



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** Covering 127,243 square miles (329,560 square kilometers), Vietnam is just larger than New Mexico and stretches from north to south for nearly 1,000 miles (1,600 kilometers). Flat deltas in the north and south are separated by central highlands. Hills and mountains are found in the far north. Summer rainfall is heavy in most areas. While the south experiences a mostly tropical climate, the north has four seasons (two are short); winter months are chilly, but temperatures do not reach freezing. In the south, May to September is hot and rainy, while October to March is warm, humid, and dry. Temperatures are often above 84°F (29°C). Approximately 17 percent of the land is arable; 30 percent is covered by tropical and highland forests.

**History.** In the first century B.C., Vietnam's recorded history began. However, Vietnamese dynasties did not begin until A.D. 939, when Ngo Quyen defeated invading Chinese troops to establish the Ngo Dynasty, ending centuries of Chinese domination. The French imposed colonial rule in the latter nineteenth century.

The Japanese occupied Vietnam during World War II, installing a pro-Japan government while retaining Vietnam's monarch. After defeating Japan, the Allies divided Vietnam into two zones for the purpose of disarming Japanese troops. The British completed the task in the south, while the Chinese disarmed the Japanese troops in the north. The political division between north and south remained after the Japanese troops were disbanded. The British restored French rule in the south and the Chinese restored the Vietnamese emperor, Bao Dai, to rule in the north. However, as Bao Dai attempted to resume political authority, an uprising (called the August Revolution) in Hanoi and other major northern cities led the

emperor to abdicate. The Viet Minh, who led the communist-initiated, anti-French movement, took over rule. On 2 September 1945, communist leader Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the entire nation's independence. Negotiations with France broke down in 1946, and the first Indochina war ensued. It culminated in France's defeat in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam's northwest.

The 1954 Geneva Accord called for national elections in 1956. The southern regime led by President Ngo Dinh Diem refused to recognize the accord. This refusal gave communists in the south pretext for an uprising. Northern communists first aided and then joined their southern comrades. Collectively called the Viet Cong, these troops fought under North Vietnam's leadership. The Soviet Union and China backed North Vietnam. Supporting its containment policy (which opposed the spread of communism), the United States sent supplies and troops to help the south against the Viet Cong. The war spread to Laos and Cambodia.

After years of fighting, U.S. and southern Vietnamese support for the war diminished. U.S. troops withdrew in 1972, and the southern regime in Saigon fell to the north in April 1975. Saigon's name was officially changed to Ho Chi Minh City, but most Vietnamese still call it Saigon. Thousands of families fled; those remaining faced difficult years of poverty, repression, and international isolation.

In 1976, Vietnam's north and south were officially reunited as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The United States refused to recognize the government and imposed a crippling economic embargo that lasted almost 20 years. After the "American War" (as the Vietnam War is known in Vietnam), troops under Cambodia's leader, Pol Pot, repeatedly attacked

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southern Vietnam. In 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia, deposing the genocidal Pol Pot regime and installing a government (led by Hun Sen) loyal to Hanoi. China invaded northern Vietnam for a short time in 1979. Vietnam, exhausted by war and occupation, withdrew from Cambodia in 1989. In 2000, Vietnam and China finally formalized a border agreement.

The withdrawal from Cambodia allowed Vietnam to also seek renewed relations with the United States. Washington opened an office in Hanoi in 1991 to coordinate the search for U.S. soldiers missing in action and to pave the way to better relations. The United States lifted its trade embargo in 1994, and U.S. companies began to invest in Vietnam.

In the 1980s, Vietnam's one-party government began introducing a series of wide-ranging reforms in an attempt to improve the nation's economy and living standards. This program, known as *doi moi* (renovation), remains a key element of government policy today, seeking to encourage private enterprise, attract foreign investment, integrate Vietnam into the global economy, and transform Vietnam from an agricultural to an industrialized nation.

