

Mekong Delta



Vietnam's 'rice basket', the Mekong Delta is a watery landscape of green fields and sleepy villages, everywhere crisscrossed by the brown canals and rivulets fed by the mighty Mekong River. Its inhabitants – stereotyped as friendly and easygoing – have long toiled on the life-sustaining river, with their labours marked by the same cycles governing the waterways.

The delta, which yields enough rice to feed the country with a sizable surplus, was formed by sediment deposited by the Mekong. The process continues today, with silt deposits extending the shoreline by as much as 80m per year. The river is so large that it has two daily tides. Lush with rice paddies and fish farms, this delta plain also nourishes the cultivation of sugarcane, fruit, coconut and shrimp. Although the area is primarily rural, it is one of the most densely populated regions in Vietnam and nearly every hectare is intensively farmed.

The uniquely southern charm with its welcoming introduction to life along the river is the real draw, and visitors can explore quaint riverside towns, sample fruits bartered in the colourful floating markets or dine on home-cooked delicacies before overnighting as a homestay guest. Other highlights include visits to local orchards, flower markets and fish farms. There are also bird sanctuaries, rustic beach getaways like Hon Chong and impressive Khmer pagodas in the regions around Soc Trang and Tra Vinh.

Those seeking an idyllic retreat will find it in Phu Quoc, a forested island dotted with pretty beaches, freshwater springs and empty dirt roads (ideal for motorbike adventures). Good diving and white-sand beauty have led to its growing popularity, with a mix of cheap bungalows and five-star resorts along an uncrowded coastline.

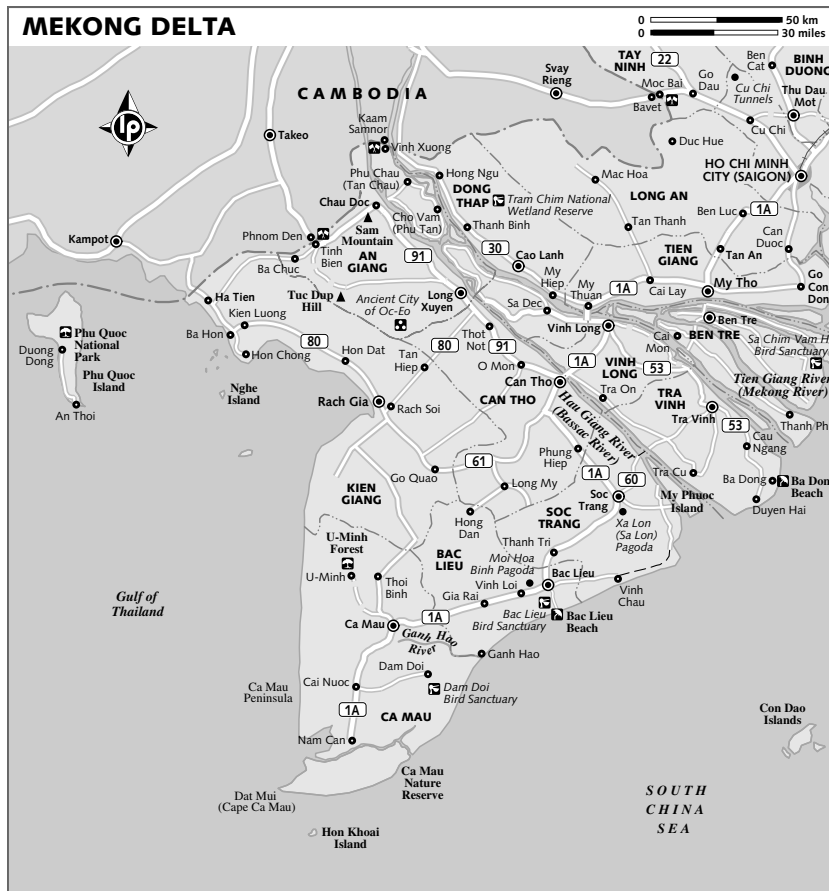
HIGHLIGHTS

- Overnight in a rustic, riverside guesthouse at one of many of the Mekong's many **homestays** (p409)
- Explore lush river islands and feast on fresh fish and coconut candy along the canals between **My Tho** (p407) and **Ben Tre** (p407)
- Enjoy a rustic getaway at the sleepy beach town of **Hon Chong** (p447)
- Gaze at striking Khmer pagodas and learn about the Mekong's first inhabitants in **Tra Vinh** (p413) and **Soc Trang** (p427)
- Bask on pretty beaches and revel in the natural beauty of idyllic **Phu Quoc Island** (p452)
- Explore the peaceful town of **Chau Doc** (p436) before catching a boat to Cambodia



■ ELEVATION: 0-3M

■ BEST TIME TO VISIT: NOV-MAR



History

The Mekong Delta was once part of the Khmer kingdom, and was the last region of modern-day Vietnam to be annexed and settled by the Vietnamese. Cambodians, mindful that they controlled the area until the 18th century, still call the delta 'Lower Cambodia'. The Khmer Rouge tried to follow up on this claim by raiding Vietnamese villages and massacring the inhabitants. This led the Vietnamese army to invade Cambodia in 1979 and oust the Khmer Rouge from power. Most of the current inhabitants of the Mekong Delta are ethnic Vietnamese, but there are also significant populations of ethnic Chinese and Khmer, as well as a few Chams. For more on the Khmer back story see p415.

When the government introduced collective farming to the delta in 1975, production fell significantly and there were food shortages in Saigon (although farmers in the delta easily grew enough to feed themselves). People from Saigon would head down to the delta to buy sacks of black-market rice, but to prevent 'profiteering' the police set up checkpoints and confiscated rice from anyone carrying more than 10kg. All this ended in 1986 and farmers in this region have since propelled Vietnam forward to become the world's second-largest rice exporter after Thailand.

Getting There & Around

Most travellers head to the Mekong Delta on an organised tour – a cheap and easy way to

get a taste of the delta. Those travelling on their own will have greater access to areas off the beaten track, with many little-visited places to discover.

Travel by express minibuses is cheap, efficient and comfortable (though crowded). The ultimate way to see the delta, however, is by private car, bicycle or rented motorbike. Two-wheeling around the delta is good fun, especially getting lost among the maze of country roads!

Since the opening of the river border crossing between Vietnam and Cambodia at Vinh Xuong (near Chau Doc), more and more travellers are choosing this route (see p441) over the land border at Moc Bai. Cambodian visas are issued at the border.

Wherever you go in the delta (except for My Tho), be prepared for ferry crossings. Fruit, soft drinks and sticky rice-based snacks are sold in the ferry waiting areas.

TOURS

Numerous travel agents in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) offer inexpensive minibus tours (p338). The cheapest ones are sold around the Pham Ngu Lao area. Before you book, shop around, and remember that you usually get what you pay for. This is not to say pricey tours are necessarily better, but sometimes 'rock bottom' means all you will get is a brief glance at the region from a packed bus full of other tourists. The cost largely depends on how far from HCMC the tour goes. The standard of accommodation, transport, food and the size of the group will be other determining factors.

For customised tours of the Mekong Delta on two or four wheels, HCMC's **Sinhbalo Adventures** (www.sinhbalo.com) cannot be beaten.

MY THO

☎ 073 / pop 180,000

My Tho, the quiet capital city of Tien Giang province, is the traditional gateway to the delta, owing to its proximity to HCMC. Visitors on a whirlwind Vietnam tour often take a day trip here to catch a glimpse of the famous river. In order to visit floating markets, however, you'll need to continue on to Can Tho (p421). The town itself is an important market town, and its quaint but busy waterfront is easily explored on foot.

My Tho was founded in the 1680s by Chinese refugees fleeing Taiwan for political reasons. The Chinese have virtually all gone now,

Typhoon Durian

In 2006 several eastern provinces in the delta sustained serious damage by Typhoon Durian. It left nearly 100 dead, damaged or destroyed more than 200,000 homes and sank more than 800 fishing vessels. Ben Tre province suffered the worst damage, with hundreds left homeless.

having been driven out in the late 1970s when their property was seized by the government. The economy is based on tourism, fishing and the cultivation of rice, coconuts, bananas, mangoes, longans and citrus fruit.

Orientation

Sprawling along the bank of the northernmost branch of the Mekong River, My Tho is laid out in a regular grid pattern.

The bus station is 3km west of town. Coming from the bus station, you enter My Tho on Đ Ap Bac, which turns into Đ Nguyen Trai (oriented west-east).

Parallel to the Mekong River is Đ 30 Thang 4 (also written as Đ 30/4), named for Saigon Liberation Day.

Information

The official tourism authority for Ten Giang province, **Tien Giang Tourist** (Cong Ty Du Lich Tien Giang; ☎ 873 184; dulichtg@bdvn.vnd.net; 8 Đ 30 Thang 4; ☎ 7am-5pm) is not terribly helpful. You're better off inquiring at the tourism desks found at hotels.

Mekotours (☎ 874 324; congdoantourist@hcm.vnn.vn; 61 Đ 30 Thang 4), attached to the Trade Union Hotel, offers a range of excursions including bicycle tours (with an overnight homestay) and boating tours to the floating markets. Most trips are priced at group rates (US\$5/10 per person for boating/bicycle excursion), so you'll have to negotiate if you're on your own.

There's an **Incombank ATM** (nr Đ 30 Thang 4 & Đ Le Loi) near the boat landing. The post office is located at 59 Đ 30 Thang 4; there's an internet café next door.

Sights

CAO DAI TEMPLE

If you missed the one in Tay Ninh (p382), My Tho has its own colourful but smaller **Cao Dai Temple** (Đ Ly Thuong Kiet) that's worth a look. It's west of the town centre between Đ Dong Da and Đ Tran Hung Dao.

MY THO CENTRAL MARKET

This **market** (Đ Trung Trac & Đ Nguyen Hue) is in an area of town that is closed to traffic. The streets are filled with stalls selling everything from fresh food and bulk tobacco to boat propellers. In an attempt to clear these streets, the local government has built a three-storey concrete monstrosity on the riverside, intending to relocate vendors inside. With the high rent and taxes, however, there have been very few takers and the top two floors remain empty.

VINH TRANG PAGODA

The monks at **Vinh Trang Pagoda** (60A Đ Nguyen Trung Truc; admission free; ☎ 9-11.30am & 1.30-5pm), a beautiful and well-maintained sanctuary, provide a home for orphans, disabled and other needy children. Donations are always welcome.

The pagoda is about 1km from the city centre. To get there, take the bridge east across the river on Đ Nguyen Trai and after 400m turn left. The entrance to the sanctuary is about 200m from the turn-off, on the right-hand side of the building as you approach it from the ornate gate.

Tours

Boat trips are the highlight of a visit to My Tho. The small wooden vessels can navigate the mighty Mekong (barely), but the target for most trips is cruising past pleasant rural villages through the maze of small canals. Depending on what you book, destinations usually include a coconut-candy workshop, a honeybee farm (try the banana wine!) and an orchid garden.

THE RIVER OF NINE DRAGONS

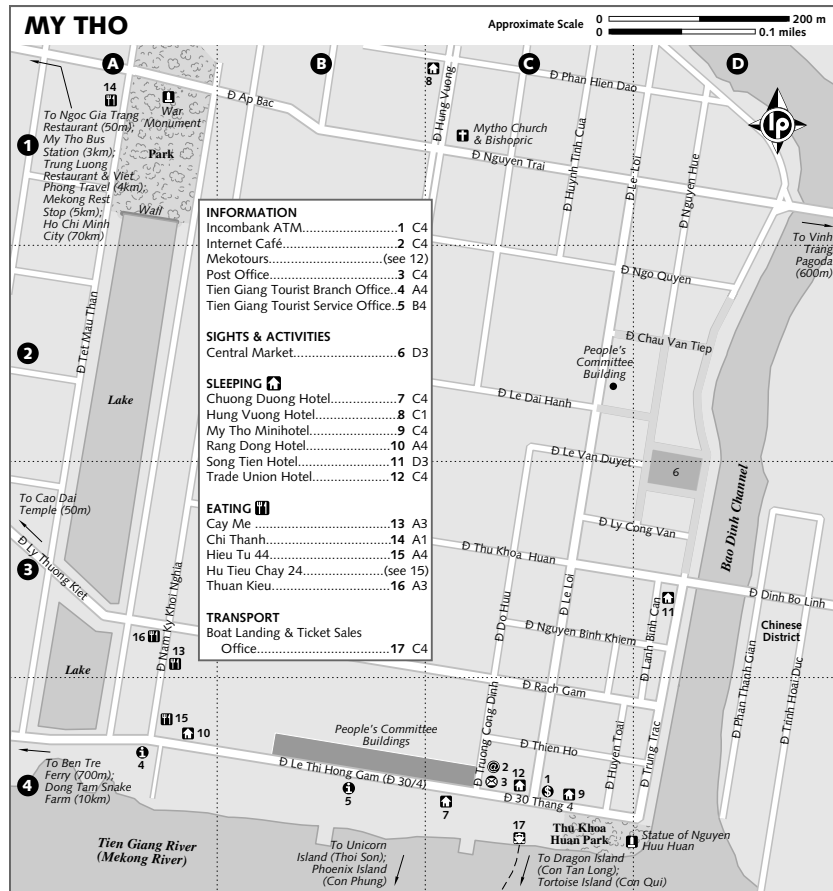
The Mekong River is one of the world's great rivers and its delta is one of the world's largest. The Mekong originates high in the Tibetan plateau, flowing 4500km through China, between Myanmar and Laos, through Laos, along the Laos-Thailand border, and through Cambodia and Vietnam on its way to the South China Sea. At Phnom Penh (Cambodia), the Mekong River splits into two main branches: the Hau Giang (Lower River, also called the Bassac River), which flows via Chau Doc, Long Xuyen and Can Tho to the sea; and the Tien Giang (Upper River), which splits into several branches at Vinh Long and empties into the sea at five points. The numerous branches of the river explain the Vietnamese name for the Mekong: Song Cuu Long (River of Nine Dragons).

The Mekong's flow begins to rise around the end of May and reaches its highest point in September; it ranges from 1900 to 38,000 cubic metres per second depending on the season. A tributary of the river that empties into the Mekong at Phnom Penh drains Cambodia's Tonlé Sap Lake. When the Mekong is at flood stage, this tributary reverses its flow and drains into Tonlé Sap, thereby somewhat reducing the danger of serious flooding in the Mekong Delta. Unfortunately, deforestation in Cambodia is disturbing this delicate balancing act, resulting in more flooding in Vietnam's portion of the Mekong River basin.

In recent years seasonal flooding has claimed the lives of hundreds and forced tens of thousands of the region's residents to evacuate from their homes. In some areas inhabitants are not able to return to their homes until the waters fully recede several months later. Floods cause millions of dollars worth of damage and have a catastrophic effect on regional rice and coffee crops.

Living on a flood plain presents some technical challenges. Lacking any high ground to escape flooding, many delta residents build their houses on bamboo stilts to avoid the rising waters. Many roads are submerged or turn to muck during floods; all-weather roads have to be built on raised embankments, but this is expensive. The traditional solution has been to build canals and travel by boat. There are thousands of canals in the Mekong Delta – keeping them properly dredged and navigable is a constant but essential chore.

A further challenge is keeping the canals clean. The normal practice of dumping all garbage and sewage directly into the waterways behind the houses that line them is taking its toll. Many of the more populated areas in the Mekong Delta are showing signs of unpleasant waste build-up. The World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) is one organisation that's working with local and provincial governments to improve conservation techniques and sponsoring environmental education and awareness programs. To learn more, contact **WWF Greater Mekong Programme** (www.wfindochina.org).



The My Tho People's Committee almost has a monopoly on boat travel, charging around US\$25 for a two- to three-hour tour (book at the tourist office). However, private touts operate customised tours cheaper than the 'official' rates (per hour around 50,000d), but they are illegal and there's a small chance your boatman may be fined by the river cops. The best place to look for these freelancers is along the riverfront, but they'll probably find you first.

Inexpensive boat tours can also be booked at the out-of-the-way but friendly **Viet Phong Travel** (☎ 882 522; vietphongtravel@hcm.vnn.vn; 94 Đ Le Thi Hong Gam; ☎ 8am-5pm); it's best to contact its staff at Trung Luong Restaurant (see p406), as its pier office is difficult to find.

Sleeping

BUDGET
Rang Dong Hotel (☎ 874 400; 25 Đ 30 Tháng 4; r 130,000-150,000d; ☎) Privately run, this decent, friendly spot remains popular with budget travellers. Third-floor rooms open onto a terrace with river views.

My Tho Minihotel (☎ 872 543; 67 Đ 30 Tháng 4; r 100,000-200,000d; ☎) This basic waterfront hotel has simply furnished rooms. Pricier rooms are bigger and have better ventilation. Room No 1 has a river view.

Hung Vuong Hotel (☎ 876 777; 19 Đ Hung Vuong; r 120,000-220,000d; ☎) This popular place has very clean rooms with tall ceilings and simple wood furniture. Some rooms lack natural light.

Song Tien Hotel (☎ 872 009; fax 884 745; 101 Đ Trung Trac; r/stg 160,000/260,000d; ☎) The Song Tien has comfortable rooms with red and white tile floors, TV and fridge. Suites are spacious with polished lacquer furniture. There's also a lift.

Trade Union Hotel (Khach San Cong Doan; ☎ 874 324; congdoantourist@hcm.vnn.vn; 61 Đ 30 Tháng 4; r 90,000-210,000d; ☎) This ageing government-run hotel has a mix of rooms from dingy and stifling to clean and roomy – the best are on the upper floor with a shared balcony facing the river.

Chuong Duong annex (☎ 882 264; 1 Đ Truong Cong Dinh; r US\$15-30; ☎) This new annexe is up the street from the Chuong Duong Hotel, with a polished feel, but no views.

Chuong Duong Hotel (☎ 870 875; cdhotelmtho@hcm.vnn.vn; 10 Đ 30 Tháng 4; r US\$25-35; ☎) My Tho's most luxurious accommodation, this place boasts a prime riverside location and respectable in-house restaurant. All rooms overlook the Mekong River.

Other options: overnighting in a bungalow on Unicorn Island (Thoi Son) or in the rarely visited hotel on Phoenix Island (p406);

RICE PRODUCTION

The ancient Indian word for rice, *dhanya* ('sustainer of the human race'), is apt when describing the importance of rice to the Vietnamese.

A Vietnamese fable tells of a time when rice did not need to be harvested. Instead, it would be summoned through prayer and arrive in each home from the heavens in the form of a large ball. One day a man ordered his wife to sweep the floor in preparation for the coming of the rice, but she was still sweeping when the huge ball arrived and struck it by accident, causing it to shatter into many pieces. Since then, the Vietnamese have had to toil to produce rice by hand.

Rural Vietnam today is in many ways similar to what it would have been centuries ago: women in conical hats (*non bai tho*) irrigating fields by hand, farmers stooping to plant the flooded paddies and water buffalo ploughing seedbeds with harrows.

Despite the labour-intensive production process, rice is the single most important crop in Vietnam and involves more than 50% of the working population. While always playing an important role in the Vietnamese economy, its production intensified considerably as a result of economic reforms, known as *doi moi* ('renovation'), in 1986. The reforms helped transform Vietnam from a rice importer to exporter in 1989. Today rice is a substantial part of the country's earnings. In 2006 Vietnam exported around 4.5 million tonnes of rice, earning around US\$1.4 billion.

The importance of rice in the diet of the Vietnamese is evident in the many rice dishes available, including rice omelette (*banh xeo*), rice porridge (*chao*) and extremely potent rice wine (*ruou gao*), to name a few. Vietnam's ubiquitous *com pho* (rice-noodle soup) restaurants serve white rice (*com*) with a variety of cooked meat and vegetables, as well as rice-noodle soup (*pho*).

Despite advances in rice production, much of the work is carried out without modern machinery. Fields are ploughed and harrowed with the assistance of water buffaloes, seeds are planted by hand, and when the seedlings reach a certain age they have to be individually uprooted and transplanted to another field to avoid root rot. This painstaking process is mostly undertaken by women. Irrigation is typically carried out by two workers using woven baskets on rope to transfer water from canals to the fields. When the water level is high enough fish can be raised in the paddies.

Rice plants take three to six months to grow, depending on the type and environment. In Vietnam the three major cropping seasons are winter-spring, summer-autumn and the wet season. When ready to harvest, the plants are thigh-high and in about 30cm of water. The grains grow in drooping fronds and are cut by hand, then transported by wheelbarrows to thrashing machines that separate the husk from the plant. Other machines are used to 'dehusk' the rice (for brown rice) or 'polish' it (for white rice). A familiar sight at this stage is brown carpets of rice spread along roads to dry before milling.

In recent rice news (2006), Vietnam, along with Thailand, announced a ban on growing genetically engineered varieties of rice, citing health concerns. The announcement came in the wake of scandals caused by the US and China contaminating the global rice supply with unapproved and illegal genetically engineered rice varieties.

inquire at Tien Giang Tourist (p402). There are also homestay options around Vinh Long (p409).

Eating

RESTAURANTS

Chi Thanh (☎ 873 756; 279 Đ Tet Mau Than; mains 20,000-40,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A tidy spot for delicious Chinese and Vietnamese fare, Chi Thanh has two locations, both with menus in English.

Ngoc Gia Trang (☎ 872 742; 196 Đ Ap Bac; mains 25,000-45,000d; ☺ lunch & dinner) This charming, restaurant sits among greenery on the road into My Tho from HCMC. Its pleasant courtyard is a good spot to enjoy traditional dishes. There's an equally attractive café attached.

Mekong Rest Stop (☎ 858 676; Hwy 60; mains around 30,000-40,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) About 5km west of town, this airy, thatched-roof restaurant serves an excellent assortment of fresh seafood and traditional dishes amid pleasant water-garden environs.

Trung Luong (☎ 855 441; Hwy 60; set menu 50,000-60,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A few kilometres west of town, Trung Luong is near the gate marking the entry point to My Tho. Here too is a nice garden and nicely prepared dishes (elephant fish is a favourite).

Other good spots:

Cay Me (60 Đ Nam Ky Khoi Nghia; mains 10,000-15,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner)

Thuan Kieu (☎ 876 636; 47 Đ Nam Ky Khoi Nghia; mains 10,000-20,000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner)

HU TIEU RESTAURANTS

My Tho is known for a special vermicelli soup, *hu tieu my tho*, which is richly garnished with fresh and dried seafood, pork, chicken and fresh herbs. It is served either with broth or dry (with broth on the side) and can also be made vegetarian.

Although *hu tieu* can be found at almost any eatery in town, there's a handful of speciality restaurants. Carnivores will enjoy **Hu Tieu 44** (44 Đ Nam Ky Khoi Nghia; soups 7000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner), while vegetarians should look for **Hu Tieu Chay 24** (24 Đ Nam Ky Khoi Nghia; soups 4000d; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner).

Getting There & Around BOAT

The car ferry to Ben Tre province leaves from Ben Pha Rach Mieu station about 1km west of My Tho city centre, near 2/10A Đ Le Thi

Hong Gam (the continuation west of Đ 30 Thang 4). The ferry operates between 4am and 10pm and runs at least once an hour (per person/motorbike 1000/5000d). Ten-person trucks shuttle passengers between the ferry terminal and the bus station. A new bridge under construction (due for completion in early 2009) will link My Tho with Ben Tre by road, greatly diminishing travel time between the two towns.

BUS

My Tho is served by buses leaving HCMC from Mien Tay bus station (p372) and from the bus station in Cholon. Buses from Cholon have the added advantage of dropping passengers right in My Tho, as opposed to the bus station outside of town. The trip takes 1½ hours.

The **My Tho bus station** (Ben Xe Khach Tien Giang; ☺ 4am-5pm) is several kilometres west of town. To get there from the city centre, take Đ Ap Bac westward and continue on to Hwy 1 (Quoc Lo 1).

Buses to HCMC (18,000d, two hours) leave when full from the early morning until about 5pm. There's also daily bus service to most points in the Mekong Delta.

CAR & MOTORBIKE

The drive from HCMC to My Tho along Hwy 1, by car or motorbike, takes about two hours.

Road distances from My Tho are 16km to Ben Tre, 104km to Can Tho, 70km to HCMC and 66km to Vinh Long.

AROUND MY THO Phoenix Island

Until his imprisonment by the communists for his antigovernment activities and the consequent dispersion of his flock, the Coconut Monk (Ong Dao Dua; see the boxed text, opposite) led a small community on Phoenix Island (Con Phung), a few kilometres from My Tho. In its heyday the island was dominated by a wildly imagined open-air **sanctuary** (admission 5000d; ☺ 8-11.30am & 1.30-6pm). The dragon-encrusted columns and the multiplatformed tower, with its huge metal globe, must have once been brightly painted, but these days the whole place is faded, rickety and silent. Nevertheless, it's good kitsch – there's even a model of the Apollo rocket set among the Buddhist statues! With some imagination you can picture how it all must have appeared as

THE COCONUT MONK

The Coconut Monk was so named because he once ate only coconuts for three years; others claim he only drank coconut juice and ate fresh young corn. Whatever the story, he was born Nguyen Thanh Nam in 1909, in what is now Ben Tre province. He studied chemistry and physics in France at Lyon, Caen and Rouen from 1928 until 1935, when he returned to Vietnam, got married and had a daughter.

In 1945 the Coconut Monk left his family in order to pursue a monastic life. For three years he sat on a stone slab under a flagpole and meditated day and night. He was repeatedly imprisoned by successive South Vietnamese governments, which were infuriated by his philosophy of achieving reunification through peaceful means. He died in 1990.

