

# Free Travel Guide

# Ho Chi Minh City

## (HCMC/Saigon)

Ho Chi Minh City, commonly known as Saigon or by the abbreviations HCMC or HCM, is the largest city in Vietnam and the former capital of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam).

Following the fall of Saigon in 1975, Saigon was "officially" renamed Ho Chi Minh City. However the old Saigon name is still used by both Vietnamese and foreigners, especially when referring to the most central part of the city to which most tourists flock.

### REACHING HO CHI MINH CITY

#### By Plane

The local airport in HCMC is Tan Son Naht International airport (IATA – SGN).

→ Connections to/from Tan Son Naht International airport [click here](#).

#### Getting to city center from airport

- By Bus - The No. 152 non-air-conditioned airport bus is the cheapest and safest way for backpackers heading to Pham Ngu Lao Street from the airport. For 5,000 dong per person (as on May 2014) plus a 5,000 dong fee for bags, the bus leaves every 15min and will drop you off at the east end of the Pham Ngu Lao area (at the bus terminal on the southwest side of the Ben Thanh Market roundabout).
- By Taxi - There are several options for getting a taxi from the airport to the city centre (District 1). Use companies such as Mailinh and Vinasun. The cost from airport to any place in District 1, should not cost more than USD 10-15 (as on May 2014).

#### By Bus

If you take a bus into Ho Chi Minh City, you will end up at one of the following bus stations:

- Cho Ben Thanh Bus Station - This is right in the centre of Ho Chi Minh City, within walking distance of accommodation options and tourist sights.
- Mien Dong Bus Station - Buses heading north arrive and leave from here. You can take bus No. 19 from Cho Ben Thanh Bus station to this station.

- Mien Tay Bus Station - Take bus No. 139 from Tran Hung Dao Street to get here.
- Cholon Bus Station.
- Dinh Bo Linh station - MaiLinh buses from Da Nang arrive here.

Several companies provide bus travel from Phnom Penh, Cambodia to HCMC, at approximately US\$12 per person. Visas to Vietnam cannot be obtained at the border, so have one organized before you arrive.

## **By Train**

Trains are safe, air-con, comfortable, quite fast and quite reliable. There are five daily departures from Hanoi along the "Reunification line". Although several of the trains are called "express", all journeys take about 30 to 35 hours. The fastest train is SE3 departing from Hanoi at 11:00 pm and arriving at 5:00 am two nights later. However, SE5 departing at 3:45 pm and arriving at 4:40 am has higher-quality tourist carriages.

## **GETTING AROUND HO CHI MINH CITY**

### **By Bicycle**

It is an adventure to cycle around in the big city, but not that challenging as it may look like. Expect to inhale exhaust gases, try to stay ahead or beside the swarm of bikes, be assertive, leave the left lane to the cars. If you do not have a horn, you can still scream or just smile around as you look to your destination, pretending to ignore everything which crosses your way.

### **By Taxi**

Taxis are the most comfortable way of getting around, and very modest in price compared to other major cities in the world. Taxis are numerous and it's usually not hard to flag one down anywhere in the city centre from early morning until about 1:00 am, though finding one in the rain or during workday rush hours can be difficult. Ho Chi Minh City taxis were charging in the range of 12,000 to 13,000 dong per kilometer (as on May 2014).

### **By Motorbike**

Motorbike taxis are plentiful, cheap, and are generally quite safe. As of 2007 all riders in Vietnam are now required to wear helmets, a rule that is strongly enforced. Make sure a driver supplies you with a helmet. If he doesn't - find another one, as you'll be the one stung for the fine.

Absolutely agree on a price before you set off; short hops around town shouldn't be more than 40,000 dong (as on May 2014), if you go between districts this increases and all the way to the airport around 80,000 dong (as on May 2014). A rule of thumb for the price is to round up of half the cost of taxi ride for the same travel. Drivers are generally quite friendly and will go slower upon request. They're also not adverse to a bear hug if you're really struggling to hold on to the motorbike. Many of the moto drivers, especially in District 1, speak some English and like many Vietnamese will repay you in a flood of smiles (and probably point out all the sights) if you make a little effort to get to know them.

You can rent your own motorbike in many places, especially around the backpacker area (Pham Ngu Lao) in District 1. 110,000 dong (as on May 2014) should get you a decent 100-110cc bike. Driving in Saigon is best left to experienced drivers. The traffic is intense and has its own rhythms and logic. However, if you're up for

an adventure, it's best to keep a few things in mind: drivers with limited experience should consider renting an automatic bike (usually a bit more expensive), as at busy crossroads there is not time for worrying about how to change gears.

## By Cyclo

A ride on a cyclo, which is sort of akin to a reverse tricycle with the passenger sitting in a front seat, through downtown HCMC is a great way to see the city the way the locals do. The sights, sounds, and smells are a large part of the excitement of the city, and are best experienced from the relaxed pace of a cyclo. A word of warning: be careful with cameras, purses and watches while cyclo riding as these items are easily stolen by motorbike riders.



*Cyclo*

For many reasons, not least because of government attempts to restrict cyclo on busy urban streets, this form of transportation is disappearing. At around 36,000 dong/hr (as on May 2014) and because they are so slow, they can be a good choice for taking in the city. Be sure to bargain hard with the cyclo rider beforehand. Some cyclo riders have been known to attempt to change the agreed price after your journey has finished, whilst another trick may include the driver visiting places which benefit his wallet. To avoid these problems, make sure you are clear on the price and destination upon departing.

