

HALONG BAY

Cruise and Tour Travel Guide



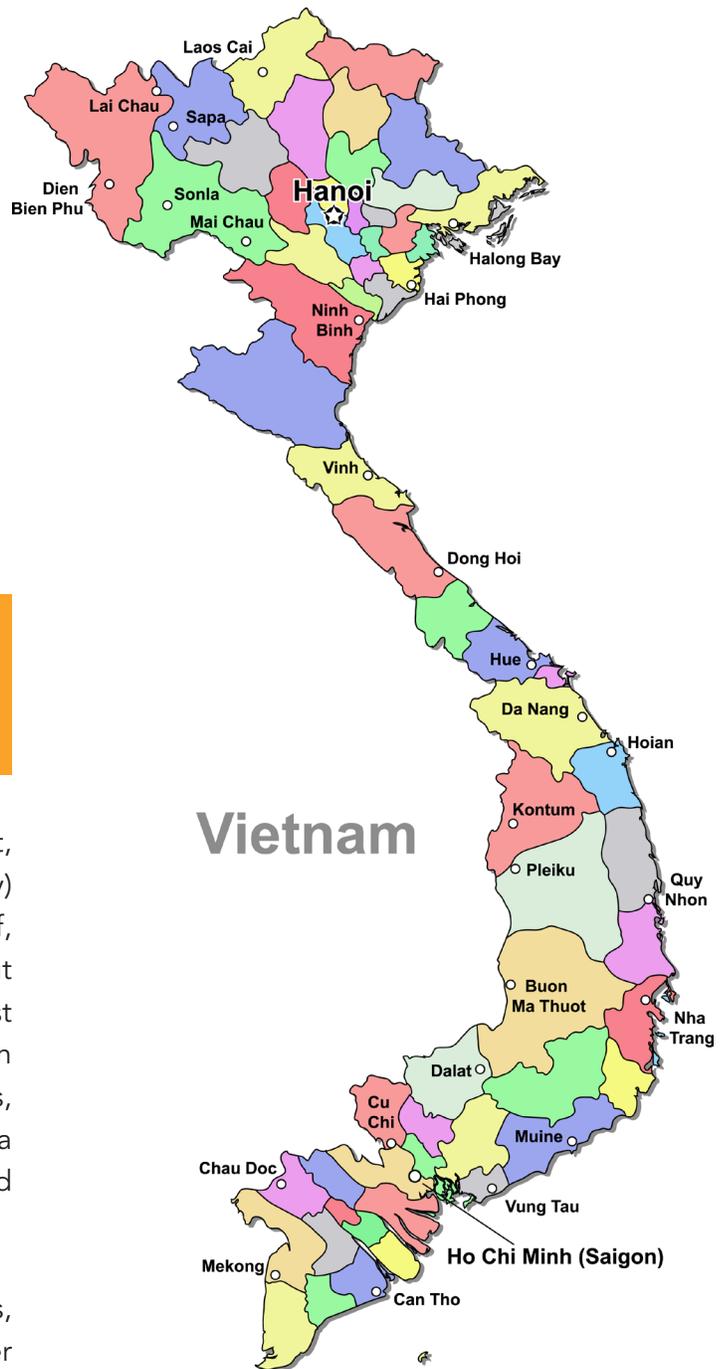
HALONG BAY,

Vietnam Cruise Vacation

Even the people of Vietnam agree that a visit to Vietnam is not complete without a visit to Halong Bay.

Halong Bay is situated on Vietnam's northern coast, 170km (106 miles, or a three to four hour journey) from the capital city of Hanoi. Within the bay itself, more than 1600 rugged limestone karsts and islets jut steeply from the emerald waters. The islands (most of which are uninhabited) wear gowns of lush green vegetation and are home to numerous birds, reptiles, and other animal species. The waters teem with a wide variety fish, and fishing boats have dropped their nets here for centuries.

On many days, a light mist lightly obscures the islets, creating a mystical wonderland for those at water level. When the sun is out, the deep green waters and lush vegetation gleams and glistens. It is a place of tranquility and astounding beauty.





