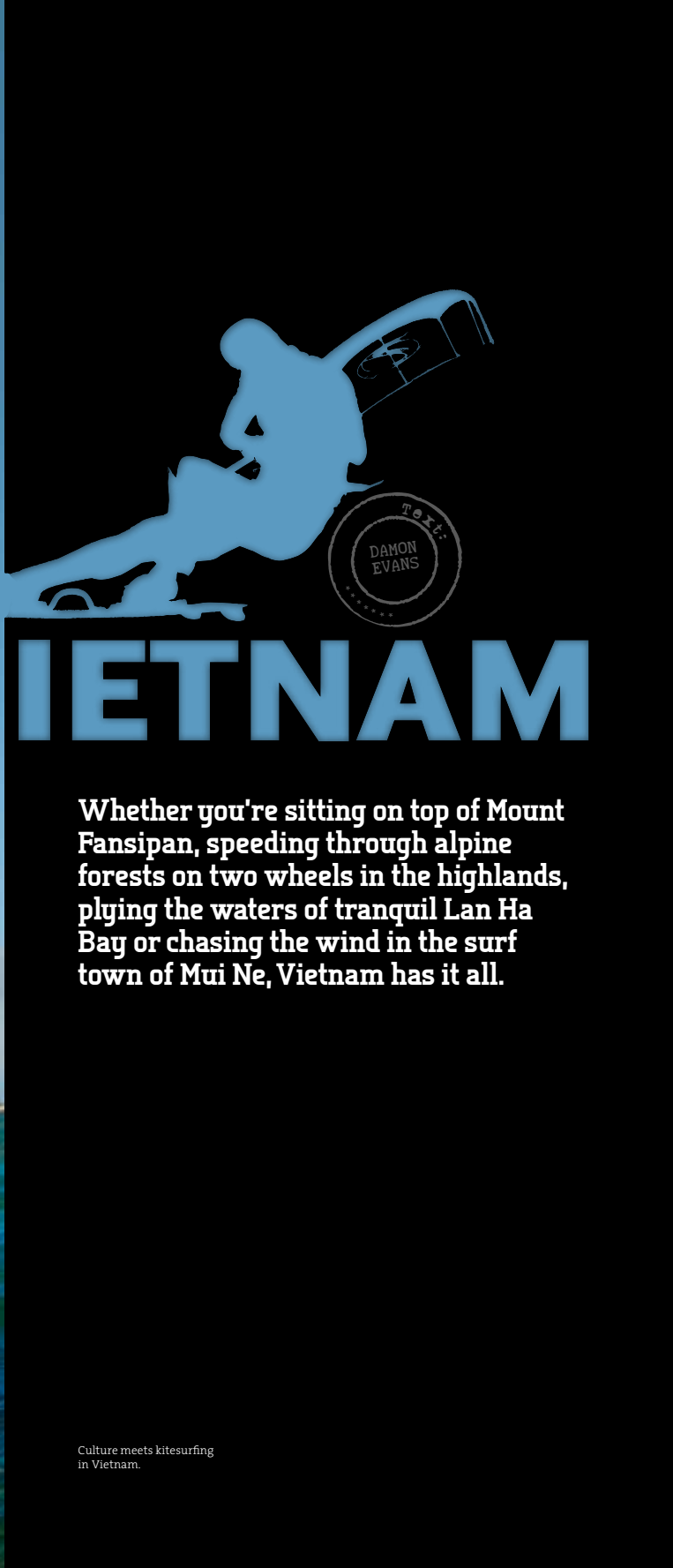


FEATURE

GET A DVENTURO



US IN VIETNAM

Whether you're sitting on top of Mount Fansipan, speeding through alpine forests on two wheels in the highlands, plying the waters of tranquil Lan Ha Bay or chasing the wind in the surf town of Mui Ne, Vietnam has it all.

Culture meets kitesurfing in Vietnam.

