

DAY 3 Mekong Delta

Another adventure in store today as we head south to the Mekong River and its sprawling delta. The Mekong rises in Tibet and travels over 4,600 kilometres through seven countries before splitting into nine tributaries and emptying into the South China Sea. Today we will cruise around several islands in the delta named after the four holy animals of Vietnam, visit orchards and local villages and eat fantastic tropical fruit, such as longan, jackfruit, sabadilla and pineapple. The delta is considered the rice bowl of Vietnam, producing sometimes three crops of rice a year and an abundance of fish products including the indispensable fish sauce! We return to the local capital of My Tho for a magnificent lunch then the two hour drive back to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon).

Accommodation: Continental Hotel

DAY 4 Ho Chi Minh City

A free day in Ho Chi Minh City to explore.

Accommodation: Continental Hotel

DAY 5 Dalat

Today we farewell Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) and travel north into the Central Highlands of Vietnam, our destination is the former French hill station of Dalat. Established in the early 20th century by the French colonialists, Dalat sits at an elevation of 1,500 metres and has a reputation for a cool climate and clean fresh air. The French used Dalat as a resort to escape the heat and humidity of the Saigon summer, and here you will see many old French villas - grand homes that entertained the well-to-do with hunting and fishing abundant in the surrounding hills. Today Dalat is a bustling market town with a reputation for growing cold climate vegetables and magnificent cut flowers. Our drive meanders through coffee and tea plantations, always gaining altitude until the final climb into Dalat. We arrive at our hotel later this afternoon.

Accommodation: The Dalat Palace

DAY 6 Dalat & Nha Trang

After breakfast we will visit the Dalat flower market and take a stroll through the local shops. Dalat is famous for its embroidery work and we visit the local factory to see first-hand how these exquisite works are made. The showroom is extensive, the quality of the work superb. We head due east towards the coast descending down two passes as we travel. The view is spectacular on all sides with mountain peaks and deep valleys running into the distance. The pace is leisurely today and we will stop for lunch once we reach the coastal plains. Here we are entering the southernmost edge of the former Champa Kingdom, a civilisation that flourished in central Vietnam from Hue in the north to Phan Rang in the south. The Cham people originated in India and are distinctive in this region with their darker skin and unique architecture. Commonly, they still live in small mud-brick houses and, over time, they constructed fantastic temples for their kings, and dedicated them to Vishnu, God of the Universe in Hindu belief. As we approach the coast we will visit the Poklongarai Cham Towers, built in the 13th century and one of the best examples (and best preserved) of Cham style architecture. We continue on to our destination at Nha Trang, joining Highway One once again and passing through rice paddies and mango groves; mountains to our left and the vast expanse of Cam Ranh Bay to our right. Our hotel is well located just across from the beach. We arrive just in time for sunset. **Accommodation: Hotel Novotel Nha Trang**

DAY 7 Nha Trang – South China Sea Cruise

A day of relaxation ahead as we take a cruise on the South China Sea among the islands off Nha Trang. Swimming, snorkelling and relaxing are the order of the day; you could even bring your book! The swimming is safe and comfortable, the water temperature warm and inviting. Lunch is included today on board and we will return to Nha Trang and our hotel by 2pm. The rest of the afternoon is at leisure to explore the local area.