Plaques on the 3.5m-high porcelain jar (created in 1972) on Con Phung tell all about the Coconut Monk. He founded a religion, Tinh Do Cu Si, which was a mixture of Buddhism and Christianity. Representations of Jesus and the Buddha appeared together, as did the Virgin Mary and eminent Buddhist women, and the cross and Buddhist symbols. Today only the symbols remain, as the Tinh Do Cu Si community has dissolved from the island.

the Coconut Monk presided over his congregation, flanked by enormous elephant tusks and seated on a richly ornamented throne.

If you really wish to experience the fullness of the island, you can spend the night at the simple **Con Phung Hotel** (☎ 075 822 198; fax 075 894 940; r with/without air-con US\$10/7; ☺). Rooms are comfortable, clean and simple, and the best quarters have river views. A restaurant serves decent traditional mains (set menu 50,000d to 80,000d).

Private boat operators can take you to and from the island as part of an organised tour (around 50,000d per hour). You might also keep an eye out for the Coconut Monk's complex as you chug by on the My Tho-Ben Tre ferry.

Dragon Island

Famed for its well-known **longan orchards**, Dragon Island (Con Tan Long) makes for a pleasant stop and stroll. The lush, palm-fringed shores of the island are lined with wooden fishing boats; some of the residents of the island are shipwrights. There is a small restaurant on the island. Dragon Island is a five-minute boat trip (per person 10,000d) from the dock at the southern end of Đ Le Loi.

Other Islands

Two islands in the vicinity, **Tortoise Island** (Con Qui) and **Unicorn Island** (Thoi Son) are worth popular stops for the coconut candy and banana wine workshops. On Tortoise Island is an excellent restaurant, the **Du Lich Xanh Con Qui** (☎ 610 988; set menu 40,000-80,000d; ☺ lunch). It's a peaceful thatched-roof setting, surrounded by

water hyacinths. Although you can visit these islands as part of a package tour from HCMC, you'll have much more freedom if you hire a boat yourself in My Tho. Budget around US\$10 to US\$14 for a three- or four-hour cruise, making stops along the way.

Dong Tam Snake Farm

Operated by the Vietnamese military for profit and open to the public, the **snake farm** (admission 20,000d; ☺ 7am-5pm) at Dong Tam lies about 10km from My Tho in the direction of Vinh Long. It breeds snakes – mostly pythons and cobras – for eating, for their skins and for producing antivenin. At certain times the keepers feed live animals, including ducks, to the pythons and other snakes. If this bothers you, you may want to forego a visit. A 15-minute video tells the history of the snake farm.

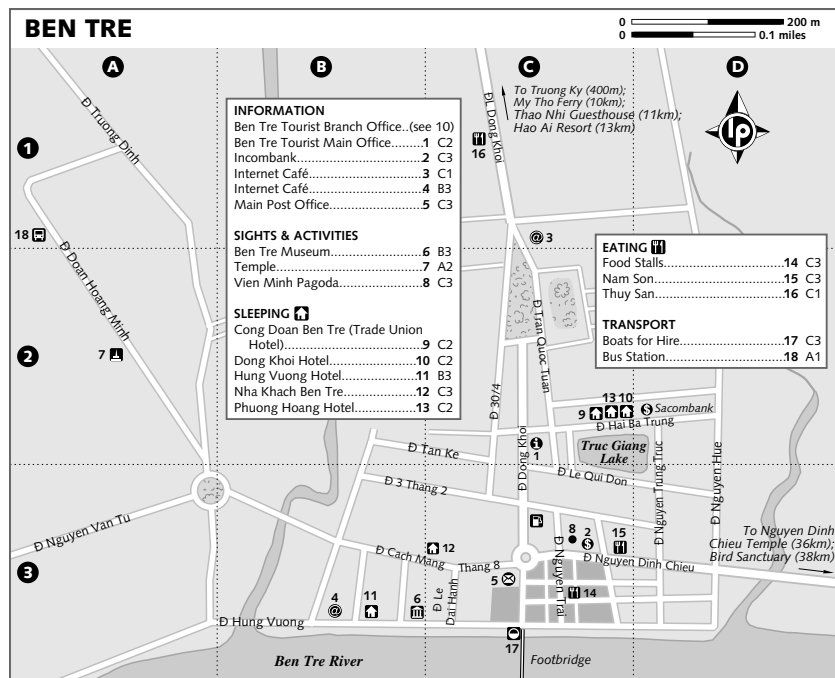
The restaurant here includes cobra on the menu and there's a shop where you can stock up on snake wine and cobratox – a cream made from venom, that's said to be good for treating rheumatism.

You'll need your own transport to get to Dong Tam Snake Farm. Coming from HCMC, continue for 3km beyond the turn-off to My Tho and turn left at the Dong Tam Junction (signposted). From the junction, follow the dirt road for 4km, turn right and continue for 1km until you reach the snake farm.

BEN TRE

☎ 075 / pop 120,000

The picturesque little province of Ben Tre, just south of My Tho, sees little of the tourist traffic of its northern neighbour. Its sleepy



waterfront, lined with ageing villas, and active market nearby makes for a pleasant stroll, and there's good exploring into Ben Tre's rustic settlement across the bridge south of the centre. The town has a tiny lake (Truc Giang), ringed with a few cafés. Ben Tre is also a good place to arrange boat trips (see p410) around the area – particularly those wanting to escape the tour buses.

Ben Tre is famous for *keo dua* (coconut candy). Many local women work in small factories making these sweets, spending their days boiling cauldrons of sticky mixture, before rolling it out and cutting sections off into squares and wrapping them into paper for sale.

Information

The **Ben Tre Tourist Office** (☎ 829 618; ttddulichbt@hcm.vnn.vn; cnr Đ Hai Ba Trung & Dong Khoi; ☹ 7-11am & 1-5pm) rents out bikes, boats, canoes and arranges Mekong excursions lasting from four hours (245,000đ) to two days (320,000đ). You can also hire a 12-passenger speedboat (US\$60 per hour). They have a **branch office** (☎ 822 392; dulichbt@hcm.vnn.vn; 3rd fl, 16 Đ Hai Ba Trung; ☹ 7-11am & 1-5pm) inside the Dong Khoi hotel.

Ben Tre has a few **internet cafés** (per hr 4000đ), including one on Đ Hung Vuong and another on Đ Tran Quoc Tuan. There's also internet access at the **main post office** (3/1 Đ Dong Khoi; per hr 4000đ).

Get cash at **Incombank** (☎ 822 507; 42 Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu; ☹ closed weekends).

Sights

In the centre of Ben Tre is the **Vien Minh Pagoda**, which is also the head office of the Buddhist Association of Ben Tre province. Though the history of the pagoda is vague, the local monks say it is over 100 years old. The original structure was made of wood, but it was torn down to make way for the present building. Reconstruction took place from 1951 to 1958 using bricks and concrete.

An interesting feature of Vien Minh Pagoda is a large white statue of Quan The Am Bo Tat (Goddess of Mercy) set in the front courtyard. The Chinese calligraphy that adorns the pagoda was performed by an old monk.

The **Ben Tre Museum** (Bao Tang Ben Tre; Đ Hung Vuong; ☹ 8am-11am & 1-5pm) is set in an ageing but atmospheric old yellow villa. It has the usual assortment of rusty weapons and American

War paraphernalia, along with rousing images of Ho Chi Minh ploughing the fields, talking on the phone and looking in turns kind and tough.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Nha Khach Ben Tre (☎ 822 339; fax 826 205; 5 Đ Cach Mang Thang 8; r with breakfast 80,000-230,000đ; ☹) Brought to you by the communist party, this curious place has clean, somewhat stark rooms with tall ceilings, Chinese-inlaid furniture and decent natural lighting. There's an airy café next door.

Thao Nhi Guesthouse (☎ 860 009; thaonhitours@yahoo.com; Hamlet 1, Tan Thach Village; r 80,000-250,000đ; ☹) A friendly, rustic place amid abundant greenery,

Thao Nhi is 11km north of town, and offers a range of comfortable rooms. The in-house restaurant serves excellent elephant-ear fish, and there's free bike rental; you can also arrange boat trips here. As it's difficult to find, hire a moto-taxi to take you there from the boat dock (arriving from My Tho).

Phuong Hoang Hotel (☎ 821 385; 28 Hai Ba Trung; r 120,000-180,000đ; ☹) Should be your last choice in town, with small battered rooms, though 203 and 204 overlook the lake.

Cong Doan Ben Tre (Trade Union Hotel; ☎ 825 082; fax 813 017; 36 Đ Hai Ba Trung; r incl breakfast 130,000-170,000đ; ☹) This government-owned place has a range of rooms from airy and decent to utterly depressing. Friendly staff and centrally located.

A NIGHT UPON THE MEKONG

One of the highlights of any Vietnam trip is doing a homestay with some of the friendly Mekong families. Here, you'll get a taste of local customs by sharing a home-cooked meal and possibly a few glasses of rice wine before retiring to your bed or hammock near the river. Although many tourists book through group tours in Saigon, there's no reason you can't do it yourself. The following options all charge around US\$10 per night, which includes a night's sleep, dinner and breakfast the next morning. Note that most hosts are unlikely to speak much English, but welcome foreign guests just the same. All of the places listed below are perched along a river or canal. Vinh Long is the best place to arrange for homestays.

Le Thanh Hong (☎ 070 858 612; An Than hamlet, An Binh village, Long Ho district) Located across the Co Chien River from Vinh Long, this place has four small rustic bungalows amid flowers and pretty landscaping. The monkey on a chain is unfortunate. You can also book here through Cuu Long Tourist (p411) in Vinh Long.

Mai Quoc Nam (☎ 070 859 912; fax 859 244; Phuan 1 hamlet, Binh Hoa Phuoc village, Long Ho District) A short boat ride from Vinh Long, Mai Quoc Nam has a modern concrete building in front, but lovely wooden bungalows tucked away in a garden setting in back. You can also arrange boating excursions here.

Nha Co Tran Tuan Kiet (☎ 073 824 498; fax 073 925 051; 22 Phu Hoa hamlet, Dong Hoa Hip village, Cai Be district) This traditional wooden house has beautiful ornate details and a history dating back 150 years – during which it's remained in the same family. The cooking here is excellent (watch and learn while dinner is prepared, then enjoy the feast), and private rooms are available. It's in Cai Be, 25km west of My Tho.

Sau Giao (☎ 070 859 910; Binh Thuan 2 hamlet, Hoa Ninh village, Long Ho district) Located a few kilometres outside of Vinh Long along the river, Sau Giao is a beautiful traditional wooden house (in the same family for four generations) that's set with a bonsai garden in front. They serve excellent cuisine – even if you don't stay here, it's a worthwhile lunch stop (set lunch 60,000đ) if you're hiring a boat from Vinh Long. Bicycle hire available (per day US\$1).

Song Tien (☎ 070 858 487; An Thanh hamlet, An Binh village, Long Ho District) Across the Co Chien River from Vinh Long, this friendly place offers accommodation in small bungalows with squat toilets. The landscaping here is particularly lush with orange and lemon trees, and the owner and his wife, both former VC soldiers, are known to bust out the mandolin from time to time for a bit of traditional singing for their guests.

Tam Ho (☎ 070 859 859; info@caygiong.com; Binh Thuan 1 hamlet, Hoa Ninh village, Long Ho district) About 1.5km from Vinh Long, Tam Ho is a working orchard run by a friendly, welcoming family – one of the hosts bears a striking resemblance to Ho Chi Minh. Private rooms available.

MIDRANGE

Dong Khoi Hotel (☎ 822 501; dongkhoihotelbtre@vmm.vn; 16 Đ Hai Ba Trung; r 196,000-255,000; 🍽️) Popular with wedding parties, this hotel with a lift is the best of the three on the lakefront. It has clean, carpeted rooms done in pink and green. There's a decent restaurant (mains 20,000d to 40,000d) with an English menu on the ground floor.

Hung Vuong Hotel (☎ 822 408; 166 Đ Hung Vuong; r US\$25-35; 🍽️) One of Ben Tre's nicest hotels, this riverfront spot has tile floors, polished wood furniture, modern bathrooms with tubs and great river views (from the front rooms). There's a good restaurant as well.

Eating

Nam Son (☎ 822 873; 40 Đ Phan Ngoc Tong; mains 15,000-30,000d; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) This place is usually packed with locals feasting on roast chicken and drinking draught beer.

Truong Ky (☎ 813 616; 517 ĐL Dong Khoi; mains 20,000-30,000d; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) A trim, multistorey restaurant just outside of town, Truong Ky serves delectable fish and seafood, though there's no English menu.

Thuy San (☎ 833 777; 210B ĐL Dong Khoi; mains 30,000-70,000d) A decent option on the way into town, Thuy San cooks up traditional mains amid faux greenery.

Hao Ai Resort (☎ 610 785; 2nd hamlet, Tan Thach village; 🍽️ lunch) A handsome, lushly landscaped restaurant that serves tasty fish plates. Get there by hiring a private boat where the ferry docks from My Tho (around 30,000d).

For ultra-cheap eats, head to the market, which has plenty of **food stalls** (rice plates around 7000d).

Getting There & Away

The My Tho–Ben Tre ferry (motorbike/person 5000/1000d, 15 minutes one way) is the only option between the two towns – though a bridge due for completion in 2009 will provide a road link. Ferries run 24 hours a day, every 20 minutes or so (less frequently between 7pm and 6am). Ferry crossings are much quicker if you're travelling by motorbike (as opposed to car) since there are numerous small boats that can take you across the river.

Public buses stop at the bus station west of the town centre on Đ Doan Hoang Minh. Private minibuses also make the Ben Tre–HCMC run daily. They operate on no fixed schedule, so you'll need to inquire locally. Ask around

the market, or by the petrol station on Đ Dong Khoi (where some vans arrive/depart).

Getting Around

Slow boats can be rented at the public pier near the market. Here you can figure on about 30,000d to 50,000d per hour, with a minimum of two hours cruising the local canals. Check with the boat drivers who hang around near the end of the footbridge.

AROUND BEN TRE
Nguyen Dinh Chieu Temple

Dedicated to Nguyen Dinh Chieu, a local scholar, this **temple** (🕒 7.30-11.30am & 1.30-6.30pm) is in Ba Tri district, which is a 30-minute drive (36km) from Ben Tre. It's a very charming temple, excellent for photography.

Bird Sanctuary

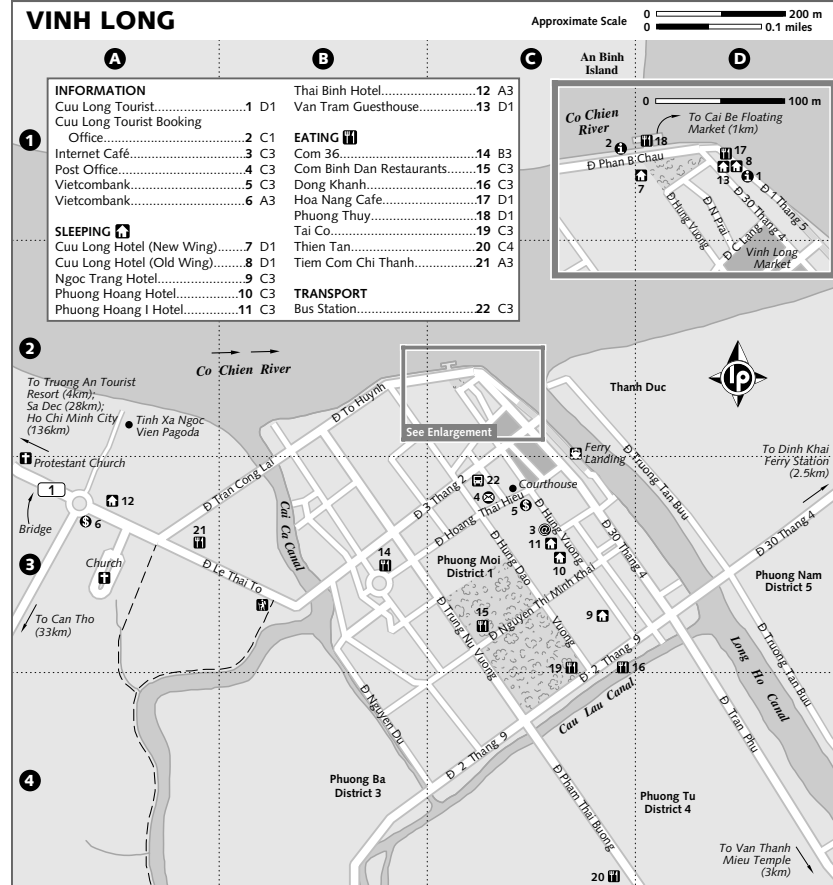
The locals make much of the storks that nest at the local bird sanctuary, **San Chim Vam Ho** (☎ 858 669; admission 10,000d; 🕒 7-11am & 1-7pm), as a stork sitting on the back of a water buffalo is a quintessential image of the Mekong waterways. The sanctuary is 38km east of Ben Tre town. Ben Tre Tourist has speedboats that can make the round trip in about two hours, or slow boats that take about five hours. Compare the going rates at Ben Tre Tourist with what freelance boat operators charge.

To get there overland, follow Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu east out of town for 20km to Giong Tram. Turn left onto the windy, rural dirt road leading to Trai Tu K-20 (Prison K-20); you'll reach the prison after travelling 11km (you may see hundreds of prisoners out tilling the fields) – turn right and drive the final 7km to Vam Ho.

VINH LONG

☎ 070 / pop 130,000

A bit more chaotic than other Mekong towns of its size, Vinh Long has noisy, motorbike-filled streets, though its riverfront (and its several restaurants) make for a pleasant escape from the mayhem. Despite the lack of in-town attractions, Vinh Long is the gateway to river islands and some worthwhile sites, including the Cai Be floating market, orchards and homestays – which can be a highlight of a Mekong journey. Vinh Long is the capital of Vinh Long province and situated about midway between My Tho and Can Tho.

**Information**

Cuu Long Tourist (☎ 823 616; cuulongtourist1@hcm.vnn.vn; 1 Đ 1 Thang 5; 🕒 7am-5pm) is one of the more capable state-run tour outfits located in the Mekong Delta region. For those interested, it can arrange homestays at an orchard (see p409). It also has a small booking office near the Phuong Thuy restaurant, which can rent out bicycles (per day US\$2) and motorbikes (per day US\$8).

Next to Phung Hoang Hotel is an **internet café** (26 Đ Hung Vuong; per hr 3000d). **Vietcombank** (☎ 823 109; 143 Đ Le Thai To) has two branches in town and can exchange cash and travellers cheques.

The post office is located on Đ Hoang Thai Hieu.

Sights**MEKONG RIVER ISLANDS**

What makes a trip to Vinh Long worthwhile is not the town but the beautiful small islands in the river. The islands are given over to agriculture, especially the growing of tropical fruit, which are shipped to markets in HCMC.

To visit the islands you can charter a boat through Cuu Long Tourist (see left) for around US\$10 per person or pay substantially less for a private operator (US\$3 to US\$4 per hour).

You can also take the public ferry (3000d) to one of the islands and then walk around on your own; however, this isn't as interesting as a boat tour, since you won't cruise the narrow canals.

Some of the more popular islands to visit include **Binh Hoa Phuoc** and **An Binh Island**, but there are many others. This low-lying region is as much water as land and houses are generally built on stilts.

CAI BE FLOATING MARKET

This bustling **river market** (☎ 5am-5pm) is worth including on a boat tour from Vinh Long. It is best to go early in the morning. Wholesalers on big boats moor here, each specialising in one or a few types of fruit or vegetable. Customers cruise the market in smaller boats and can easily find what they're looking for, as larger boats hang samples of their goods from tall wooden poles.

One interesting thing you won't see at other floating markets is the huge Catholic cathedral on the riverside – a popular and fantastic backdrop for photographs.

It takes about an hour to reach the market from Vinh Long, but most people make detours on the way there or back to see the canals or visit orchards.

VAN THANH MIEU TEMPLE

A big surprise in Vinh Long is the large and beautiful **Van Thanh Mieu Temple** (Phan Thanh Gian Temple; Đ Tran Phu) by the river. It's unusual as far as Vietnamese temples go, as it's a Confucian temple, which is very rare in southern Vietnam. The front hall honours the local hero Phan Thanh Gian, who led an uprising in 1930 against the French colonists. When it became obvious that his revolt was doomed, Phan killed himself rather than be captured by the colonial army.

The rear hall, built in 1866, has a portrait of Confucius above the altar. The building was designed in the Confucian style and looks like it was lifted straight out of China.

Van Thanh Mieu Temple is 3km south-east of town. Don't confuse it with the much smaller Quoc Cong Pagoda on Đ Tran Phu, which you'll pass along the way.

Tours

Cuu Long Tourist offers a variety of boat tours ranging from three to five hours in length, as well as overnight excursions – though you can also arrange this with local operators. Tour destinations include small canals, fruit orchards, brick kilns, a conical palm hat workshop and the Cai Be Floating Market (above). Plan on about US\$25 (per small group) for

a day-long boat trip, less with independent guides.

Sleeping

See the boxed text 'A Night Upon the Mekong', p409, for homestay options outside of town. Cuu Long Tourist can help arrange booking and transportation to these charming but rustic spots.

Phuong Hoang I Hotel (☎ 825 185; khachsanhphung hoang@yahoo.com; 2H Đ Hung Vuong; r 60,000-250,000d; ☎) This fairly new addition to Vinh Long features pleasant rooms with ornate ceilings and tile floors. Bigger rooms upstairs have better views.

Ngoc Trang Hotel (☎/fax 832 581; 18 Đ Hung Vuong; r 70,000-220,000d; ☎) This is good value with clean rooms and friendly service. Top-end rooms are spacious with balconies and lacquered furniture.

Thai Binh Hotel (☎ 827 161; fax 822 213; 202 Đ Le Thai To; r 80,000-120,000d; ☎) On the outskirts of town, the Thai Binh is a cheap but fairly grubby option – a last resort.

Phuong Hoang Hotel (☎ 822 156; khachsantvl@vnn.vn; 2R Đ Hung Vuong; r 100,000-200,000d; ☎) Another branch of Phuong Hoang, it offers similar value and is located nearby.

Van Tram Guesthouse (☎ 823 820; 4Đ 1 Thang 5; s/d 150,000-220,000d; ☎) The five rooms at this clean, comfortable, family-run place are spacious, with hot water, TV and balconies.

Cuu Long Hotel (☎ 823 656; cuulonghotelvl@hcm.vnn.vn; 1 Đ 1 Thang 5; r old wing US\$8-22, new wing US\$20-40; ☎) This hotel has two branches right on the riverfront. The cavernous old wing has spacious, vaguely dingy rooms with balconies. New-wing rooms are cleaner and more modern but with less character. All rooms have satellite TV and rates include breakfast.

Truong An Tourist Resort (☎ 823 161; r US\$25) Midway on the 8km stretch of road between Vinh Long and the My Thuan bridge, this is a quiet place to stay if you don't mind being away from town. There are cottages here, but not much to do except sit by the river and enjoy the park-like surroundings.

Eating

Com 36 (☎ 836 290; 36 Đ Hoang Thai Hieu; mains 8000-15,000d; ☎ lunch & dinner) A traditional Vietnamese spot with metal tables and a high ceiling. No English menu, but dishes (like pork and stuffed tofu) are displayed behind a glass counter – just point and enjoy.

Tiem Com Chi Thanh (☎ 823 457; 64 Đ Le Thai To; mains 12,000d; ☎ lunch & dinner) Rice steamed in tiny clay bowls is served with excellent Chinese dishes ranging from tofu and shiitakes to frog to pork intestine.

Tai Co (☎ 824 845; 40A Đ 2 Thang 9; hotpot 30,000d; ☎ lunch & dinner) *Lau* (hotpot) is the speciality here, but Tai Co also serves good Chinese fare. It's divey but popular.

Dong Khanh (☎ 822 357; 49 Đ 2 Thang 9; mains 30,000-45,000d; ☎ lunch & dinner) This place serves a tasty variety of dishes, including octopus with mushrooms and fish hotpot (serves two). Red tablecloths and red-backed chairs give it a somewhat classy feel. English menu.

Thien Tan (☎ 824 001; 56/1 Đ Pham Thai Buong; mains 30,000-50,000d; ☎ lunch & dinner) Specialising in barbecued dishes, this is the best eatery in town. Recommended is the fish cooked in bamboo (*ca loc nuong tre*) and chicken cooked in clay (*ga nuong dat set*).

Good local point-and-eat **com binh dan restaurants** (rice plates 8000d) line Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai. Other good spots:

Hoa Nang Café (Đ 1 Thang 5; mains 10,000-40,000d;

☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Riverfront views to enjoy with your iced coffee.

Phuong Thuy (Đ Phan B Chau; mains 20,000-80,000d;

☎ lunch & dinner) OK food and fine river views.

Vinh Long Market (Đ 3 Thang 2; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Delicious local fruit and meal vendors.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Cargo boats sometimes take passengers from Vinh Long all the way to Chau Doc (near the Cambodian border); inquire locally if this appeals to you.

BUS

Frequent buses go between Vinh Long and HCMC (three hours, 50,000d), which leave HCMC from Cholon bus station (p372) in District 5, and from Mien Tay bus station (p372). You can also get to Vinh Long by bus from Can Tho (25,000d), My Tho, Tra Vinh, Chau Doc and other points on the Mekong Delta. Vinh Long's bus station is conveniently located smack bang in the middle of town.

