

Around Ho Chi Minh City



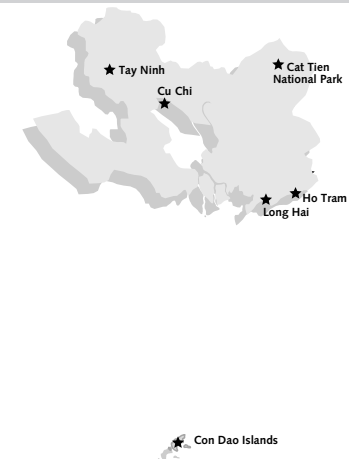
As the geographic footprint of Ho Chi Minh City continues to expand, finding a respite from urban life has become a somewhat complicated undertaking. Thankfully, there are still some refreshing escapes – to wild forests, inviting beaches and fascinating historical and cultural sights – just a short journey from town.

One of the region's top attractions is the Cat Tien National Park, a 70,000-hectare Unesco-rated biosphere boasting a startling variety of flora and fauna. Visitors can go bird-watching, take to hiking trails, overnight in a crocodile swamp and look for signs of Vietnam's rarest wildlife. The Con Dao Islands, a 40-minute flight from the city, offer an equally attractive getaway, albeit of a tropical island flavour. A former prison colony under the French and US regimes, Con Dao today boasts largely undiscovered beaches, empty coastal roads and a healthy ecosystem complete with coral reefs and colonies of green sea turtles – one of Vietnam's best places to see them in the wild.

Other fine beaches stretch just east of the gruff oilman's town of Vung Tau. Although lacking the popularity of Mui Ne and Nha Trang further up the coast, there are some sparkling gems here – particularly Long Hai and Ho Tram – for those seeking a quiet beach holiday far from the madding crowd. More popular than HCMC's nearby beaches and forests, however, are the dark, stifling tunnels of Cu Chi, where VC guerrillas once lived, fought and – in many cases – died. Nearby, the fantastical Cao Dai Temple provides a surreal point to learn about Vietnam's uniquely home-grown religion. Both of these sights are extremely popular tour-bus day trips from HCMC.

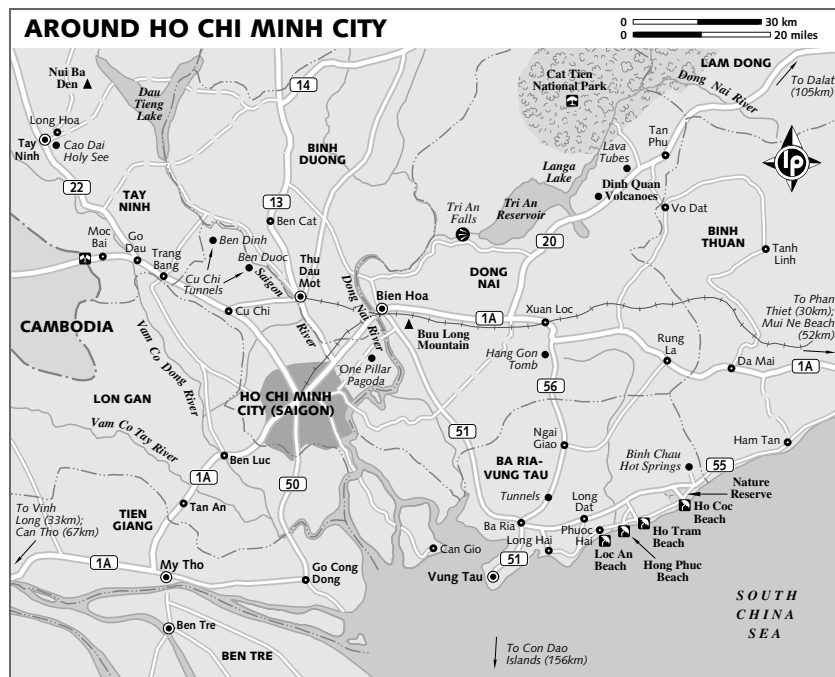
HIGHLIGHTS

- Bask on lovely beaches, snorkel coral reefs and motorbike empty coastal roads on the **Con Dao Islands** (p395)
- Go hiking or cycling in the lush forests of **Cat Tien National Park** (p392).
- Take in the sun and surf, just a short trip from HCMC, on the sandy beaches of **Long Hai** (p389) and **Ho Tram** (p391)
- Get a taste of subterranean Viet Cong life in the cramped tunnels at **Cu Chi** (p378).
- Witness the colourful spectacle of daily worship services at Tay Ninh's **Cao Dai Great Temple** (p382)



■ ELEVATION: 30M

■ BEST TIME TO VISIT: DEC-MAR



National Parks

Two notable national parks are found in this southern slice of Vietnam. Cat Tien National Park (p392), a few hours from HCMC, makes a lovely detour between HCMC and Dalat for those interested in bird-watching and hiking.

Even more remote is Con Dao National Park (p397), located on a string of islands accessible by thrice-weekly flights from HCMC. This national park includes forests, coral reefs and uninhabited islands, home to nesting sea turtles.

Both parks give visitors the opportunity to explore Vietnam's all-too-rare wild side.

CU CHI TUNNELS

The town of Cu Chi is a district of greater HCMC and has a population of about 200,000 (it had about 80,000 residents during the American War). At first glance there is little evidence here to indicate the intense fighting, bombing and destruction that occurred in Cu Chi during the war. To see what went on, you have to dig deeper – underground.

The tunnel network of Cu Chi became legendary during the 1960s for its role in facilitating

Viet Cong (VC) control of a large rural area only 30km to 40km from HCMC. At its height the tunnel system stretched from the South Vietnamese capital to the Cambodian border; in the district of Cu Chi alone there were more than 250km of tunnels. The network, parts of which was several storeys deep, included innumerable trap doors, constructed living areas, storage facilities, weapons factories, field hospitals, command centres and kitchens.

The tunnels made possible communication and coordination between the VC-controlled enclaves, isolated from each other by South Vietnamese and American land and air operations. They also allowed the VC to mount surprise attacks wherever the tunnels went – even within the perimeters of the US military base at Dong Du – and to disappear suddenly into hidden trapdoors without a trace. After ground operations against the tunnels claimed large numbers of US casualties and proved ineffective, the Americans resorted to massive firepower, eventually turning Cu Chi's 420 sq km into what the authors of *The Tunnels of Cu Chi* (Tom Mangold and John Penycate) have called 'the most bombed, shelled, gassed,

defoliated and generally devastated area in the history of warfare'.

Cu Chi has become a place of pilgrimage for Vietnamese school children and communist-party cadres. Two sections from this remarkable tunnel network (which are enlarged and upgraded versions of the real thing) are open to the public. One is near the village of Ben Dinh and the other is 15km beyond at Ben Duoc. Most tourists visiting the tunnels end up at Ben Dinh, the favourite of bus tours; those seeking more of a surreal, funhouse atmosphere should head to Ben Duoc.

History

The tunnels of Cu Chi were built over a period of 25 years that began sometime in the late 1940s. They were the improvised response of a poorly equipped peasant army to its enemy's high-tech ordnance, helicopters, artillery, bombers and chemical weapons.

The Viet Minh built the first dugouts and tunnels in the hard, red earth of Cu Chi (ideal for their construction) during the war against the French. The excavations were used mostly for communication between villages and to evade French army sweeps of the area.

When the VC's National Liberation Front (NLF) insurgency began in earnest around 1960, the old Viet Minh tunnels were repaired and new extensions were excavated. Within a few years the tunnel system assumed enormous strategic importance, and most of Cu Chi district and the nearby area came under firm VC control. In addition Cu Chi was used as a base for infiltrating intelligence agents and sabotage teams into Saigon. The stunning attacks in the South Vietnamese capital during the 1968 Tet Offensive were planned and launched from Cu Chi.

BORDER CROSSING: MOC BAI-BAVET

This busy border crossing is the fastest way to get between HCMC and Phnom Penh, crossing via Moc Bai. Numerous traveller cafés in the Pham Ngu Lao (p339) offer transport between the capitals for around US\$8, with most buses departing around 8am. Allow about six hours for the trip, including time spent on border formalities. Cambodian visas are issued at the border, though you'll need a passport-sized photo.

In early 1963 the Diem government implemented the botched Strategic Hamlets Program, under which fortified encampments, surrounded by many rows of sharp bamboo spikes, were built to house people who had been 'relocated' from communist-controlled areas. The first strategic hamlet was in Ben Cat district, next to Cu Chi. Not only was the programme carried out with incredible incompetence, alienating the peasantry, but the VC launched a major effort to defeat it. The VC were able to tunnel into the hamlets and control them from within. By the end of 1963 the first showpiece hamlet had been overrun.

The series of setbacks and defeats suffered by the South Vietnamese forces in the Cu Chi area rendered a complete VC victory by the end of 1965 a distinct possibility. In the early months of that year, the guerrillas boldly held a victory parade in the middle of Cu Chi town. VC strength in and around Cu Chi was one of the reasons the Johnson administration decided to involve US troops in the war.

To deal with the threat posed by VC control of an area so near the South Vietnamese capital, one of the USA's first actions was to establish a large base camp in Cu Chi district. Unknowingly, they built it right on top of an existing tunnel network. It took months for the 25th Division to figure out why they kept getting shot at in their tents at night.

The US and Australian troops tried a variety of methods to 'pacify' the area around Cu Chi, which came to be known as the Iron Triangle. They launched large-scale ground operations involving tens of thousands of troops but failed to locate the tunnels. To deny the VC cover and supplies, rice paddies were defoliated, huge swathes of jungle bulldozed, and villages evacuated and razed. The Americans also sprayed chemical defoliants on the area aerially and a few months later ignited the tinder-dry vegetation with gasoline and napalm. But the intense heat interacted with the wet tropical air in such a way as to create cloudbursts that extinguished the fires. The VC remained safe and sound in their tunnels.

Unable to win this battle with chemicals, the US army began sending men down into the tunnels. These 'tunnel rats', who were often involved in underground fire fights, sustained appallingly high casualty rates.

When the Americans began using German shepherd dogs, trained to use their keen sense

of smell to locate trapdoors and guerrillas, the VC began washing with American soap, which gave off a scent the canines identified as friendly. Captured US uniforms were put out to confuse the dogs further. Most importantly, the dogs were not able to spot booby traps. So many dogs were killed or maimed that their horrified handlers then refused to send them into the tunnels.

The USA declared Cu Chi a free-strike zone: little authorisation was needed to shoot at anything in the area, random artillery was fired into the area at night, and pilots were told to drop unused bombs and napalm there before returning to base. But the VC stayed put. Finally, in the late 1960s, American B-52s carpet-bombed the whole area, destroying most of the tunnels along with everything else around. The gesture was militarily useless by then because the USA was already on its way out of the war. The tunnels had served their purpose.