Accommodation: Hotel Novotel Nha Trang



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DAY 8 Danang and Hoi An

This morning we depart the hotel for the short transfer to Nha Trang Airport and our one hour flight to Danang. This flight marks a geographical point in our program as we leapfrog from the south into central Vietnam and the destinations of Hoi An, Hue and Danang. The centre of Vietnam is also the narrowest point of this country - the border with Laos only 100 kilometres to the west. The area has always played a pivotal role in the development of Vietnam with the old trading port of Hoi An, the strategic harbour of Danang and the imperial capital of Hue. On arrival in Danang we will visit the Champa Museum, housed in a purpose-built French colonial building, before heading further south to the Marble Mountains. These five small mountains rise from the river flat, and over the years have provided marble and other limestone products for the local artisans. We climb one of the peaks and visit a grotto then continue to the other side for a spectacular view of the famous China Beach. We continue to the ancient town of Hoi An, a world heritage site and our base for the next three days. Hoi An is a delightful place to visit and the home of Vietnam's best tailors. Here you can have shirts, skirts, suits and blouses made to order in the best quality fabrics at very reasonable prices. Hoi An has a fascinating history of trading and discovery with visits by the Portuguese, Japanese and Chinese traders through the last five centuries. Consequently, there is a mix of architecture reflecting the cosmopolitan nature of this small and quaint village. After lunch in a local restaurant we will take a walking tour of Hoi An to show you some of the key sights and help orientate you. By late afternoon our day is complete.

Accommodation: The Hoi An Hotel

DAY 9 Red Bridge Cooking School

Hoi An is renowned for its cuisine, and this morning we will have the chance to see how Vietnamese food is prepared and, later, a chance to enjoy lunch in the delightful surrounds of the Red Bridge Restaurant. We start the morning off with coffee and tea at the Hai Scout Cafe (9am) and visit Hoi An's colourful market to experience the amazing sounds and aromas of this busy market. We will have the opportunity to interact with the local sellers and purchase some of the ingredients to be used in the cooking lesson later. We board our boat for a leisurely cruise (20 minutes) along the Hoi An River to the Red Bridge Cooking School. This is a chance to view local river life, so make sure your camera is handy. On arrival we learn about some of Hoi An's and Vietnam's well-known dishes. The cooking class is an interesting and fun way to learn about the local cuisine. Each person helps prepare the dishes and then sits down to enjoy the meal. Included in the demonstration is a brief introduction to Vietnamese food carving (plate decoration). We finish at approximately 1pm with transfer back to central Hoi An.

Accommodation: The Hoi An Hotel

DAY 10 Hoi An

Free Day **Accommodation: The Hoi An Hotel**

DAY 11 Hue

We depart this morning for the spectacular drive over the Hai Van Pass to the former imperial capital of Vietnam, Hue. Travelling north from Hoi An, we traverse three passes interspersed with magnificent scenery and hugging the coast. Hue is set by the banks of the Perfume River and was the former home of the now defunct Nguyen dynasty who ruled as kings of Vietnam from 1802 to 1945. On arrival in Hue we check into our hotel and walk to a local restaurant for lunch. This afternoon we will visit the Citadel and the former Royal Palace of the Nguyen dynasty. The Citadel is largely modelled on the Forbidden City in China, with an outer wall, moat and various inner walls protecting the residence of the king, his concubines and mandarins. Unfortunately, two wars have taken their toll on the structure and buildings, firstly during the French occupation in



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1946, and then during the Tet Offensive in January 1968 when North Vietnamese troops occupied and held the Citadel for 30 days. Many fine buildings were destroyed, and now with the help of UNESCO, restoration work is slowly bringing the Citadel back to its former grandeur. We take an extended walking tour of the grounds and visit various significant buildings within the complex. We then return to the hotel.

Accommodation: Le Residence Hotel

DAY 12 Hue River Cruise

This morning we leave the hotel and transfer by private bus to the boat jetty for a leisurely cruise on the Perfume River. We travel in a westerly direction viewing daily life on the river and heading for the Thien Mu Pagoda, the oldest pagoda in Vietnam, located on a small peninsula with commanding views in all directions. Hue, as well as being the former capital, is also the home of Buddhism and it was from the Thien Mu Pagoda in 1962 that a monk drove his car to Saigon to protest against the repressive Diem regime. After arriving in Saigon the monk parked his car in the central boulevard, got out and immolated himself. Images of this graphic demonstration were flashed around the world in newspaper and television news. We continue by boat towards the mountains and the tomb of Vietnam's second king, Ming Mang. This king ruled Vietnam from 1820 until 1843, and under his reign the Citadel was begun. He is also credited with establishing the borders of Vietnam as we see them now. His reputation is legendary throughout Vietnam, and the story goes that he had over 500 wives and concubines. We tour the grounds of the tomb, which is under some restoration and is a good example of the periods architecture. Our bus will meet us and transfer us back to our hotel. Later this afternoon we continue our discovery of the Nguyen dynasty in Hue by visiting the tombs of Tu Duc and Khai Dinh. Tu Duc was the longest serving king of the Nguyen dynasty (1848-1873) and his tomb is rambling and majestic. Tu Duc had the misfortune to be king during the French invasion (from 1859). Until his death he struggled against occupation and really was the last of the kings to offer any resistance to the French. It is often said that later kings of the Nguyen dynasty were simply puppet emperors of the French. We continue to the tomb of Khai Dinh (the second last king of the Nguyen dynasty) who ruled from 1918 to 1928. Here we can see in the architecture and presentation of the monuments how Vietnam had come well and truly under the influence of the French colonialists. We return to the hotel by our private bus.