MUI NE CHASING THE WIND

THE SUN BURNS BRIGHTLY in the blue sky above. It makes me squint for a split second as I catch its glare. But neither the sea spray nor the sun is detracting my attention from the job in hand. My sight is firmly fixed on the huge kite, some 16 metres long, which is tethered to my torso and soaring 25 metres above me. A kaleidoscope of fear, adrenaline and sheer excitement races through my body. This is the moment I have been eagerly anticipating since enrolling in a kiteboarding course in Mui Ne.

Floating on my back, knees bent and feet strapped to the board, I crank the kite's control bar hard to the left. The kite responds and moves accordingly. The force generated by the kite as it dives propels me out of the water. In a flash, I am lifted up and pulled by the kite. I start to surf across the water. Then all of a sudden, my

nostrils fill with salt water as my body slams into the sea.

My instructor explains that I lost control of the kite but I am not deterred in the least. I am hungry to experience that same heady sensation when the kite launches me out of the water. In short, I am chomping at the bit to learn kiteboarding, which is one of the world's fastest growing water sports.

It's with this goal in mind that I have travelled to Vietnam's coastal action capital of Mui Ne. The town, nestled amongst spectacular sand dunes, boasts a chilled-out stretch of white beach and is fast becoming the mecca for the sport in Asia. With winds of over 12 knots on more than 200 days a year, conditions are ideal for both learners and improvers of kiteboarding, also known as kitesurfing. Kiteboarders can zip

along at speeds of around 60 kilometres per hour on what is best described as a mini-surfboard, very similar to a snowboard. It is common to see experienced riders perform tricks and jumps, sometimes remaining airborne for 10 seconds or more.

There are numerous schools dotted along the beach that will sign you up for a course. For experienced riders seeking uncrowded beaches, get in touch with Twan or Anthony from Vietnam Kitesurfing Tours. These guys have spent years scouting the country for the best kiting spots and have even been arrested by the army after straying into a military zone to find their secret locations.

For many, kiting is like a drug and once hooked, you'll be hard pressed to wean yourself off the addictive nature of the sport.



1

Olivier Laugero

1. The kids are lovin' it in Mui Ne.
2. Flat water fun in Phan Rang.

UNDERWATER EXPLORATION

• If underwater adventures are more your thing, Vietnam's growing diving scene is definitely worth a look. There are a number of spots along the country's lengthy coastline. Nha Trang is Vietnam's most established beach resort. Here you'll find plenty of dive operators ready to show you the waters of the Hon Mun Marine Park.

• Can Dau is the country's emerging dive destination. The national park boasts many unexplored remote islands in an unspoilt area. It looks set to be the next big thing.

• Discover an alternative relaxing diving adventure on Phu Quoc island, close to the border with Cambodia. The island is widely tipped to be the next Koh Samui.

INFORMATION

Rainbow Divers www.divevietnam.com

Scuba Dive Vietnam www.scubadivevietnam.com

Whale Island Resort www.iledelabaleine.com





DALAT HIGH TIMES IN THE HIGHLANDS

MY PALMS ARE SLIGHTLY clammy inside my leather gloves. My legs tremble. It feels like I am about to get shaken off my mountain bike as I thunder down the single track trail. On the left, a near vertical drop looms large in my peripheral vision. The evergreen forest around me blurs as I am engulfed in the moment. This is the rush I hoped for when signing up for the ride aptly named Northern Exposure.

The route is semi-technical as well as strenuous. It takes me over a series of dirt and single tracks in Dalat's hill country. I slow down and the smell of pine trees overwhelms me. I almost think I'm in England. Suddenly my friendly guides, Vien and Linh from Phat Tire, hail me down to point out an artichoke farm. This is the countryside surrounding





Dalat, a quiet place in Vietnam's south central highlands. The emerging adventure capital of Vietnam has a slightly sombre Soviet feel, but is peppered with elegant French colonial villas. It was originally the playground of the French, who came to enjoy the clear mountain air, escaping the humidity of Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City). The area offers some of the best mountain biking, hiking and canyoning opportunities in Vietnam. The cool climate and high altitude make it the perfect location to tackle all these activities.