CAR & MOTORBIKE

Vinh Long is just off Hwy 1, 66km from My Tho, 33km from Can Tho and 136km from HCMC.

TRA VINH

☎ 074 / pop 96,000

Boasting more than 140 Khmer temples scattered about the province, Tra Vinh is a quiet place for exploring the Mekong's little-touted Khmer connection. The town itself is fairly quiet and sees little tourist traffic, owing to its somewhat isolated location on a peninsula. Getting there is a straight up and back trip, because no car ferries cross the rivers here (motorbikes can be ferried by small boats).

About 300,000 ethnic Khmer live in Tra Vinh province. At first glance they might seem to be an invisible minority since they all speak fluent Vietnamese and there's nothing outwardly distinguishing about their clothing or lifestyle. However, digging a little deeper quickly reveals that Khmer culture is alive and well in this part of Vietnam. Many of its numerous pagodas have schools to teach the Khmer language – many Tra Vinh locals can read and write Khmer at least as well as Vietnamese.

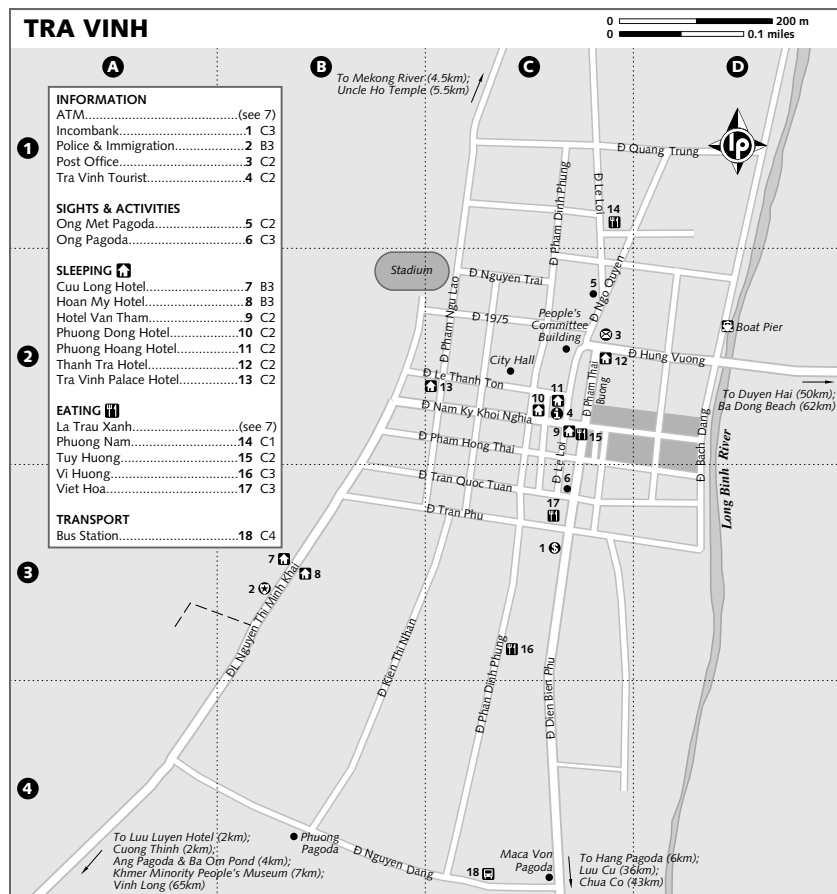
Vietnam's Khmer minority are almost all followers of Theravada Buddhism. If you've visited monasteries in Cambodia, you may have observed that Khmer monks are not involved in growing food and rely on donations from the strictly religious locals. Here in Tra Vinh, Vietnamese guides will proudly point out the monks' rice harvest as one of the accomplishments of liberation. To the Vietnamese government, nonworking monks were seen as parasites. The Khmers don't necessarily see it the same way and continue to donate funds to the monasteries surreptitiously.

Between the ages of 15 and 20, most boys set aside a few months or years to live as monks (they decide themselves on the length of service). Khmer monks are allowed to eat meat, although they cannot kill animals.

There is also a small but active Chinese community in Tra Vinh, one of the few remaining in the Mekong Delta region.

Information

Tra Vinh Tourist (☎ 858 556; tvtourism@hcm.vnn.vn; 64 Đ Le Loi; ☎ 7.30-11am & 1.30-5pm) is probably the friendliest outfit in the Mekong. The staff can provide regional travel info and book various trips to sites around the province, though the boat trips are the most interesting. A good map (Tra Vinh Yellow map, 12,000d) of the town and province is available here.



There's an ATM at Cuu Long Hotel. **Incombank** (☎ 863 827; fax 863 886; 15A Đ Dien Bien Phu) exchanges foreign currencies and handles Visa cash advances.

Sights

ONG PAGODA

The very ornate, brightly painted **Ong Pagoda** (Chua Ong & Chua Tau; cnr Đ Pham Thai Buong & Đ Tran Quoc Tuan) is a 100% Chinese pagoda and still a very active place of worship. The red-faced god on the altar is deified general Quan Cong. He is believed to offer protection against war and is based on a historical figure, a soldier of the 3rd century. You can read more about him in the Chinese classic *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

The Ong Pagoda was founded in 1556 by the Fujian Chinese Congregation, but has been rebuilt a number of times. Recent visitors from Taiwan and Hong Kong have contributed money for the pagoda's restoration, which is why it is in such fine shape.

ONG MET PAGODA

The chief reason for visiting the large Khmer **Ong Met Pagoda** (Chua Ong Met) is its accessibility – it's right in the centre of town. The friendly monks will happily show you around.

BA OM POND & ANG PAGODA

Known as Ao Ba Om (Square Lake), this idyllic, square-shaped pond is surrounded

by tall trees and makes for a pleasant respite from the city noise. It's a spiritual site for the Khmers and a picnic and drinking spot for local Vietnamese.

More interesting is the nearby Ang Pagoda (Chua An in Vietnamese; Angkor Rek Borei in Khmer), a beautiful and venerable Khmer-style pagoda. Opposite the pagoda entrance is the nicely presented **Khmer Minority People's Museum** (Bao Tang Van Hoa Dan Tac; admission free; ☎ 7-11am & 1-5pm Fri-Wed), which displays photos, costumes and other artefacts of traditional Khmer culture.

Ba Om Pond is 7km southwest from Tra Vinh along the highway towards Vinh Long.

HANG PAGODA

This modern Khmer pagoda is also known as the stork pagoda owing to the great white birds that nest in the tall trees here. Although the pagoda itself is modern and painted in soft pastels, the birds are a worthwhile sight if you come at the right time – around dusk during the rainy season. The monks here are particularly friendly and eager to practice their English skills. Chua Hang is located 6km south of town on Đ Dien Bien Phu.

UNCLE HO TEMPLE

The highly unusual (particularly in these southern parts) **Uncle Ho Temple** (Den Tho Bac;

THE PLIGHT OF THE KAMPUCHEA KHMER

Visitors to some Mekong provinces may be surprised to find Khmer towns whose inhabitants speak a different language, follow a different brand of Buddhism and have a vastly different history and culture than their Vietnamese neighbours. Though the Khmer are a minority in the Mekong, they were the first inhabitants here, with an ancestry going back at least 2000 years.

The Kampuchea Krom (meaning 'lower Cambodia') is the unofficial Khmer name for the Mekong Delta region, whose indigenous inhabitants are the Khmer Krom, an ethnic minority living in Southern Vietnam. The Khmer Krom trace their origins back to the 1st century AD, to the founding of Funan, a maritime empire that stretched from the Malay peninsula to the Mekong. Archaeologists believe Funan was a sophisticated society that built canals, traded in precious metals and had a high level of political organisation as well as agricultural know-how. Following the Funan came the Chenla empire (630–802), the mightiest ever in Southeast Asia, and then the Khmer Empire (which saw the creation of Angkor Wat among other great achievements). By the 17th century, however, the empire was in ruins. This was also the time of rising power for their northern rivals, when the Vietnamese empire, under rule from Hue, began expanding south – conquering first the Cham empire before setting their sights on Khmer lands in the Mekong Delta.

According to some historians, there were around 40,000 Khmer families living around Prei Nokor when the Vietnamese arrived in the 1600s. This was an important port of the Khmers that was rechristened in 1698 as Saigon. Waves of Vietnamese settlers populated the city as other colonists continued south. Prior to their arrival there were 700 Khmer temples scattered around South Vietnam. Over the next century the Khmer Krom fought and won a few victories in the region, expelling the intruders, only to lose their gains in new rounds of attacks.

When the French subjugated Indochina in the 19th century, the hope of an independent Kampuchea Krom would be forever destroyed. Although the ethnic Khmer were a majority in Southern Vietnam at that time, the French didn't incorporate the colony with Cambodia but made it a separate protectorate called Cochinchina. When the French were finally driven out in 1954, the delta was incorporated into the state of South Vietnam. Since then, the Vietnamese have adopted a policy of integration and forced assimilation (adopting Vietnamese family names and the Vietnamese language among other things). According to the Khmer Kampuchea-Krom Federation, many atrocities have been committed against the minority in the last four decades, and the Khmer Krom continue to suffer persecution. They report difficult access to Vietnamese health services, religious discrimination (Khmer Krom are Theravada Buddhists, unlike Vietnam's Mahayana Buddhists) and also racial discrimination. The Khmer are the poorest segment of the population. Even their numbers remain a contentious topic. Vietnam reports one million Khmer Krom, which are called 'Nguoi Viet Goc mien' (Vietnamese of Khmer origin) by Vietnamese officials, while KKF claims there are seven million Khmer living in Southern Vietnam. For more information about the ongoing struggles of the Khmer Krom, visit www.khmerkrom.org.

☞ 7-11am & 1-5pm) is dedicated, of course, to the late president Ho Chi Minh, and contains a shrine to Ho as well as a small museum displaying photos of his life. The temple was built in 1971, while the war was still in progress, and there's a downed US aircraft on the grounds. The Uncle Ho Temple is at Long Duc commune, 5km north of Tra Vinh town.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Phuong Hoang Hotel (☎ 858 270; 1 Đ Le Thanh Ton; r 50,000-176,000d; 🏠) Rooms behind the thin bamboo doors range from dingy to grim. There's no hot water.

Phuong Dong Hotel (☎ 865 486; 1A Đ Pham Dinh Phuong; r 65,000-125,000d; 🏠) Another grubby cheapie, with hot water and very basic rooms.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Van Tham (☎ 858 959; 151 Đ Le Loi; r 150,000-180,000d; 🏠) Above the market, Hotel Van Tham has clean, light-blue rooms and kind-hearted staff. The worst rooms are small and windowless; the best are spacious with balconies (US\$2 spells the difference).

Hoan My Hotel (☎ 862 211; fax 866 600; 105A Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai; r 160,000-340,000d; 🏠) This tall, slender hotel has a horse painting in the lobby and trim, pleasantly furnished rooms with dark wood furniture, good natural lighting and glass shower stalls.

Tra Vinh Palace Hotel (☎ 864 999; fax 863 005; 3 Đ Le Thanh Ton; r 180,000-280,000d; 🏠) Set with a plant-filled courtyard, the Palace features attractive details, making for a pleasant overnight. The best rooms are spacious with tall ceilings, balconies and solid furniture.

Luu Luyen Hotel (☎ 842 306; 16 Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai; r 180,000-280,000d, ste 390,000d; 🏠) This new hotel has a range of nicely outfitted rooms with a dash of style. A good restaurant is next door. It's located 2km south of downtown on the road to Vinh Long.

Thanh Tra Hotel (☎ 853 621; fax 853 769; 1 Đ Pham Thai Buong; r US\$13-27; 🏠) This big, central hotel has comfortable and clean rooms and draws occasional tour groups.

Cuu Long Hotel (☎ 862 615; cuulonghoteltravinh@hcm.vnn.vn; 999 Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai; r US\$17-27, ste US\$37; 🏠) The three-star Cuu Long has a range of comfortable, bright rooms; the best have balconies, pretty wood furniture and bathrooms with tubs. There's a lift.

Eating

Vi Huong (☎ 865 738; Đ Phan Dinh Phung; mains 10,000d) A cheap place doing simple Vietnamese dishes, including sour soup, fish in a clay pot and pork with rice.

Phuong Nam (☎ 853 511; Đ Chau Van Tiep; mains 12,000-18,000d) The spot for excellent barbecued and clay-pot dishes.

Cuong Thinh (☎ 848 428; 18A Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai; mains 15,000-60,000d) This pleasant, open-sided place is popular for its traditional mains and palm-lined ambience. It's 2km south of town on the road to Vinh Long.

Tuy Huong (☎ 858 312; Đ Pham Thai Buong; mains 20,000-30,000d) Serves good Vietnamese and Chinese fare amid simple but not unpleasant ambience.

La Trau Xanh (☎ 862 615; 999 Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai; mains 20,000-60,000d) One of the town's best restaurants, La Trau Xanh sits behind the Cuu Long Hotel and offers rich dishes like steamed seabass and shrimp in coconut sauce.

Viet Hoa (☎ 863 046; 80 Đ Tran Phu; mains 30,000d) Run by a friendly Chinese family, Viet Hoa is justly famous in town, serving some of Tra Vinh's best dishes (try the fish kebab or a hotpot to share).

Getting There & Away

Tra Vinh is 65km from Vinh Long and 205km from HCMC. Buses to HCMC depart regularly (60,000d, 4½ hours) from Tra Vinh's intercity bus station on Đ Nguyen Dang, on the south side of town.

AROUND TRA VINH

Chua Co

A Khmer monastery, Chua Co is interesting because the grounds form a bird sanctuary. Several types of stork and ibis arrive here in large numbers before sunset to spend the night. Of course, there are many nests here and you must take care not to disturb them.

Chua Co is 43km from Tra Vinh. Travel 36km to Tra Cu then follow the sandy road for 7km to the monastery.

Luu Cu

Some ancient ruins are found at Luu Cu, south of Tra Vinh near the shores of the Hau Giang River. The ruins include brick foundations similar to those found at Cham temples. There have been a series of archaeological digs here and the site is now protected. It's 10km from the town of Tra Cu (36km from Tra Vinh).

Ba Dong Beach

This yellow-sand beach is not bad compared with other 'beaches' in the Mekong Delta, but the main attraction at Ba Dong Beach is the peace and quiet – it sees very few visitors during the week – though weekends can get packed. The big event here – well worth attending if you happen to be in the area – is the **Khmer Ok Om Bok Festival**, featuring colourful boat races. It's held on a weekend in late October early November (ask for details at Tra Vinh Tourist, p413).

Tra Vinh Tourist operates the only accommodation on the beach. The **Ba Dong Beach Resort** (☎ 739 559; badongresort@hcm.vnn.vn; d/bungalow 160,000/22,000d; 🏠), opened in 2004, has pleasant bungalows (and simpler rooms) with ocean views and hot-water bathrooms. Rates include breakfast, and there's a seafood restaurant attached. Reserve via Tra Vinh Tourist.

To get here from Tra Vinh, head 50km along the paved road to Duyen Hai and follow the bumpy dirt road for 12km until you reach the beach. About three buses a day make the trip from Tra Vinh to Duyen Hai (15,000d), from which you can hire a moto-taxi (for 10,000d) to take you to the beach.

SA DEC

☎ 067 / pop 108,000

The former capital of Dong Thap province, Sa Dec is a peaceful town of tree-lined streets, fading colonial villas and orchards and flower markets outside of town. It has a small degree of fame as the setting for *The Lover*, a film based on the novel by Marguerite Duras. Two of the classic French villas used in the film can be seen across the river from the market area.

Groups doing a whirlwind tour of the Mekong Delta often make a lunch stop here and drop in on the nurseries.

Information

An **internet café** (☎ 862 010; Đ Hung Vuong) stands next door to the **post office** (cnr Đ Hung Vuong & Quoc Lo 80). There's a **Vietcombank ATM** (251A Đ Nguyen Sinh Sac) at the Bong Hong Hotel. Hwy 80 is known as Đ Nguyen Sinh Sac as it passes through town.

Sights

HUONG TU PAGODA

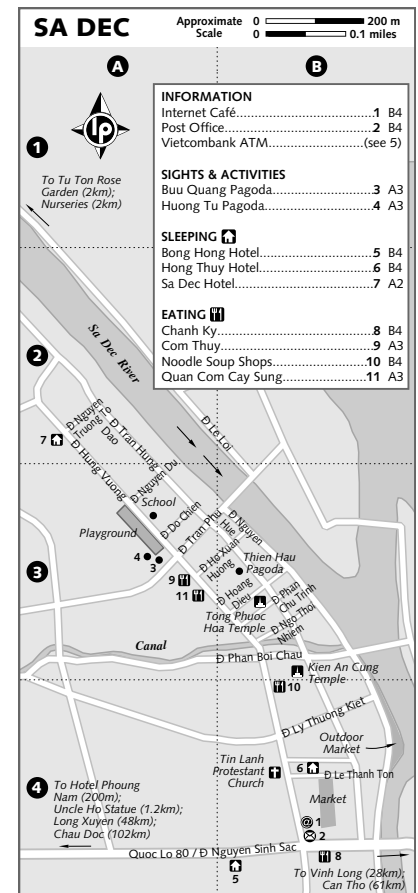
Of classic Chinese design is the Huong Tu Pagoda (Chua Co Huong Tu), where a bright white statue of Quan The Am Bo Tat standing on a pedestal adorns the grounds. Don't

confuse this place with the adjacent **Buu Quang Pagoda**, which is somewhat less glamorous.

NURSERIES

The **nurseries** (vuon hoa; ☞ 8-11am & 1-5pm) operate year-round, though they are practically stripped bare of their flowers just before Tet. Note that domestic tourists from HCMC arrive in droves on Sundays – and the nurseries are a major sightseeing attraction around the Tet festival holiday.

There are many small operators here, each with a different speciality. The most famous garden is called the **Tu Ton Rose Garden** (Vuon Hong Tu Ton; ☞ 8-11am & 1-5pm), which has over 500 different kinds of rose in 50 different shades and colours.



San Vuon (☎ 871 988; 57 Đ Le Duan; mains 35,000-55,000d) A bamboo-filled interior and lush landscaping makes for a peaceful setting at San Vuon. A big menu features the usual menagerie of dishes (frog, rat, snake, lobster as well as good grilled beef and chicken). **Tan Nghia** (☎ 871 989; 331 Đ Le Duan; mains 50,000-90,000d) With a good location beside the river, this open-sided spot serves tasty local favourites, including grilled meats and seafood.

Getting There & Around

The road between Cao Lanh and Long Xuyen is beautiful but has few buses. You'll probably need to hire your own vehicle to take that route, but try your luck at the bus station next to the market.

The sights around Cao Lanh are best visited by river. Although you could possibly arrange something privately with boat owners, you'll probably find it easier – though more expensive – to deal with Dong Thap Tourist (p418). Plan on spending US\$25 to US\$30 for a half-day boating tour.

AROUND CAO LANH White Stork Sanctuary

To the northeast of Cao Lanh is a bird sanctuary (Vuon Co Thap Muoi) for white storks. The sanctuary only covers 2 hectares, but the birds seem mostly undisturbed by the nearby farmers.

The storks are accustomed to people and are fairly easy to spot, as they feed in the mangrove and bamboo forests. They live in pairs and don't migrate with the seasons, so you can see them at any time of year.

There are no roads as such to the bird sanctuary, so getting there requires a trip by boat. Dong Thap Tourist (p418) can arrange this, though you may be able to arrange it elsewhere. A speedboat costs US\$25 per hour and the ride takes 50 minutes. A slow boat costs US\$4 per person (with 20 people) and takes three hours to make the return journey. In the dry season, you have to plan your boat trip according to the two daily tides – at low tide the canals can become impassable.

Many travellers include a trip to White Stork Sanctuary with a visit to Rung Tram (see below).

Rung Tram

Southeast of Cao Lanh and accessible by boat tour is the 52-hectare **Rung Tram** (Tram Forest;

admission 5000d; ☎ 7am-5pm) near My Hiep village. The area is one vast swamp with a beautiful thick canopy of tall trees and vines. It's one of the last natural forests left in the Mekong Delta and by now probably would have been turned into a rice paddy were it not for its historical significance. During the American War the VC had a base here called Xeo Quit, where top-brass VC lived in underground bunkers. But don't mistake this for another Cu Chi Tunnels – it's very different.

Only about 10 VC were here at any given time. They were all generals who directed the war from here, just 2km from a US military base. The Americans never realised that the VC generals were living right under their noses. Of course, they were suspicious about that patch of forest and periodically dropped some bombs on it to reassure themselves, but the VC remained safe in their underground bunkers.

During the rainy season a 20-minute boat tour (4000d) by canoe takes you past old bunkers and former minefields along narrow canals filled with ever-present dragonflies and water hyacinths. During the dry season you can explore this area on foot.

Access to Rung Tram is most popular by boat and many visitors combine a visit with a trip to White Stork Sanctuary. You can also try hiring a speedboat from Cao Lanh to Rung Tram, which takes around 30 minutes (depending on the tides). It is also possible to reach the forest by road if you are travelling by car or motorbike. From My Hiep, you can also hire a slow boat (seating up to 10 persons) that takes around 40 minutes to make the 2km journey to Rung Tram.

Tram Chim Nature Reserve

Due north of Cao Lanh in Tam Nong (Dong Thap province) is Tram Chim National Wetland Reserve (Tram Chim Tam Nong), which is notable for its **eastern sarus cranes** (*Grus antigone sharpii*). Over 220 species of bird have been identified within the reserve, but ornithologists will be most interested in the rare red-headed cranes, which grow to over 1.5m high. Seeing these birds, however, requires a considerable commitment (time, effort and money), so it's really for bird enthusiasts only.

The birds nest here from about December to June; from July to November they migrate to Cambodia, so schedule your visit to coordinate with the birds' travel itinerary if you

want to see them. Also, the birds are early risers – early morning is the best time to see them, though you might get a glimpse when they return home in the evening. During the day, the birds are engaged in the important business of eating.

Tam Nong is a sleepy town 45km from Cao Lanh. The one-way drive takes about 1½ hours by car; it's also possible to get there by boat. A speedboat takes only one hour, but costs US\$25 per hour to rent. A slow boat can be arranged from Dong Thap Tourist (p418). From the guesthouse in Tam Nong it takes another hour by small boat (per hour US\$15) to reach the area where the cranes live and another hour to return. Add to this whatever time you spend (perhaps an hour) staring at your feathered friends through binoculars (bring your own), and then the requisite one to four hours to return to Cao Lanh, depending on your mode of transport.

The state-run **guesthouse** (r with fan US\$10) in Tam Nong is just before the bridge, heading into town. It has extremely basic rooms; bring your own bug spray. Tam Nong shuts down early – if you want to eat dinner here, make arrangements before 5pm.

CAN THO

☎ 071 / pop 330,000

The largest city in the Mekong, Can Tho is a buzzing town with a lively waterfront and a colourful mix of narrow back streets and wide boulevards that make for some rewarding exploration – especially after a few days spent in the wilds. As the political, economic, cultural and transportation centre of the Mekong Delta, Can Tho hums with activity; while its access to nearby floating markets make it a major draw for tourists, who come here to boat along the myriad canals and rivers leading out of town.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Queen (9 Đ Chau Van Liem; per min 100d; ☎ 7am-11.30pm) This pleasant internet café serves sandwiches, ice cream and cocktails as well as speedy net access.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital (Khoa Khan Benh; ☎ 820 071; 4 Đ Chau Van Liem)

MONEY

Golf Hotel (2 Đ Hai Ba Trung) Has an ATM.

Sacombank (☎ 810 519; fax 810 523; 13A Đ Phan Dinh Phung) Credit card advances can be done here.

Vietcombank (Ngan Hang Ngoai Thuong Viet Nam; ☎ 820 445; fax 820 694; 7 Đ Hoa Binh) Has foreign-currency exchange and 24hr ATM.

POST

Post office (2 ĐL Hoa Binh)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Can Tho Tourist (☎ 821 852; fax 822 719; 20 Đ Hai Ba Trung; ☎ 7am-5pm & 6-8pm) Staff at this provincial tourism authority are pleasant and helpful; they can speak English and French. Decent city maps are available for 10,000d.

Vietnam Airlines (☎ 824 088) Has a booking desk at the Can Tho Tourist office.

Sights

CAN THO MUSEUM

The enormous, well-presented **Can Tho Museum** (☎ 813 890; 1 ĐL Hoa Binh; admission free; ☎ 8-11am & 2-5pm Tue-Thu; 8-11am & 6.30-9pm Sat, Sun & holidays) has exhibits of the history of Can Tho resistance during foreign rule as well as displays on the culture and history of the province. There's a life-size pagoda and ample English signage.

MUNIRANGSYARAM PAGODA

The ornamentation of **Munirangsyaram Pagoda** (36 ĐL Hoa Binh) is typical of Khmer Hinayana Buddhist pagodas: it doesn't have any of the multiple Bodhisattvas and Taoist spirits common in Vietnamese Mahayana pagodas. In the upstairs sanctuary a 1.5m-high representation of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, sits serenely under a Bodhi Tree.

