



## Volunteer Handbook for Vietnam

Xin Chao!

Welcome to our Volunteer Handbook for Vietnam.

While no person or book or website can give a new traveler to Vietnam a full understanding of its culture, we believe that this Handbook will go a long way in preparing you for your trip and the living experience there.

We have spent years revising this Handbook, based on the experiences of our volunteers and staff who have spent significant time in Vietnam. They have all have contributed their unique insights and advice to the information in this Handbook.

Although there is some overlap, our Handbook to Vietnam does not try to duplicate all of the general travel information you will find in published guide books such as the **Rough Handbook to Vietnam** and **Lonely Planet Vietnam**.

Our main focus in the Handbook to Vietnam is on travel information that is specifically relevant to a volunteer like yourself who will serve others in Vietnam and become a member of the local community.

We encourage you to share the Handbook to Vietnam with your family and friends and anyone else interested in your trip to Vietnam. We also strongly recommend taking a copy with you on your trip.

As always, if you have any questions about the Handbook to Vietnam or any other issues or concerns, please get in touch with us.

Regards,

Scott Burke  
Founder & Director  
Cosmic Volunteers  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania USA

## **BEFORE YOU GO**

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### **1. Entry Requirements for Vietnam**

In order to enter Vietnam, you must have a valid passport, departure tickets, and a visa.

#### **Passport**

Must be valid for at least the next six months.

#### **Tickets for your departure from Vietnam**

Vietnam's Immigration Department has the right to ask you at the airport to show copies of either your return flight home or tickets for land travel if you are leaving Vietnam by land. However, we have never heard of a case where they did ask. If they do ask and you only have a one-way ticket, simply tell them that you will be taking a bus ride to Cambodia then flying from Cambodia back home.

#### **Visa**

You must have a Vietnam visa in order to enter Vietnam, whether arriving by air or land. You can obtain the visa either: 1) upon arrival in Vietnam, or 2) from a Vietnamese embassy.

#### Visa Upon Arrival

Simply send us a scan of your passport ID pages and a 1-2 day window of when you will arrive (ie February 20-21, 2011). Our Coordinator in Ho Chi Minh City will then obtain your "tourist" visa from Vietnam Immigration, then email you a visa document which you would print and present to Immigration officials upon arrival at the airport in Ho Chi Minh. Immigration will then stamp your passports accordingly. After you get settled in the first few days, you would reimburse our Coordinator for the visa fee and get a receipt from them.

#### Visa from a Vietnamese Embassy

You can either visit a Vietnamese embassy in person or send them the visa materials (including passport) by mail/post. You must submit the following visa materials: Passport valid for at least the next 6 months, Visa application form, 1 passport-size photograph, and Visa fee by money order (US\$25). On the visa application form, the Purpose of Visit should be "Tourism", and your Contact person in Vietnam will be sent to you by Cosmic by email.

Visit this web page for visa application form and instructions: [www.vietnamembassy-usa.org](http://www.vietnamembassy-usa.org)

## 2. Health Preparation

We strongly recommend that you **visit a travel doctor** at least two months before you arrive in Vietnam for information about immunizations and advice on how to stay healthy there.

We also strongly recommend that you obtain a **travel insurance** policy that will cover any medical costs you might have in Vietnam. Cosmic's staff uses Multinational Underwriters ([www.mnui.com](http://www.mnui.com)) for travel insurance policies. Cosmic Volunteers does not provide health insurance to participants.

For **vaccinations**, Vietnam does not require any vaccinations for entry into Vietnam. Cosmic Volunteers follows the current vaccination recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) which are listed on their website at [wwwn.cdc.gov/travel/destinationVietnam.aspx](http://wwwn.cdc.gov/travel/destinationVietnam.aspx)

If you take **prescription medicines**, make sure you have enough to last during your trip. Keep them in their original prescription bottles and always in your carry-on luggage.

For **comprehensive health information** for travelers to Vietnam, visit the CDC's website at [wwwn.cdc.gov/travel/destinationVietnam.aspx](http://wwwn.cdc.gov/travel/destinationVietnam.aspx)

## 3. Register Your Trip with your Home Government

An optional but highly recommended pre-trip step is to register your travel plans to Vietnam with your home country's government. Doing this can be helpful if you lose your passport in Vietnam or if there is a country-wide emergency and you need your embassy's help. You can register with your respective government online at the following websites:

USA Citizens: <https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibrs/ui>

UK Citizens: <http://www.britishhighcommission.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1089125546964>

Canadian Citizens: <http://www.voyage.gc.ca/main/sos/rocapage-en.asp>

Australian Citizens: <https://www.orao.dfat.gov.au/orao/weborao.nsf/homepage?Openpage>

#### 4. Power-of-Attorney

Another optional but recommended pre-trip step is to consider creating a Power-of-Attorney document (POA) which lets you appoint someone at home to manage important financial and legal matters on your behalf while you are in Vietnam. This is a particularly smart thing to do if you will be staying in Vietnam for an extended period of time, say at least one month. You can create a custom POA document for \$35 USD online with Legal Zoom, which Cosmic staff uses for its POA documents while traveling. Legal Zoom's website is <http://www.legalzoom.com/power-of-attorney/power-of-attorney-overview.html>. Keep in mind that, after Legal Zoom mails you the POA, you must get the document notarized by a notary public before the document can take effect.

#### 5. Photocopy Important Documents

Before you leave home, make two sets of photocopies of all important documents. Put one set of copies in your checked luggage, and leave a set of copies at home with your family/friends. Keep your original documents in your carry-on bag while you are traveling to Vietnam.

##### Documents to Photocopy:

- Passport ID page
- Vietnam Visa
- Plane Ticket
- Contact information of Vietnam Coordinator\*
- Contact Information for Cosmic in USA\*
- Contact Information for family/friends at home
- Travel Insurance Policy
- Credit card(s)
- Travelers Checks (if you have them)
- Power-of-Attorney (if you have one)

\* We will send you this information by email before you leave for your trip.

## 6. Contact Information

Before you leave home, we will send you the mobile numbers of your Coordinators in Vietnam and the US. **They will be your 24 hour contacts during your program.** Please carry their contact numbers on your person (not your bags) while en-route to and in Vietnam.

