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Attractive areas in Central and Southern Vietnam

Most travellers to Vietnam who wish to see a substantial part of the country arrive in Hanoi, and after visiting the northern area of Vietnam, make their way down the coast to Ho Chi Minh and the Mekong Delta.

The same can be done in reverse, arriving in Ho Chi Minh and after visiting the South of Vietnam you can make your way up through Central Vietnam and the coastal areas to Hanoi.

Either way this page will give you some basic information on the most attractive and easily accessible places to visit in the Central and Southern areas of Vietnam between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh.

We are constantly monitoring the development of facilities available for recreation and accommodation for the visitor to these areas. In so doing we can improve the standards and ensure the satisfaction of service and accommodation that we provide to our customers.

Further information on any of these areas, or on transport and accommodation in Vietnam to suit your personal requirements can be forwarded to you on request.

Cuc Phuong

In the Northern Central part of Vietnam, 140km south of Hanoi we have the Cuc Phuong National Park. Home to a magnificent variety of Vietnams flora and fauna and many caves where stone tools of prehistoric people have been discovered. 70km in length and 11km in width it was established in 1962 and is Vietnams first national park. There are over 300 bird, 100 mammal and 36 reptile species so far recorded. Of the almost 2000 known plant species 430 have been isolated for their medicinal properties and over 300 are regarded as food sources.

The park is also home to the famous Cay Kim Gao tree which it is said that if anything poisonous touches its light coloured timber it will turn black. In ancient days kings and emperors would only eat from chopsticks made from this wood.

One of the highlights enjoyed by everyone who visit the park is the Endangered Primate Rescue Center.

A preview of which can be seen on their website - <http://www.primatecenter.org>

With help from the Vietnamese authorities the center has had some major improvements in recovery and breeding since starting out as a small operation in 1995. The center is home to almost 100 animals including the small nocturnal lorises and many species of gibbons and langurs.

For those who enjoy the forest environment this is an excellent park for trekking, with many short and long hikes ranging from 1 day trails to several days with an overnight stay at a Muong tribal village.

There is guest house accommodation and self contained bungalows for groups and families and camping is also an option for those who have the equipment.

Hue

Traditionally the small quiet city of Hue has always been regarded as one of the educational centres of Vietnam. Founded as a Royal City in 1687 its rich cultural and religious history is the gateway to the treasures of Vietnams royal past.

The main attractions for the visitor are the splendid tombs of the Nguyen emperors. These magnificent mausoleums are constructed along the banks of the Perfume River over a 16km stretch, and are easily accessible by boat from Hue.

The remains of the ancient Citadel has a perimeter of 10km, and within it lies the Imperial Enclosure which houses the Forbidden Purple City which was the emperors private residence. There are also many interesting Temples and Pagodas that are worth a visit in Hue.

Vietnam is renowned for its many culinary dishes from the different areas around the country. Hue is one of these places and is well regarded for its culinary delights. The unique taste of the food here is most appealing.

Hoi An

The ancient town of Hoi An was one of the major trading centres of Southeast Asia in the 16th century and is now a living museum. Its narrow streets are bordered by splendid architecture reflecting the past cultural influences. There's plenty to do, you can take the cultural and heritage half day walk through the town and see the local artisans working their mediums such as ceramics, wood, paint and fabrics. Listen to some traditional music or take some Vietnamese cooking classes.

You can go for a boat ride on the river or hire a bicycle or motorbike and go to the beach. Shopping is big here, and combined with the overwhelming charm of the town Hoi An is a shoppers paradise. Tailor made clothing is one of the traditional specialties here and there are plenty of fabrics and designs to choose from. They are also excellent at copying your own style or design if you have one.

Wood carvings are also a local specialty, and can be found in the gorgeous old buildings along with the art galleries.

There are lots of hotels ranging from the budget backpacker style to the resort class complete with swimming pool and recreational facilities. All are within walking distance from the town and its many good restaurants.