As well as battering my legs on the Northern Exposure route, I also enjoyed more leisurely rides past vegetable farms, with stops to take in stunning views of the many lakes and rivers. The trips also opened a window to local life. Children tickled me with their enthusiastic greetings and seemed genuinely amused by our small group of riders clad in technicolour cycling gear.

Adrenaline junkies should also try canyoning. It's terrifyingly good fun. After strapping on a safety harness and learning the proper abseiling techniques, our group moved along to a rather large cliff. We were at the top and told to go abseiling down with ropes. Butterflies started to circle inside my stomach, but it was time to brush aside my childhood fears. It was surprisingly easy, if a little scary at first, but I made it to the bottom.

After a few descents, we came across a waterfall. We abseiled down the side of it and splashed into a cool pool of water, which turned out to be a natural waterslide. We had great fun being washed down the chute to the lagoon at the bottom. For the fit or more experienced, check out the advanced route. This includes the most difficult abseil, known affectionately as The Washing Machine.

Trekking is also a great way to take in the jungle-blanketed valleys and to spot wildlife around Dalat. Various programmes offer you the chance to traverse sketchy bridges and meet local hill tribes.

1, 2, 3, 4. Thrills and trails abound in Dalat. You can get a soakin' great time, too.





SAPA
SITTING ON THE
ROOF OF VIETNAM

SAPA IS THE GRAND-DADDY of Vietnam's adventure circuit. But despite the substantial growth in tourism, it still retains an air of mystery and charm.

On arrival, I am greeted by rolling mist and tribal women in colourful garb as the first light of dawn creeps over the mountains.

The imposing peak of Mount Fansipan beckons. It is the last major peak in the Himalayan chain and the tallest mountain in Vietnam, towering 3,143 metres above sea level. Two or three-day climbs to the peak are the norm.

I put my name down for a two-day trip and turn up early the next morning to meet my guide, Xuan from Duc Minh Travel. The trek starts off relatively easy enough through the woods.

After a couple of hours, we stop for an early lunch, and Xuan whips out a bamboo water pipe longer than my arm. He assures me that the water removes impurities from his tobacco.

We trek higher after lunch and the slight sweat from my earlier exertion starts to dry off as the temperature drops.

We pass through vibrant green vegetation and the narrow path becomes steeper. I stop to catch my breath and admire the views of the valleys below. My legs start to ache, but my spirit is high and I push on happily.

Finally we arrive at the overnight camp. A sumptuous feast awaits and I am introduced to the local "fire water". The rice wine flows endlessly and I get that warm glowing feeling inside.

The next day we wake at dawn to start our ascent to the top. It's the time of day I love best.



Damon Evans

1. On the Sapa trail in Cat Cat village.
2. Head in the clouds on Mt Fansipan.

FEATURE

The air is crisp and the dew that carpets the ground glistens in the morning light. The route through the rainforest is extremely wet and slippery. I use my hands and feet to scramble over rocks and vines as it starts to drizzle. My mind wonders how much further it is. But the wave of ecstasy that hits me when we reach the top is well worth it.

Unfortunately, the peak is shrouded in mist, which limits visibility. But for me, it's just as much about the journey as the destination. I feel like I'm on top of the world. Sitting perched on the rock waving the Vietnamese flag amongst my fellow climbers, I sense a special feeling of camaraderie. There are people of all ages, shapes and sizes. For some, getting

to the top was harder than others, but we are all united in our achievement.

Sapa is also a hotbed for trekking. You'll meet people from the Hmong, Dao and Tay tribes as you pass by paddy fields that cascade down the mountain slopes. For those seeking a deeper experience, opt for a multi-day hike with homestays in traditional stilt houses.