The VC guerrillas serving in the tunnels lived in extremely difficult conditions and suffered horrific casualties. Only about 6000 of the 16,000 cadres who fought in the tunnels survived the war. Thousands of civilians in the area were killed. Their tenacity was extraordinary considering the bombings, the pressures of living underground for weeks or months at a time and the deaths of countless friends and comrades.

The villages of Cu Chi have since been presented with numerous honorific awards, decorations and citations by the government, and many have been declared 'heroic villages'. Since 1975 new hamlets have been established and the population of the area has more than doubled; however, chemical defoliants remain in the soil and water, and crop yields are still poor.

The Tunnels of Cu Chi, by Tom Mangold and John Penycate, is a wonderful work documenting the story of the tunnels and the people involved on both sides.

Sights

THE TUNNELS

Over the years the VC developed simple but effective techniques to make their tunnels difficult to detect or disable. Wooden trapdoors were camouflaged with earth and branches; some were booby-trapped. Hidden underwater entrances from rivers were constructed. To cook they used 'Dien Bien Phu

kitchens', which exhausted the smoke through vents many metres away from the cooking site. Trapdoors were installed throughout the network to prevent tear gas, smoke or water from moving from one part of the system to another. Some sections were even equipped with electric lighting.

Ben Dinh

This small, renovated section of the **tunnel system** (admission 70,000d) is near the village of Ben Dinh, 50km from HCMC. In one of the classrooms at the visitors centre, a large map shows the extent of the network; the area shown is in the northwestern corner of greater HCMC. The tunnels are marked in red, VC bases in light grey and the river in light blue (the Saigon River is at the top). Fortified villages held by South Vietnamese and US forces are marked in grey, while blue dots represent the American and South Vietnamese military posts that were supposed to ensure the security of nearby villages. The dark blue area in the centre is the base of the US 25th Infantry Division. Most prearranged tours do not take you to this former base, but it is not off limits and you can arrange a visit if you have your own guide and driver.

To the right of the large map are two cross-section diagrams of the tunnels. The bottom diagram is a reproduction of one used by General William Westmoreland, the commander of US forces in Vietnam (1964–68). For once the Americans seemed to have had their intelligence information right (though the tunnels did not pass under rivers, nor did the guerrillas wear headgear underground).

The section of the tunnel system presently open to visitors is a few hundred metres south of the visitors centre. It snakes up and down through various chambers along its 50m length. The tunnels are about 1.2m high and 80cm across, and are unlit. Some travellers find them too claustrophobic for comfort. A knocked-out M-41 tank and a bomb crater are near the exit, which is in a reforested eucalyptus grove.

Be warned that this site tends to get crowded, and you can feel like you're on a tourist conveyor belt most days.

Ben Duoc

Many Vietnamese and the odd foreign visitor make it to the **Ben Duoc tunnels** (admission 70,000d). The tunnels here have been enlarged to ac-

commodate tourists and feature a number of sights within the underground chambers themselves. The emphasis here is more on the fun fair rather than the history of the tunnels. Hence visitors can don guerrilla costumes and gear before scraping through the tunnels in order to feel like a 'real' VC soldier. Inside are bunkers, a hospital and a command centre that played a role in the 1968 Tet Offensive, and the set pieces include tables, chairs, beds, lights, and dummies outfitted in guerrilla gear (aside from your fellow tourists, that is). Although it's amusing, it's not exactly the way the real tunnels once looked – which were cramped and largely barren as per those found at Ben Dinh.

Perhaps more moving than the underground chambers is the small **Ben Duoc temple** built in 1993 in memory of the Vietnamese killed at Cu Chi. It's flanked by a nine-story tower with a flower garden in front.

CU CHI WAR HISTORY MUSEUM

The small **Cu Chi War History Museum** (Nha Truyen Thong Huyen Cu Chi; admission US\$1) is not actually at the tunnel sites but just off the main highway in the central area of the town of Cu Chi. Almost all of the explanations are in Vietnamese. There are a few gruesome photos showing civilians who were severely wounded or killed following American bombing raids, and a list of VC guerrillas killed in the Cu Chi area. Overall, it's rather disappointing and doesn't warrant a visit. Most travellers find HCMC's War Remnants Museum (p340) far more edifying.

Tours

An organised tour is the easiest way to visit the Cu Chi tunnels and it's not even remotely expensive.

Most of the cafés on Đ Pham Ngu Lao in HCMC run combined full-day tours to the Cu Chi tunnels and Cao Dai Great Temple (p382) for around US\$5. For something a little more interesting, try the half-day boating trip to the tunnels organised by Delta Adventure Tours (p339). It costs around US\$9 per person.

Getting There & Around

Cu Chi district covers a large area, parts of which are as close as 30km to central HCMC. The Cu Chi War History Museum is closest to the city, while the Ben Dinh and Ben Duoc tunnels are about 50km and 70km, re-

spectively, from central HCMC by highway. There's a back road that reduces the distance significantly, though it means driving on bumpy dirt roads.

BUS

The buses going to Tay Ninh pass through Cu Chi, but getting from the town of Cu Chi to the tunnels by public transport is impossible – it's 15km, so you'll have to hire a motorbike from Tay Ninh (around US\$6 return).

TAXI

Hiring a taxi in HCMC and driving out to Cu Chi is not all that expensive, especially if the cost is shared by several people. The easiest way to do this is to stop by one of the budget travel cafés in Pham Ngu Lao (p339) and arrange a car, or see if you can flag a taxi in that neighbourhood with a driver who will agree to charge you for driving time only. See p376 for details on local taxi companies.

A visit to the Cu Chi tunnel complex can easily be combined with a stop at the headquarters of the Cao Dai sect in Tay Ninh. A taxi for an all-day excursion to both should cost about US\$45.

TAY NINH

☎ 066 / pop 42,000

Tay Ninh town, the capital of Tay Ninh province, serves as the headquarters of one of Vietnam's most interesting indigenous religions, Cao Daim. The Cao Dai Great Temple at the sect's Holy See is one of the most striking structures in all of Asia. Built between 1933 and 1955, the temple is a rococo extravaganza combining the conflicting architectural idiosyncrasies of a French church, a Chinese pagoda, Hong Kong's Tiger Balm Gardens and Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum.

Tay Ninh province, northwest of HCMC, is bordered by Cambodia on three sides. The area's dominant geographic feature is Nui Ba Den (Black Lady Mountain), which towers above the surrounding plains. Tay Ninh province's eastern border is formed by the Saigon River. The Vam Co River flows from Cambodia through the western part of the province.

Because of the once-vaunted political and military power of the Cao Dai, this region was the scene of prolonged and heavy fighting during the Franco-Viet Minh War. Tay Ninh province served as a major terminus of

the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the American War, and in 1969 the VC captured Tay Ninh town and held it for several days.

During the period of tension between Cambodia and Vietnam in the late 1970s, the Khmer Rouge launched a number of cross-border raids into Tay Ninh province and committed atrocities against civilians. Several cemeteries around Tay Ninh are stark reminders of these events.

Information

Tay Ninh Tourist (☎ 822 376; tanitour@hcm.vnn.vn; 2108 Đ 30/4) is located in the Hoa Binh Hotel (opposite). Tay Ninh's **post office** (Đ 30/4) is down the street, but it does not offer internet services.

Sights

CAO DAI HOLY SEE

The Cao Dai Holy See, founded in 1926, is 4km east of Tay Ninh, in the village of Long Hoa.

The complex houses the **Cao Dai Great Temple** (Thanh That Cao Dai), administrative offices, residences for officials and adepts, and a hospital of traditional Vietnamese herbal medicine, which attracts people from all over the south for its treatments. After reunification the government 'borrowed' parts of the complex for its own use (and perhaps to keep an eye on the sect).

Prayers are conducted four times daily in the Great Temple (suspended during Tet). It's worth visiting during prayer sessions – the one at noon is most popular with tour groups from HCMC – but don't disturb the worshippers. Only a few hundred priests participate in weekday prayers, but during festivals several thousand priests, dressed in special white garments, may attend.

The Cao Dai clergy has no objection to your photographing temple objects, but you cannot photograph people without their permission, which is seldom granted. However, you can photograph the prayer sessions from the upstairs balcony, an apparent concession to the troops of tourists who come here every day.

It's important that guests wear modest and respectful attire inside the temple, which means no shorts or sleeveless T-shirts, although sandals are OK since you have to take them off anyway before you enter.

Set above the front portico of the Great Temple is the **divine eye**. Americans often comment that it looks as if it were copied from the

back of a US\$1 bill. Lay women enter the Great Temple through a door at the base of the tower on the left. Once inside they walk around the outside of the colonnaded hall in a clockwise direction. Men enter on the right and walk around the hall in an anticlockwise direction. Shoes and hats must be removed upon entering the building. The area in the centre of the sanctuary is reserved for Cao Dai priests.

A **mural** in the front entry hall depicts the three signatories of the 'Third Alliance Between God and Man': the Chinese statesman and revolutionary leader Dr Sun Yatsen (1866–1925) holds an ink stone; while the Vietnamese poet Nguyen Binh Khiem (1492–1587) and French poet and author Victor Hugo (1802–85) write 'God and Humanity' and 'Love and Justice' in Chinese and French (Nguyen Binh Khiem writes with a brush; Victor Hugo uses a quill pen). Nearby signs in English, French and German each give a slightly different version of the fundamentals of Cao Daism.

The Great Temple is built over nine levels, representing the nine steps to heaven, with each level marked by a pair of columns. At the far end of the sanctuary, eight plaster columns entwined with multicoloured dragons support a dome representing the heavens – as does the rest of the ceiling. Under the dome is a giant star-speckled blue globe with the 'divine eye' on it.

The largest of the seven chairs in front of the globe is reserved for the Cao Dai pope, a position that has remained unfilled since 1933. The next three chairs are for the three men responsible for the religion's law books. The remaining chairs are for the leaders of the three branches of Cao Daism, represented by the colours yellow, blue and red.

On both sides of the area between the columns are two pulpits similar in design to the *minbar* in mosques. During festivals the pulpits are used by officials to address the assembled worshippers. The upstairs balconies are used if the crowd overflows.

Up near the altar are barely discernible portraits of six figures important to Cao Daism: Sakyamuni (Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism), Ly Thai Bach (Li Taibai, a fairy from Chinese mythology), Khuong Tu Nha (Jiang Taigong, a Chinese saint), Laozi (the founder of Taoism), Quan Cong (Guan-gong, Chinese God of War) and Quan Am (Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy).