## By Bus

Bright green public buses serve 150 routes throughout the city. You can find maps of the bus system at the large Ben Thanh bus station across the street from Ben Thanh Market in District 1 - just go into the waiting room to the desk in the middle. The buses are cheap, safe and not too crowded. Many are modern and comfortable, with such amenities as air conditioning, music, and even television. Finding the right line can be a challenge if you don't speak or read Vietnamese. If you cannot find your way, ask the locals nicely, they will try their best to help. A piece of paper and marker pen may help to ease the conversation.

The buses are efficient and fast. Most are staffed by two employees: the driver and the fare collector. The driver keeps the bus moving while the fare collector interacts with the passengers. Locals claim, plausibly, that buses are even faster than taxis. The reason is that buses have an informal right of way on the streets of

Ho Chi Minh City; when another vehicle sees a bus coming, that vehicle gets out of the way. Taxis know that they are supposed to back down from confrontations with buses. Buses are also cheaper (4,000-8,000 dong per ride, which is considerably less than \$1, as on May 2014) and safer than many of the alternatives. The biggest problem is that when you get off the bus, you become a pedestrian.

## By Foot

Crossing the road in Saigon can be a nightmare. It is always scary, for some they will get used to it quite quickly. If ever in doubt, Saigon's "Tourist Security" officers (guys in marked green uniforms) will happily help you across. A quicker way of getting across is to simply follow the lead of a local crossing the street.

## WHAT TO SEE IN HO CHI MINH CITY

### Historical Sites

**Reunification Palace** – Also known as Independence Palace, it was built on the site of the former Norodom Palace. It was designed by architect Ngô Viết Thụ and was the home and workplace of the President of South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. It was the site of the end of the Vietnam War during the Fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, when a North Vietnamese Army tank crashed through its gates.



*Reunification Palace*

**War Remnants Museum-** The War Remnants Museum is a war museum at 28 Vo Van Tan, in District 3, Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Vietnam. It primarily contains exhibits relating to the American phase of the Vietnam War.

**City Hall** - Ho Chi Minh City Hall or Hôtel de Ville de Saïgon was built in 1902-1908 in a French colonial style for the then city of Saigon. It was renamed after 1975 as Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee. Illuminated at night, the building is not opened to the public or for tourists. A statue of the namesake is found in park next to the building.

**Museum of Vietnamese History** - The Museum of Vietnamese History is located at 2 Nguyen Binh Khiem Street, Ben Nghe Ward, District 1, in Ho Chi Minh City. Formerly known as the Musée Blanchard de la Brosse, built by Auguste Delaval in 1926, and The National Museum of Viet Nam in Sai Gon, it received its current name in 1979. It is a museum showcasing Vietnam's history with exhibits from all periods. It should not be confused with the National Museum of Vietnamese History in Hanoi.

## Religious Sites

**Notre Dame Cathedral** – Also known as, Saigon Notre-Dame Basilica, officially Basilica of Our Lady of The Immaculate Conception is a cathedral located in the downtown of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Established by French colonists, the cathedral was constructed between 1863 and 1880. It has two bell towers, reaching a height of 58 meters (190 feet).



*Notre Dame Cathedral*

**Central Mosque** - One of 12 mosques serving Ho Chi Minh City, the Central Mosque was built in 1935. It was originally constructed for worshipers from southern India then resident in Saigon, but now Muslims from as far as Pakistan and Indonesia come to pray. Friday draws the biggest crowds. The shaded verandah and cool stone floors make it an ideal place to sit, read or even nap in the heat of the day. As with most mosques, remember to take your shoes off before entering and dress conservatively if you wish to enter.

**Thien Hau Pagoda** - Chua Ba Thien Hau (The Pagoda of the Lady Thien Hau) is a Chinese style temple located on Nguyễn Trãi Street in the Cho Lon (Chinatown) district of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. It is dedicated to Thiên Hậu, the Lady of the Sea ("Tian Hou" as transcribed from the Chinese), who is also known as "Mazu".

**Quam Am Pagoda** - Chùa Quan Am is a Chinese style Buddhist pagoda located on Lao Tu Street in Cho Lon, District 5, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Founded in the 19th century, it is dedicated to the bodhisattva Quan Am. The pagoda is very popular among both Vietnamese and Chinese Buddhists. Most of the inscriptions are in Chinese characters, but some labels have been added in Vietnamese.

## Architectural Attractions

**Bitexco Financial Tower** - Bitexco Financial Tower is a skyscraper in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, owned by Bitexco Group, a Vietnamese company. With 68 floors above ground and three basements, the building has a height of 262.5 metres (861 ft), making it the 124th tallest building in the world. Ecuadorian architect Carlos Zapata, the creative mastermind behind Bitexco Financial Tower, drew inspiration for this skyscraper's unique shape from Vietnam's national flower, the Lotus. The tower was the tallest building in Vietnam from 2010 to early 2011 when Keangnam Hanoi Landmark Tower topped out on 24 January 2011.

**Saigon Sky Deck** - Located on the 49th floor the observation deck offers sweeping 360-degree panoramic views of the entire city and the nearby Saigon River. Facilities include a gift shop, information touch screens (in English and Vietnamese), free to use binoculars and complimentary bottled water. The 50th floor is also freely accessible via a set of stairs which lead to a cafe that serves a range of refreshments.

## WHAT TO DO IN HO CHI MINH CITY

**Dam Sen Water Park** - Close to the city centre. Opened in 1999, with new water slides added each year. This water park offers some truly unique water slide experiences, including the amazing "Space Bowl". The slides have been badly designed and it's a common sight to see someone clutching their head when leaving them. Restaurant, health services, and animation dinosaurs are on the premises. Take bus n°38 from Ben Thanh bus station. Admission is based on height and time of arrival; under 0.8m free, others 40 - 110 000 dong (90 000 after 4pm).

