viet Cong base.
- **Intentional 'Finish-off':** Local accounts suggest that after surviving multiple bombing raids, A1 was finally brought down by a sapper team deployed by helicopter.
- **Icon of Loss:** The destruction of A1 was considered a cultural catastrophe. Renowned Cham art scholar Philippe Stern reportedly wrote a letter of protest to U.S. President Richard Nixon after its obliteration.
- **Present Remains:** Today, little remains beyond its foundations and a pile of collapsed bricks. Nonetheless, elements of the precise brickwork typical of the 10th-century A1 style are still visible. The layout and remains of its subsidiary temples are also discernible.



## 5.8.5.3 Group C – The Eastern Sanctuary

Group C is one of the most compact yet historically rich clusters at My Son. It showcases structures from the **8th to 10th centuries**, representing both early and transitional Cham architectural styles. The layout includes a central sanctuary (C1), functional auxiliary buildings, and decorative features that highlight evolving religious practices.

Group C follows the typical Cham temple layout: an **east-facing axis** leading from the **gopura (C2)** through the **mandapa (C3)** to the **main sanctuary (C1)**. Supporting structures like the **kosagrha (C4)** and **water basin (C6)** ensured that ritual practice could be conducted fully, while minor shrines or pavilions like **C5** completed the ceremonial flow. The group's **compactness** and **clarity of function** make it an ideal example of early Cham religious planning.





- [\*\*C1 Kalan\*\*](#): Main sanctuary of Group C, likely 9th century, built in **Mỹ Sơn A1 style**. Dedicated to **Shiva**, with a square base and surviving pilasters marking its ritual importance.
- [\*\*C2 Gopura \(Gate Tower\)\*\*](#): Eastern brick gate tower marking the sacred entrance. Central passageway likely flanked by guardian figures; symbolizing transition into the temple's inner sanctum.
- [\*\*C3 Mandapa \(Ritual Hall\)\*\*](#): Rectangular ritual hall used for offerings and processions. Foundations indicate open design, possibly with columns, aligned directly with the main shrine.
- [\*\*C4 Kosagrha \('Fire Temple'\)\*\*](#): Saddle-roofed fire temple used for preparing offerings and storing sacred items. Architecturally similar to B5 in Group B; functioned as a ritual kitchen.
- [\*\*C5 Pavilion or Minor Shrine\*\*](#): Possibly a small shrine or resting pavilion. Its exact purpose is unclear, but it contributed to the ceremonial flow toward the main temple.
- [\*\*C6 Sacred Pond or Reservoir\*\*](#): Ceremonial basin for purification rituals—likely used for cleansing the **linga** or devotees before entering the sanctum.

[Jump to Group D](#)

## C1 – The Main Sanctuary (Kalan)

### Function and Significance:

C1 is the central **kalan** (main sanctuary) of Group C and served as the spiritual heart of the group. Like other kalans at My Son, it would have housed a **linga-yoni altar** symbolizing Shiva, the main deity of Cham Hindu worship. The sanctuary was the most sacred space, accessible only to priests and royalty for ritual worship.



### Architectural Features:

- Built on a **square base**, C1 features **projecting pilasters**, **false windows**, and **cornices** to create vertical rhythm.
- It was likely crowned by a multi-tiered **shikhara** (tower) that is now mostly missing.
- The brickwork displays the [My Son A1 style](#), with [precision-laid bricks, no visible mortar](#), and decorative stone details such as **lintels** and **dvarapalas** (guardian figures).
- A single door faces **east**, in keeping with Hindu temple norms, symbolizing auspiciousness and the direction of the rising sun.

## Dating:

- Estimated to have been built in the **9th century**, during the period when Cham architectural practices were reaching a stylistic peak.

## Current Condition:

- The structure is partially ruined, with most of the superstructure collapsed.
- However, the **base, doorway, and sculptural elements** survive well enough to interpret the original form and purpose.

[Back to Group C](#)



## C2 – Gopura (Gate Tower)

### Function:

C2 functioned as the **gopura**, or **entrance gateway**, into the Group C sacred compound. Passing through the gopura marked the transition from the secular world to the consecrated temple area.

### Architectural Details:

- It is aligned along the **main east-west axis**, in front of the ritual hall ([C3](#)) and sanctuary ([C1](#)).
- Typically built with a **tunnel-like corridor** running through the base of a modest tower structure.
- Would have included **guardian figures** and possibly **decorative carvings** to symbolize protection and divine authority.