The town is also a haven for motorbiking and mountain biking. Around town, roads are fantastic, largely consisting of craggy peaks and dramatic vistas.

Trekking on the roof of Vietnam.



TWO-WHEELED ACTION

- Vietnam will not disappoint freewheelin' petrol heads. Motorbike tours can be arranged throughout the country. Saddle up and cruise through the lowlands of the Mekong Delta or skirt the borders of Laos and China in the country's deep northern provinces. Consider exploring the famous Ho Chi Minh Trail and retrace the route used by the North Vietnamese communist troops to reach the South during the war.

- Pedal power is an alternative way to get under the skin of the country. Check out scenic hideaways such as isolated Mai Chau in the central northern region. Its idyllic rural valleys and variety of terrains make this less-visited spot a great place

to hop on a bicycle. Most people here are ethnic White Thai, distantly related to tribes in Thailand, Laos and China.

INFORMATION

CYCLING

Indochina Adventure www.indochina-adventure.com
Phat Tire Adventures www.phattireventures.com
Spice Roads www.spiceroads.com
Lotus Asia www.vietnamcycling.com

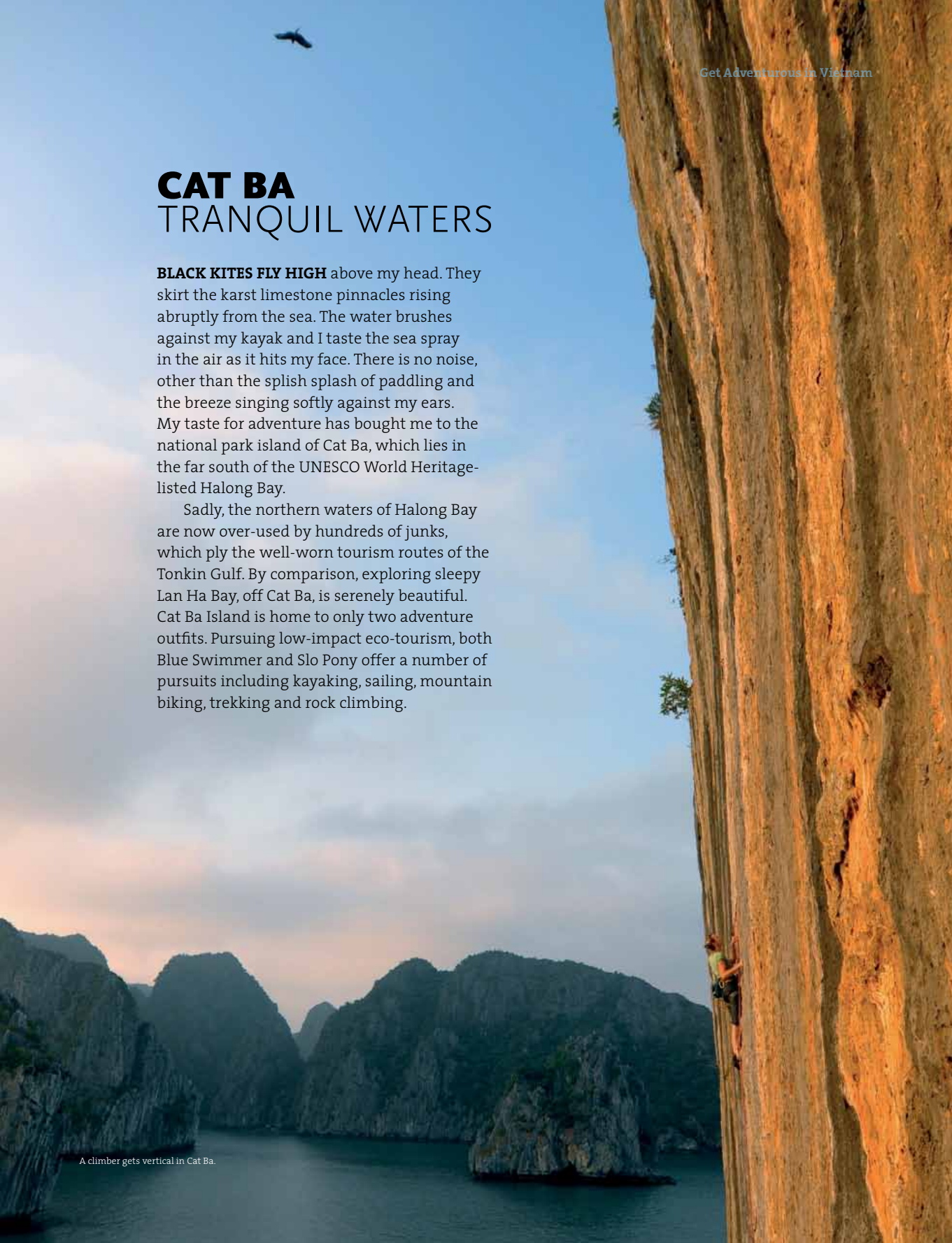
MOTORBIKING

Explore Indochina www.exploreindochina.com
Offroad Vietnam www.offroadvietnam.com
Motor Tours Asia www.voyagevietnam.net

CAT BA TRANQUIL WATERS

BLACK KITES FLY HIGH above my head. They skirt the karst limestone pinnacles rising abruptly from the sea. The water brushes against my kayak and I taste the sea spray in the air as it hits my face. There is no noise, other than the splish splash of paddling and the breeze singing softly against my ears. My taste for adventure has bought me to the national park island of Cat Ba, which lies in the far south of the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Halong Bay.

Sadly, the northern waters of Halong Bay are now over-used by hundreds of junks, which ply the well-worn tourism routes of the Tonkin Gulf. By comparison, exploring sleepy Lan Ha Bay, off Cat Ba, is serenely beautiful. Cat Ba Island is home to only two adventure outfits. Pursuing low-impact eco-tourism, both Blue Swimmer and Slo Pony offer a number of pursuits including kayaking, sailing, mountain biking, trekking and rock climbing.