**Dai Nam Tourist Park** - Dai Nam Tourist Park, opened in November of 2008, it is one of the newest and largest tourist attractions in Vietnam. It features the Dai Nam Van Hien Temple, an entertainment site, open range zoo, shopping areas, hotels, local and western cuisine sites, and the largest man made mountain range in Vietnam. Costing over 50 billion dong to build, this park is the beginning of mass tourism in Vietnam, although it is aimed at both tourists and locals and comes highly recommended. Transport options to the park are quite convoluted and as the park is new, online information is scarce. Reports are that you can catch the 616 bus from the main bus terminal in Ho Chi Minh, but most hotels will tell you that's not possible and insist on a private taxi. According to the locals, it is very much worth a visit, purely just to view the temple. Entry is 100,000 VND for adults, 50,000 for children. Be aware that most attractions in the park cost extra on top of the entry fee, but adult tickets combining the zoo and beach can be had for 280,000 VND.

## SHOPPING IN HO CHI MINH CITY

Vietnamese arts and crafts, or mass-produced resin knock-offs thereof, are sold by dozens of shops around the central tourist district. The best, most expensive items can be mostly found on Dong Khoi or the immediate side streets. The goods tend to get progressively simpler and cheaper as you move west toward Ben Thanh Market (though the best wood-carving shop is a stall on the back side of Ben Thanh). A few shops have authentic woven silk textiles from Sapa and the north. Lacquered paintings, plates, bowls, etc. are quite striking and unique to Vietnam. Vietnamese propaganda posters can be very impressive and offer a taste of history.

## Markets

**Chợ Bến Thành aka Ben Thanh Market** - Southwest end of Le Lai: a den of thieves, but some great shopping. Ben Thanh is recognizable from its clock tower on the large traffic circle. The largest old-style market in the central district, with several hundred small stalls stuffed with goods on almost impassably narrow aisles. Due to its popularity with tourists, the market is now divided between tourist goods (jeans, T-

shirts, smaller souvenirs in abundance) and regular items (fruit and vegetables, rice, kitchen wares, flowers, meat, fast food and local-style pickled fruits and candies). Most items are not price-marked, and vendors always quote a 50-100% higher price to tourists, so bargaining hard will save you money. The chief method of parting visitors from their money is ambiguity: for example never making it quite clear how many you are being quoted for; or what the exact price is; or what exchange rate is being used to calculate your change. Be ready for these onslaughts (often by a sweetly smiling young lady), or be prepared to part with more cash than you need to. Right at the north side (back) of Ben Thanh Market are some shops that are operated by Ben Thanh Group and they sell goods at fixed price and much cheaper than the stalls in the market. No bargaining needed. If the good selection of knock-offs here just won't do, there's plenty to be had in the surrounding side street shops or night market later.

**Chợ Bình Tây** in the Chinatown, the more underrated twin of Ben Thanh, selling everything from spices, Chinese medicines, silk to obscure varieties of fermented fish, dried seafood and jerky. If you are searching for a variety of Vietnam silks and velvets, skip the tourist trap Ben Thanh Market and head for Bình Tây instead. Most of Chợ Bình Tây is wholesale goods. In fact, you can see much of Ben Thanh Market's goods are from here.

**Night Market** (just outside of Ben Thanh Market). Here you can enjoy many kinds of different food and drink, and go round to do your shopping as well. Open from 18:00 (when the Ben Thanh Market closes).

## **Supermarkets and department stores**

**Co-op Mart Supermarkets**, frequented by throngs of the Saigon middle-class and backpackers alike, can be found everywhere around HCMC. In District 1 they can be found at the corner of Nam Ky Khoi Nghia and Nguyen Dinh Chieu, about 1km from the centre OR in Cong Quynh, walking distance away from the end of Backpacker street Pham Ngu Lao. Prices are reasonably lower, though the selection leans more toward Vietnamese culinary requirements.

**Western/Japanese-style department** stores 3 stores are near the centre. For most visitors, the only reason to go there is to enjoy the air-con, and derive some amusement from the silly-high prices of western-branded consumer goods.

- Parkson on Dong Khoi a block north of the Opera house
- Diamond Plaza, further north behind the Notre Dame Cathedral
- Zen Plaza on Nguyen Trai two blocks west of the New World Hotel
- Taka Plaza on 102 Nam Ki Khoi Nghia near Bach Dang ice-cream store

## **Souvenir**

**Phuong Mai Art Gallery**, 129 B Le Thanh Ton St., District.1 (near the Norfolk Hotel and the Revolution Museum). A gallery showing contemporary Vietnamese artists, both established and emerging. There's another showroom at 213C Dong Khoi in District 1.

**Oil-Painting** - Bui Vien Street, near backpackers area in De Tham and Pham Ngu Lao streets, in District 1. There are several shops along this street selling oil painting at reasonable prices (ranging from 450,000-5,000,000 dong). If you want a portrait of a Vietnamese painting or even have your own photograph oil-painted, shop around here. You can get a readily available portrait within a day or two.

## EATING IN HO CHI MINH CITY

You're spoiled for choice in Saigon, which offers the country's largest variety of Vietnamese and international food. Bargains are getting harder to find, however, and restaurant prices have been rising at up to 30% per year due to a combination of higher food prices, rising wages, and soaring real estate costs. Land in the city centre now sells for around US\$16,000 per square meter, so even a modest-sized restaurant sits on real estate worth more than US\$1 million. Authentic local food at bargain prices is one of the glories of Vietnam, but it's getting harder to find in Saigon as the city becomes ever more upscale and cosmopolitan.