### Style and Dating:

- Constructed in the **late 8th to early 9th century**.
- Likely displays elements transitional between [Dong Duong](#) and **My Son A1 styles**.

### Current Condition:

- Partially collapsed but retains enough of its brick walls and foundations to demonstrate its axial position and ceremonial role.

[Back to Group C](#)

## 5.10.4 Long Biên Bridge – Hanoi's Historic Iron Dragon

([bridge\\_map](#), [train\\_station\\_map](#), [Serein\\_Cafe\\_map](#), [reviews](#))

**Opening Hours:** Open 24/7 (best visited at sunrise or sunset)

**Admission:** Free

**Access:** Pedestrians and motorbikes share a lane; no cars allowed

**Suggested Visit Duration:** 45–60 minutes (or longer for photo walks)

### Overview of Long Bien Bridge

**Long Biên Bridge (Cầu Long Biên)** is a **symbol of Hanoi's resilience, history, and character**. Stretching across the **Red River**, this aged iron structure was once known as the '**horizontal Eiffel Tower**' of Indochina. Built in the early 20th century by the French and once bombed by American forces, Long Biên Bridge has witnessed **colonialism, war, and peace**, earning a revered place in Vietnam's collective memory.

Today, it stands as a **living museum**, still in use, **bustling with motorbikes, pedestrians, and vendors**. It offers dramatic views of the river, countryside, and city — making it an **essential stop for history buffs, photographers, and curious travelers**.

For us, Long Bien Bridge was one of the highlights of Hanoi.

Here are some photos that we took:



## Historical Background of Long Bien Bridge

### Colonial Conception and Engineering Feat (1898–1902)

Long Biên Bridge (originally named *Pont Doumer*) was a **flagship infrastructure project** of the French colonial regime, named after **Paul Doumer**, the Governor-General of Indochina who later became President of France.

- **Construction began in 1898** and was completed in **1902**, undertaken by the **Daydé & Pillé Company** of Paris, a firm linked to Gustave Eiffel's school of iron engineering.
- It was designed as a **cantilever bridge**, stretching **1.68 kilometers across the Red River**, with 19 steel spans and 20 massive stone piers.
- The bridge was built to link **Hanoi to the port city of Haiphong** and beyond, providing a key route for transporting rice, coal, and minerals from northern Vietnam to the coast — and back to France.
- At the time of its completion, it was considered **one of the longest bridges in Asia**, and a marvel of modern engineering in the colonial world.



However, the grandeur was also symbolic of **imperial dominance**. It was funded and built primarily to serve French economic and strategic interests, not those of local Vietnamese communities.

## Cultural and Urban Impact

Long Biên Bridge was more than a utility project — it **changed Hanoi forever**:

- It helped define the **modern industrial geography** of the city, creating a direct rail link between central Hanoi and other northern provinces.
- The land beneath and around the bridge became the site of **markets, train stations, and working-class settlements**.
- The Vietnamese came to view it with both **awe and ambivalence**: a marvel of engineering, yes — but also a symbol of foreign rule.

## Wartime Symbolism and Destruction (1940s–1970s)

The bridge would go on to become a **key target in multiple wars**, taking on **new layers of meaning** during Vietnam's 20th-century struggles for independence.

## First Indochina War (1946–1954)

- Used by both French and Việt Minh forces, it played a role in transporting troops and supplies.
- After the French defeat at **Điện Biên Phủ**, it became a **symbol of national victory** and pride for North Vietnam.

## Vietnam War / American War (1965–1972)

- The bridge was **repeatedly bombed** by U.S. forces, who saw it as a critical logistics node for the **Ho Chi Minh Trail** and supply routes into Hanoi.
- It was **first attacked in August 1967**, and again in 1972 during the *Linebacker* campaigns.
- Despite heavy damage, **Vietnamese workers repeatedly rebuilt it**, often by hand and under great danger.
- Its survival became a **national rallying point**, and in propaganda posters, it was dubbed the ‘**Iron Dragon of the Red River**’ — a symbol of the people’s endurance.

## Post-War Legacy and Preservation

In the post-war years, newer bridges (like Chương Dương and Vĩnh Tuy) were constructed to accommodate modern traffic.

