

Highlights of Ho Chi Minh City

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When we travel we always want to see new things, experience new cultures and meet exciting people. In other words, have new experiences to add to our memories. Ho Chi Minh City can guarantee all that, especially for the first-time visitor. There's plenty to broaden your horizons when you visit this vast metropolis that blends its French past with 21st Century skyscrapers.

The best time to visit is between December and March when it's drier and the temperatures range between 21°C and 34°C. Expect it to be colder if you venture up to the mountainous north of the country.

The first impression of Ho Chi Minh or the old Saigon as it was known before the war is the number of Vespas used by nearly everyone for absolutely anything. You see impossible loads on them as they transport all kinds of things around the city. Crossing the road is a challenge but if there are no traffic lights, just take the plunge and step off confidently and they seem to miss you! Since the city is known for its wonderful food, one of the best things to do to orientate yourself is a **Vespa Street Food Tour**. It's an unforgettable experience and really safe. The guides are often Uni students with excellent English and lots of interesting information.



John Frew and Marcia with two uni students on their Vespa Street Food Tour

Since the Vietnam War played such a big part in our lives in Australia, it's very educational to visit the **War**

Remnants Museum which really leaves you in no doubt about the brutality of war. Be prepared for some disturbing photographs illustrating the atrocities of this war from which they are still recovering. Along the same theme, the **Reunification Palace** is a significant historical building left exactly as it was when on the morning of 30 April 1975, the first communist tanks crashed through the gates of this building and Saigon surrendered to the North.

One of the most striking buildings in Ho Chi Minh City is the **Central Post Office** designed by Gustave Eiffel and built in 1886. It is a reminder of the French colonial past in the old Saigon and worth a visit to see the historic maps painted on the walls. In the same area is the **Notre Dame Cathedral** built in 1877 giving another romantic feeling to the centre of the busy city. There are also pagodas and temples scattered throughout the city that are worth a look and certainly they can offer refuge and peace for a few minutes in the heart of this noisy city.



Ho Chi Minh City Central Post Office

Shopping can be a delight here with **D. Dong Khoi** full of boutiques selling beautiful silks and **D. Pasteur** selling handmade ready-to-wear fashion. Leave enough time to order your handmade shirts and suits just in case you need some changes made to your garment. It is well worth the trouble to get measured and fitted for a special outfit though. If all this is too much, just head down to **Ben Thanh Market** where you can get just about anything you want at a good bargain price.

If you still have some time left there are several museums, including the **History Museum**, **HCMC Museum** and **Ton Duc Thang Museum** which is a fascinating place to catch up on Vietnamese recent history. Located on the river, it's a pleasant walk from most central city hotels. It tells Vietnamese history from the 19th and 20th Centuries, including the colonial prisons and how after suffering for fifteen years in prison, Ton Duc Thang became President of Vietnam.

For something different, a short taxi ride will get you to the **Traditional Vietnamese Medicine Museum** in District 10 where the architecture of the building is the first thing to notice. The tour is amazing and covers many aspects of traditional herbal medicine and its history over many years, finishing with a cup of herbal tea.

The Fine Arts Museum is another aspect of Vietnamese life that is quite delightful to see, including the elegant colonial building with stained glass windows and wide corridors. The art collection is impressive with modern paintings and sculptures as well as traditional works. Just nearby is what is known as Antique Street in **Le Cong Kieu** Street where you can see an amazing collection of antiques and maybe some junk, but that's fun to explore.

One of the best things to do in Ho Chi Minh City is a tour of **Cu Chi Tunnels**. This can be booked prior to leaving Australia and can include a boat ride down Saigon River there and back as part of the tour. It is an absolute eye opener of things that happened in the Vietnam War and you will certainly come away in a more reflective mood. It's one of those experiences never forgotten.



The Cu Chi Tunnels

Finally, a visit to some of the **rooftop bars** will lift your spirits with awesome views of the city especially at sunset when many have a happy hour. The **EON Heli Bar** on 51st floor of the Bitexco Financial Tower is certainly the highest vantage point but there are many others that are quite interesting and have a better décor and setting, as well as cheaper drinks.

The picture I always take away of Ho Chi Minh City is **The People's Committee Building** or City Hall at the end of Nguyen Hue walking promenade. It's a former old Saigon French Colonial hotel featuring beautiful wooden shutters and yellow stucco which have been well preserved, opposite is a pretty tree lined square where a statue of Uncle Ho faces his former colonial enemies.



The People's Committee Building

Visiting Ho Chi Minh City leaves you in awe of these amazing people and their willingness to just get on with it. They are truly generous and fun loving and best of all you can't help love their wonderful food. Hope you enjoy a trip there as much as we did.

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Marcia was Principal of Sunning Hill ETU (the Juvenile Justice Centre for Girls formally at Yasmar) from 1999-2009, and then Principal of Caringbah Public School from 2009-2016. She was an active member of the Student Welfare Reference Group during her time with SPC.