The local food shows influences from French colonial times - bakeries have fresh and excellent baguettes, which they will fill with cheese, potted meat, ham, and onions, or any combination thereof, cheaply. Beef is used in various dishes - whether in any of the many variations of pho, or in a regional specialty such as "bun bo hue" or Hue beef soup. Be sure to try, aside from pho, dishes such as the above-mentioned Hue beef soup, or "banh xeo" aka. Vietnamese omelettes, consisting of a delicious filling of your choice (various options included bamboo shoots and enoki mushrooms, along with meat, prawns, or both) in a crispy outer crepe-like casing.

Food stalls are scattered all over the city, but there's a fair collection in the Ben Thanh market (see Buy). For local fast food, try the ubiquitous Pho 24' chain (though it can be more the twice the price of local fare). Additionally, foreign fast food franchises Lotteria and KFC have established presences in the city. The first McDonald's in Ho Chi Minh City opened on 8 February 2014.

The setback of eating street food or food done on holes-in-the-walls in any town or city in Vietnam is unsure good hygiene. Street hawkers are not only cooks but they are also cashiers. They touch money and often flip over the bills with their fingers moistened with their saliva (added flavor to food). If a bun (baguette) is dropped in the pavement, it is still picked up to be mixed with the rest of the bunch. A hawker (hawkers are about 90% women able to carry loads on poles with their petite body) may cough or sneeze and while preparing food, cover her mouth with her bare hands then resume what she was just doing. Food may have unwanted items like hair particle or even pubic or armpit hair-like strand. Utensils may be washed from the same portable small 1-litter size ice-cream container washing basin, without detergent. Debris on spoons are just wiped off from the water on that small dish. Drinking glasses may just be dunked two or three times and ready for the next user.

## BUDGET

- The Burger Corner, 43 Nguyen Hue Street, District 1, close to Bitexco Tower. Small but very tasty burgers, perfect size for a snack. If making a meal out of it should pay the extra 30,000 for a second paddie. Keep an eye out for their daily deals and combos. It can be cheaper getting a burger and drink combo than the burger alone.
- Dong Ba, 110A Nguyen Du, Dist 1. This is a shop that sells Hue Food including Hue beef noodles and traditional banh beo rice cakes.
- Falafellim, 97 Pham Ngu Lao St., District 1. Homemade falafel, tahini and hummus in soft pita bread pockets. Sadly it has closed, but has reopened (in a sense) in the guise of a small Kosher restaurant down the alley at 121/37 Le Loi. Open only Mon-Thur 6:30-9:30PM.
- Pao restaurant & cafe, 158 Bui Vien, Dist 1. This restaurant is just open on May 2009 but very unique decor with all small instruments, traditional dress, hats, of the minority ethnic group in North of Vietnam. Truly Vietnamese food like spring rolls, hot pot, pho, 35,000-60,000 dong. They have a live Vietnamese instrument show on every Friday, Sunday.

- Pho 19, 19 Nguyen Trai St., District 5. A small space and very cheap place for Pho and Bo Kho. Excellent Pho and Bo Kho, a bowl costs only 25,000-30,000dong. Open only 6AM-11AM.
- Pho 2000, 3 locations, one sharing space with I Love Burger, one right next to Ben Thanh Market, and the last toward the end of Le Thanh Ton Street. The restaurant was once visited by a former US president, Bill Clinton. Has pho (including a seafood version), along with the usual Vietnamese rice dishes, including a superb vegetarian curry.
- Thao Nhi, 185/20 Pham Ngu Lau. -10PM. Vietnamese and Western food with excellent beefsteak, salads, Vietnamese crêpes, Dalat wine... Tasty, healthy, friendly and very cheap. The location is very quiet. Mains from ~40,000 dong (vegetarian~35,000 dong). Beer from 10,000 dong (jan/13).
- Bun Cha Van Anh on the corner of Truong Son Street - that's the main street to the airport - and Song Day Street. ☎ +84 8 486308. No A/C, no menu, no English, no toilet, no walls - just bun cha Hanoi (grilled porky bits with cool rice noodles, soupy stuff and fresh herby veggie stuff that you mix together with condiments to form whatever you like)

