





## Nha Trang: Beautiful and Affordable Living on the Vietnamese Coast

By Wendy Justice

 ${
m M}$ ost foreigners who live in Nha Trang - and there are close to a thousand of them - seem to agree on one thing. Once they have moved here, they say that they never want to leave. The reasons are many - you can be footsteps away from one of the most beautiful bays in the world or a short drive from some of the prettiest landscapes in Southeast Asia.

It's easy to become a welcomed part of the large and active foreign community. Nha Trang's very low cost of living allows you to enjoy a high-quality lifestyle at a There are enough opportunities for very affordable price.

The mountains that serve as a backdrop to the coastal city of Nha Trang are picturesque, with interesting towns and villages, beautiful lakes and streams, and cool pine forests that offer a pleasant summer retreat. A hike in the jungle reveals cascading waterfalls and isolated swimming holes. On the beach, there are a full range of activities, with some of the best snorkeling and diving in all of Vietnam located around the islands just off-shore.

outdoor adventure to keep even the

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most energetic retiree busy. Life here can be as adventurous – or as lazy – as anyone could desire.

Nha Trang is a special place – it's a melting pot of nationalities and cultures. You can eat at a different restaurant every day, enjoying a huge variety of Vietnamese and international cuisines that reflect the tastes of Nha Trang's diverse population. French speakers are as comfortable here as English speakers; large numbers of French and French-Canadian expatriates reside alongside the Europeans, Russians, Australians, Indians, and Americans who live here. A large number of Vietnamese are fluent in English, French, or both, making communication less of a challenge than it is in many other Asian cities. Australian expats Ron and Marie Litchfield explain here what bought them to Nha Trang and why they hope to stay for many more years.



A melting pot of nationalities

Housing in Nha Trang can be anything from a tiny apartment to an expansive mansion, and expats can be found at all levels of the income spectrum. Vietnam is one of the least expensive countries in an inexpensive part of the world, and living in Nha Trang costs less than living in the larger cities of Ho Chi Minh or Hanoi. Modern and comfortable fully furnished houses can be found for under US\$400 per month, and even the most expensive luxury homes in town rarely rent for more than US\$1,000. Add another three or four hundred dollars for food, transportation, and entertainment, and living expenses will be low enough to suit even the most frugal retiree.

It's a small city, but more amenities are available here than in many Vietnamese cities much larger than Nha Trang. There are modern supermarkets and upscale clothing stores, and convenient, vibrant traditional markets. There are numerous spas and an excellent hot spring spa and resort. Vietnam's largest amusement park and aquarium is in Nha Trang, and there is even a miniature golf course here – the first one in Asia.



One of the most beautiful bays in the world

Nha Trang is a social place, and with such a large foreign population, there are plenty of opportunities to make friends. Nha Trang has been a popular resort town for almost a century, and foreigners have always been made to feel welcome. Spend a few months here, and you'll likely have as many Vietnamese friends as you will expats. With relatively straight-forward immigration laws, it's easy to stay in Vietnam long-term and join the evergrowing number of foreigners who have decided to make Nha Trang their home.

#### **History and Legends**

Nha Trang has been inhabited since around 192 A.D., when a breakaway Chinese colony, the Kingdom of Lin Yi, presided over the area. From the 7th century up until the mid-19th century, Nha Trang was an integral part of the Kingdom of Champa. The people of Champa are the descendants of ancient Malayo-Polynesian settlers who most likely reached the Southeast Asian mainland from Borneo. Settling along the coastal and mountainous regions of Vietnam and into Laos, the Cham were primarily a seafaring people dedicated to trade, and maintained few permanent settlements of any size away from the coast. The Cham gave the name *Ya Trang*, meaning "Reed River" (now called the Cai River), to this area. The name of Nha Trang was adopted in 1653.

The Cham are a distinct minority group in southern Vietnam, currently numbering around 77,000 individuals. The modern Cham people have largely assimilated into mainstream Vietnamese culture. However, many of the Cham have retained

their unique ethnic rites, spoken and written language, and continue to practice the religious beliefs they have held since the early days of their existence.



The Po Nagar Cham Towers

Nha Trang was once the capital city of the Champa Empire centered at the site of the famous Po Nagar Cham Tower complex. The complex was founded around 781 AD by the Champa king Satyavarman. Four of the original towers at Po Nagar have been restored and the area is once again open to visitors and devotees. The towers are located in the middle of modern-day Nha Trang atop a hill overlooking the bay on the northern bank of the River Cai.

The original founding of Nha Trang is steeped in legend. According to J. Hackin and Paul Louis Couchoud, co-authors of the text, *Asiatic Mythology 1932*:

"Cham tradition claims that the founder of the Cham state was Lady Po Nagar. She originated from Khanh Hoa province, in a peasant family in the mountains of Dai An. Spirits assisted her when she sailed on a drift piece of sandalwood to China, where she married a Chinese crown prince, the son of the Emperor of China, with whom she had two children, and then became Queen of Champa. When she returned to Champa to visit her family, the Prince refused to let her go, but she flung the sandalwood into the ocean, disappeared with her children and reappeared at Nha Trang to her family. When the Chinese prince tried to follow her back to Nha Trang, she was furious, and turned him and his fleet into stone."

The end of the Champa Kingdom came after four centuries of battles between the Cambodian Khmer Empire, the Vietnamese people, and the Cham. The Po Nagar Cham Tower complex remained a central place of worship for the

Cham until the Vietnamese emperor Minh Mang defeated the kingdom in 1832.

The area controlled by the Kingdom of Champa was subsequently annexed into Vietnam. One of Nha Trang's most famous residents, beloved throughout Vietnam, was Alexandre Yersin (1863-1943). Dr. Yersin was a renowned physician, bacteriologist, astronomer, explorer, and agriculturist. He is most famous for discovering the bacillus that is responsible for causing bubonic plague. Ông Năm, or Fifth Grandfather as he is affectionately called in Vietnam, came to live in Indochina in 1889 and spent the next 50 years as a resident of Nha Trang. Initially living in a simple thatch hut, he learned to speak Vietnamese fluently and became deeply involved in promoting the health and welfare of the people of Nha Trang.

Besides making important medical and scientific discoveries, he introduced rubber and quinine-producing trees to Vietnam and was instrumental in the founding of the French hill station and agricultural center of Dalat. The epitaph on his tombstone, located on the outskirts of Nha Trang in the village of Suoi Dau, reads, "Benefactor and humanist, venerated by the Vietnamese people." His home in Nha Trang is now the site of the Yersin Museum, which adjoins the Pasteur Institute.



Yersin: Venerated benefactor and humanist

Dr. Yersin founded the Pasteur Institute of Nha Trang in 1895, and in 1934, he was nominated as its honorary director and served on its administrative board. The Pasteur Institute of Nha Trang continues to be an active medical center, where vaccines and hygiene programs are provided to the residents of the country's southern region. Medical research is still

carried out here, and medical advice is provided to about 70 patients a day.



A French Gothic Church

The Nha Trang Bay and the surrounding areas were sparsely populated for many years, and comprised of remote fishing villages surrounded by lush jungles and abundant wildlife, where tigers and other game roamed freely. This isolation came to an end in the early 1920s, when French colonialists "discovered" the natural beauty and potential of the area. They were impressed by the beautiful, sandy beaches, attractive islands, and stunning bay, and determined that it would be a perfect location for a seaside resort. The French began to transform the area at the mouth of the River Cai from a sleepy fishing village to a resort town.

During their colonial rule of Vietnam, Nha Trang saw an abundance of French visitors. In 1924, the French established Nha Trang as a "townlet" and the administrative capital of Khanh Hoa Province. In 1937, Nha Trang was upgraded to the status of "town," though it was not until 1999 that Nha Trang was officially recognized as a city. Nha Trang is unique in Vietnam in that it is the only city in the entire country whose name is spelled without any accents or diacritics.

The French left their architectural mark on this region, as well. The beautiful Nha Trang Cathedral, built between 1928 and 1933 in French Gothic style, is still in use today. Other grand French-colonial mansions, such as the National Oceanographic Museum and the People's Committee building, are found throughout Nha Trang.

A major airbase was built in Nha Trang in 1949 by the French. It was used as an air force military training school until the French left the country in 1954. From 1955 until 1975, Nha Trang was the site of an airbase used by the Republic of Vietnam Air Force and by the United States during the Vietnam War. This airbase was once one of the busiest airports in Asia – so saturated that air traffic frequently had to be diverted to other nearby airfields. After the war, it was used by the North Vietnamese Air Force, and later as a civil airport until 2004. The airfield still exists today, but only sees limited use. Cam Ranh International Airport, built on the grounds of another old American airbase about 20 miles south of Nha Trang, has replaced the old airport.

