

SMART TRAVELLER

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History, high-rises, and rich coffee in Ho Chi Minh City

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Cutting-edge Vienna rethinks its city hotels



Saigon's skyline is a blend of modern high-rises, traditional pagodas, and old French colonial architecture.

Saigon Sabbatical

FROM CLASSIC HISTORICAL ATTRACTIONS TO INNOVATIVE SHOPS AND RESTAURANTS, THERE ARE PLENTY OF GREAT WAYS TO SPEND A WEEKEND IN HO CHI MINH CITY | BY MARGOT BIGG

Here is *National Geographic Traveller India's* handy guide to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Vietnam. It is designed as a mid-level holiday, but can be scaled up or down depending on preferences. The French colonial city has many museums linked to the Vietnam War, but also has a thriving café culture and great food. This three-day itinerary has been worked out for a couple and costs ₹25,000 without airfare or visas.

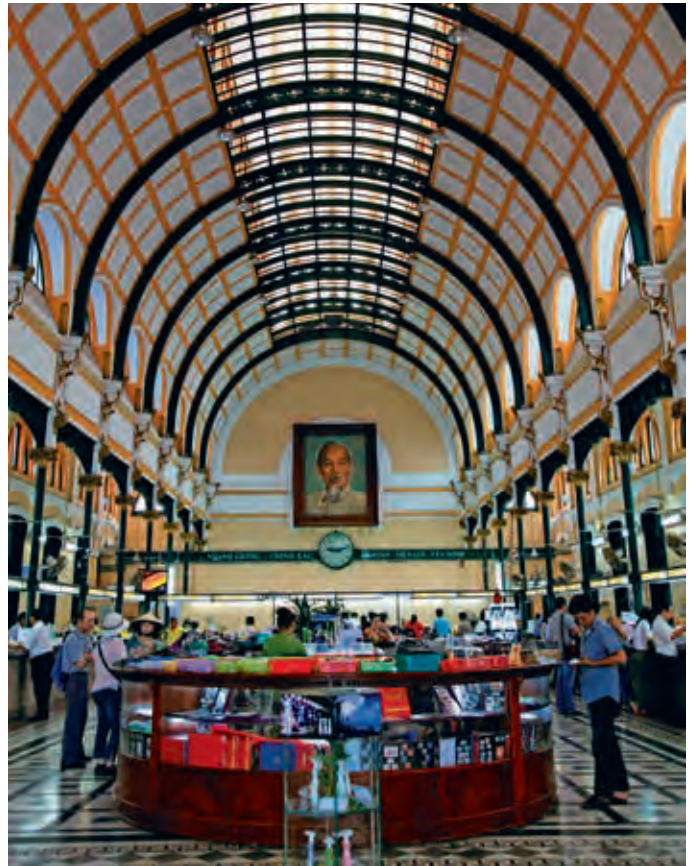
Ho Chi Minh City, also known as Saigon, is Vietnam's largest metropolitan area and easily one of Southeast Asia's most up-and-coming tourist destinations. However, life in Saigon feels surprisingly slow for a city of its size, except for the roads, which are usually thronged with commuters on motor scooters. There's a huge coffee shop culture; people-watching while sitting out on street-side terraces and sipping sweet, strong Vietnamese coffee is a common pastime. It's also a spectacular city for aimless strolling, thanks to numerous green spaces and the striking mix of 19th-

century French colonial architecture, Cantonese pagodas, and modern skyscrapers that dominate the skyline.

This weekend-long itinerary is designed to help travellers hit all of Saigon's classic attractions, and still squeeze in enough time to check out some of the city's coolest spots to eat, shop, and play. We've also added an optional third day with a half-day trip out of the city for those who have a little more time to spare.

GETTING THERE

There are no direct flights between India and Ho Chi Minh City. Travellers



Piles of locally grown fruit like strong-smelling durian and hairy rambutan are sold at busy Bến Thành Market (left); The art deco-inspired Central Post Office, built in the late 19th century, is one of Saigon's oldest buildings (right).