### THE PEOPLE

**Population.** Vietnam's population of 81.6 million is growing at 1.3 percent annually. The majority of people live in rural regions, mainly in the Red and Mekong River Deltas and along the coastal plain. The largest cities are the capital, Hanoi, and Saigon, which is almost twice as large. About 88 percent of the population is ethnic *Kinh* (Vietnamese). The Chinese (3 percent) form an important merchant class. The rest of the population consists of Khmer, Hao, and Cham peoples in addition to more than 50 highland minority groups, each with its own language and culture.

Over the years, many Vietnamese fled their country, often in difficult circumstances, in search of better conditions. There are large immigrant and refugee communities in the United States and elsewhere. Many refugees are being repatriated from other Asian nations; others would return voluntarily if the political system in Vietnam were to change.

**Language.** Vietnamese is the official language, although ethnic minorities still speak their own languages at home. Vietnamese is monosyllabic; each syllable is a word, but as many as four syllables can be joined together to form a new word. For instance, *thanh* (fresh) joins with *nien* (years) as *thanh nien* (youth). Each word has six tones and therefore six possible meanings. The word's tone is indicated by a symbol usually located above the word's main vowel. English is the most popular foreign language to study. Older people may speak some French. Some adults speak Russian or another foreign language because Vietnamese citizens would often work in other communist countries prior to 1991.

**Religion.** Vietnam's constitution has always guaranteed freedom of religion, but it is only slowly becoming a full reality. Buddhism is practiced by 55 percent of the population. Temples and pagodas are busy with people offering prayers for success and health to various gods and goddesses. About 12 percent of the population is Taoist and 8 percent is Roman Catholic. Christianity is becoming more popular in cities. Some ethnic minorities remain animists, practicing a reverence for all living things.

Regardless of religion, nearly all Vietnamese venerate their ancestors. The Vietnamese believe the deceased are accessible to help or hinder the living. Almost every Vietnamese family has an altar for ancestor worship. Family members place fruit

and/or flowers on the altar on the first and middle days of each lunar month. They also burn incense and offer prayers to ancestors for support in overcoming misfortune and obtaining good luck.

**General Attitudes.** Vietnamese respect those who respect others. Children must respect teachers and parents. Vietnamese value marital fidelity, generosity, gentleness, and hard work. The lazy, selfish, and disloyal are despised. Promptness is important to the Vietnamese; the time stated is the time meant. Neighbors help each other, and families support one another. Vietnamese hope for a future of wealth and security but worry that traditional family and cultural values will be lost in a modern economy.

The Vietnamese lived under Chinese domination for one thousand years, followed by almost one hundred years of French colonialism (1858–1954). Then came 30 years of civil war that included the war against the United States. This long struggle for independence has given the Vietnamese a deep sense of national pride. Still, people focus on the future rather than the past. They often are baffled by the fixation many people in the United States have with the “American War,” which they see as past history. Rather than being anti-American, most people today have an interest in all things from the United States.

People are both pleased with their nation's progress and uncertain about the future. Urban areas are enjoying better basic services, a more open cultural atmosphere, and a growing economy. Unfortunately, the countryside—where about three-fourths of the population lives—continues to be neglected. Peasants still are dominated by party officials, still lack access to cultural opportunities and basic services (health care and education), and still live in grinding poverty. Such inequality encourages urban migration and strains urban infrastructure.

**Personal Appearance.** Everyday dress for both men and women generally consists of slacks worn with a casual cotton or knit blouse or sport shirt. For special occasions, women wear the graceful, traditional *ao dai*, a long dress with front and back panels, worn over satin trousers. Men might wear shorts at the beach or work site but not otherwise in public.

### CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

**Greetings.** Vietnamese shake hands when greeting formally, but otherwise greet verbally, bowing the head slightly and standing at a distance of about 3 feet (1 meter). A formal greeting between strangers is *Xin chao*. The most common greeting among friends is *Di dau day?* (Where are you going?). *Co khoe khong?* (How are you doing?), *Lam gi day?* (What are you doing?), and *Chao* (Greetings) are also popular.