For the most part, Nha Trang saw very little combat during the Vietnam-American war. Fighting broke out briefly during the time of the Tet Offensive in early 1968, resulting in heavy damage to the tiled roof of Long Son Pagoda at the base of the hill where the white Buddha overlooks the city. The Buddha's base was once used as a library, but was closed after the Tet Offensive when it was discovered that the Viet Cong used the library to plan attacks on the city. The rebuilt pagoda is dedicated to the seven Buddhist monks who sacrificed themselves by fire protesting against the U.S.- supported Diem regime.



Buddha looks out over the city

As a result of the airbase here, Nha Trang was often the first place – or the last – that American servicemen saw in Vietnam. It also became a popular place for soldiers to go in search of fun, rest, and relaxation during the war. The local

people, happy for the commerce and the popularity of their town, built restaurants and bars and all the other things they knew soldiers would enjoy. That hospitality still prevails today - one of the reasons why people find Nha Trang to be such a welcoming place.

The United States employed many of the local people as translators. As a result, English is more widely understood in Nha Trang amongst older people than in many other places in Vietnam. Many of the older Vietnamese living here will proudly share their stories of "working for the Americans" during the war.

of Nha Trang is currently 392,000. Estimates project that major town to the north of Nha Trang is Ninh Hoa, about 30 the city will have a population of 630,000 by the year 2025; miles (50 km) away. only time will tell whether Nha Trang will be able to maintain its small-town easy-going ambiance. There is a great deal of construction all along the beachfront, with new hotels, restaurants, and shopping centers springing up almost overnight. The national government seems to have taken a special interest in the area, recognizing the enormous potential of this city and its residents. The provincial government is quite progressive as well. It is to their credit that Nha Trang has such a beautiful and long oceanside park and wide, manicured roads.

With government and private investment flowing into the province, Nha Trang will hopefully grow not only bigger, but better - better infrastructure, better environment, and a higher standard of living for the local Vietnamese people.

#### A Beautiful Setting

Nha Trang, the capital city of Khanh Hoa Province, is located in south-central Vietnam, about 270 miles (435 km) north of Ho Chi Minh City and 865 miles (1,392 km) south of Hanoi. It lies 816 miles (1,313 km) to the east of Bangkok, Thailand. The South China Sea, with its warm waters and gentle waves, serves as the eastern boundary of the city. Several islands lie just off shore, providing natural barriers to potentially damaging storms. The islands lend even more mystique to this area - in fact many travel publications claim that Nha Trang has one of the most beautiful bays in the world.

The Cai River runs right through Nha Trang, its final destination before reaching the ocean. Originating in the mountains to the west, this peaceful river passes by traditional fishing villages and unspoiled agricultural valleys.

The coastal area consists of dramatic bays and wide sandy beaches, separated by rocky headlands. The roads along the shoreline offer some wonderful vantage points, affording Buddha looks out over the city sweeping views of the many islands dotting the horizon.

Lush jungles with waterfalls and opportunities for quiet solitude lie north of Nha Trang. The land here is sparsely populated. There are a few national parks and wildlife sanctuaries along the peninsulas of the north coast, many of them guite remote -Nha Trang is the capital of Khanh Hoa Province. The population you might need to charter a boat to visit them. The only nearby



Delicious, cascading and cool mountain waters

To the west Nha Trang is bordered by the foothills and mountains of the Central Highlands, creating a lovely backdrop for the city. There are many places to explore in the highlands, and mountain towns offer a pleasant respite from the warmer, tropical weather in the city. It is roughly 75 miles (120 km) from Nha Trang to the high country.

There are a few hills on the immediate outskirts of the city and along the banks of the Cai River, though for the most part, Nha Trang City is quite level, lending itself well to cycling. Bicycles are almost as common here as motorbikes and automobiles as a means of transportation.

#### An Almost Perfect Climate

Nha Trang's location - in the coastal plain between the centralmountains and the shores of the South China Sea - results in one of the most comfortable climates in Vietnam.

The average year-round temperature in Nha Trang is 79F (26°C). Temperatures rarely dip below 68F (20 °C) or rise above 86F (30°C). The winter months, November through February, are cooler and drier than the rest of the year. Winter highs range from the mid 70s to low 80s (24 °C to 28 °C), with evenings occasionally cool enough for a light sweater or jacket. The warmest months, April through June, have average highs in the mid 80s (28 °C), with low average temperatures in the low to middle 70s (24 °C). Daytime temperatures can reach the mid 90s (34 °C) during this time. Sea breezes provide a refreshing, cooling effect, with the windiest days conveniently occurring during the warmer and wetter summer months.



Tran Phu Street - perfect for gentle cycling

While the temperature does not vary widely from one season to another, the amount of precipitation does. December through April is the driest time of the year, with February the driest month receiving an average of only five inches (127 mm) of rain. There is a dramatic increase in the amount of precipitation from May through November, with the rainiest months being August and September when an average of nearly 80 inches (2,032 mm) of rain falls. Increased rainfall means increased humidity – as a result, late summer months feel hotter, with July and August having the highest humidity of the year.

Rainstorms, when they do come, tend to be typical of monsoon climates. The skies open up abruptly, a torrent of rain falls for the next hour or so, and then the downpour stops as suddenly as it started. Two hours after a rainstorm, the skies are blue, with steam rising from the drenched pavement. Day-long drizzles

may occur, especially in the winter, but they are relatively rare. Of more concern are the typhoons that strike almost every year sometime from mid-October to mid-December. Although most typhoons track to the north of Nha Trang, these storms can bring heavy rainfall and high winds to the area. Since Nha Trang is protected by several outlying islands, it doesn't get the high waves and damage from typhoons that may occur elsewhere along the Vietnam coast. These islands also protect Nha Trang from the risk of tsunamis.

Earthquakes are extremely rare in this area. At the most, there could be light tremors resulting from earthquakes originating in China.

#### **About Town**

Nha Trang residents find that there are more than enough activities in town to keep them busy. The beach is lovely year-round – perfect for a stroll along the soft sand or on one of the many footpaths and jogging trails along the pretty seaside park, which stretches along almost the entire length of the six mile-long Nha Trang beach. The park is full of sculptures, ornamental landscaping, and swaying palm trees. There are plenty of places to stretch out – you can rent a lounge chair and enjoy fresh seafood and cold drinks supplied by a passing vendor or purchase something from one of the many restaurants set along the beach. Several places rent jet-skis, parasails, and other water sport equipment. The steady sea breezes make Nha Trang beach a popular spot for kite enthusiasts, too.



Kites and sand sculptures at the Beach Festival

You can easily charter a boat to explore the bay and it's possible to go on any one of a number of snorkeling or diving trips – Nha Trang is well-known for the excellent diving found around its many nearby islands. Some of these islands are uninhabited; others have small, traditional villages. Numerous companies offer boating excursions for diving, snorkeling, fishing, drinking, or leisure. There is also a marina in Nha Trang, where you can berth your own boat.



You can be as adventurous - or as lazy - as you like

A cable car over the ocean – reputed to be the longest of its type in the world – connects the city of Nha Trang to Vinpearl, on Hon Tam Island. Here, you can stay in the luxury <u>Vinpearl Resort</u>, or visit for a day of fun. There is a large amusement park and water park at <u>Vinpearland</u> and a "4-D" movie theater. Vinpearl is also popular for its spa, shopping, and fine dining. The largest aquarium in Vietnam is also on the grounds of this "somethingfor- everyone" resort. The park is not quite up to Disneyland standards, but it's probably one of the best amusement parks in Southeast Asia. Vinpearl is a major attraction in Nha Trang, drawing its fair share of western visitors, and is a major vacation destination for Vietnamese families from throughout the country.



Thap Ba Hotspring

There are natural hot springs and geothermal mud baths at the Thap Ba Hot Spring Center. This is a popular place located about 15 minutes from downtown. You can enjoy a mud bath, mineralwater soak and a massage, relax under a hot waterfall, have a steam bath, or swim in one of the naturally warm pools. Prices are very reasonable, and the views are lovely. Nearby is the Cai River Marina, which has a cute 18-hole miniature golf course – one of the first in Southeast Asia. You can also rent a canoe, kayak, or jetski here, or take a boat tour up the river. Other water activities around Nha Trang include the Phu Dong Water Park and Waves Watersports, which offers windsurfing, sea kayaking, waterskiing, and sailing lessons.

There are several Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist temples in Nha Trang, as well as a giant Buddha image set on top of a hill in the Long Son Pagoda complex. This graceful statue can be seen from almost anywhere in the city. There are also some very attractive churches, including Nha Trang Cathedral, one of the grand Gothic buildings erected by the French colonialists in the early 20th century.

Nha Trang now has a golf course and driving range which is located at the <u>Diamond Bay Resort</u>, midway between Nha Trang and the Cam Ranh airport. Currently, the golf resort has nine holes open, with the remainder of the course scheduled to open soon. Constructed alongside the beach, it offers beautiful views of the bay. There is also a spa, five-star hotel, and a restaurant on the grounds.