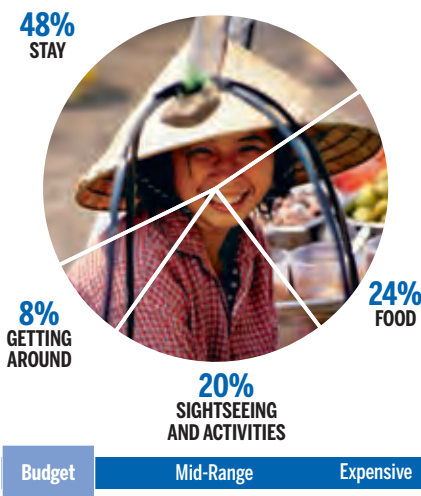
from Delhi or Mumbai will need to switch flights at a Southeast Asian hub like Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, or Bangkok.

Most travellers arrange for a pick-up from their hotel, though there is a pre-paid taxi counter at the airport. Note that all taxis are privately run and don't necessarily offer fixed rates. It costs about VND130,000-160,000/₹390-480 to the city centre, though rates depend on gas prices. The journey to the city centre takes around half an hour.

Scooters and motorbikes are by far the most popular way to get around the city, and most hotels can help arrange a rental. Expect to pay around VND150,000/₹450 per day, and remember to drive on the right-hand side of the road. Alternatively, catch a ride on a motorbike taxi—rates vary though meters are used, so agree on a price ahead of time; short rides should cost VND30,000-50,000/₹90-150. Taxicabs are also common and can be arranged through your hotel or by using apps such as GrabTaxi.

YOUR EXPENSE STATS

According to this itinerary, it will cost a couple ₹25,000 for three days in Ho Chi Minh City. This includes visiting the sightseeing spots listed, and meals and hotel stay at mid-level establishments. Expenses can be further reduced if you opt for less expensive restaurants and cheaper accommodation. Saigon is open to travellers of every budget.



VISA

Vietnam offers visa on arrival facilities for Indian passport holders arriving by air, but an approval letter obtained in advance is required. Applications can be filled and submitted online and approval letters come in about two working days (*agents like www.vietnameseembassy.org/vietnam+visa.html can assist with visa on arrival; fee \$15/₹1,027; does not include stamp fee of an additional \$25/₹1,712 paid on arrival in Vietnam*).

NEED TO KNOW

The currency in Vietnam is the dong (VND). At the time of printing, ₹1 could buy 335 dong. ATMs are widely available throughout Vietnam and most accept debit cards with a Visa/Maestro endorsement. Hotel prices are sometimes quoted in US dollars and though this currency is widely accepted at most tourist-friendly shops and attractions, other foreign currencies may not be.

STAY

One of the newest luxury properties to

launch in the city, **The Reverie Saigon** is about as swanky as it gets. The hotel occupies multiple floors in the 39-storey Times Square Tower in the central District 1. Rooms have floor-to-ceiling windows offering stunning city views. Features include an expansive luxury spa and multiple restaurants offering everything from traditional Italian fare to Cantonese fine dining (+84-8-38236688; www.thereveriesaiigon.com; doubles from \$350/₹23,300).

A solid mid-range option is **Asian Ruby Central Hotel** also in District 1, and a short walk from most of the city's major attractions. It offers clean, spacious, air-conditioned rooms, and a free breakfast buffet with both Vietnamese hot dishes and continental food. There are a couple of great cafés just outside the hotel's main entrance for travellers craving a traditional Vietnamese filter coffee (+84-8-38277948; www.asianrubycentralhotel.com; doubles from \$60/₹4,000).

Tucked away in a quiet lane in Pham Ngu Lao, Ho Chi Minh City's backpacker district, **Tripwriter Hotel & Bistro** offers a budget-meets-boutique experience, with only 15 units. Rooms and common areas are elegant, particularly for a budget hotel. They feature wooden floors, tiled bathrooms, and lots of locally sourced decorative pieces. The on-site continental restaurant gets rave reviews from guests (+84-8-38361915; 185/28 Pham Ngu Lao street, District 1; doubles from \$30/₹2,000).

For something more traditional, book a stay at the **Hotel Majestic**, one of the city's oldest hotels. Dating back to 1925, this lovely property offers elegant rooms and suites with colonial-style decor including moulded ceilings and art deco stained glass panels. The hotel offers Vietnamese cooking classes and has traditional Vietnamese music performances at its Cyclo Restaurant (+84-8-38295517; www.majesticsaiigon.com; doubles from \$86/₹5,733).