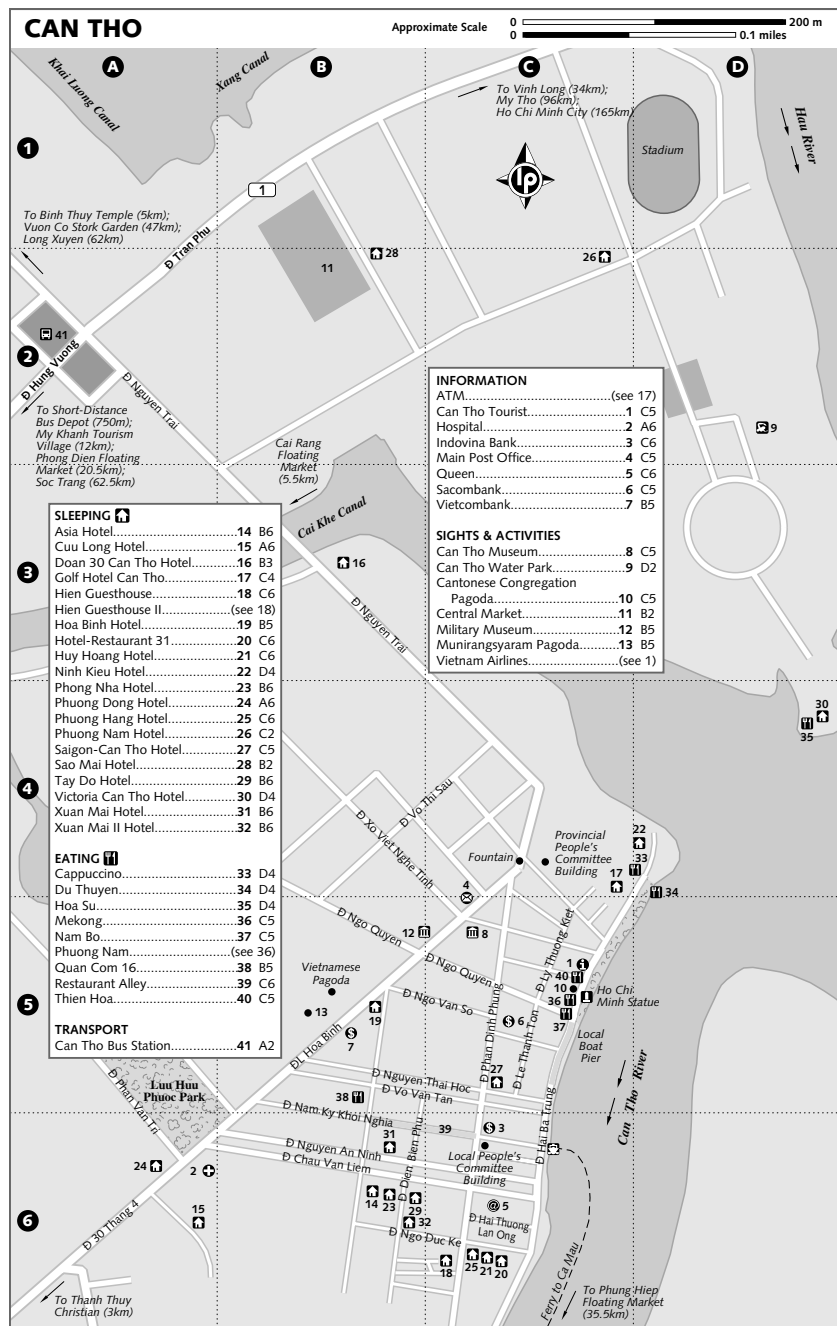
Built in 1946, the Munirangsyaram Pagoda serves the Khmer community of Can Tho, which numbers about 2000.

CANTONESE CONGREGATION PAGODA

Occupying a splendid location facing the Can Tho River, this small **Chinese pagoda** (Quan Cong Hoi Quan; Đ Hai Ba Trung) was built by the Cantonese Congregation. The original one was constructed on a different site about 70 years ago. The current pagoda was built with funds donated by overseas Chinese more recently. Can Tho used to have a large ethnic-Chinese population, but most of them fled after the anti-Chinese persecutions (1978-79).

CENTRAL MARKET

Many local farmers and wholesalers arrive at this **market** (Đ Hai Ba Trung) by boat to buy and



sell. The fruit section, near the intersection of Đ Hai Ba Trung and Đ Ngo Quyen, is particularly colourful and stays open until late evening.

MILITARY MUSEUM

Devoted to all things militaristic, this **museum** (6 ĐL Hoa Binh; admission free; ☎ 8-11am & 2-4.30pm Tue, Thu & Fri, 8-11am & 7-9pm Sat) has the usual assortment of American War weaponry and Ho Chi Minh portraits. Missiles and a fighter aircraft sit on the front lawn.

Can Tho for Children

CAN THO WATER PARK

For a bit of glorious chlorinated fun, try the **Can Tho Water Park** (☎ 763 343; Cai Khe Ward; water park/pool only 40,000/25,000d; ☎ 9am-6pm). Among the attractions are water slides and a wave pool. Children under 1m tall are admitted free.

Tours

The highlight of visiting Can Tho is taking a boat ride through the canals to a floating market. The cost is around 50,000d per hour for a small boat, which can carry two or three passengers. For boat operators (mostly women), just wander by the riverside near the market. You can also book through Can Tho Tourist, but this leaves little room for negotiation.

Larger motorboats can go further afield and it's worth hiring one to make a tour of the Mekong River itself. Check the going rates at Can Tho Tourist then see what's on offer at the pier by the Ninh Kieu Hotel (see right). Prices range from 150,000d for a three-hour tour to 250,000d for a five-hour tour. Negotiation is the name of the game.

For more on the area's floating markets, see p426.

Sleeping

Can Tho boasts the best range of accommodation in the Mekong Delta.

BUDGET

Phong Nha Hotel (☎ 821 615; 75 Đ Chau Van Liem; r with fan/air-con from 60,000/120,000d; ☎) It's cheap and basic here, with slatted wood doors and a low-key, family atmosphere. Bathrooms could be cleaner, and it's on a noisy street with many motorbikes.

Hien Guesthouse (☎ 812 718; hien_gh@yahoo.com; 118/10 Đ Phan Dinh Phung; r with fan/air-con US\$5/8; ☎) A favourite of budget travellers, this friendly,

family-run guesthouse is tucked down a narrow alley near the city centre. Small, clean rooms come with floor-level mattresses in the older half of the building.

Hien Guesthouse II (106/3 Đ Phan Dinh Phung; r with fan/air-con US\$5/9; ☎) A newer annex, this place has slightly better rooms and there's a shared terrace. Dependable motorbikes are available for around US\$5 a day.

Hotel-Restaurant 31 (☎ 825 287; 31 Đ Ngo Duc Ke; s/d with fan US\$5/8, r with air-con US\$10; ☎) Popular with backpackers, this clean hotel has a mix of rooms; the worst are small and cramped; the best (like No 301) are spacious and airy. The restaurant serves good meals (mains 30,000d to 40,000d).

Huy Hoang Hotel (☎ 825 833; 35 Đ Ngo Duc Ke; r with fan/air-con from 80,000/120,000d; ☎) This cheapie, bare-bones option has rooms with little or no ventilation, though there are hot-water bathrooms, and the place is clean. Huy Hoang is centrally located and there's a common balcony.

Xuan Mai II Hotel (☎ 832 578; 17 Đ Dien Bien Phu; r US\$6-12; ☎) A good-value option, this new hotel has spotless rooms with big windows and kind service. The best rooms have bathtubs.

Phuong Hang Hotel (☎ 814 978; 41 Đ Ngo Duc Ke; r 120,000d; ☎) This small minihotel has clean quarters with intricately tiled floors. Front rooms have big windows.

Sao Mai Hotel (☎ 764 082; fax 764 083; 65 Đ A1, Cai Khe ward; r 150,000-250,000d; ☎) Near the central market, this is one of many new hotels in the neighbourhood. Sao Mai has clean, spacious rooms that are a good value.

Xuan Mai Hotel (☎ 811 931; 94 Đ Nguyen An Ninh; r US\$12-15; ☎) This friendly new hotel has excellent rooms with polished wood furniture and high ceilings. There's a lift.

Phuong Nam Hotel (☎ /fax 763 949; 118/9/39 Tran Van Khe; r US\$13-22; ☎) Southeast of the main market, this new seven-storey hotel has clean rooms with big bathrooms and wireless access. It's a bit out of the way but it's better value than most waterfront options.

MIDRANGE

Doan 30 Can Tho Hotel (☎ 823 623; fax 811 140; 80A Đ Nguyen Trai; r US\$10-25; ☎) At the northern end of town on the riverbank, this army-owned place has a dingy lobby, but decent rooms. Some have balconies and river views, as well as huge bathrooms. Rates include a simple breakfast. There's a lift and an outdoor café.

My Khanh Tourism Village (☎ 846 260; www.mykhanh.com; 335 Đ Lo Vong Cung, Phong Dien District; r US\$15-35; 🍽️ 🛏️) Located 12km southwest of Can Tho, this small, lushly landscaped complex has freestanding wood bungalows with attractive furnishings. There's a pool, a decent restaurant, and you can book boating and other excursions.

Cuu Long Hotel (☎ 822 669; cuulongcthotel@hcm.vnn.vn; 52 Đ Quang Trung; r US\$16-30; 🍽️ 🛏️) Rooms at this large hotel are generally light, airy and a bit quieter than those in the centre. Unfortunately, economy rooms are dingy and can't be recommended. Breakfast included. There's a lift.

Phuong Dong Hotel (☎ 812 199; phuongdonghotel@hcm.vnn.vn; 62 Đ 30 Thang 4; r US\$19-30; 🍽️ 🛏️) A newish place with fair, carpeted rooms (some lack windows) that have modern bathrooms. There's a lift and a business centre.

Hoa Binh Hotel (☎ 820 536; hoabinhct@hcm.vnn.vn; 5 ĐL Hoa Binh; r US\$20-30, st US\$45; 🍽️ 🛏️) Rooms have carpeting, IDD phones, wi-fi access and satellite TV. With its elegant wood furniture, it's one of the better deals for this price range, though cheaper rooms lack windows. Breakfast included.

Asia Hotel (Khach San A Chau; ☎ 812 800; asiahotel@hcm.vnn.vn; 91 Đ Chau Van Liem; r US\$20-32; 🍽️ 🛏️) A nicely maintained place with spotless rooms. Deluxe rooms have large balconies; rates include breakfast.

Tay Do Hotel (☎ 827 009; www.taydohotel.vnn.vn; 61 Đ Chau Van Liem; r US\$25-30; 🍽️ 🛏️) Set with a sparkling lobby and abundant amenities (including a sauna and massage services), the Tay Do offers comfortable, carpeted rooms, (deluxe rooms have balconies). Breakfast is included.

Ninh Kieu Hotel (☎ 821 171; fax 821 104; 2 Đ Hai Ba Trung; r new wing US\$40-80, old wing US\$25-30; 🍽️ 🛏️) This hotel belongs to the army and occupies a terrific location on the riverfront. Rooms in the new wing are carpeted and have balconies. Old-wing rooms are clean but dated, featuring green colour schemes.

Saigon-Can Tho Hotel (☎ 825 831; www.saigoncantho.com; 55 Đ Phan Dinh Phung; s US\$38-50, d US\$49-62; 🍽️ 🛏️) You'll find abundant amenities and a fair selection of carpeted rooms at this three-star place – though only the upper-tier rooms have a window to the outside! All rooms have bathtubs and DSL access, and there's a restaurant, massage service, sauna and karaoke. Rates include breakfast.

TOP END

Golf Hotel Can Tho (☎ 812 210; www.golffhotel.vnn.vn; 2 Đ Hai Ba Trung; r US\$60-149, st US\$185-200; 🍽️ 🛏️ 🚗) The enormous riverside Golf Hotel is near the Ninh Kieu pier. Tastefully decorated rooms boast incredible views from the upper-floor balconies. Hotel facilities include a health club and a beauty salon; breakfast included.

Victoria Can Tho Hotel (☎ 810 111; Cai Khe Ward; www.victoriahotels-asia.com; r US\$161-282; 🍽️ 🛏️ 🚗) This lovely place sits right on the riverfront and is Can Tho's *crème de la crème*. Lavish rooms have garden or river views and guests have access to the fine restaurant, open-air bar, tennis courts and swimming pool. Nonguests can use the facilities as long as they order something at the restaurant.

Eating & Drinking

Along the Can Tho River waterfront there are several café-restaurants, most serving Mekong specialities such as fish, frog and turtle, as well as standard backpacker fare.

Other popular eateries line the riverfront strip, across from the giant metallic Uncle Ho statue.

Quan Com 16 (☎ 827 326; 77 Đ Vo Van Tan; mains 15,000; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A very popular traditional eatery serving tasty, inexpensive bites.

Restaurant Alley (Đ Nam Ky Khoi Nghia; mains around 15,000d) This is a good spot to escape the tourist scene on the riverfront. Situated in an alley between Đ Dien Bien Phu and Đ Phan Dinh Phung, there are about a dozen local restaurants scattered on both sides of the street.

Mekong (☎ 821 646; 38 Đ Hai Ba Trung; mains 15,000-25,000d; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Mekong is always packed, for good reason: good Vietnamese food at reasonable prices.

Thien Hoa (☎ 821 942; 26 Đ Hai Ba Trung; mains 15,000-25,000d; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The speciality of the house are delicious Huế-style spring rolls (*dac biet cha gio re*).

Phuong Nam (☎ 812 077; 48 Đ Hai Ba Trung; mains 25,000d; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) As with Mekong, Phuong Nam is a delicious deal.

Nam Bo (☎ 823 908; nambo@hcm.vnn.vn; 50 Đ Hai Ba Trung; mains 25,000-50,000d; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) Housed in a thoughtfully restored, classic French villa, Nam Bo offers excellent European and Vietnamese cuisine in a delightful atmosphere. The view of the local fruit market from the 2nd-storey terrace can't be beaten.

Cappuccino (☎ 825 296; 2 Đ Hai Ba Trung; mains 35,000-70,000d; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) For a break from

THE FRUITS OF VIETNAM

One of the great rewards of travelling through the Mekong is sampling the extraordinary array of fruits available at markets, orchards and street stalls all over the region. A handful of fruits worth seeking include the following:

Buoi (pomelo) – this gargantuan grapefruit has thick skin and sweeter, less acidic fruit than ordinary grapefruit.

Chom Chom (rambutan) – tiny fiery red fruit with hairy skin, and tender sweet white flesh. Most prevalent during the rainy season (May to October).

Đu Đu (papaya) – Vietnam boasts 45 species of papaya; it's great in juices or raw when ripe (orange to red flesh), and used in tangy salads when green.

Dua (pineapple) – another common Mekong fruit, some aren't so sweet. Locals sometimes doctor them up with salt and red chilli powder.

Khe (starfruit) – a five-pointed, shiny skinned fruit that is intensely juicy.

Mang Cau (custard apple) – inside this fruit's bumpy green skin lie black pips surrounded by white flesh – which indeed taste very much like custard.

Mang Cut (mangosteen) – violet, tennis-ball-sized fruit. Cut open to reveal white sour-sweet flesh. Kind of like durian for beginners.

Mit (jackfruit) – giant, blimp-shaped fruit containing chewy yellow segments. It's loaded with vitamins.

Nhan (longan) – this tiny fruit has light brown skin, a translucent juicy white pulp and is used for many purposes in the Mekong (it's even dried and used for kindling).

Oi (guava) – green, edible skin with pink flesh, the guava is loaded with vitamins and is great raw or in juice.

Sau Rieng (durian) – with a memorable odour, this huge spiky fruit has creamy rich interior of a taste somewhat resembling custard; you'll either love it or hate it.

Thanh Long (dragon fruit) – unusual in appearance, dragon fruit is a large red fruit with spiky fronds tipped with green. It has a mild, crisp flesh with numerous edible seeds.

Trai Vai (lychee) – very common, this small, round red spiky fruit has a white fleshy inside, which is particularly sweet.

Xoai (mango) – mangos come in several varieties; the sweetest are large round ones with bright yellow skin. Connoisseurs say the best come from Cao Lanh (p418).

Vu Sua (star apple) – a round, smooth fruit that produces a sweet, milky juice (its name means milk from the breast).

pho, head to this popular Italian restaurant near the riverfront. You'll find a decent selection of pizzas and pastas and delivery is available.

Thanh Thuy Christian (☎ 840 207; 149 Đ 30 Thang 4; mains 40,000-50,000d; 🍽️ 8am-11pm) This goat-meat speciality restaurant serves tasty curried goat; or if you're feeling adventurous, try the goat-scrotum hotpot. The restaurant is a few kilometres out of town, just beyond the local university. Look for the sign on your left, just beyond the junction with Đ Tran Hoang Na.

Du Thuyen (☎ 810 841; Đ Hai Ba Trung; mains 40,000-75,000d) For a unique dining experience, climb aboard this three-level wooden ship, where you can enjoy the usual standards while floating along the river. Du Thuyen typically sails from 8pm to 9.30pm.

Hoá Su (☎ 820 717; Cai Khe Ward; mains 40,000-85,000d; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Overlooking the water, this popular eatery serves seafood and other favourites, to great river views. It's near Victoria Hotel.

So Hom (☎ 815 616; 50 Đ Hai Ba Trung; mains 45,000-70,000d; 🍽️ 8am-midnight) Inside the former market, this sleek and attractive spot serves a variety of Vietnamese and fusion dishes (shrimp with mango, papaya salad, vegetable tandoori) and the riverside setting is Can Tho's most idyllic spot for a meal or a drink.

Getting There & Away

BUS

There are buses leaving HCMC from Mien Tay bus station (p372; about 65,000d, five hours). Express minibuses make the same trip in about the same time.

The main bus station in Can Tho is about a kilometre north of town at the intersection of Đ Nguyen Trai and Đ Tran Phu. There is another short-haul bus depot about 300m south of the intersection of Đ 30 Thang 4 and Đ Mau Than, which is good for getting to Soc Trang and the Phung Hiep floating market.

CAR & MOTORBIKE

Whether you travel by car or motorbike, the ride from HCMC to Can Tho along Hwy 1 takes about four hours. There is one ferry crossing at Binh Minh (in Can Tho). The Can Tho ferry runs from 4am to 2am.

To get from ĐL Hoa Binh in Can Tho to the ferry crossing, go along Đ Nguyen Trai to the main bus station and turn right onto Đ Tran Phu.

Getting Around

XE LOI

Unique to the Mekong Delta, these makeshift vehicles are the main form of transport around Can Tho. A *xe loi* is essentially a two-wheeled wagon attached to the rear of a motorbike, creating what resembles a motorised *cyclo*, but with four wheels touching the ground rather than two. Fares around town should be about 5000d per person (they can carry two, or sometimes more), a bit higher for trips to outlying areas.

AROUND CAN THO

Perhaps the biggest drawcard of the delta is its colourful **floating markets**, which are on the banks of wide stretches of river. Most market folk begin early to avoid the daytime heat, so try to visit between 6am and 8am. The tides, however, are also a factor as bigger boats must often wait until the water is high enough for them to navigate.

Some of the smaller, rural floating markets are disappearing, largely because of improved roads and access to private and public transport. Many of the larger markets near urban areas, however, are still going strong.

Rural areas of Can Tho province, renowned for their durian, mangosteen and orange orchards, can easily be reached from Can Tho by boat or bicycle.

Cai Rang Floating Market

Just 6km from Can Tho in the direction of Soc Trang is Cai Rang, the biggest floating market in the Mekong Delta. There is a bridge

here that serves as a great vantage point for photography. The market is best before 9am, although some vendors hang out until noon, it's less lively by then.

Cai Rang can be seen from the road, but getting there is far more interesting by boat. From the market area in Can Tho it takes about an hour by river, or you can drive to the Cau Dau Sau boat landing (by the Dau Sau Bridge), from where it takes only about 10 minutes to reach the market.

Phong Dien Floating Market

Perhaps the best floating market in the Mekong Delta, Phong Dien has fewer motorised craft and more stand-up rowing boats. It's less crowded than Cai Rang and there are far fewer tourists. The market is at its bustling best between 6am and 8am. It is 20km southwest of Can Tho and most get there by road.

It is theoretically possible to do a whirlwind boat trip here, visiting the small canals on the way and finishing back at the Cai Rang floating market. This journey should take approximately five hours return from Can Tho.

Phung Hiep Floating Market

Until recently, the small town of Phung Hiep was notable for its eerie snake market. In 1998, however, a national law banned the capture and sale of snakes in an effort to control the rapidly multiplying rat population (due to a relative absence of snakes), which had been devastating rice crops. Snake sellers throughout the country are now forced to operate underground.

These days the cages that used to swell with cobras and pythons are empty, and Phung Hiep is now just a regular market. There is a small-scale floating market under the bridge and boats can be hired here for a tour along the river.

Phung Hiep is right on Hwy 1, 35km from Can Tho in the direction of Soc Trang.

Stork Garden

On the road between Can Tho and Long Xuyen, **Vuon Co** (admission 2000d; ☎ 5am-6pm) is a 1.3-hectare stork sanctuary. It is a popular stop for group tours coming to view the thousands of resident storks. There is a tall wooden viewing platform. The best times of day to see the birds are around dawn and dusk.

Vuon Co is in the Thot Not district, about 15km southeast of Long Xuyen. Look for

a sign in the hamlet of Thoi An: 'Ap Von Hoa'; coming from Can Tho the sign is on the west side of the road, immediately after a small bridge. It is a few kilometres off the main highway – reachable on foot within 30 minutes, or hire a motorbike taxi for about 5000d.

SOC TRANG

☎ 079 / pop 115,000

Soc Trang is the scruffy, workaday capital of Soc Trang province. Khmer people make up about 28% of the population. Although the town itself isn't much, it's a good base for exploring some impressive Khmer temples in the area. Furthermore, there is a colourful annual festival (usually in December) and, if you're in the vicinity at the right time, it's worth your while to catch it.

Soc Trang Tourist (☎ 821 498; www.soctrangtourism.com; 131 Đ Nguyen Chi Thanh; ☎ 8-11am & 1.30-5pm) is adjacent to the Phong Lan 2 Hotel. The staff are friendly enough, but speak little English and are not all that accustomed to walk-in tourists.

ATMs are available outside the Khanh Hung Hotel and Que Huong Hotel. The **post office** (☎ 820 051) is at 1 ĐL Tran Hung Dao.

Sights

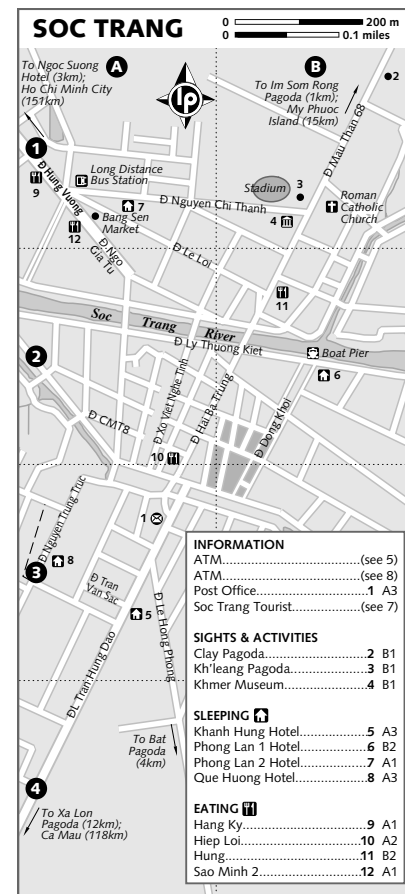
KH'LEANG PAGODA

Except for the bright orange paint job, this **pagoda** (Chua Kh'leang) looks like it's been transported straight from Cambodia. Originally built from bamboo in 1533, it had a complete rebuild in 1905 (this time using concrete). There are seven religious festivals held here every year that are worth seeing – people come from outlying areas of the province for these events. Even outside of festival times, Khmer people drop in regularly to bring donations and pray.

Several monks reside in the pagoda, which also serves as a base for over 150 student monks who come from around the Mekong Delta to study at Soc Trang's College of Buddhist Education across the street. The monks are friendly and happy to show you around the pagoda and discuss Buddhism.

KHMER MUSEUM

This **museum** (Bao Tang Tinh Soc Trang; ☎ 822 983; 23 Đ Nguyen Chi Thanh; admission free; ☎ 7.30-11am & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Fri) is dedicated to the history and culture of Vietnam's Khmer minority. Indeed,



it serves as a sort of cultural centre, and traditional dance and music shows are periodically staged here for larger groups – advance notice is essential.

The Khmer Museum is opposite Kh'leang Pagoda and often appears closed; you may have to rouse someone to let you in.

CLAY PAGODA

Buu Son Tu (Precious Mountain Temple) was founded over 200 years ago by a Chinese family named Ngo. Today the temple is better known as **Chua Dat Set** (163 Đ Mau Than 68), or Clay Pagoda.

Unassuming from the outside, this pagoda is highly unusual in that nearly everything inside is made entirely of clay. These

objects were hand-sculpted by the monk Ngo Kim Tong. From age 20 until his death at 62, Tong, an ingenious artisan, dedicated his life to decorating the pagoda. He made the hundreds of statues and sculptures that adorn the interior today.

Entering the pagoda, visitors are greeted by one of Ngo's greatest creations – a six-tusked clay elephant (which is said to have appeared in a dream of Buddha's mother). Behind this is the centre altar, which alone was built from over five tonnes of clay. In the altar are a thousand Buddhas seated on lotus petals. Other highlights include a 13-storey Chinese-style tower over 4m tall. The tower features 208 cubby-holes, each with a mini-Buddha figure inside, and is decorated with 156 dragons.

The pagoda also features two giant candles (200kg and 260cm tall) that burn in honour of the great artist.

