

TRAVEL ITINERARY - VIET NAM:

The best travel booking agent in the whole of Vietnam for people based in Hanoi is: Mrs Phuong (Fiona) Nguyen and her husband Smiley, who work independently and own their own travel company.

Their company is called **Custom Vietnam Travel J.S. Company** (not to be confused with the bad company in the review of 08 Jul 09 below!).

They can book cheap flights, accom, private tours, or customise any other larger tours.

They are honest, professional, reliable, speak great English and will tailor any travel for your needs (and troubleshoot any issues and tell you if a hotel or tour is dodgy).

The local guides, drivers and contacts they use throughout Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos have also been excellent, polite and trustworthy.

Their details are below, and they also have a facebook page.

CUSTOM VIETNAM TRAVEL J.S.COMPANY

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Phuong and Smily ph: 0912490302 or ph 043 7185 750

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Our Itinerary – for an idea of a nth-sth trip

Ha Noi –Sights: Old Quarter, Hoan Kiem Lake, Temple of Literature, water puppets, museums, galleries, restaurants etc.

Hotel recommendation: Hanoi Lenid Hotel

08 Jul 09- 0800h Day trip to **Mai Chau**. (US\$37 each). Arrive Mai Chau at 1130h, lunch in Thai minority traditional stilt house. After lunch, short walk around village, then cycle tour around villages in the valley and to the market. 1530h return to Hanoi with stopover at Silk Village of Van Phuc. Rtn Hanoi approx 1900h. Need to take own drinks. Organise this with Phuong's company not the dodgy one we used (below).

Review:

Not having time to visit Sapa during her visit to Vietnam, I thought it would be a great idea to take my sister on a day trip to Mai Chau instead, in order to see how the minority Thai people live.

Unfortunately the tour we booked through **Customised Tours** at 22 Bao Khanh Street (2 doors up from the Kangaroo Cafe) did not deliver on the tour that was promised. We paid US\$37 per person for a mini-bus trip with guide to take us to Mai Chau, have lunch with the Thai people, do a walking tour around the village with a local guide, followed by a cycling tour of the River Valley, tour the markets and on the way home stop off at the Van Phuc silk village.

Well that sounded nice, but our day was more like as follows:

- Guide is late and seemingly drunk.
- We are picked up in an old Russian army jeep, no aircon, no seatbelts, fuel gauge and lights don't work, not waterproof in the rain.
- We picked up two other Dutch people and crammed them in as well.
- Guide appeared drunk and hyper, he talked all about partying in Ha Long Bay (which was his usual guiding gig) and was asking the Dutch bloke for tips on picking up younger women. He then fell asleep for the entire trip because he was a bit under the weather.
- On arrival, we talked to an old Thai fella in his PJs for about 5 mins and then they all abandoned us to eat lunch, so didn't really experience Thai culture. We learnt a bit about Holland though!
- No walking tour was conducted.
- A little old lady met us to do the cycling tour on decrepit bikes that all fell apart. It didn't matter anyway, because our guide was so hungover we stopped at her house after 5 mins of riding and drank tea for an hour

and our guide sent her off to buy him cigarettes...so still didnt really meet the Thai people.

- I did most of the translating as the guide couldnt be bothered talking to the local guide.

- Returned to the village by bike around a couple of paddy fields. Drove back to Hanoi, guide slept the whole way.

- We didn't stop at Van Phuc Village because the guide stuffed up the timings.

- Got soaked by monsoon rain in the jeep and it ran out of petrol in a busy tunnel on outskirts of Hanoi.

- Returned to Hotel an hour late.

The next day I went in and complained. The owner was smug, rude and patronising and said that all the tourists love the Jeep....he offered us another tour. As if! Anyway after aguing for over an hour they finally reluctantly refunded US\$30 back to me. I dont recommend anyone uses this company!

Sapa:

Recommendation for **Sapa** hotel = <https://www.sapadragonhotel.com/>

Sapa Dragon Hotel; Deluxe - \$70 aud/ room/ night

Organise guided walk around the hill tribe villages through Phuong's company.

More **Hanoi** sights - HCM Mausoleum (have to be here before 10am, dress code), Hoa Lo Prison, Ngoc Son Temple, markets, museums, shopping.

Transfer to **Ha Long Bay** 0830h, Overnight stay on 5 star Bhaya Cruise Junk, discounted prices for ex-pats. **Bhaya Cruises Co. Ltd**, Hanoi Sales Office, 7th Floor - 27 Mai Hac De street, Hanoi, Vietnam, Tel: +84-4-3 944 6777/ Fax: +84-4-3 944 6776, Email: sales@bhayacruises.com

1200h - Check-in at Bhaya Café, Halong City.

Embark on Bhaya Classic for a Welcome Cocktail followed by a cruise briefing.

13:00 – 15:30 Savour a delicious Vietnamese buffet lunch as Bhaya Classic heads to Bai Tu Long Bay passing the towns of Hon Gai and Cam Pha, Oan Lagoon, Mat Quy (Monster Head) and Am Tich (Teapot) Islets and Vung Vieng fishing village.

15:30 – 17:00 Visit the fishing village by tender (30 minutes each) then return to the vessel for free time at your leisure or join one of the following optional activities:

Discover the fishing village by local rowing boat;

Kayak into the village or swim near the boat;

Optional onboard activities: Sunbathing, traditional massage, etc.

Trip by tender to an isolated pristine beach for swimming, snorkelling, etc.