Taking a drive in the countryside is always an adventure. You'll see beautiful beaches and enjoy panoramic overlooks of the bay to the east. Peaceful rice paddies, rolling hills, and sugar cane fields grace the views to the west. You may happen across a cave temple (there is one on the way to the Thap Ba Hot Springs) or find a tiny village where locals wave to you as you pass through. The main highway bypasses the city, though you can access it easily for trips north and south. However, it's a busy road with narrow shoulders and lots of trucks and buses barreling past. Motorbikes are relegated to driving on the shoulders. This can be a bit terrifying, especially if you are new to driving in this country.

Although there aren't any expat clubs or many organized activities here, you'll find plenty of foreigners who will be delighted to see a new face in town. There are lots of opportunities for socializing at one of the many restaurants, coffee shops, and bars. Expats who have been here awhile

find the Vietnamese people are also friendly and welcoming and soon develop an assortment of Western and Eastern friends. When you are ready to explore further afield there's plenty more to see and do in the area surrounding Nha Trang.



Panoramic view of the bay from central Nha Trang

#### Medical and Dental Care

Most uncomplicated illnesses and ailments can be treated in Nha Trang. There is an army hospital here as well as the 1,000-bed Khanh Hoa General Hospital, both of which are capable of providing adequate general care. The newest medical facility in town, the VK Medical Diagnosis Center, opened its doors in mid-2010. Routine lab-work, x-rays, EKGs, ultrasounds, and full diagnostic screenings are handled on-site, and they also have an emergency room. They have four English-speaking doctors – three general practitioners and one chiropractor.



Excellent medical care is found in Nha Trang

A visit to the doctor here costs 200,000 VND (about US\$10). Many expatriates living here say that they are quite comfortable receiving care in these facilities for general medical issues, broken bones, and infections. Additionally, there are several excellent physicians with various specialties scattered throughout the city. Bs. Le Phu, at 14 Bach Dang Street,

is a very skilled Englishspeaking eye, ear, nose, and throat physician. A visit to his office, with a full examination, costs 40,000 VND (US\$2).

At this time, there are no facilities in Nha Trang capable of handling life-threatening medical conditions or severe trauma. In the event of a serious medical emergency, the general procedure in Nha Trang is to be stabilized, and then transported to Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). The French Hospital in HCMC has a good reputation, and has the equipment and expertise to handle most serious medical conditions and can manage advanced trauma.

However, most foreigners that we have spoken to here say that if given the choice, if seriously ill or injured, they would prefer to be treated in Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, or Singapore. For this purpose, it makes sense to carry a health insurance policy that includes coverage for medical evacuation. Without insurance, if the need arose, it could cost many thousands of dollars to be airlifted to another country. Fortunately, Nha Trang has an international airport that can be utilized for medical evacuations.



Better than most medication

Dental care in Nha Trang is surprisingly good and affordable by any standard. The dental clinics in Nha Trang can handle any dental condition, from dentures to dental implants. There are several excellent dentists here, whose clinics have modern equipment, hygienic conditions, and extremely reasonable prices. Most places will provide a check-up without x-rays for free. The Saigon Dental Center, for example, has an English-speaking dentist, and foreigners living here say that he gives great care. A professional cleaning and polishing costs 100,000 VND (about US\$5), simple fillings cost the same as cleaning, and a titanium porcelain crown costs 2 million VND (US\$86). Saigon Dental Center has two locations in the city.

The main clinic is located in the tourist area on Nguyen Thien Thuat Street and a second clinic is located near the Dam Market.

Prescriptions are rarely required for medication. Pharmacies are located throughout the city. However, many medications available in North America have not yet made it to this corner of the world. If you require regular medication, be sure that you have both the generic and chemical name for it. The local pharmacy may either carry that exact medication or may be able to find a suitable substitute. Otherwise, you may wish to consider ordering your usual medication online and having it shipped here.

Nha Trang is full of tiny little pharmacies that sell basic drugs – aspirin, cough and cold remedies and so on, but they may not have much of a selection of other medications. In general, the larger and busier the pharmacy, the greater likelihood that they will stock the medications that you need. There are a number of larger pharmacies with knowledgeable staff along Quang Trung Street. The large and very busy pharmacy at 68 Quang Trung, right across the street from the old Maximark, is recommended by local hospitals.

When buying medications locally, always check the package for signs of tampering, be sure that the lot numbers match and the medication has not passed its expiration date. Counterfeit medications do exist in Vietnam, although this does not seem to be a widespread problem in Nha Trang. In general, medications here cost a fraction of what they cost in the West, and chances are good that they will be authentic. When in doubt about authenticity, though, get your medications at the hospital or at one of the larger pharmacies.

If you have an urge for a massage, you'll find a wide selection of spas and a multitude of individual practitioners. A skilled sixtyminute massage by a blind masseur costs only 40,000 VND (US\$2). A one-hour massage at an upscale spa will generally be less than US\$20 (payable in U.S. dollars). You may want to ask locally for a recommendation, as many places advertising massage offer less reputable services as well.

#### **Shopping and Living**

It wasn't long ago that the only way to buy groceries in Nha Trang was to head to the market - a maze of dimly-lit aisles, vendors crammed into every conceivable nook and

cranny hawking their wares, a cacophony of sound, smells, and stimulation that would be nervewracking for anyone not accustomed to shopping in this way.



Efficient, western-style shopping

Things have changed here in the last few years. The markets are still going strong, and locals still flock to them to buy their fresh-baked baguettes, vegetables, produce, meat, and household goods. But there are now western-style supermarkets here, with good selections at fixed, clearly marked prices. Maximark was the first of these large super-centers, and today, there are two of them in Nha Trang. Both stores are air-conditioned. The newest one, near the train station, has a large grocery store on the ground level, and a well-stocked department store and food court that spans the three floors above it.

In the past few months, a Citimart has opened near the Sheraton Hotel on Tran Phu Street. This is a large and well-organized modern supermarket, located in the upscale Nha Trang Center Mall. This new mall also boasts numerous namebrand shops, a KFC, food court, and arcade. A bowling alley, cinema, luxury hotel, and serviced apartments are scheduled to open soon. Both of the Maximarks and the Citimart accept credit cards...once a novelty in this developing country.

Nowadays, even the locals head to the supermarkets to buy some of their groceries, although the traditional markets are still their primary shopping venue. Many foreigners will go to the markets to buy certain items – like those delicious fresh baguettes I mentioned – while getting the majority of their food at the grocery stores.

If you want to experience the market at its best, be there well before noon. The Vietnamese tend to be early risers, and they like to get their chores out of the way first thing. There are a several large markets in Nha Trang – anyone can point you to the nearest one, depending on where you live.



The early bird gets the worm

Most markets will be divided into two sections – the wet market, where meat, poultry and fish are sold – and the dry market, which will have everything else. There is usually a corner of the market where inexpensive, simple meals are prepared. The market will often spill out beyond its boundaries and into the surrounding neighborhood. Specialty shops, small cafes, and itinerant street vendors are all drawn to these bustling centers of commerce. Here Efficient, western-style shopping is a comprehensive list of grocery items from the Maximark store.

#### Clothes, Crafts, and Copies

Clothes are very inexpensive in Nha Trang. In fact, many clothes sold in the West are made in Vietnam. Quality is often quite good, and many clothing stores have wide selections. However, if you wear larger sizes, it can be quite challenging to find clothes that fit, since most Vietnamese are much smaller and thinner than western people. If you have large feet, you may also have difficulties buying anything other than flip-flops. It's a good idea for "western-sized" people to pack an adequate supply of shoes and clothing, and plan to make an occasional trip to "the city" when it's time for new clothes.

Since Nha Trang receives a lot of western tourists, there are a few shops that sell large or even some extra-large styles, but in general, the supply here is quite limited. Alternatively, you could visit one of several tailors in Nha Trang (or go to Hoi An, where there are literally hundreds of tailors) and get your clothing custom-made. As with everything in Vietnam, the cost for tailormade clothing is less than you would expect.

Many fine artists and craftsmen call Nha Trang their home. There are renowned photographers and calligraphers, skilled weavers, sculptors, and ceramicists. It's worth a visit to the Long Thanh Gallery to view the outstanding photography of Vietnam's most prominent photographers. You can also stop in and have a coffee with Frenchman Thiery Beyne, the talented photographer at Artful Gallery who has some very impressive photos that capture the heart and soul of Vietnam. There are many fine handicraft stores along Huong Vuong, Nguyen Thien Thuat, and Tran Phu Streets.



A temple at the mouth of the River Cai

Books, movies, "name brand" clothing and accessories are commonly copied versions of the originals, available here for much less than you would expect to pay back home. As a rule, if it sounds too good to be real, it probably isn't! Although you can't rent a movie anywhere in the city, several places sell them at very inexpensive prices.

