



Can Vietnam reinvent itself as an adventure destination?



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November 2, 2017

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Traditionally a destination associated with war history and culinary tourism, Vietnam is fast shedding its skin, updating its image, and becoming a hub for adventure-seekers.

The heavenly landscapes, the scarred history, the tastebud-dizzying cuisine: For years, my travel-o-meter has fixated upon the glories of Vietnam (largely the result of binge-watching the salacious quests of gonzo Viet-aficionado Anthony Bourdain.)

Yet despite my handful of Southeast Asian encounters to date, Vietnam remains—achingly—on my list of things to chew. And now it turns out there's a burgeoning new reason to drop it all and make the trip across.

Though not traditionally cast as a prime nook for adventure tourism, the scene is shifting fast. As the old trend of piña colada-sipping beachside vacays gives way to more adventurous long-haul outings worldwide, Vietnam is looking inward and asking: Why can't we be the next Southeast Asian adventure destination?



A traveler enjoys the sunset views atop Mua Cave in Vietnam's Ninh Binh province. Photo: Eila Liffander

Tourism on the rise

Tourism in Vietnam is skyrocketing. According to the World Tourism Organization's World Tourism Barometer, the country is one of the world's top 10 most rapidly growing tourist markets. It received over 2.2 million foreign visitors in January and February 2017, up almost 35 per cent from the same time the year before (and double the number in 2010.) In short, Vietnam is on a roll.

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Tracey Johnson, director of operations at Hanoi-based tailor-made tour company Wide Eyed Tours, has witnessed the transformations firsthand. "I've been here in Vietnam for the past 12 years—the first six as a tour leader and the other six managing a tour company," she says. "There have been massive changes in every aspect of this country. Vietnam has slowly been able to shake off its reputation as being just a 'war history' destination. People have started to realize there is a magnificent range of scenery and experiences to enjoy."



Once a destination known more for its food and war relics, the perception of Vietnam has changed, and continues to do so. Top photo: Oliver Pelling; Bottom: Rene Deanda

If you're one of these sensible people, you'll know all about Vietnam's spectacular and diverse landscapes: Some 2000 miles of stunning coastline, the rice terraces of the northern regions, a bounty of limestone karsts, beautiful bays, abundant waterfalls and jungle—all of which scream 'prime choice' for any avid adventure tourist (and fertile territory for a viable and eco-friendly adventure tourism industry.)

Local operators also seem to be taking heed. Johnson points out how abseiling is now hugely popular in and around Da Nang, Da Lat, and Cat Ba Island. There's also a new operator in Da Nang offering canyoning—a new drawcard activity for the area. So too are jeep, motorbike, and discovery tours sprouting near the caves at Phong Nha.

“More and more young backpackers are discovering the delights of riding motorbikes up and down the country,” adds Johnson. “There are many opportunities in Vietnam for adventure operators. It's also great to see Vietnam becoming a destination that people are returning to, as they realize that it takes more than just 10 days to really see everything.”



From the terraced rice paddies along the Khau Pha Pass to the coastline at the emerging resort town of Mui Yen in Binh Thuan province, Vietnam offers endless spectacular scenery. Top photo: Doan Tuan; Bottom: Ryan Dam

Potential, untapped

Yet while numbers overall are on the rise—and adventure operators and infrastructure continue to emerge—the adventure scene is just starting to feel the flow. As Vietnam’s online English-language newspaper VietNamNet Bridge points out, the sector still only accounts for around 10 per cent of the greater pie, with the potential for a far more diverse market remaining largely untapped.

As founder and chairman of Vietnam Bike Tours—one of the first specialized locally owned operators in the region—Ngo Trong Huy has also witnessed the boom, and the potential, firsthand. “We’ve been growing 17-25 per cent a year,” he says. “But in 2017 we have over 10 million foreign visitors—so I think there is still opportunity for more of our kind of [adventure] tourism.”

The figure, as Huy points out, is but a third of neighboring Thailand’s annual 30 million-or-so visitors. While that might seem like something to strive for, the reality is this disparity is probably working in Vietnam’s favor.

According to regional expert Adam Vaught of niche travel specialist Zicasso, Thailand might be the envy of the region numbers-wise, but Vietnam remains top choice for the “savvier traveller.”

“I don’t know if it was intentional or not, but I feel like Vietnam has done a good job of learning from what I would call ‘Thailand’s mistakes,’” he says. “I feel like Thailand’s tourism has developed in the same way Costa Rica’s has, where they both have sacrificed their culture to cater to what tourists want. Over time, it leaves a place feeling very accessible to mass tourists, but lacking authenticity.”



While one traveler hikes through Da Lat in Vietnam's picturesque Central Highlands, others are taking to abseiling, kayaking, and motorcycling to get their Vietnamese adventure hit. Top photo: Thanh Tran; Middle and bottom: Courtesy of Wide Eyed Tours

Striking the balance

If you ask Ngo Trong Huy's opinion, the strength of his industry (the adventure sector and beyond) relies on a united trio of influences: An influx of solid capital, stable governance, and savvy marketing.

As Forbes' Brett Davis highlights historically, Vietnam has not always done a good job of marketing itself as an international travel destination, largely the result of budget limitation.

It's true that Vietnam's National Administration of Tourism (VNAT) has been proactive policy-wise. For example, in October 2017, they launched a two-year plan to build new infrastructure along the East-West corridor, a key route to link Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar overland. However, broader marketing efforts remain thwarted by insufficient funding.

VNAT's budget—\$2 million per year—is dire compared to the larger regional players. National tourism promotion for Thailand is \$69 million per year, while Malaysia's is \$105 million, and in Indonesia, it's \$200 million.



*No longer confined to guesthouses: Travelers can now camp
below the limestone karst cliffs in Vietnam. Photo: Siam
Choudhury*

In lieu of support, the industry has started to take the initiative itself. The newly formulated Tourism Advisory Board (TAB) is a not-for-profit crew of local stakeholders, tour operators, and business owners, and they recently collaborated with VNAT to create Vietnam's glossy new visitor website to show off Vietnam's appeal to first-time and return travelers.

But perhaps Vietnam is showing that a 'less is more' approach to tourism is the sustainable way to go. Boom markets like Thailand and Costa Rica, as Vaught reminds, learned the hard way how delicate the dance can be between robust promotion and over-saturation, and that authenticity—the travel industry's favorite buzzword, particularly within the adventure sector—remains the bedrock of a viable industry.



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