



Vietnam - Mountains to Mekong

INTRODUCTION

Escape to the hidden corners of Vietnam, exploring by bike in regions far from the beaten track of tourism. Our journey has been designed to show you the best scenery but also give you an insight into the lives, culture and history of this amazing country.

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

- Explore high mountains and hidden regions
- Visit the famous Bac-Ha Sunday market
- Meet the people and experience the culture
- Fully guided and vehicle supported throughout

LEADERS IN CYCLE HOLIDAYS

CycleActive has been dedicated to cycling since 1996. We are experts when it comes to travel and training on bikes – so everyone from novices to experienced cyclists can feel totally safe and secure when travelling with us. From tour planning to on-the-ground operations, every holiday is overseen by a team of qualified, experienced professionals.

Our Vietnamese tours are run by a team of experienced local guides. They have proven skills in bike guiding and mechanics but are also multi-lingual expert leaders who will help you get a true understanding of all you encounter on your journey. This interaction is a real highlight of any trip to Vietnam.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT HOLIDAY

At CycleActive we carefully grade our trips according to both the level of fitness you need and, for mountain biking, the level of skill you need. We also offer personal advice to anyone who needs it, by email or on the phone, to ensure that you find a holiday suitable for your abilities and desires.

This trip is Fitness Grade 2 and 3. This tour involves a reasonable amount of cycling per day, with the option of some good climbs, although the larger ones can be avoided by going up in the support vehicle. A moderate or good level of fitness is required to fully enjoy this tour.

This trip is Skill Grade A/B. The tour mainly takes place on wide tracks and smooth singletrack. Some confidence on a mountain bike is required so that you feel comfortable cycling on the narrower trails but these are not technically challenging, unless taken at speed, so you do not need any higher level riding skills.

SUMMARY ITINERARY

From the UK

Day 1 & 2. Depart London. Arrive Hanoi morning of day 2, Then a tour of city.

Day 3. Fly to Dien Bien, cycle through plantations heading for the village of Muong Lay.

Day 4. Head deeper into tribal lands as we head for Lai Chau.

Day 5. Cycle over the highest pass in Vietnam to the town of Sapa.

Day 6. Explore the Sapa valley, villages and terraces by bike.

Day 7. Ride towards the Chinese border heading for Lao Cai.

Day 8. Visit the Sunday market at Bac Ha and explore the region by bike.

Day 9. Singletrack hill ridge ride. Board the night train back to Hanoi.

Day 10. Fly to Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) and explore the city, then continue to DaLat.

Day 11. Explore the rolling hills, flower and coffee plantations of the central highlands.

Day 12. Ride the mountain and forest trails to TaNung.

Day 13. Descent day through coffee, tea, banana and rubber fields, then on to the beach.

Day 14. Explore the local fishing villages by bike, and relax on the beach.

Day 15 & 16. Travel back to Saigon and depart for the UK

Full details of dates, prices and what is included can be found on our website.



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Detailed Itinerary

Days 1 & 2 – Arrival

Flights from the UK to Hanoi generally depart from London on the morning of day 1 to arrive on the morning of day 2 in Hanoi (allowing for the 7 hour time difference). You need to arrive before midday, but if you wish you can arrive a day or two early, giving you time to explore this historic city.

We collect you from the airport on day 2 and transfer you to a good hotel in the heart of the city. In the afternoon we go on a tour, which takes us past the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, visits the Temple of Literature, and after dinner to a traditional water puppet show.

Day 3 – Hanoi to Muong Lay (60km)

This morning we fly to Dien Bien, leaving the city far behind and stepping straight back in time as we enter the world of rural Vietnam.

We assemble our bikes and after lunch we cycle on a narrow tar road, seldom used by vehicles, through rolling countryside filled with tropical trees, plantations and dotted with small villages. After 60km we board our back up vehicles and drive to our destination - the village of Muong Lay on the fringes of the Hmong tribal region.

Day 4 - Muong Lay to Lai Chau (65km)

This morning we cycle from the door of the hotel straight onto singletrack routes which wind along through the fields and hillsides. During the middle of the morning we load up for a 40km transfer by bus over one pass and start cycling again along the Nam Na River to Pan Tan where our restaurant for lunch has a great scenic view.

A gutsy climb of 17km awaits us after lunch followed by an awesome downhill enjoying the views of mountain ranges, lakes, rivers, jungle, and tiered paddy fields rising and falling as far as the eye can see. We're also getting deeper into tribal lands and we'll see Tay, Hmong and Tsao tribespeople in their villages and tending their crops. There is an optional massage at the end of the day, which is a nice reward for today's workout.