Though some of the décor borders on kitsch, the pagoda is an active place of worship, and totally different from the Khmer and Vietnamese Buddhist pagodas elsewhere in Soc Trang. The resident monk, Ngo Kim Giang, is the younger brother of the artist and a delightful old man to chat with about the pagoda. He speaks excellent French although very little English.

The Clay Pagoda is within walking distance of the town centre. Needless to say, the clay objects in the pagoda are fragile – do not touch.

IM SOM RONG PAGODA

This large, beautiful Khmer pagoda was built in 1961 and is notable for its well-kept gardens. A plaque on the grounds honours the man who donated the funds to build the pagoda. There are many monks in residence here, most of whom are very friendly and happy to chat.

Im Som Rong Pagoda is over 1km east of Soc Trang on the road to My Phuoc Island. When you reach the main gate it's a 300m walk along a dirt track to the pagoda itself.

Festivals & Events

OC BOM BOC FESTIVAL

Once a year, the Khmer community turns out for the Oc Bom Boc Festival, with long-boat races on the Soc Trang River. This event attracts visitors from all over Vietnam and even Cambodia. First prize is over US\$1000, so it's not difficult to see why competition is so fierce.

The races are held according to the lunar calendar on the 15th day of the 10th moon, which roughly means December. The races start at noon, but things get jumping in Soc Trang the evening before. Hotel space is at a premium during the festival and travellers without a prepaid hotel reservation will probably have to sleep in a car or minibus.

Sleeping

Phong Lan 2 Hotel (☎ 821 757; fax 821 757; 133 Đ Nguyen Chi Thanh; r 90,000-130,000; 🍷) Though a bit worn, this is still an OK place to stay, with friendly staff and tidy, airy rooms. Rates include breakfast, and there's massage and sauna service.

Khanh Hung Hotel (☎ 821 027; fax 820 099; 15 ĐL Tran Hung Dao; r 110,000-341,000d; 🍷) The Khanh Hung boasts a large indoor-outdoor café and trim rooms that range from bare and fan-cooled to air-conditioned and adequately furnished. All rooms have small balconies. There's a lift.

Phong Lan 1 Hotel (☎ 821 619; fax 823 817; 124 Đ Dong Khoi; r with/without hot water 150,000/125,000d; 🍷) This riverside hotel is fair value for its clean rooms. As elsewhere, some rooms lack windows, and street-facing rooms may be noisy.

Ngoc Suong Hotel (☎ 613 108; ksnqocsuong@hcm.vnn.vn; Km 2127 QL1; r US\$20-40, ste US\$80; 🍷) Located 3km outside of town, on the road to Can Tho, this attractive new complex offers light and airy rooms with comfortable furnishings and big windows. There's also a pool and tennis court.

Que Huong Hotel (☎ 616 122; khachsangquehuong@yahoo.com; 128 Đ Nguyen Trung Truc; r 190,000-390,000d; 🍷) Run by the People's Committee, this sleek new hotel has comfortable rooms with flat-screen TVs, minifridges, DSL access and sizable windows. There's a good restaurant here, with one of the only English menus in town.

Eating

Most restaurants in Soc Trang do not have English menus, nor are meal prices written anywhere, though no one's likely to gouge you.

Hung (☎ 822 268; 74-76 Đ Mau Than 68; mains 20,000d; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) One of the best places in town, Hung serves delicious grilled meat and fish and always seems to be busy.

Hang Ky (☎ 612 034; 67 Đ Hung Vuong; mains 20,000-50,000d; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Recommended for its good traditional dishes, Hang Ky is a large, airy space that's quite popular (wedding parties included).

Sao Minh 2 (☎ 610 836; 115 Đ Ngo Gia Tu; mains 20,000-50,000d; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) On the main road into town, Sao Minh 2 is another popular spot, serving tasty *xiu mai* (marinated pork) among other good selections.

Getting There & Away

Long-distance buses stop at the station on Đ Nguyen Chi Thanh, just down the street from Soc Trang Tourist. Buses run between Soc Trang and most Mekong cities, including Can Tho (20,000d) and Ca Mau (40,000d). Regular vans travel to Ho Chi Minh City (80,000d, around six hours).

AROUND SOC TRANG

Bat Pagoda

This is one of the Mekong Delta's most unusual sights and has become a favourite stop-off for both foreign and domestic tourists. The Bat Pagoda (Chua Doi) is a large monastery compound. Upon entering through an archway, you'll almost immediately hear the screeching of the large colony of resident fruit bats. There are thousands of these creatures hanging from the fruit trees. The largest bats weigh about 1kg and have a wingspan of about 1.5m.

Fruit bats make plenty of noise – in the morning the din is incredible (likewise the smell). The bats are not toilet trained, so watch out when standing under a tree, or bring an umbrella. In the evening the bats spread their wings and fly out to invade orchards all over the Mekong Delta, much to the consternation of farmers, who are known to trap the bats and eat them. Inside the monastery the creatures are protected and the bats seem to know this – no doubt this is why they stay.

The best times for visiting are early morning and at least an hour before sunset, when the bats are most active. Around dusk hundreds of bats swoop out of the trees to go foraging.

The monks are very friendly and don't ask for money, though it doesn't hurt to leave a donation. The pagoda is decorated with gilt Buddhas and murals paid for by overseas Vietnamese contributors. In one room there's a life-size statue of the monk who was the former head of the complex. There's also a beautifully painted Khmer longboat here of the type used at the Oc Bom Boc Festival.

Behind the pagoda is an odd tomb painted with the image of a pig. It was erected in memory of a pig with five toenails (usually pigs have only four toenails). It died in 1996,

but two other rare pigs with five toenails have survived and are being raised by the monks. These pigs are not for eating – they are pets.

There's a small restaurant just opposite the Bat Pagoda.

The Bat Pagoda is about 4km west of Soc Trang. You can catch a motorbike taxi or easily walk there in under an hour. About 3km out of town towards the pagoda the road splits into two – take the right fork and continue for 1km.

Xa Lon (Sa Lon) Pagoda

This magnificent, classic Khmer pagoda is 12km from Soc Trang, towards Ca Mau, on Hwy 1. The original wooden structure was built over 200 years ago. In 1923 it was completely rebuilt, but proved to be too small. From 1969 to 1985, the present-day large pagoda was slowly built as funds trickled in from donations. The ceramic tiles on the exterior of the pagoda are particularly stunning.

As at other pagodas, the monks lead an austere life. They eat breakfast at 6am and beg for contributions until 11am, when they hold a one-hour worship. They eat again at noon and study in the afternoon – they do not eat dinner.

At present around 25 monks reside here. The pagoda also operates a school for the study of Buddhism and Sanskrit – the language of all original books about Buddhism.

My Phuoc Island

A 15km journey east of Soc Trang brings you to the Hau Giang River. From there it's a short boat ride to My Phuoc Island. It's an isolated spot very suitable for growing fruit. The local government tourist agency likes to bring foreigners here for tours of the orchards. You can do it yourself, though this is a little complicated since you'll need a motorbike to get to the river.

BAC LIEU

☎ 0781 / pop 136,000

The capital of southern Bac Lieu province, Bac Lieu is 280km from HCMC. Of the 800,000 people living in the province, about 8% are of Chinese or Cambodian origin.

The town has a few elegant but forlorn French colonial buildings, like the impressive **Fop House** (now used as a community sports centre), but not much else.

Farming is a difficult occupation in this region because of saltwater intrusion, and the province is better known for its healthy longan orchards. In addition to this, the enterprising locals eke out a living from fishing, oyster collection and shrimp farming, as well as salt production (obtained from evaporating saltwater ponds that form immense salt flats).

Most foreigners use Bac Lieu as a springboard to reach the outstanding bird sanctuary out of town.

Information

The helpful **Bac Lieu tourist office** (☎ 824 272; fax 824 273; 2 Đ Hoang Van Thu; ☹ 7-11am & 1-5pm) is next to the Bac Lieu Hotel. Surprisingly, there's often someone on hand who speaks English. Pick up a town map (a rough photocopy) and inquire about trips to the Bird Sanctuary (right) here.

The **post office** (☎ 824 242; 20 Đ Tran Phu) is off the main roundabout downtown; up the same street is **Sacombank** (☎ 932 200; fax 932 201; B2 Đ Tran Phu), which can exchange currency.

Sleeping

In addition to those listed below, there are numerous inexpensive guesthouses that dot the road into town (from Soc Trang), where rooms cost around US\$10.

Bac Lieu Guest House (☎ 823 815; 8 Đ Ly Tu Trong; r 130,000; ☹) One of the town's cheapies, this has small, worn rooms that lack natural light. There's a restaurant below.

Bac Lieu Hotel (☎ 822 437; fax 823 655; 4 Đ Hoang Van Thu; r US\$16-25; ☹) Near the river, this is a worn but serviceable option with polished tile floors and trim furnishings. Better rooms have balconies and tubs. Next door, a newer Bac Lieu Hotel was under construction in 2006.

Cong Tu Hotel (☎ 953 304; fax 953 111; 13 Đ Dien Bien Phu; r US\$16-30; ☹) Just west (50m) of the Bac Lieu Hotel, Cong Tu is a scruffy old colonial gem that's well worn but still popular with Vietnamese. The best rooms have a balcony and are spacious with tall ceilings (but sad carpeting).

Hoang Cung Hotel (☎ 823 362; 1B/5 Đ Tran Phu; r 80,000-200,000d; ☹) About 1km from the roundabout in the direction of Soc Trang (across from the Khmer pagoda gate), this hotel offers clean and comfortable rooms, the best with balconies overlooking a large palm in back.

Eating

Khai Ky (☎ 820 312; 80 Đ Hai Ba Trung; mains 10,000d; ☹ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Across the road from the Bac Lieu Hotel, this tiny restaurant serves excellent bowls of noodle soup.

Bac Lieu 2 (☎ 824 951; 89/3 Đ Tran Phu Lo 1; mains 30,000d; ☹ breakfast, lunch & dinner) About 700m north of the roundabout (en route to Soc Trang), this is a local favourite serving decent dishes in a clean environment.

Among hotel restaurants, the best is at the **Cong Tu Hotel** (Đ Dien Bien Phu; mains 20,000-60,000d; ☹ breakfast, lunch & dinner), with traditional mains and a pleasant outdoor setting.

Getting There & Around

The bus station is on the main road into town, 1 km west of the centre. From here you can catch regular buses to Ho Chi Minh City (80,000d), Ca Mau (25,000d) and Soc Trang (25,000d).

For trips to outlying areas (including the Bird Sanctuary), you can arrange a taxi through the Bac Lieu tourist office or by calling ☎ 922 922. Rates are 40,000d for the first 2 km, and 6500d for every kilometre thereafter.

AROUND BAC LIEU

Bac Lieu Bird Sanctuary

Five kilometres south of town, **Bac Lieu Bird Sanctuary** (Vuon Chim Bac Lieu; ☎ 835 991; admission 40,000d; ☹ 7.30am-5pm) is notable for its 50-odd species of bird, including a large population of graceful white herons. This is one of the most interesting sights in the Mekong Delta and is surprisingly popular with Vietnamese tourists. Foreign visitors are rare, probably because Bac Lieu is so out-of-the-way.

Whether or not you see any birds depends on what time of year you visit. Bird populations are at their peak in the rainy season – approximately May to October. The birds hang around to nest until about January, then fly off in search of greener pastures. There are basically no birds here from February until the rainy season begins again.

The drive is only 5km but the road is in bad shape. The rest of the trek is through dense (and often muddy) jungle. Bring plenty of repellent, good shoes, water and binoculars.

Pay the admission fee when you reach the entrance of the bird sanctuary. You can (and should) hire a guide here – you'll probably get lost without one. The guides aren't supposed to take any money, so tip them (US\$2 is

enough) discreetly; most guides do not speak English. Transport and guides can also be arranged at the Bac Lieu tourist office (see opposite), but hiring a guide there will cost you around US\$10 for the day.

Bac Lieu Beach

The same road leading to the Bac Lieu Bird Sanctuary terminates 10km from Bac Lieu at this beach (Bai Bien Bac Lieu). Don't expect white sand – it's all hard-packed Mekong Delta mud. Quite a few shellfish and other slimy things crawl around where the muck meets the sea. Tide pool enthusiasts might be impressed. Locals may be willing to take you for a walk on the tidal flats where they harvest oysters. There's a simple restaurant on the beach for local seafood dishes; another restaurant is scheduled to open there in 2007.

Moi Hoa Binh Pagoda

This Khmer pagoda (Chua Moi Hoa Binh or Se Rey Vongsa) is 13km south of Bac Lieu along Hwy 1 (look to your left while driving to Ca Mau).

The pagoda is uniquely designed and chances are good that the monastery's enormous tower will catch your eye even if you're not looking for it. As pagodas in Vietnam go, it's relatively new, having first been built in 1952. The tower was added in 1990 and is used to store the bones of the deceased. There is a large and impressive meeting hall in front of the tower.

Most Khmer people in the area head for monastery schools in Soc Trang in order to receive a Khmer education. Apart from the small contingent of student monks, very few students study at the Moi Hoa Binh Pagoda.

CA MAU

☎ 0780 / pop 176,000

Built on the swampy shores of the Ganh Hao River, Ca Mau is the capital and largest city in Ca Mau province, which was devastated by Typhoon Linda in 1997. It occupies the southern tip of the Mekong Delta – a wasteland for centuries, the area was first cultivated in the late 17th century. The population of Ca Mau includes many ethnic Khmers.

Owing to the boggy terrain, this area has the lowest population density in southern Vietnam. Ca Mau lies in the middle of Vietnam's largest swamp and is known for its powerful mosquitoes.

Ca Mau has developed rapidly in recent years, but the actual town itself is rather dull. The main attractions here are the nearby swamps and forests, which can be easily explored by boat. Bird-watchers and aspiring botanists are reportedly enthralled with the area for its stork-sighting opportunities and swamp ecology. Consult Ca Mau Tourist before undertaking trips to these outlying attractions.

Information

Interesting boat trips – two days and two nights to Nam Can, Dat Mui (Cape Ca Mau), the Da Bac Islands and the U-Minh Forest – can be organised at **Ca Mau Tourist** (Cong Tu Du Lich Minh Hai; ☎ 831 238; 3-5 Đ Ly Bon; ☹ 8-11am & 1-5pm). Other services available here include foreign-currency exchange, car and boat rentals and visa extensions.

Near the post office, **Incombank** (☎ 838 677; icbcau@hcm.vnn.vn; 94 Đ Ly Thuong Kiet) offers foreign-currency exchange and cash advances. There's an ATM located inside the Anh Nguyen Hotel.

In an emergency, seek medical help at **Ca Mau Hospital** (Benh Vien Ca Mau; ☎ 831 015; Đ Ly Thuong Kiet).

Sights

CA MAU MARKET

This is a wholesale market (☹ 6am-6pm) and not really a place for people to shop. The animal life on display – such as fish and turtles – is cleaned, packed into crates, frozen and sent to HCMC by truck. It's an interesting place to wander around – it certainly bears little resemblance to the supermarkets at home. However, animal rights advocates will not be pleased.

There's also a **floating market** (☹ 6am-mid-afternoon) here.

CAO DAI TEMPLE

Though not as large as the one in Tay Ninh (p381), the **Cao Dai Temple** (Đ Phan Ngoc Hien) is still an impressive place and it's staffed by friendly monks. The temple was built in 1966 and seems to be fairly active.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Than Son Hotel (☎ 815 825; 23 Đ Phan Ngoc Hien; r 80,000-230,000d; ☹) This slender five-storey hotel has clean, nicely maintained rooms with decent-sized windows.

Ca Mau Hotel (☎ 831 165; fax 835 075; 20 Đ Phan Ngoc Hien; r 120,000-220,000d; 🏠) Small, trim, well-outfitted rooms here have bathrooms with tubs. Rates include breakfast.

Quoc Nam Hotel (☎ 827 281; 23 Đ Phan Boi Chau; r 120,000-250,000d; 🏠) This is a friendly, low-key affair with clean, simple, pleasant rooms – some brighter than others. Its top-floor restaurant overlooks the market.

Ca Mau Trade Union Hotel (☎ 825 037; fax 830 873; 9 Đ Luu Tan Tai; r 130,000-300,000d; 🏠) Almost opposite the Cao Dai Temple, this hotel has a range of rooms from small, dingy and dark to spacious, bright and clean.

Song Ngoc Hotel (☎ 817 303; 2B Đ Hung Vuong; r 150,000-250,000d; 🏠) Situated on a busy road, Song Ngoc is a newish place with small, clean rooms with kitschy bedspreads. There's a lift.

MIDRANGE

Phuong Nam Hotel (☎ 831 752; fax 834 402; 91 Đ Phan Dinh Phung; r/stg 170,000/240,000d; 🏠) Another good-value place, Phuong Nam is clean and pleasantly furnished. Some rooms have balconies.

Quoc Te Hotel (International Hotel; ☎ 826 745; ksquoc te@hcm.vnn.vn; 179 Đ Phan Ngoc Hien; r 200,000-700,000d; 🏠) Boasting a lift, a restaurant and massage service, the Quoc Te is a solid midrange choice. The priciest rooms have big views of the city; breakfast buffet is included.

Anh Nguyet Hotel (☎ 567 666; anhnguyethotel@yahoo.com; 207 Đ Phan Ngoc Hien; r US\$19-69; 🏠) This top midrange option has comfortable, carpeted rooms with trim furnishings, colourful bedspreads and big windows.

Eating

Ca Mau's speciality is shrimp, which are raised in ponds and mangrove forests. Oddly, Ca Mau's best restaurants are in a row on the north end of town.

Pho Xua (☎ 829 830; 126 Đ Phan Ngoc Hien; mains 40,000-50,000d) Featuring many shrimp and fish dishes, Pho Xua is a snazzy place with lush landscaping.

Thanh Truc (☎ 820 021; 126 Đ Phan Ngoc Hien; mains 45,000d) Next door to Pho Xua, this is a good place for hot pot and grilled meat dishes.

There is a cluster of small, cheap roadside restaurants on Đ Ly Bon, at the entrance to the street market. The friendly outdoor restaurant in the Ca Mau Trade Union Hotel is also a good bet.

Getting There & Away BOAT

Ca Mau has several piers, where you can catch boats around the region. Three to four hydrofoils a day travel between Ca Mau and Rach Gia (the boat docks in Rach Soi, about 10km from Rach Gia). This departs from Ferry Pier Can Ganh Hao daily between 7.30am and 1pm (90,000d, three hours). This pier is also where you can catch a speedboat south to Nam Can (one daily, one hour, 40,000d). Ferry Pier B also has departures to Nam Can (one daily, one hour, 40,000d).

Boats to Can Tho (three daily, three to four hours, 97,000d), with a stop in Phung Hiep, depart from Cong Ca Mau pier (Đ Quang Trung), 3km east of town.

Also popular are the (slow) boats to U-Minh Forest (opposite). These depart from Ferry Pier A (two hours, 25,000d). For a guided tour, it's best to inquire at the tourist office.

BUS

The buses from HCMC to Ca Mau leave from Mien Tay bus station (p372). The trip takes 11 hours by regular bus and eight hours by express bus (around 115,000d). There are several daily express buses to HCMC leaving between 5am and 10.30am. Regular daily buses also connect to other towns in the region, including Bac Lieu (24,000d) and Can Tho (60,000d).

The Ca Mau bus station is 2.5km from the centre of town, along Hwy 1 towards HCMC.

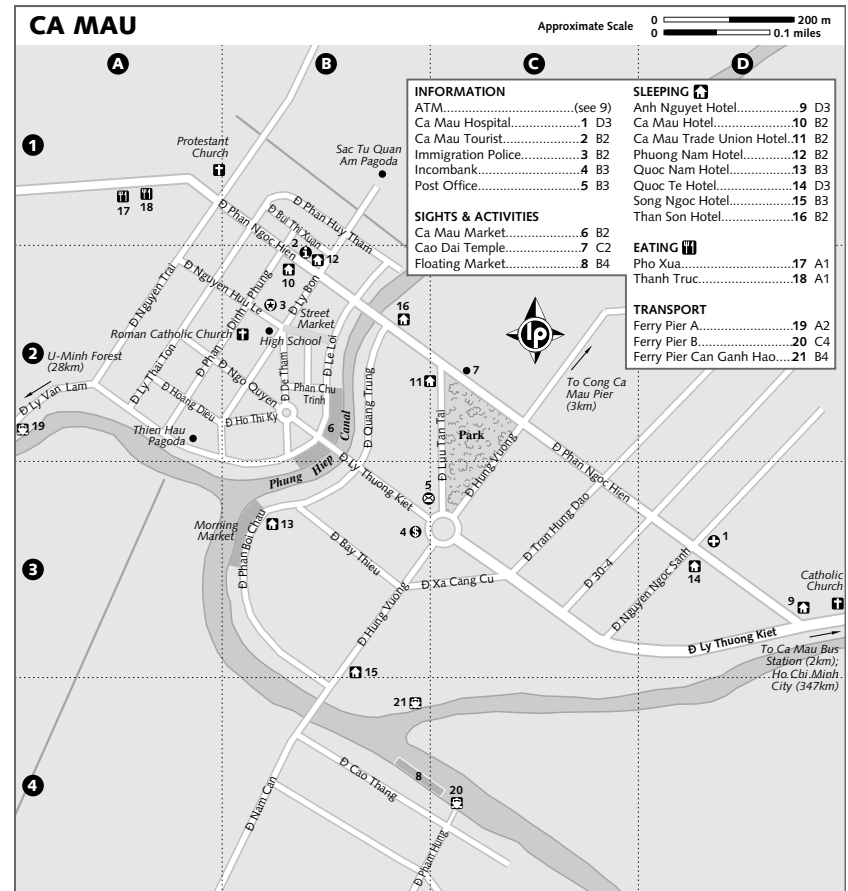
CAR & MOTORBIKE

Ca Mau is the end of the line for Hwy 1; it's the southernmost point in Vietnam that's accessible by car and bus. Drivers who boldly attempt to drive on the 'highway' south of Ca Mau will soon find their vehicles sinking into a quagmire of mud and mangroves.

Ca Mau is 178km from Can Tho (three hours) and 347km from HCMC (eight hours).

Getting Around

There are plenty of water taxis along the canal at the back of Ca Mau Market. For longer trips upriver, larger longboats collect at the cluster of jetties just outside the market area. You can either join the throngs of passengers going downriver or hire the whole boat for about 50,000d an hour.



AROUND CA MAU U-Minh Forest

The town of Ca Mau borders the U-Minh Forest, a huge mangrove forest covering 1000 sq km of Ca Mau and Kien Giang provinces. Local people use certain species of mangrove as a source of timber, charcoal, thatch and tannin. When the mangroves flower, bees feed on the blossoms, providing both honey and wax. The area is an important habitat for waterfowl.

The U-Minh Forest, which is the largest mangrove forest in the world outside of the Amazon basin, was a favourite hideout for the VC during the American War. US patrol boats were frequently ambushed here and the VC regularly planted mines in the canals. The

Americans responded with chemical defoliation, which made their enemy more visible while doing enormous damage to the forests. Replanting efforts at first failed because the soil was so toxic, but gradually the heavy rainfall has washed the dioxin out to sea and the forest is returning. Many eucalyptus trees have also been planted here because they have proved to be relatively resistant to dioxin.

Unfortunately the mangrove forests are being further damaged by clearing for shrimp-farming ponds, charcoal production and woodchipping. The government has tried to limit these activities, but the conflict between nature and humans continues. The conflict will probably get worse before it gets better, because Vietnam's population is still growing rapidly.

Eating

Besides the hotel restaurants, it's slim pickings for decent eating spots in Long Xuyen.

Hai Thue (☎ 845 573; 245/3 Đ Luong Van Cu; mains 15,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A popular choice serving up excellent and cheap Vietnamese food.

Buu Loc (☎ 844 401; 246/3 Đ Luong Van Cu; mains 15,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) There's no English menu, but this is another top local place for satisfying, inexpensive meals.

Hong Phat (☎ 842 359; 242/4 Đ Luong Van Cu; mains 15,000-30,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A good, value place for its simple seafood dishes.

There's good coffee and a happening scene at the **riverside cafés** (coffee 4000d) on Đ Pham Hong Thai.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

To get to the Long Xuyen ferry dock from Đ Pham Hong Thai, you'll need to cross Duy Tan Bridge and turn right. Passenger ferries leave from here to Cho Vam, Dong Tien, Hong Ngu, Kien Luong, Lai Vung, Rach Gia, Sa Dec and Phu Chau (Tan Chau). Boats to Rach Gia (15,000d, nine hours) leave at 6.30am and/or 8am. You can also catch boats from here to Sa Dec (10,000d, four hours) at noon.

From the An Hoa ferry terminal you can also catch boats to Cao Lanh and Sa Dec.

BUS

The buses heading from HCMC to Long Xuyen leave from the Mien Tay bus station (p372; around 35,000d).

Long Xuyen bus station (Ben Xe Long Xuyen; ☎ 852 125; opposite 96/3B Đ Tran Hung Dao) is at the southern end of town. Buses from Long Xuyen to Ca Mau, Can Tho, Chau Doc, Ha Tien, HCMC and Rach Gia leave from here.

CAR & MOTORBIKE

Long Xuyen is 62km from Can Tho, 126km from My Tho and 189km from HCMC.

Getting Around

The best way to get around Long Xuyen is to take a *cyclo*, *xe dap loi* (a two-wheeled wagon pulled by a bicycle) or a *xe loi*.