In other situations, Vietnamese greet with a variety of phrases that are nearly always accompanied by a title. The title used depends on the relationship of the two individuals. Titles are based on family, as if everyone were related. For instance, a person greeting a man about the same age as the person's father calls the man *bac* (uncle): *Bac di dau day?* (Uncle, where are you going?). If the man is of the person's brother's age, the title used is *anh* (brother). If a man greets an older woman of his mother's generation, he greets her as *co* (aunt) and refers to himself as *chau* (nephew).

Peers might call each other by their given names, and younger people are addressed by given name. Names in Vietnam are structured with the family name first, followed by a middle name and a given name (e.g., *Nguyen Huu Minh*). Pro-

professionals or officials are addressed by one or more appropriate titles (e.g., *Bac si* for “doctor”).

**Gestures.** It is inappropriate to touch another person’s head, the body’s most spiritual point. It is rude to summon a person with the index finger. Instead, one waves all four fingers with the palm down. Hand gestures otherwise are limited because verbal communication is preferred. Men and women do not show affection in public, but it is common for members of the same sex to hold hands while walking. Vietnamese use both hands to pass an object to another person. Crossing the index and middle fingers is impolite.

**Visiting.** Vietnamese friends and relatives visit each other as often as the distance between their homes permits. Evening and weekend visits are most common. Most visits occur without prior arrangements in rural areas, but urban families with phones are beginning to prefer a call in advance. Holidays are the best time to visit distant friends and relatives. Relatives also gather for the death anniversaries of their ancestors. Urban residents take rural hosts a gift of something from the city, such as candy for the children, tea, bread, and so on. Rural visitors take urban hosts something from their farm (sticky rice, a live chicken, fresh produce).

During a short visit, hosts serve tea and cigarettes and chat about local matters. Guests politely wait for the host to begin drinking first. The host may invite the visitor to stay for the upcoming meal; if the individual has a long way to travel home, he or she is expected to stay. The invitation is extended before meal preparation begins so as not to make the guests feel they need to leave.

**Eating.** The Vietnamese eat three times a day; they use chopsticks and rice bowls for most meals. They hold the rice bowl in the hand; it is considered lazy to eat from a rice bowl on the table. Spoons are used for soup. Dishes of food are placed in the center of the table. Diners choose small portions from these dishes throughout the meal and place the food in their individual rice bowls. One is careful not to take the last portion of any dish, leaving it for someone else. This means food may be left on the serving dishes, but no one should leave rice or other food in his or her individual bowl. People usually eat their meals at a table, although they may sit on a mat for certain occasions (e.g., when guests are present and the table is not big enough). The host might serve guests but usually just invites them to help themselves. Female guests help female hosts wash the dishes.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** The rural family includes parents, their unmarried children, and married sons and their families living in the same household. However, as married sons establish their own households, the youngest son inherits the parental home and cares for the elderly parents. Single-family homes are more common in urban areas. Extended families provide members with assistance and support as needed. Men and women share most responsibilities in the family, although men are considered the authority and women care for the children. Both are breadwinners and both (if farmers) work the fields.

**Dating and Marriage.** Youth begin dating in their late teens. In urban areas, young people generally go as couples to coffeehouses or movies. In rural Vietnam, they tend to socialize in groups. Young people are free to choose their mates; they are encouraged to marry after the man is at least 25 and the woman 23. Some weeks or months before a wedding, the two families meet to get to know each other. Later, there will be a formal

proposal ceremony when the man asks permission of the bride’s parents to marry her. At a traditional wedding, the two families sit on opposite sides of a table in front of an ancestral altar. After a formal ceremony, they share a feast.