Further Information

Hanoi is a fascinating place. It's been inhabited since 3000BC and has been the capital of Vietnam for almost 1000 years. Every dynasty that ruled the country has made its mark here, and the cultural sights and diversity are truly breathtaking.

The backroads we cycle are on the western side of the Fansipan mountain range – a side seldom visited as it is extremely hard to access and has few “tourist sights” to attract people. In reality this is the reason it is such a fabulous area for our tours – we're cycling through a physical and social landscape that has remained almost unchanged for thousands of years.



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Day 5 - High road to Sapa (up to 87km)

Once again the day kicks off with singletrack riding through the villages and we expect to see more tribes' people in colourful dress, living their lives the way they have for generation after generation

As the day goes on we get closer and closer to the highest mountains of the Fansipan range. After a morning of rolling trails we start to climb and this is a moment of choice – do you want to ride all the way to the highest pass in Vietnam (at 1900m)? If not then the vehicle is there to take you up, and everyone can enjoy the amazing descent to the mountain town of Sapa on the other side.

Day 6 - Exploring Muong Bo and Sapa (37km)

The valley south of Sapa is one of the most beautiful sights on this or any journey through Asia. This morning we head out to explore it by bike on a trip which could last between 2 hours and 6 hours, depending on how far you want to go and how keen you are to explore on foot as well as by bike.

We ride down a winding track, lined with steeply stacked terraces of rice paddies tended by the tribes of the region. At some points we'll stop to walk in the villages, meeting Black Hmong in their traditional dress, still dyed by hand with indigo picked on the hills, as they have done for centuries. Deeper into the valley we meet the Tay tribe, Red Dzao and others, planting or harvesting rice, the children driving oxen across the paddies. Sometimes our bike trails pass through a local's backyard (Don't worry, they don't mind!) and as we cycle through the reception we get is fantastic.

Day 7 - Border ride to Bac Ha (79km)

We ride northwards out of Sapa towards the Chinese border, following a seldom used dirt track through high, rolling mountains. It's a fabulous ride with giant, open views and a feeling of truly remote beauty which we can enjoy all the way down the long descent to the valley below us. Once out of the mountains we head on to the town of Lao Cai. From here we drive to Bac Ha.

Day 8 - Exploring Bac Ha (25km)

We plan our Vietnam tour to ensure that we are in Bac Ha on Sunday, for the market, as this is a great opportunity to view local life-styles. Just make sure you bring enough film! By mid-morning it's time to get out onto the trails to explore the region, its villages and the stunning scenery of mountains and forest. Wherever you go you will become a major focus of attention. Stopping to admire the view, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, people will suddenly appear from the hills. Often these will be people from the Flower Hmong tribe, the most colourful in Vietnam.

The town of Sapa is the hub of this mountainous region, and the main starting point for treks into the surrounding tribal lands. Originally a small centre for the Hmong and Yao, it became a mountain retreat for wealthy French inhabitants from Hanoi in the early 1900's. After they were removed during the 40's and 50's, it returned to being a quiet mountain town.

The Sunday market at Bac Ha is a famous sight, full of colour, energy and the whole mix of local society all coming together. It has traditionally been a place to buy an amazing assortment of local wines and spirits, made from rice, cassavas, corn and different sorts of fruits such as plums, apples and peaches.



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Day 9 – Lao Cai and Hanoi (54km)

Today is a great singletrack day - a fantastic ride along the hill ridges through evergreen forests and ancient hill tribes. We have a picnic lunch along the way and we can have some well-earned snacks and a cold beer at the end of the ride. We then pack up the bikes and drive to Lao Cai in time for the night train back to Hanoi. Bikes will be sent to Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) ready for the next part of the biking adventure.

Day 10 – Saigon and DaLat

The coastal belt of Vietnam was once a quiet, cycle friendly area but now the age of commerce has had a big effect. This is the busy, heavily trafficked economic powerhouse of Vietnam – and whilst that is great for the country's prosperity it doesn't make for great cycling, or an interesting, long drive.

Instead, having sent the bikes ahead by truck, we now take a short internal flight from Hanoi to Saigon, allowing us time to explore the city before lunch. We then fly on to DaLat, a former French hill station on the fringes of the central highlands of Vietnam.

Days 11 & 12 – Exploring the Central Highlands (45km / 52km)

Vietnam's central highlands offer a combination of rural roads and tracks, beautiful rolling landscapes and difficult access for other visitors - making it an ideal area for our tour.

Arriving here through the southern town of DaLat gives us the chance to base ourselves in one comfortable hotel for three nights, so you can unpack, unwind and explore at your leisure. If you choose not to go on the bike rides on day 11 or 12 then you can simply explore on foot or on bike at your own pace, or just take a day off and relax.

