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CULTURE SHOCK!
VIETNAM



CULTURE SHOCK!

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

VIETNAM

Ben Engelbach

For Review only

CULTURE **SHOCK!**

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

VIETNAM

Ben Engelbach

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Culture shock is a state of disorientation that can come over anyone who has been thrust into unknown surroundings, away from one's comfort zone. *CultureShock!* is a series of trusted and reputed guides which has, for decades, been helping expatriates and long-term visitors to cushion the impact of culture shock whenever they move to a new country.

Written by people who have lived in the country and experienced culture shock themselves, the authors share all the information necessary for anyone to cope with these feelings of disorientation more effectively. The guides are written in a style that is easy to read and cover a range of topics that will arm readers with enough advice, hints and tips to make their lives as normal as possible again.

Each book is structured in the same manner. It begins with the first impressions that visitors will have of that city or country. To understand a culture, one must first understand the people—where they came from, who they are, the values and traditions they live by, as well as their customs and etiquette. This is covered in the first half of the book.

Then on with the practical aspects—how to settle in with the greatest of ease. Authors walk readers through how to find accommodation, get the utilities and telecommunications up and running, enrol the children in school and keep in the pink of health. But that's not all. Once the essentials are out of the way, venture out and try the food, enjoy more of the culture and travel to other areas. Then be immersed in the language of the country before discovering more about the business side of things.

To round off, snippets of information are offered before readers are 'tested' on customs and etiquette. Useful words and phrases, a comprehensive resource guide and list of books for further research are also included for easy reference.

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PREFACE

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Dear Reader:

You know how life works: It pulls us around the dance floor and pushes us into unexpected corners of it. After all, look what happened to you. One thing led to the next, and you ended up in Vietnam. Maybe you were reassigned to your company's Hanoi branch. Or maybe your wife was reassigned to Hanoi and now she's dragging you across the Pacific with her. Either way, welcome abroad.

No matter what your backstory is, you'll be an outsider in Vietnam, and outsiders tend to be clueless. But that's OK—that can be fixed. What follows is my full report, compiled over the course of what's now been a year in this hot, strange little country.

Some context: I live and work in the capital of Hanoi, but did my due diligence by flying down to Ho Chi Minh City (the urbanity formerly known as Saigon) to spend two weeks wandering through the markets and eating enough food to feed an army. Most expats in Vietnam end up getting sucked in by the tractor beams of one of these two big cities, which is why I name-check them so often, and have devoted a substantial percentage of my word count to demarcating their differences. If you happen to be moving to Danang or Haiphong, don't fret—the information that follows holds true for you too.

By this point in my tour of duty I've cleared a few of the hurdles you're about to run into, which is why I think this book will be a useful read. I'm not a Communist cheerleader, nor do I have a tour to sell—I'm here to give you the unfiltered take on the place. I'll tell you what will treat you well and

what you'll have to struggle through. Between geographical immersion and interviews with both Vietnamese locals and fellow expats, I think I managed to check all the boxes for you. You'll be duly warned of the flower-killing smog, the nuclear-hot sun, the crush of traffic, and the ceaseless rain. But you'll also turn the last page itching for a *banh mi* sandwich with a *ca phe trung* (egg coffee).

As an expat you'll be both a guest and an ambassador. You'll have to study and infiltrate the culture like a sleeper agent. It'll take some work—but it's fun work. Vietnam has a sort of unique magnetism that keeps most people here long after their initial end-dates. And when they do leave, you'll see a lot of them again; nearly every expat is subject to the Vietnamese boomerang effect.

Another thing about life is that it's never perfect. You'll probably suffer through a few small disasters while you're here, and that's when your mind will start to whisper that what you hoped would be an adventure was actually a mistake, and that this country and everyone in it is out to get you.

But that's not really true. Everything that happens here is just a result of Vietnam being itself, and the Vietnamese you encounter are people just like you, who are just getting by. And every baffling inconvenience is part of the authentic experience.

And that's what you came here for, right?

Ben Engelbach

Hanoi

1 April 2017

I have a legion of Vietnamese friends and fellow expats to thank for their assistance on this project. I owe you all a deep debt for the long stretches of time you spent sitting across from me, the clueless one, in a café and answering an unholy amount of questions. You're welcome to a beer (or three) next time I see you in Hanoi.

I also have to mention my students, the dozens and dozens of you, who I've been with in the classroom for the better part of a year. Your energy and curiosity have made my job feel more like a hangout, or maybe like hosting a talk show, and our conversations have given me insights into Vietnam's culture and inner workings that I'd have been hard-pressed to chase down elsewhere. Thanks to all of your expertise, I've become a pseudo-know it all on the subject of Vietnam (the guy at the bar who starts sentences with "Well, actually...").