If your flight(s) to Vietnam is delayed for any reason, please first call your Vietnam Coordinator 24 hours to let them know of the delay. If you cannot reach him/her for whatever reason, please call your US Coordinator 24 hours.

For non-emergencies, please contact us at our regular office phone at 1-215-609-4196 or by email at [team@cosmicvolunteers.org](mailto:team@cosmicvolunteers.org). Our office hours are Monday-Friday from 9am to 5pm EST. We monitor emails and voice mails on weekday evenings and weekends.

## 7. What to Pack

### Carry-On Bag

- Passport
- Plane Ticket
- Contact information of Vietnam Coordinator
- Contact Information for Cosmic's office in USA
- Contact Information for home (family, friends)
- Travel Insurance Policy
- Cash (at least \$100 USD or equivalent)
- Credit card(s)
- Travelers Checks (if you have them)
- Any prescription medicine
- Any electronic equipment (laptops, mobile phone, camera, mp3 player)
- Toiletries (Toothbrush/paste, contact lens solution & case, feminine products)
- Reading materials
- Pen(s)

Tip 1: During air travel, some travelers prefer putting their passport, cash, credit cards etc. in a money pouch that is concealed under their clothes for security. We've found that it's just as safe and convenient to put your cash and credit cards in a front pants pocket, and keep your passport in a front shirt pocket.

Tip 2: While in Vietnam, we always keep our passports in a sealable plastic baggie (the kind used for sandwiches). This protects the passport from moisture in the hot climate where your passport can become soggy, especially if it's in your pocket while you're traveling around the country.

### **Checked Baggage**

Don't overdo it. pack lightly so you can travel more easily and store your bag in small places. Think in terms of a backpack, duffel bag, or moderate-sized suitcase and a day pack. Because the climate is generally hot, you can often wash clothes out and dry them overnight. Bring lots of lightweight clothes. For men and women, it is better to dress conservatively.

#### Clothing:

- 5-6 pairs khaki pants (or jeans but jeans can be hot)
- 1-2 pairs shorts (for around the house and sports)
- 5-7 short-sleeved tops/t-shirts
- 1-2 long-sleeved shirts/tops
- Undergarments
- Women may want to bring a longer skirts instead of shorts and short dresses since it is more respectful of the culture
- Sturdy sneakers or shoes
- Sandals or flip-flops
- Cotton socks
- Sleepwear
- Light jacket or windbreaker
- A nice outfit for special occasions

#### Health and Hygiene:

- Handiwipes and anti-bacterial hand lotion
- Over-the-counter medications for pain relief, fever, diarrhea
- Insect repellent with DEET
- Sunscreen (stronger-the-better)
- Vitamins
- Toiletries (soap, shampoo)

Miscellaneous:

- Notebooks, pens, paper
- Glasses, contacts/solution - and bring a copy of your prescription
- Small travel pack/day pack
- Lightweight, quick-dry towel

**8. Donations and Gifts**

We are often asked by volunteers about this topic. We have a detailed article on the subject on our website ([http://www.cosmicvolunteers.org/articles\\_donations.html](http://www.cosmicvolunteers.org/articles_donations.html)). It's based originally on my experiences in Vietnam over the years, but it applies to so many other countries that I wanted to post something for future volunteers. Basically, I am not a fan of bringing items from home – I've found it's better to buy any items in the host country. I can't tell you how many orphanages, schools, and AIDS organizations I've visited around the world that had rooms full of donated stuff they couldn't use – cold-weather clothes, expired medicines, books the kids didn't understand or found boring because of cultural difference, etc.

**9. Accommodations in Vietnam**

Because there are no homestays in our programs in Vietnam, volunteers stay at hotels or guesthouses. Most volunteers and other travelers stay at hotels in District 1 of Ho Chi Minh City. There are hundreds and hundreds to choose from, which can get quite overwhelming. The budget hotels range in price from \$8-\$25 per night, and even the cheapest have air conditioning and WIFI and are quite clean and safe. If you wish, we can reserve a room at one of the hotels for your first night. Then if you want to stay there, you are more than welcome to do so. If not, our Coordinator can show you around to see various options. You can also book your hotel from home. However we do not recommend this, because it is so difficult from the websites to see what you're getting. The hotels often look nothing like the website photos!

**10. Meals in Vietnam**

Your program fee covers meals the first 24 hours in Vietnam. After that, volunteers eat at restaurants. The food is very inexpensive and is typical Vietnamese food with soups with noodles, vegetables, chicken, fruits etc. For example, a typical lunch there is rice-noodle soup with chicken and vegetables ("pho ga") which is \$1-2 at local shops. Most people eat meat here, but there are choices for vegetarians such as western-style restaurants and local shops that have rice, noodles, beans and vegetables. The street food is quite safe to eat and very tasty. You will get the most out of the food experience if you can go with a local person, whether our Coordinator or a new friend.

## ARRIVING IN VIETNAM

This section describes the normal schedule and activities for volunteers during their first several days in Vietnam. The major points will include the airport arrival, travel to the volunteer location, and introduction to the culture, host family, and volunteer work.

Your actual schedule might vary from what is described below, depending on your arrival day and time as well as your volunteer location. Before you leave home, we will send you by email a detailed itinerary that covers your first 3-4 days in Vietnam. Note that because most flights into Vietnam arrive in the evening/night, you will most likely spend the first night in Ho Chi Minh in a hotel, then travel to your host family and volunteer location the next day.