There is a large selection of movies, many of them new releases, on the third floor of the new Maximark building. A DVD here costs 12,000 dong – about US\$0.60. As is the case with many items in Vietnam, almost all of the DVDs sold in Nha Trang are unauthorized copies. It can be difficult, or even impossible, to find a non-pirated DVD here. This presents no problems if you are living in Vietnam, but it is something to keep in mind if you have thoughts of bringing your collection back to your home country. Many stores selling DVDs also sell music CDs – at about the same price as DVDs.

### Bargaining is the norm...

If you do shop at the traditional market, it's important to have a sense of what something should cost. Ask a trusted Vietnamese friend what a fair price would be for a particular item. They'll usually give you a price range. When you find the item, it isn't uncommon to be charged the same or even less than what you expect – usually a bit less than that same item would cost in the grocery store. Although bargaining is the norm, there are some vendors who will initially quote you a very fair price, with the expectation that negotiating is unnecessary. As you become more familiar with the culture of the market, you'll become more comfortable with how business is conducted.

If you're not accustomed to shopping in an Asian market, consider taking a day or two to watch how buyers and sellers interact before attempting to buy anything. You'll see shoppers pick up a product, examine it closely, then negotiate a fair price. You'll notice that shoppers bargain harder on household items and clothing than they usually do for food. Knowing a few words of Vietnamese will really help when you begin your negotiations – just knowing your numbers and being able to say a handful of Vietnamese words will often result in a significant price reduction.

Whether you know a few Vietnamese words or not, it's a good idea to bring a calculator with you. You can then ask the vendor to enter the amount that she is asking for the item. A good-natured look of shock, while uttering the phrase mak qua! (expensive!), will generally bring the price almost down to earth. Saying that you're sorry but you won't pay the price – with a smile – will often have the desired results, as well. Next, give the price that you would like to pay (or a bit less than that) and hand your calculator back to the vendor. She'll either agree or enter a price above your price, which you can either agree to or not.

Regardless of whether you purchase or decline the item, etiquette requires that business is always conducted with a smile – and if you don't purchase the item, an even larger smile and an apology of some sort is protocol. Getting angry or breaking off communications with indignation would cause both the vendor and the buyer to lose face. Think of it as a friendly game and approach it with a sense of fun - it's not a competition.

If you meet a vendor you like and visit them regularly, a relationship will form that often results in lower prices, better quality and maybe even a friendship. Other vendors in the area will begin to notice you and want to do business with you, especially if you bargain gracefully. However, no matter how well you bargain, you will likely be charged a bit more than a local Vietnamese. Don't take it personally – it's always been this way here. Bargaining is an art form and takes practice, patience, and a sense of humor. You wouldn't want to haggle over a very small amount – 1,000 dong, for example, is less than US\$0.05. On the other hand, you wouldn't want to spend 50,000 dong for a small container of yogurt that you could buy at the supermarket for 4,500 dong.

Many foreigners have their housekeepers or Vietnamese sweethearts do their shopping at the market for them. Locals have been marketing since they were toddlers, and they are experts at it. They'll often dress up in their oldest, scruffiest clothes (so that they look poor) and they'll come back at the end of their trip with bags of food at impressively low prices. A friend in Nha Trang related his experience one day at the market: "I saw a jacket that I liked and asked how much it cost. I was told it was 500,000 dong. I haggled and haggled and got the price down to 300,000 dong, which I thought was quite reasonable. I told the vendor that I would think about it and left. Then I had my wife, who is Vietnamese, go talk to the seller. She came back with the jacket in hand, after giving the lady 50,000 dong!"

#### Bringing your pet to Nha Trang

Pet ownership is on the rise in Vietnam. Larger supermarkets carry dog and cat food, but some items, like cat litter, are not available. Veterinarians may be few and far between. If you want to bring your cat or dog to Vietnam, you (and your pet) will need to meet Vietnamese regulations in addition to complying with any requirements imposed by the airlines.

Your pet must be vaccinated for rabies at least 30 days, but not longer than 12 months, prior to entering the country. A USDA (if you are traveling from the US) or CFIA (if you are traveling from Canada) accredited veterinarian must then complete the Vietnam International Health Certificate. By completing this form, the veterinarian is certifying that the pet is healthy, free of parasites, and that there is no evidence of diseases communicable to humans. If you are not traveling

from either of these countries, the Governing Authority of your country should endorse the forms. You must also include a copy of your pet's rabies certificate. Although other vaccinations are recommended, only the rabies vaccine is required by Vietnamese authorities. Although it isn't required, it is suggested that your pet is microchipped prior to traveling.

Include the pet's inoculation record and the USDA-endorsed Vietnam International Health Certificate and attach it to a completed Pet Passport form. Technically, there is no such thing as a "Pet Passport" but you can create a passport-like document, with the help of your veterinarian, with all the required and vital information about your pet in one place. This "passport" makes it easy for officials at the border or airport immigration to verify your pet's health and inoculation records.

Vietnam does not quarantine healthy pets who have met their requirements. If your paperwork is in order, it should just take a few minutes at immigration before you can be reunited with your pet.

#### Ins And Outs Of Finding A Rental



Luxury house in Nha Trang

One of the most attractive things about living in Nha Trang is the low cost of living; renting a house or apartment here is generally very easy on the budget. There are decent apartments in good neighborhoods starting at around 2.5 million VND per month – around US\$108; for this amount, you could expect to rent an unfurnished, two-bedroom apartment with 24-hour security. However, these units would not include housekeeping or any utilities and may not include an air-conditioner. Serviced apartments start at around 6 million VND (about US\$260) per month, with housekeeping and almost all utilities included in the rent. Single-family houses start at around 6 million VND per month and even the largest luxury home is unlikely to

exceed 20 million VND (about US\$863) per month. Houses may come fully furnished, but utilities and housekeeping are not usually included in the rent. A budget for a couple in Nha Trang, in an apartment or a house, can be viewed here.

The rental market in Nha Trang functions almost entirely on wordof- mouth. There is one property management company, Nha Houng's, that occasionally has a listing or two but house-hunting in Nha Trang hasn't as yet worked on this level. In an <u>interview with Nha Huong's Property Manager</u>, Chi Huong, one gets a sense of the low-key rental scene in Nha Trang.

Most people, when they are seeking long-term housing in Nha Trang, will initially move into a guesthouse or hotel. Rates are quite reasonable, and discounted weekly or monthly rates are frequently available. The disadvantage of living in a guesthouse or hotel is that there won't be a kitchen – but restaurants are so inexpensive, this isn't necessarily a drawback! Although hotels and guesthouses can be found in any price range, if you're on a budget, you should have no difficulty finding a clean, serviced room for around US\$300 per month (usually payable in U.S. dollars).

Once you're settled in a room, it's time to start making inquiries. Ask everyone you meet, from the hotel staff and travel agencies to restaurant employees and street vendors.

Although a few places will have English-language signs advertising "House for Rent," or "Apartment for Rent," you'll be more likely to see signs saying "Nhà cho thuê," ("house for rent" in Vietnamese) and a phone number. You'll need to have someone who speaks Vietnamese make the phone call for you, accompany you to view the property, and help with the negotiations and final arrangements. Housing units for foreigners must meet certain government-mandated, minimum standards; such as being equipped with fire extinguishers and having adequate plumbing.

We asked one expat how he found a place to live, and he told us his strategy: "I talked to everyone I could, and I gave every Vietnamese person I talked to my phone number and one U.S. dollar. I asked them to help me find a place to live, and I told them that if they found me the right place, I would give them a US\$50 finder's fee. Needless to say, I got a lot of phone calls that way, and looked at 15 places that first week. In one week, I had spent about US\$100 and was able to move immediately into a five-bedroom furnished house th at cost me US\$350 per month."

Even though almost any place could be easily adapted to satisfy these requirements, not all landlords are comfortable in learning the process. However, it's less of a problem in Nha Trang than in many other Vietnamese towns. Foreigners have been coming to this area for years and local people are generally aware of what they need to do to satisfy the government's requirements in order to rent to a foreigner.



Beautiful house for rent in new development

The Met Vuong Estate Company had a few online listings for rentals in Nha Trang at the time of writing. Their website can be somewhat intermittent; it is, however, worth checking back every so often. The Expat Blog has a current listing for a fully furnished apartment near to the beach with 24-hour security, cable TV, Internet and some utilities included, for US\$380 per month. The Vietnamese website Nha Trang House has many rental postings. You can use an online translator to view the current listings. The Nha Trang Club, a local Internet forum and bulletin board, has many rental listings. The website is entirely in Vietnamese, so you will need a translator. This website is quite active and may be an excellent source for finding rentals. They also have quite a few general classified advertisements - everything from motorbikes for sale to computer repair. Another source for finding a place to live is Craigslist. They occasionally have a listing or two for rentals in Nha Trang.