LONG HOA MARKET

Several kilometres south of the Cao Dai Holy See complex is **Long Hoa Market** (☎ 5am–6pm). This large market sells meat, food staples, clothing and pretty much everything else you would expect to find in a rural marketplace. Before reunification the Cao Dai sect had the right to collect taxes from the merchants here.

Sleeping & Eating

Anh Dao Hotel (☎ 827 306; 146 Đ 30/4; r 180,000–270,000đ) About 500m west of Hoa Binh Hotel, this place is old and rather nondescript, though the rates here also include a decent breakfast.

Hoa Binh Hotel (☎ 821 315; fax 822 345; 210 Đ 30 Thang 4; r 200,000–350,000đ; ☎) This is the main place in town, 5km from the Cao Dai Great Temple, where travellers stay if they do spend the night. It's a classic Russian-style concrete slab; rates include breakfast.

Both hotels have in-house restaurants, but there's cheaper and better Vietnamese food right next door to the Hoa Binh Hotel at **Thanh Thuy** (☎ 827 606; Đ 30 Thang 40; mains 35,000–60,000đ). You won't find prices on the menu, but the cost is reasonable and portions are large.

If you're heading to Tay Ninh with your own wheels, one of the better restaurants to look for along Hwy 22 is **Kieu** (☎ 850 357; 9/32 Hwy 22; mains 10,000–16,000đ), around 5km from Cao Dai Temple towards HCMC. The food is cheap and good, and the brick kilns out the back are interesting to poke around in after lunch.

Getting There & Away

Tay Ninh is on Hwy 22 (Quoc Lo 22), 96km from HCMC. (The road passes through **Trang Bang**, the place where the famous photograph of a severely burnt young girl, screaming and running, was taken by a journalist during a US napalm attack) There are several Cao Dai temples along Hwy 22, including one (which was under construction in 1975) that was heavily damaged by the VC.

BUS

There are buses from HCMC to Tay Ninh that leave from the Tay Ninh bus station (Ben Xe Tay Ninh) in Tan Binh district and Mien Tay bus station in An Lac.

MOTORBIKE

As there's no public transportation to Cu Chi from Tay Ninh, you'll have to hire a motorbike

in Tay Ninh. Look for *xe om* drivers in front of the hotels. It will probably cost you around US\$6 for a return trip.

TAXI

An easy way to get to Tay Ninh is by chartered taxi, perhaps on a day trip that includes a stop in Cu Chi. An all-day return trip from HCMC to both should cost about US\$45.

NUI BA DEN

☎ 066

Over fifteen kilometres northeast of Tay Ninh, **Nui Ba Den** (Black Lady Mountain; admission adult/child 8000/4000đ) rises 850m above the rice paddies, corn, cassava (manioc) and rubber plantations of the surrounding countryside. Over the centuries Nui Ba Den has served as a shrine for various peoples of the area, including the Khmer, Chams, Vietnamese and Chinese, and there are several interesting **cave temples** on the mountain. The summits of Nui Ba Den are much cooler than the rest of Tay Ninh province, most of which is only a few dozen metres above sea level.

Nui Ba Den was used as a staging area by both the Viet Minh and the VC, and was the scene of fierce fighting during the French and American Wars. At one time there was a US Army firebase and relay station at the summit, which was later, ironically, defoliated and heavily bombed by US aircraft.

The name Black Lady Mountain is derived from the legend of Huong, a young woman who married her true love despite the advances of a wealthy Mandarin. While her husband was away doing military service, she would visit a magical statue of Buddha at the mountain's summit. One day Huong was attacked by kidnappers but, preferring death to dishonour, she threw herself off a cliff. She then reappeared in the visions of a monk who lived on the mountain, and he told her story.

The hike from the base of the mountain to the main temple complex and back takes about 1½ hours. Although steep in parts, it's not a difficult walk – plenty of old people in sandals make the journey to worship at the temple. Around the temple complex a few stands sell snacks and drinks.

If you'd like more exercise, a walk to the summit and back takes about six hours. The fastest, easiest way is via the **chair lift** (one way/return adult 30,000/50,000đ, child 15,000/25,000đ) that

CAO DAISM

A fascinating fusion of East and West, Cao Daim (*Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do*) is a syncretic religion born in 20th-century Vietnam that contains elements of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, native Vietnamese spiritualism, Christianity and Islam – as well as a dash of secular enlightenment thrown in for good measure. The term Cao Dai (meaning high tower or palace) is a euphemism for God. There are an estimated two to three million followers of Cao Daim worldwide.

History

Cao Daim was founded by the mystic Ngo Minh Chieu (also known as Ngo Van Chieu; born 1878), a civil servant who once served as district chief of Phu Quoc Island. He was widely read in Eastern and Western religious works and became active in séances. In 1919 he began receiving revelations in which the tenets of Cao Dai were set forth.

Cao Daim was officially founded as a religion in 1926, and over the next few decades attracted thousands of followers, with the Cao Dai running Tay Ninh province as a virtually independent feudal state. By 1956 the Cao Dai were a serious political force with a 25,000-strong army. Having refused to support the VC during the American War, the sect feared the worst after Reunification. And for good reason: all Cao Dai lands were confiscated by the new communist government and four members of the sect were executed in 1979. Only in 1985, when the Cao Dai had been thoroughly pacified, was the Holy See and some 400 temples returned to their control.

Philosophy

Much of Cao Dai doctrine is drawn from Mahayana Buddhism, mixed with Taoist and Confucian elements (Vietnam's 'Triple Religion'). Cao Dai ethics are based on the Buddhist ideal of 'the good person' but incorporate traditional Vietnamese beliefs as well.

The ultimate goal of the Cao Dai disciple is to escape the cycle of reincarnation. This can only be achieved by refraining from killing, lying, luxurious living, sensuality and stealing, among other things.

The main tenets of Cao Daim are the existence of the soul, the use of mediums to communicate with the spiritual world and belief in one god – though it also incorporates the duality of the Chinese Yin and Yang. In addition to séances, Cao Dai practices include priestly celibacy, vegetarianism and meditative self-cultivation.

According to Cao Daim, history is divided into three major periods of divine revelation. During the first period God's truth was revealed to humanity through Laoze (Laozi) and figures associated with Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. The human agents of revelation during the second period were Buddha (Sakyamuni), Mohammed, Confucius, Jesus and Moses. The third and final revelation is the product of the 'Third Alliance Between God and Man', which is where séances play a part. Disciples believe that Cao Daim avoids the failures of the first two periods because spirits of the dead guide the living. Among the contacted spirits who lived as Westerners are Joan of Arc, William Shakespeare, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Victor Hugo, who was posthumously named the chief spirit of foreign missionary works owing to his frequent appearance.

All Cao Dai temples observe four daily ceremonies, held at 6am, noon, 6pm and midnight. These rituals, during which dignitaries wear ceremonial dress, include offerings of incense, tea, alcohol, fruit and flowers. All Cao Dai altars have the 'divine eye' above them, which became the religion's official symbol after Ngo Minh Chieu saw it in a vision.

If all this sounds like just what you've been waiting for, you can always join up. Read more on the official Cao Dai site: www.caodai.org.

shuttles the pilgrims up and down the hill. You can also opt to slide down the hill on the mountain's toboggan run.

At the base of the mountain there are lakes and manicured gardens and (as with many

such sacred sites in Asia) a mix of religion and tacky amusement park-style attractions: paddle boats for hire, ceramic beaver rubbish bins, and a choo-choo tram car (tickets 2000d) to save the weary a bit of walking.

Very few foreign tourists visit the mountain, but it's a popular place for Vietnamese people. Because of the crowds, visiting on Sunday or during a holiday or festival is a bad idea.

Nui Ba Den appears prominently in a recent memoir published by a former American soldier in *Black Virgin Mountain, A Return to Vietnam* by Larry Heinemann.

Sleeping & Eating

If you get stuck having to overnight at Nui Ba Den, grotty A-frame bungalows and camping options are available at **Nha Nghi Thuy Dong** (☎ 624 204; bungalows 140,000d; A-frame platform tents 75,000d). Bungalows are situated about 500m inside the main entrance gate, on the side of the lake. Each bungalow has a basic squat toilet, and showers are outside. Tent accommodations have shared toilets and cold showers available for 500d. Alternatively, you can shower free of charge at the nearby Trung Pagoda, where the monks will prepare you traditional vegetarian meals with a day's advance notice (the food is free, but a contribution is suggested).

Thuy Dong Restaurant (mains 12,000-25,000d) is attached to the bungalow complex and has nice views of the lake. There are also a few nearby food stalls and kiosks selling cold drinks and souvenirs. Outside the main gate in the parking area, look for the stalls selling locally produced dried fruit and sweets made from coconuts and sugar cane.

Getting There & Away

There is no public transport to Nui Ba Den. If you're not travelling with your own wheels, the easiest way to reach the site is to take a xe om from Tay Ninh for around 50,000d.

ONE PILLAR PAGODA

☎ 08

The official name of this interesting pagoda is **Nam Thien Nhat Tru** (Chua Mot Cot Thu Duc; ☎ 896 0780; 1/91 Đ Nguyen Du), but everyone calls it the One Pillar Pagoda of Thu Duc.

The One Pillar Pagoda of Thu Duc is modelled after Hanoi's One Pillar Pagoda, though the two structures are not identical. Hanoi's original pagoda was built in the 11th century, destroyed by the French and rebuilt by the Vietnamese in 1954; HCMC's version was constructed in 1958.

When Vietnam was partitioned in 1954, Buddhist monks and Catholic priests wisely

fled south to avoid persecution and continued to practise their religion. One monk from Hanoi who travelled south in 1954 was Thich Tri Dung. Just after his arrival in Saigon, Thich petitioned the South Vietnamese government for permission to construct a replica of Hanoi's famous One Pillar Pagoda. However, President Ngo Dinh Diem was a Catholic with little tolerance for Buddhist clergy and denied permission. Nevertheless, Thich and his supporters raised the funds and built the pagoda in defiance of the president's orders.

At one point the Diem government ordered the monks to tear down the temple, but they refused even though they were threatened with imprisonment for not complying. Faced with significant opposition, the government's dispute with the monks reached a standoff. However, the president's attempts to harass and intimidate the monks in a country that was 90% Buddhist did not go down well and ultimately contributed to Diem's assassination by his own troops in 1963.

During the American War the One Pillar Pagoda of Thu Duc was in possession of an extremely valuable plaque said to weigh 612kg. After liberation the government took it for 'safekeeping' and brought it to Hanoi. However, none of the monks alive in Hanoi today could say just where it is.