Long Biên Bridge was **no longer the main artery**, but:

- It remained **functional for trains, motorbikes, bicycles, and pedestrians**.
- It became a **beloved historical relic** — romanticized in literature, film, and poetry.
- In the 1990s and 2000s, discussions began about either demolishing or modernizing it — but strong public opposition led to **preservation and adaptive use** instead.

## Architectural Notes of Long Bien Bridge

**Style:** **Cantilever bridge** with 19 steel spans, supported by 20 stone piers sunk deep into the riverbed.

**Materials:** Imported French steel, with much of the framework **riveted by hand**.

## What to See and Do at Long Bien Bridge

### Walk or Ride Across the Bridge

- The central train tracks are separated on either side by a path for motorcycles and one, little elevated foot path. In some areas, the footpath is obstructed and pedestrians need to use the motorcycle path.



- Enjoy sweeping views of the **Red River**, **banana plantations**, and **floating fishing villages**. We loved the **scenic walk** on the bridge.







## Photography Heaven

- The **rusted iron girders**, **aging rail tracks**, and **open sky** make this a **favorite spot for photographers**, especially at **sunrise and sunset**.
- Capture portraits of **train crossings**, **vendors**, and **street life**, or shoot wide-angle views of the **river delta** below.
- The most instagrammable spot ([map](#)) can be accessed from the Long Bien Railway Station ([map](#)). But **please be careful**, you will need to walk a short distance on the tracks to get to the most iconic photo spot, and if a train comes, then you have nowhere to go. So, plan ahead and make sure that there is no train in sight.



## Watch the Train

- Long Biên Bridge still carries a **single active railway line** down its center.
- Trains pass **a few times per day** — it is an unforgettable moment to watch (and feel) the bridge tremble as it rolls by.
- Morning and late afternoon trains are especially photogenic.

## Explore the Red River Island

- Descend mid-bridge using the ramp and stairs to access the **banana plantations and vegetable gardens** on **Banana Island / Red River Island / Bãi Giũa**. We strongly recommend exploring the island, and if it is only for 15min. Besides the banana trees, you will see goats, and people working in the fields, etc.

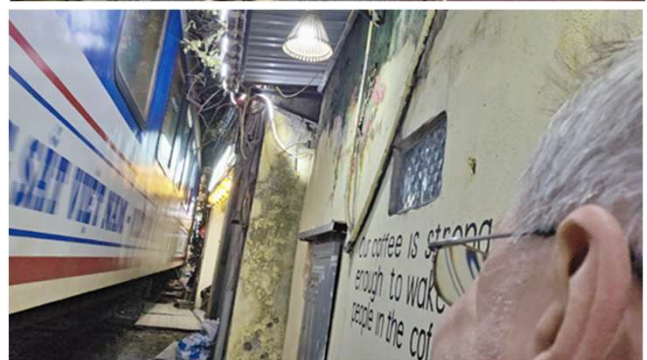




## Train Street South ([map](#) [south](#))

The **second, lesser-known section** is located by **Hanoi 1990s restaurant**, closer to Hanoi Station. While this area is less commercialized and has fewer cafés, it offers a similar experience with fewer crowds and a more ‘local’ atmosphere.

The vendors here are very nice – they ask you to buy a drink or some food, but we have seen people sit on restaurant chairs and not consuming anything. As typical for Vietnam, the locals in this area are very nice and friendly.





## Watch the Train Pass by

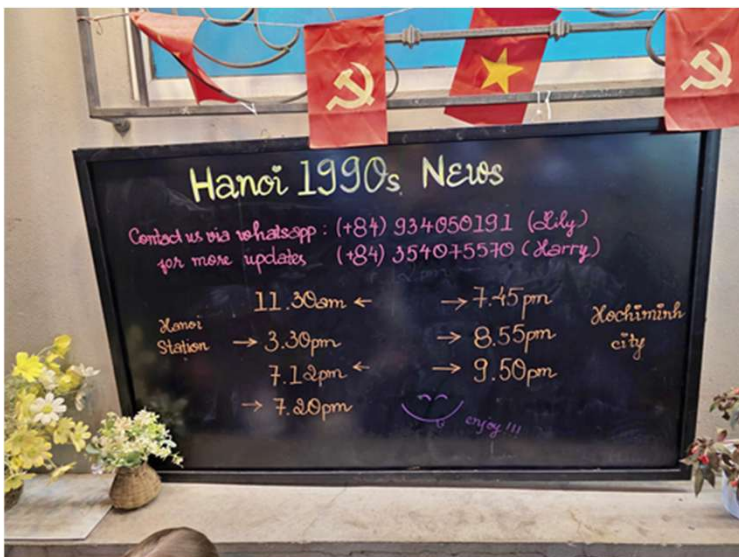
The primary draw of Train Street is, of course, watching a train pass through an alley that looks far too narrow for it. Onlookers gather on both sides of the track, cameras at the ready. Just minutes before arrival, locals will begin alerting visitors to move back, retract tables and chairs, orient their knees in the direction of the moving train, and press themselves against the walls of buildings. When the massive train drives past, sometimes mere inches from bystanders, it creates a surreal and unforgettable experience.