### **Arriving at the Airport in Ho Chi Minh**

- When your plane lands in Ho Chi Minh, you will be directed to the **Immigration counters**. Have your passport and disembarkation card ready (you receive the card during the flight). The immigration officer might ask basic questions such as “How long are you staying in Vietnam?” or “Is this your first time to Vietnam?”.
- After the Immigration officer stamps your passport, walk to **baggage claim**.
- We strongly recommend that you **exchange currency** at the currency counter in the baggage claim area. Exchange at least US\$50 or equivalent for Vietnam Rupees. (It is always a good idea to walk out of the airport in any country with some local currency on you.)
- Grab your luggage, then walk through the **Customs** lines and towards the exit doors.
- Before you exit the airport, the staff may ask you to show your **luggage tags** given to you by the airport check-in staff before you boarded your flight.
- When you walk through the airport’s **exit doors**, look for our Program Coordinator who will be holding a sign with your name on it.
- There are usually **big crowds** waiting outside the airport exit door. The scene can look chaotic and intimidating. Try to look calm (even if you’re not) and smile and scan the crowd for our Program Coordinator holding your name sign.
- You and our Program Coordinator will take a taxi to **leave the airport**. At this point, please **contact someone back home** to let them know that you arrived in Vietnam safely. Your Program Coordinator will offer their mobile phone for a brief call or text message.
- The Program Coordinator will take from the airport to a hotel in Ho Chi Minh for the first night
- During your first few days, your Coordinator will take you to regular meals at restaurants, all included in your program fee.



**If You Do Not Find Our Program Coordinator**

If there is an extremely unusual situation in which you do not meet your Program Coordinator in **Ho Chi Minh** (such as a major flight delay): Call your Program Coordinator in **Ho Chi Minh** on their mobile (Ask airport staff how to make a call; they speak English).

If you cannot reach the Program Coordinator in Ho Chi Minh, call Cosmic Volunteers' Coordinator in the US 24 hours, Scott Burke. He will have another Coordinator in Ho Chi Minh meet you at the airport.

Alternatively, if you do not meet your Program Coordinator in **Ho Chi Minh**, you can take a taxi to a hotel by yourself, then call us when you can to meet you there. In this situation, exit the airport and hire a taxi to take you to the Orient Hotel. Address: 274-276 De Tham St, Saigon. Location: Pham Ngu Lao Ward, District 1. Tel: 08/920-3993. Use only a taxi that has a meter. The cost from the airport to the hotel should be about 200,000 Vietnamese Dong (\$10 USD). A basic room should cost around \$20 USD (400,000 Dong). Check-in to the hotel, then asked the staff how you can call your Program Coordinator. Cosmic will reimburse you for the taxi, hotel, and meals. The hotel is approximately 30 minutes from airport.

## YOUR FIRST DAYS IN VIETNAM

### Introduction to Vietnam

After your first night in Ho Chi Minh, your Program Coordinator will pick you up in the morning for your all-day introduction to Vietnam. This initial experience will be more informal and hands-on, with the Program Coordinator taking you around town to see life on the streets. This normally includes visits to local markets, cultural sites, and museums. They will also go over the major points about your stay such as staying healthy, street smarts, living with your host family, the volunteer work, contact information, etc. We also recommend that you take care of any practical errands such as:

- Buying a mobile phone / SIM card / phone credit
- Exchanging money / travelers checks
- Using an ATM machine
- Buying electrical adapters
- Buy any toiletries

If you did not previously **book your accommodations for the duration of your stay**, your Coordinator will be happy to show you various hotel options during the day. (see previous section on accommodations)

At the end of the day, your Program Coordinator will drop you off at your hotel. You will have the remainder of the evening to walk around your hotel's neighborhood or simply rest for the night.

Starting with your taxi ride from the airport, your road travel in Vietnam can really provide you with an unparalleled insight into the people, the sights, sounds, and smells(!) of Vietnam – all from the relatively insulated environment of a taxi or bus seat. So watch, listen, smile, ask questions, listen (to the endless car horns!), and just try to soak it in. As Verge Magazine says (Winter 2008): "Fifteen minutes on a bus usually teaches you more about a country's social, political, and economic conditions than three hours studying a guidebook."

## Introduction to Volunteer Work

On your second full day in Ho Chi Minh, your Program Coordinator will pick you up at your hotel and accompany you to your shelter for introductions with the children and the Director and a tour of the facility. Depending on your specific schedule, you should be able to begin your volunteer work today, such as playing with the children.

## Jet Lag

Flying across multiple time zones disrupts your body's circadian rhythm, leading to sleep problems and other symptoms which fall under the condition known as "jet lag."

Symptoms often include insomnia, waking early, excessive sleepiness, headaches, irritability, digestive problems like constipation or diarrhea, muscle aches, and difficulty concentrating. Younger travelers and female travelers are more susceptible to jet lag, while some travelers are not affected much.

As a general guideline, the recovery rate from jet lag is one day per time zone traveled. So if you live in New York (nine hours behind Vietnam), it could take you as long as nine days to fully recover from the jet lag.

To recover from jet lag:

- Drink plenty of water before, during and after your flight
- Try to sleep on the plane if it's nighttime in Vietnam
- Adjust to the local day/night schedule immediately
- Try not to sleep until nighttime in Vietnam, no matter how tired you are
- Exercise daily (during daylight hours, especially early morning)
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol

## WHILE IN VIETNAM

This covers the major things you will have to deal with as a volunteer in Vietnam, generally in the order in which you first encounter them:

### **The Heat**

Vietnam might not be the hottest and most humid place on earth, but it certainly feels like it most days. You will get your first blast of it as you walk through the airport's exit doors. During your stay you will likely sweat more than you ever have in your life. The heat and humidity will cling to you, annoy you, and make you look forward to your air conditioned room at the end of the day. Do not forget the sun either. We are closer to the equator here, so the sunburns can be severe. Even if you do not want to use a heavy SPF, at the very least use a face lotion that has 15+ SPF.

### **The Traffic**

Along with the heat, you will likely never forget the traffic in Vietnam. Specifically, the hundreds of thousands of motorbikes on the roads daily. They are noisy and smelly, clogging up every inch of the road and sometimes even riding on the sidewalks. Throw in the taxis, trucks, passenger cars and pedestrians, and you will see why the congested roads of Ho Chi Minh City have become legendary. Ho Chi Minh's streets are very dangerous in terms of traffic safety, due to the sometimes careless driving combined with lack of enforcement of traffic laws. You will get your first glimpse as soon as you exit the airport with our Coordinator in a taxi. YouTube has lots of videos posted of the traffic, so take a look.

Horns: There is almost constant horn-blowing here by vehicles. However unlike back home, people here are not honking out of anger/aggression but are merely giving courtesy honks so that others are aware of them and do not get injured.