The pagoda is in the Thu Duc district, about 15km northeast of central HCMC. Traveller cafés and travel agencies in HCMC (p338) should be able to put together a customised tour to the pagoda or to arrange a car and driver for you.

CAN GIO

☎ 08

Notable for its mangrove forest, Can Gio is a low palm-fringed island some 25km southeast of HCMC. The island, which is at the intersection between the Saigon River and the sea, was created by silt washing downstream. It's hard-packed mud rather than sandy beach, so attracts few visitors and the area remains entirely undeveloped.

The principal attraction here – and it's a minor one – is **Can Gio mangrove forest** (Lam Vien Can Gio; ☎ 874 3069; fax 874 3068; admission 15,000d). Formed by sediment deposits from the Dong Nai and Long Tau Rivers, this forest sounds impressive on paper: its 75,000 hectares contains a high degree of biodiversity with more than 200 species of fauna and 50 species of

flora. Infrastructure, however, is lacking, and only mangrove enthusiasts will truly enjoy the trip out. There is also the **Can Gio Museum**, which has displays on the wildlife of the forest, along with exhibits relating to local war history; the park also has a monkey sanctuary, home to at least a hundred simians. Admission to the Can Gio mangrove forest also covers the museum.

CAO DAI TEMPLE

Though much smaller than the Cao Dai Great Temple at Tay Ninh, Can Gio boasts a Cao Dai temple of its own. It's near the market and is easy to find.

CAN GIO MARKET

Can Gio has a large market, which is made very conspicuous by some rather powerful odours. Seafood and salt are definitely the local specialities. The vegetables, rice and fruit are all imported by boat from HCMC.

WAR MEMORIAL & CEMETERY

Adjacent to the local shrimp hatchery is a large and conspicuous cemetery and war memorial (Nghia Trang Liet Si Rung Sac), 2km from Can Gio Market. Like all such sites in Vietnam, the praise for bravery and patriotism goes entirely to the winning side and there is nothing said about the losers. Indeed, all of the former war cemeteries containing remains of South Vietnamese soldiers were bulldozed after liberation – a fact that still causes much bitterness.

CAN GIO BEACH

The southern side of the island faces the sea, creating a beachfront nearly 10km long. Unfortunately a good deal of it is inaccessible because it's been fenced off by shrimp farmers and clam diggers. Nevertheless, there is a point about 4km west of the market where a dirt road leads off the main highway to HCMC, heading towards the beach. The road is easily distinguished by the telephone poles and wires running alongside it. At the beach you'll find a handful of stalls selling food and drinks. The hills of the Vung Tau Peninsula are easily visible on a clear day.

Getting There & Away

Can Gio is about 60km southeast of central HCMC, and the fastest way to make the journey is by car or motorbike (about two hours).

There's a **ferry crossing** (motorbike/car 2000/10,000d) 15km from HCMC at Binh Khanh (Cat Lai), a former US naval base. The road is paved all the way from HCMC to Can Gio. Once you get past the ferry, there is little traffic and the sides of the road are lined with mangrove forests.

BUU LONG MOUNTAIN

Since various tourist pamphlets will tell you that **Buu Long Mountain** (admission 8000d) is the 'Halong Bay of the south', you'd be forgiven for thinking that it must be nothing short of stunningly beautiful. In truth Buu Long Mountain is no Halong Bay, but it's a pretty and peaceful place to make a day trip to escape the crowds of HCMC.

The summit is 60m above the car park, and there are several good walking trails. The top of the mountain is marked by a pagoda, from where you can look down and clearly see **Long An** (Dragon Lake). There is some lovely countryside scenery, good bird-watching and sweeping views of the rural farms along the Dong Nai River.

You can buy cold drinks and noodles at a few refreshment shops, but we recommend trying out the food at the small **vegetarian restaurant** (meals 10,000-20,000d; ☺ breakfast & lunch) at the top of the mountain.

Buu Long Mountain is 32km from central HCMC and is best reached by car or motorbike. It's 2km off the main highway after crossing the bridge that marks the border between HCMC municipality and Dong Nai province.

TRI AN FALLS

An 8m-high and 30m-wide cascade on the Song Be (Be River), the Tri An Falls are awesome in the late autumn, when the river's flow is at its greatest. Tri An Falls are in Dong Nai province, 36km from Bien Hoa and 68km northeast of HCMC (via Thu Dau Mot).

Further upstream is **Tri An Reservoir** (Ho Tri An), a large artificial lake fed from the forest highlands around Dalat and created by the Tri An Dam. Completed in the early 1980s with Soviet assistance, the dam and its adjoining hydroelectric station supplies the bulk of HCMC's electric power.

VUNG TAU

☎ 064 / pop 195,400

Vung Tau drones with bass-thumping action on the weekends as visitors from HCMC

motor into town; weekdays, however, are blissfully dead. Vung Tau's beaches are easily reached from HCMC, making them a favourite of that city's residents since French colonists first began coming here around 1890.

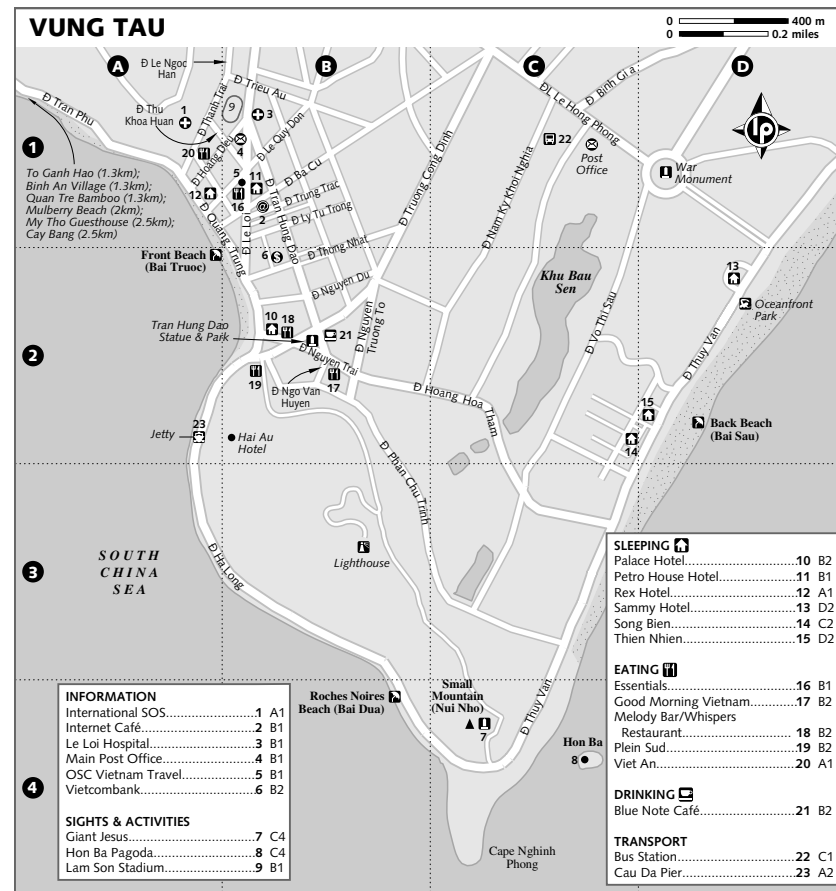
Known under the French as Cap St Jacques – so-named by Portuguese mariners in honour of their patron saint – Vung Tau is a commercialised beach resort on a peninsula jutting into the South China Sea, about 128km southeast of HCMC (via Bien Hoa). The business of oil-drilling here means the azure horizon is marred by frequent oil tankers, and the population flecked with joy-seeking expats.

The beaches here aren't Vietnam's best, nor is the water pristine due to pollution from oil-

drilling, but Vung Tau is an easy, fast beach foray out of HCMC. Beachgoers looking for a tropical-holiday feel might do better making the three-hour trip to beautiful Mui Ne Beach (p300).

Orientation

Vung Tau's peninsula is punctuated by Small Mountain (Nui Nho) to the south and Big Mountain (Nui Lon) in the north. Back Beach (Bai Sau) stretches for kilometres, with a wide, sandy beach and a long strip of guesthouses and hotels. You'll find the downtown action at Front Beach (Bai Truoc), but no beach. If you're looking for a quiet, pebbly beach, head for tranquil Mulberry Beach (Bai Dau), up the northwest coast.



Information

International SOS (☎ 858 776; Đ Le Ngoc Han; consultations US\$55-65; ☎ 24hr)

Internet Café (4A Đ Ba Cu; per hr 3000d) Fast connections.

Le Loi Hospital (☎ 832 667; 22 Đ Le Loi)

Main post office (8 Đ Hoang Dieu) Located at the ground level of the Petrovietnam Towers building.

OSC Vietnam Travel (☎ 852 008; www.oscvn.com; 9 Đ Le Loi) Vung Tau's biggest travel agency sells a decent city map (20,000d) and offers a host of unique tours, including an old battlefield tour (US\$49 per person).

Vietcombank (☎ 852 024; 27-29 Đ Tran Hung Dao) Exchanges cash, travellers cheques and gives credit card advances. You'll also find an ATM at the Rex Hotel at 1 Đ Le Quy Don.

Sights & Activities

Atop Small Mountain, a **giant Jesus** (admission free, parking 2000d; ☎ 7.30-11.30am & 1.30-5pm) waits with arms outstretched to embrace the South China Sea – showing off ungraciously swallows' nests in His armpits. At His foot is a sad collection of monkeys and snakes in cramped cages.

A kilometre or so northwest, the 1910 **lighthouse** (admission 2000d; ☎ 7am-5pm) boasts a spectacular 360-degree view sans imprisoned animals. From the ferry dock on Đ Ha Long, take a sharp right on the alley north of the Hai Au Hotel, then roll on up the hill.

Pagodas dot the length of Đ Ha Long, but prim **Hon Ba pagoda** sits offshore on an islet – the place to be if low tide coincides with sunrise.

Along Front Beach, heading towards Mulberry Beach, you'll find café-bars on the hillside facing the ocean. On weekends you stand the best chance of hearing local amateurs belting out the ballads *du jour*, backed by live bands. It's like karaoke, only...good.

Oh, one more thing: where else in Vietnam do you think you'll see greyhound racing? **Lam Son Stadium** (☎ 807 309; www.sesracing.com; 15 Đ Le Loi; admission 20,000d; ☎ 7-10.30pm Sat) is the place.

Sleeping

During weekends and holidays, Vung Tau's hundred or so hotels can get heavily booked, but usually you can find a room.

BACK BEACH

There's a string of older midrange hotels on the western side of Small Mountain if you can't find a room on Back Beach. The following places are across the street from the sand and South China Sea.