DAY 1

Start your first day in Saigon at the Taoist **Jade Emperor Pagoda**, built by the city's Cantonese community at the turn of the 20th century. The rose-coloured pagoda is decorated with wooden carvings and houses numerous chambers that lead up to an idol of the Taoist god, Ngoc Hoang or the Jade Emperor. The temple also has



The network of underground tunnels at Cu Chi, a day trip from Saigon, served as hiding places during the Vietnam War (top); Much of the contemporary art at the Ho Chi Minh City Museum of Fine Arts is inspired by the war (bottom left); Bánh mì sandwiches, available at street vendors as well as gourmet restaurants, are a tribute to Vietnam's French colonial past (bottom right).

a small turtle sanctuary as the creatures are considered lucky charms (73 Mai Thi Luu, District 1; open daily 7 a.m.-6 p.m.; entry free).

From here, it's a 12-minute walk to the **Museum of Vietnamese History**, which charts the region's past, from the prehistoric era to the present. Highlights include artefacts of ruling dynasties, as well as objects from neighbouring countries, including Khmer stone carvings and Buddha statues from across Asia (2 Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, District 1; baotanglichsuvn.com, open 8-11.30

a.m and 1.30-5 p.m. Tue-Sun; entry VND15,000/₹45).

For lunch, hop in a taxi and make your way south about 2.5 kilometres to the enormous **Bến Thành Market**, a covered market crammed with souvenir stalls, fruit and vegetable vendors, and excellent street food stalls. Just keep an eye on your belongings as the place has its fair share of pickpockets. Head to the market's food court to sample bánh mì, a quintessentially Vietnamese baguette sandwich. These sandwiches are generally stuffed with local daikon radish, shredded coriander, pickled

carrots, plus some sort of meat filling, which is often pork. Chicken or tofu versions are usually available too (*Lê Thánh Tôn, District 1; sandwiches cost around VND15,000-20,000/₹45-60*).

After touring the market, take a 15-minute stroll north to the **War Remnants Museum**, a good introduction to the history and devastating impact of the Vietnam War. This government-run museum features old military bombers along with dioramas and interpretive displays about the war and its aftermath. Some of the material is graphic and may not be suitable for children (*28 Võ Văn Tần, District 3; warremnantsmuseum.com; open 7.30 a.m.-noon and 1.30-5 p.m. daily; entry VND15,000/₹45*).

From here it's a quick 10-minute walk to **Independence Palace**, or the Reunification Palace. This iconic structure is best known as the site where the Vietnam War officially ended with a tank crashing through the palace gates in 1975. Although parts of the palace serve as government offices, hour-long tours are available and provide valuable insights into the history and significance of the conflict (*135 Nam Kỳ Khởi Nghĩa, District 1; www.dinhdoclap.gov.vn, open 7.30-11 a.m and 1-4 p.m. daily; entry adults VND30,000/₹90, children VND5,000/₹15*).

End your first day with an early dinner at **Huong Sen Vegetarian Restaurant**, a 10-minute cab ride away. This quiet, vegetarian restaurant specializes in meat-free takes on traditional Vietnamese dishes, such as pho, Vietnam's world-famous meat-and-noodle soup that's typically prepared with beef broth (*230 Bui Vien St., District 1; mains from around VND60,000/₹180*). Alternatively, head over to **Saigon Xua & Nay**, a five-minute walk from Independence Palace. The popular haunt has a long list of local delicacies, from shrimp skewers to dishes that demonstrate the city's French influence, such as garlicky escargot (*33 Nguyen Trung Truc, District 1; mains from around VND55,000/₹165*).