It looks scary, but I felt perfectly safe.

## Train Schedule (Subject to Change)

Train schedules can vary, and sometimes trains are delayed or canceled without much notice. Schedules seem to change by the season, and you can always ask the locals, or look for a sign which states the current schedules.

At the time we were there, train schedules were: 11:30am, 3:30pm, 7:12pm, 7:20pm, 7:45pm, 8:55pm, 9:50pm.



## 5.12.2.6 Dark and Bright Cave Excursion on a Lan Ha Bay Cruise

Here is what you will see on the Dark and Bright Cave excursion.





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## 5.12.2.7 Trung Trang Grotto Excursion on a Lan Ha Bay Cruise

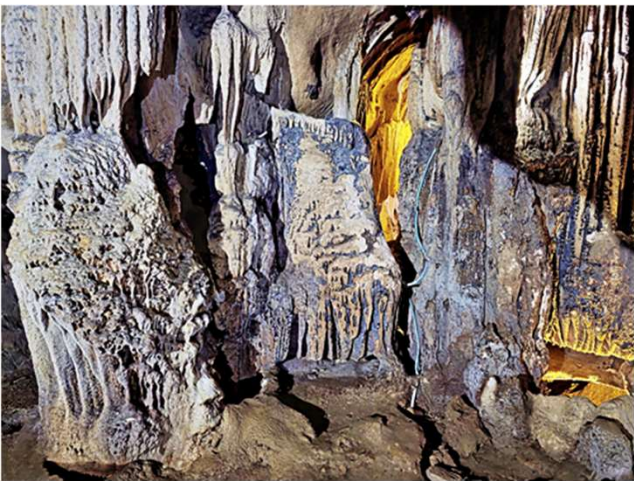
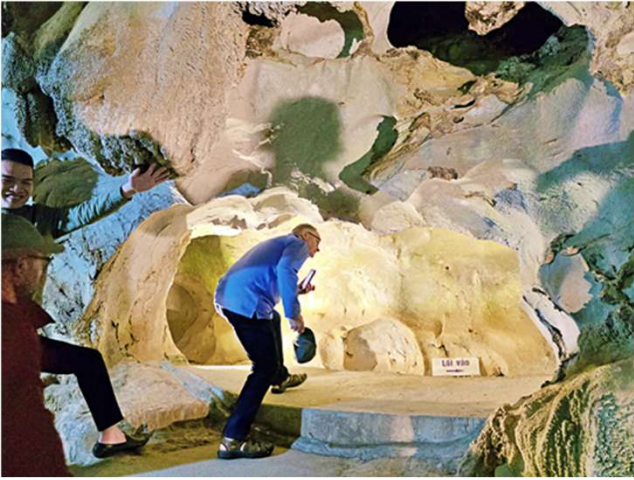
Here is what you will see when visiting Trung Trang Grotto with a bus transfer to and from the cave.













