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Da Lat, Vietnam:
Asia's City Of Eternal Spring



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From Colonial Hill Station To Honeymoon Capital: Da Lat Is Vietnam's La La Land

By Sophia Titley



As I make my way down a broad boulevard shaded by leafy cedars on either side, I regret that I'm not wearing a jacket today. Despite the sunshine and blue sky, the air is crisper than I'd anticipated.

I'm kept from turning back to my hotel by the smell of fresh-baked baguettes stacked in a window display ahead. With one of those and a cup of coffee in hand, I'm determined to continue my initial exploration of this town.

I pass estates with shuttered windows, wrought-iron balconies, and latticed gardens... all the makings of alpine chalets. Ahead of me, the spire of a Roman Catholic church juts out above the skyline, and Grand Lac shimmers in the morning light.

At first, the sensation is disorienting, but as I look up at a replica of the Eiffel Tower (about one-fourth the size of the original), it becomes downright bizarre... Am I in small-town Vietnam or some sort of France-themed amusement park? The answer, it turns out, is a bit of both. I'm in Da Lat.





Grand Lac, built by the French, is now known as Xuan Huong Lake



Da Lat is the resort town that the French carved out of Vietnam's Central Highlands back when the country was a French colony. Like all hill stations around the world, it served colonists as an escape from the sweat, grime, and tropical malady of the lowlands.

The French endowed Da Lat with villas, boulevards, golf courses, parks, health complexes, and more. Architectural and cultural remnants from that era remain today, casting a historic and otherworldly charm over the place.



Da Lat's mini Eiffel Tower is part of the reason it was dubbed "Little Paris"

Something about Da Lat inspires romance. . . Whether it's the well-preserved past or its cool weather, misty peaks, and pine forest, love is in the air here in Vietnam's honeymoon capital.

Understandably, Da Lat's tourism organizers want to encourage that reputation and have made efforts to capture the town's natural charm. To most Westerners, those efforts are probably misguided. . .

They come in the form of Vietnamese-brand kitsch—swan-shaped paddleboats, concrete statues of woodland creatures, and heart-shaped everything meant for young couples to pose in front of.



An example of Vietnamese kitsch from the Valley of Love

While tacky, these adornments add to Da Lat's quirkiness, and it remains a fascinating place to visit. . . Mainstream international tourism hasn't discovered Da Lat yet, but the word is out among expats. The small but diverse group that live here do so because it offers peace

and tranquility, natural beauty, an agreeable climate, and a low cost of living.

The Lam Dong Province and Da Lat, its capital, are the garden bed of Vietnam. This province produces more flowers than any other in Vietnam and is responsible for 50% of the country's floral output. Everything from roses and marigolds to hydrangeas and golden everlasting is grown here.

So, too, is produce not available in other parts of the country: coffee, strawberries, cabbage, cauliflower. . . Da Lat even has its own wine industry. Vietnam may be famous for having some of the most delicious food on the planet, but Lam Dong is famous for having some of the most delicious food in Vietnam. The herbs and vegetables essential to Vietnamese cuisine are at their freshest here.

The best thing about Da Lat, though, is that it can be enjoyed at an impossibly low cost to expats. You don't need a lot to live well here, and as people shake off outdated perspectives about this part of the world, Da Lat's reputation as an overseas retirement destination is only going to grow.

Geography

Where The Devil Is Da Lat?



Da Lat's in southern Vietnam, about 300 kms northeast of Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) and 130 kms southwest of coastal Nha Trang.

It's a high-elevation town, sitting at about 1,500 meters above sea level in the Lang Biang Plateau of the Central Highlands. Its rolling topography is full of slopes and valleys and features an abundance of freshwater, including 3 rivers, 12 waterfalls, and 16 lakes.

Is It Prone To Natural Disaster?

The chances of natural disaster here are slim. Although Vietnam has a huge stretch of coastline, Da Lat's high elevation and inland position mean that a Ring of Fire tsunami wouldn't reach the town. Earthquakes are just as unlikely. . . The area is so seismically secure, it was chosen as the site of Vietnam's first nuclear research reactor.

That said, Da Lat is surrounded by hills, and any slope that's subject to gravity is also susceptible to landslides. The 500-meter scar on the peak of Lang Biang Mountain is proof of that.

Climate—Step Aside Medellín

The City of Eternal Spring in this part of the world is decidedly Da Lat. Its temperate mountainous climate is pretty much perfect—never too hot or cold, the temperature perpetually hovers at about 65°F.

Da Lat's climate is so agreeable, it's the reason foreigners came here in the first place and what continues to draw them here today. Expats living in Vietnam retreat here from the steamy lowlands and the cool weather, misty peaks, and pine forest are a novelty to Vietnamese tourists. Many time their visits according to the seasons.

4 Seasons Of Flowers

January to March are the coldest months of the year at about 62°F. Cherry blossoms are in bloom and attract tourists from across Asia. Not only are they beautiful, they hold significance across many East Asian cultures.

April to June, things heat up to about 66°F, and lavender, hydrangea, and purple phoenix paint the city a different set of hues. This is also when Vietnamese peaches and avocados come into season.