DAY 2

Start your second day in the city with a traditional Vietnamese coffee—slow-brewed through a drip filter and served over a dollop of condensed milk—at **Café Tabac** (*drinks from VND18,000/₹54*) on Pham Ngu Lao, the city's famous backpacker street. It's a charming,



Trendy L'Usine pioneered a new concept in Saigon, creating a shared boutique, gallery, and café space in a 19th-century French colonial building (top); Saigon's War Remnants Museum is a grim reminder of the fallouts of the Vietnam War, with exhibits ranging from military vehicles to munitions and photographs (bottom).

family-owned coffee shop with stylish brick-and-wood interior accents and a friendly vibe. Tabac also sells bags of coffee for those who want to brew cups at home. On your way out, stop by the coffee accessories shop upstairs to pick up a filter of your own.

If you're in the mood to shop, you're in the right part of town. There are plenty of souvenir shops in the area, as well as a few good spots to pick up high-quality, trendy Vietnam-themed T-shirts with funky motifs, such as traffic lights or faux vintage ads for quintessentially Vietnamese products. Some of the best buys are at **Papaya** (*171 Bui Vien, District 1; www.papaya-tshirt.com*) and **Ginko**

(*54-56 Bui Vien, District 1; ginkgo-vietnam.com*); the latter has better options for women and children.

Next, take a quick taxi ride to the Bến Nghé area, a 10-minute drive away, and get off at the **Saigon Post Office** (*2 Công xã Paris, District 1*). This iconic structure was designed in the late 19th century by a team of French architects, and has an unmistakably Gallic look, with a marigold-yellow exterior, covered with intricate white stucco; and gorgeous art deco interiors with high arched ceilings and huge skylights. It's right across the street from the **Notre Dame Cathedral**, a striking neo-Gothic-meets-

YADID LEVY/AGE FOTOSTOCK/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (SHOP), VIDLER STEVE/PRISMA/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (TANK)

Romanesque structure covered with imported French tiles.

While you're in Bến Nghé, drop by **L'Usine**, a multipurpose retail space showcasing home decor products and apparel from up-and-coming local designers. It also shares a roof with an upmarket French café. The menu here focuses strongly on light bistro fare with a substantial dessert list featuring classics, such as brownies, alongside a rotating selection of daily specialities (151/1 Đông Khởi, District 1; lusinespace.com; coffee from VND65,000/₹200).

After lunch, fit in a bit more shopping at **Anupa Eco Boutique**, which specializes in eco-friendly luxury accessories, including beautifully crafted handbags, fine local jewellery, and elegant scarves (9 Đông Du, District 1; www.anupa.net). It's just a block away from **Yen Loan Shop**, which deals in exquisitely detailed model ships that range from a few inches to a metre or even longer. Though getting one of these delicate creations home without damage might be too cumbersome a proposition, it's worth stopping here just to see the craftsmanship (9, Công Trường Lam Sơn).

From the Bến Nghé area, it's a 20-minute taxi ride to one of the city's newest and arguably quirkiest attractions. The **Artinus 3D Museum** is an interactive museum specializing in optical illusions and 3D paintings. Visitors can pose for pictures in front of giant 3D depictions of underwater scenes, landscapes, and even fantasy



The Vietnam War ended when a tank crashed through the gates of Independence Palace.

worlds such as a magical fairyland and a house of cards guarded by a jack of spades (02-04 Đường số 9, District 7; artinusvn.com, open 9 a.m.-10 p.m. daily; VND200,000/₹600 weekdays 220,000/₹660 weekends and holidays).

On your way back into the city centre, stop by **Phuc Long** for a cold coffee or a Vietnamese iced green tea (122 Lê Lợi, District 1; drinks from VND 25,000/₹75). From here, head straight to the **Ho Chi Minh City Museum of Fine Arts** housed in a pretty, colonial city mansion that blends French and Chinese elements. Permanent exhibits include paintings, sculptures, and decorative pieces from across the centuries, with a

notable collection of Buddha statues and traditional silk paintings dating back to the pre-colonial era (97 Phó Đức Chính, District 1; open 9 a.m.- 5 p.m. Tues-Sun; entry VND10,000/₹30). Alternatively, head straight to **Công viên Tao Đàn**, a scenic public park filled with flower and plant gardens, meandering pathways, and a play area for kids (Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai, District 1).