Noi Ha Tran, Tommy Southgate, Chris Hocker, Kevin Aberly, Hoang Nguyen, Duong Duy Thien Bao and Mohammed Sami contributed photographs to this project, and elevated it in a way that I wouldn't have been able to, even if I were shooting with the world's best camera.

And finally, special thanks must go to two people: John Bocskay, author of *Culture Shock! Korea*, who recommended me for this book, and Rachel Heng of Marshall Cavendish for taking me on board.

And of course, any errors, whether they be factual ones or errors with lingual transcriptions, should be attributed to me and me alone.

It's worth mentioning that we'll be using the Westernized names of Vietnamese locations in this book. For example, in the Vietnamese language, the city of Hanoi is written as Hà Nội (each syllable is given its own word, and tone markers are visible above the letters). But we'll use the international style, which combines the syllables together and removes the tone markers, resulting in "Hanoi".

The exceptions are in Chapter 8: Languages and parts of the Glossary and Resource Guide where relevant.

MAP OF VIETNAM

For Review only



CHAPTER 1

FIRST IMPRESSIONS



▣ Bizarre travel plans are dancing lessons from God. ▣

— Kurt Vonnegut, writer

Let's start with the good news: I'll be surprised if you don't love Vietnam.

Gallons of ink have been spilled describing the country's charm and beauty, and those may well be the reasons you board the plane for the East. And you'll find what you came for. After a half-decade of criss-crossing Asia, I can put my hand on the Bible and say that Vietnam's landscapes, bays, and mountain ranges are among the best on the continent.

If it's adventure you seek, you can be on a motorbike and out of the city a few hours after your plane lands. If you end up staying in-country for a while, you'll find yourself leaning back at a lakefront *bia hoi*, holding a 50-cent mug of beer as you realize that you're living in a paradise. The expat consensus is so unanimous that it verges on propaganda; I haven't talked to anyone who doesn't like living here.

Now that the good news is out of the way, let's get to the dirt. Just because Vietnam rides high in the approval polls doesn't mean your stay here will be one long, sunlit travel montage. It'll do you well to remember that this country is still a very real place. Hopefully this will prevent you from getting off the plane in Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City (that's what they're calling Saigon these days) and finding yourself... disappointed.

Because that's what happened to me. I'd heard nothing but glorious legends told of Vietnam, which led to my expectations being wildly miscalibrated. The consequence of buying into the hype was that my first 72 hours in Hanoi



Workers in the rice fields, circa 2016.

ended up being the opposite of a honeymoon period, whatever that is.

As promised, I did see the French mansions and the broad, shady lanes when I first got here. But I soon internalized that the country is more than just a pretty postcard you can walk around in; it's actually a real place, with grit and chaos being two of its defining characteristics. These new realities quickly threatened to outweigh its Instagram potential.

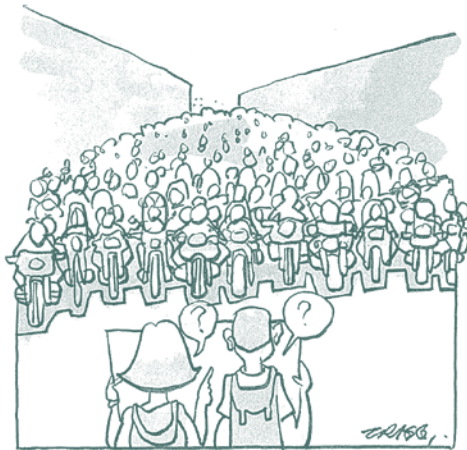
Visit Vietnam, and you're visiting another planet—and the past as well. The country is still pushing through the adolescent phase of its development, after having its progress blunted by a famously turbulent (that's putting it mildly) 20th century.

The highway heading into Hanoi from Noi Bai International Airport cuts across a sprawl of rice paddies, where workers in those iconic rice hats toil away as if in a staged tableau. That's the pretty side of living in the past. But there's a

practical side, too. There have been a few times when I've had to slow my motorbike to navigate around a parade of cows being force-marched along the median by a farmer. I swerved wide to get around the herd—and had to brake quickly so I wouldn't T-bone one of them. It had been trying to escape from the farmer, who was trying to smack it with a switch.

You'll probably spend your first few days in one of Vietnam's two biggest cities (Hanoi or Saigon). Now, on Planet Earth we have quiet cities, and we have chaotic ones. Guess what kind Vietnam has?