Clean, functional and modern Arabella-kitchen

There are a few serviced apartments in the city, such as Golden House and the Arabella Serviced Apartments. These fully furnished apartments are often available on a month-to-month basis, and come equipped with cable TV, Internet, and twiceweekly housekeeping. Electricity and gas for cooking is not included in the rent and is paid monthly to the owner. Rents at Golden House start at around US\$300 per month. The Arabella, with slightly larger units, charges US\$400 per month and up, depending on the length of the lease. When we left Nha Trang, our apartment was rented to an ORL reader; you can read about her move to Nha Trang and how she and her partner have settled in.

The Lavu Residence has small serviced apartments located right in the heart of the tourist district, with rents ranging from U\$\$200 for a studio apartment to U\$\$300 for a one-bedroom place. There is a 15-story apartment complex located at 60 Nguyen Thien Thuat St. that often has a few apartments available, with rents ranging from U\$\$300 to U\$\$550 per month. Further information on these units is available by asking at the Amigo Dive Shop at 60 Nguyen Thien Thuat St. (See: Rolodex of Nha Trang contacts for more information on these and other possible rental options.)

On the southern tip of the Nha Trang Peninsula, just past the Vinpearl cable car terminus, there is a very new and luxurious housing development. Most homes are still under construction, although a few residences are now occupied. At this time, the development consists mainly of custom-built large, single-family homes, although there are a few apartments that have been recently completed or are under construction. Many of the homes here are for sale, though a number of them have "for rent" signs posted in English, Vietnamese, or both.

Houses and apartments can come fully furnished, partially furnished or totally unfurnished. Unfurnished places generally do not include a stove or refrigerator or anything other than the most basic fixtures. Partially furnished places will typically have all or most of the furniture that you'll need, and fully furnished places include pillows, linens, cooking utensils, and other amenities.

Furniture is relatively inexpensive in Nha Trang, and it's easy enough to purchase your own. If you plan to stay long-term and furnish your place yourself, you'll have more properties to choose from.

Security deposits are generally required when renting in Nha Trang. For month-to-month rentals, the deposit charged is usually equal to one month's rent. On a longer term lease, there may be no deposit, but the rent may be payable in part or in full for the term of the lease. In other words, if you sign a two-year lease, you may have to pay for six months or one year at the time of the signing. This is often negotiable, though as a rule, the more that you are willing to pay in advance, the lower your monthly rent will be.



Nha Trang from our Arabella apartment

Vietnam is not a quiet country. Busy streets resonate with the clamor of beeping horns, sounds of commerce, and the occasional public announcement blasted through loud speakers. People wake up early and go to work early. If you move to a neighborhood with construction or a busy market, be prepared to awake soon after the sun comes up unless you're a very sound sleeper. Some people keep roosters at home, even in the heart of the city – and roosters actually wake up well before dawn! Bars close late, so you may want to visit your prospective neighborhood late at night to discover if there are any nightclubs within hearing range of your potential new home or apartment.

It would be unthinkable for a Vietnamese person to ever complain about noise – it is part of the culture here and is accepted, if not always appreciated. Don't despair though – there are plenty of places for rent in quiet neighborhoods away from the main roads, commercial districts, nightclubs or construction sites. A budget for a couple in Nha Trang, in an apartment or a house, can be viewed here.

#### **Paying for Your Rental**

Although rents are often quoted in U.S. dollars, the law states that rent – other than for hotels – should be paid in Vietnamese dong. In Nha Trang, many owners prefer to be paid in dollars

and if dong is offered as payment, it may be converted at a less favorable rate than a bank would charge. Additionally, the banks in Vietnam may not give as good of an exchange rate as you could get outside of the country. So it's best to come to Vietnam with an adequate supply of U.S. dollars. Almost all hotels and guesthouses will quote their room rates in U.S. dollars, although they will all accept dong, but at a slightly less than optimal exchange rate. A few hotels will accept credit cards, but be aware that they will add an additional 3% onto the room rate to cover their processing fees (in addition to any fees charged by your bank for making a foreign transaction). Utilities are always paid in Vietnamese dong.



Check out the neighborhood for noise

#### **Owning Property in Vietnam**

Foreigners are not permitted to purchase land or houses in Vietnam. Long-term land leases are available, but only if the property is to be used for business or commercial purposes. Unlike Thailand, you can not legally lease land and build a personal residence on it. That isn't to say that foreigners do not own houses here – they do. But those who do have taken a risk that could be considered excessive.

If a foreigner is determined to buy a home in this country, the title to the property must be put into a Vietnamese national's name. This would require that you have absolute trust in the person who will be the registered owner of your home. Some foreigners have purchased homes this way, making a separate agreement with their "silent" Vietnamese partner. However, this is not a legal contract. The law is clear that only Vietnamese citizens can own houses. If the Vietnamese partner chose to renege on the deal, the foreign partner would have no legal recourse. Further, if the partner should die, the home would follow the inheritance laws in place for the Vietnamese, putting the foreigner at risk of losing any rights at all to the property.

It is legal for a foreigner to own a condominium here, although at this time, there are very few – if any – condos in Nha Trang. This might be an option sometime in the future as the country continues to develop. Even so, the prevailing Vietnamese laws would have to change significantly before ownership would be advisable. For example, the law currently reads that if you leave the country for 90 days without disposing of your dwelling, the entire property certificate is subject to invalidation, and the title to your dwelling will revert to the Vietnamese government.

The one bright side to owning property in Vietnam is that there are no property taxes – though this is a meaningless advantage considering the drawbacks involved. With rents being as affordable as they are, there is really no reason to contemplate buying a home here unless you or your spouse are Vietnamese citizens.

#### Setting Up and Settling In

With only around 300,000 people living in Nha Trang, there isn't the population pressure that is found in many other parts of Vietnam. Prices here tend to be geared more towards the local Vietnamese rather than catering to the relatively well-heeled international crowd. Additionally, a spate of new development has put pressure on many businesses, forcing prices down. All of this is good news for retirees on a fixed income. The cost of living here is considerably less than it is in the densely populated metropolitan areas of Ho Chi Minh City or Hanoi, and less than you will find in Hoi An, Mui Ne, or other areas that rely upon a strong tourist economy. An experienced full-time housekeeper in Nha Trang will charge about US\$125 per month and a meal for two won't strain the budget for more than perhaps US\$10. Most apartment owners are happy to do whatever is in their power to keep you satisfied, so settling in can be a pleasure here. A budget for a couple in Nha Trang, in an apartment or a house, can be viewed here.

#### **Internet Services**

There are several Internet service providers in Nha Trang, offering both 3G and ADSL connections. <u>VNPT</u> has the most reliable connections in this area. They offer several Internet plans starting at less than US\$15 per month. Other providers offer similarly priced plans for ADSL, including <u>Mobifone</u> and <u>FPT Internet</u>. Internet will generally be included in the rent for most apartments in Nha Trang. If you are renting a house, you may need to make your own arrangements for Internet.

#### **Banking and Money**

Because of the instability of the Vietnamese currency (called Vietnamese dong, or VND), many foreigners prefer to keep their money in U.S. dollars, which is the de facto currency for many major transactions here. Many Vietnamese banks are unaccustomed to providing services to foreigners, so a common and often much easier way of banking is to use your bank from "back home" and make withdrawals as needed from a local ATM. Alternatively, <a href="HSBC">HSBC</a> has offices throughout Vietnam, and a bank account with them in your home country will do double-duty as a Vietnamese bank account.

If you have a Vietnamese bank account, you can expect to earn a high rate of interest – currently, it's around 14% for a Vietnamese dong account and over 2% for a U.S.-dollar account. But at present, inflation is also high in this country, around 22% at the time of writing. Having your currency in a dong account increases your vulnerability to currency fluctuations and inflation – that 14% might mean a real gain of near-zero or worse. Another thing to consider before opening a Vietnamese bank account is that while you can take money into Vietnam, you can not legally take large amounts back out of the country. For these reasons, we do not recommend having a Vietnamese bank account at this time.



A typical meal cooked at your table

When you come to Vietnam, bring an adequate supply of crisp, new, U.S. dollar bills, as well as an ATM card for obtaining Vietnamese currency. ATMs in Vietnam only dispense Vietnamese dong. Most hotels set their rates in U.S. dollars, and long-term rents in Nha Trang will often be assessed in dollars, as well. You can pay your rent in Vietnamese dong, but the exchange rate used will often be the street rate, which is not as favorable as the interbank rate.