Car ferries from Long Xuyen to Cho Moi district (across the river) leave from the ferry terminal near the market every half-hour between 4am and 6.30pm.

AROUND LONG XUYEN

Ancient City of Oc-Eo

During the 1st to 6th centuries AD, when southern Vietnam, much of southern Cambodia and the Malay peninsula were ruled by Funan, the Indian-influenced empire, Oc-Eo was a major trading city. Much of what is known about the Funan empire, which reached its height during the 5th century AD, comes from contemporary Chinese sources and the excavations at Oc-Eo. The excavations have uncovered evidence of contact between Oc-Eo and what is now Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, as well as Persia and the Roman Empire.

An elaborate system of canals around Oc-Eo was once used for both irrigation and transportation, prompting Chinese travellers of the time to write about 'sailing across Funan' on their way to the Malay peninsula. Most of the buildings of Oc-Eo were built on piles and pieces of these structures indicate the high degree of refinement achieved by Funanese civilisation. Artefacts found at Oc-Eo are on display in HCMC at the History Museum (p341) and Fine Arts Museum (p342), in Hanoi at the History Museum (p101) and in Long Xuyen at the An Giang Museum (p435).

Though there is in fact very little to see here, the remains of Oc-Eo are not far from Long Xuyen. Inquire at An Giang Tourist for guides and travel information. Oc-Eo is most accessible during the dry season. Special permission may be required to visit (see p434 for more information).

CHAU DOC

☎ 076 / pop 102,000

Perched on the banks of the Bassac River, Chau Doc is a pleasant town near the Cambodian border with sizable Chinese, Cham and Khmer communities. Its cultural diversity – apparent in the mosques, temples, churches and nearby pilgrimage sites – makes it a fascinating place to explore even if you aren't headed to Cambodia. Taking a boat trip to the Cham communities across the river is another highlight, though its addictive market and peaceful waterfront make fine backdrops to a few days of relaxing before heading out.

Owing to the popular river crossing between Vietnam and Cambodia (p441), many travellers pass through Chau Doc.

Information

There's **internet service** (per hr 4000d; ☎ 7am-9pm) in the courtyard of Chau Doc's main **post office** (☎ 869 200; 2 Đ Le Loi). Foreign currency can be exchanged at **Incombank** (☎ 866 497; 68-70 Đ Nguyen Huu Canh).

Though not officially a tourist office, there's a travel information desk at Vinh Phuoc Hotel (right) where objective, pressure-free travel advice is dispensed. Tours and onward travel arrangements are sold at reasonable prices. Check here first for up-to-date reports on hydrofoils to Phu Quoc Island, border crossing information, slow cargo boats and bus schedules.

Other agencies where you can buy boat transport to Phnom Penh and book half- and full-day boating trips on the Mekong include **Mekong Tours** (☎ 868 222; www.mekongvietnam.com; 14 Đ Nguyen Huu Canh) and **Delta Adventure** (☎ 563 810; 53 Đ Le Loi).

Sights

CHAU PHU TEMPLE

In 1926 the **Chau Phu Temple** (Dinh Than Chau Phu; cnr Đ Nguyen Van Thoai & Đ Gia Long) was built to worship the Nguyen dynasty official Thoai Ngoc Hau, who is buried at Sam Mountain (p440). The structure is decorated with both Vietnamese and Chinese motifs. Inside are funeral tablets bearing the names of the deceased and some biographical information about them.

MOSQUES

Domed and arched **Chau Giang Mosque**, in the hamlet of Chau Giang, serves the local Cham Muslims. To get there, take the car ferry from Chau Giang ferry landing in Chau Doc across the Hau Giang River. From the ferry landing, walk away from the river for 30m, turn left and walk 50m.

The **Mubarak Mosque** (Thanh Duong Hoi Giao), where children study the Koran in Arabic script, is also on the river bank opposite Chau Doc. Visitors are permitted, but you should avoid entering during the calls to prayer (five times daily) unless you are a Muslim.

There are other small mosques in the Chau Doc area. They are accessible by boat, but you'll need a local guide to find them all.

FLOATING HOUSES

These houses, whose floats consist of empty metal drums, are both a place to live and a

livelihood for their residents. Under each house, fish are raised in suspended metal nets: the fish flourish in their natural river habitat; the family can feed them whatever scraps are handy; and catching the fish requires less exertion than fishing. You can find these houses floating around Chau Doc and get a close-up by hiring a boat (but please be respectful of their privacy). To learn more about the workings of these fish cages, see p440.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Vinh Phuoc Hotel (☎ 866 242; 12 Đ Quang Trung; r US\$6-15; ☎) A good budget deal, this place is run by an amiable Brit who is an excellent source of local travel information. There's a good in-house restaurant serving Vietnamese and Western food (mains around 30,000d).

Ngoc Phu Hotel (☎ 866 484; 17 Đ Doc Phu Thu; r 90,000-150,000d; ☎) Even the fan rooms at this large, liveable place have hot water, TV and fridge. The staff here are particularly cheery and helpful. Under renovation at the time of writing, Ngoc Phu may raise rates in coming years.

Thuan Loi Hotel (☎ 866 134; hoteltuanloi@hcm.vnn.vn; 18 Đ Tran Hung Dao; r 100,000-190,000d; ☎) Overlooking the riverside, this pleasant place with communal terrace has friendly staff and a relaxed atmosphere. Fan rooms are very basic, with cold-water bathrooms. Air-conditioned rooms are bright and airy.

Delta Adventure Inn (Nha Khach Long Chau; ☎ 861 249; deltaadventureinn@hotmail.com; r 120,000-240,000d; ☎) This cosy terracotta-tiled compound sits amid the rice paddies about 4km from Chau Doc. The views of Sam Mountain are lovely from the island café-restaurant on the grounds.

Hoa Mai Hotel (☎ 867 608; 24/4 Đ Khom Chau Thoi 2; r US\$10; ☎) This newish place has an elegant façade and clean, spacious rooms opening onto a shared balcony. It's in a quiet setting southwest of the centre.

Song Sao Hotel (☎ 561 777; songsaohotel@yahoo.com; 12-13 Đ Nguyen Huu Canh; r US\$11-16; ☎) Song Sao has simple, tidy rooms with wood furniture. Some are small and lack natural light; others have balconies.

Trung Nguyen Hotel (☎ 866 158; trungnhan@yahoo.com; 86 Đ Bach Dang; r US\$12-17; ☎) This handsome, polished place has bright and airy rooms, each with a balcony. There's friendly, helpful management, and breakfast is included.

FISH FARMING & BIO-FUEL

Fish farming constitutes around 20% of Vietnam's total seafood output and is widely practised in An Giang province, in the region near the Cambodian border. The highest concentration of 'floating houses' with fish cages can be observed on the banks of the Bassac River in Chau Doc, near its confluence with the mighty Mekong.

The fish farmed here are two members of the Asian catfish family, basa (*Pangasius bocourti*) and tra (*P hypophthalmus*). It is interesting to note that even with two tides a day here, there is no salt water in the river. Around 18,000 tonnes of fish are exported annually, primarily to European and American markets (as well as Australia and Japan), in the form of frozen white fish fillets.

The two-step production cycle starts with capturing fish eggs from the wild, followed by raising the fish to a marketable size – usually about 1kg. Fish are fed on a kind of dough made by the farmers from cereal, vegetables and fish scraps. The largest cage measures 2000 cubic metres and can produce up to 400 tonnes of raw fish in each 10-month production cycle.

One of the more interesting developments affecting fish-farming was announced in 2006, when Saigon Petrol and An Giang Fisheries Import-Export Company (Agifish) agreed to set up a joint venture to produce bio-fuel from the fat of the tra and basa catfish. Some 400,000 tonnes of the two fish are consumed annually in the Mekong River provinces, and if some of its by-products could be utilised the effects would be groundbreaking. One kilogram of fish fat can yield 1L of bio-diesel fuel, according to one project specialist, meaning some 60,000 tonnes of bio-diesel fuel could be made yearly if all the tra and basa fat could be utilised from the processing plants in the region. Agifish, which sets its initial projections at producing 10,000 tonnes a year, claims the bio-fuel will be more efficient than diesel, that it's nontoxic and will generate far less exhaust. After the factory is up and running (it's slated to be built near Can Tho), Agifish claims it will be a boon to the local economy, to local fish farmers who will earn more money, and even to the environment. Those who've gotten a whiff of *nuoc mam* (fish sauce) and thought, 'you can power a dump truck on this stuff' aren't far off the mark.

here after dark due to the risk of robbery in this remote, unlit area.

The drive takes about three hours, and it's possible to visit Ba Chuc and Tup Duc en route. If you don't plan to drive yourself, *xe om* drivers typically charge about US\$15.

Getting Around

Xe loi can be hired around town for a few thousand dong.

Boats to Chau Giang district (across the Hau Giang River) leave from two docks: vehicle ferries depart from Chau Giang ferry landing (Ben Pha Chau Giang), opposite 419 Đ Le Loi; smaller, more frequent boats leave from Phu Hiep ferry landing (Ben Pha FB Phu Hiep), a little further south.

Vehicle ferries to Con Tien Island depart from the Con Tien ferry landing (Ben Pha Con Tien) at the river end of Đ Thuong Dang Le; you can catch boats to Chau Giang and Phu Chau (Tan Chau) from the Ben Do Quoc Doanh ferry landing on Đ Gia Long, opposite the post office.

Private boats (30,000d for a few hours), which are rowed standing up, can be hired

from either of these spots, and are highly recommended for seeing the floating houses and visiting nearby Cham minority villages and mosques. Motorboats (50,000d per hour) can be hired in the same area.

Prices for all of the public ferries (per person 500d, motorbike or bicycle 1000d) double at night; bicycles or motorbikes require their own ticket.

AROUND CHAU DOC Phu Chau (Tan Chau) District

Traditional silk making has brought fame to Phu Chau (Tan Chau) district across southern Vietnam. The market in Phu Chau has a selection of competitively priced Thai and Cambodian goods.

To get to Phu Chau district from Chau Doc, take a boat across the Hau Giang River from the Phu Hiep ferry landing, then catch a ride on the back of a *xe om* (about 15,000d) for the 18km trip to Phu Chau district.

Sam Mountain

There are dozens of pagodas and temples, many of them set in caves, around Sam Moun-

tain (Nui Sam), which is about 6km southwest of Chau Doc via Đ Bao Ho Thoi. The Chinese influence is obvious and Sam Mountain is a favourite spot for ethnic Chinese (both pilgrims from Vietnam and abroad).

Climbing the peak is a highlight of a visit to Sam Mountain. The views from the top are excellent (weather permitting) and you can gaze over Cambodia. There's a military outpost on the summit, a legacy of the days when the Khmer Rouge made cross-border raids and massacred Vietnamese civilians.

Walking down is easier than walking up, so if you want to cheat, have a motorbike take you to the summit. The road to the top is on the east side of the mountain. You can walk down along a peaceful, traffic-free trail on the north side, which will bring you to the main temple area. The summit road has been decorated with amusement-park ceramic dinosaurs and the like. But there are also some small shrines and pavilions, which add a bit of charm and also remind you that this is indeed Vietnam and not Disneyland.

TAY AN PAGODA

This pagoda (Chua Tay An) is renowned for the fine carving of its hundreds of religious figures, most of which are made of wood. Aspects of the building's architecture reflect

Hindu and Islamic influences. The first chief monk of Tay An Pagoda (founded in 1847) came from Giac Lam Pagoda in Saigon. Tay An was last rebuilt in 1958.

The main gate is of traditional Vietnamese design. Above the roof are figures of lions and two dragons fighting for possession of pearls, chrysanthemums, apricot trees and lotus blossoms. Nearby is a statue of Quan Am Thi Kinh, the Guardian Spirit of Mother and Child.

In front of the pagoda are statues of a black elephant with two tusks and a white elephant with six tusks. Around the pagoda are monks' tombs. Inside are Buddha statues adorned with psychedelic disco lights.

TEMPLE OF LADY XU

Founded in the 1820s, the Temple of Lady Xu (Mieu Ba Chua Xu) faces Sam Mountain, not far from Tay An Pagoda. The first building here was made of bamboo and leaves; the last reconstruction took place in 1972.

According to legend, the statue of Lady Xu used to stand at the summit of Sam Mountain. In the early 19th century Siamese troops invaded the area and, impressed with the statue, decided to take it back to Thailand. But as they carried the statue down the hill, it became heavier and heavier, and they were forced to abandon it by the side of the path.

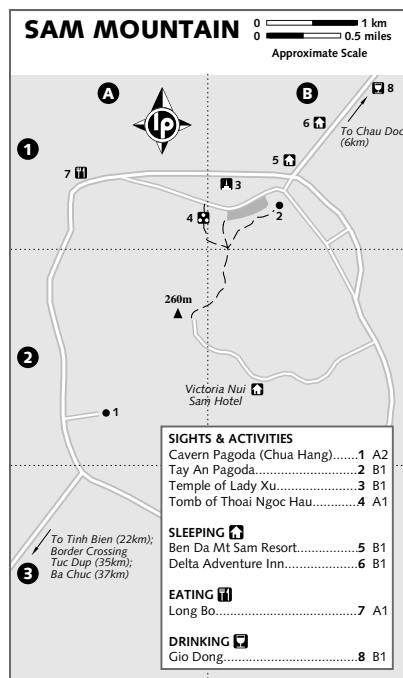
BORDER CROSSING: VINH XUONG-KAAM SAMNOR

One of the most enjoyable ways of entering Cambodia is via this crossing located just west of Chau Doc along the Mekong River. If coming from Cambodia, get a visa. If exiting, Cambodian visas are available on arrival, but minor overcharging is common.

Numerous agencies in Chau Doc sell boat tickets taking you from Chau Doc to Phnom Penh via the Vinh Xuong border. Slow boats for the trip cost around US\$8 to US\$10 and take eight hours (leaving around 8am and arriving in Phnom Penh at 4pm).

There are several companies offering faster boats between Chau Doc and Phnom Penh. **Hang Chau** (Phnom Penh; ☎ 012-883 542) departs Chau Doc at 7am and Phnom Penh at 12 noon and costs US\$15. The more upmarket **Blue Cruiser** (Phnom Penh; ☎ 023 990 441; Chau Doc ☎ 091-401622) pulls out at 8.30am and at 1.30pm respectively, costing US\$35. It takes about four hours including a slow border check. More expensive again is the **Victoria Hotels express boat** (www.victoriahotels-asia.com), which runs from the Victoria Chau Doc Hotel to Phnom Penh. At US\$75 per person, it tends to be exclusive to Victoria hotel guests.

Some adventurous travellers like to plot their own course. Catch a minibus from Chau Doc to the border at Vinh Xuong (US\$1, one hour). The border posts here are some way apart so hire a moto (US\$1) to carry you from building to building to deal with the lengthy bureaucracy. There are separate offices for immigration and customs on both sides of the border, so it can end up taking as much as an hour. Luggage has to be x-rayed on the Vietnamese side of the border. Once officially in Cambodia at Kaam Samnor, arrange a speedboat to Neak Luong (US\$2.50 per person, US\$15 for the boat, one hour). Once in Neak Luong, change to a local bus (4500r, regular departures) to Phnom Penh, which will terminate at the Central Market.



One day some villagers who were cutting wood came upon the statue and decided to bring it back to their village in order to build a temple for it; but it weighed too much for them to budge. Suddenly, there appeared a girl who, possessed by a spirit, declared herself to be Lady Xu. She announced to them that 40 virgins were to be brought and that they would be able to transport the statue down the mountainside. The 40 virgins were then summoned and carried the statue down the slope, but when they reached the plain, it became too heavy and they had to set it down. The people concluded that the site where the virgins halted had been selected by Lady Xu for the temple construction and it's here that the Temple of Lady Xu stands to this day.

Offerings of roast whole pigs are frequently made here, providing an interesting photo opportunity. The temple's most important festival is held from the 23rd to the 26th day of the fourth lunar month. During this time, pilgrims flock here, sleeping on mats in the large rooms of the two-storey resthouse next to the temple.

TOMB OF THOAI NGOC HAU

A high-ranking official, Thoai Ngoc Hau (1761–1829) served the Nguyen Lords and, later, the Nguyen dynasty. In early 1829, Thoai Ngoc Hau ordered that a tomb be constructed for himself at the foot of Sam Mountain. The site he chose is not far from Tay An Pagoda.

The steps are made of red 'beehive' stone (*da ong*) brought from the southeastern part of Vietnam. In the middle of the platform is the tomb of Thoai Ngoc Hau and those of his wives, Chau Thi Te and Truong Thi Miet. Nearby are several dozen other tombs where his officials are buried.

CAVERN PAGODA

The Cavern Pagoda (Chua Hang, also known as Phuoc Dien Tu) is about halfway up the western side of Sam Mountain. The lower part of the pagoda includes monks' quarters and two hexagonal tombs in which the founder of the pagoda, a female tailor named Le Thi Tho, and a former head monk, Thich Hue Thien, are buried.

The upper section has two parts: the main sanctuary, in which there are statues of A Di Da (the Buddha of the Past) and Thich Ca Buddha (Sakyamuni, the Historical Buddha); and the cavern. At the back of the cave behind the sanctuary building is a shrine dedicated to Quan The Am Bo Tat.

According to legend, Le Thi Tho came from Tay An Pagoda to this site half a century ago to lead a quiet, meditative life. When she arrived, she found two enormous snakes, one white and the other dark green. Le Thi Tho soon converted the snakes, which thereafter led pious lives. Upon her death, the snakes disappeared.

Sleeping & Eating

For details on the Delta Adventure Inn between Chau Doc and Sam Mountain, see p437.

Ben Da Mt Sam Resort (☎ 076-861745; bendanuisam@hcm.vnn.vn; Quoc Lo 91; r 217,000–350,000d; 🍷) This large complex has pleasant, attractive rooms, some of which overlook a lily-filled water garden. You'll find the standard amenities, plus steam bath, massage and sauna. Breakfast is included and there's an outdoor restaurant.

Long Bo (☎ 076-861 479; Khom Vinh Tay1; mains 60,000d) Well worth the trek out here, this excellent grilled-meat restaurant is among

Chau Doc's gems. A favourite dish is *bo lui xa*, which is beef wrapped around lemongrass. You cook it yourself on the hot coals brought to your table. It's 1km west of Lady Xu Temple.

BA CHUC

Close to the Cambodian border, just inside Vietnam, is Ba Chuc, otherwise known as the Bone Pagoda. The pagoda stands as a grisly reminder of the horrors perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge. Between 1975 and 1978 Khmer Rouge guerrillas regularly crossed the border into Vietnam and slaughtered civilians. And this is to say nothing of the million or so Cambodians who were also killed.

Between 12 April and 30 April 1978, the Khmer Rouge killed 3157 people at Ba Chuc. Only two people are known to have survived. Many of the victims were tortured to death. The Vietnamese government might have had other motives for invading Cambodia at the end of 1978, but certainly outrage at the Ba Chuc massacre was a major reason.

Two other notable pagodas at Ba Chuc are Chua Tam Buu and Chua Phi Lai. The Bone Pagoda has a common tomb housing the skulls and bones of over 1100 victims. This resembles Cambodia's Choeung Ek killing fields, where thousands of skulls of Khmer Rouge victims are on display. Near the skull collection is a temple that displays gruesome photos taken shortly after the massacre. The display is both fascinating and horrifying and you will need a strong stomach in order to visit.

To reach Ba Chuc follow the road that runs along the canal from Chau Doc to Ha Tien. Turn off this main road onto Hwy 3T and follow it for 4km.

TUC DUP HILL

elevation 216m

Because of its network of connecting caves, Tuc Dup Hill served as a strategic base of operations during the American War. *Tuc dup* is Khmer for 'water runs at night' and it is also known locally as 'Two Million Dollar Hill', in reference to the amount of money the Americans sank into securing it. Tuc Dup is 35km from Chau Doc and 64km from Long Xuyen.

This is a place of historical interest but there isn't much to see. It's worth a trip if you're visiting Ba Chuc.

HA TIEN

☎ 077 / pop 93,000

Lying just 8km from the Cambodian border, Ha Tien is on the Gulf of Thailand and has a vastly different feel from other delta settlements. All around the area are lovely, towering limestone formations, which support a network of caves, some of which have been turned into temples. Plantations of pepper trees cling to the hillsides. On a clear day, Phu Quoc Island (p452) is easily visible to the west. The town itself has a sleepy charm, with crumbling colonial villas and a colourful riverside market. It sees only a handful of visitors, who come to explore the unique sights out of town.

Ha Tien was a province of Cambodia until 1708. In the face of attacks by the Thais, the Khmer-appointed governor, a Chinese immigrant named Mac Cuu, turned to the Vietnamese for protection and assistance. Mac Cuu thereafter governed this area as a fiefdom under the protection of the Nguyen Lords. He was succeeded as ruler by his son, Mac Thien Tu. During the 18th century the area was invaded and pillaged several times by the Thais. Rach Gia and the southern tip of the Mekong Delta came under direct Nguyen rule in 1798.

During the Khmer Rouge regime, Cambodian forces repeatedly attacked the Vietnamese territory and massacred thousands of civilians here. The entire populations of Ha Tien and nearby villages (in fact, tens of thousands of people) fled their homes. Also during this period, areas north of Ha Tien (along the Cambodian border) were sown with mines and booby traps, which have yet to be cleared.

Though the government has designated Ha Tien a 'frontier economic zone', the border crossing here is not yet open to tourists. This may change in upcoming years. Check with travel agencies in Ha Tien.

Information

The **post office** (☎ 852 190; 3Đ To Chau; 🕒 7am–10pm) also has internet access for 4000d per hour.

There's an **Agricultural Bank** (Ngan Hang Nong Nhiep; ☎ 852 055; fax 851 888; 37Đ Lam Son) near the market area.

Sights

MAC CUU FAMILY TOMBS

On a low ridge not far from town are the Mac Cuu Family Tombs (Lang Mac Cuu). They are known locally as Nui Lang, the Hill of the

Tombs. Several dozen relatives of Mac Cuu are buried here in traditional Chinese tombs decorated with figures of dragons, phoenixes, lions and guardians.

The largest tomb is that of Mac Cuu himself; it was constructed in 1809 on the orders of Emperor Gia Long and is decorated with finely carved figures of Thanh Long (Green

Dragon) and Bach Ho (White Tiger). The tomb of Mac Cuu's first wife is flanked by dragons and phoenixes. At the bottom of the ridge is a shrine dedicated to the Mac family.

TAM BAO PAGODA

Founded by Mac Cuu in 1730 is the **Tam Bao Pagoda** (Sac Tu Tam Bao Tu; 328 Đ Phuong Thanh; ☎ prayers

8-9am & 2-3pm). It is now home to several Buddhist nuns. In front of the pagoda is a statue of Quan The Am Bo Tat standing on a lotus blossom in the middle of a pond. Inside the sanctuary, the largest statue on the dais is of A Di Da, the Buddha of the Past. It is made of bronze, but has been painted. Outside the building are the tombs of 16 monks.

Near Tam Bao Pagoda is a section of the city wall dating from the early 18th century.

PHU DUNG PAGODA

This **pagoda** (Phu Cu Am Tu; ☎ prayers 4-5am & 7-8pm) was founded in the mid-18th century by Mac Thien Tich's wife, Nguyen Thi Xuan. It is now home to one monk.

In the middle of the main hall is a statue of nine dragons embracing a newly born Thich Ca Buddha. The most interesting statue on the main dais is a bronze Thich Ca Buddha from China. On the hillside behind the main hall are the tombs of Nguyen Thi Xuan and one of her female servants; nearby are four monks' tombs.

Behind the main hall is a small temple, Dien Ngoc Hoang, dedicated to the Taoist Jade Emperor. The figures inside are of Ngoc Hoang flanked by Nam Tao, the Taoist God of the Southern Polar Star and the God of Happiness (on the right); and Bac Dao, the Taoist God of the Northern Polar Star and the God of Longevity (on the left). The statues are made of papier-mâché moulded over bamboo frames.

To get to Phu Dung Pagoda, turn off Đ Phuong Thanh at No 374.

THACH DONG CAVE PAGODA

Also known as Chua Thanh Van, this is a subterranean Buddhist temple 4km from town.

To the left of the entrance is the Stele of Hatred (Bia Cam Thu), which commemorates the massacre by the Khmer Rouge of 130 people here on 14 March 1978.

Several of the chambers contain funerary tablets and altars to Ngoc Hoang, Quan The Am Bo Tat and the two Buddhist monks who founded the temples of this pagoda. The wind here creates extraordinary sounds as it blows through the grotto's passageways. Openings in several branches of the cave afford views of nearby Cambodia.

DONG HO

The name translates as East Lake, but Dong Ho is not a lake but an inlet of the sea. The

BORDER CROSSING: TINH BIEN-PHNUM DEN

This little-used border crossing is less convenient for Phnom Penh-bound travellers, but may be of interest if you're in a hurry to reach Cambodia's south coast. The border is in a remote area with little in the way of transport getting you there and away. You'll need to arrange a visa before heading to Tinh Bien, as visas are not currently issued at the border. Take care of this at the Cambodian consulate in HCMC (p467).

'lake' is just east of Ha Tien, and is bounded to the east by a chain of granite hills known as the Ngu Ho (Five Tigers) and to the west by the To Chan hills. Dong Ho is said to be most beautiful on nights when there is a full or almost-full moon. According to legend, on such nights fairies dance here.