The urban streets are jagged, crumbling and altogether too narrow to accommodate the endless surge of motorbikes that rumble over them every day. Do you need to go somewhere? Well, I've got some bad news for you. Traffic isn't a joke—the city turns itself inside out during morning and evening rush hours. If you're driving, prepare yourself for a slow, grinding game of land warfare as you battle for every inch. The only thing worse than loitering away your existence in gridlock is not doing so — because bikers are free to shoot around as fast as they want (for some reason, they ride like they're being chased by an F-16) wherever they want (almost invariably, this means going the wrong way down a



one-way). Stay sharp, because they will hit you. My friend was knocked down on her second day here. She got off pretty easy—just a scrape—but you may not be so fortunate. I have other friends who have ended up staying a night or two in the hospital after suffering collisions of their own. Best to always err on the cautious side.

There's also the air quality in town. It is—how shall we put this diplomatically—less than optimal. On the day of this writing, Hanoi had literally become the most-polluted major city in the world (at least for a few hours), beating out perennial champ Beijing. By the time rush hour hits, the air has become superheated by bike and bus exhaust (at the first chance you get, buy a surgical mask from a roadside vendor). More smoke rises at night, as the locals burn trash piles in the gutter.

Perhaps keen to suffer from as many kinds of pollution as possible, Hanoi has added noise pollution to the mix, too. From around 4pm each day, a system of war-era loudspeakers blare public service announcements and patriotic anthems for an hour, sometimes two (bring noise-cancelling headphones). What's with the noise? Isn't it 2017, and doesn't Vietnam have the Internet for communication?

That it does, but Vietnamese officials still don't see what all the fuss over the World Wide Web is all about—(maybe they think it's a passing fad?)—and still insist that a high-decibel public broadcast system is the best way to spread information. I wish you the best of luck if you're trying to catch a power nap.

And when you wake up with a dry mouth, don't drink the tap water, not unless you want to spend your first day camped out within sprinting radius of the hotel bathroom. While we're on the subject of stomachaches, that reminds me—did you

The First Night

I found some notes from my first day in Hanoi while I was prepping for this book. After landing, despite reeling from the one-two punch of culture shock and jet lag, my friend and I rallied and headed to the Night Market for dinner.

The Night Market is written as a proper noun because it's a weekly festival in the city. Every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday night, the city closes off a half-dozen streets in Hanoi's Old Quarter so vendors can sell T-shirts and scarves and all the other "I've-been-to-Vietnam" souvenirs. You do your shopping, or just sit on one of the stools that the restaurants have set up outside in the night air.

It's sort of an anarchical experience, with bright lights strobing and locals hollering and bumping into you... and you shouldn't miss it.

This is what I wrote:

- Sat in the cab for 20 minutes only to travel two blocks. Too many bikes and carts and people; no discernible traffic laws; transportation is a cutthroat, move-or-die enterprise. Will never take a taxi to the night market (or through the city centre?) again.
- Pretty eclectic cuisine — frog legs, bok choy, fish (with bones in it), etc.
- Live bands on the street really energize the whole scene, but also make it too loud to really talk to each other.
- Best to hold it. Restaurant bathroom is akin to what I've seen in bus stations in America, except these ones have no toilet paper and take up the square footage of a broom closet.
- Unimaginatively-named beer. Hanoi's local brew is simply called "Hanoi". Saw a few bottles of "Saigon" as well.
- Finishing on a positive note, the combined price of the meal and taxi was cheap, US\$3. (We're paying 1950s prices for everything here.)

forget to wash your hands before you ate? Then you've got something in common with the cooks; they probably didn't wash their hands before preparing your food.

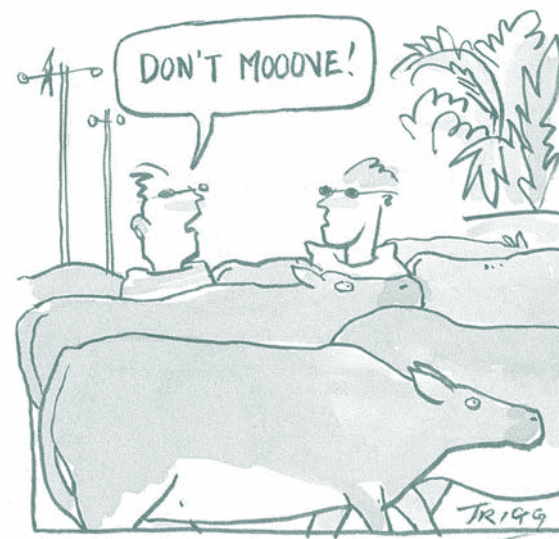
Also, if you have a foreign face, be prepared to pay double the listed price of an item, or to receive incorrect change via sleight of hand. And I hope you like asking for things, because you'll have to do it two or three times in events when there's no financial incentive for the service staff involved.