## Mid-Range

- Bi Saigon, 185/26 Pham Ngu Lao Str, District 1 (in an alley just off the main tourist street, Bui Vien). Extensive menu with a choice between Vietnamese, Italian, Mexican and other styles. Open plan kitchen so you can see your food being prepared.
- La Sen Restaurant (Nha Hang La Sen), (moved from 30 Ba Huyen Thanh Quan, Phuong 6 - Quan 3, location unknown). ☎ +84 8 930 6682. Opening hours 9:30AM-11PM. Clean medium-priced restaurant serving food from the regions of Hue, Saigon and Hanoi. Just in the centre of district 3. Friendly service, full A/C, 2 floors and room for about 100 persons.
- Quan An Ngon, District 1. Two different restaurants operate with the same name within a few blocks of each other, one at 160 Pasteur Street, and the other (recently reopened) on Nam Ky Khoi Nghia across from the Reunification Palace. Set in atmospheric old French villas, with similar menus Vietnamese food, including regional specialities prepared in numerous independently-operated food stalls around the perimeter. Both are popular and both tend to be jammed at peak hours requiring a wait for a table. (The name literally means "restaurant of delicious eating".) The one on Pasteur has dozens of kerosene lamps burning for "atmospheric" decoration at night, so if you have asthma or COPD or feel you got enough pollution already, better to try the other one. Mains from 45,000 dong.
- Sushi Bar, with four locations: corner of Le Thanh Ton and Ton Duc Thang in Q1, about six blocks northeast of the Opera House; on a large alley full of restaurants off Ton Duc Thang by the river and near the Legend Hotel; on the food-court floor of Zen Plaza on Nguyen Trai; and in the Saigon Court apartment building on Nguyen Dinh Chieu. Probably the best sushi value in Saigon. They serve a larger and more interesting variety than the typical American or European sushi restaurant, at half the price. Draft Tiger beer is 24,000 dong. Very popular, so you can expect to wait during the middle dining hours.
- JJ's Brazilian Barbeque, 279 Pham Ngu Lao. A Western-style barbeque restaurant that serves one of the best steaks in HCM. The all-you-can-eat Churascco buffet with free-flow salad bar cost only 550,000 dong. A beer and a meal from the Ala Carte menu should cost less than \$15.
- Une Journée à Paris, 234 Le Thanh Ton St. Q1, 100 m from Ben Thanh Market. Authentic French 'boulangerie, patisserie, et salon de thé'. French petit déjeuner at 50,000 dong.

## SPLURGE

- 1960 Presidential Club, 22nd Floor, Sailing Tower, 111A Pasteur, Dist.1 ([www.diamondlife.com.vn](http://www.diamondlife.com.vn)). Located on the top floor of a 22-storey building, from here you can have unobstructed view of the Reunification Palace down below. The venue is actually a combination of a restaurant specializing in Vietnamese and Italian cuisines, a spa offering traditional Vietnamese therapies as well as an out-door swimming pool with a great view of the city. If you are looking for a nice day of relaxation for your mind and body, go and give this place a try.
- Hard Rock Cafe, part of the Kumho Asiana Plaza complex, which is located at 39 Le Duan Avenue, Dist. 1. The usual American burgers and grill dishes. Around 290,000 dong for a burger meal. Good service and friendly staff. They also have live bands on selected evenings. Great choice if you are craving Western food, and want to pick up some memorabilia from the Rock Shop.
- Basilico, Ground Floor, InterContinental Asiana Saigon Residences, Corner Le Van Huu & Nguyen Du Str. Sophisticated restaurant offering an all-day snack menu of exquisite delicacies. Before noon, try local, imported tea or coffee blends along with a selection of freshly baked French patisseries and muffins. From 5:30pm until 8:30pm, enjoy the nightly entertainment followed by a live pianist.
- La Hosteria, on Le Thanh Ton a few blocks east of the Hilton. A gourmet Italian restaurant with excellent home-made pasta dishes in the range of 125,000 dong and main dishes 150,000+.
- L'En tete, 1st floor, 139 Nguyen Thai Binh, Q.1 (at the junction with Calmette). Excellent French restaurant in a area not normally associated with high dining. Great for a leisurely dining experience, good food with main courses ranging from 150,000-450,000 dong. Open 5PM-midnight.
- Temple Club, 29-31 Ton That Thiep, Q.1 (first floor, with an ice cream parlour below) has a 1930s ambiance with separate bar, restaurant, and lounge area sections. The food is fair but most people come to soak up the atmosphere.
- The Deck Saigon 38 Nguyen U Di, Thao Dien, An Phu, D2 (15 minutes from the centre of Saigon) ( Tel # 8 3 744 6632) ([www.thedecksaigon.com](http://www.thedecksaigon.com)) The only 5\* restaurant on the banks of the Saigon River. Modern fusion cuisine using the best local ingredients. Extraordinarily glamorous cocktails created by renowned New York mixologist, open air dining on large wooden Deck alongside the Saigon River or inside air conditioned area and bar. Arrive in style - The Deck can arrange to bring you and your guests right to your dinner table by boat. When you have a location as good as ours, right on the river, there's no other way to arrive.
- ZanZBar Restaurant & Bar 41 Dong Du Street, Q1 (diagonally opposite Sheraton Hotel) has modern casual-upscale feel with extensive range of international & Vietnamese cuisine (plenty for vegetarians to choose from). Eclectic crowd comprised of local Vietnamese, local expatriates and visiting tourists. Wine-by-glass and cocktail menu. At night the lit up columns create a great ambience.
- Yu Chu, First Floor, Inter Continental Asiana Saigon, Corner Hai Ba Trung & Le Duan Blvd. Yu Chu is renowned for the quality and presentation of its authentic Chinese and Peking cuisine. The restaurant marries contemporary style, stylish surroundings and elegant décor. As diners look on, the skillful Chef prepares fresh Dim sum, authentic Peking Duck, hand-pulled noodles and hot wok dishes within the open, impeccably designed show kitchen. Amongst the local, Yu Chu is the most famous for its authentic Peking duck and Dim Sum “All – You – Can Eat” where you can enjoy as much as you wish at either lunch or dinner.

# DRINKING IN HO CHI MINH CITY

## Microbreweries

There are two categories of beer places in Saigon. You have the regular local bottled beers and bia hoi which you can find easily. One unique phenomenon with Vietnam is all the local microbreweries that serve Czech or German styled beers. There are about 10 microbreweries in the city whereof several are located in the city center. A small glass of beer costs about 30,000 VND and food prices are normally a bit higher than on the average local restaurants. Most of them import both hops and malt from Czech Republic or Germany and the beers are more full bodied than the bottled local beers. The style is something between regular lagers and IPA/stout and the consistency is low, therefore the taste and quality of beer differ from month to month.