**Diet.** White rice is eaten with every meal. A fermented fish sauce called *nuoc mam* can be used as a dip or a seasoning. The main meal includes rice, a salty dish (such as *thit kho*, pork cooked in fish broth), a vegetable dish (such as *rau luoc*, boiled vegetables), and soup. *Canh ca* (fish and vegetable soup) is the most popular. Abundant local fruits include watermelon, papaya, bananas, and citrus fruits.

**Recreation.** Vietnamese men enjoy team sports such as volleyball and soccer. Badminton, tennis, table tennis, and swimming are popular in cities. Only young, unmarried women tend to engage in sports. Urban people of all ages like to get out early in the morning to jog, exercise, or do yoga or *tai chi* (a martial art used for relaxation). Men play Chinese checkers in their leisure time. Rural people have less leisure time but enjoy spending it in the company of friends and relatives.

**The Arts.** The development of the arts in Vietnam originally paralleled Chinese and Indian arts. However, since French colonialism in the 1950s, Western culture has greatly influenced Vietnamese music, literature, and dance.

Many Vietnamese enjoy theater. The popular *cai luong* is a type of musical comedy developed in the early 1900s. Also prominent are traditional Chinese opera (*hat boi*, *hat tuong*, or *hat bo*), Vietnamese operettas (*hat cheo*), and water puppetry (*mua roi nuoc*, in which a pool of water serves as the stage). Vietnamese music often focuses on singing. *Ca dao* is unaccompanied vocal music. Traditional music is played on stringed instruments. These include the *dan tranh* (a multiple-stringed instrument), *dan bau* (a single-stringed instrument), and *dan vong co* (a modified guitar).

Vietnam is famous for decorative woodwork, which is sometimes inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Other significant arts are weaving, wood-block printing, and mosaics.

Vietnamese literature was originally written in Chinese, but a unique writing system called *chu nom* developed using Chinese characters to write Vietnamese words. The Latin alphabet was adopted in the 17th century but was not fully embraced as the literary alphabet until French rule. Vietnam’s most famous piece of literature is *Kim Van Kieu* (The Tale of Kieu), a narrative poem written at the beginning of the 19th century.

**Holidays.** There are 11 major lunar holidays (*tet*) in Vietnam, but the most important one is the Lunar New Year (*Tet nguyen dan*) in late January or early February. On this day, everyone in Vietnam celebrates his or her birthday and considers him or herself one year older. For as long as one week, the Vietnamese spend their time feasting and visiting. Beforehand, houses are cleaned, ancestral graves are refurbished, debts are settled, and strained relationships are mended. People buy flowers to bloom during the holiday in honor of spring, and they decorate special *tet* trees. Of the other *tet* celebrations, *Tet thuong nguyen* and *Tet trung nguyen* are most significant. The former is on the first full moon of the new year. The latter is on the full moon of the seventh month. *Tet trung nguyen* is a day to pardon the sins of the dead by reading the *Vu lan* (Buddhist prayer book).

Public holidays include International New Year’s Day (1 Jan.), a day commemorating the 1975 defeat of South Vietnam (30 Apr.), Labor Day (1 May), and National Day (2 September, the day Ho Chi Minh declared independence).

**Commerce.** Most offices are open Monday through Saturday

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from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., closing at noon for one hour. Shops often close for two hours at noon but stay open until about 7 p.m. Government stores remain open until 8 p.m. People may shop daily for perishables. In rural areas, open-air markets and traveling traders are common.

### SOCIETY

**Government.** Vietnam is a socialist state led by a president (currently Tran Duc Luong), a prime minister (currently Phan Van Khai), his deputies, and a 19-member Government Council (*Politburo*). The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) is the only legal political party and holds all of the power. The Secretary-General of the Communist Party (Nong Duc Manh) wields enormous influence. The National Assembly (*Quoc-Hoi*) has 500 seats. All candidates are screened and approved by the CPV. All citizens may vote at age 18.