History of Halong Bay

Long before becoming a UNESCO World Heritage site, the magic of Halong Bay was created in legend: when the ancient ancestors of the Vietnamese first began to settle the land, they were under threat of an enemy invasion. The gods sent a family of dragons to protect the people, and the dragons spat jewels and bits of jade into the bay. The jewels and jade sprang up from the sea as giant rocks directly in front of the invaders' ships, causing them to smash into the rocks and into each other. When the danger was past, the dragon family also settled into the waters to live forevermore in peace.

Archeological finds from the sea floor and in caves formed in the limestone islands place inhabitants in this area around 25,000 years ago. The bay waters slowly covered these settlements as the land sank, leaving the exposed island tops to create the beautiful and surreal architecture that thrills so many visitors today. Many of the islands have been given names to reflect the shapes that are suggested by the rocky limestone cliffs and crags.

FAMOUS HALONG BAY SITES

Caves, grottoes, and secret lakes wait for discovery, as do the treasures of the inhabited islands.



Sung Sot Cave (Surprise Cave)

Stone steps take you down into this massive cave carved into three sections by the forces of water into the center of Bo Hon Island. Stalactites and stalagmites stand as silent sentinels along the 500 meter lighted pathway. Colored spotlights highlight fascinating rock formations on both floor and ceiling (which is 30 meters above you), and as you traverse the narrow passage into the second large chamber, you will be bathed the in filtered natural light that glows through natural skylights far above.



Cat Ba Island

A main stop for multi-day cruising boats, Cat Ba offers all the natural beauty you could hope for along with resorts, budget accommodations, restaurants, and shopping. Luxuriate on the small but exquisite beaches or hike into the jungle terrain of the National Park to see if you can spot one of the endangered golden-headed langurs. The island also contains three temples to the three murdered royal women who washed up on the beaches of Cat Ba as well as caves, a butterfly farm, and a zoo.

Dau Be Island

Six hidden lakes gleam like gems in the middle of Dau Be Island, making this a favorite destination for those who love to swim and dive into the crystal waters. Dau Be Island is also home to the famous underground Ba Ham Lake, a system of three pits linked by tunnels and only accessible at low tide in a kayak. In the lush jungle of the island lives an abundance of wildlife such as monkeys, birds, flying squirrels, bats, and more.



Dau Go Cave (Driftwood Grotto, Cave of Wonders)

Located on Driftwood Island, the Dau Go Cave is made up of three main halls, each of which boasts waterfalls of stalactites and is lit by mysterious light under the 25 meter high ceiling. In the dim light, the rock formations seem to come to life, suggesting scenes from ancient times. A stele erected on the orders of Emperor Khai Din in 1917 sings the grotto's praises as a place of beauty and peace.



Floating Fishing Villages

For generations, families have lived on boats, fishing the rich waters of Halong Bay. Floating fishing villages still exist in the bay, where the inhabitants run fish and pearl oyster farms and where tourists are welcome to visit and buy fresh seafood.





VISITING HALONG BAY

With Halong Bay Vietnam Tours

There are several ways to visit and enjoy Halong Bay in Vietnam. Depending on your traveling style and budget, you can choose which method suits you best. There is little to compare to the experience of standing on a junk, its bright sails catching the wind, wending your way over the emerald waters between the green-topped karsts and islets.

Take a Cruise

Taking a four-hour or a one-, two-, or three-day cruise is one of the most popular methods of seeing Halong Bay. Cruises are available in just about any price range, from budget to mid-range to deluxe. In general, budget cruises, or 1- or 2-star cruises, are better for single travelers or those who have the flexibility to roll with the last-minute itinerary changes budget cruise operators often throw in. Budget cruises can be crowded with day-trippers or require you to climb over multiple boats to get to your boat. While the service, food, rooms, and itinerary can be mediocre at best, many adventurous tourists enjoy the budget tours because of the people they meet and the fact that the money they are saving allows them to stay longer in Vietnam. For safety, however, avoid any cruises on old boats, as Quang Ninh Province currently does not require boats or tour operators to meet any strict standards, which allows some independent operators to get away with using boats that are dangerously unsafe.

Mid-range cruises, or 3-star cruises, are ideal for those who want a little more comfort and who might have children in tow. Rooms, food, and service are better than budget cruises, and cruise participants can usually count on the operator to stick with the promised itinerary, weather permitting. Mid-range cruises hit the sweet spot between cost and comfort, making them the most popular type of cruises for tourists. include an impressive collection of lacquer paintings on the second floor.