Kayaking, sailing a catamaran or cruising on a traditional sail-powered junk are all excellent eco-friendly ways to explore less-visited islands and beaches around Cat Ba. My group chanced upon several sea coves and sheltered lagoons during the guided kayak trip with Blue Swimmer. Our adventure also included stopping on an isolated island for a lavish lunch spread.

On dry land, Cat Ba also has plenty to offer the adventurous. If you've a head for heights, check out the rock climbing options offered by Slo Pony. "Climbs for novices and beginners run up to 25 metres. The views combined with the effort participants put into achieving them is a potent combination," says Brian of Slo Pony.

For experienced climbers, try a deep water solo. This involves climbing over dead vertical or overhanging rocks with no ropes before free-falling into the sea below. Fans are lured by the freedom of movement, a complete feeling of oneness with the rock, as well as rushes of pure adrenaline and outright joy.

Back on the ground, it's easy to rent an automatic motorbike and discover the coastline roads that link up with the lush wooded limestone rocks of the rugged interior. My partner and I did just that. It's just us, the scenery and the tarmac speeding along under the bike as we head toward the national park.

We spend an hour or so scrambling over slippery smooth rocks as we trek up the small forest trail



behind the park's headquarters. As we walk, the slight chill of the morning is slowly thawed by the warm air. Emerging at Ngu Lam Peak, soaked in sweat, we breathe in the fresh air hungrily whilst absorbing the panoramic view of the tropical forest below. It's one of those moments that make you feel thrillingly alive.

There are plenty of trekking opportunities for every level, including a challenging 18-kilometre hike that takes in one of the mountain summits. Be sure to take a guide or risk getting lost under the canopy of trees.

Mountain biking is a good alternative for exploring Cat Ba. Stick to the asphalt or arrange to go off-road with one of the adventure companies. Be warned, your lungs may feel like they are about

to burst as you head out of Cat Ba town and up the hills. But it will become easier with some sweeping downhill sections and long, flat straights that cut through the island.