Thien Nhien (☎ 853 481; 145A Đ Thuy Van; d 100,000-200,000d; ☎) Along the main beach drag, this simple, airy guesthouse has tidy rooms, some with balconies, air-con and ocean views.

Song Bien (☎ 523 311; 131A Đ Thuy Van; d 120,000-150,000d; ☎) Chinese-style décor brightens this fairly comfortable place; although there are no ocean views, there's a shared terrace on the top floor.

Sammy Hotel (☎ 854 755; sammyhotel@hcm.vnn.vn; 157 Đ Thuy Van; r from US\$35; ☎) Easily the fanciest place this side of Small Mountain, Sammy has an in-house Chinese restaurant and comfortable rooms with all the trimmings. There's a pool at the oceanfront park across the street. None of the ocean-view rooms have balconies, oddly, though mountain-view rooms do.

FRONT BEACH

Rex Hotel (☎ 852 135; rex.osc@hcm.vnn.vn; 1 Đ Le Quy Don; s/d from US\$28/35; ☎) The Rex has clean, spacious, carpeted rooms, friendly service and abundant amenities – all of which make it one of the best options in town.

Petro House Hotel (☎ 852 014; petro.htl@hcm.vnn.vn; 63 Đ Tran Hung Dao; s/d with breakfast from US\$35/45; ☎) One of Front Beach's more elegant options, the Petro House has an attractive lobby with a wide staircase leading up to its comfortable, carpeted rooms. The hotel has a business centre, a gym and a pool table in the bar. The in-house French restaurant Ma Maison serves guests 24 hours a day, and non-guests can use the pool for US\$5.

Palace Hotel (☎ 856 411; palacevt@hcm.vnn.vn; 1 Đ Nguyen Trai; s/d from US\$40/45; ☎) This centrally located place has a solid reputation for its big, comfortable rooms. Perks include traditional folk-music performances, tennis courts and a pool. Rates include breakfast.

BINH ANH VILLAGE & MULBERRY BEACH

My Tho Guesthouse (☎ 551 722; 45 Đ Tran Phu; r 120,000d) Among a handful of simple guesthouses on this stretch of road, My Tho has battered, extremely basic rooms – but it's an OK deal if you can score an ocean-fronting room (drift off to sleep to the sound of crashing waves).

Binh An Village (☎ 510 016; www.binhnavillage.com; 1 Đ Tran Phu; r/ste US\$175-290; ☎) Vung Tau's most lavish option, Binh An consists of nicely furnished rooms and five bungalows amid serene oceanfront scenery. Each bungalow is beautifully decorated with Asian antiques and graced with a terrace. There are two swimming pools,

one ocean-fed and one freshwater, both near the sea's edge. There's also a good open-air restaurant here (set meals US\$15 to US\$38), which is open for lunch and dinner, with live jazz most weekend nights and à la carte international and Vietnamese cuisine.

Eating & Drinking

The road along Back Beach, Đ Thuy Van, is crammed with *com* shops and seafood restaurants. Most of the nightlife in town is of the oilmen-and-prostitutes variety.

FRONT BEACH

Melodies Bar/Whispers Restaurant (☎ 856 028; 13-15 Đ Nguyen Trai; ☎ 4pm-midnight) Local expats start their evenings at the downtown BB Bar/Whispers Restaurant with well-prepared Western food and pool tables in a noisy, lively setting.

Plein Sud (☎ 511 570; 152A Đ Ha Long; mains 35,000-150,000d; ☎) Feed your Mediterranean food cravings here. With home-smoked fish and meat, an authentic Italian wood-fired pizza oven and tapas, Plein Sud offers a fixed menu supplemented with rotating specials and freshly baked French bread. There's a lovely terrace lined with banana trees, and a pool table and a bar.

Viet An (☎ 853 735; 1 Đ Hoang Dieu; mains 60,000-90,000d) On a quiet street in town, Viet An has a small, greenery-surrounded patio and prepares nicely spiced halal Indian food.

Good Morning Vietnam (☎ 856 959; 6 Đ Hoang Hoa Tham; pastas 60,000-90,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) One more outpost in the coastal chain, this pleasant eatery serves up reliably good Italian food. It's an expat favourite.

Essentials (☎ 510 099; 6 Đ Le Quy Don; ☎ 7.30am-9pm) Imported picnic victuals are available at this tiny shop, from cereals to frozen veal; it also delivers.

Blue Note Café (☎ 532 247; 6 Đ Tran Hung Dao; coffees 6000-8000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) One of a handful of cafés scattered in this neighbourhood, the Blue Note's spacious tree-shaded terrace makes a pleasant stop for a coffee or a drink.

MULBERRY BEACH

Mulberry Beach's main road has several good seafood places down on the water.

Cay Bang (☎ 838 522; 69 Đ Tran Phu; mains 45,000d; ☎ 11am-10pm) This local favourite, serving fresh seafood, overlooks the water and is a festive place on weekends.

Quan Tre Bamboo (☎ 836 157; 7 Đ Tran Phu; mains 45,000-90,000d; ☎ lunch & dinner) Go to this place if you're hankering for lobster or a cocktail with a view of the giant Mary with Baby Jesus statue, best enjoyed from the upstairs terrace.

Ganh Hao (☎ 550 909; 3 Đ Tran Phu; mains 50,000-80,000d) The seafood here is superb, and you can enjoy a wide variety of dishes (including a delicious seafood soup) on the terrace overlooking the waves.

Getting There & Away

From Mien Dong bus station in HCMC, air-con minibuses (25,000d, two hours, 128km) leave for Vung Tau throughout the day until around 4.30pm. From Vung Tau's **bus station** (192A Đ Nam Ky Khoi Nghia) to Mulberry Beach or Back Beach, a *xe om* should cost around 10,000d.

Should convenience outweigh cost, catch a **Petro Express hydrofoil** (☎ HCMC 08-821 0650, Vung Tau 816 308) to Vung Tau (120,000d, 90 minutes) at Bach Dang jetty in HCMC. Boats leave roughly two hours starting at 6.30am, but check in HCMC for the latest schedule. In Vung Tau the boat leaves from Cau Da pier, opposite the Hai Au Hotel.

Getting Around

Vung Tau is easily traversed on two wheels. Guesthouses can arrange bicycle hire (per day US\$2); motorbikes cost US\$5 to US\$10 per day. Or just make eye contact with that *cyclo* or *xe om* driver on the corner.

LONG HAI

☎ 064

Those heading south, who also want to escape the mass-tourism soullessness of Vung Tau, could press on to Long Hai, a less-commercialised seaside retreat within a couple of hours' drive of HCMC. The fishing village of Long Hai, 30km northeast of Vung Tau, has a pretty white-sand beach and the area benefits from a microclimate that brings less rain than other parts of the south. Its natural beauty and microclimate are the main reasons why Bao Đai, the last emperor of Vietnam, built a holiday residence here (now the Anaoasis Beach Resort; p391).

Long Hai is a peaceful place to visit during the week, but it loses its local character on the weekends when Vietnamese tourists (and the occasional busload of Chinese visitors) pack the sands on weekends. Though there are a

couple of low-key resorts in the Long Hai vicinity, western travellers have yet to arrive, so if you're looking for a lively spot with dining and nightlife action, Mui Ne (p304) is probably a better choice.

Sights & Activities

The western end of Long Hai's beach is where fishing boats moor and is therefore none too clean. However, the eastern end is attractive, with a reasonable amount of white sand and palm trees. For even prettier beach, keep heading east.

After the Tet holiday, Long Hai hosts an annual major **fishermen's pilgrimage festival**, where hundreds of boats come from afar to worship at **Mo Co Temple**.

Apart from the beaches, there are several sites in the area well worth exploring. At Minh Dam, 5km from Long Hai, there are **caves** with historical connections to the Franco-Viet Minh and American Wars. Although the caves are little more than spaces between the boulders covering the cliff-face, VC soldiers bunked here off and on between 1948 and 1975; you can still see bullet holes in the

rocks from the skirmishes that happened here. Steps hewn into the rock-face lead up to the caves, with spectacular views over the coastal plains at the top.

Nearby there is a **mountain-top temple** with more great panoramic views of the coastline.

Twenty kilometres away at Dia Dao there are **underground tunnels** (similar, but on a smaller scale, to those at Cu Chi) dating from the American War.

If you are heading to/from Hwy 1, north of Long Hai, a less-travelled route is via the **hot springs** at Binh Chau, 60km away from Long Hai. There are also plenty of other beaches to seek out as you make your way north or south along the coastal Rte 55.

You could also treat yourself to a day at **Anoasis Beach Resort** (☎ 868 227; Provincial Rd 44; admission weekday/weekend US\$6/10). The tropically landscaped grounds of this luxury resort were once home to another of Emperor Bao Dai's villas. Day passes entitle nonguests to full use of the recreational facilities, which include a swimming pool, tennis courts, billiards and ping-pong tables and a lovely stretch of private beach.

Sleeping

Military Guesthouse 298 (Doan an Dieu Duong 298; ☎ 868 316; Rte 19; r 150,000-200,000d; 🚻) At the dead end of Rte 19, this guesthouse is run by the navy, which may help explain its prime beachfront location. Rooms here are clean and comfortable, with tile floors and hot water; the cheapest rooms are fan only.

Thuy Duong Tourist Resort (☎ 886 215; fax 886 180; bungalow US\$20-30, hotel r US\$35-60; 🚻 📺 📺) A large complex in Phuoc Hai village, about 4km from Long Hai, this vast resort sprawls out on both sides of the road. Hotel rates include breakfast; bungalow rates don't. Try to avoid the beach bungalows facing the noisy cafés on the beach. Day use of the clean, attractive beach costs 15,000d.

our pick **Anoasis Beach Resort** (☎ 868 227; www.anoasisresort.com.vn; Provincial Rd 44; bungalows with breakfast US\$150-300; 🚻 📺 📺) One of Vietnam's loveliest beachside retreats, this stylish boutique resort is the brainchild of French-Vietnamese helicopter pilot Anoa Dussol-Perran and her husband. Anoasis offers cosy wooden cottages spread out over the landscaped property, and it has a beautiful private beach. Recreational opportunities include cycling, fishing, tennis and, of course, massage. Weekday rates are slightly lower than the weekend rates listed above, with discounts offered for stays of two nights or more.

Long Hai Beach Resort (☎ 661 355; reservation@longhaibeachresort.vn.com; Provincial Rd 44; r/bungalow with breakfast from US\$105/125; 🚻 📺 📺) Some 500m east of Anoasis, this new resort has pleasantly furnished rooms and bungalows scattered about a lush complex. The accommodations aren't huge for the money, but all the amenities are on offer – tennis court, pool, gym – and there's a pretty beach just a stroll from your door.