A trip out to My Son the historic site of the ancient kingdom of Champa, set in a lush valley surrounded by hills and streams that run around and between the structures it is well worth a visit. My Son became a religious centre under King Bhadravarman in the late 4th century and was occupied until the 13th century, the longest period of development of any monument in Southeast Asia.

Nha Trang

Nha Trang is a rapidly developing beach resort town and is one of the most popular in Vietnam.

The focus here is the beach and the clear turquoise water were nearly all of the activity happens. The beach service is excellent, with food, cold beer, massage therapies including beauty treatments and manicures, and a host of products and services to keep you entertained.

The clear waters around the coast make for some great snorkeling or scuba diving and Nha Trang is Vietnams premier place for this activity. There are 3 dive shops to choose from, a French one, a British one and a Vietnamese one.

All of them are certified and you can hire all the necessary equipment.

There are many islands surrounding the coast of Nha Trang and a boat trip out to visit some of them especially the little fishing villages is highly recommended. This can also be a good way to do some snorkeling without going on a dive boat.

Nha Trang is a seafood haven which has a wide variety of species including abalone, lobster, prawns and scallops.

There are some excellent eateries for you to try.

The evening entertainment can be spent at either a disco or one of the local bars, one being the Nha Trang Sailing Club an Aussie run open air beach bar.

Or for the more traditional the Vien Dong hotel has nightly ethnic minority song and dance performances.

Dalat

The southern central highlands of Dalat provide us with a beautifully temperate climate. With its many waterfalls and lakes, and evergreen forests and park like environment, this area is one of the most delightful in all of Vietnam. It is the country's most popular honeymoon spot and is home to many of Vietnams artists. One of the main local industries here is the growing of flowers. At the Dalat Flower Gardens the many beautiful varieties can be seen, these include fuchsias, orchids and hydrangeas which are sold all over southern Vietnam.

The best way to see the sites in and around Dalat if you don't have your own transport is either by tourist bus or by hiring a bicycle or motorbike.

Another method which is becoming very popular is to hire one of Dalat's so called notorious Easy Riders.

Taking a quote from a testimonial in the lonely planet guide book ...

'Travelling with the Easy Riders is a great way to explore the region, and having a friendly and articulate guide along with you can really help put things into perspective. You can usually find the Easy Riders hanging around the hotels in Dalat, but don't worry about looking they'll find you. All of them speak English and some can speak French and German. Most of the Easy Riders carry portable guestbooks containing raving testimonials from past clients.'

The Easy Riders can be hired for fun day trips around Dalat, and the cost is very reasonable (about \$10 (\$US) a day around the city, or \$12 (\$US) a day around the outskirts). Longer and further trips around the highlands or down to the coast can also be arranged.

Mui Ne

Unlike Nha Trang Mui Ne is more relaxed and laid back and offers a peaceful change of pace. A quiet lovely stretch of white sand with swaying palm trees. Famous for its enormous sand dunes and rock formations, you can explore them by following the 'Fairy Spring' stream from the sea to its source which passes through these beautiful creations.

Unlike NhaTrang there is no scuba diving here but from August through to December Surf's up, and for the windsurfing crew the winds blow from November to May with a reported minimum wind speed of 12 knots.

There is a water sports shop in Mui Ne that rents good quality surfboards, windsurfers and kite surfing boards, and will give you basic help and instruction. For further adventures in the area there is ecotourism and adventure sports trips such as trekking, canyoning and rock climbing. Or if you are a keen golfer then 10km away, about a 10-15 minute drive to the nearby town of Phan Thiet there is a professional 18 hole golf course.

There are many hotels and resorts with varying prices to choose from and there are some interesting restaurants that serve beautiful and cheap seafood dishes along with 'special wild food' such as pigeon, rabbit, deer, frog and wild boar. Mui Ne is only a small town and getting around is comfortably done by foot or you can rent a bicycle.