July to September is the height of rainy season (Da Lat gets about 70 inches of precipitation a year), so it's a good time to hunker down in one of the city's cozy cafés and also when persimmons become available.

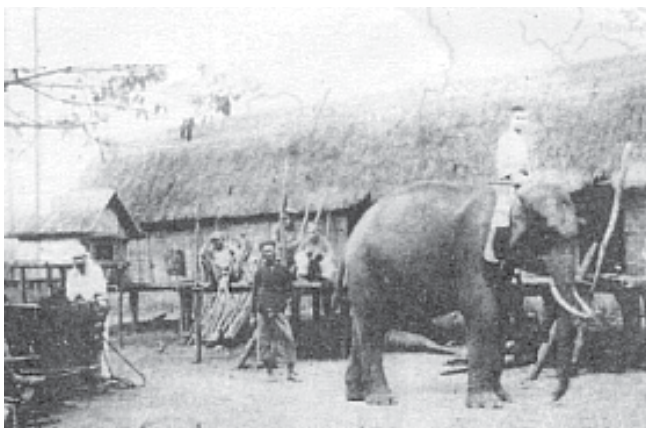
October to December, temperatures drop back down to about 63°F. The city becomes truly colorful this time of year, with sunflowers, pink grass, red maples, and buckwheat flowers in bloom.

A Bit Of Background: Da Lat's History

Before the French arrived, Da Lat was sparsely populated by various Vietnamese ethnic minority groups. The name Da Lat translates to "river of the Lat tribe," referring to the Da River (now called Cam Ly River) that runs through the city.

In 1893, Dr. Alexandre Yersin (protégé of Louis Pasteur and famous for discovering the source of bubonic plague) began poking his nose into the Central Highlands in search of a rest and relaxation center for Indochina's French.

Governor General Paul Doumer wanted a colonial hill station and specified four criteria for its site: high altitude, farming land, abundant water, and accessibility. Da Lat fit the bill and became an official city in 1912.



At first, only hunters and adventure-seekers would brave the treacherous road from HCMC to Da Lat. . . Tigers, elephants, and wild boar were said to roam the area and kept more prudent visitors at bay.



The original Da Lat Palace hotel

In 1922, The Palace, a luxury hotel, was established to help change Da Lat's image. It attracted affluent clientele, from members of royal families to artists and politicians, and helped put Da Lat on the map.

Urban planning was carried out by Ernest Hébrard (a renowned French architect). A health complex, two schools, a golf course, several parks, villas, and boulevards were set up. By 1944, there were over 1,000 French villas and 5,600 Westerners living in Da Lat.

The onset of WWII made it difficult for Da Lat's substantial French population to receive imported foodstuffs from the motherland. . . Apparently the French can be particular about what they eat.

Luckily, the climatic conditions in Da Lat provided the solution. Perfect for temperate agriculture cultivation, plans for big-scale produce and hydroelectric power were put in motion.

Da Lat soon found itself with a surplus of crops, the sale of which allowed it to cross over into a stage of prosperity. From 1939 to 1945, it was the summer capital of the Federation of Indochina, prompting government offices to be established here.

Da Lat And The Vietnam War

A tacit agreement to keep Da Lat as a site of rest and relaxation kept its involvement in the Vietnam War to a minimum. Between Jan. 31 and Feb. 9, 1968, several battles between the Viet Cong and South Vietnamese MPs took place in Da Lat, which centered around the Tet Offensive. The South Vietnamese MPs retained control of Da Lat for a time, but it eventually fell to North Vietnamese forces on April 3, 1975.

Today, Da Lat is the capital of Lam Dong Province and has a population of some 400,000.

Da Lat's Expat Community

Between 300 and 500 expats live in Da Lat. . . The exact number is hard to pin down as many of this group are part-timers. They typically hail from Australia, the U.K., Canada, the States, Russia, Spain, Italy, Japan, and Korea. Some relocated because of work, others are digital nomads or entrepreneurs, but many of this group are retirees.

Expats don't congregate in any specific part of town; instead, you bump into them as you go about daily life. Da Lat is small, and as a foreigner, you stand out here. While I sat in One More Café chatting with owner Lorelle for this issue's [Expat Interview](#), I noticed that she knew every third or fourth customer that came through the door.

It's in expat haunts like these where you're bound to cross paths with other foreigners, and there are a plenty of expat haunts in Da Lat. . . You'll also find them at Escape Bar, a live-music bar that plays the classics and has 1970s décor, or Botea Bistro, a French restaurant with a backwall library full of books, to name a few. . .

If you prefer to socialize in more structured meetups, Facebook groups like Expats in Da Lat or What's On Da Lat are good places to start. There you can find groups based on your specific interests (like language-exchange opportunities, vegan meetups, women's groups, etc.).

How Are Americans Perceived Here?

The Vietnam War is a recent memory for many. . . Vietnam is eager to rise up from the various stages of hardship it's passed through, and its people are hungry for opportunity and a better standard of living. Tourism is seen as a means to that end, and, from what I gather, American tourists and expats are welcomed here.