HA TIEN MARKET

Ha Tien has an excellent market along the To Chau River. It's well worth your while to stop here – many of the goods are from Thailand and Cambodia, and prices are lower than in HCMC. Cigarette smuggling is particularly big business.

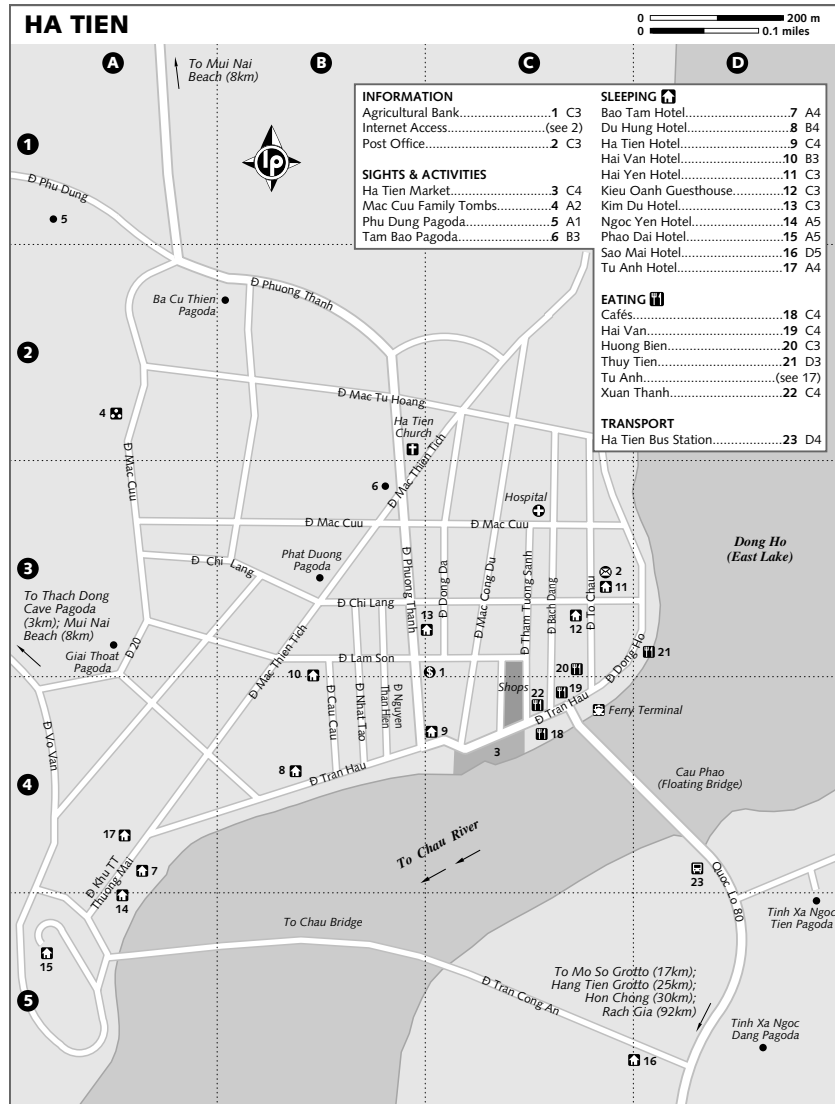
Sleeping BUDGET

Phao Dai Hotel (☎ 851 849; r 80,000-200,000; ☎) On a hill in the far southwest of town, the Phao Dai is a relatively quiet place. Air-con rooms have ocean views, and the best rooms open onto shared terraces. Facilities include massage, a karaoke bar and a restaurant.

Ngoc Yen Hotel (☎ 952 953; fax 952 955; 12 Đ Khu Trung Tam Thuong Mai; r 120,000-220,000; ☎) This is good value with its newish feel and clean, modern rooms set with polished wood furniture. Some windows open only onto the corridor.

Bao Tam Hotel (☎ 952 944; fax 952 945; 23 Đ Khu Trung Tam Thuong Mai; r 140,000-170,000; ☎) This friendly, new spot has tidy, nicely outfitted rooms with green tile floors. Upper-storey rooms have balconies. As elsewhere some rooms lack windows.

Tu Anh Hotel (☎ 852 622; fax 951 703; 170 Đ Mac Thien Tich; r 150,000-250,000; ☎) With windows and air-conditioning in every room, Tu Anh is one of Ha Tien's best newcomers. It has clean and polished rooms and friendly service.



Other budget choices:

Kieu Danh Guesthouse (☎ 852 748; 20 Đ To Chau; r 50,000-80,000d; ☺) A friendly, family-run place with battered rooms. Cold-water bathrooms.

Sao Mai Hotel (☎ 852 740; Đ Tran Cong An; r 80,000-150,000d; ☺) A nice, clean place south of the floating bridge. Ocean views from top-floor rooms.

MIDRANGE

Hai Van Hotel (☎ 852 001; fax 851 685; 55 Đ Lam Son; r 70,000-220,000d; ☺) Hai Van offers a range of rooms from cheap and basic fan-cooled rooms (with cold-water bathrooms) to comfortably set rooms in the new wing with balconies. There's a lift.

Kim Du Hotel (☎ 851 929; fax 852 119; 14 Đ Phuong Thanh; r 120,000-200,000d; ☺) Rooms at this decent but ageing option have big windows and are in OK shape. The in-house restaurant is good. It has a lift.

Du Hung Hotel (☎ 951 555; fax 852 267; 17A Đ Tran Hau; r 180,000-250,000d; ☺) Another new, good-value option with clean rooms and dark wood furniture. Lift available.

Hai Yen Hotel (☎ 851 580; fax 851 889; 15 Đ To Chau; r 200,000-350,000d; ☺) Offers spotless rooms with colourful bedspreads and decorative ceilings. Some rooms lack windows; others (like room 517) have fine river views.

Ha Tien Hotel (☎ 952 093; fax 951 102; 36 Đ Tran Hau; r 300,000-400,000d; ☺) Ha Tien's finest hotel has comfortable, carpeted rooms with dark wood furniture, though some rooms lack windows. An inviting, open-sided restaurant fronts the place.

Eating & Drinking

Ha Tien's speciality is an unusual variety of coconut that can only be found in Cambodia and this part of Vietnam. These coconuts contain no milk, but the delicate flesh is delicious. Restaurants all around the Ha Tien area serve the coconut flesh in a glass with ice and sugar.

Hai Van (☎ 850 344; 4 Đ Tran Hau; mains 10,000-15,000d; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Dishes up good Vietnamese, Chinese and Western meals.

Xuan Thanh (☎ 852 197; 20 Đ Tran Hau; mains 15,000-40,000d; ☺) lunch & dinner) Set with chrome chairs opposite the market, this cheery place serves tasty plates of fish, shrimp and other Vietnamese fair.

Tu Anh (☎ 852 622; 170 Đ Mac Thien Tich; mains 20,000-40,000d; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner) The restaurant of this decent hotel also serves excellent dishes, including delicious seafood with noodles.

Huong Bien (☎ 852 072; 974 Đ To Chau; mains 20,000-30,000d) Another excellent eatery.

Thuy Tien (☎ 851 828; Đ Dong Ho; coffee 3000d) For an iced coffee against the lakeside scenery, stop by this low-key café.

For livelier backdrop try the cafés along the waterfront.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Passenger ferries dock at the ferry terminal, which is not far from the To Chau Hotel near the floating bridge. Daily ferries depart to Phu Quoc (55,000d, 8.30am), but these are worn, wooden boats that may not be seaworthy. It's wise to take a more reliable hydrofoil from Rach Gia.

BUS

Buses from HCMC to Ha Tien leave three times daily from the Mien Tay bus station (p372); the trip (around 110,000d) takes eight to 10 hours.

Ha Tien bus station (Ben Xe Ha Tien) is on the other side of the floating toll bridge from the centre of town. Buses leave from here to HCMC, Can Tho (67,000d, five hours, three daily), Chau Doc (41,000d, four hours, four daily) and Rach Gia (22,000d, two hours, frequent) among other destinations.

CAR & MOTORBIKE

Ha Tien is 92km from Rach Gia, 95km from Chau Doc, 206km from Can Tho and 338km from HCMC.

AROUND HA TIEN

There are many other islands off the coast between Rach Gia and the Cambodian border. Some locals make a living gathering swiftlet nests (the most important ingredient of that famous Chinese delicacy, bird's-nest soup), on the islands' rocky cliffs.

Beaches

The beaches in this part of Vietnam face the Gulf of Thailand. The water is incredibly warm and calm here, like a placid lake. The beaches are OK for bathing and diving but hopeless for surfing.

Mui Nai (Stag's Head Peninsula) is 8km west of Ha Tien; it supposedly resembles the head of a stag with its mouth pointing upward. On top is a lighthouse and there are sand beaches on both sides of the peninsula. Mui Nai is

accessible by road from both Ha Tien and from Thach Dong Cave Pagoda (admission person/car 2000/10,000d).

There are simple restaurants overlooking the beach, and several guesthouses in the area, including **Kim Ngan** (☎ 077-951 661; r 150,000-200,000d; ☺), a basic place with clean rooms just steps from the beach (no view).

There's no public transport to the beach. A moto-taxi there should set you back around 10,000d.

No Beach (Bai No), lined with coconut palms, and shady **Bang Beach** (Bai Bang) are several kilometres west of Ha Tien and can be reached from the road to Mui Nai Beach.

Mo So Grotto

About 17km towards Rach Gia from Ha Tien, and 3km from the road, Mo So Grotto consists of three large rooms and a labyrinth of tunnels. Sadly, the local Morning Star cement factory has carted away a substantial amount of limestone and managed to cause irreparable damage to the grotto. The cave is accessible on foot during the dry season and by small boat during the wet season. Visitors should take torches (flashlights) and a local guide.

Hang Tien Grotto

About 25km towards Rach Gia from Ha Tien, Hang Tien Grotto served as a hideout for Nguyen Anh (later Emperor Gia Long) in 1784, when he was being pursued by the Tay Son Rebels. His fighters found zinc coins buried here, a discovery that gave the cave its name, Coin Grotto. Hang Tien Grotto is accessible by boat (20,000d) from the ferry terminal in Ha Tien. The trip takes about an hour.

Hon Giang Island

About 15km from Ha Tien and accessible by small boat, Hon Giang Island has a lovely, secluded beach.

HON CHONG

☎ 077

This small and secluded village beach resort has the most scenic stretch of coastline on the Mekong Delta mainland. It's a peaceful place most of the year and sees few foreign travellers. The big attractions here are Chua Hang Grotto, Duong Beach and Nghe Island. Though they are a far cry from the stunning 3000-plus islands and grottoes of Halong

Bay, the stone formations here are indeed photogenic. Aside from the three gargantuan cement factories that spew out smoke along the road from Ha Tien, the coastal drive there boasts some beautiful landscape.

Hon Chong lies along both sides of the road from Ba Hon, curving along the coast. Rustic and midrange hotels dot the road, which terminates at Chua Hang Grotto and the temple there.

Chua Hang Grotto

Chua Hang Grotto is entered through a Buddhist temple set against the base of a hill. The temple is called **Hai Son Tu** (Sea Mountain Temple; admission 2000d). Visitors light incense and offer prayers here before entering the grotto itself, whose entrance is located behind the altar. Inside is a statue of Quan The Am Bo Tat.

Duong Beach

Running north from Chua Hang Grotto, this beach (Bai Duong) is named for its long-needed pine trees (*duong*). The southern area can get busy with Vietnamese tourists – and their beloved karaoke – but otherwise the 3km stretch of coast is quite tranquil.

Although this is easily the prettiest beach in the Mekong Delta, don't expect any white sand. The waters around the delta contain heavy concentrations of silt (and cement dust), so the beach sand tends to be hard while in the water it's muddy. Still, the water is reasonably clear here and this is the only beach south of HCMC (excluding those on Phu Quoc Island) that looks appealing to swimmers. The beach is known for its spectacular sunsets.

From the busy southern end of the beach (near Chua Hang Grotto), you can see remnants of **Father and Son Isle** (Hon Phu Tu) several hundred metres offshore; it was said to be shaped like a father embracing his son – though the father was washed away in 2006. Boats can be hired at the shore to row out for a closer look.

Nghe Island

This is the most beautiful island in the area and is a favourite pilgrimage spot for Buddhists. The island contains a **cave temple** (Chua Hang) next to a large statue of Quan The Am Bo Tat, which faces the sea. The area where you'll find the cave temple and statue is called Doc Lau Chuong.

Finding a boat to the island is not too difficult, though it is much cheaper if you round up a group. Inquire at the Hon Trem Guesthouse (below). You can also rent a speed boat for the day for 900,000d from the Tan Phat restaurant (right). The boat seats up to 20, and the captain can take you on a tour of four islands in the area. Tourists are not permitted to stay on the island.

Sleeping

The hotels are completely booked when Buddhists arrive to worship 15 days before and one month after Tet. Another worship deluge occurs in March and April. The following hotels are listed in order, as you approach them on the main (and only) road into town.

Green Hill Guesthouse (☎ 854 369; 905 Hon Chong; d US\$14-20; 🏠) This lovely villa on the hill is the first place you'll see upon arriving in Hon Chong. Perched on a knoll overlooking Duong Beach, this friendly, family-run guesthouse has comfortable, spacious rooms. The 2nd-storey balcony, festooned with orchids and bougainvillea, has great views. Try booking the top-floor room, with its neat conical ceiling and private terrace.

An Hai Son Resort (☎ 759 226; anhaiison@hcm.vnn.vn; Bai Gieng Hamlet; r 240,000-300,000d; 🏠 📺) Some 500m from Green Hill Guesthouse, this resort has clean, pleasantly furnished rooms amid a nicely landscaped setting. Villa rooms are smaller, cheaper and nicer, with stylish furniture. Rooms on the 2nd storey have sea views. There's a tennis court and massage services; breakfast included.

My Lan Hotel (☎ 759 044; mylanhotel@vnn.vn; r 150,000-210,000d; 🏠) Another 150m from An Hai, this hotel has a range of rooms, some so white as to be on the clinical side, while others are roomy with decent windows and even shower curtains in the bathrooms!

Diem My Hotel (☎ 759 216; 1022 Hamlet 3; r 60,000-160,000d; 🏠) About 200m further, Diem My is one of Hong Chong's cheapest options. Expect basic rooms, light pink walls and a somewhat musty smell. The bathrooms are cold-water only.

Binh An Hotel (☎ 854 332; fax 854 533; 1030 Hamlet 3; r 80,000-200,000d; 🏠) Up the road (another 200m), Binh An is a fine but ageing place with gardens. The old-wing fan rooms are grotty but cheap; new-wing rooms are nicer with air-con.

Hon Trem Guesthouse (☎ 854 331; contact@hontremresort.com; r/bungalow 400,000/450,000d; 🏠)

Hong Chong's best overnight is found 300m past Binh An. This recently overhauled guesthouse has attractive, light and airy bungalows with artwork on the walls, private terraces and sizable bathtubs. Guesthouse rooms are handsomely designed but lack the fine views. There's also a good seafood restaurant (mains 60,000d to 90,000d) overlooking the water, and you can book spa services and boat tours here. Breakfast included.

Huong Bien Guesthouse (☎ 854 537; Hamlet 3; r 150,000d; 🏠) The last place in town before reaching the Chua Hang Grotto, this guesthouse has trim rooms with green tile floors, small windows and cold-water bathrooms. It's run by a friendly young family. Across the street are a few basic restaurants.

Eating

Tan Phat (☎ 759 943; Hamlet 3; mains 30,000-60,000d; 🏠) Just outside of Hon Chong (400m from Green Hill Guesthouse) on the road to Ha Tien, this excellent restaurant serves filling seafood dishes, which you can enjoy on the back deck above the water.

Hong Ngoc (coconuts around 3000d), just near the entrance gate to the Chua Hang Grotto, is a good place to sample delicious Ha Tien coconuts.

Aside from special orders prepared at your hotel, there are **thatch-roof restaurants** (mains 10,000-40,000d) along the beach and **food stalls** (mains around 10,000d) near the entrance of Chua Hang Grotto. For only a few dollars, you can point to one of the live chickens, which will be summarily executed and barbecued for you.

Getting There & Away

Chua Hang Grotto and Duong Beach are 32km from Ha Tien towards Rach Gia. The access road branches off the Rach Gia-Ha Tien highway at the small town of Ba Hon, which is just west of the cement factory at Kien Luong. Buses can drop you off at Ba Hon, from where you can hire a motorbike to get around.

There's also a direct bus service from Rach Gia to Hon Chong (25,000d, 2½ hours, three daily). It departs from the **Ben Xe Ha Tien bus station** (Đ 30 Thang 4) in Rach Gia and in Hon Chong from outside the Huong Bien Guesthouse.

RACH GIA

☎ 077 / pop 180,000

The prosperous capital of Kien Giang province, Rach Gia is a booming port city on the

Gulf of Thailand. The population includes significant numbers of both ethnic Chinese and ethnic Khmers. Most travellers give the chaotic centre short shrift, heading straight to the port for boats to Phu Quoc Island. Those who linger, however, might be charmed by the quaint waterfront and sleepy nearby streets, which provide great opportunities for both pleasant strolls and some decent seafood.

With its easy access to the sea and the proximity of Cambodia and Thailand, fishing, agriculture and smuggling are profitable trades in this province. The area was once famous for supplying the large feathers used to make ceremonial fans for the Imperial Court.

Information

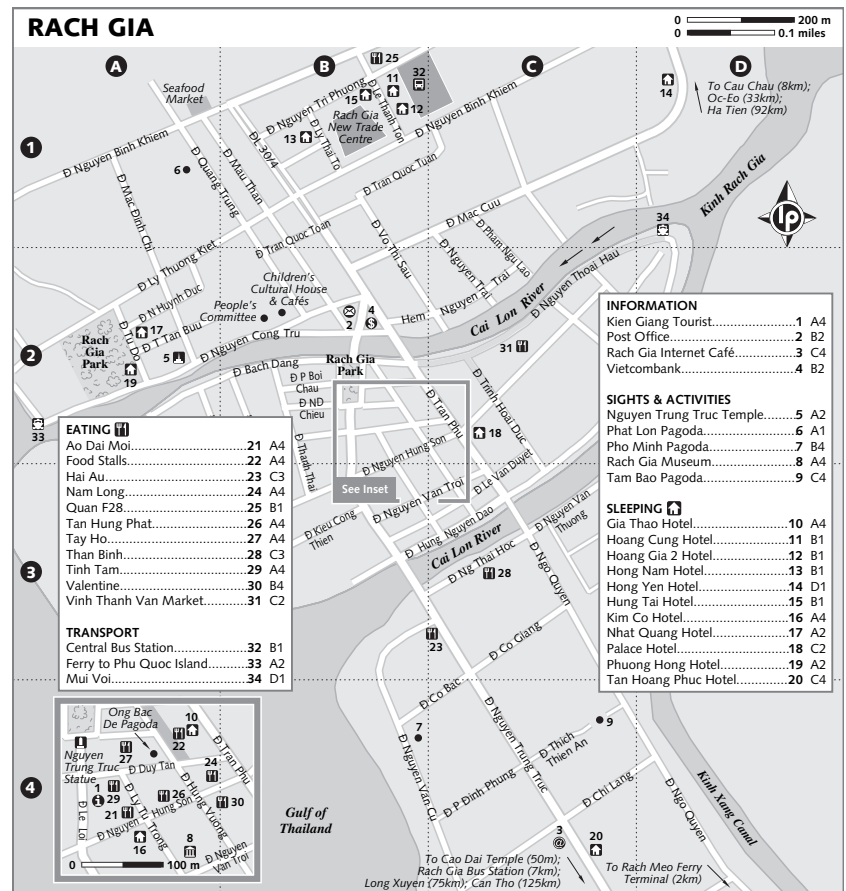
The provincial tourism authority is **Kien Giang Tourist** (Du Lich Lu Hanh Kien Giang; ☎ 862 081; dlhuanhkg@hcm.vnn.vn; 5 Đ Le Loi; 🕒 7am-5pm).

Vietcombank (☎ 863 178; fax 866 243; 2 Đ Mac Cuu) has a 24-hour ATM. On the road towards Long Xuyen, **Rach Gia Internet Café** (152 Đ Nguyen Trung Truc) has a pretty fast connection. The **post office** (☎ 873008; 2 Đ Mau Than) is centrally located near the river.

Sights

RACH GIA MUSEUM

The **Rach Gia Museum** (☎ 863 727; 21 Đ Nguyen Van Troi; admission free; 🕒 7-11am Mon-Fri plus 1-5pm Mon-Wed) was recently restored and is worth a visit to see the Oc-Eo artefacts and pottery.



NGUYEN TRUNG TRUC TEMPLE

This **temple** (18 Đ Nguyen Cong Tru) is dedicated to Nguyen Trung Truc, a leader of the resistance campaign of the 1860s against the newly arrived French. Among other exploits, he led the raid that resulted in the burning of the French warship *Esperance*. Despite repeated attempts to capture him, Nguyen Trung Truc continued to fight until 1868, when the French took his mother and a number of civilians hostage and threatened to kill them if he did not surrender. Nguyen Trung Truc turned himself in and was executed by the French in the marketplace of Rach Gia on 27 October 1868.

The first temple structure was a simple building with a thatched roof; over the years it has been enlarged and rebuilt several times. The last reconstruction took place between 1964 and 1970. In the centre of the main hall is a portrait of Nguyen Trung Truc on an altar.

PHAT LON PAGODA

This large Cambodian Hinayana Buddhist pagoda, whose name means Big Buddha, was founded about two centuries ago. Though all of the three dozen monks who live here are ethnic Khmers, ethnic Vietnamese also frequent the pagoda.

Inside the sanctuary (*vihara*), figures of the Thich Ca Buddha wear Cambodian- and Thai-style pointed hats. Around the exterior of the main hall are eight small altars.

The two towers near the main entrance are used to cremate the bodies of deceased monks. Near the pagoda are the tombs of about two dozen monks.

Prayers are held here daily from 4am to 6am and 5pm to 7pm. The pagoda, off Đ Quang Trung, is officially open during the seventh, eighth and ninth lunar months (summer season), but guests are welcome all year round.

PHO MINH PAGODA

Only a handful of Buddhist nuns live at **Pho Minh Pagoda** (cnr Đ Co Bac & Đ Nguyen Van Cu; ☎ prayers 3.30-4.30am & 6.30-7.30pm). This small pagoda was built in 1967 and contains a large Thai-style Thich Ca Buddha that was donated by a Buddhist organisation based in Thailand. Near the Thai-style Buddha there is a Vietnamese-style Thich Ca Buddha. The nuns living here reside in a building located behind the main hall. The pagoda is open to visitors and prayers are held daily.

TAM BAO PAGODA

This **pagoda** (☎ prayers 4.30-5.30am & 5.30-6.30pm), which dates from the early 19th century, is near the corner of Đ Thich Thien An and Đ Ngo Quyen; it was last rebuilt in 1913. The garden contains numerous trees sculpted as dragons, deer and other animals.

CAO DAI TEMPLE

This small **Cao Dai Temple** (189 Đ Nguyen Trung Truc) was constructed in 1969 and is worth a peek if you missed the Great Temple in Tay Ninh.

Sleeping

Phuong Hong Hotel (☎ 866 138; 5 Đ Tu Do; r 80,000-180,000d; ☎) Although the rooms are small, this family-run spot is clean and friendly, and the quarters are nicely maintained. Some bathrooms are cold-water only.

Hung Tai Hotel (☎ 877 508; 30/4 Đ Le Than Thon; r 120,000-250,000d; ☎) A fair range of rooms are on offer here, from windowless cells to bright and airy, green-hued quarters. Most rooms lack hot water.

Nhat Quang Hotel (☎ 863 433; 16 Đ Tu Do; r 130,000-160,000d; ☎) Although the walls are thin and the rooms smallish, this is a friendly place on a pleasant street near the river mouth.

Hong Yen Hotel (☎ 879 095; fax 863 789; 259 Đ Mac Cuu; r 150,000/250,000d; ☎) Modern, comfortable rooms are good value. Some rooms have balconies.

Hong Nam Hotel (☎ 873 090; fax 873 424; Đ Ly Thai To; r 150,000-250,000d; ☎) This minihotel offers sparkly, spacious rooms decked out with all the modern comforts. It's near the Rach Gia Trade Centre. Some have balconies.

Hoang Cung Hotel (☎ 872 655; fax 872 656; 26 Đ Le Thanh Ton; r 150,000-250,000d) Similar in standard and near the Hong Nam, the pricier rooms at this place have stuffed armchairs, bathtubs and funky bas-reliefs gracing the bedroom walls.

Kim Co Hotel (☎ 879 610; fax 879 611; 141 Đ Nguyen Hung Son; r 160,000/200,000d; ☎) This friendly place has colourful rooms (mint walls, orange curtains) and tubs in some bathrooms. Most rooms lack windows.

Gia Thao Hotel (☎ 878 576; fax 868 091; 164 Đ Tran Phu; r 160,000-300,000d; ☎) This well-located hotel has clean, nicely maintained rooms with polished floors. The best rooms have balconies; the worst lack windows.

Hoang Gia 2 Hotel (☎ 920 980; tuananggia@vnn.vn; 31 Đ Le Than Thon; r 180,000-250,000d; ☎) Set with nice

wood furnishings and bathtubs, the rooms here are in good shape, though some could use more light. There's a lift.

Tan Hoang Phuc Hotel (☎/fax 878 855; 173 Đ Nguyen Trung Truc; r 180,000-200,000d; ☎) A bit out of the way, Tan Hoang Phuc is excellent value for its clean and sizable rooms with attractive furnishings and big windows.