## Coffee Shops

Vietnam is the world's second largest exporter of coffee behind Brazil, and cà phê is very popular among the Vietnamese. It's a paradise for coffee-loving visitors. The local style is strong and sweet; key words to remember are: sữa (sweetened condensed milk), đá (ice), and nóng (hot, pronounced "nowm"). Cà phê đá is strong, sweet iced coffee; and cà phê sữa đá is the same with condensed milk. Cà phê (sữa) nóng is brewed fresh on your table brewed in a little metal apparatus placed over a cup; just lift it off when it has cooled enough to touch (and hence drink). Prices range from 10,000 to 20,000 dong for coffee in the local style.

- Cafe 5 Sao Near the Turtle Pond, on Pham Ngoc Thach. Plays loud techno music. Attractive but pretentious crowd.
- Bobby Brewery Coffee, on Bui Vien st., opened and operated by an American guy who is used to offering money for the charity. It's a nice place with good beverage. Used to show the movies on 2nd and 3rd floor.
- Gloria Jeans Cnr Dong Khoi and Nguyen Thiep (opposite the Sheraton). Popular international cafe chain.
- Kem Café Nearest place for many in downtown D1 to go with a local. Pull up a plastic chair and sit on the pavement. A table will appear. Practice "Cà phê đá" or "Cà phê sữa đá". If you want hot then attempt "nowm" but don't expect to be understood.
- Hideaway Café, 41/1 Pham Ngoc Thach, Q.3 - as its name implies, this place is hidden away and a good place to read, or have a quiet conversation or meal. Decent Western menu, although slightly pricey, is good. Free wifi.
- Highlands Coffee is an upscale, somewhat pricey chain serving Western-style as well as local-style brews in prime locations around the tourist district. They also serve food and pastries. Cappuccino costs above 30,000 dong but the food and coffee quality is disappointing and service is terrible, especially at their Vincom centre location.
- Trung Nguyen - The Vietnamese version of Starbucks, but with much better coffee. They have locations all over the city, but are not well represented in the heart of the tourist district. Figure on 10,000 dong for a basic cuppa, although there are plenty of variations including the infamous weasel coffee (cà phê chồn), made from coffee beans collected from civet excrement. Two convenient outlets are east side of Nguyen Hue right before City Hall, and corner of Thu Khoa Huan and Ly Tu Trong.

## Bars and Clubs

- 163 Cyclo Bar, 163 Pham Ngu Lao Street, 2 doors down from the Duna Hotel. Thumping music until 2AM with friendly staff. Sex workers catering to Caucasian men here. If you're not interested, just gently disengage.
- Allez Boo, corner Pham Ngu Lao, De Tham. For those that have been here before, you'll find the original bar is now Highlands coffee and an all new Allez Boo has opened on the opposite corner. It's shiny and brand-new, but retains the same feel as the original. There's a bar with A/C on the 2nd floor with DJ-type music, and an airy rooftop patio. Quite similar to its sibling establishment, Go2 Bar. Saigon green 45.000 dong.
- Apocalypse Now, 2C Thi Sach. Legendary and still packed on weekends, although aside from a few movie references it's not all that much to look at. Stays open late. Now opened their 2nd floor for dj, dancing, drinks with less crowded atmosphere. Cover charge of 150,000 dong.
- Eden, De Tham Street. Often busy, full of sporties, revellers, expats and others. Dark and deep and reasonably priced for the backpacker main drag. Open late.
- Fuse, 3A Ton Duc Thang Street, District 1 (formerly Cage). Full of parties. Lots of expats. Drinks are quite expensive charging around 80,000 dong for a cocktail.
- Go2 Bar, corner De Tham and Bui Vien. The main backpacker bar while Allez Boo was closed, still a great meeting place, as it's impossible to miss the four floors of neon lights on the outside. Large patio on the sidewalk at street level, a cozier bar on the second floor with occasional live music or big-screen sports, plus a rooftop patio (with retractable roof!) with individual BBQs up a steep set of stairs on the 5th floor. Open 24 hr. Crawling with prostitutes after dark until sun up. Saigon green 30.000 dong.
- Xu Bar, Hai Ba Trung street, near the Opera house. Great wine list. Nice ambiance & service. Not a club.
- Velvet, Ho Huan Nghiep/ Dong Khoi corner. Nice ambiance & music. Latest chic bar in town. Gets very busy, and at weekends you will need a booking.
- Bounce Club, on top of Parkson on Le Thanh Ton street. Very crowded with locals in the weekends. Large dance floor, great hip hop music, somewhat too crowded.
- Polo, Ham Nghi Street (above the Liberty Hotel). Mixture of expats and locals, starts getting busy quite early. Reasonably priced food and drink, good music spanning from the 80s/halal to the present. Noisy and smokey.
- Rio Saigon, A Brazilian flowery decor-themed bar/pub with a great Phillipino house band playing Pop/Rock such as Bon Jovi & Skid Row. It was apparently the original "17 Saloon" bar (now at Pham Ngu Lao) when it was still located along the Saigon River. Great service staff and excellent atmosphere. It is situated at 131 Ton That Dam St. (District 1), ☎+84 8 8211827,+84 8 8211812. You will be surprised that its located somewhere within a wet street market. Gets crowded around 21:00 and closes at midnight.
- Saigon Pho, this little hole in the wall is only a stone's throw from Allez Boo, but much more expat orientated. Open until late.