Cost Of Living

Your cost of living in Da Lat may vary depending on your lifestyle, but, regardless, it will be lower here than it is in the States. A couple can live comfortably on about US\$1,000 a month.

This number changes depending on where you live (rent is higher in central areas), the size and modernity of your rental, what you eat (eating at expat restaurants or buying imported groceries is more expensive), and your habits (how often you shop, your indulgences, travel expenses, etc.).

If you eat and shop like a local, you'll save greatly. Eating at Vietnamese restaurants costs about 100,000 dong for a meal for two. A grocery trip to a local market is about 500,000 dong, which you might need to do a few times a week. This is one place in the world where eating out can save you money.

The same isn't true of the expat restaurants, where an average meal for two costs about 400,000 (I dined at Primavera Restaurant and had pizza, salad, and wine for two for 365,000 dong). Likewise, if you shop for imported goods at stores, you'll spend much more on groceries.

Rent can be as low as 4,500,000 dong for a studio apartment on the edge of town. For a more central apartment, expect to pay between 8,000,000 and 10,000,000 dong. Air conditioning isn't needed in Da Lat, so electricity bills are always low, and utilities are usually included in the cost of rent.

In short, life in Da Lat is inexpensive; the dong is one of the weakest currencies in the world, and the average monthly salary here starts at about US\$125 a month. If locals can get by on that, an expat should be able to do quite well here. The average pension goes a lot further in Vietnam than it does back home.

[Go here for fully itemized budget for Da Lat, Vietnam.](#)

What's There To Do In Da Lat?

Bask In Natural Beauty

Natural beauty is what made Da Lat popular among the French in the 1900s, and it continues to live up to that reputation today. Its beauty is not what you'd expect from a tropical country, though. . .



Da Lat's position in the Central Highlands affords it cool weather, and its rolling hills are sheathed in pine forest. It also has an abundance of freshwater. Most surprising to me, though, is the sky in Da Lat—it's a vibrant blue that I'm not used to seeing in Asia.

The number of outdoor activities you can do here is limitless. A fun, low-intensity option for getting to know the place is renting a motorbike and driving around the countryside. More active types might like hiking or biking instead.

All the peaks, valleys, and forest provide endless trails and vistas. . . Da Lat is the site of several outdoor competitions, like the Da Lat Victory Challenge (a cycling race) and Da Lat Ultra Trail (an international marathon). Expats often participate in both.





Lakes And Parks

Da Lat may not be coastal, but it has several lakes in the city and on its outskirts. Xuan Huong Lake (formerly known as Grand Lac) in the center of town was created by the French. It's so scenic with the walking trail and cherry blossoms that surround it, it's one of the city's major symbols. Renting a swan-shaped paddleboat and going for a ride is a popular—if embarrassing—way to enjoy it.

In fact, paddleboating is popular on almost all of Da Lat's lakes. Da Thien Lake (6 kms outside Da Lat) is in the aptly named Valley of Love, also known as the Niagara Falls of Vietnam because it's frequented by honeymooners. The romantic spot features benches around the lake, flower gardens, and views of the Lang Biang peaks.



Golden Valley on a foggy day

Golden Valley (about 16 kms outside the city) is another of Da Lat's sprawling parks. It also has a lake at its base and footpaths that allow you to explore flower gardens, pine forests, and a rock garden. Tuyen Lam, Lake of Sighs, Dan Kia, and Da Nhim are a few of the other lakes you can visit.

Waterfalls

Da Lat has plenty of streams, rivers, and waterfalls, too. There are at least 12 waterfalls in its immediate vicinity, all of which are impressive. Cam Ly and Datanla Waterfalls are the closest to town, but sadly, have been overdeveloped and accessorized with kitsch.

Tiger, Prenn, Ankroet, Lien Khuong, Elephant, and Bao Dai waterfalls are within 10 and 50 kms of town. As a rule, the further you go from Da Lat, the fewer the kitschy adornments and the more impressive the waterfalls are.



Elephant Falls (25 kms from the city) is some 30 meters high. If you're up for a little adventure, you could hire a tour company (check the [Rolodex](#) for recommendations) to take you white-water rafting or canyoning on one of the falls.

Dat Lat's Quirky Culture

While Da Lat is popular among expats of the past and present, it isn't a bustling metropolis where you'll find flashing lights and big-city amenities... quite the opposite. People are attracted to this place

because it's peaceful. If you want highbrow entertainment (like the opera or theatre), this isn't the place for you.

Religious Architecture



That doesn't mean it's not a culturally fascinating place. . . Despite its small size, Da Lat is religiously diverse, which is reflected in its architecture: You'll find everything from churches, cathedrals, and abbeys to Zen Buddhist pagodas and Cao Dai temples to name a few.

The most eye-catching building in town is the St. Nicholas Cathedral, a Roman Catholic cathedral with a massive, 47-meter spire. Built by the French in the 1930s, it features 70 stained-glass windows imported from the motherland.



Domaine de Marie also stands out because it's bright pink. It fuses French and Vietnamese architectural styles and dates to the 1940s, although it's still active today as a Catholic convent.