Wind down with a casual dinner at **5ku Station**, a sprawling open-air patio restaurant with DIY barbecue. Diners order meats and/or vegetables to their tables, each equipped with a table-top grill (27 Lê Thánh Tôn, District 1; meals from around VND74,000/₹220 per person). For something a bit fancier, nearby **Xu Restaurant Lounge** has a decent cocktail menu, along with pan-Asian à la carte and fixed menus in a slightly upscale place with mood lighting (www.xusaigon.com, mains from VND120,000/₹360; cocktails from VND130,000/₹390).

After dinner, head over to **King Karaoke**, a five-minute walk from both XU Lounge and 5ku Station. Just don't expect to get up in front of a crowd; this upscale karaoke club offers opulent private rooms, many with over-the-top themes seemingly drawn from baroque European palaces. Vietnamese and English-language songs are available (31-33 Hai Ba Trung, District 1; kingkaraoke.vn). If you'd rather shop than sing, take a 15-minute taxi ride out to **Ky Hoa Night Market**. With hundreds



Dating to the turn of the 20th century, Ho Chi Minh City Hall is among the city's prettiest French colonial buildings.



A large golden Buddha presides over the interiors of the Xá Loi Pagoda in Saigon's District 3.

of stalls, this enormous market offers everything from handicrafts to clothes, and is popular with tourists and local youth alike. It's also got plenty of street food stalls, and you can easily fill up without spending much more than VND15,000/₹45. Local specialities include *bánh xèo*, small savoury crepes filled with meat, sprouts, and green onions (Cao Thang Road, District 10; dishes from VND5,000/₹15).

DAY 3

If you can spare an extra day, take a trip out to the **Cu Chi Tunnels**, located about 65 kilometres northwest of Ho Chi Minh City. They are part of a huge network of underground tunnels that were used by the Viet Cong insurgents during the Vietnam War for hiding, storage, and transporting supplies. Today, the Cu Chi section of the tunnels are among the city's most popular tourist attractions, and offer travellers the opportunity to learn about how people survived underground during the war. The tunnels are accessible to tourists at two sites: Ben Duoc and the closer Ben Dinh.

While private taxis to the tunnels can be arranged, most travellers join one

of a number of organized group tours departing to Ben Dinh daily from Ho Chi Minh City. A majority of the tours leave in the morning and transport visitors by minivan or speedboat, sometimes with breakfast or lunch included. The journey takes around 45 minutes to an hour each way, and admission charges (VND90,000/₹270 per person) are generally not included in the price of the tours (tours from VND150,000/₹454 per person). Most tours return to the city by around 1 p.m.

If you haven't had lunch at the Cu Chi Tunnels, **Hum Vegetarian Cafe & Restaurant** is popular with vegetarians and non-vegetarians alike. The restaurant focuses on tofu dishes served with rice, along with interesting appetizers, from lotus seed soup, to olives and fruit in chilli sauce (32 Vo Van Tan, District 3; mains from around VND60,000/₹180; www.hum-vegetarian.vn). Seafood lovers may prefer **Lau Cá Kèo**, a cafeteria-style eatery that's particularly known for its seafood hotpots. The menu here is extensive, with everything from simple seafood noodle dishes to octopus boiled with ginger (18 Bà Huyện, District 3; mains from around VND40,000/₹120).

It's a 10-minute walk west from the restaurant to **Xá Loi Pagoda**, the city's largest Buddhist Pagoda, built in 1956. While the exteriors are impressive, the interiors are the main draw, notably due to the presence of a large golden Buddha and a dozen or so panels illustrating his early life as Prince Siddhartha (89B Bà Huyện, District 3).

End your afternoon with a relaxing massage at **Massage Enjoy**, a 15-minute drive from the pagoda. This therapeutic massage parlour has English-speaking staff and offers a variety of treatments, ranging from foot massages to full body massages with hot stone therapy (15B3 Le Thanh Ton, District 1; www.massageenjoy.com; massages from VND120,000/₹365).

Right next to Massage Enjoy, **Quan Bui** is a trendy bar and restaurant, complete with a lush rooftop garden for open-air dining. While the ambience is enough to make this a great spot to end your time in Saigon, the food options are equally impressive, with a wide selection of fish soups, claypots, salads, and Saigon-style fried spring rolls on the menu (17a Ngô Văn Năm; quan-bui.com; mains from around VND80,000/₹240). ●