## 5.13.1.1 Route 1: The Classic & Most Spiritual Route

**Duration:** 2.5 to 3 hours

**Caves visited:** 9 caves

**Temples visited:** 3 temples

**Best for:** Visitors interested in **temples, legends**, and the area's **historic atmosphere**



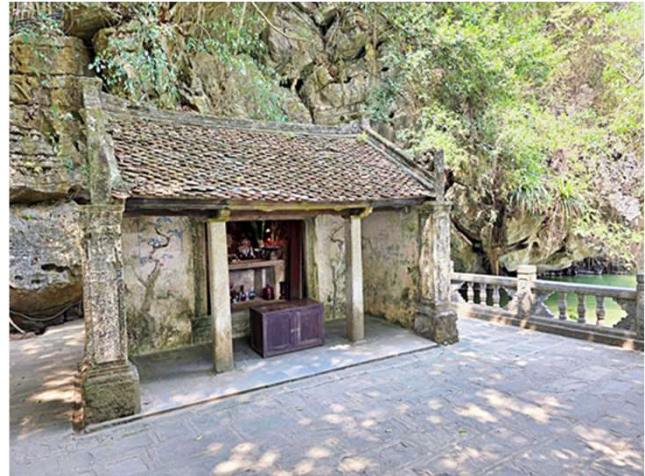
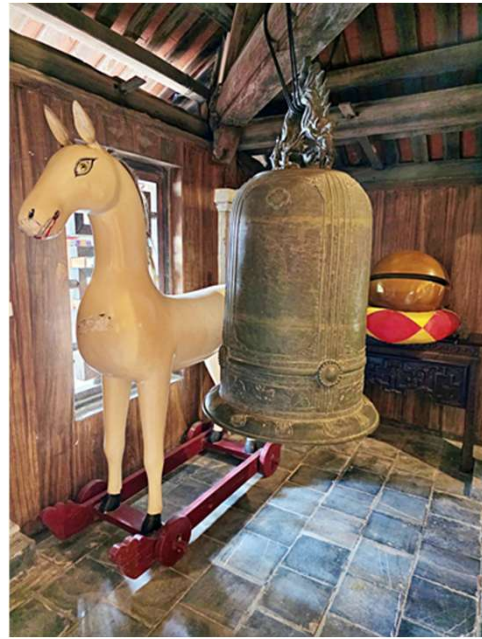
## 1. Trình Temple

Dedicated to **General Nguyễn Minh Không**, a revered figure in Vietnamese history and medicine, Trình Temple is one of the oldest and most venerated temples in the Trang An Complex. It symbolizes **loyalty to the Đinh kings**, ancestral worship, and the enduring presence of guardianship in Vietnamese cosmology. Locals still make offerings here for protection and healing.

Here are some photos that we took:









## 2. Hang Tối (Dark Cave)

This cave's name reflects the darkness of the unknown and the symbolic **journey through inner stillness and reflection**. In Vietnamese belief, darkness is not feared but embraced as part of balance. Visitors are encouraged to move quietly, listening to nature and embracing the meditative quality of the space.

Here are some photos that we took:



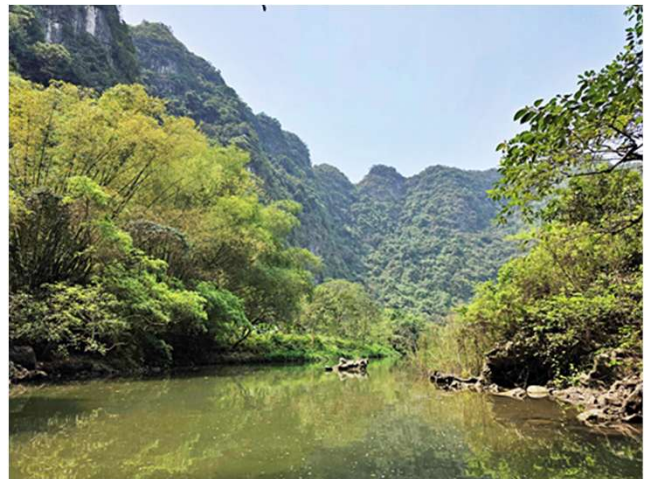
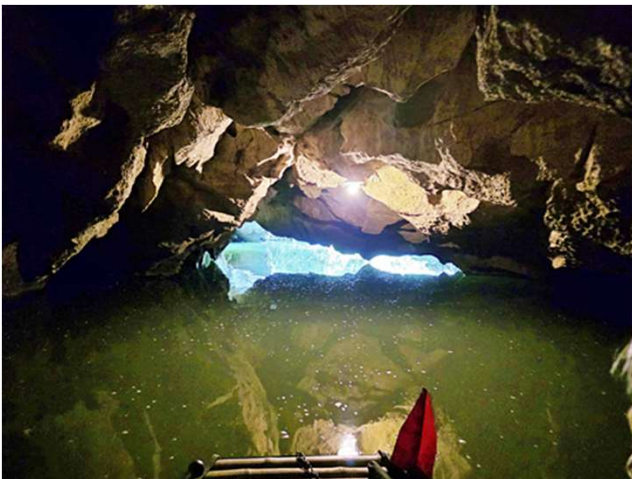




## 3. Hang Sáng (Bright Cave)

Entered after Hang Tối, Hang Sáng serves as the **symbolic emergence into light**: hope, clarity, and renewal. The passage between dark and light is seen as a spiritual metaphor for enlightenment and wisdom in Vietnamese Buddhist-influenced thought.