## WHERE TO SLEEP IN SAIGON

There are plenty of nice and reasonably priced local hotels available for tourists as well as the very expensive international chains like Sheraton and Hyatt. Do take note (especially lonely male travelers) that most hotels do not allow you to bring back a local female companion to stay overnight. Inquire about their 'guest privileges'. Many of the non-international chain properties (that are very nice) do allow guests.

### Budget

- Cosman Rucksack inn, 189 Bui Vien St, District 1, ☎ +84 8 66802368 (tuan@cosman.vn). Brand new place, great breakfasts for US\$7. Professional high calibre chef serving delicious foods at very reasonable prices. Staff very friendly and helpful, although English is not the greatest. Two free computers for all guests to use, free Wi-Fi. Nicer and cleaner than most places on the road. Around 20 beds, little privacy. Japanese capsule-like sleeps for US\$5.
- Mai Guesthouse, 241/41 Pham Ngu Lao, District 1, ☎ +84 8 38369176 (maiguesthouse@yahoo.com.vn). Newer Guesthouse run by a very friendly family in main tourist area of District 1. Rooms with A/C, refrigerator, cable TV, ensuite, viber internet and wifi. Highly recommended. Room prices from US\$16-28.(4 single bed / 28\$, 2 twin-bed / 04 persons / 24\$/night, double 02 persons/16\$/night). Visa & Mastercard accepted.
- An Phuong 2, 295 Pham Ngu Lao, District 1, ☎ +84 8 920 5509 / +84 8 836 9248 (anhphuong2@yahoo.com). Situated directly across from where the buses drop tourists, it is a friendly family-run guesthouse, very clean and homely. Free internet, cheap laundry and all rooms have double glazing. US\$15.
- Private Studio, Vo Van Kiet Street (two minutes ride from Ben Thanh market), checkin: 2:00 pm; checkout: 1:00 pm. Fully furnished studio with air conditioning, kitchen, washing machine and internet connectivity. It is located in a residential area on Vo Van Kiet Street and is accessible to business and entertainment centers. Friendly Host. Free House Keeping Services USD 25.
- Blue River Hotel, 283/2C Pham Ngu Lao, District 1, ☎ +84 8 3837 6483 or mobile +84 903 679994 (blueriver1126@yahoo.com). Amazing small hotel in an alley off Pham Ngu Lao. They can arrange an airport pickup for US\$15 (though an official taxi from the airport counter will run you only US\$8). Some staff members speak English and the service is good. \$25 for a room without a view. US\$30 for a room with a view that may or may not have a balcony.
- PP Backpackers, 283/41 Pham Ngu Lao (in an alley off PNL along with various other guest houses and hotels, there's a list over the entrance at #283), ☎ 0939815799 (ppbackpackers@gmail.com). Run by a Vietnamese family, this hostel offers clean dorms and rooms, can book tours and offers a big breakfast (even the so-called 'small breakfast') for US\$1. Dorm US\$6.
- Tam Anh Guesthouse, 241/21 Pham Ngu Lao, District 1, ☎ +84 8 3837 0756 (tamanhhotel@gmail.com). A clean and secure family-run guesthouse. Good A/C, free wi-fi. Laundry service provided. US\$11-15.
- Tan Dat My Hotel, 81-83 Ong ich Khiem, District 11 (About a 15min taxi ride to District 1), ☎ +84 8 3963 4424. Large rooms with a view, A/C, wifi, fridge, cableTV and a free rooftop breakfast next to the Dam Sen Park. French bakery 30 m away. American style supermarket 10 min walk on the same street. US\$17.

## Mid-Range

- Binh Hung Hotel, 9A Nguyen Thai Binh St., Tan Binh Ward., Dist 4, ☎ +848 3948 2515 (binhhunghotel2009@gmail.com). Nice, clean, modern hotel with fantastic service. As the writer was checking in, the front desk helped a backpacker not staying at the hotel arrange a bus ticket at no cost (hotel is not a travel agency, ticket was arranged through bus station by phone). Rooms are equipped with A/C, cable TV, and bathrooms with toilet, shower, and bathtub. Internet is lightning fast. Great bang for your buck. From US\$25.
- Thuan Thien Hotel, 277 Le Thanh Ton St., Ben Thanh Ward., Dist 1, ☎ +848 3822 8122, A/C rooms, cable TV, DVD, coffee/tea maker, mini-bar, and a private toilet and shower with bathtub. High-speed Internet, dry cleaning and laundry service, and a travel agency for booking tours. From US\$34.
- Asian Hotel, 146-148-150 Dong Khoi Street, Ben Nghe District, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, ☎ +84 8 3829 6979. Asian Hotel is located along Dong Khoi Street in the Ben Nghe District of Ho Chi Minh City. Every room has A/C, cable TV, and internet.
- Dai Nam Hotel, 79 Tran Hung Dao St., District 1, ☎ +84 8 3824 2525 (sales@dainamhotel.com.vn), 3 star. 5 min walk from Ben Thanh Market and the backpacker area on Pham Ngu Lao Street. Breakfast and free in-room wifi. The Gossip night club is in this hotel. US \$35-55.
- Continental Hotel, 132-134 Dong Khoi Street. An old-school colonial hotel dating back to 1880 and the setting of Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American*. Garden, huge rooms, nice balcony views. From US\$60 and up (taxes, service, breakfast included). On the minus side, there is no pool, and traffic noise can be irritating.
- Dong Do Hotel, 35 Mac Thi Buo Street, District 1. New hotel with clean and comfortable rooms. From US\$20-35.
- The First Hotel, 18 Hoang Viet St, Ward 4, Tan Binh District, ☎ +84 8 3844 1199. 4 star hotel, 104 A/C rooms, cableTV, mini-bar, shower with bathtub, and wifi. Casino and ballroom, fitness room, tennis court, swimming pool, airport transfer and car rental. From US\$75.
- Mai Hotel, 4A-4B Thi Sach Street, Ben Nghe Ward, District 1. Opened in 2008 and expanded with a second wing. Clean and comfortable rooms with A/C and bar fridge. Right around the corner is the *Apocalypse Now Club*. Breakfast included, free wifi in the lobby, while connections are a little patchy in the rooms. From US\$30-55
- Rex Hotel, 141 Nguyen Hue Boulevard. Ideally located in the heart of Ho Chi Minh City, next door to the People's Committee Hall. Another old standby, former haunt of the press corps and site of the daily news briefing during the Vietnam War. The 5th floor rooftop beer garden is famous and its symbol, the golden crown, is rotating again. The rooms are very pleasant and there is a swimming pool on the roof. Buffet breakfast. From US\$70.
- Xuan Loc Hotel, 47-49-51 Le Anh Xuan, District 1, ☎ +84 8 3827 4641, +84 8 3827 4642, +84 8 3827 5507, +84 8 3827 5508 (xuanlochotel@hcm.fpt.vn). 3 star hotel with clean and comfortable rooms. Breakfast available, internet and computers are provided. From US\$60.
- Mekong Lodge, 196/1/20 Cong Hoa St, Tan Binh Dist, ☎ +84 933 449 391. A good hotel for those love nature. from US\$60.