Eating

There's a cluster of thatch-roof beachside restaurants called **Can Tin 1, 2, 3 and 4** (mains around 15,000-70,000d; 🕒 7am-7pm) near Military Guesthouse 298. These serve decent Vietnamese mains – including good, simple seafood dishes. Apart from these relaxed places, there aren't many other options in Long Hai.

Getting There & Around

Long Hai is 124km from HCMC and takes about two hours to reach by car. The 30km road between Vung Tau and Long Hai is

not served by public transport; a *xe om* ride should cost around 50,000d.

Motorbike-taxi drivers hang around all the likely tourist spots in the area.

LOC AN BEACH

☎ 064

A new road winds along the coast from Long Hai to Binh Chau, crossing through the town of Phuoc Hai before passing by a dune-covered beach and the small **Loc An Resort** (☎ 886 377; www.locanresort.com; d with breakfast 190,000-440,000d; 🚻 📺). Situated on a lagoon some 50m from the palm-shaded beach, this guesthouse has trim and tidy rooms, and staff are friendly and welcoming. Boats shuttle guests to the beach and back for free. The restaurant has a terrace (mains 40,000d to 60,000d) and serves decent seafood, plus there's a pool table.

At the fork in the road, there's a sign leading to **Thuy Hoang** (☎ 874 223; bungalows 260,000d; 🚻), which consists of small A-frame beach bungalows. It has an indoor-outdoor restaurant that serves good locally caught seafood and cold beer.

HO TRAM BEACH

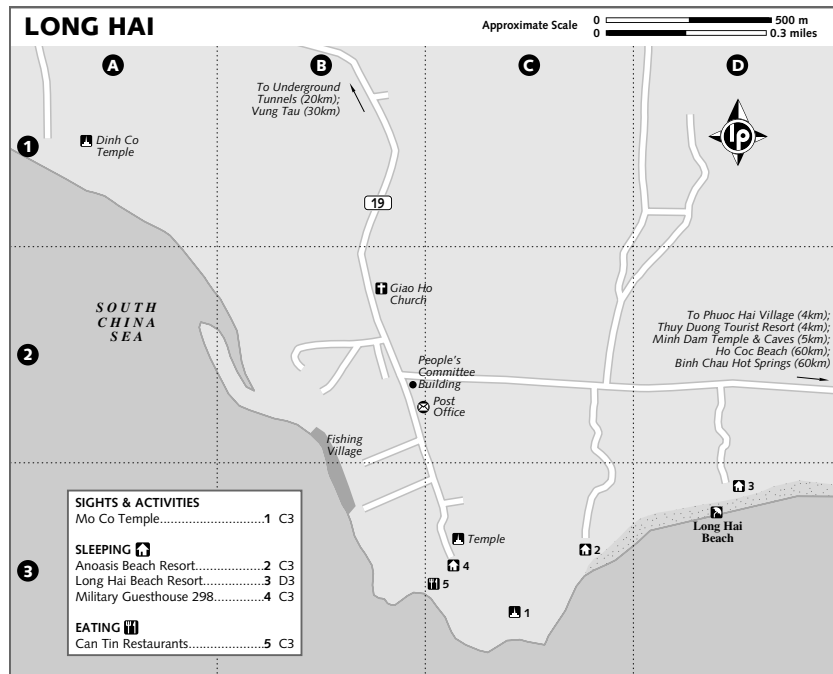
☎ 064

Another 5km east of Loc An, you'll pass by a lovely stretch of sand that's still rather undeveloped. The big draw of this area is the fairly new **Ho Tram Osaka Resort & Spa** (☎ 781 525; www.hotramresort.com; bungalow incl breakfast US\$72-160; 🚻 📺), a peaceful, beautifully landscaped complex sprinkled with attractive bungalows. Each has high ceilings and unique furnishings and layouts (the best are duplexes with beach views). There's also a spa, a beach bar and an open-sided restaurant (mains 80,000d to 120,000d) that's open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and is well worth visiting if you're passing through the area.

HO COC BEACH

☎ 064

Keep heading along the coastal road, another 12km or so from Ho Tram, and you'll arrive at the remote and beautiful Ho Coc Beach. Golden sands backed by dunes and clear waters, along with the lack of development, make it a draw – particularly on weekdays, when you'll have the beach largely to yourself. As elsewhere along the coast, weekends bring crowds of Vietnamese tourists.



The area around the beach is part of an 11,000-hectare rainforest that was designated a nature reserve in 1975. Most of the larger wildlife was exterminated or else relocated for safety reasons (most of the elephants were sent to Thailand), but plenty of birds and monkeys can be spotted in the forest. Guides for the walking trails can be hired for about 50,000d a day. Inquire at Hang Duong Ho Coc (below).

Sleeping & Eating

There are only a few accommodation choices right at the beach, all of which have decent adjoining restaurants serving good seafood.

Saigon-Ho Coc (☎ 791 036; fax 878 175; bungalows s/d 120,000/160,000d) Also called Khu Du Lich Bien Ho Coc, these beachfront A-frame bamboo bungalows with simple private bathrooms (with cold water) are small and rustic, but are not unpleasant places to bunk.

Hang Duong Ho Coc (☎ 878 145; fax 873 878; bungalows 120,000-200,000d; ♿) About 50m south down the beach from Saigon-Ho Coc, this equally rustic resort has masses of cosy wooden cottages. The rooms have an attached cold-water bathroom, and some have air-con (others are fan only).

Hotel Ven Ven (☎ 791 121; info@kimsabai.com; r 250,000d; ♿) Across the road from the turn-off to the beach bungalows, this attractive newish spot has pleasant, spotless rooms set amid greenery. Although it's not on the beach, Ven Ven is the nicest option in the area, and the sands are just a short stroll away.

Getting There & Away

There's no public transport out here, but some of the budget cafés in HCMC offer appealing day and overnight trips to Ho Coc. **Saigon Tourist** (☎ 08-829 8914; www.saigontourist.net; 49 Đ Le Thanh Ton, HCMC) puts together trips to Ho Coc that include a visit to Binh Chau Hot Springs Resort (below). This also makes for a good (but very long) day trip on a motorbike – which you can also hire in Vung Tau. The new road is in decent shape, and it's a particularly magical ride past sand dunes with lovely ocean views on certain stretches of the road between Ho Tram and Ho Coc.

BINH CHAU HOT SPRINGS

☎ 064

About 150km from HCMC, and 60km north-east of Long Hai, is **Binh Chau Hot Springs** (Suoi

Khoang Nong Binh Chau; admission 20,000d) and the **Binh Chau Hot Springs Resort** (☎ 871 131; www.saigonbinhchauecoresort.com; s/d/bungalow incl breakfast from US\$25/35/125, camping per person 50,000d).

Chief among the attractions on this 35-hectare site is an outdoor hot-spring-fed swimming pool (admission 30,000d), though visitors wanting the full experience might opt for a soak in a mudbath (admission 120,000d). The pool temperature is around 37°C, and the minerals in the water are said to be beneficial to your bones, muscles and skin, and are also said to improve blood circulation and mental disorders. There's also a spa, with massages available. Also onsite are a golf practice range, tennis court, restaurant and playground.

If you want to stay overnight here, there's a range of accommodation options. The rooms are airy and tidy, with trim furnishings, though the ones at the lower bracket are small. Suites and bungalows provide roomier quarters.

Until about a decade ago there was wildlife in the area, including tigers and elephants, but it seems humans have nearly won the area over. In 1994 six elephants were captured near the springs, but after a few months of keeping them as pets their captors turned them over to the zoo in HCMC. Nowadays the only wildlife you are likely to spot are ceramic lions, cheetahs and panthers, which decorate the marshes around the springs.

The hottest spring reaches 82°C, which is hot enough to boil an egg in 10 to 15 minutes. Vietnamese visitors like to boil eggs in the bamboo baskets set aside for this purpose; you'll find a couple of giant chicken statues decorating the springs where you, too, can boil up a snack for yourself, with raw eggs on sale.

Getting There & Away

The resort is in a compound 6km north of the village of Binh Chau. The road connecting Rte 55 to Binh Chau is a smooth ride, thanks to funds donated by the Australian government in the '90s.

Good highway or not, there's no public transport. You'll need a motorbike or car; if you choose the latter, perhaps you can find some travellers to share the expense.

CAT TIEN NATIONAL PARK

☎ 061 / elevation 700m

One of the outstanding gems of the region, the 72,000-hectare **Cat Tien National Park** (☎ / fax 669 228; adult/child 50,000/20,000d; ♿ 7am-10pm)

KIND-HEARTED STRANGERS *Regis St Louis*

Sometimes Vietnam gets a bad rap from travellers. After spending a few days in HCMC or Hanoi, the offers of motorbike and *cyclo* rides, invitations to dine here or come meet beautiful ladies over there can seem a constant stream of tiresome background noise. A few unfortunate events – suffering petty theft, getting grossly overcharged – can even lead to cynicism. 'The Vietnamese are only after my money,' one jaded traveller told me.

Although there are undeniably opportunists in Vietnam – as there are anywhere in the world – these are a small (but unfortunately highly visible) faction. Meanwhile, benevolent, golden-hearted souls go about their days largely invisible to travellers. Sometimes it takes misfortune to bring them out into the open. During research for this book, I had my own minor crisis while motorbiking a lovely but totally empty stretch of road between Vung Tau and Ho Coc, south of HCMC. I was at least 10 km from the nearest town and an hour's ride from my hotel when my bike sputtered and died. It was late in the day and the sun was setting. After a few moments of feeling sorry for myself and some fruitless tinkering with the silent engine, I began pushing the bike.

I covered about 500m when a young couple pulled up next to me and offered help. Although the two spoke little English, the man explained that he would push me – his foot against the back peg of my bike as he drove along, the two of us balanced closely together. He guided me to a shop of his friend, who was unable to fix it, and then he insisted on pushing me the rest of the way to Vung Tau. When we finally arrived, in darkness after a rather gruelling journey, he refused any payment. Instead he invited me out for a drink, and even then he wouldn't let me pay. It was a humbling encounter, meeting such a generous soul who was willing to put himself out for a stranger. It's just one of the reasons why travelling in Vietnam is so rewarding: it's less about seeing the sights than mingling with a truly great people.

comprises an amazingly biodiverse region of lowland tropical rain forest. The hiking, mountain biking and bird-watching are easily the best in Southern Vietnam. Always call ahead for reservations as the park can accommodate only a limited number of visitors.