**Economy.** Under *doi moi*, thousands of unprofitable state-owned firms merged or were shut down. With U.S., Japanese, and other Asian investment, new plants opened, previously underdeveloped industries (manufacturing, textiles, mining, and oil) experienced growth, and entrepreneurs began turning Ho Chi Minh City into a bustling commercial center. Hanoi, the center of Vietnamese tradition, became more cosmopolitan and business oriented. The government wants to improve efficiency, stability, and the climate for foreign investment.

Many urban Vietnamese desire to be a trader or businessperson, so many small shops are opening throughout the country. However, agriculture remains the primary activity, employing two-thirds of the labor force, and rural farmers remain locked in poverty. Many men migrate to cities to work temporarily between harvests or at night.

Vietnam's government has instituted policies to overcome the poor infrastructure, low salaries, corruption, and rapidly growing gap between the rich and the poor, all of which hinders greater economic progress. Implementation of these programs to improve Vietnam's education, health, and bureaucracy depends on skilled workers taking government positions. However, few are interested in working for the government. Vietnam's currency is the *dong* (VND).

**Transportation and Communications.** The Vietnamese highway system is extensive, although road quality is variable and rural roads often need repair. Many war-damaged roads are still in need of repair. A rail service runs from Hanoi to Saigon through the coastal lowlands. Few individuals own cars, but most urban families have at least one motorbike. Bicycles are also used for private transportation. Pedicabs are commonly used as taxis in cities. Most people depend on local public transportation, which includes bus service to district towns. Vietnam's national airline has a number of domestic and international routes. The communications system is not well developed but is being updated. The press is controlled by the government, but opportunities for freedom of expression are expanding. Internet use is increasing but subject to government oversight.

**Education.** Primary education is free to all, beginning at age five. In some areas, school facilities do not adequately handle all children, so students attend on a half-day basis. The school week is Monday through Saturday. All children are encour-

### DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank . . . . .	109 of 175 countries
Adjusted for women . . . . .	89 of 144 countries
Real GDP per capita . . . . .	\$2,070
Adult literacy rate . . . . .	95 percent (male); 91 (female)
Infant mortality rate . . . . .	31 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy . . . . .	66 (male); 71 (female)

aged to finish high school. The drop out rate is increasing as young people leave to look for work. University education is free to qualified students, but there is stiff competition for limited space. Vietnam has begun allowing students who can afford tuition but do not qualify for a government subsidy to enter a university as paying students. The number of private universities and institutions of higher learning is rising as social and economic conditions in Vietnam gradually open.

**Health.** Vietnam's healthcare system offers free or low-cost medical care to all people, but facilities are often inadequate, especially in rural areas. Every commune has a clinic, but it may lack modern medicine or other supplies. Traditional healing and natural medicines play an important role in health care. People grow herbs and use local raw materials to make medicine. Malnutrition affects a large proportion of rural children. Severe and chronic flooding have damaged millions of homes and put millions at risk of disease from polluted groundwater, malnutrition, and malaria. The number of Vietnamese infected with HIV/AIDS is rapidly increasing.

### AT A GLANCE

#### Events and Trends.

- In June 2003, a Vietnamese court passed the death sentence against mob boss Truong Van Cam and five of his men after they were found guilty of ordering the killing of their rival. They were also convicted of attempting to bribe government officials. Nearly 150 other people, most of them found guilty, were tried along with the men as part of a government crackdown on corruption.
- The Vietnamese government announced in 2003 that it hoped to cut the nation's coffee production by 20 percent over a two-year period. The global price of coffee beans recently hit its lowest point in decades, hurting many of the country's small farmers. Vietnam is the world's second-largest coffee exporter.
- Following 2002 elections for the National Assembly, the body met to reappoint President Tran Duc Luong and Prime Minister Phan Van Khai to their second five-year terms. Nong Duc Manh has served as the head of the CPV since his selection by the party in April 2001. The three leaders emphasize legal reform, economic integration, and the fight against government corruption as the nation's most important issues.

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