I left Cat Ba feeling like a traveller, an explorer and an adventurer. It's hard not to be mesmerised by the mystical landscape and the island's magical allure. AGP

There are plenty of options to work that body when you're in a place like Cat Ba.



Charles Dillcott

NATIONAL PARKS

Make an effort and head out to some national parks where a whole different side of Vietnam is revealed. There are numerous nature reserves all over the country, but the following is a small selection to whet your appetite.

PARK	HIGHLIGHTS	ATTRACTIONS	WHERE	WHEN TO GO
Cat Ba	Jungle, caves, beaches	Rock climbing, kayaking, hiking	Northeast	Mar–Aug
Con Dao	Turtles, dugongs, beaches	Swimming, sailing	Southeast	Nov–Jun
Bai Tu Long	Beaches, caves, karst pinnacles	Snorkelling, diving, bird watching	Northeast of Halong Bay	Apr–Nov
Phong Nha-Ke Bang	Karsts, caves, birdlife	Kayaking, surfing, swimming, trekking	North central	Apr–Sep
Cat Tien	Primates, rhinos, tigers, elephants, birdlife	Caving, boat trips, bird watching, trekking	Southern	Nov–Jun

INFORMATION

Adventure Tours Vietnam www.adventuretours.vn
 Viet Vision Travel www.vietvisiontravel.com

GETTING THERE AND AROUND

DALAT

Vietnam Airlines has frequent services linking Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi to Dalat airport, which lies 30 km south of town. Buses run from Ho Chi Minh City (6–7 hours), Nha Trang (7 hours) and Mui Ne (5 hours) to Dalat, each costing just a few US dollars.

CAT BA

Hoang Long Bus Company goes to Cat Ba from Hanoi. The trip will cost about US\$10 and takes about 5 hours. Daily buses depart from Luong Yen bus station.

MUI NE

Daily buses run from Ho Chi Minh City (4 hours), Nha Trang (5 hours) and Dalat (5 hours) for a couple of US dollars. Alternatively, arrange a private vehicle.

SAPA

Take the overnight train from Hanoi to Lao Cai, from where it's a short hop in a minibus to Sapa town. The comfortable soft sleeper or private rail carriage options are best and can be arranged by your hotel, travel agent or at the station in Hanoi.

WHEN TO GO

DALAT

December to April is the best time to visit. This time of year is the coolest and has the lowest possibility of rain. Remember to bring some warm clothes for the evenings.

CAT BA

Cat Ba can be visited throughout the year, but January and February are quite chilly. The mild weather in March through to May is great for outdoor pursuits. The height of the summer is high season for Vietnamese tourists, which means larger crowds and higher prices.

MUI NE

Mui Ne can be visited all year round, but the best time for wind is between December and March. Surf is up from August till December.

SAPA

Dry season is from January to June. From March to May, the weather is usually excellent. Expect rain in the summer months of June and August. The best time to ascend Mount Fansipan is from mid-October to mid-December and again in March, when wildflowers are in bloom.

ACCOMMODATION

DALAT

- Budget: YK Home Villa (www.ykhomevilla.com). A peaceful villa complete with a garden. It's a 20-minute walk to the town centre.
- Mid-Range: Saigon-Dalat Hotel (www.saigondalathotel.com). Good value, classy hotel with an indoor swimming pool.
- Luxury: Sofitel Dalat Palace (www.softel.com). A grand hotel built in 1922 brimming with old-world charm.

CAT BA

- Budget: Bayview Hotel (Tel: +84-31-388-8241). The rooms are clean and airy. Some come with large bay windows overlooking the bay.
- Mid-Range: Holiday View Hotel (www.holidayviewhotel-catba.com/index.php). One of the better mid-range options with nice views from the rooms.
- Luxury: Sunrise Resort (www.catbasunriseresort.com). Perfect all-round resort by the beach. Balcony rooms offer beautiful views.