Our first ride here takes us out past old colonial French villas, on to winding singletrack trails and through the hills to Victory Lake and Tiger Falls. The second day involves more climbing as we bike our way across the mountains, reaching 1750m altitude. From here we blast down 1000 metres of vertical descent, using tracks through the pine forests and in to the village of TaNung. We then have the choice of a transfer back up the 20km climb to our hill station hotel, or a final, challenging ride!

Day 13 – Descent to the Coast (up to 112km)

An early start gets us onto our first breathtaking descent, starting at the door of our hotel and winding down into the DucTrong district. After rolling through the open countryside we descend again, passing through coffee, tea, banana and rubber plantations before jumping in our vehicle for a short transfer to DiLinh.

From here we ride on easy, gentle terrain through GiaBac, another tribal village, then have the choice of a final transfer or bike ride all the way to the MuiNe beach.

The night train in Vietnam is very clean, comfortable and quiet, making it the perfect way to save time as we travel right out of the mountainous north for the next stage of our tour.

You won't find much information on this region of Vietnam in the guidebooks, because its lack of major cultural sites, combined with difficult access, has long put off the backpackers and less intrepid travellers. This is possibly one reason to come – it's an area rich in the simple, traditional history and culture of Vietnam, seldom touched and still unspoilt.



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Day 14 – Exploring MuiNe (up to 30km)

With the end of the trip now close you can choose between relaxing by the pool at our very comfortable hotel, or heading out for a final bike ride. If you decide to go for a spin we'll take you along the coast, through fishing villages and past the sand dunes, to give you a real flavour of life in this corner of Vietnam.

Whatever you choose to do, we all meet up back at the hotel this evening for one final dinner together.

Days 15 & 16 – Journey Home

This morning we leave the coast for the drive to Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) airport. On arrival we box up the bikes and let you check in for your journey home. Flights to the UK generally land on the morning of day 16.

If you wish to see more of Saigon we can arrange extra city accommodation for you, including transfers back to the airport when your holiday is finished.



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TRAVEL FACTS

Tour Guidebook

On booking you will be sent detailed information on a wide range of topics including health advice, recommended clothing, money, visas and so on, to help you prepare for your holiday. If you have questions on these topics either now or after you have read the Guidebook, please contact us.

Geography and Climate

Vietnam is predominantly mountainous, with densely-populated fertile plains in the north and south around the Red River and Mekong deltas. The climate varies considerably from north to south, but we time our trips to co-inside with the best seasons and avoid the rains in each area we visit.

Vehicle Support

All equipment and provisions are carried by a support vehicle, which takes us around Vietnam, links up the rides, and is ready to pick up tired riders at any of the ride dropout points. Our leaders carry a good toolkit and will help to fix any bike problems. However, we cannot guarantee to be equipped for all repairs, so you must ensure that your bike is in good working order before coming on the tour. If unsure, please have a bike shop give it a full service (or follow the service guide in our pre-travel information guidebook).

Cycle Rental

For a tour such as this we usually recommend having a bike with at least front suspension, which fits you well and which has good quality components on it that will work without problems for the whole tour. You can choose to rent a bike from us, in Vietnam, or bring your own with you. If you choose to bring a bike please check the airline baggage conditions first as some have strict weight limits.

Flights

You can book your own flights for this tour or we can book your flight through an ATOL bonded agent and you will have a separate contract for your flight with them. They will provide all flight confirmations and tickets. For this tour we fly out from the UK to Hanoi in the morning and **must arrive there before midday on day 2** of the tour in order to be there in time for transfers and a city tour that first afternoon (also, we need to arrange the onward transfer of bikes and they must depart soon after midday, so this arrival time is essential if you are bringing your own bike). The internal flights on day 10 are included in the tour cost. Your return flight needs to be booked from Saigon, with a departure either in the evening of day 16 or the next morning (although extra charges would be made for hotel accommodation and transfers if you chose to stay for an extra night).

Passports and Visas

For entry into Vietnam, UK citizens need a full passport, valid for at least 6 months after the date of entry. A visa is required for entry into Vietnam and can easily be obtained from the Embassy in London. Visit www.vietnamembassy.org.uk/consular.html for full details. For the latest advice on recommended inoculations either consult your doctor, your nearest travel clinic or go online and check the NHS travel website: www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk

Clothing and Equipment

On booking, a detailed list of useful and essential items will be sent to you. The only specialist items required are cycle clothing and a helmet, which must be worn for all cycle rides.



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