### **Toilets**

Hotels, restaurants and most homes have western "sit" toilets. But the tricky part happens after you do your business. Many places (even hotels) do not have toilet tissue – so buy a small roll upon arrival in Vietnam and carry it with you everywhere. Next, the used toilet tissue actually gets placed in the trash can, not in the toilet bowl. Gross yes, but that's the way it's done here, because the pipes cannot handle it. Alternatively, if you really want to be a local, you will forgo the toilet tissue altogether and use water to clean up – from the spigot/hose located next to the toilet. Finally, if you are in a rural area or stop at a petrol station, expect a to find a squat toilet that has the worst smell imaginable.

### How to Cross the Street in Vietnam

To a first-time visitor to Vietnam, crossing the street can be an intimidating and frightful endeavor. There are traffic lights at major intersections, however even with the lights, drivers often ignore the signals and will even drive motorbikes on sidewalks as mentioned above. The good news is that most vehicles travel slowly, and vehicles and pedestrians all move together in a seemingly synchronized flow. Everyone displays typical Vietnamese courtesy with very few displays of anger or any confrontations.

The most important thing to keep in mind when crossing the street in Vietnam:

Walk slowly and do not make any sudden movements!

- **Never run across the street or dart through traffic.**
- Start walking slowly and maintain your pace – vehicles will weave around you.
- Even if there is a traffic light, you will rarely find a “perfect time” to cross.
- You will sometimes only be able to cross one half of the street, then have to wait in the middle of the street before you have an opening to finish your crossing.
- Spend a few minutes watching how locals cross the street, to see how it is done.
- Try to maintain eye contact with vehicle drivers, to make sure they see you.
- There are “tourist police” in green uniforms and blue caps who assist tourists with crossing the street, getting directions etc. Large hotels have the same service.

Keep in mind too when walking that there are uneven and pot-holed surfaces everywhere, from sidewalks to roads to shop entrances – so be very careful.

### Water

Drink only bottled water, never tap water. You can find bottled water everywhere. A 1.5 liter bottle is about 8,000 Dong (\$.50). A good idea is to buy a large 5+ liter jug of water for your room, then fill smaller bottles to take with you during the day. You can buy the large jugs for about 10,000 Dong (\$.60). It saves you money and you'll use fewer plastic bottles.

### District 1

Most foreigners stay in District 1, about 30 minutes from the airport. There are a dizzying number of hotels, restaurants, markets (indoor and outdoor) and shops that cater to foreigners and locals alike. The presence of tourists has created a small army of pushy vendors walking around selling their goods or others simply begging for money. You'll quickly become familiar with the sunglasses guys, motorbike taxi guys (blue shirts mostly), girls carrying books to sell, and the bars and restaurants that have staff permanently on the sidewalk to lure you in. The good part of District 1 is that it is so vibrant and you will find many shops and hotels who speak decent English. The bad part is that many visitors – especially volunteers – find the tourist area a bit tiresome after a while.

### Hotels

- All hotels hold guests' passports during their entire stay.
- Ask for a room as high as possible – to get quiet from traffic below.
- Ask for a room away from the main street – again for quiet.
- Bring a laptop – even the cheapest hotels have free WIFI.
- The front desk can always help you arrange day/weekend tours.

- Small family-run hotels are great places to get to know locals.

### **Mobile Phones**

We **urge** you to have a mobile phone in Vietnam. This can be an “unlocked” phone you bring from home or a phone you purchase in Vietnam. It makes it easier for you to stay in touch with your local coordinator and Cosmic staff in the US, both for safety reasons and logistical considerations (in case you get lost).

Best thing to do: buy a new phone in Vietnam for \$25. Then you buy phone credits (“units”) from street vendors and phone shops. Note that incoming calls are free – including incoming international calls.

Our Coordinator in Vietnam has a handful of phones that we regularly lend to volunteers for free during their stays, depending on the number of volunteers we have here at any given moment.

### **Shelters**

In a typical shelter in Ho Chi Minh City, there are 20+ girls (or boys, as they try to separate by gender), ranging in age from 4-17. Some are truly orphans, while some have been abused by parents and/or have parents who are so poor that they cannot even feed them. The children go to regular schools during the day outside the shelters, but at varying intervals so there are always girls at the shelter.

There are also shelters located inside maternity hospitals in HCMC that have 100+ children. Both within and outside Ho Chi Minh, there are also huge orphanages run by Buddhist monks that house nearly 200 children.

The volunteer work at each shelter varies a bit but basically involves helping them with homework, practicing their verbal English, playing games, arts and crafts, sharing any special talents/skills you have, and generally giving them as much caring and love as you can.

Some advice when you are at the shelters:

- It is fine to bring items to the orphanage such as crayons, notebooks etc but please ask us first so we can let you know the needs of your specific shelter.
- When in doubt as to what to do: Smile and say hello to the first kids you see!!
- Do not talk about the childrens' background unless they do so first.
- Be patient as the older children practice their English.
- Always take off your shoes when entering the building.
- Many of the shelter buildings are surprisingly in very good shape.
- Not that political talk comes up much, but keep in mind that many of the shelters are run by the government and locals can be touchy about any political criticism.

### **Taxis**

You will likely take taxis a lot, especially for your commute from your hotel to the shelters each workday. They all use meters and are air-conditioned. Our favorite taxi company is Vinasun but they are all mostly the same. Just put your hand out and you'll have a taxi pull up in moments.

Great Tip for taxi travel:

Many of the taxi drivers speak limited English. So, a great tip is to collect business cards of the places you go often, such as your hotel and the shelter, and show them to the driver.

Alternatively, if you have a camera or smart-phone, snap a photo of the building's name / address and show those photos to the drivers.