Here are some photos that we took:





## 4. Hang Nau Ruou (Wine-Brewing Cave)

According to local legend, **Hang Nấu Rượu** was once used **by royal brewers** during the time of the **Đinh Dynasty** (10th century), when Hoa Lư served as Vietnam's imperial capital. The spring deep within the cave was said to produce **exceptionally pure water**, perfect for distilling high-quality rice wine for the royal court.

The name '*Nấu Rượu*' literally means '**cooking wine**', and it is believed that brewers would haul rice and ingredients into the cave, ferment them in urns, and age the wine in the natural coolness of the rock-walled interior. This made the resulting product uniquely smooth and strong—worthy of kings and ceremonial offerings.

Some tales go even further, claiming that the wine brewed here was **infused with medicinal herbs** and served as a kind of sacred elixir during coronation rituals or spiritual rites.

Here are some photos that we took:







## 5. Đền Trần (Trần Temple)

Built to honor **Trần Hưng Đạo**, the national hero who led Vietnam to victory against Mongol invasions, this temple is a patriotic and spiritual landmark. Offerings here reflect themes of **strength, national pride, and ancestral protection**, and the temple serves as a place of prayer for courage and resilience.

Here are some photos that we took:





- **500 Steps**

Begin your ascent up the iconic 500 stone steps, but do not rush. Take your time and be sure to stay hydrated, especially in the heat. About halfway up the climb, you will reach a **fork in the path**: the **right-hand trail** leads to a small **pagoda perched on a narrow rocky outcrop**, while the **left-hand path** is the main path which continues upward toward the summit, where a striking **statue of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva** stands proudly atop **Dragon Mountain**.

As you approach the top, you will be greeted by your **first panoramic viewpoint**, offering a breathtaking glimpse of the **Ngo Dong River** snaking through the lush, valley floor far below. The dramatic contrast of water, rice fields, and limestone peaks makes this one of the **most photogenic spots in all of Hang Múa**, a personal favorite of ours for capturing unforgettable memories of Ninh Binh.

Here are some photos that we took:









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- **Quan Âm Pavilion (Goddess of Mercy Shrine)**

At the summit of the main staircase, you will find a **small Buddhist shrine** dedicated to **Quan Âm (Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva)**, the goddess of mercy and compassion. **Quan Âm**, also spelled **Quán Thế Âm**, is the Vietnamese name for **Avalokiteśvara**, the Bodhisattva of **Compassion and Mercy** in Mahāyāna Buddhism. She is one of the most **beloved and widely worshiped figures in Vietnamese spiritual life**, revered by Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike for her boundless compassion.

Though Avalokiteśvara was originally depicted as male in early Indian Buddhism, in **Vietnam (as well as China, Korea, and Japan)**, the figure gradually became **feminized**, and is now almost always represented as a **gentle, maternal female figure**, often wearing flowing white robes and a serene expression. This transformation reflects the Vietnamese people's association of Quan Âm with **unconditional love, comfort, and spiritual refuge**, much like a divine mother. Here are some photos that we took:



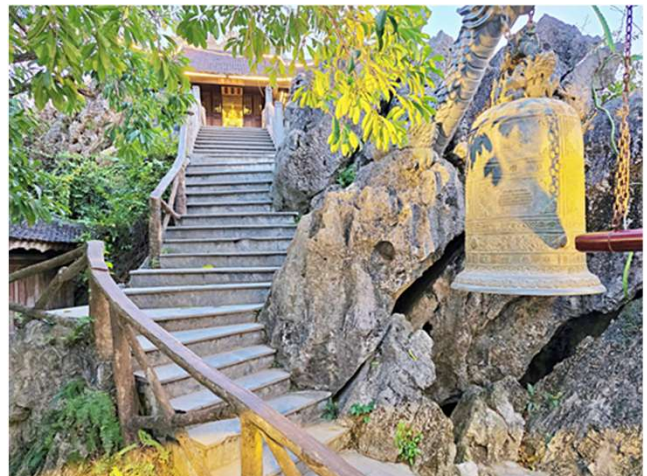
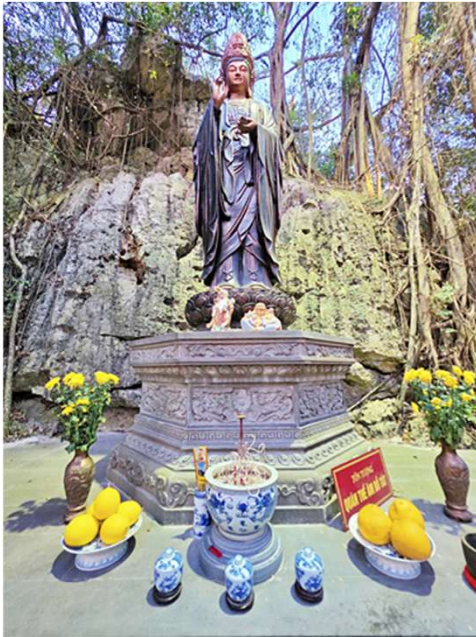


## 5.13.3.3 Shrine on the hill

The larger eastern island has a temple on the top. The steps to access the trail and steps up the hill is a bit hidden. You can access them when you walk from the [bridge](#) (2) towards the Highlands Café, and then bypass it to the left. Behind the Café you will find metal stairs going up. This is the trail.

The view from the top where the shrine is, is fantastic. This is a good vantage spot to see the sunset and then the lights that illuminate this part of town.

Here are some photos that we took:









## 5.13.3.4 Two Pagodas

At the eastern end of the lake are two islands, one small man-made island with a pagoda, and a larger island with a tall 'mountain', which has another pagoda on its western end. Both pagodas are connected via a bridge. These pagodas are gorgeous on the exterior and the interior. They are also illuminated at night. We strongly suggest you take a look at the fantastic carvings on the inside.

Here are some photos that we took:













## 5.14.1.2 Corridor of Arhats #8

This corridor stretches about 2 miles (3 km) (one of the longest Arhat corridors in Asia) and is lined with **500 life-sized Arhat statues**, each carved from monolithic stone. Arhats are enlightened disciples of the Buddha, and every statue is unique in facial expression, pose, and detail. This hall symbolizes the path to enlightenment and serves as a meditation route for pilgrims. As you walk through the corridor, it is customary to stop and gently touch the hands or feet of certain statues believed to bring good luck, wisdom, or health.

Here are some photos that we took:





## 5.14.1.3 Bell Tower (Gác Chuông) #9

Known as **Gác Chuông**, this striking structure houses Vietnam's **heaviest bronze bell**, weighing **36 tons**. It is a multi-tiered pavilion built in traditional Vietnamese architecture, with curving tiled roofs and wooden interiors. Pilgrims may witness monks striking the bell during important ceremonies, filling the air with a resonant, meditative sound.

Symbolically, the bell represents the Buddha's voice calling all sentient beings to awaken.

Here are some photos that we took:





## 5.14.1.4 Diên Quan Âm (Kuan-yin Hall) #10

Dedicated to **Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva (Quan Âm)**, the Goddess of Compassion, this hall enshrines a large golden statue of the deity with **thousands of arms and eyes** — each representing omnipresent mercy and watchfulness. Quan Âm is one of the most venerated figures in Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhism, often prayed to for peace, health, and the resolution of suffering. The serene ambiance, combined with the scent of incense and chanting, makes this a tranquil and emotionally moving space for visitors and devotees alike.

Here are some photos that we took:





## 5.14.1.5 Pháp Chủ Hall – The Buddha Sakyamuni Hall (Diện Giáo Chủ) #12

This is the **central sanctuary** of the modern pagoda complex and houses **Vietnam's largest indoor bronze Buddha statue** — a seated Shakyamuni Buddha measuring **33 ft (10 m) tall** and weighing over **220,000 lbs (100 tons)**. Known locally as **Diện Giáo Chủ**, this hall is ornately decorated with lotus motifs, gold inlay, and wooden carvings. It is the main site for Buddhist ceremonies, prayers, and meditation sessions. The atmosphere is reverent and awe-inspiring, especially during major festivals like Vesak or Lunar New Year.

Here are some photos that we took:







- **Middle Pagoda (Chùa Trung)**

Reachable by ascending about **100 stone steps**, this second-tier pagoda is partially built into a cave. Inside, you will find a **dimly lit chamber** with altars, Buddhist statues, and votive offerings.