These needling, startling frustrations go a little way

toward explaining why I, a Westerner blindly accustomed to convenience, had to acquire my taste for urban Vietnam. My inaugural chipper Facebook posts were all lies; what really happened was that I spent my first nights here sitting on a dirty plastic chair in a *banh cuon* restaurant—with rats running between my feet, twitching tails the width of telephone cables—while I ruminated darkly over the chain of events that led me here.

Now. Your perception could be completely different. You might get here and love it straight away.

But if you walk off the plane and get hit with culture shock like I did, hang tough. The clouds will part (that promise is metaphorical; the smog cover isn't going anywhere), and you'll remember what I said at the start of this chapter—that Vietnam is as gorgeous, alluring, and charming as advertised. It's a strange maze to navigate, but you can get through it. And after a while, you won't even notice the cows.





A man moves through a thin alley in Saigon. (Photo credit: Kevin Abery)

FIRST IMPRESSIONS: SAIGON

Since I live in the capital, I imagine that makes me an honorary Hanoian. But I realize that many of you will be moving to Ho Chi Minh City. It's the largest city in Vietnam, the former capital of the now-vanquished Republic of South Vietnam (more on that later), as well as the country's primary international business outpost.

So, just for you, I flew down south to do some recon. My flight was delayed, and by the time I got on to the bus into the city centre it was 5pm. And every day at that time, I have a Pavlovian anxiety attack—in Hanoi, 5pm is the end of the world. Evening traffic is so thick that the city grinds to an ugly, shuddering halt. The only way you're getting anywhere in less than an hour is by helicopter.

Saigon was definitely busy, but while I was on the airport bus, I still had the sensation of slow, consistent motion. I realized that it was because parts of the city were developed more recently, which means the roads are wider. I got

the impression of space and manoeuvrability. It was as if dimensions that I'd been subconsciously accustomed to for the past six months had been stretched out by the hands of a giant.

The variety of restaurants and street food in Saigon is such that I'd need the rest of my life, and yours too, to sample everything. There are glass storefronts and smoky, high-dollar restaurants and corporate towers aplenty. When you're downtown, you can sense the money in a way that you don't in Hanoi. And being more cosmopolitan, Saigon therefore carries the impersonal vibe you'd expect (the population went from starving to comfortably aloof in just a few decades).

In District 1, where Google Images seems to have pulled all of its "Saigon" search results from, the city fairly gleams with eternal celebration, what with its towers and golden halls standing proudly on the Saigon River. Saigon, like New York City and Shanghai, is one of those cities that feels so much like a capital—and yet isn't one (anymore). It's still Vietnam, but after seeing the North, it feels like a Vietnam set up in an alternate universe.

Of course, as you drift away from the bulls' eye of the city centre and explore the outer rings, you'll see that Saigon is still rough and tumble, still the real Vietnam. There are the givens—the crumbling sidewalks, the shady (literally and

Saigon or Ho Chi Minh?

Officially, it's Ho Chi Minh City. But that was a top-down name change put into effect by the victorious political elite in the postwar period.

What do the people call it? The locals laughed at me for even asking—to them, it's Saigon. It's been called Saigon since the colonial French named it such in 1860 (the city had gone by Gia Dinh prior to that). The locals live in Saigon, they're Saigonese, and they eat Saigonesese food. "Saigon" rolls off the tongue easier, too—"Ho Chi Minh City" is an unwieldy jumble of syllables, and it feels like it takes an hour to say.

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figuratively) alleys, and streetside bike repair operations.

One disappointment: There's a dearth of *bia hoi* (cheap beer gardens, common to the North) down there, so I had to look a little harder for my first cheap buzz after my day trek through the streets.

It's hard to form an inclusive opinion on this country without walking through both its capital and its largest city, the two weights that keep the nation anchored in the top and bottom. Hanoi is a straight, pure shot of all that is and has been Vietnam. It's in your face, and doesn't pander. Saigon? It's the antidote some expats might need after doing time up in the North. I expect I'd have taken more kindly to Vietnam if I'd eased into it by using Saigon as a "gateway" city.

It's all about what you're looking for.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ben Engelbach is an American who was born and raised in New Hampshire. He studied screenwriting at Biola University in La Mirada, California, and upon graduation fled East in order to dodge the Great Recession. Finding Asia an agreeable travel destination, he stuck around, teaching English in both China and South Korea before heading to Vietnam in 2016. He currently lives in Hanoi and *CultureShock! Vietnam* is his first book.