Fine restaurants catering to foreigners will frequently have their prices set in U.S. dollars, though most restaurants use dong. Transportation is almost always charged in dong. Immigration collects its visa fees in U.S. dollars and will not accept Vietnamese dong. If you run short of dollars, consider stocking up when you visit another country, where you should be able to buy dollars at or near the interbank rate. Many establishments will accept your credit card for payment, but there is usually an extra 3-4% fee added onto the charge. Be sure to advise your bank that you will be in Vietnam so that your ATM and credit card transactions are not blocked for suspicious activity. The majority of ATMs in Nha Trang (and throughout Vietnam) will dispense a maximum of 2 million dong, which is roughly US\$100. Most Agribank ATMs and some Techcombank and ANZ Bank ATMs will allow withdrawals of up to 4 million dong, with multiple withdrawals permitted on the same day. If needed, it may be possible to go to a bank teller to make a larger withdrawal.

#### **Unscrambling Utilities**

Land-line telephones are unusual in Vietnam – the majority of people use cell phones. The national telephone provider for than US\$5 per month for tap water. A five-gallon container fixed-line phones is VNPT, and they are also a major provider of of purified drinking water costs 30,000 VND (US\$1.50). Most mobile phone services. Local calls on a fixed-line cost about US\$0.05 cents per minute. A mobile postpaid plan through VNPT with a 24-month commitment allows for 250 minutes per month of calling for about 400,000 VND, with lower per- Cooking stoves usually use propane gas. Cooking gas is minute prices on more expensive plans. Most people use a supplied in a tank similar to those used for outdoor barbecue prepaid plan which does not require a contract, where blocks grills in the West, which is exchanged when empty. Unless you of minutes are bought on an as-needed basis. Frequent do a great deal of cooking at home, you'll find that a tank of promotional rates make these prepaid plans popular and gas will last for several months and only costs around 300,000 economical. Other popular providers of cell phone services, with both prepaid and postpaid options, are Mobifone, Vinaphone, and Viettel (Vietnamese languageonly site).



That's a fine mess you got me into

Electricity runs at around US\$20-30 per month for a onebedroom apartment and up to around US\$75 for a threebedroom house - more if you use air conditioning frequently. The current price of electricity ranges from 1,000 VND per kilowatt-hour to 3,000 VND per kilowatt-hour, depending on usage. However, landlords may choose to charge the tenant directly for the electricity they use - and this may occasionally be at an inflated price. A good landlord should be very willing to show you where your electric meter is, as well as verifying that each unit has its own meter. When renting a place of your own, be certain to clarify who pays the electric bill and how the rate will be calculated. As with most things in Vietnam, prices are frequently negotiable, even for electricity. When you do pay the landlord for electricity, be sure to collect a receipt. There are occasional reports from people who have paid for their electricity, only to have the landlord insist at a later time that they never received payment.

The water that comes out of the tap is not potable, but can be used for cooking, bathing, and cleaning. It is charged by units, with one unit being one cubic meter, or 1,000 liters. Each unit costs less than 5,000 VND (US\$0.25). Most people spend less apartments will include tap water, but not drinking water, in the monthly rent.

VND (about US\$14) to fill. Since almost all Vietnamese food is prepared on a stove-top, it is very unlikely that your place will come equipped with an oven. Even top-of-the-line luxury homes rarely come with more than a 4-burner stove. You can purchase an inexpensive portable oven at any small appliance store. Most furnished places will include a microwave oven and a refrigerator/freezer and often come equipped with a rice cooker and water-boiler.

#### Getting By In English

English is the main, second language of the Vietnamese people. It is taught in schools and universities. Many older Vietnamese people and a few younger ones will also speak some French, a leftover from the colonial days. Japanese is also gaining

in popularity as a second (or even third) language for some people. You can get by quite easily in Nha Trang as an English speaker. English is widely spoken and understood, particularly in the areas frequented by tourists. Most restaurants will have menus in both Vietnamese and English. If you need directions, there will almost always be someone nearby who speaks enough English to be of assistance. Since Nha Trang has been welcoming foreigners since the 1920s, you'll find that the locals here have better English skills than in many parts of Vietnam. There are very few day-to-day situations when you would need to have a Vietnamese translator.

#### **Culinary Delights**

Nha Trang is blessed with an exceptional array of eating opportunities. International fare and Vietnamese favorites are equally well represented. Whatever your taste – from gourmet to street food, from adventurous to timid – you will be spoiled for choice in Nha Trang.

Fresh baguettes are available throughout Vietnam, but Nha Trang has a well-deserved reputation for making some of the tastiest baguettes in the country. Baked throughout the day, baguettes are available fresh from the market or served at almost any restaurant still warm from the oven. Sidewalk vendors sell sandwiches made from the soft and crusty loaves for less than a dollar, stuffed with vegetables, various meats and pâtés. A baguette served with butter and jam, a fried egg or a simple omelet, accompanied by a cup of strong coffee, is a typical Nha Trang breakfast – one that foreigners adapt to very easily!



Creative bakery breakfast buns

Not surprisingly, seafood is very popular in Nha Trang. Restaurants throughout the city will have displays of freshly

caught fish, shrimp, crab, lobster, and shellfish on ice. Often sold by weight and always cooked to order, restaurants will serve them steamed, fried, baked in banana leaves, stewed with herbs in a clay pot, or cooked to perfection on an outdoor grill. A typical local-style seafood meal will consist of an order (or two) of fish, a serving of rice or fried noodles, and a plate of stir-fried vegetables, with a little fish sauce, lime, salt, chilies, and soy sauce served on the side.

#### A Taste of the Orient

In much of the Orient, coffee is a relative newcomer, with tea being the drink of choice. In Vietnam, though, coffee is the preferred beverage of many locals. As with baguettes, coffee became popular during the French colonial years. No one prepares coffee in quite the same way as the Vietnamese. A small metal drip decanter is filled almost to the brim with smoky, darkroasted coffee, then topped off with hot water and placed on top of a small glass.

It takes several minutes for the brew to slowly make its way to the glass, and the finished coffee is thick, syrupy and strong. If you expect to have a full cup of coffee, you'll be disappointed; when the brew has fully drained into the glass, there might be less than a half inch of coffee – but the coffee is so rich and thick, it is amazingly satisfying. Located throughout the city and along the beachfront on Tran Phu Street are dozens of coffee shops and bistros. Some of these cater to westerners, others attract a mainly local crowd, and almost all of them do a thriving business.

 $C\grave{a}$   $ph\hat{e}$   $s\~{u}$ a is served with sweetened condensed milk, and  $C\grave{a}$   $ph\hat{e}$   $d\~{a}$  is black coffee with ice – a popular variation that serves to add volume to the drink. Almost all restaurants and coffee shops will serve a complimentary glass of iced Vietnamese tea to accompany any coffee drink, and some places will offer a small thermos of hot water for those who want to dilute their coffee and add an extra few sips to the glass. A popular pastime here – much as it is in the West – is to spend an hour or two in a coffee shop, sipping coffee and socializing. Many coffee shops will also offer light food, ice cream, fruit juices, and smoothies. Bulk coffee is readily available at shops throughout Nha Trang and is often displayed sorted by caffeine content.

There are quite a few restaurants and bars that cater to the expat crowd. The area bordered by Nguyen Thien Thuat, Tran Quang Khai, Nguyen Thi Minh Kai, and Tran Phu streets are full of restaurants and bars that attract a mainly western clientele. There are several restaurants serving authentic French food

at very reasonable prices. Perhaps Memphis-style barbeque ribs or a southern-fried chicken dinner is more to your taste? You can find it here. Nha Trang probably has the best quality and selection of Italian food east of Italy. There are restaurants that serve German, Irish, Japanese, Indian, Chinese, Russian, and American and Mexican food. There's genuine Australian-style fish and chips, and excellent steaks, burgers, and chops. Some of the large resorts and luxury hotels along the beach offer extravagant buffets, including the Sheraton Hotel, which has an exquisite seafood buffet every Sunday night. Go here for our top eating-out-in-Nha Trang choices.



The choice of shellfish is endless

Vietnamese love to get together with their family and friends and show off their barbeque skills, and there are a few notable restaurants in Nha Trang that specialize in this unique dining experience. You can cook your own food just how you like it on a small charcoal-fired grill that is placed on your table. These restaurants will serve you your choice of marinated beef, pork, chicken, or seafood, along with vegetables and side dishes, and the rest is up to you!

Nha Trang's central location, beautiful bay and pleasant coastal climate make it a popular destination for Vietnamese tourists from throughout the country. Local restaurants serve a variety of regional specialties spanning the cuisines of the Mekong Delta in the far south to Hanoi in the north. Rice-noodle and grilled meat dishes from Hanoi are popular, as are the delicious Vietnamese-style pancakes and soups from the south and the central coast's small-dish delicacies from Hue and Hoi An.

Whatever Vietnamese food you order, it will likely be very healthy and low in calories, with small portions of lean meat or fish served with assorted fresh vegetables, piquant herbs, and rice or noodles. Although entrees are usually accompanied by small bowls of pungent dipping sauces and chilies, most Vietnamese foods are not served hot and spicy unless it is requested.