Palace Hotel (☎ 866 146; fax 867 423; 243 Đ Tran Phu; r US\$10-20; ☎) Surprisingly, the cheapest rooms on the top floor are the ones with balconies. This place is clean, but some rooms lack windows.

Eating

Rach Gia is known for its seafood, dried cuttlefish, dried fish slices (*ca thieu*), fish sauce and black pepper.

Ao Dai Moi (☎ 866 295; 26 Đ Ly Tu Trong; soups 8,000d; ☎ breakfast) The name means 'new *ao dai*' and Ao Dai Moi is run by a local tailor. The simple place has very good *pho* and won ton soup in the morning.

Than Binh (☎ 874 780; 2 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc; mains 10,000-15,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Near Hai Au, this is another popular spot with an enticing assortment of fresh-cooked dishes displayed on a long counter.

Tinh Tam (☎ 861 452; 22 Đ Ly Tu Trong; mains 10,000-20,000d; ☎ 7-10am; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This friendly, clean, minimalist place serves good vegetarian fare for breakfast only.

Nam Long (☎ 862 268; 100 Đ Nguyen Hung Son; mains 15,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A hole-in-the-wall spot delivering cheap plates of battered shrimp and fried noodles.

Tan Hung Phat (☎ 867 599; 118 Đ Nguyen Hung Son; mains 15,000-30,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This friendly newish place has a good selection of fish and seafood dishes. Blue tablecloths lend a homey vibe.

Valentine (☎ 920 852; 35 Đ Hung Vuong; mains 15,000-40,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is a cosy spot for coffee or a meal, with faux brickwork and pink, heart-covered columns. If all the frippery makes you giddy, head upstairs for karaoke.

Tay Ho (☎ 863 031; 6 Đ Nguyen Du; meals 15,000-50,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Serves excellent Chinese and Vietnamese dishes at reasonable prices.

Quan F28 (☎ 867 334; 28 Đ Le Than Thon; mains 30,000-50,000d; ☎ lunch & dinner) With pavement seating and a popular night-time buzz, Quan F28 is the place to go for molluscs – crab, shrimp, snails, blood cockles and the like.

Hai Au (☎ 863 740; 2 Đ Nguyen Trung Truc; mains 40,000-80,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Popular Hai Au serves decent Vietnamese standards, though its sunny terrace overlooking the Cai Lon River is the real draw.

Cheap, tasty Vietnamese food is sold from food stalls along Đ Hung Vuong between Đ Bach Dang and Đ Le Hong Phang.

Vinh Thanh Van Market, Rach Gia's main market area, stretches east of Đ Tran Phu along Đ Nguyen Thoi Hau, Đ Trinh Hoai Duc and Đ Thu Khoa Nghia.

Getting There & Away**AIR**

Vietnam Airlines flies between HCMC and Rach Gia twice weekly; see p485 for more details. The same flight carries on to Phu Quoc Island (p458).

BOAT

At the western end of Đ Nguyen Cong Tru is Rach Gia Park, where you catch the ferries across to Phu Quoc Island.

Mui Voi ferry terminal (*mui* means nose and *voi* means elephant – so named because of the shape of the island) is at the northeastern end of Đ Nguyen Thoi Hau.

Approximately three boats daily leave for Ca Mau (80,000d, three to five hours) from the **Rach Meo ferry terminal** (☎ 811 306; 747 Đ Ngo Quyen), about 2km south of town.

BUS

Buses from HCMC to Rach Gia leave from the Mien Tay bus station (p372); the express bus takes six to seven hours (around 90,000d). Night buses leave Rach Gia for HCMC between 7pm and 11pm.

The **Central bus station** (Đ Nguyen Binh Khiem) is in town, near the Rach Gia New Trade Center, and has daily express services to Can Tho (40,000d, three hours, every two hours), Ha Tien (22,000d, three hours, hourly), Long Xuyen, Sa Dec and HCMC. You can catch buses to Hon Chong (25,000d, 2½ hours, three daily).

There's also a bigger **Rach Gia bus station** (Ben Xe Rach Soi; 78 Đ Nguyen Trung Truc), 7km south of the city (towards Long Xuyen and Can Tho). Buses link Rach Gia with Can Tho, Dong Thap, Ha Tien, Long Xuyen and HCMC.

CAR & MOTORBIKE

Rach Gia is 92km from Ha Tien, 125km from Can Tho and 248km from HCMC.

civilians on Sunday but you must leave your passport with the military receptionist while you're on the base. In any event, do not try to sneak onto the beaches: make local inquiries and obey the rules.

Bai Cua Can & Long Beach

The most accessible beach, Bai Cua Can (Map p453) is in the northwest. It's 11km from Duong Dong.

Long Beach (Bai Truong; Map p453) is indeed a long, spectacular stretch of sand from Duong Dong southward along the west coast, almost to An Thoi port (20km). The southern end of the beach is known as Tau Ru Bay (Khoe Tau Ru). The water is crystal clear and the beach is lined with coconut palms.

Long Beach is easily accessible on foot (just walk south from Duong Dong's Cau Castle), but you will need a motorbike or bicycle to reach some of the remote stretches towards the southern end of the island. The beach around the family-run guesthouse area is a particularly popular spot. There are a few bamboo huts where you can buy drinks, but bring water if you're planning a long hike along this beach.

Bai Sao & Bai Dam

Two beautiful white-sand beaches along the southeastern part of the island are Bai Sao (Map p453) and Bai Dam (Map p453), situated just a few kilometres from An Thoi. There are a couple of beachfront restaurants at Bai Sao.

Just south of these beaches is undeveloped Bai Khem (Map p453), one of the most beautiful beaches on the island and also, sadly, a military area that's closed to the public.

SUOI DA BAN

Compared with the waterlogged Mekong Delta, Phu Quoc has very little surface moisture; however, several springs originate in the hills. The most accessible of these is **Suoi Da Ban** (Stony Surface Spring; Map p453; admission 1000d, motorbike 1000d). Basically, it's a white-water creek tumbling across some attractive large granite boulders. There are deep pools and it's pleasant enough for a swim. Bring plenty of mosquito repellent.

Another pleasant waterfall is **Suoi Tranh** (admission 1000d, motorbike 1000d), which is reachable by a 10-minute walk through the forest from the ticket counter.

FOREST RESERVE

Phu Quoc's poor soil and lack of surface water have disappointed farmers for generations, although their grief has been the island's environmental salvation. About 90% of the island is forested and the trees now enjoy official protection. Indeed, this is the last large stand of forest in the south.

The forest is most dense in the northern half of the island. The area is a forest reserve (Khu Rung Nguyen Sinh). You'll need a motorbike or mountain bike to get into the reserve. There are a few primitive dirt roads, but no real hiking trails.

AN THOI ISLANDS

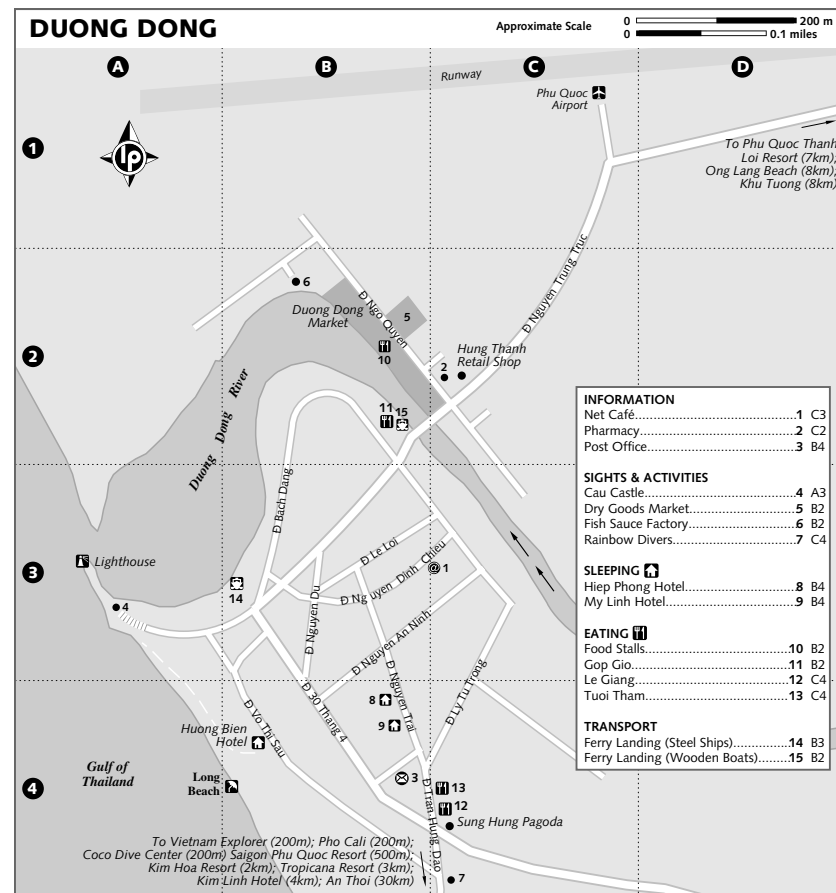
Off the southern tip of Phu Quoc are the tiny An Thoi Islands (Quan Dao An Thoi; Map p453). These 15 islands and islets can be visited by chartered boat, and it's a fine area for sightseeing, fishing, swimming and snorkelling. Hon Thom (Pineapple Island) is about 3km in length and is the largest island in the group. Other islands here include Hon Dua (Coconut Island), Hon Roi (Lamp Island), Hon Vang (Echo Island), Hon May Rut (Cold Cloud Island), Hon Dam (Shadow Island), Chan Qui (Yellow Tortoise) and Hon Mong Tay (Short Gun Island).

Most boats depart from An Thoi on Phu Quoc, but you can make arrangements through hotels in Duong Dong. The Tropicana Resort has a large boat for charter that can make the trip directly from Long Beach. You can also inquire at Rainbow Divers (see below). Boat charters are seasonal and generally do not run during the rainy season.

DIVING & SNORKELLING

Though Nha Trang gets the biggest billing as Vietnam's best dive destination, diving opportunities also abound around Phu Quoc – but only during the dry months of November to May. The reputable **Rainbow Divers** (Map p455; ☎ 0913-400 964; www.divevietnam.com; ⏰ 7am-10pm) has a dive centre on the island and offers a wide range of diving and snorkelling trips. Find it at Saigon-Phu Quoc Resort (see p457).

Other dive outfits are **Coco Dive Center** (Map p453; ☎ 982 100; cocodive@dng.vnn.vn; 58 Đ Tran Hung Dao) and **Vietnam Explorer** (Map p453; ☎ 846 372; www.divingvietnam.com; 36 Đ Tran Hung Dao). A two-tank dive costs around US\$45; snorkelling trips run US\$20.



KAYAKING

There are several places to rent kayaks along Bai Sao beach, and its protected, fairly calm waters make for a smooth ride. In addition to locals who hire out boats, you can ask at either restaurant along the beach: **My Lan** (Map p453; ☎ 990 779) and **Ai Xiem** (Map p453; ☎ 990 510). You can expect to pay around 60,000d per hour.

PHU QUOC PEARL FARM

On an isolated stretch of Long Beach, **Phu Quoc Pearls** (Map p453; ☎ 980 585; www.treasuresfromthedeep.com; ⏰ 8am-5pm) is a requisite stop if you're shopping for pearls. A small shop sells pearl necklaces and earrings, and wall panels describe (in English) how the oysters yield their

goods. There's a tiny café on site. Avid pearl hunters can find cheaper wares at kiosks in the village of Ham Ninh.

COCONUT TREE PRISON

Being an island and an economically marginal area of Vietnam, Phu Quoc was useful to the French colonial administration – chiefly as a prison. The Americans took over where the French left off and as a consequence Phu Quoc was used to house about 40,000 VC prisoners.

The island's main penal colony was known as the Coconut Tree Prison (Nha Lao Cay Dua; Map p453) and is near An Thoi town. Though it's considered an historic site, plans to open a museum here have been stalled. It's

still used as a prison, so not surprisingly, few visitors come to check it out.

CAU CASTLE (DINH CAU)

According to the tourist brochures, Duong Dong's main attraction is **Cau Castle** (Dinh Cau; Map p455; admission free). In fact, it's not so much a castle as a combination temple and light-house. It was built in 1937 to honour Thien Hau (Goddess of the Sea), who provides protection for sailors and fishermen. The castle is worth a quick look and gives you a good view of the harbour entrance. Around sunset, locals stroll along the promenade leading from the castle to the decrepit Huong Bien Hotel.

FISH SAUCE FACTORY

OK, so it's not your average sightseeing attraction, but more than a few have enjoyed a visit to the **distillery** (Map p455; admission free; ☎ 8-11am & 1-5pm) of Nuoc Mam Hung Thanh, the largest of Phu Quoc's fish-sauce makers. At first glance, the giant wooden vats may make you think you've arrived for a wine tasting, but one sniff of the festering *nuoc mam* essence brings you right back to reality (it's actually not so bad after a few minutes).

Most of the sauce produced is exported to the mainland for domestic consumption, though a surprising amount finds its way abroad to kitchens in Japan, the USA, Canada and France.

The factory is a short walk from the **markets** in Duong Dong. There is no admission charge to visit, though you'd be best off taking a guide along unless you speak Vietnamese. Keep in mind that although *nuoc mam* makes a wonderful gift for your distant relatives, you may not be able to take it out of the country. Vietnam Airlines, among other carriers, has banned it from its planes.

Tours

Your best bet for booking tours is through your hotel, as there's no local tourism authority in Duong Dong. Most travellers get around the island by hired motorbike. There are a handful of English-speaking motorbike guides on the island, the most notorious of whom is **Tony** (☎ 091 319 7334). Raised by a US military family, Tony speaks a distinctive breed of Al Pacino English that could easily land him a role in the next *Sopranos* episode.

Sleeping

Depending on the tourist load, prices for Phu Quoc's hotels and resorts are very much negotiable. Between late December and early January, accommodation fills up fast, so it's advisable to book well in advance. At last count, more than two dozen resorts littered the sands of Long Beach. Most hotels provide free transport to and from the airport; inquire when you book.

LONG BEACH

Khach San A74 (Map p453; ☎ 980 899; ksa74phuquoc@yahoo.com; 72 Đ Tran Hung Dao; r 150,000-250,000đ) This plain but friendly hotel is a good fallback option. It has clean, modern, sizable rooms, some with sea views.

Lam Ha Eco Resort (Map p453; ☎ 847 369; r/bungalow US\$12/15; ☎) Friendly, family-run Lam Ha is excellent value for money, with trim and tidy rooms and bungalows (some with verandas) scattered around a lush setting.

Tropicana Resort (Map p453; ☎ 847 127; www.reservation.tropicanavietnam.com; d US\$15, bungalow US\$35-70; ☎ ☎ ☎) The unassumingly pretty Tropicana is the kind of oasis you might need after a rough ferry ride. Attractive, handsomely furnished bungalows, all with veranda, face around the garden or the sea, and friendly English- and French-speaking staff give a warm welcome. Rates include breakfast.

Beach Club (Map p453 ☎ 980 998; www.beachclubvietnam.com; r/bungalow US\$15/20) Run by an English-Vietnamese couple, this laid-back spot provides great value for the money. Accommodations are in rustic but cosy sea-fronting bungalows (with hot water) or simpler rooms (with cold water). The owner is a great source of local info. There's a pleasant beachside restaurant.

Sea Star Resort (Map p453; ☎ 982 161; www.seastarresort.com; r US\$20, bungalow US\$30-38; ☎) New in 2005, this resort features pleasant, modern, yellow bungalows, all with individual porches; the best are just a few feet from the sea. Rooms are simple, clean and tidy.

Kim Hoa Resort (Map p453; ☎ 848 969; kimhoapresort@hcm.vnn.vn; r US\$22-32, bungalow US\$22-35; ☎ ☎ ☎) This popular guesthouse has wooden-sided bungalows (some overlooking the ocean) and rooms opening onto a garden. Accommodations are clean and nicely outfitted.

Thien Hai Son Resort (Map p453; ☎ 983 044; www.phuquocthienhaison.com; 68 Đ Tran Hung Dao; r US\$32-35, bungalow US\$42-44; ☎ ☎ ☎) This green-hued

complex has comfortable, airy rooms and trim, tidy bungalows, some with sea views. There are massage services, a tennis court and a pool. Breakfast included.

Sasco Blue Lagoon Resort (Map p453; ☎ 994 499; www.sasco-bluelagoon-resort.com; s/d from US\$80/100, bungalow US\$100-140; ☎ ☎ ☎) New in 2006, this high-end resort offers trim, attractively furnished rooms and bungalows – all with balconies. Spa services available.

Saigon-Phu Quoc Resort (Map p453; ☎ 846 510; www.vietnamphuquoc.com; 1 Đ Tran Hung Dao; r US\$95-190; ☎ ☎ ☎) Attractive rooms here are in villa-type houses, and have good views overlooking the beach. Rates include buffet breakfast; book through the website for significant deals.

Down a narrow road to the beach, 1km south of Tropicana, is a string of family-run bungalows and guesthouses as well as a few high-end options:

Thanh Hai (Map p453; ☎ 847 482; thanhhai99926@yahoo.com; r/bungalow from US\$4/6; ☎) One of the best deals on the island, this peaceful, family-run spot in the woods has clean and simple rooms and bungalows.

Nhat Lan (Map p453; ☎ 847 663; nhatlan98@yahoo.com; bungalow US\$8) Run by a kind family, Nhat Lan has comfortable concrete bungalows with thatch-roofs; there are hammocks for relaxing and a pleasant restaurant.

La Veranda (Map p453; ☎ 982 988; www.laverandaresort.com; r/villa from US\$140/210; ☎ ☎ ☎) Phu Quoc's fanciest resort, La Veranda has airy, stylish rooms with all the creature comforts and top-notch service. There's also a spa and the island's best restaurant (mains US\$12 to US\$15).

ONG LANG BEACH

Although it is rockier and less beautiful than Long Beach, Ong Lang Beach, 7km north of Duong Dong near the hamlet of Ong Lang, is unquestionably less crowded and quieter.

Phu Quoc Resort Thang Loi (Map p453; ☎ 985 002; www.phu-quoc.de; bungalows US\$15-30) A lovely resort, the Thang Loi has 12 wooden bungalows in a vast open garden setting, under the shade of cashew nut, palm and mango trees. The staff are friendly and the restaurant is cosy. Room rates vary depending on the size. Email ahead for reservations.

Mango Bay (Map p453; ☎ 0903-382 207; www.mangobayphuquoc.com; bungalows US\$25-50) This attractive, relaxed resort offers stylish rooms and bungalows, all with terraces. It's also an eco-friendly resort that uses solar-panels and organic and recycled building materials.

Bo Resort (Map p453; ☎ 0913-640 520; www.boresort.com; bungalows US\$30-65) Recommended by travellers, this resort with a good restaurant is run by a French-Vietnamese couple.

BAI SAO

My Lan (Map p453; ☎ 990 779; bungalow US\$15) Currently the only place to stay on this lovely beach, My Lan rents small, rustic but charming bungalows, each with wood floors, a thatch roof and a cold-water shower and toilet out back. There's a decent restaurant where you can eat fresh seafood and dig your feet into the sand.

DUONG DONG

Most travellers prefer to stay at the beach, though there are options if Duong Dong town steals your heart.

Hiep Phong Hotel (Map p455; ☎ 847 342; 17 Nguyen Trai; r 100,000đ; ☎) A friendly family-run spot offering clean, tidy rooms with air-conditioning and hot water bathrooms.

My Linh Hotel (Map p455; ☎ 848 674; 9 Nguyen Trai; r with fan/air-con 100,000/130,000đ; ☎) A few doors down from Hiep Phong, this minihotel is similar value with new rooms and English-speaking owners.

AN THOI

Although few travellers care to stay in workaday An Thoi (Map p453), there are some decent options.

Huyn Tham (☎ 990 505; Khu Pho 1; r with fan/air-con 100,000/150,000đ; ☎) One of several sparklingly new minihotels on the main road into town, Huyn Tham has clean, comfortable rooms, some with views over the water. It's 150m from the ferry pier.

Eating

Tuoi Tham (Map p455; ☎ 846 368; Đ Tran Hung Dao) A popular local place with good food (mains around 10,000đ to 30,000đ) and welcoming atmosphere on the way from Duong Dong to Long Beach. Outdoor seating.

Le Giang (Map p455; ☎ 846 444; 289 Đ Tran Hung Dao; ☎ lunch & dinner) This is very similar to Tuoi Tham in terms of popularity, atmosphere, location and prices. Outdoor seating.

Pho Cali (Map p453; ☎ 994 177; 39 Đ Tran Hung Dao; mains 15,000-20,000đ; ☎ lunch & dinner) This inviting noodle shop serves tasty bowls of *pho* and hot spring rolls. The English-speaking owner is a good source of island info.

Gop Gio (Map p455; ☎ 847 057; 78 Đ Tran Hung Dao; mains 30,000-50,000d; 🍴 lunch & dinner) On the main road into Duong Dong, this casual indoor-outdoor eatery has excellent seafood, with fresh, tasty dishes like shrimp with mango and steamed grouper with ginger.

German Biergarten (Map p453; 50 Đ Tran Hung Dao; mains 30,000-80,000d; 🍴 lunch & dinner) A favourite meeting spot of local expats, this place serves Bockwurst, pork chops, beef goulash and other Teutonic hits, along with German beer in bottles. There's bench-style seating and Johnny Cash singing overhead.

Ai Xiem (Map p453; ☎ 990 510; Bai Sao; mains 40,000-60,000d; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Located on the lovely white sands of Bai Sao beach, this is a great, low-key place for fresh seafood (including barbecue fish and fish cooked in clay pot). Tables are on the sands, a few metres from lapping waves. To get here, follow the paved road a few kilometres north of An Thoi and look for the 'My Lan' sign on the right, which leads down a rugged dirt track to the beach.

My Lan (Map p453; ☎ 990 779; Bai Sao; mains 40,000-60,000d; 🍴 lunch & dinner) About 400m south of Ai Xiem, My Lan offers equally good seafood and the same beachside allure.

For atmosphere and fine food, check out the seafront terrace restaurants at the Tropicana Resort (p456) and the Kim Hoa Resort (p456). La Veranda (p457) serves excellent dishes in a marvellous setting.

For something a bit more local, try the restaurants in the fishing village of Ham Ninh. There are several along the pier (end of the road), including **Kim Cuong I** (Map p453; ☎ 849 978; Ham Ninh; mains 30,000-40,000d).

There are heaps of cheap food stalls (Map p455) all around the market area in Duong Dong.

Drinking

Run by the same great crew who made this erstwhile Nha Trang institution a legendary good time, the friendly Rainbow Bar (Map p453) is located right on the beach, just south (150m) of Tropicana Resort.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Vietnam Airlines has four flights daily between HCMC and Duong Dong, Phu Quoc's main town.

A popular round trip between HCMC and Phu Quoc is to travel overland through

the Mekong Delta, taking a ferry to the island from Rach Gia and, when you're finally tanned and rested, taking the short one-hour flight (US\$35) back to HCMC.

BOAT

Numerous companies operate speedy hydrofoils that sail between Rach Gia and Phu Quoc. Boats leave the mainland daily between 7am and 8.30am, and return from Phu Quoc between 12.30pm and 1.30pm. Ticket prices for the 2½-hour journey range from 150,000 to 200,000d for adults, and 70,000 to 90,000d for children. Tickets must be purchased in advance – though you can usually find a seat by booking as little as 30 minutes ahead. There are no fast boats going between Ha Tien and Phu Quoc, though dodgy wooden market boats also make the journey (p446).

Hydrofoil companies include **Super Dong** (Rach Gia ☎ 077-878 475, Phu Quoc 077-980 111), **Duong Dong Express** (Rach Gia ☎ 077-879 765, Phu Quoc 077-990 747) and **Hai Au** (Rach Gia ☎ 077-879 455, Phu Quoc 077-990 555). All have offices by the dock in Rach Gia and in Phu Quoc – both by the An Thoi dock and in Duong Dong. Most travel agents can book passage.

All passenger ferries departing and arriving at Phu Quoc use the port of An Thoi on the southern tip of the island.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Phu Quoc's airport is almost in central Duong Dong. The motorbike drivers at the airport will charge you about US\$1 to most hotels in Phu Quoc, but are notorious for trying to cart people off to where they can collect a commission. If you know where you want to go, tell them you've already got a reservation.

BICYCLE

If you can ride a bicycle in the tropical heat over these dusty, bumpy roads, more power to you. Bicycle rentals are available through most hotels for about US\$1 per day.

BUS

There is a skeletal bus service between An Thoi and Duong Dong. Buses run perhaps once every hour or two. A bus (tickets 10,000d) waits for the ferry at An Thoi to take passengers to Duong Dong.

MOTORBIKE

You won't have to look for the motorbike taxis – they'll find you. Some polite bargaining may be necessary. For short runs within the town, 5000d should be sufficient. Otherwise, figure on around 10,000d for about 5km. From Duong Dong to An Thoi will cost you 30,000d.

Motorbikes can be hired from most hotels and bungalows for around US\$7 per day – though some of these bikes are fairly dodgy: inspect thoroughly before setting out. For pricier but very reliable motorbikes inquire at **Pho Cali** (Map p453; ☎ 994 177; 39 Đ Tran Hung Dao; per day from 250,000d).

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