### **Staying Healthy and Safe**

#### Hospitals and Clinics in Ho Chi Minh City

##### CENTRE MEDICAL INTERNATIONAL

Address: 1 Han Thuyen Street, District 1

Tel (24 hr): (08) 3827-2366

Fax: (08) 3827-2365

Website: [www.cmi-vietnam.com](http://www.cmi-vietnam.com)

##### CHO RAY HOSPITAL

Address: 201 B Nguyen Chi Thanh St., District 5

Tel (24 hr): (848) 3855-4137

Fax: (848) 3855-7267

E-mail: [bvchoray@hcm.vnn.vn](mailto:bvchoray@hcm.vnn.vn)

Website: [www.choray.org.vn/trangchu\\_eng.asp](http://www.choray.org.vn/trangchu_eng.asp)

Cho Ray Hospital is the largest hospital in Ho Chi Minh City.

**COLUMBIA ASIA INTERNATIONAL CLINIC**

Address: 08 Alexandre de Rhodes, Dist.1, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Tel (24 hr): 848 3 8238455 / Fax: 848 3 8238454

E-mail : [saigonclinic@columbiaasia.com](mailto:saigonclinic@columbiaasia.com)

Website: [www.columbiaasia.com](http://www.columbiaasia.com)

The top causes of injury and death for travelers abroad are road accidents and drowning. This comes as a surprise to many, because the media tends to focus on terrorism, political strife, and infectious diseases as the most likely dangers for travelers abroad.

If you become ill or injured in Vietnam, please seek medical treatment immediately. Then as soon as possible, inform your host family and local Program Coordinator. They will contact our staff in the US so that we can assist in any way we can, such as notifying your family back home.

There are both government and private health facilities near all of our volunteer areas, with emergency and outpatient care available. There are also pharmacies (“drugstores”) throughout the country where you can buy medications. A doctor’s prescription is often required.

The three areas you need to focus on daily for staying healthy and safe in Vietnam are:

- **Food and Water**
- **Avoid Insect Bites**
- **Avoid Injuries**

### Food and Water

Traveler’s Diarrhea is the most common illness suffered by travelers to Vietnam. It’s usually caused by bacteria in the food or water you consume, and usually occurs within the first week of travel. You must be extra cautious about food and water.

Some very important tips:

- Do not drink tap water at any time in Vietnam
- Do not consume ice cubes
- Drink only bottled water, boiled water, or carbonated drinks in bottles/cans
- Wash your hands often with soap and water
- Avoid restaurants that look dirty
- Avoid food from street vendors
- Avoid raw fruits and vegetables unless you peel them
- Brush your teeth using only bottled water
- Stay hydrated (see “Hot Climate”)

### Avoid Insect Bites

You must avoid insect bites in Vietnam because you are at risk for illnesses such as malaria and dengue fever. Malaria is transmitted to humans by the bite of an infected female Anopheles mosquito. The first symptoms of malaria are normally fever, chills, sweats, headaches, muscle



pains, nausea and vomiting (For a definitive diagnosis, you must have a lab test). The peak biting period for malaria is dusk and dawn.

To prevent insect bites:

- Stay indoors at dawn and dusk as much as possible
- When you are outside at night, wear long sleeves and long pants
- For sleeping, wear long sleeves and long pajama bottoms
- Use an insect repellent with 30%-50% DEET

### Avoid Injuries

- As a **pedestrian**, you must be very cautious, especially at night:
  - Vehicles always have the right of way
  - Assume that vehicles will not stop for you
  - There are sometimes no sidewalks
  - Some streets have open sewers on each side, so be careful
  - Due to lack of lighting, try to stay out of the road at night as much as possible since drivers might not see you
  - Jogging can be very dangerous due to traffic and uneven surfaces
  -
- As a passenger in any vehicle:
  - Do not travel in vehicles late at night
  - Never sit in the front seat or top of any bus or taxi
  - Wear seat belts when possible
  - Do not take private, unlicensed taxis or cars
  - Try to avoid riding on any motorcycles, either as driver or passenger
- If you take a trip to a beach area or river: We strongly recommend that you **do not go swimming**. The rip currents in the ocean are very dangerous, even for the best swimmers.
- Do not have contact with **animals**. You could get rabies, insect bites, and skin rash/infections, etc.

## Personal Greetings

Greetings in Vietnam are an important aspect of life there. People mostly shake hands both when greeting and saying goodbye. They shake with both hands and usually bow their head slightly as a sign of respect. For the elderly, if they do not extend their hand, then bow slightly to them instead. Vietnamese women are more inclined to bow their head slightly than to shake hands.

To say “hello” in Vietnamese, the word is “xin chao” (seen chow), followed by the other person’s name then title. Chances are that you will pronounce the word incorrectly, but the Vietnamese person(s) will be thrilled that you gave it a try.

## Face

As a visitor to Vietnam (and any other Asian country), you should be familiar with the concept of “face” which is extremely important in their culture. “Face” refers to a person (or company) maintaining a good image, via their reputation, prestige, and dignity. A person can lose face, save face or give face to another person. As a short-term visitor to Vietnam, you will not become an expert on face, but you can successfully handle the concept simply by treating all people with respect and courtesy and not causing public embarrassment of anyone.

Examples of face:

- Arguing loudly with an airline ticketing agent will cause them to lose face
- Complimenting your dinner host will give the host face
- Dressing sloppily and walking into an important meeting will lose face for you

## Dress Code

When you are in Vietnam, you should observe a conservative dress code, so that you do not give offense or draw unwanted attention. For women, this means that you should not wear short-shorts or have cleavage, especially at the shelters. Flip-flops are fine everywhere, and they are easy to kick off as you enter buildings.

## Learn some basics about Vietnam before you arrive

- Vietnam’s Prime Minister is Nguyễn Tấn Dũng (2006 – )
- Population is 87 million
- Life expectancy is 70 years
- Vietnam War: 1959-1975 betw. North Vietnam and US-supported South Vietnam

## General Etiquette

- Vietnamese are very conservative and prefer order and politeness
- Modesty and humility are emphasized in the culture
- Many customs are rooted in Confucian respect for education, family and elders
- Never lose your temper in public

- Evasion and inaccuracy are preferred in order to keep appearances pleasant
- Breaking a promise is a very serious matter
- Avoid public displays of affection with a member of the opposite sex.
- Only the elderly normally touch a child's head.
- White skin is considered beautiful; a sun tan identifies you as a peasant.
- Pass and receive items with both hands (i.e. business cards, plates)
- Do not point with your finger - use your hand.
- Do not stand with your hands on your hips.
- Do not cross your arms on your chest.
- Do not pass anything over someone's head.
- Do not touch anyone on the shoulder.
- Do not touch a member of the opposite sex.