Truc Lam Pagoda is just outside the city but easy to spot from a distance—the curved roofs contrast sharply against the surrounding pine forest. When the 100-or-so Zen Buddhist monks and nuns that

practice here aren't meditating, they're tending to the temple's immaculate gardens.



You can get to this pagoda by cable car. . . The 30-minute ride takes you over strawberry farms tended to by conical-hatted workers. It gives you a glimpse at pastoral life and an understanding of just how green this region is. You can also visit Tuyen Lam Lake from the temple, which lies just 222 steps below it.



Linh Phuoc Pagoda is yet another symbol of Da Lat. . . It would be difficult for a 49-meter dragon made up of 12,000 recycled bottles and cobblestone mosaics not to stand out. Within the dragon is a place of Buddhist worship.

The massive yellow building that presides over Da Lat is Thanh that Da Phuoc, a Cao Dai temple. It pays tribute to the leaders of several world religions: Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, Lao-Tze, and Mohammed. This is to name but a few of Da Lat's religious sites. . .

A photograph of a bright yellow building with a white balcony. The balcony is adorned with various plants, including a large green bush with pink flowers and a potted plant with reddish-brown leaves. A black lantern-style light fixture is mounted on the wall below the balcony. The overall scene is sunny and tropical.

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Other Sites Of Interest



Hang Nga Guest House (also known as Crazy House) is a former hotel with a mind-boggling architectural style. Reminiscent of Gaudí's Park Güell in Barcelona, the building doesn't have a single straight wall. Instead, it emulates shapes found in nature—mushrooms, icicles, caves, tree trunks, spiderwebs, etc. It came about as the personal project of Dang Viet Nga, who has her PhD in architecture from the University of Moscow.

French-Colonial Architecture



Remnants of Vietnam's French-colonial period abound in Da Lat. . . The Da Lat Railway Station was built in 1932 by French architects Moncet and Reveron. It has three peaked roofs, which resemble the Trouville-Deauville Station in Normandy. Today, it only functions as a tourist attraction, running a daily service to Trai Mat, a traditional village nearby.



Da Lat's French Quarter is a neighborhood made up of French chalets in various states of repair. Some of these sprawling estates haven't been touched since the 1930s (which some say is because of Vietnamese superstition about ghosts).



Le Café de la Poste was once the colonial post office

Despite being rundown, these houses offer a window into the past. . . The neighborhood isn't an official tourist attraction—you'll have to scout it out for yourself using a map. Several hotels, like Hotel Du Parc, and other buildings, like the old post office, remain from that bygone era as well.

Da Lat's Central Market



All roads lead to Da Lat's Central Market

The hub of cultural activity in Da Lat is its Central Market, which sells everything from cheap sunglasses, vegetables, and winter clothing to trinkets, nut (preserved fruit candy), and plants.



Because of Da Lat's climate, you can get a lot of locally grown produce here that you can't get in other areas of Southeast Asia, like artichoke, asparagus, stone fruits, and berries.

You might be gringo-priced if you shop here, but things are so inexpensive, you probably won't care. At sundown, the market sprawls even larger with the addition of food stalls selling Dalatense street snacks.

Leisure Activities

Golf

Da Lat has three golf courses, and green fees are between 1,800,000 to 3,100,000 dong for 18 holes. Da Lat Palace Golf Club, five minutes from

Da Lat, dates to the 1920s and is frequently rated the best course in Vietnam and one of the best in Asia.



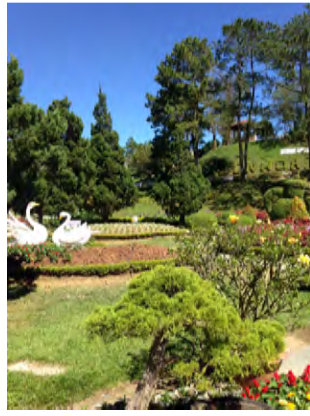
SAM Tuyen Lam Golf Club, 20 minutes from the city center, flanks Tuyen Lam Lake and, situated in a valley, features many slopes. The Da Lat at 1200 Country Club is about an hour from Da Lat, and as its name suggests, sits at an elevation of between 1,000 and 1,500 meters above sea level.

Flower Gardens

The first thing I noticed about Da Lat was that there are flowers everywhere—every road median and roundabout is embellished with an intricate floral display. To see the biggest assortment of flowers in one place, a trip to the Da Lat Flower Gardens is necessary.



Open for the past 52 years, it features an extensive collection of bonsais, cacti, orchids, roses, mimosas, hydrangeas, and so on. It even has a windmill, massive wine bottle, and mini lake (of course, with paddleboats) to complete the over-the-top French feel.



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Cuisine, Coffee, And Wine

Vietnamese food is some of the healthiest in the world because of its heavy emphasis on fresh herbs and vegetables and avoidance of oil and dairy. Out of necessity, Vietnamese people have learned to do a lot with a little. Dishes are made from simple, inexpensive ingredients but masterfully prepared. . . They're also extremely inexpensive, with the average meal costing about 100,000 dong.