Fresh, healthy food at a street-side eatery

Fish sauce accompanies almost every local dish – much of it is prepared locally, as some of the country's best fish sauce comes from Nha Trang. Often used as an alternative to soy sauce, fish sauce adds a savory touch of flavor that complements almost any Vietnamese food. There are some who claim that the sign of a well-adjusted expat in Vietnam is one who uses more fish sauce than the locals!

Many Vietnamese restaurants, whether they are enclosed indoor eating places or those set up on the sidewalks, offer seating on tiny little plastic stools arranged around little plastic tables. These eateries will often have excellent and inexpensive food – just pick one that is packed full of local diners. Westerners tend not to patronize these places – the little stools can be intimidating for some – but the proprietors are often delighted to serve foreigners (and will probably watch them very carefully in hopes that their specialty is met with approval). If you're watching your budget, having a meal in one of these establishments is a good way to save money while eating fresh and healthy food and can be a delightful way to expose yourself to the local culture.

#### **Unique Cultural Values**

Công cha như núi Thái Sơn, nghĩa mẹ như nước trong nguồn chẩy gia –

The effort of a father is like a tall mountain, and the caring of a mother is like a flowing spring.

#### The Musical Language

Đường đi ở miệng - He that speaks well may find his way anywhere.

The Vietnamese language is beautiful and lends itself well to poetry and song. It is a tonal language, so it can be quite challenging for western speakers to learn. It is also a monosyllabic language – almost every word is six letters or less. One word can often have several meanings, depending on the tone that is used and the context of the sentence. Subtle differences in tone and emphasis can totally change the meaning of a word or make it incomprehensible to the listener.

Dialects change from north to south and often differ significantly from village to village. However, there are very few sounds in Vietnamese that are difficult for westerners to replicate. Vietnamese uses a modified Roman alphabet, but words commonly sound different than the letters might indicate. Diacritics are About 60% of the Vietnamese vocabulary is derived from the Chinese languages. Those who understand Mandarin may have some success understanding Vietnamese. However, Vietnamese has also borrowed words from the French language (such as cà phê, from the French word café), and from English (such as tivi, from the English word TV, or television).

Although the language is an extremely difficult one to master, the ability to speak at least some Vietnamese will be very helpful and will earn you more than a bit of respect and goodwill. If you do your shopping at the local markets and shops, instead of the supermarket, you will find a few words of Vietnamese an essential bargaining tool. Have a go and watch what happens - prices will drop markedly! It's also helpful in countless other day-to-day interactions. For example, few taxi drivers or business owners outside tourist areas will have more than a limited knowledge of English.

Since there is a university in Nha Trang, it is easy to find students willing to tutor foreigners in the Vietnamese language in order to supplement their own incomes. Asking around is the best way to find an experienced private tutor. Alternatively, you can contact Vietnam Advanced Education. They offer small group lessons for native English speakers. Classes are given twice a week over the course of two months. The tuition is 800,000 VND (about US\$34) for the course.

The Vietnamese have a value system that deeply influences all aspects of their daily life and relationships. To understand the people – which is necessary to make sense of living here – you need to have a sense of the culture.

The most important cultural value in Vietnam is family. Central to this concept is the obligation of filial piety – the most essential of all virtues in Vietnamese society. The child is expected to be grateful to his parents for the debt of birth, rearing, and education. From early childhood, children are taught to think of their parents and ancestors first, even at their own expense; to make sacrifices for the parents' sake, and to love and care for them in their old age. If someone does a wrong or selfish thing not only is that individual at fault, but the blame is shared with the parents, siblings, relatives, and ancestors. Likewise, any success or fame achieved by an individual brings honor, "face," and pride to all members of the family.

Retirement and nursing homes are very rare in Vietnam, there's really no need for them, as all Vietnamese children know that

they have a responsibility to care for their parents when their parents can no longer care for themselves. Not only is this a moral responsibility, but it is also a legal one – if the parents can not care for themselves, the state has the authority to order the children to assume their care. Such action would cause not only a terrible "loss of face" for the responsible child (generally the eldest daughter), but would greatly dishonor the parents, siblings, relatives, and ancestors.

This deep sense of family obligation extends throughout life and even beyond death. It is important for a person to return to die in his or her own native village if possible, "As a leaf which leaves the branch to fall down on the ground at the foot of the tree." The native village is the place where parents and family live, as well as the place where the family's ancestors are buried. Many Vietnamese, especially people in the rural areas, never move out of their native villages or provinces. During the important holiday of Tet, it is the goal of all Vietnamese living away from their villages to return home to honor their family and ancestors. Many cities will appear virtually deserted during Tet, as millions of city dwellers dutifully travel back to their ancestral homes.



Extended families enjoying Tet fireworks

The second value intrinsic to Vietnamese society is the yearning for a good name. A Vietnamese proverb says, "After death, a tiger leaves behind his skin, a man his reputation." A good name is considered to be of greater value than any material possession. By securing a good name, one can command respect and admiration from one's fellow countrymen. A person with a bad reputation, no matter how rich and powerful, is looked down upon, while a poor person with a good name is respected and honored. The Vietnamese believe that the best thing that a person can leave behind once he has died is a good reputation. In this way, he achieves immortality. The qualities most cultivated in gaining a good name are those virtues most extolled by the Confucian doctrine: a sense of honor, honesty, righteousness, modesty, generosity, and a disdain for material gains. In view of the strong solidarity of the Vietnamese family, it is not surprising that individuals strive for a good name not only for themselves but also for their parents and children.

The third core value in Vietnamese culture is the love of learning. Education is considered more precious than wealth and material success. Rich people who are not educated are often looked down upon by others and feel inferior to learned people who may be poor. In the traditional Vietnamese social system the scholar ranked first, before the farmer, artisan, and tradesman. The lure of prestige, increased earning potential, and the prospect of improved social status are among the strongest incentives in the pursuit of knowledge. As it is in the west, education is the prime force of vertical mobility in Vietnamese society. Both men and women are expected to

study hard in school, and it is the goal of any young person to one day graduate from university. Learning brings honor to the family, as well – thus incorporating all of the important values of the Vietnamese culture.

# The Advantage of Being a Senior in Vietnam

Vietnamese people are obliged to show respect to people who are senior to them in age, status, or position. At home, they should show respect to their parents, older siblings, and older relatives. This is expressed by obedience in words and action. Respect is an integral part of the concept of filial piety. It's also the reason why no well-raised Vietnamese person would ever lose his temper in public, or even openly express scorn or unhappiness to another person. The concept of "losing face" is very important in Vietnam – something to be avoided at all cost. Why risk damaging your good name or bring shame upon your family?

This is also why, when you meet someone, they will immediately ask you for your age and what you do for a living. They need to know how to address you so that they can give you the proper respect. If you are old enough to be the parent of that person, you will be known as chi or anh — mother or father. If you are old enough to be that person's grandparent, you will be called  $\hat{o}ng$  or ba—grandfather or grandmother.

## Beware the Helpful Stranger (and Other Annoyances)

Nha Trang is a remarkably safe city. Crime is much less prevalent here than it is in Hanoi or Saigon. Roads are wide and for the most part, not overly congested, and scams, though they do exist, are rarer here than in many other Vietnamese cities.

Although the long beaches here are undeniably beautiful, there are times of the year when the water is murky and patches of litter mar the otherwise pristine setting. During the rainy season, or after a storm, it's best to avoid swimming in the areas near the river outlet. The water can become quite polluted as detritus from villages upriver is flushed into the bay. There are fine beaches north and south of the city that do not have the issues that Nha Trang beach experiences, or at least not to the same extent. Bai Dai beach, located halfway between Nha Trang and the airport, is very pretty, as are the beaches along the coast road to the north of the river.

The drainage system in Nha Trang is good in some places and not so good in others, so it can take a few days after a hard rain for things to dry out. Flooding, though not severe enough to cause damage, can occur anywhere – this is a time to wear flip-flops or gumboots if you plan to be outside.

Hiring a taxi is a hassle-free experience. In many other cities in Vietnam, foreigners (and locals) are often at risk of being overcharged. Most of Nha Trang's taxi drivers use their meters as a matter of course. Generally, drivers will take you to your destination using the shortest route possible. Since Nha Trang is a small city, a couple of dollars will get you almost anywhere in town that you want to go. Most drivers do not speak much English, so it's helpful to show them a business card or a written address. In Nha Trang, Mai Linh is one of several reputable taxi companies. The Mai Linh Company has metered taxis throughout Vietnam and they insist on honest drivers. If you take a taxi here, just be sure that the driver turns on the meter and you'll be fine.

There are few stoplights and stop signs in Nha Trang (although there are more here than in many Vietnamese cities), and laws are not rigidly enforced. Pedestrians, bicycles, *cyclos* (pedicabs), motorbikes, cars, trucks, and buses share the same streets. As a result, traffic moves quite differently here than what you would see in the West. Many foreigners feel quite comfortable driving a motorbike or bicycle here after they've had a little time to adjust to the conditions. Traffic accidents are rarely serious, since people tend to drive slowly.