Accommodation: Le Residence Hotel

DAY 13 Hanoi

This morning we depart early (7 am) for our flight to Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam. On arrival in Hanoi we transfer to our hotel, a journey of about 50 minutes depending on the traffic. Hanoi is a bustling, vibrant city that retains an old-world charm rarely found in Asian cities these days. Set on the Red River and with many natural lakes, the city was once called the Paris of the East and was home to the administrative government of the French colonialists for almost 80 years. Here you will see many fine examples of French architecture from public buildings to magnificent villas. Whist some buildings have fallen into disrepair, fortunately, there has been an active restoration program that is bringing these old buildings back to life. Dinner tonight is at one of the many fine restaurants in Hanoi. **Accommodation: Sofitel Metropole Hanoi**

DAY 14 Halong Bay – Cruise

An early start to the day as we head to Halong Bay. The drive is interesting and varied and our first chance to view the countryside in the north and make some comparisons with our earlier experiences in the south. Rice fields are in abundance, busily tended by conical-hat workers, their water buffaloes always close by. The country changes as we near Halong Bay, with limestone formations appearing in the distance and the presence of an active coal mining industry. Halong Bay is a unique place where thousands of limestone islands rise from the sea. The region was recognised for its beauty and rareness by UNESCO and became a world heritage site in 1996. We arrive at the boat harbour and board our vessel to cruise the islands of Halong Bay. Amongst the islands



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are many grottos and caves, and for the next three hours we cruise the calm waters of Halong Bay and visit one of the caves. Lunch is included today. Back at the jetty we will be met by our bus and driven back to Hanoi, which gives us another chance to see rural life in Vietnam. **Accommodation: Sofitel Metropole Hanoi**

DAY 15 Hanoi

We begin our exploration of Hanoi with a visit to the Mausoleum of Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam's most revered statesman and patriotic hero. Ho Chi Minh died in September 1969 and his body lies in state, a testimony to the struggle of the Vietnamese people against invading countries over the last 150 years. After viewing Ho, we continue via the former Presidential Palace to Ho's House on Stilts, then on to the Ho Chi Minh Museum to see a fascinating collection of articles and static displays depicting Ho's life and the times he lived through. We head to the Temple of Literature, Vietnam's oldest educational institution dating back to the 11th century, before resting for lunch at one of the many stylish cafes in Hanoi. This afternoon we continue our visit to the Hoa Lu prison, built by the French to hold political dissidents then later used by the Vietnamese to hold American airmen shot down over the north. The prison was famously renamed the 'Hanoi Hilton'. We move on to the History Museum where there are once again fine examples of Vietnamese history, art and culture. From here we take a leisurely stroll back to our hotel. Tonight, a special treat when we visit the world famous Thang Long Water Puppets. **Accommodation: Sofitel Metropole Hanoi**

DAY 16 Hanoi

Free day in Hanoi for sightseeing and shopping - maybe a visit to one of the museums or historical sights. Tonight is our farewell dinner, a special night to celebrate our time in Vietnam. **Accommodation: Sofitel Metropole Hanoi**

DAY 17 Departure

Farewell to Hanoi and Vietnam. Continue your travels or return home.



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