Dalatese Dishes



In Da Lat, aside from sampling street food at the market, you should try bo kho (chunky beef stew with carrot and lemongrass) and banh mi (Vietnamese baguettes) at Lien Hoa Bakery—a local institution. Banh trang is a regional dish that's similar to a pizza in that it's circular and has various toppings. You can find this all over the city in roadside stalls. Nem

nuong is another local specialty: You'll get a pile of fresh herbs, grilled pork slices, and crispy rice paper rolls, which you can roll up yourself according to make spring rolls.



A sampling of Dalatese street snacks

Tastes Of Home In Da Lat



Primavera Restaurant serves up classic comfort food

If you get a craving for more familiar flavors, Da Lat has several international restaurants run by expats. Primavera Restaurant makes fresh pasta and pizza and is run by an Italian man.



One More Café has comfy chairs and tasty lattes

Restaurant Ichi is your go-to Japanese spot (owned by a Japanese expat), serving up sushi, yakitori, and tempura. One More Café is run by Lorelle, an Australian expat (who I interview in this issue's [Expat Interview](#)), and serves breakfast, lunch, coffee, and pastries.

Where To Go For A Cup Of Joe

Vietnam is the second-largest producer of coffee in the world. Coffee is grown locally, and you can sample it in many of the city's cafés. The Vietnamese like their coffee hot, strong, and sweet. A traditional cup (8,000 dong) will feature an espresso-like shot with a thick layer of sweetened-condensed milk at the bottom.



For a Western-style coffee (20,000 to 40,000 dong) and a piece of cake, go to Windmills Coffee Shop. Or if you like a bit of history with

your coffee, head to Le Café de la Poste, housed in the old French post office. It features stained-glass windows, a long wood-paneled bar, chandelier, and black and white photos on the wall.

Vietnam's Wine Industry

One of the best things about France's legacy in Vietnam is that today it has a wine culture. About 12 wine producers operate in the country, but the most famous is Vang Dalat.



A bottle of Vietnamese wine costs between 100,000 and 190,000 dong

While this table wine won't be winning any international awards any time soon, Vietnam's wine industry is still young and has time to improve. I'm happy that it exists at all.

English Spoken In Da Lat

Vietnam's big cities like HCMC and Hanoi are where you'll find the most English speakers... but even then, their numbers aren't high, and their English ability isn't great.

Da Lat is a much smaller city, and its tourism industry is geared towards Vietnamese people... There hasn't been a huge impetus to learn English here.

That said, getting by is not as difficult as you might imagine. For day-to-day activities like ordering food in a restaurant, getting gas, or asking for directions, simple gesturing works surprisingly well. If you're traveling by bus or taxi, it helps to show the driver the written destination name.

Learning Vietnamese will be a challenge. This Austroasiatic language has five different dialects, and it's a tonal language, so word meaning is determined by pronunciation.

Picking up even a little bit of Vietnamese is good practice, though, even if it's just hello, goodbye, and thank you. The best way to do that in Da Lat is to hire a local tutor, which is inexpensive given the area's

minimum wage (about US\$125). You might even be able to practice before leaving home (Vietnamese is one of the most spoken languages in the States).

Education

Without a single international school, Da Lat is not a good option if you have young children. Although enrolling your kids in a Vietnamese school is an option, education standards are not up to par. Homeschooling or boarding school in another city or country are the only alternatives.

In terms of higher education, Da Lat has several universities; some (like Da Lat and Yersin University) have classes in English.

Disabled Access

Da Lat's infrastructure isn't intentionally designed to accommodate people with disabilities or mobility issues, but many of its streets are paved and therefore wheelchair-navigable.



If you rented a house in Da Lat, you'd likely need to pay for modifications to make it accessible for a wheelchair.

LGBT Living

Currently, marriage is only officially accepted between a man and a woman in Vietnam. As a foreign gay or lesbian couple living here, you may not enjoy recognition from the law, but you're unlikely to face discrimination... You won't be seen as part of Vietnamese culture, and most condemnation of homosexuality occurs within the home.

Health Care

Hospitals And Clinics

Da Lat has several public and private hospitals and clinics, but the public ones aren't up to international standards and are therefore better avoided. Also, the cost of private care is low enough that most expats can afford to pay out of pocket. The two private hospitals are Lam Dong General Hospital and Hoan My Hospital.

Hoan My Hospital is the more highly recommended of the two because it's clean, modern, and part of the Hoan My Medical Group, the largest private hospital and clinic group in the country. Several expats visit this hospital exclusively to see Dr. Ho Thi Delin, who is professional and speaks English.



The Pasteur Institute is also recommended for vaccines, injuries, and illnesses. An infectious-disease research center, it's mainly responsible for vaccine production and administration but since 2014 has also operated a free-standing clinic to serve the local population's general health needs.

For more serious medical needs, you should make your way to HCMC where you can access a higher standard of care. The French-Vietnamese Hospital earned Joint Commission International accreditation in 2016, and Vinmec International Central Park Hospital received it in 2017, ensuring better quality health care and patient safety.

It can be difficult to find an English-speaking doctor at any of the above-mentioned facilities. What many expats do is ask a Vietnamese friend who can translate to accompany them to appointments. That, or the Google Translate app on your cell phone, are your best options.