*Important: In order to proceed and see the real highlights of Bich Dong Pagoda, you need to take the nearly invisible walking path between the rocks to the left of the Middle Pagoda, and the Middle Pagoda. The path leads you behind the Middle Pagoda and into a cave.*

Here are some photos that we took:





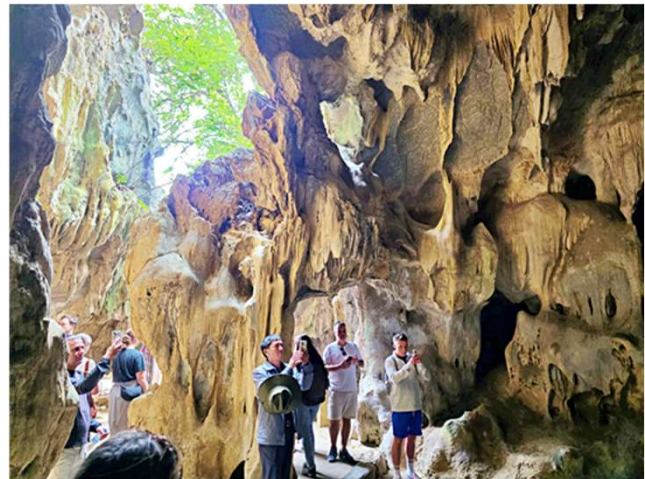




- **Dark Cave (Hang Tối)**

Following the path that begins to the left of Middle Pagoda, and then behind it, you will get to the **dark cave passage**, home to shrines and ancient carvings. It is narrow and mysterious, offering a peek into the meditative, hidden world of early monks.

Here are some photos that we took:







- **Upper Pagoda (Chùa Thượng)**

The final climb leads up more stairs. There is one area during the ascend where you have nice views of the **rice paddies, lotus ponds, and karst mountains** of Tam Cốc. This is the best view – once you are up at the top, trees will block your views.



Once you get to the top, you will see the highest shrine, situated in a smaller grotto near the mountain's summit. To manage expectations: The shrine does not sit at the top of the mountain, it is barely at mid-height. But the trail ends here. This spot used to offer **stunning panoramic views** over the Tam Cốc valley, with endless green fields and snaking rivers below, but they are now blocked by trees.



## 6. Closing Remarks

### ABOUT RUDY FROM BACKPACK & SNORKEL

I was born in Germany and emigrated to the US in 2003. My wife and I are a truly multinational couple: I, with my German background, and she with her Chinese heritage. Both of us live in the USA.

Sadly, working in the US means we have much fewer vacation days compared to other countries like e.g. Germany and thus we cannot travel very frequently.

Through a lot of trial and error, we have found our ideal travel and vacation style. **Making Memorable Moments** by focusing on important destinations, planning time for meeting the locals and, of course, for relaxation are our priorities.

We have also learned to appreciate local foods and try to eat as many local dishes as possible. Just for fun, we try to eat at one Chinese restaurant in each country we visit. It is absolutely amazing how different Chinese food is all over the planet.





# Backpack & Snorkel

## Making Memorable Moments

### MAKING MEMORABLE MOMENTS

You may take 10,000 photos during your vacation, rush from one attraction to the next, but what you will remember in your heart is how you were **Making Memorable Moments**.

For me, that was e.g. Spider Rock in Canyon de Chelly (ever heard of this US National Park?). When I first saw it, I was blown away by this majestic natural obelisk and the beautiful canyon that it sits in. I have been there two more times and still feel the same.

Or think of Isla Mujeres, a small island outside Cancun, Mexico. On the surface, Playa Norte is supposedly Mexico's most beautiful beach and it is always crowded and the boats that anchor there play loud music.

Below the surface, Isla Mujeres is very relaxed, quite walkable and it has friendly locals, good authentic Mexican food and good international cuisine and is often very affordable.

**Isla Mujeres is our personal paradise!**



## PACK YOUR BACKPACK & SNORKEL AND LET'S GO

Our travel style has evolved over the years. We are packing light these days when we travel and typically only need a small backpack per person - see our [Traveling Light Guide](#).

With this guide, I want to provide value to you and help you plan your own relaxing vacations with the goal of **Making Memorable Moments!**

Please contact me if you have any questions or comments.