Ho Chi Minh City

Formally known as Saigon and with a population of over 6 million people Ho Chi Minh is the vibrant economic centre of the south. The constant hustle and bustle of Vietnamese life surrounds you. Timeless contrasting images and aromas evoking exotic sensations abound you. The ancient culture and tradition blending with a developing modernity. Early in the morning before work you will see a large majority of Vietnamese in their local park doing the traditional Tai Chi. You may see the graceful hands of a seamstress creating an 'Ao Dai' the beautiful traditional dress of the women folk.

The places and things that can be seen here are diverse and numerous and depend largely on your personal interest.

I have listed here some of the most common.

Ho Chi Minh has some excellent museums, the War Remnants Museum is the most popular with artillery and infantry pieces on display and a rare opportunity for people to hear the victims of US military action tell their own story. There are many interesting Temples and Pagodas in and around the city area, the oldest being Giac Lam Pagoda which dates from 1744. In virtually original condition this Vietnamese Buddhist pagoda houses ten monks and incorporates aspects of Taoism and Confucianism.

Ho Chi Minh City (continued)

The Cholon area of the city is also worth a visit. Here the streets are filled with some amazing sights and sounds and the rich aromas of the traditional herb shops. There are also many excellent Chinese and Vietnamese foods to sample. The Ben Thanh market is the most popular and probably the best one to visit. It is basically a huge series of individual markets all in one complex. The market itself and all the surrounding streets create a vibrant lively atmosphere. Virtually anything you want you can get here, a great place for shopping.

An absolute must is a visit to the Cu Chi Tunnels, an amazing complex of underground tunnels used by the Viet Cong during the Vietnam war. The tunnel network stretched from the South Vietnamese capital to the Cambodian border. In the district of Cu Chi alone there was over 250km of tunnels. The network encompassed specially constructed living areas, weapons factories, hospitals and command centres. This allowing the Viet Cong to communicate effectively and to mount surprise attacks on the US army with devastating results. Unable to contain these attacks the US military resorted to massive firepower turning Cu Chi's 420sq km into 'the most bombed, shelled, gassed, defoliated and generally devastated area in the history of warfare'.

Cu Chi has become a place of pilgrimage for many Vietnamese. There are numerous cemeteries all around the area.

Mekong Delta

The lusciously green beautiful Mekong Delta is the southern most region of Vietnam.

Formed by sediment continually being deposited from the Mekong River the area is extremely rich and fertile.

With almost half of the area under cultivation it produces enough rice to feed the whole country and create a surplus that is exported putting Vietnam as the second largest rice exporter in the world after Thailand.

Other products produced here include sugar cane, tropical fruits and fish.

The closest city in the Mekong Delta from Ho Chi Minh city is My Tho. Boat trips are the highlight of a visit here. You can cruise down the maze of small canals taking in the pleasant rural outlook of the local villages, stopping on the way to visit places of interest such as a family run coconut candy workshop, a honey bee farm, or a beautiful orchid garden.

Vinh Long is a popular destination for visitors to the delta region and offers a variety of boat tours including overnight excursions. Attractions include cruising down the small canals and visiting the fruit orchards and the conical hat making workshops. A trip out from Vinh Long to the bustling Cai Be Floating Market is an exciting shopping experience, cruising easily around the boats sampling the many exotic fruits and vegetables of the region.

Homestays at one of the Mekong Delta's rural properties can be arranged and is an unforgettable experience, giving you a unique insight into the day to day lives of the local people.

Cantho with a population of 330,000 is the largest city in the region and is the main business centre in the Mekong Delta. A vibrant and friendly city with many colourful floating markets dotted around the rivers and canals. These are the main attractions to the area, combined with a wider variety of small and large boats for hire and the capacity to negotiate economical trips.

Cantho also has large range of the best accommodation available in the Mekong Delta, with many good budget priced hotels and guesthouses.