Pharmacies

If you have a condition that doesn't require doctor care but does require a regular medication, the good news is that Vietnam's pharmacies are well-stocked, and you can buy almost anything over the counter.

Make sure you know the generic and chemical name for the medication you require. If the pharmacy doesn't have the brand-name version, they might have the chemical-name version or a suitable substitute.

Health Insurance

There are several options for local health insurance providers, such as HSBC Vietnam, Baoviet Health Insurance, and Pacific Cross Vietnam. Plans aren't expensive (for example, HSBC's Bronze Plan provides six months of coverage for 960,000 dong) and provide peace of mind.

Dental Care

The cost of dental care in Da Lat is significantly lower than in Canada or the States. For example, the average cost of a cleaning is between 120,000 to 200,000 dong. The best-recommended clinic in Da Lat is Dr. Smile, but, again, the standard and range of services available in HCMC are superior. Westcoast International Dental Clinic is highly recommended in that city.

Visas And Residency

The bad news is you'll need a visa to visit Vietnam (even as a tourist), which you'll need to apply for before you get here. The good news is, it's easy to arrange and can last for three months and be extended.

You can extend your visa two times before you have to leave the country to renew it. The catch is that you can only extend it for the same amount of time as you applied for originally.

For example, if your first visa was for one month, you can only apply for two, one-month visas (for a total of three months in the country). If your first visa was for three months, you can get two, three-month visas (for a total of nine months in the country).

Many Vietnam expats use this strategy to stay in the country long-term, because, unfortunately, Vietnam doesn't have a retirement visa in place yet. Another option is to get a business visa, which can last for a year and be extended, or an investor's visa, which can last up to five years. For information about gaining residency in Vietnam, [go here](#).

Da Lat's Property Market

Foreigners can own property in Vietnam with restrictions. The Vietnamese government owns all land in Vietnam: Vietnamese citizens can lease it indefinitely, but foreign residents can only lease for 50 years.

The exception is certain condo developments, which are strictly regulated by the government and found in bigger cities like HCMC and Da Nang. There aren't any of these condo developments that I'm aware of in Da Lat.

Unless your spouse is Vietnamese, owning property in Da Lat doesn't make sense. With a 50-year lease, the value of the property goes down as each year remaining on the lease passes. Plus, it's so inexpensive in Da Lat, renting indefinitely is a better option.

Da Lat's Rental Market

The rental market varies on location. In the center of town, you can expect to pay between 8,000,000 to 10,000,000 dong a month for a two-bedroom apartment. On its fringes, 4,500,000 to 6,000,000 is typical.

Vietnamese landlords generally require a 12-month lease. In some cases, they'll want pay for the entire year upfront; in others, you can arrange month-to-month or three- or six-month pay schedules. You might also be able to negotiate a shorter lease but should expect to pay more in that case.

How To Find A Rental

Finding a rental is an informal process. . . As far as I know, there are no English-speaking rental agencies in town. The best way to go about finding a place is to join one of the Facebook groups, like Expats in Da Lat. New advertisements for rooms, apartments, and houses appear daily, and renters seem eager to find Western tenants.



Alternatively, you could come to Da Lat, arrange to stay long-term in an inexpensive hotel, and find a rental through word-of-mouth recommendation. A Villa in Dalat (see RolodexANCHOR LINK for contact details) rents fully furnished studio apartments to expats who want to test the waters in Da Lat with short-term leases.

Inconveniences And Annoyances

Traffic And Honking

When you ask expats about the annoyances of living in Da Lat, the first thing they mention is traffic and honking. In places like Canada,

Retirement Haven... Offshore Haven... Tax Haven...
Adventurer's Wonderland... English-Speaking Paradise...

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it's illegal to honk your horn unless absolutely necessary. In Vietnam, honking is second to breathing.



Motorcycle traffic in Vietnam can be overwhelming

You honk to communicate everything from, "It's OK to pass," to "it's not OK to pass." Until you decipher the natural flow of traffic, it can be confusing, hectic, and stressful.

Differences In Customer Service

Standards in customer service may not be what you're used to either. . . Eating isn't a formal activity in Vietnam; various social strata may be eating together at a makeshift food stall at any given time.

Safety

Da Lat is extremely safe, whether you're male, female, single, or accompanied. I feel completely at ease walking around here. . .

Oddly enough, the same can't be said for furry four-legged friends. . . Pet-snatching, especially of small, designer-breed dogs is an issue here. Pets are either re-sold or held for ransom. The best way to avoid this is to get a big (or ugly) dog.

Motorbike thievery is also a risk. If you park in a busy or monitored area (for a small fee), you'll avoid problems.

Getting To Da Lat: Planes, Trains, And Automobiles

By Air

Da Lat's airport, Lien Khuong International Airport, is located about 30 minutes outside the city. You can get to and from the airport in a taxi for 250,000 dong or by shuttle for 40,000 dong.

Though Da Lat's airport is technically international, the only cities outside of Vietnam that it serves are Bangkok, Thailand, and Wuhan,

China. Your best option for getting to Da Lat from abroad is to fly into one of the country's more trafficked international airports (like HCMC, Da Nang, or Hanoi) and then take a low-cost domestic flight to Da Lat. Vietnam Airlines, Jetstar Pacific, and VietJet Air are popular options for domestic air travel.