In the 2nd century AD the Cat Tien area was a religious centre of the Funan empire, and ancient Oc-Eo cultural relics have been discovered in the park. Cat Tien was hit hard by defoliants during the American War, but the large old-growth trees survived and the smaller plants have recovered. Just as importantly, the wildlife has made a comeback and in 2001 Unesco added Cat Tien National Park to its list of biosphere reserves. Since then, infrastructure has improved markedly with decent overnight options. It's worth spending at least two full days here, if possible.

Fauna in the park include 326 bird species, 100 types of mammal, 79 types of reptile, 41 amphibian species, plus an incredible array of insects, including 400-odd species of butterfly. Many of these creatures are listed as rare and endangered, including the Javan rhinoceros. Considered one of the rarest mammals in the world, this unusual rhino exists only in Cat Tien (there are believed

to be seven or eight living in the park) and on the island of Java, in Indonesia. Leopards are also believed to live in the park, while another unique creature found here is a type of wild ox called a gaur. Rare birds in the park include the orange-necked partridge, green peafowl and Siamese fireback. There is also a healthy population of monkeys. Leeches are a less desirable member of the local fauna so come prepared, especially during the wet season.

Elephants roam the park, but their presence has caused some controversy. In the early 1990s a herd of 10 hungry elephants fell into a bomb crater, created during the American War, just outside of Cat Tien. Local villagers took pity on the elephants and dug out a ramp to rescue them. Tragically, since then 28 villagers have been killed by rampaging elephants. Theoretically, the problem could have been 'solved' by shooting the elephants, but the Vietnamese government wasn't willing to risk the wrath of international environmental groups. However, none of these organisations has come up with the funds for relocating the elephants, some of which were finally removed to zoos. In the longer term such conflicts are likely to be repeated because

of the increasing competition between Vietnam's wildlife and its growing population for the same living space.

Cat Tien also boasts a wide range of ever-green, semideciduous and bamboo forests; some 1800 species of plants thrive in the park.

Cat Tien National Park can be explored on foot, by mountain bike, by 4WD and also by boat along the Dong Nai River. There are many well-established hiking trails in the park, though the catch is you'll need to hire a **guide** (per half-/full day 60,000/120,000d), as well as transportation to and from the start of the trail (4WDs can also be rented for 120,000d per hour). Unfortunately, guides don't speak much English.

Highly recommended is an overnight visit to the **Crocodile Swamp** (Bau Sau), which is a 9km drive from the park headquarters and you have to trek the last 4km to the swamp; the walk takes about three hours return. It may be possible for smaller groups (four or less) to spend the night at the ranger's post here. It's a good place to view the wildlife

that comes to drink in the swamp. Another evening activity is the **night safari** (160,000d) that the park offers. Wherever you decide to go, be sure to book a guide in advance and take plenty of insect repellent.

The park lies 150km northeast of HCMC and 40km south of Buon Ma Thuot and straddles the border of three provinces – Lam Dong, Dong Nai and Binh Phuoc.

Sleeping & Eating

There are simple, all-wooden shacks as well as comfier, concrete **bungalows** (☎ /fax 669 228; shack/bungalow 90,000/160,000d; ♿ ♿) near the park headquarters. The facilities here are new and in good condition; a pool and a tennis court are on hand. You can pitch a tent at the park's campsite (20,000d), though you'll need your own gear. There are also several small restaurants near the park entrance, including a simple thatch-roof canteen (mains 12,000d to 24,000d), which opens from 7am to 10pm, and a more modern shinier affair (mains 12,000d to 38,000d) serving heartier fare just down the path. It's open 7am to 8pm.

NATIONAL HIGHWAY 20: ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS

Langa Lake

The HCMC–Dalat road (Hwy 20) spans this reservoir, which is crossed by a bridge. Lots of floating houses, where families harvest the fish underneath, can be seen here. It's a very scenic spot for photography, and most tourist vehicles on the HCMC–Dalat road make a short pit-stop here.

Volcanic Craters

Near Dinh Quan on Hwy 20 there are three volcanoes – now extinct, but nonetheless very impressive. The craters date from the late Jurassic period, about 150 million years ago. You'll have to do a little walking to see the crater. One is on the left-hand side of the road, about 2km south of Dinh Quan, and another on the right-hand side about 8km beyond Dinh Quan, towards Dalat.

Underground Lava Tubes

A bit beyond the volcanic craters, towards Dalat, are underground lava tubes. These rare caves were formed as the surface lava cooled and solidified, while the hotter underground lava continued to flow, leaving a hollow space. Lava tubes differ sharply in appearance from limestone caves (the latter are formed by underground springs). While limestone caves have abundant stalactites and stalagmites, the walls of lava caves are smooth.

The easiest way to find the lava tubes is to first find the teak forest on Hwy 20 between the Km120 and Km124 markers. The children who live around the forest can point you to the entrance of the lava tubes. However, you are strongly advised *not* to go into the tubes by yourself. It's best to have a guide and, furthermore, inform someone responsible where you are going. You definitely need to take a torch (flashlight).

For more information on the waterfalls and other attractions along Hwy 20, see the Central Highlands chapter (p315).

Getting There & Away

Whichever way you come, you'll be dropped off at the park office, 100m before the ferry across the Dong Nai River to park headquarters. Buy your entrance ticket from the park office, which will include the price of the ferry crossing.

The most common approach to the park is from Hwy 20, which connects Dalat with HCMC. To reach the park, follow the narrow 24km road, which branches west from Hwy 20 at Talai Junction (Nga Ban Talai), 125km north of HCMC and 175km south of Dalat. The road to the park is signposted at the junction, and with your own wheels getting there shouldn't be a hassle.

By bus, take any Dalat-bound service (35,000d, four hours) and tell the driver to let you off at Vuon Quoc Gia Cat Tien. From this junction, you can hire a motorbike (they're always around) to take you the remaining 25km to the park (around 40,000d).

Another approach to Cat Tien National Park is to take a boat across Langa Lake and then go by foot from there. **Dalat Holidays/Phat Tire Ventures** (☎ 063-829 422; www.phattireventures.com) is a reputable ecotour operator in Dalat and is a good place to inquire about this and other access options from the central highlands area (including mountain-biking to the park from Dalat).

Although many travel agencies from HCMC operate tours to the park, we've received mixed reviews from the budget agencies. For a reputable customised birding, bike or hiking tour, contact Sinhbalo Adventures (p338).

CON DAO ISLANDS

☎ 064 / pop 1650

One of the stellar attractions in this region, the Con Dao Archipelago is slowly gaining attention for its startling natural beauty. Con Son, the largest of this chain of 15 islands and islets, is ringed with lovely beaches, coral reefs and scenic bays, and remains partially covered in thick forests. In addition to hiking, diving and exploring empty coastal roads and deserted beaches, there are some excellent wildlife-watching opportunities.

Con Son Island (with a total land area of 20 sq km) is also known by its Europeanised Malay name, Iles Poulo Condore (Pulau Kundur), which means 'Island of the Squashes'. Although it seems something of an island

paradise, Con Son was once hell on earth for the thousands of prisoners who languished in confinement during the French and American regimes.

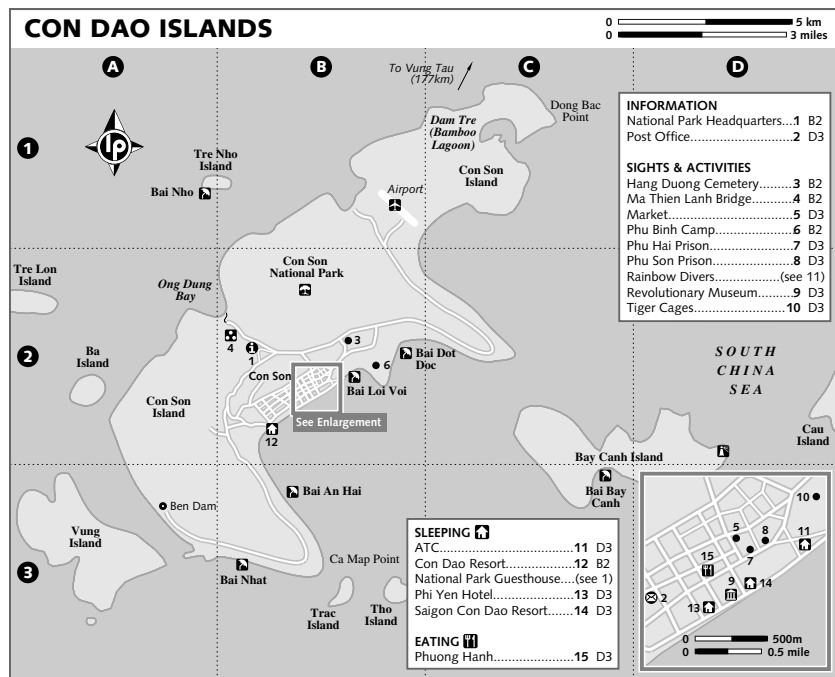
Roughly 80% of the land area in the island chain is part of Con Dao National Park, which protects Vietnam's most important **sea turtle** nesting grounds. For the last decade the World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) has been working with local park rangers on a long-term monitoring program. During nesting season (May to September) the park sets up ranger stations to rescue threatened nests and move them to the safe haven of hatcheries.

Other interesting sea life around Con Dao includes the **dugong**, a rare and seldom-seen marine mammal in the same family as the manatee. Dugongs live as far north as Japan, and as far south as the subtropical coasts of Australia. Their numbers have been on a steady decline, and increasingly efforts are being made to protect these adorable creatures. Major threats include coastal road development, which causes the destruction of shallow-water beds of seagrass, the dugongs' staple diet.

Con Dao is one of those rare places in Vietnam where there are virtually no structures over two storeys, and where the traveller's experience is almost hassle-free. There's even no need to bargain at the local market! Owing to the relatively high cost and the inaccessibility of the islands, mass tourism has thankfully been kept to a minimum.

These days most visitors to Con Son are package-tour groups of former VC soldiers who were imprisoned on the island. The Vietnamese government generously subsidises these jaunts as a show of gratitude for their sacrifice. Foreign tourists are still few and far between, though their numbers are on the rise.

The driest time to visit Con Dao is from November to February, though the seas are calmest from March to July. The rainy season lasts from June to September, but there are also northeast and southwest monsoons in autumn that can bring heavy winds. In November 1997 typhoon Linda did a number here: 300 fishing boats were lost, reefs were wiped out and the forests flattened. September and October are the hottest months, though even then the cool island breezes make Con Dao relatively comfortable when compared with HCMC or Vung Tau.



