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Tips for a Tourist in Vietnam

Travelling in a foreign country, especially one completely different from one's own, can be both a rewarding and bewildering experience even for the most seasoned of tourists. A country as off-beat as Vietnam is bound to be no exception to this rule. Tourism in this Southeast Asian nation is very much in its infancy with the country receiving fewer than 3000 Western tourists annually, mainly from Japan and France. Despite the fact that guided tours coordinated by the state-run Vietnamtourism are the only way for Western tourists to visit the country, delays, abrupt itinerary changes, substandard facilities and service are all to be expected by tourists. A few tips, however, can make the difference between a trip to Vietnam being a grueling marathon of frustration and one that is the experience of a lifetime.

Although the Americans suffered a huge military debacle in Vietnam, their currency still reigns supreme. Tourists should take plenty of American dollars with them, preferably in small bills, and American change can also often come in handy. Greenbacks are indispensable for paying all bills and making purchases at hard currency shops. On the other hand travellers cheques and credit cards cannot be used in Vietnam, so it is advisable to leave them at home.

Tourists wanting to exchange American dollars into dong, the Vietnamese currency, should do so at their hotel. Tourist hotel exchange rates are much better than those offered by the central bank and are an alternative to the risks of black market exchange.

As to what there is for tourists to purchase in Vietnam, this is a question of individual taste. By Western standards Vietnamese goods are of very poor quality and this even reflects itself in products made

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for the tourist market. Paintings, lacquerware and ivory items are all available, but selection and style are limited. As for Western goods, little of foreign manufacture is available, even in hard currency stores. This goes especially for toiletries, medication and photographic supplies. And while the range of goods available on the black market is surprising, particularly in the South, selection is at best haphazard and tourists will definitely pay high prices, even by Western standards. Thus, a rule of thumb when travelling in Vietnam is, if in doubt, bring it with you.

One thing tourists will certainly realize even before their arrival is that Vietnam is not a destination for travellers on the cheap. Costs including airfare from Bangkok can run well above \$150 U.S. per day and, for what a tourist is getting relative to other Southeast Asian destinations, Vietnam is not much of a bargain either. Accommodations are generally spartan although most tourist hotel rooms now have private bath or shower and effective air-conditioning. Still, poor maintenance and design have caused many hotels to fall into disrepair. Certain features of a normal hotel room such as electricity and hot water are only sporadic luxuries, while others such as soap, towels and toilet paper are best brought into the country as part of a tourist's luggage.

Food too may present some problems for a Western tourist, especially in the North where meals often leave much to be desired. If one is desperate for a good meal, asking a Vietnamtourism guide for the name of a private restaurant and going there is usually the only solution.

With all the difficulties and hardship one has to endure while touring in Vietnam, something that will come as a pleasant surprise is the freedom of movement a foreigner enjoys. Within reason tourists can

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can go anywhere they like whenever they like and are free to rearrange their tour itineraries as they wish. Visas can be extended and side trips to Cambodia undertaken, both with a minimum of prior arrangement.