MUI NE

- Budget: Paradise Huts (Tel: +84-62-384-7177). Bungalows set in a pretty garden.
- Mid-Range: The Sailing Club Mui Ne (www.sailingclubvietnam.com). Intimate resort with Storm Kiteboarding Centre on site.
- Luxury: Coco Beach Resort (www.cocobeach.net). Idyllic bungalows and villas by the beach.

SAPA

- Budget: Fansipan View Hotel (www.fansipanview.com). Well-maintained rooms with friendly staff.
- Mid-Range: Chau Long Sapa Hotel (www.chaulonghotel.com). Offers fantastic views of the surrounding mountains and valleys.
- Luxury: Victoria Sapa Resort & Spa (www.victoriahotels-asia.com). Beautiful resort with swimming pool. The spa is great for a little pampering after a day of trekking.



ATTRACTIONS

DALAT

Wander through the bizarre Hang Nga Crazy House and get lost in the surreal architecture reminiscent of Gaudi. Take a scenic 15-minute cable-car ride over pine forests to Truc Lam Monastery, which overlooks Tuyen Lam Lake.

Adventure sports: Mountain biking, trekking, canyoning, rock climbing, and kayaking.

CAT BA

Rent a motorbike and discover the scenic routes to caves, beaches and the national park. Cat Ba Island is one of the few places in Vietnam where you can enjoy a relaxed ride without the hassle of heavy traffic.

Adventure sports: Kayaking, rock climbing, trekking, sailing and mountain biking.

MUI NE

Take a jeep ride and visit the white sand dunes. For a moment, you'll think you are in the Sahara Desert. Adventure sports: Kiteboarding, windsurfing, sailing and surfing.

SAPA

Take a leisurely walk through Cat Cat village. Soak up the atmosphere at the market square with the numerous hill-tribe people. Adventure sports: Climbing, trekking, mountain biking

FOOD

DALAT

Lien Hoa (Tel: +84-633-822-934) is a local institution complete with a bakery, noodle shop and restaurant. Join the locals and queue for a baguette, chase away the chills with a bowl of steaming stewed duck/beef noodle or dig into a sumptuous hotpot. Art Cafe (Tel: +84-633-510-089) offers local cuisine in an intimate environment. Chat with the lively

artist/owner whose work adorns the walls whilst you indulge in the caramelised fish or claypot chicken.

CAT BA

There is plenty of delicious fresh seafood for the taking in Cat Ba. Pick from the tanks at the local restaurants along Nui Ngoc Road or visit the floating restaurants in the harbour. Green Mango (www.greenmango-restaurant.blogspot.com) claims to offer food without MSG, a rarity in Vietnam. No complaints though as both the Western and Vietnamese food tastes as good as it looks.

MUI NE

Lam Tong (Tel: +84-623-847-598) is great for its inexpensive fresh seafood right on the beachfront. Rung Forest Restaurant (Tel: +84-623-847-589) offers traditional Vietnamese cuisine with traditional Cham music as accompaniment.

SAPA

Follow the smoky trail to the row of stalls next to the church and tuck into various tasty grilled meats. Gerbera Restaurant (Tel: +84-203-871-064) offers larger-than-usual portions and the sizzling chicken hot plate is a favourite.



INFORMATION

Vietnam National Administration of Tourism www.vietnamtourism.com
 Vietnam Kitesurfing Tours www.vietnamkitesurfingtours.com
 Blue Swimmer Adventures www.blueswimmersailing.com
 Slo Pony Adventures www.slopony.com
 Storm Kiteboarding Centre www.stormkiteboarding.com
 Jibe's Beach Club www.windsurf-vietnam.com
 Windchimes www.windsurfing-vietnam.com
 Handspan Adventure Travel www.handspan.com
 Topas Travel www.topastravel.vn



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