History

Occupied at various times by the Khmer, Malays and Vietnamese, Con Son Island also served as an early base for European commercial ventures in the region. The first recorded European arrival was a ship of Portuguese mariners in 1560. The British East India Company maintained a fortified trading post here from 1702 to 1705 – an experiment that ended when the English on the island were massacred in a revolt by the Macassar soldiers they had recruited on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi.

Con Son Island has a strong political and cultural history, and an all-star line-up of Vietnamese revolutionary heroes (many streets are named after them) were incarcerated here. Under the French, Con Son was used as a major prison for opponents of French colonialism, earning a reputation for the routine mistreatment and torture of prisoners. In 1954 the island was taken over by the South Vietnamese government, which continued to utilise its remoteness to hold opponents of the government (including students) in horrifying conditions. During the American War the South Vietnamese were joined here by US forces.

Information

The **national park headquarters** (☎ 830 150; vqgdcdo@hcm.vnn.vn; 29 Đ Vo Thi Sau; ☎ 7-11.30am & 1.30-5pm Mon-Fri, 7.30am-11am & 2-4.30pm Sat) is a good place to get information. Since the military controls access to parts of the national park, stop here first to have staff direct you to possible island excursions and hikes; this office also distributes a free useful handout on hikes around the island. Some hiking trails have interpretive signage in English and Vietnamese. The headquarters also has an exhibition hall with displays on the diversity of local forest and marine life, threats to the local environment, and local conservation activities.

Several slow internet cafés are found in town, including one attached to the **post office** (cnr Đ Tran Phu & Nguyen Thi Minh Khai; per hr 2400d; ☎ 8am-8pm)

PENNILESS IN PARADISE

Before flying out to Con Dao Island, be sure to get ample funds as there are no banks or ATMs on the island.

Sights & Activities

CON DAO NATIONAL PARK

From March to November it's possible to do a beautiful and leisurely two-hour **trek** starting from near the airport runway, but you'll definitely need a local guide to do this (about US\$6 for the outing). The walk leads through thick forest and mangroves, and past a hilltop stream to **Bamboo Lagoon** (Dam Tre). This spot is stunning and there's good snorkelling in the bay. You could even consider arranging for a boat to come and pick you up.

A hike that you can do yourself is a 1km walk (about 25 minutes each way) through rain forest to **Ong Dung Bay**. The trail begins a few kilometres north of town. On the road to the trailhead, you'll also pass the ruins of the Ma Thien Lanh Bridge, built by prisoners under the French occupation. The bay itself has only a rocky beach, though there's interesting coral 300m off shore.

Rainbow Divers (☎ 630 023; bin@divevietnam.com) runs an office out of the Phi Yen Hotel, though they're scheduled to move to ATC sometime in 2007. They offer some excellent dives among the coral reefs around the islands. During the dry season (November to May) visibility is good and dives are less likely to be cancelled. This is also a good source of island info (English spoken).

CON SON ISLAND

Con Son town is a sleepy seafront settlement that would make a perfect location for a period film. All three of the town's hotels are on Đ Ton Duc Thang, along a strip of forlorn single-storey French villas (most are abandoned and in disrepair, but nonetheless photogenic). Nearby is the local **market**, which is busiest between 7am and 8am.

The main sights on Con Son Island are a museum, several prisons and a cemetery. If you visit the museum first you can buy a ticket for 35,000d that will get you a guided tour of the museum and prisons – very good value.

The **Revolutionary Museum** (☎ 7-11am & 1.30-5pm Mon-Sat) is next to Saigon Con Dao Hotel and has exhibits on Vietnamese resistance to the French, communist opposition to the Republic of Vietnam, and the treatment of political prisoners (including some gruesome photos of torture). There is also a mock-up of the islands and some curiously embalmed animals – including a monkey smoking a pipe.

Phu Hai Prison, a short walk from the museum, is the largest of the 11 prisons on the island. Built in 1862, the prison houses several enormous detention buildings, one with about 100 shackled and emaciated mannequins that are all too lifelike. Equally eerie are the empty solitary cells with ankle shackles (the decree on the walls in Vietnamese means 'no killing fleas' – prisoners were not allowed to dirty the walls). Nearby is the equally disturbing **Phu Son Prison**.

The notorious **Tiger Cages** were built by the French in the 1940s. From 1957 to 1961 nearly 2000 political prisoners were confined in these tiny cells. Here there are 120 chambers with ceiling bars, where guards could watch down on the prisoners like tigers in a zoo, and another 60 solariums with no roof at all.

Over the course of four decades of war, some 20,000 people were killed on Con Son and 1994 of their graves can be seen at **Hang Duong Cemetery**. Sadly, only 700 of these graves bear the name of the victims. Vietnam's most famous heroine, Vo Thi Sau (1933–1952), was the first woman executed (by a firing squad) on Con Son, on 23 January 1952. Today's pilgrims come to burn incense at her tomb, and make offerings of mirrors and combs (symbolic because she died so young). In the distance behind the cemetery you'll see a huge **monument** symbolising three giant sticks of incense.

Phu Binh Camp is also part of the main tour, though it's outside of town. Built in 1971 by the Americans, this one has 384 chambers and was known as Camp 7 until 1973, when it closed following evidence of torture. After the Paris Agreements in 1973, the name was changed to Phu Binh Camp.

CON SON BEACHES & OTHER ISLANDS

On Con Son there are several good beaches worth finding. Inquire at the hotels about snorkelling gear rental for about 50,000d per day.

Bai Dat Doc is one nice beach with a long stretch of sand. Keep an eye out for dugongs frolicking in the water.

Bai Nhat is small and very nice, though it's exposed only during low tide. **Bai An Hai** looks nice, but there are a good number of fishing boats moored nearby, and a few too many sandflies. **Bai Loi Voi** is OK as well, and shallow, but there can be a fair bit of rubbish and lots of sea shells.

THE RETURN OF THE GREEN SEA TURTLE

Two decades ago the fate of the Green Sea Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) in Con Dao seemed dire. They were prized for their meat, and their shells had value as souvenirs. To make matters worse, the turtles' numbers were decimated by destructive fishing practices. And yet, today, following a decade of local and foreign initiatives, the turtle has made a remarkable comeback. One of Vietnam's most important sea turtle nesting sites lies scattered around the shores of the Con Dao archipelago. The World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) has helped substantially, as have other international organisations, by setting up conservation stations on the islands of Bay Canh, Tre Lon, Tai and Cau. According to WWF, since 1995 some 300,000 hatchlings have been released into the sea. In 2006, 85% of sea turtle eggs hatched successfully – the highest percentage in Vietnam. Later that year WWF also launched a satellite tracking program (the first of its kind in Vietnam) to give conservation workers a better understanding of migration patterns, as well as key habitats used by the turtles for feeding and mating. Though the population is on the rise, many turtles still die after nesting – often from getting ensnared in fishing nets.

Visitors wishing to see the turtles in their natural habitat can arrange a trip to Bay Canh Island and spend the night at the conversation site. (Turtles only lay their eggs at night, each one producing three to ten nests with an average of 70 eggs.) The best time to see them is during the nesting season, which is from May to September. For information on trips, inquire at Rainbow Divers (p397) or at the Con Dao National Park Headquarters (p396). Tours prices vary from US\$30 to US\$75.

The best beaches of all are on the smaller islands, such as the beautiful white-sand beach on **Tre Lon**.

Perhaps the best all-round island to visit is **Bay Canh**, which has lovely beaches, old-growth forest, mangroves, coral reefs (good snorkelling at low tide) and sea turtles (seasonal). There is a fantastic two-hour walk to a functioning French-built **lighthouse**.

Sleeping & Eating

Three of the island's five hotels are on the main road facing the bay in town.

Phi Yen Hotel (☎ 830 168; fax 830 428; 34 Đ Ton Duc Thang; s/d 170,000/222,000d; 🏠) This basic, friendly minihotel has some rooms with partial sea views. All have air-con and hot water.

ATC (☎ 830 345; atc@fmail.vnn.vn; 8 Đ Ton Duc Thang; bungalow from US\$22, villa US\$55-75) This friendly guesthouse offers accommodation in eight tidy, brick bungalows, with air-con, hot water and a terrace (several of which overlook the sea). There are also two spacious thatch-roof stilt houses relocated here from Hoa Binh.

Saigon Con Dao Hotel (☎ 830 155; sgtcd@hcm.vnn.vn; 18 Đ Ton Duc Thang; s/d from US\$40/50; 🏠) Run by Saigon Tourist, this place is 400m south of ATC and offers clean, trim rooms, some with ocean views. It's overpriced for the money, though some visitors end up here on package tours. (Inquire at the Saigon Tourist office, p338, in HCMC if you're looking for a package deal.)

National Park Guesthouse (☎ 830 150; vqgdao@hcm.vnn.vn; 29 Đ Vo Thi Sau; r 150,000d) A pleasant budget option next to the park headquarters, this friendly place has clean, simple rooms, some with excellent views of the lush mountain. It's 2km north of town.

Con Dao Resort (☎ 830 939; www.condaoresort.com.vn; 8 Đ Nguyen Duc Thuan; r US\$30-35, villa US\$40-70; 🏠) Con Dao's finest lodging, this place lies about 600m south of town and overlooks a sandy beach rather than the road. Rooms are clean and comfortable and have either beach or mountain views. Buffet breakfast is included. You'll also find here the best restaurant in town (try the excellent prawn salad Con Dao style) with mains from 30,000d to 75,000d.

All of the hotels have restaurants, though if you're looking for something more local in flavour, try **Phuong Hanh** (☎ 830 180; 38C Đ Nguyen Hue; mains around 30,000d), a pleasant indoor-outdoor eatery in the centre of town.

Getting There & Around

AIR

With its newly upgraded airport, Con Son Island offers flights departing every other day from HCMC, operated by Vasco (Vietnam Air Services Company) for US\$80 return. The tiny airport is about 15km from the town centre. All of the hotels provide free transport to and from the airport. Although it's advis-

able to book your hotel ahead and arrange to be met at the airport, you can often show up and grab a seat on one of the hotel shuttle vans that meet the plane – though it would be bad form not to stay at least a night at whatever hotel gives you a free lift.

BOAT

If you want to explore the islands by boat, hire one from the national park office. A 12-person boat costs around 1,200,000d per day.

MOTORBIKE & BICYCLE

Some of the main sites on Con Son, such as the Revolution Museum and Phu Hai Prison, are within walking distance of town, but to get further afield a motorbike is ideal. All of the hotels rent motorbikes for about US\$7 to US\$10 per day (bicycles cost around US\$2 per day). There are good coastal cycling routes (such as from town to Bai Nhat and onto the tiny settlement of Ben Dam), some nice gradual ups and downs and, thankfully, little motor traffic.

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