### **Table Manners**

- Everyone eats with chopsticks (so you might want to practice at home)
- Wait to be shown where to sit.
- Older people are usually seated first.
- Pass dishes with both hands.
- The most common utensils are chopsticks and a flat spoon.
- People hold bowls close to their faces.
- Hold the spoon in your left hand while eating soup.
- Meals are typically served family-style.
- Try to finish everything on your plate.
- Do not refuse an offer of tea.
- Cover your mouth when using a toothpick.
- If you are invited to a Vietnamese home:
  - Always bring a gift: fruit, sweets, flowers, fruit, or incense.
  - Gifts should be wrapped in colorful paper.
  - Do not give handkerchiefs, anything black, yellow flowers or chrysanthemums.

## Chopsticks Etiquette

Learn how to use chopsticks before you arrive in Vietnam!!

- Use chopsticks to push rice into your mouth, holding the rice bowl to your mouth
- Use chopsticks to pick up rice in plates, such as fried rice
- Always use two chopsticks at once, even when using them for stirring.
- Do not eat directly from the community bowl
- Place food into your own bowl, then into your mouth
- Do not use chopsticks to point
- Do not spear food with chopsticks
- Do not play with chopsticks (i.e. putting them in your mouth when not eating)
- When not using chopsticks, place them on the table or a chopstick rest
- When you are finished eating, rest your chopsticks on top of your rice bowl.
- Never place chopsticks in a "V" shape when done eating (it's a bad omen.)
- Do not leave chopsticks standing vertically in a bowl of rice or other food

## Money

The **Dong** is the legal currency of Vietnam. The exchange rate is 1 USD = 18,900 Dong..

Vietnam is overwhelmingly a cash-based society. Very few merchants anywhere in the country accept credit cards. So **expect to pay cash for everything**.

First, we recommend that you **bring from home at least \$100 USD** (or equivalent currency) in cash. Do not bring bills larger than \$20, because money exchangers might consider them to be counterfeit (there's only a small chance of this, but it's one less hassle you can easily avoid).

While in Vietnam, the best way to get cash is to use an **ATM machine**. ATM's dispense money in Vietnamese Dong. There are ATM's in most towns even in rural areas.

If you need **fast cash from home**, your family can send you instant cash using services like Moneygram ([www.moneygram.com](http://www.moneygram.com)) or Western Union ([www.westernunion.com](http://www.westernunion.com)), with Moneygram by far the cheaper option. If you do not need the money in a timely manner, have your family make a deposit at your bank account back home, then you can withdraw the money in cash using your ATM card.

For **daily spending money** during your trip, count on spending \$5-\$10 per day (excluding your hotel costs). The actual amount can vary considerably, depending on factors such as:

- Your daily commuting costs between your host family and volunteers job
- How many meals / snacks you buy
- Whether you buy / use a mobile phone
- Extra sightseeing you choose to do
- Shopping for clothes, toiletries, souvenirs

You can **exchange your cash** for Dong at the airport, as well as at banks and private money-changers on the street. Ask your Program Coordinator to find a bank or a reputable private money-changer.

We do not recommend **travelers checks** because it can be very difficult to find banks where you can cash them, and the process is often time-consuming. Instead, Visa has a prepaid card that acts as an ATM card and debit card, but is not tied to any bank account. You should also bring at least one **credit card** to use for emergencies, such as cash advances.

## Hot Climate

Ho Chi Minh is very hot and humid year-round. Temperatures average about 90 F (30 C) in Ho Chi Minh. You must take care on a daily basis to stay hydrated and avoid the sun as much as possible. If you become severely dehydrated, you might need to take oral re-hydration salts. You will normally find air-conditioning in Vietnam at your hotel.

Tips on handling the heat:

- Stay hydrated daily with water
- Wear a hat outside
- Wear loose-fitting clothes made from breathable fabrics
- If you exercise, do so at sunrise
- Do not sunbathe
- Use sun block if you will be outside for long periods

Symptoms of dehydration:

- Restlessness and irritability
- Sunken eyes
- Dry mouth and tongue
- Increased thirst
- Skin goes back slowly when pinched

## Culture Shock

You have probably heard the term “culture shock”, but what is it exactly? Webster’s Dictionary defines it as “a sense of confusion and uncertainty sometimes with feelings of anxiety that may affect people exposed to an alien culture or environment without adequate preparation.”

Compared to our other host countries, **Vietnam has a high level of culture shock for our volunteers.**

Some examples of culture shock in Vietnam:

- There is traffic 24 hours a day, usually fast and aggressive
- Hardly anyone speaks English (includes menus too)
- Some older folks will simply stare at you, without trying to interact at all
- Motorbikes driving on the sidewalk
- Walking among throngs of Vietnamese pedestrians across the street

- Choking air pollution
- Vehicles honk horns constantly and loudly
- The heat and humidity are often unbearable

Please understand: **You are in a different country now**, one that has cultural practices, life experiences, needs, infrastructure (lack of), and a worldview that can be very different to the ones you are used to. You can either fight this type of reality or **learn to adapt to it**. We strongly suggest the latter. You have to accept the responsibility that comes with being a stranger in a strange land.

How can you handle culture shock?

- Be humble and respectful
- Observe & Listen
- Be Inquisitive
- Ask Questions
- Do not judge
- Do not act offended by comments or questions
- Offer your help
- See yourself in others
- Smile

### **Saving the World**

It is admirable that you want to have a positive impact on people's lives in Vietnam. After all, that should be why you signed up to volunteer in Vietnam, and that is why Cosmic sends volunteers there.

But please understand: **You will not “save the world” during your trip to Vietnam**. Or on any trip abroad, for that matter. If you even have the phrase “save the world” in your vocabulary, you are in for a rude awakening in Vietnam and your stay will be filled with major disappointment and disillusionment.