Deluxe cruises, or 4- and 5-star cruises, offer the highest quality of service, food, and accommodations. Deluxe cruises can also include special features, such as dinner in one of the famous caves, a stop at a private beach, kayaking to fascinating places, fishing at a floating fishing village, cooking classes, and more. For older tourists, those with some physical impairments, or family groups, a deluxe cruise is a good choice.

Cruise companies almost always provide transportation between Hanoi and Halong Bay with the cost of the cruise.



Book a Cruise Online or in Hanoi

It's best to book your cruise with a reputable travel agency either before your trip or once you are in Hanoi rather than trying to haggle a price on the docks (unless you are a veteran traveler). The top cruise companies also offer online booking, where you can check out the itinerary, view photos of the boats and rooms, and make special requests. Private cruises are also available and, though they cost more, allow you to make up your own itinerary based on your interests and desires.

Booking online can cost you top dollar, however, because you have no chance to negotiate. You usually have the option of booking a cruise through your hotel's front desk, which makes things very convenient. For those who really like to negotiate, ask hotel staff for recommendations and then visit a few Hanoi travel agencies yourself to compare prices and book your cruise.



The Cost of a Cruise

The cost of your cruise will depend on the length of the cruise, the quality of the boat and operation, and the level of service you desire. Budget cruises can cost next to nothing up to around USD\$65 dollars per person. Mid-range cruises fall into the USD\$75 to USD\$150 per person range. Deluxe cruises start at the lowest around USD\$150 and go up from there. Top prices may reach USD\$300 or USD\$400 per person for a 3 day/2 night cruise.

If you are traveling alone, you can either share a room with a stranger or pay a single supplement (somewhere around USD\$15 and up) to ensure you have your own room.



DIY Visits to Halong Bay

Even if you make your own travel plans and decide to get yourself to Cat Ba Island for a little R&R, you'll end up on one of the many cruise or day-tripper boats. Plus, you'll have to pay for each attraction and every meal out-of-pocket. Still, if you want to spend several days on Cat Ba Island or in Halong Bay City without worrying about your cruise itinerary (and getting woken up at 8am to get back to your boat), a DIY visit can be excellent.

You can buy a ticket on a bus or mini bus from Hanoi to Halong Bay for about USD\$6 and then hire a motorbike taxi or regular taxi to take you to the wharf. Additionally, you can buy a train ticket from Hanoi to Halong City and then buy a bus-ferry-bus ticket to Cat Ba Island.



DIY tourists should plan to spend a night in Halong Bay City both before and after a day trip or longer trip out to Cat Ba Island as buses to and from Hanoi do not run late in the evening. You can also head straight from Hanoi to Cat Ba Island without a visit to Halong Bay City.

Another option is to book a cruise and then hop off the cruise at whatever point you desire before boarding another boat to get back to Halong Bay City. Make arrangements with the cruise company ahead of time so you will be assured space on a later boat.



HALONG BAY, VIETNAM TRAVEL

Obtaining a Visa to Visit Vietnam

Visitors to Vietnam will need to obtain a visa before being allowed to travel throughout the country. The process is not difficult, and the expense is minimal, but without the visa, you will not be able to travel past the airport.

You can get a visa through any Vietnam embassy located in major cities around the world. Another option is to apply online and have your visa waiting for you at any of Vietnam's three international airports. [Click here](#) to see how to apply online and to get details about who needs to apply for a visa (citizens of some countries are exempt or are granted automatic visas for a specific duration of time).



When to Apply for Your Visa

Ideally, you should apply for your visa and have your Approval Letter before traveling to Vietnam. In some cases, an emergency visa can be issued, but this is the exception to the rule. Visas applied for online can be approved in two business days (be aware that the Department of Immigration is not open on Vietnamese holidays), but it is recommended that you apply at least a week or two in advance of your trip, if not more.

Summary

No visit to Vietnam is complete without a tour of beautiful Halong Bay. The easiest option is to book a cruise in order to glide between and around the limestone karsts and islets scattered in the emerald waters in comfort, but you can also find your own way to and from this natural wonder of the world. Experience amazing natural wonders such as caves and grottoes, sandy beaches, floating fishing villages, and inhabited islands like Cat Ba.

Vietnam contains a multitude of treasures just waiting to be discovered. We hope you enjoy your visit to this ancient country and its culture.