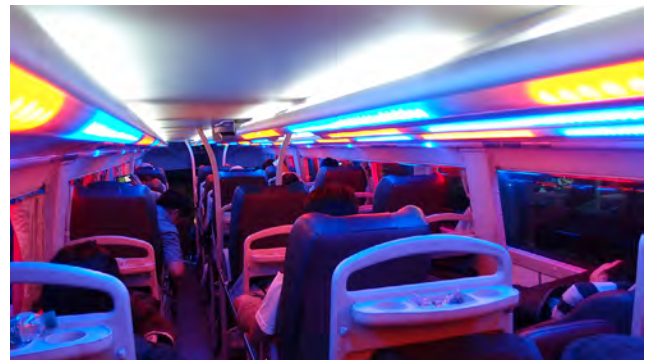
By Land

You can also access Da Lat by land, whether you take a train, sleeper bus, or car.

Sleeper Bus

Sleeper buses are the most economic option for long-distance travel in Vietnam, but you get what you pay for. This country is long and narrow, and its major cities are well-dispersed; most over-land travel is a multi-hour ordeal.

The sleeper buses are often double-decker and come equipped with bunk beds or chairs that recline. . . but just because they're called sleeper buses doesn't mean you'll be getting any sleep.



Your bus might feature disco lights and loud music. . . it'll probably feature lots of honking and a grumpy driver. . . and it'll definitely feature many windy roads taken at white-knuckle speeds. All this to say, non-medicated sleep isn't easy to achieve.

Train

Vietnam's trains are comfortable and dependable—definitely a cut above the sleeper buses. Different ticket classes are available (hard seat, soft seat, hard sleeper, and soft sleeper) as well as train types (including luxury trains).

Depending on what you opt for, you may or may not get air conditioning. Usually, you can buy snacks and drinks on board. . . Regardless, it's a great way to see the countryside, which, in Vietnam, is nothing short of spectacular.

Renting A Car

You could also opt for maximum flexibility by renting a car, but note that your car rental will also include a driver. It's very rare that a rental

company will rent a car to a foreigner without the accompanying driver, even if you have an international driving permit.

While unusual, this is actually a good thing. Getting behind the wheel of a car could be a suicide mission, as foreigners likely wouldn't understand Vietnam's traffic rules (if it has any), car-honking protocols, or how to navigate its streets.

Getting Around Da Lat

On Foot

Once you get to Da Lat, you can get around on foot. The city is relatively small at just under 400 square kms. Walking around is a nice activity as it's not too hot, sidewalks are abundant, and the main thoroughfares are embellished with flowering plants.

The Art Of Crossing The Street

Crossing the street in one piece is a skill in Vietnam. . . Crosswalks and controlled stops aren't easy to come by, and they may not be respected by drivers. You'll need to move cautiously as you step into the street and enter the ubiquitous stream of motorbikes.

In my experience, the best method for crossing is one part timing (i.e. looking for a gap in the stream), one part caution (raising your hand to indicate that you're going to cross), and one part blind faith that motorbike drivers will either stop or swerve around you.

Taxis

Taxis are relatively cheap (about 100,000 dong for a 15-minute trip) and useful for going longer distances. Mai Linh is the taxi company preferred by locals. . . They stand out because their cars are bright green.

Motorbike

The best option for getting around Da Lat is on a motorbike. Most trips you'll take in and around the city are slightly too far to walk but too close to warrant a taxi. Motorbikes are the happy medium. They afford flexibility and are cheap to buy, rent, and fill up with gas.

Though they're unsafe, you'll never be going very fast on Da Lat's streets. And if someone like me, with limited driving experience and road sense can do it, chances are you can, too.

Internet Availability

Internet is widely available in Da Lat and reliable. . . I had no trouble checking emails or video calling. While I was pleasantly surprised to find out that Netflix works here (it's restricted in certain Asian countries, like Indonesia and China), I did have some interruptions while using the streaming service.

Reliability Of Electricity

Power is likewise reliable in Da Lat. Outages happen every couple of months (especially if you're next-door to a construction site), usually lasting for under an hour. The fact is, Da Lat's electrical grid is third-world, although the city's supposedly working on expanding capacity.

Environmental Factors

Pollution

Vietnam's tumultuous history has prevented it from developing and entering the modern era for a long time. . . It entered a period of rapid industrialization after the end of the Vietnam War and has been sprinting to catch up with its neighbors ever since. . . Its natural world is suffering as a result.

Water and air pollution, land degradation, and waste management are at the core of the country's issues. Luckily, in Da Lat, the worst of the effects are not felt as strongly.

Water Quality

Da Lat's water supply is one of the best in the country and was established early on in the city's development, in the 1920s.

While water quality is up to the region's standards and locals drink tap water, one expat mentioned he is leery of it. With lake contamination and Agent Orange use not far off in Vietnam's history, I feel the same way.

Jugs of filtered water are available, and though they're an extra expense, the cost is negligible.

Air Quality

Vietnam is full of scooters and motorcycles, which are notoriously bad for contributing to air pollution. Da Lat is surrounded by 25,646 hectares of forest land, which may help to balance the negative side effects of scooter-use out.