## Splurge

- Caravelle, 19 Lam Son Square @ Dong Khoi, across from the Opera House, in District 1. In-house restaurants and spas. 7 km from the airport. Deluxe rooms from US\$188 per night. May 2009 celebrated their 50th year in Saigon. During the war it was home to many war correspondents and the rooftop bar served as their local "watering hole".
- InterContinental Asiana Saigon Hotel, Corner of Le Van Huu St, Le Duan Boulevard and Hai Ba Trung St, District 1. Located at Asiana Kumho Plaza which also houses the Debenhams stores and the Hard Rock Cafe. Dinner buffet is US\$40++. Can walk to city centre.
- Hotel Majestic, 5 star hotel in District 1, at the waterfront at the end of Dong Khoi Street. It got its start in 1925, and though it has undergone a number of renovations since, it maintains the same basic look outside. Rooftop bar serves mediocre ice cream and drinks. Has a non-smoking wing.
- Renaissance Riverside Hotel, 8-15 Ton Duc Thang Street, District 1. On the river and near the main tourist-shopping district, a block off of Dong Khoi.
- Saigon Domaine Luxury Residences, 1057 Binh Quoi Street, Ward 28, Binh Thanh District, ☎ +81 8 483556 6163. 4 star serviced apartments, cableTV, radio, A/C, safe, hair dryer, internet, phone, mini-bar and coffee/tea maker. Swimming pool, fitness room, sauna, business facilities and currency exchange. Car rental and airport and city transfers available. From US\$169.
- Sheraton Saigon. On Dong Khoi, in the heart of the tourist shopping district. Complete with Prada shop in the arcade. Restaurants and around US\$40 for an all you can eat buffet dinner. Red and white wine included.
- Sofitel Plaza Saigon, 17 Le Duan Boulevard, District 1, ☎ +84 8 824 1555 (reservations@sofitelsaigon.com.vn, fax: +84 8 824 1666). 290 room hotel in the city centre. Airy if slightly small rooms, comfy beds, free wired internet. Several restaurants, including a buffet and a breakfast spread. US\$160-300.
- Somerset Chancellor Court Ho Chi Minh City, No 21-23 Nguyen Thi Minh Khai Street, district 1, ☎ +84 8 3822-9197/8 (enquiry.hochiminh@the-ascott.com, fax: + 84 8 3822-1755), The serviced residence is located in the heart of the business district. It offers 172 apartments ranging from studios to three-bedroom. Each apartment is fully furnished with an open kitchen concept, contemporary western style decor and balcony. Daily rates starts from 2521000 VND.
- New World Saigon Hotel, 76 Le Lai Street, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, ☎ +84 8 3822 8888 (reservations.saigon@newworldhotels.com, fax: +84 8 3823 0710).
- Hotel Nikko Saigon ( Ho Chi Minh ), 235 Nguyen Van Cu, District 1 (beside Nowzone Shopping Mall), ☎ +84 8 3925 7777 (reservation@hotelnikkosaigon.com.vn, fax: +84 8 3925 7766), checkin: 14:00; checkout: 12 noon. From \$160.
- Park Hyatt Saigon, 2 Lam Son Square, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (Adjacent to Opera House), ☎ +84 8 3824 1234 (saigon.park@hyattintl.com). checkin: 3:00 pm; checkout: 12noon. 5 star hotel which features a collection of contemporary Vietnamese art, a variety of non-smoking dining options including an alfresco setting, an Italian restaurant, Opera, the signature Vietnamese/Western restaurant, Square One, Park Lounge that serves Afternoon Tea, and a martini bar, 2 Lam Son. The hotel also consists of a 20 meter pool, fitness center and the Xuan Spa. US\$220-\$520.

## Useful Links

Flights to Ho Chi Minh City can be booked on [Fare Buzz](#), [Yatra](#), [Expedia](#)

Hotels in HCMC can be book on [Yatra](#), [Expedia](#), [Hotelpia](#), [Hostelworld](#), [Booking.com](#), [Hotels.com](#), [Agoda](#)

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