A typical pattern of some foreign volunteers is to show up in the local community, see an endless number of problems to be solved, start to make elaborate plans to solve those problems, work feverishly on executing those plans – then, ultimately experience a great deal of frustration when they realize that they have taken on too much, too quickly. Neophytes to traveling abroad can feel this even more intensely.

Our advice for your is to “work small.” As Chinese Buddhism says, “The sage does not attempt anything big.” Focus your efforts in Vietnam on one person, one project at a time, because those small successes lead to big accomplishments **over time**.

For example, if you are at an orphanage, simply focus on giving the children your time, your caring, and love. Yes the orphanage might need a new roof, or more books, or even medicines for the children – and you can help out with those projects if you wish; but focus first on the kids and making them feel loved.

## Volunteer Work & Schedule

Our programs in Vietnam are individually-based as well, meaning that you will often be the only volunteer at your organization. You must be a resourceful, self-starter who can jump in on day one and start to contribute. Before you leave home, ask us what supplies you might bring from home, such as sports equipment or art supplies for the kids

Generally speaking, your work schedule will be Monday through Friday, from 9am to 4pm. If there are slow times at your volunteer job, please speak to your supervisor for guidance. Also speak to your Program Coordinator for guidance.

## Food

Vietnamese cuisine is not nearly as well-known abroad as, say Thai or Indian food. However don't let that fool you, as Vietnam has some of the tastiest food in the world.

The main dish here is rice noodle soup called "Pho". Pho comes in a large soup bowl and has either beef ("Bo"), chicken ("Ga") or Truong (eggs) in clear beef broth. The shop will give you a plate of leafy vegetables and spices to add to the soup.

Vietnamese cuisine uses chile peppers a lot so is quite spicy. It also uses lots of fish sauce, rice, fresh herbs, fruits and vegetables. Vietnamese recipes use many vegetables, herbs and spices, including lemon grass, lime, and kaffir lime leaves.

Besides the soups, a typical meal consists of:

- Individual bowls of rice
- A roasted meat or fish dish
- A stir-fried vegetable dish
- A Vietnamese-style soup
- Prepared fish sauce and/or soy sauce for dipping

Also, do not be shocked if your Vietnamese dining partner orders live seafood, such as shellfish, which waiters bring to the table to be cooked by the diners themselves on the small roaster in the middle of the table. In general, all dishes are communal and to be shared apart from the individual bowls of rice.

We do actually recommend that volunteers try **street food**, both for salty snacks as well as sweets. You will likely encounter new foods and dishes at every turn.

For drinks, **bottled water** can be found in shops and restaurants all over Vietnam. For soft drinks, you will find Coke, Fanta Orange and Sprite everywhere. You normally have to drink the soft drink at the shop because the shop returns the bottles to the bottler.

Do not be surprised if you **lose weight** in Vietnam. A variety of factors can contribute to this, like decreased appetite in the hot climate, lots of walking, lack of western fast food, and the fact that you might find Vietnamese food unappealing.

**Religion**

Significant minorities of adherents to Roman Catholicism, Cao Dai, and Hoa Hao and smaller minorities of adherents to Protestantism, Islam, Hinduism, and Theravada Buddhism were established later, in recent centuries.

Most Vietnamese do not classify themselves as religious. While they often visit religious temples during the year, Vietnamese peoples' outlook and behavior are related to the philosophies and practices of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Vietnamese also have a tradition of worshiping their ancestors and national heroes. There are also small but dedicated followers of Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam in Vietnam.

**For Women Travelers**

As a female visitor in Vietnam, you most likely will not experience unwanted attention from men. However, keep in mind that you are not at home and that different rules apply. Women generally play a submissive role to men in Vietnam. A woman who acts like a man will not be respected. Men you meet may misinterpret your appearance, body language, or simple presence as invitations to approach you. Even a smile to a stranger may be misunderstood. You will need to modify your behavior in order to avoid unwanted attention.



Here are some tips from our female volunteers on avoiding unwanted attention:

- Do not wear skimpy clothes
- Wear a “wedding ring” and say you are married
- Never admit that you’re traveling alone. Tell people that your boyfriend or husband will be along shortly to join you
- Steer romance-type conversation in another direction by asking questions – about local culture, food, etc
- Use humor to diffuse the situation
- If the man persists, be very direct and firmly tell him to stop, and be specific
- Walk in a group at night
- If you go to nightclubs, go with a group of friends
- Do not go to a secluded area or hotel/apartment with a man you do not know well

### **Romance**

Getting involved romantically during your trip, whether with a fellow volunteer or local Vietnamese, can be a complicated and outright dangerous thing. There is the risk of pregnancy as well as STD’s like HIV. If you do become involved and have sex, always use a condom. Also keep in mind the social aspects of romance, especially if you are involved with a Vietnamese. There is definitely a pronounced double-standard against women. Women generally play a submissive role to men. Showing affection in public is generally not acceptable.

### **Family and Friends Calling You from Home**

Your folks back home will be able to call you on your mobile phone. They can use their landline phone to direct dial your Vietnam number. However unless they have an “international” phone service plan, direct-dialing can get very expensive. We recommend instead that they buy prepaid phone cards from a company like Nobelcom. Another option – one that we recommend – is for them to call you using an Internet phone service like Skype or Yahoo. The connections are much clearer this way, and it’s usually slightly cheaper than calling from landline phones.

### **Giving Out Your Contact Information**

You will meet a lot of people during your stay, even if you are staying only one week. Locals, especially the shelter children, will frequently ask for your contact information, so that they can stay in touch with you after you return home. In our experience, these requests are genuine and innocent, and even if you give them your information, you will never hear from 99% of them. One way to manage this situation is to carry business (calling) cards that you can give out, that have your name, email address, country and telephone number. Many locals, especially children, will be very excited to have a calling card of a foreigner. If someone gives you their contact information and you promise to contact them – follow-through and do it.

### **Local Transportation**

Ho Chi Minh is known as the city of motorbikes. Because of the pollution, you will often see pedestrians and riders wearing masks. You will also see entire families riding on one motorbike, wondering how mom, dad, and three kids can manage to stay on the bike with seeming ease! If you get on a motorbike, either as driver or passenger, wear a helmet.

