



# Vietnamese



*Vietnam has witnessed a huge transition over the last 20 years, once a destination for the more intrepid traveller, it's now becoming one of the most popular destinations in the region. Craig Burkinshaw, Managing Director, shares some of his early travelling experiences and demonstrates how these changes have benefited the visiting traveller.*



Coc Ly Market, near Sapa



River scene, Hoi An



# Ventures

I first travelled to Vietnam in the early 1990s shortly after leaving university. The country was only just opening to the outside world, it was a fascinating time but you needed to be fully prepared for the creaking infrastructure and police state mentality.

Back in the UK, I found that the country had made such a deep impression on me that I wanted to return, so I arranged and led several small group tours to the country. John, a good friend from university, joined me on one of these tours. A few months later we decided to take things more seriously and Audley Travel was born (then Indochina Travel and later Asian Journeys) – offering small group and tailor-made tours throughout Indochina. Initially, I led the group tours myself. We coped with terrible roads, mediocre food and often very basic accommodation, but it was a fascinating time and I met some real characters along the way, some of whom I am still in contact with today.

The Mekong Delta, to the south of Saigon, was always one of my favourite areas. The lush green rice fields stretching as far as the eye could see

and the patchworks of fields, dotted with villagers in the tropical evening air, presented a romantic and magical vista that remains etched on my mind. Travel was painfully slow and almost always by road which was frustrating because the locals generally got around the network of rivers and canals by boat. Today, things have come a long way and there is a wide range of different boats for exploring the Delta and to make the onward journey between Vietnam and Cambodia, as well as some good quality hotels on the banks of the Mekong Delta itself. Off the southern coast lies the island of Phu Quoc. Inaccessibility and a lack of time meant that I never made it there, but today, while it still remains very much off the beaten track, it offers some wonderful places to stay in a little known corner of the world.

Heading north from Saigon we always followed “Highway One”, potholed beyond belief and scattered with chickens and dogs, it runs for around 1,000 miles to Hanoi and on to the Chinese border. The scenery remains stunning but the road is much better today and the journeys far less arduous – the driving of some of the other road users is still a little erratic, but generally you

can make it from one town to the next before night fall! Arriving in Central Vietnam you eventually reach Hoi An, a historical gem and now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Originally a trading port where people from all corners of Asia met, it is easy to imagine the town in its heyday as you stroll through the streets today. There are still lots of people wanting to trade and vegetable sellers sit alongside tailors and people selling fake Nike T-shirts in the market place. This is a great place for purchasing traditional handicrafts, and getting clothes made to measure. There are some wonderful character accommodation options in the town, but if you prefer luxury and relaxation stay a few miles away by the coast. Some of the best beach resorts in Vietnam have sprung up along this stretch of coastline and they offer superb facilities as well as access to this pretty town and all its shop houses.

Travelling from the centre to Hanoi we would usually take the overnight sleeper train. On one very memorable occasion the drivers allowed me to spend the journey in the cab. I stayed awake all night as we wound our way through the moonlit night by endless rice paddies, small villages and ▶

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► non-descript little towns. The route is mainly single track so we had to stop and wait in the sidings for southbound trains before proceeding to ensure only one train was on the track at any time. Long train journeys in Vietnam are still very basic today, and where there are alternative modes of transport available, it is best to take advantage of them and leave the train journeys to the enthusiasts.

On the northern coast the karst limestone of Halong Bay is Vietnam's scenic highlight and is best explored by boat. In theory we were not allowed to overnight on boats in the bay but we always managed to bend the rules and spend many peaceful evenings asleep in hammocks after a dinner of fresh local fish washed down with local beer. This is a wonderful way to enjoy the dramatic scenery, the experience remains as magical as ever, the only change being the arrival of much more comfortable small junks on which to explore.

Inland the north is stunning, the French called the mountains "the Tonkin Alps". I travelled extensively in the mountains to see the stunning

scenery and fascinating array of hill tribe people. Apart from the odd Russian we were often the first Caucasians many people had ever seen. Russian jeeps have been replaced with Landcruisers and comfortable sleeper carriages have been tagged onto the local train; while travel here is still a great adventure it is less bone-shaking than it once was. Just into the mountains, Mai Chau is a stunning area that can be visited in just two days from Hanoi. I led the first group tour to stay in one of the local White Tai villages and I am pleased to say that the area still offers a fascinating insight into the lives of the culturally distinct hill tribe people.

Vietnam has changed a lot in the nearly two decades since it began to open its doors to the outside world, fortunately most of the change is for the better – great restaurants, better roads, wonderful places to stay and boats that ply the rivers and coastline so you can really get under the skin of this amazing place. I will certainly be returning.

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**Craig Burkinshaw**  
Managing Director

## FACT FILE

A 17 night itinerary to Vietnam including the Mekong Delta, Saigon, Hoi An, Hanoi, Halong Bay and Sapa would cost from £2,450 per person staying in mid-range accommodation. This includes return flights from the UK. Please contact our Vietnam specialists on 01993 838 140 to start planning your own Vietnamese venture.



[www.audleytravel.com/vietnam](http://www.audleytravel.com/vietnam)

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