Southern Vietnam often tops the charts of the Solar UV Index, with very high UV levels posing risk to your eye and skin health. This catches

you by surprise in Da Lat because it's cool and breezy, but make no mistake—the sun is powerful here.

Its effects are exaggerated because of its high elevation. Those with respiratory problems should also exercise caution in Da Lat.

Where Is Da Lat Headed?

The Future Of Flower Exports

Da Lat is the capital of the Lam Dong Province, which is famous for the top-quality flowers it produces. They are particularly popular in the Japanese, Taiwanese, and Chinese markets, especially around religious holidays.

There is major export potential here, but it's being inhibited by state regulations and controls that hinder the trading process. Recently, the Japan International Cooperation Agency began working with Lam Dong Province to create a flower trading center in Da Lat.

While better cooperation between farmers, businesses, and state is still needed, this is step in the right direction. The number of branches transacted daily has already improved, which might incentivize further opening doors to international trade.

Organic Food Movement In Da Lat

The organic food movement is slowly making its way to Vietnam, and Da Lat could potentially become an important producer of it. A USDA-certified organic UHD milk was recently launched by Vinamilk (the country's main dairy producer).

This milk was produced on an organic farm in Da Lat... The potential for other organic products to be developed is there, especially if Vietnam moves toward more privatization of industry (as it did with Vinamilk).

Business Opportunities

Every expat I met is doing business in Da Lat, so it's possible to be an entrepreneur here. Most of the expat entrepreneurs operate cafés, restaurants, homestays, or hotels; there are also some Dutch expats involved in flower production. Something geared to Vietnamese tourists—the biggest demographic that visits Da Lat—could be a good option.

Also, the infrastructure necessary for someone to work remotely is already in place, and a good number of expats living here rely on the internet for their livelihood.

Is Da Lat For You?



Da Lat Pros:

- It's quiet. If you're after peace and tranquility, rest and relaxation, then this is the place for you.
- It's naturally beautiful. You can pursue a variety of outdoor interests here: hiking, biking, golf, gardening, etc.
- Perfect weather: This is the Eastern Hemisphere's City of Eternal Spring.
- The food is delicious and fresh. Reduce your expenses and your waistline just by eating out.
- Low cost of living. Everything from rent to health insurance to a cup of coffee is cheaper than it is at home, and you can live very well here on nothing but your pension.

Da Lat Cons:

- It's quiet. If you need constant stimulation and the amenities of a big city, this isn't the place for you.
- Few Vietnamese people speak English. Not being able to make yourself understood might become tiresome.
- Cultural exclusion. It's hard to form meaningful connections with locals when you can't understand each other. Hospitals aren't great: For more serious procedures, you'll need to travel to HCMC. 🇻🇳



About The Author

For Sophia Titley, home is a subjective concept. She was born in Singapore but grew up in Indonesia and Saudi Arabia... and has since lived in Canada, Spain, Colombia, and, most recently, Panama. She studied political science and Spanish at the University of British Columbia, and in her free time enjoys trying new recipes, playing soccer, and salsa dancing.

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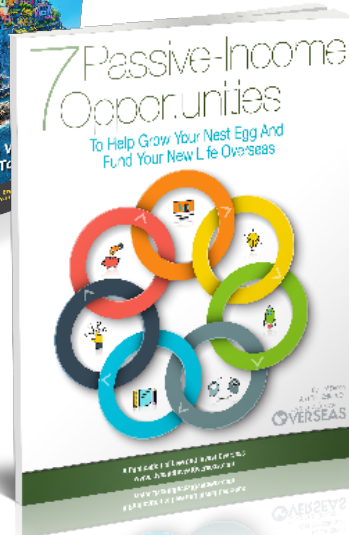
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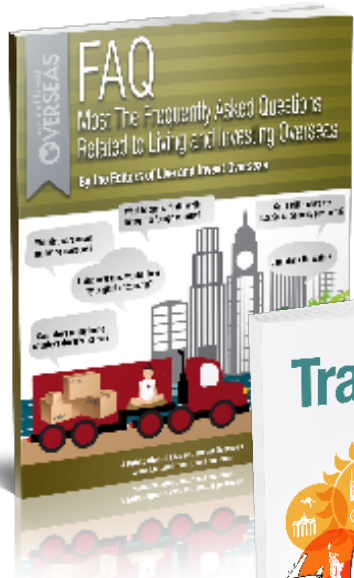
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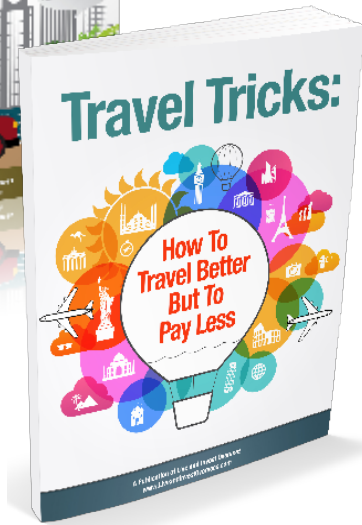
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