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# HOME & AWAY

## Varied Vietnam

**Urban hustle and bustle, ancient history and pastoral calm meet in this Southeast Asia destination.**

By Anietra Hamper

Vietnam is somewhere between yin and yang. The S-shaped country, which covers more than 300,000 square miles, operates socially and culturally through a delicate balance of calmness and chaos. It is as captivating as it is curious and inspires a serenity that lasts long after returning home to unpack the souvenirs of silk and coffee. Whether a traveler's perfect getaway is lavish or rustic, relaxing or adventurous, Vietnam is a blend of it all.



**In Vietnam's Bac Ha region, Flower Hmong women wear handmade, intricately embroidered clothing.**

*Anietra Hamper*

My guided small-group journey on General Tours World Traveler's

Vietnam Sampler took me from the bustling urban cities in the south to peaceful rural communities in the central region to tranquil paradise islands and remote tribes in the north. Along the way, I discovered an intriguing balance of life around every corner and abundant reasons why Vietnam should be on every traveler's destination list.

### The Bustling Hub

Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon, is the crown of the south. The streets buzz with activity at all hours. Motorbikes piled high with people and goods dodged me as I crossed the street; sidewalk vendors had set up shop to sell everything from luggage to chickens. Locals leisurely socialized over a bowl of pho (noodle soup).

My breakfast of succulent jackfruit was a sweet and hearty staple before I headed out to explore one of Ho Chi Minh's many local markets. Found in every city quadrant, markets provide a sensory bonanza and an exciting opportunity to engage in local culture. At each, produce is carefully organized by greens and reds in intricate displays, and the constant chatter of price negotiations rounds out the ambience like white noise. Fresh flowers bursting in iridescent pinks and yellows awakened me, and the pungent smell of dried fish

crinkled my nose. I bought a cup of espresso at a cafe and quietly observed the daily flow.

It is impossible to visit Ho Chi Minh City without reminders of the fall of Saigon in 1975. Relics of the Vietnam War on display at The National Vietnam War Museum, as well as the Cu Chi tunnels built by the Viet Cong, gave me pause. I was disturbed by the photos, weaponry and war tactics yet grateful for the opportunity to better understand such a dark time in history.

On the edge of Ho Chi Minh City runs the famous Mekong Delta. Early risers are greeted by floating markets that crowd the waterways. Local merchants toss bountiful crops of lettuce, kava, bananas and other produce from one boat to the next. The floating markets start before sunrise and end before many people even wake up for the day.

### Historical Center

The less populated central region of Vietnam is home to the charming city of Hoi An, nestled in a sprawling countryside of rice paddies. The narrow streets of the Ancient Town district lead foot traffic past local shops selling marble Buddhas and fine silk. Silk robes and scarves that sell for \$80 or more in the U.S. can be purchased in Vietnam for as little as \$5. One of my favorite moments of the trip was getting fitted for two full-length silk dresses handmade to fit me like a glove. Selecting my silk colors from the shop's hundreds of options was like being in a fairy tale.

A short flight north took me to the 1,000-year-old capital of Hanoi, where ancient culture and modernization collide. In this city, with a population of 6 million people, bonsai trees, pagodas and Buddhist monks are interspersed among cell phone stores and restaurants. For a taste of ancient culture, I attended a traditional water-puppet show, which served as a form of entertainment before the television and radio eras.



**A man meditates in Hanoi at Hoan Kiem Lake, or Lake of the Returned Sword. Legend says 14th-century emperor Le Loi was boating when a giant turtle surfaced and took his sword—reclaiming the sword from when it was given to Le Loi during a revolt against the Chinese Ming Dynasty.**

*Anietra Hamper*

Hanoi is easily explored on foot. A peaceful stroll at Hoan Kiem Lake yields the opportunity to watch Thai Chi meditations in the morning and beautifully decorated brides who come for photo sessions in the afternoon. Nearby, Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum is a jaw-dropping tribute to the former communist leader, who is still regarded as the father of the country. His embalmed body is on display inside.

Eighty miles east of Hanoi is the natural paradise known as Ha Long Bay, where 2,000 limestone monoliths, the result of thousands of years' worth of earthquakes separating the earth and sea, protrude impressively from the

water. Tourists can rest on the emerald waters in overnight accommodations on board a

Vietnamese junk, a traditional wooden sailboat.

Daytrippers to Ha Long Bay are escorted by boat to a tourist grotto carved out of one of the limestone islands. While the bay is a must-see, tourists should be advised that the typical excursion here is commercialized with color-gelled spotlights in the cave and music playing on loudspeakers. The profound silence that rests beyond the tourist lights is well worth the extra time for those who make arrangements to sail farther into the bay.

### **Humble Gifts**

A visit to the more primitive cultures of Vietnam requires an over-night train to what seems like the edge of the Earth. This cool-climate, mountainous region is called Bac Ha, situated on the Vietnam-China border and home to the Hmong people.

My motorbike ride along remote, winding dirt roads revealed a rustic, colorful culture. At sunset, rows of workers, mostly women, emerge from high in the mountains with loads of wood piled on their backs. They spend their days clearing jungle brush to make way for cascading rice terraces built by hand. The locals refer to the terraces as “stairs to heaven” for their endless architectural ascent to the sky.

Sunday in Bac Ha is a treat for outsiders: It is market day for the Hmong. Scattered along the mountain range, young men sell oxen for farming and young women sell hand-dyed yarn. It is a basic society where life is about survival not luxury.

Vietnam is a delicate balance. It is a country scarred by history and still in forward motion, where rustic tradition is balanced by modernization, where a visitor’s enjoyment of the chaos is balanced by the parting gift of serenity.

### **Planning Your Trip**

General Tours World Traveler’s guided, eight-day Vietnam Sampler includes stops in Hanoi, Ha Long Bay, Da Nang, Hoi An and Ho Chi Minh City. For more information, contact a local AAA Travel agent or visit [AAA.com/travel](http://AAA.com/travel). Ask about AAA’s exclusive deals.

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