In addition to taxis mentioned earlier, there are public buses in Ho Chi Minh which are a significant form of transportation for locals. Be careful of pickpockets and the heat!

Cosmic Volunteers pays for the following transportation: your airport pickup and drop-off, orientation travel, and the initial transport to shelter. Volunteers pays for the daily commuting, and any sightseeing excursions.

### **Internet**

As mentioned earlier, almost all hotels have free wireless Internet. However if you do not bring a laptop: many hotels have a computer in the lobby for free Internet, or you can go to an Internet cafe for cheap access.

Strongly consider creating a new email address (like Yahoo or Gmail) to be used only during your trip. Before you leave home, forward all emails from your regular email account to this one. The reason is security – because you will be using public computers and networks, you want to avoid password snatchers gaining access to your true personal email account.

### **Bringing Your Laptop**

- If you do bring your laptop, we urge you to buy a local **surge protector** in Vietnam to protect your battery and hard drive.
- Don't keep any **sensitive information** on your laptop in case of theft, such as your bank account information, passwords, etc.
- Vietnam is a very **dusty environment**, so cover your laptop at all times to protect it from damage.
- Protect the laptop from excessive banging as you travel around Vietnam.

### News on Vietnam

- [news.yahoo.com/fc/World/Vietnam](http://news.yahoo.com/fc/World/Vietnam)
- [www.thanhniennews.com](http://www.thanhniennews.com)

### Parcels/Letters

You can also send and receive parcels and letters via the post office. Parcels/letters usually take 7-14 days to reach Vietnam. When sending parcels/letters from Vietnam, do not use Vietnam's postal system – use an international carrier instead like DHL or UPS because it's safer. Also, take the parcel to the office unsealed, as the customs officer may want to inspect the contents.

Caution: Your family/friends should NOT send anything valuable by post.

### How Your Program Fee Is Used

Our office in the US sends almost 70% of your Program Fee to your Program Coordinator in Vietnam and is used for the following:

- Expenses for Program Coordinator
- Your hotel accommodations
- Your airport pickup
- Transportation / Meals for you and Coordinator during orientation
- Entrance fees to cultural sites during orientation
- Regular donations to local organizations where volunteers work
- Scholarship funds for select student in Ho Chi Minh

The remaining portion of your Program Fee is used by our US office for:

- Salaries for staff
- Recruiting volunteers
- Answering phone calls and emails during normal business hours
- Preparing volunteers for their trips
- Providing 24/7 support
- Developing and maintaining our website
- Legal and accounting services
- Office expenses like Internet access and phone bills
- Travel expenses for our staff to visit project sites

## Donations

Cosmic Volunteers will neither ask nor expect you to make any donations of any kind for any purpose (like money, medical supplies, clothes, books, etc). All of the parties we deal with in Vietnam are informed of this policy, including Program Coordinators, host families, and the organizations where you do your volunteer work.

If you decide to donate:

- **Do not give cash.** Buy materials instead, so that you know exactly how the funds will be used.
- **Buy the materials in Vietnam.** Things like flash cards and books might be biased or entirely irrelevant to the local culture. Things like medicine and medical supplies might be beneficial, but local organizations probably do not have the money to buy more supplies when yours run out; or the materials might not even be available locally.

## At the End of Your Program

At the end of their programs, our volunteers sometimes take time to travel around Vietnam for extra sightseeing. Otherwise, they depart from the airport in Ho Chi Minh. Our Coordinator will escort you to the airport for your departure.

## Returning Home

When you return home from your trip, the “reverse culture shock” can be just as significant as the culture shock when you arrived in Vietnam.

- Returning home is often not a predictable process and can be more stressful than you anticipate.
- You might find yourself different than you were before you left home.
- You might feel like a “stranger” even among friends and family.
- You might get frustrated because it is difficult for others to know what your experiences have meant to you and how you might have changed.
- You may need significant time to return to your old roles and relationships.
- Be aware that things at home may have changed while you were away, both in the society and among friends and family. Even if you have heard about these events, the impact at home may not have been obvious.
- Your friends and family might notice that you have different patterns of behavior, speech, or new attitudes.
- Strange as it may seem to others, returnees often grieve for what they have left behind. You might be missing overseas friends, a stimulating environment, the feeling of being special, experiencing greater freedoms or responsibilities, or special privileges.

Some strategies for coping with returning home:

- Make contact with other volunteers who have successfully gone through the experience of returning home from abroad. This can help you through a difficult period of re-adaptation.
- Maintain personal and professional contacts with friends and institutions in Vietnam.
- Write and reflect about your experiences in a journal. This can be private or can be shared with friends, family, or the world (via a blog).
- Tell others your stories, show them your photos and videos.
- **On a medical note: If you become ill with a fever or flu-like illness up to one year after returning from Vietnam, seek immediate medical care and tell them you were in Vietnam.**

**AND FINALLY . . .**

Make the most of every moment. Explore side streets. Take miracle walks. Perform random acts of kindness: buy fruit and share it, give flowers, pass out pens, coins and other useful and interesting things. Say hello. Smile. Take pictures. Share them. Learn about the depth of poverty. Count your blessings. Refuse to take things for granted. Give presents carefully. Play with everything. Share your toys. Blow bubbles. Spread laughter. Be kind to animals. Offer to help. Clean up your own mess without being asked. Clean up someone else's mess too. Ask questions. Answer questions. Collect addresses of people you meet. Send them postcards and email from home. Be aware that you are foreign and exotic. Hold babies. Giggle with children. Listen to old people. Be brave. Invite a dangerous stranger to dinner. Pay the bill. Learn to say thank you in the local language. Sing out loud, songs you sang as a child and songs children will teach you. Try something totally new. Don't just sight-see, sight-think. Donate energy. Spend time. Give hugs. Be thoughtful about donating, spending, and giving money. Support good work done by local people, buy a man a bike, pay a child's school tuition, offer a mother seed money and supplies to start a small business out of her home. Teach. Learn. Explore your own cultural perspective. Be subjectively aware. Touch the world. Allow the world to touch you. Come home safely . . . And remember, a true gift of seeing the world is to return where you started and see your place for the first time.