



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Covering 127,881 square miles (331,210 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 BC, Vietnam's recorded history began. However, Vietnamese dynasties did not begin until AD 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. After the Allies defeated Japan, the French-backed Vietnamese emperor, Bao Dai, attempted to assert political authority. An uprising (called the August Revolution) in Hanoi and other major northern cities forced 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, which France was unwilling to grant. Negotiations between France and the Viet Minh 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 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 government suppresses dissent with an increasing clampdown on freedom of expression.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Vietnam's population of 89.6 million is growing by 1.1 percent annually. About 71 percent of people live in rural regions, mainly in the Red and Mekong river deltas and along the coastal plain. The largest cities are Hanoi and Saigon. About 86 percent of the population is ethnic *Kinh* (Vietnamese). The Chinese form a small but 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 elsewhere. There are large immigrant and refugee communities in the United States and other nations. 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 often worked in other communist countries prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Religion

Vietnam's constitution has always guaranteed freedom of religion, but it is only slowly becoming a full reality. Buddhism is practiced by 9 percent of the population. About 7 percent of the population is 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 flowers on the altar on the first and middle days of each lunar month. They also burn incense and offer prayers to ancestors to overcome misfortune and obtain 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, which 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 migration to urban areas and strains urban infrastructure.

Personal Appearance

Everyday dress for both men and women generally consists of light-weight, loose-fitting pants 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. Young people generally adopt fashions from the West and from other parts of Asia. Imitations of popular Western clothing brands are common. People of all ages wear sandals in the warm weather.

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). A man about the age of the person's brother is called *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*). 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. In urban areas, young people socialize in the evenings by cruising the streets on motorcycles.

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 or bamboo mat. 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.

Many Vietnamese eat their meals on a bamboo mat on the floor in a common space in the household. It is increasingly common for urban people to 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). 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. As married sons establish their own households, the youngest son inherits the parental home and cares for the elderly parents. However, this system is changing as more people move to cities in search of better economic opportunities. Single-family homes are more common in urban areas. Extended families provide support as needed. Men and women share most responsibilities in the family, and both parents usually work outside the home. Men are considered the authority and women care for the children.

Housing

Most rural homes are made of wooden beams and planks, though the wealthy may use bricks and mortar. A home typically features one large room, which serves as a dining room, living area, work space, and sleeping area. If a home has separate sleeping rooms, these are generally shared by several family members. A kitchen may be located at the back of the house, near the garden. Water is drawn from wells, and chores such as washing and cooking are performed outside.

In cities, stand-alone dwellings are rare. Most people live in apartment blocks, many of which date back to the colonial era. Also common are shop houses, which have a family-run shop on the ground floor and living quarters on upper floors. As Vietnam's middle class grows, many people save for apartments in modern buildings or leave the congested cities for new residential developments on the outskirts.

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.

Life Cycle

Many Vietnamese base decisions on traditional astrology. For example, certain years are considered more auspicious than others, and a couple planning to have children may try to have them in years compatible with those of the parents. Agent Orange (a chemical defoliant used by the U.S. military during the Vietnam War) is believed to be responsible for high instances of genetic defects, so the birth of a healthy baby is considered an event of enormous good fortune, particularly if the child's horoscope is favorable. The birth of a child is welcomed as an assurance of the continuation of a family line.

As with other important events, the time of a funeral is chosen on the recommendation of an astrologer. Family and friends of the deceased walk together in a funeral procession to the gravesite, where the body is buried in a coffin. The family visits the grave several times during the weeks that follow and on the anniversaries of the person's death.

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 favorite sports in cities. Martial arts such as *tae kwon do* and *wushu* are popular among young men and women. 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 may play a traditional form of chess in their leisure time. Karaoke is a popular form of entertainment, especially for groups of young people. 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 vong co* (a modified guitar), *dan tranh* (a multiple-stringed instrument), and *dan bau* (a single-stringed instrument).

Vietnam is famous for decorative woodwork, sometimes inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Other significant arts are weaving, wood-block printing, and mosaics. 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.), Liberation Day (30 Apr., commemorating the 1975 defeat of South Vietnam), Labor Day (1 May), and National Day (2 Sept., the day Ho Chi Minh declared independence).

SOCIETY

Government

Vietnam is a communist state headed by a president (currently Nguyen Minh Triet), a prime minister (currently Nguyen Tan Dung), 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 Communist Party's secretary-general (Nong Duc Manh) wields enormous influence. The National Assembly (*Quoc-Hoi*) has 493 seats. All candidates are elected by popular vote and screened and approved by the CPV. The president is elected by the National Assembly, and the prime minister is appointed by the president. The voting age is 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. The 2008 global economic crisis led to a sharp

decline in foreign investment and demand for Vietnam's exports.

Many urban Vietnamese desire to work in business or trade, so many small shops have opened 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 to sell their produce.

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 hinder greater economic progress. Implementation of these programs to improve Vietnam's bureaucracy, education, and health 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. Mobile phones are common. The press is controlled by the government. In 2009, numerous pro-reform reporters were arrested and new restrictions were placed on reporting and sharing information online. Access to foreign satellite television stations is restricted; most people only have access to a government-run station. While most public internet use is permitted, the government restricts access to some sites.

Education

Primary education begins at age five and is free for the first six years, though families must pay for books, uniforms, and supplies. In some areas, school facilities cannot adequately handle all children, so students attend on a half-day basis. The school week is Monday through Saturday. All children are encouraged to finish high school. The drop-out rate is increasing as families are unable to afford to send their children to school and 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 portion 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

Contact Information

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POPULATION & AREA

Population	89,571,130 (rank=13)
Area, sq. mi.	127,881 (rank=66)
Area, sq. km.	331,210

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	113 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	58 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$2,900
Adult literacy rate	94% (male); 87% (female)
Infant mortality rate	22 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	70 (male); 75 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

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