#### Look Left, Look Right... Look Confident

It takes a little adjustment to cross the street anywhere in Vietnam. Vehicles do not stop for pedestrians on crosswalks, though they will make every effort to avoid hitting them. Once you get used to it, you won't have any problem crossing the street even during the busiest times of the day. Until then, you might want to wait until there are others crossing and proceed with them. To safely cross a busy street, wait until there is a small break in traffic, then slowly step off the sidewalk and begin making your way to the other side, taking steady, even steps. If you are walking steadily, drivers can anticipate where you'll be and will maneuver around you. If you begin to cross and then stop suddenly, there's a greater chance of being hit, as drivers don't expect this!

Use common sense, as you would anywhere in the world, to avoid becoming the victim of crime. If you're drunk, take a taxi home. Keep your doors locked. Don't take valuables to the beach and don't leave your possessions unattended. Avoid carrying large sums of cash in your back pocket or purse and don't count your money in a public place. This may all sound obvious, but we've heard stories of people becoming victims of crime because they did not use the same basic common sense that they would use in their own hometown.

Perhaps the most common "crime" of opportunity in Nha Trang involves the "helpful" stranger. People here are genuinely helpful and curious. If you're looking at a map, someone will likely stop and ask you if you need directions. Strangers will ask you where you are from and make conversation with you. They'll see if you need help. Most times, these interactions are innocent. However, every now and then, if you tell someone that you are looking for something, they may offer to help you find it. In fact, they may become quite insistent! This is the time to politely decline any assistance and leave your helpful stranger. Otherwise, your new "friend" will take you to the place you're looking for, will helpfully translate to the clerk what you need, and then, without your knowledge or consent, he will tell the clerk to add on thousands (or even hundreds of thousands) of dong to your bill for his "invaluable assistance." You may not find out until weeks later how much that "help" actually cost you. If something doesn't feel right, trust your instincts.

Police here are encouraged not to stop foreign motorists unless they have a command of the foreigner's language. Since few, if any, police in Nha Trang speak anything other than Vietnamese, foreigners are rarely stopped. This is not the case if you are driving in Saigon or Hanoi, where the police make an effort to employ bilingual officers. If you plan to drive in these cities, it's best to have a driver's license. We have friends here who have been stopped by the police and simply spoke Spanish or Thai to the officer, leaving in a few minutes without a citation, but we don't advocate this strategy. For more information about avoiding police hassle when driving in Vietnam refer to "Driving Licenses, Vehicle Ownership, and Insurance".

Bribery is common everywhere in Vietnam, but it rarely affects foreigners. Business owners may complain about having to pay the police every so often in order to operate their restaurants and shops, however, this is a very common

practice and is generally accepted as "the way things are." There may be occasions in which you might need to "reach an accommodation" with an official, but these would be extremely uncommon. In the many months that we have lived in Nha Trang, we have never had a situation arise where a bribe was expected or required.

Nha Trang has a party-town reputation, and has dozens of nightclubs and bars along the beach and elsewhere in the city. Along with nearly unlimited opportunities to drink copious amounts of alcohol, which is legal, Nha Trang has its share of drug dealers, who ply the sidewalks near the bars and along Tran Phu Street, which runs the length of the beach. Drugs are illegal in Vietnam, and common sense dictates that it's best to avoid breaking the law.

Despite all these warnings, most people who come to Nha Trang find it to be a delightfully laid-back city and never experience any of these annoyances. Most apartments and housing complexes hire 24-hour security, so burglaries are uncommon. A little common sense goes a long way here. Police avoid approaching foreigners unless given very good cause, and most locals are genuinely helpful and friendly.

#### Living in a Communist Country



Live Music at Patrick's Wine

Many people have asked us about how it feels to live in a communist country. As foreigners, it feels just like living anywhere else. We buy our groceries, we pay for our healthcare, we pay our rent, and we enjoy life. We can buy the latest Hollywood movies and watch HBO, CNN, and the BBC on the television. Foreign newspapers are available in the larger cities. We have been able to access any online news website that we have wanted to view, although a few websites are blocked here – you can't directly access Facebook, for example.

We enjoy freedom of movement – though, as it would be anywhere else, access to some places, such as military installations, is restricted. There are elections on a local level, and Vietnamese people are encouraged to vote. As foreign, part-time residents, we don't involve ourselves in the local or national politics – and their politics don't really affect us. We have heard of foreigners being deported or not having a visa granted due to voicing political opinions, but this is no different than it would be in Mexico, for example, or most other countries. We have never had the sense that we are being watched by anyone associated with the government. In many ways, living in Vietnam feels freer than living in the West.

#### Getting to Nha Trang

The best way to start your journey to Nha Trang, if you are entering Vietnam from overseas, would be to fly into Ho Chi Minh City's Tan Son Nhat Airport (SGN). Alternatively, you could fly into Hanoi's Noi Bai International Airport (HAN), though it is much farther away from Nha Trang. From the airport, you have several ways to reach Nha Trang.



Enjoying the public sculptures along the beach path

If you want to fly to Nha Trang, you'll land at the Cam Ranh airport. Cam Ranh International Airport is located about 20 miles south of the city, midway between Nha Trang and the town of Cam Ranh. Vietnam Airlines and Jetstar Pacific have reasonably priced daily flights to and from Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. The going rate for a taxi from the airport to Nha Trang is currently 200,000 dong – roughly US\$10. Local bus services also exist between the airport and town and could be a good low-cost alternative if you are traveling light.

Nha Trang is right on the Reunification Express railroad line that runs the length of the country from Ho Chi Minh

City to Hanoi. Several trains arrive in Nha Trang daily, offering various levels of comfort, from the inexpensive (and undesirable) "hard seat" cars to comparatively spacious, airconditioned "soft sleepers." The Man in Seat Sixty-One is an invaluable resource for train travel in Vietnam (or anywhere in the world, for that matter) where you can find current schedules and other vital information to help you plan your trip. If you can book your flight well in advance, it's worth noting that you can fly from Hanoi to Nha Trang for almost the same price as taking the 24-hour-long train trip.

Traveling by bus is the least expensive way to travel in Vietnam. Several bus companies make the 10-hour, 270-mile trip from Ho Chi Minh City to Nha Trang. Long-distance buses also make the journey from Hanoi to Nha Trang, but this is a long, long trip that requires a great deal of endurance, and should not be taken lightly. Most long-distance buses travel at night when there is less traffic and the roads are theoretically safer. Rest stops can be few and far between, and are made for the driver's convenience - not the passengers so plan accordingly. Bus companies also vary widely in the quality and condition of their buses (and drivers). Phuona Trang and Mai Linh are your best choices: their buses are generally clean and well-maintained, with assigned seating, courteous staff, and safe drivers. The bus company Sinh Tourist also has a good reputation and is a bit more focused on foreign travelers.



Traditional basket boats drying in the sun

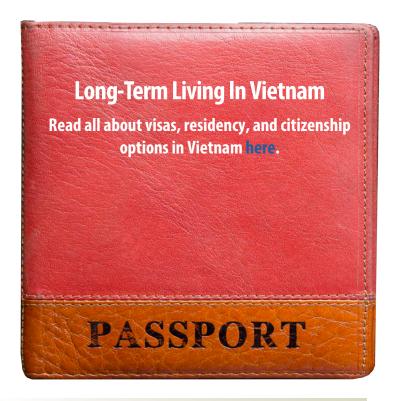
Finally, if cost is no object, consider hiring a private car and driver (you can not drive yourself unless you have a valid Vietnamese driver's license). You'll be able to stop when and where you want for photo opportunities, enticing fruit stands, or a much needed "stretch" break. Although this is undoubtedly the most expensive way to go, it will give you the most control over your trip.

#### **Summing It Up**

Best Beaches in Asia calls Nha Trang "the Vietnamese Riviera" and lists it among the world's most beautiful beaches. Travel and Leisure Magazine awarded Nha Trang the honor of having one of the world's most beautiful bays for two consecutive years. The website Most Beautiful Bays in the World has Nha Trang near the top of their list, and even Wikipedia says that "Nha Trang is widely considered to be one of the world's most beautiful bays."

However, there's more to a perfect retirement haven than having beautiful scenery. *Kiplinger*, *US News* and *World Report* agree that Nha Trang is one of the best places in the world to retire to, according to two articles published earlier this year.

What makes Nha Trang special is that it has so many things in its favor. The beach is wide and sandy, the ocean is warm and inviting, and the bay is enormously appealing. The foreigner-friendly ambiance helps even nervous new expats feel comfortable. The food is delicious and varied. English is widely spoken and understood, so it feels less intimidating than many other foreign cities. The weather is comfortable year-round without extreme variations. Life here is relaxed and easy. If all that isn't enough, it is one of the least expensive places in the world to live well.





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