17:00 Bhaya Classic cruises through the Bay to its overnight anchorage near Ho Dong Tien.

Happy Hour & Vietnamese cooking demonstration on the Sundeck.

19:30 Sumptuous Seafood Set-dinner onboard.

21:00 Retire to your cabin or join the fishing program.

Overnight onboard Bhaya Classic.

Next day, more sight-seeing around **Ha Long Bay**, then return to Hanoi approx 4pm.

06:15 Start your day with Tai Chi on the Sundeck while complimentary tea & coffee are served.

07:00 Bhaya Classic weighs anchor to cruise through the Bay passing beautiful spots like Trong (Drum), Trinh Nu (Virgin) and Me Cung Caves, Coc Ngoi (Toad) Islet, etc.

08:00 Explore the Surprise Cave (Sung Sot).

09:00 Return to Bhaya Classic. Buffet brunch is served onboard. The vessel cruises leisurely back to harbor.

11:00 Disembark at Bhaya Café, Halong City. End of services.

Another excellent company is "**Dragon Legend Cruise**" 4star cruise \$423 aud/cabin - <https://www.dragonlegendcruise.com>

Bit more upmarket / gourmet than Bhaya.

Bhaya is becoming a bit tired nowadays (2018) and my friend loved Dragon Legend – as recommended by Phuong.

Fly to **Hue** early morning (flight VN 241 \$US65, 0700h- arr 0810h).

One night at Holiday Hotel (\$10 each, www.hueholidayhotel.com), see ancient architecture of old capital, temples, museums etc. Transfer from Airport US\$10. Good hotel, they also organise DMZ tours. Boat sight-seeing trip on perfume river (\$6 for an hr) etc. Historic interest.

Take open bus to **Hoi An** - \$11 each, 4h trip. Buy food to eat on way, as rest stop is dodgy, crap bus, when they arrive in Hoi An they try and get you to stay at their hotel. Then they dropped everyone miles away from the town centre. (Open bus ticket: confirm at 11 Nguyen Tri Phuong street, Hue city, Tel: 054 3820058 / 054 3833897)

****NB:** I now fly to/from Hoi An via **Da Nang** Airport and a transfer from there to Hoi An via the marble factory with one of Phuong's drivers.

2 nights in **Hoi An**, Accom = Ha An Hotel, (ph 0510 3863126, www.haanhotel.com US\$45 each). Nice Hotel, Quiet, great buffet breakfast included, shower is a bit shit / very low. To do: Shopping, eating, tailored clothes, cooking class, sights, handicraft workshop, Japanese bridge, boat over to windmill restaurant, etc.

Another hotel recommendation: Royal Riverside Hoi An with pool, Deluxe water front: \$73p.n. <http://www.royalriversidehoian.com>

Highly recommend the AO show in either Hoi An or HCMC. It is like Cirque de Soleil for VNM: <https://www.luneproduction.com/>

Bus and Boat day trip to **My Son** Holyland ruins (\$6), 0800h leave Hoi An and visit My Son Champa Hindu temples after wandering around the ruins, jump back on bus and drive to boat, hop on long boat, eat a cheap lunch then arrive at Tra Kieu woodcarving and handicraft village. Return to Hoi An around 2pm. (An Phu Tours, 722 Hai Ba Trung St, Hoi An, ph 0510 3862643) – not sure if this specific tour is still operating but there will be similar

Second night in **Hoi An**. Accom = Ha An Hotel.

Dinner at Dao Tien Restuarant, 21 Phan Boi Chan St. – a pretty garden restuarant that trains street kids.

Lots of cooking classes / market garden tours in Hoi An – similar to what Dr Chris Brown did recently on the Living Room TV programme.

Phuong's driver (Vu, ph: 0905 660 061) to take us to **Da Nang**, via Marble Mountains (\$10). Fly from Da Nang to **Nha Trang** (3 nights), Flight VN335, US\$48, dept 0940h – arr 1045h, Taxis a rip off, use Shuttle bus from Nha Trang airport into city, buy tix inside terminal on arrival = d150,000, 40 minute trip.

Explore Nha Trang, beaches, mudbaths, museums, diving, islands, more Cham temples. Nha Trang Accomodation = Truong Giang hotel. Nice and clean. Up an alley, not much noise, handy to all the resturaunts. D300,000 dong per night. No meals avail. Bit hard to find initially. Family owned. Tel: 058 522125 email: truonggianghotel@gmail.com A good resturant we found nearby was "Same same but different" cheap food and drinks and nice people.

We did an island swimming and snorkling tour with TM travel, email: t.mtravel@yahoo.com Tel: 058 6252128. The Island tour was \$6, all meals supplied, just paid for drinks, not too dear. Picked up and dropped back to hotel.

Unfortunately this tour was overbooked by TM Travel as every VN person in country is on school holidays at this time, so the boat was packed and full of seasick Vietnamese people. Better off booking a booze cruise one to avoid overcrowding and kids.

Also visited the mud baths, lovely and relaxing. Go early in day and have lunch. Heaps of tour buses turn up from 3pm onwards.

Alternative hotel – bit nicer: The Light Hotel & Resort - AUD\$69 per night

<http://thelighthotel.com.vn/>

Go from Nha Trang up to **Da Lat** (p307) 0900h. (US\$90 = \$45 each). Private Car transfer from Nha Trang to Dalat: Mr Lăng - cell: 0903509433 (booked through Phuong). A new road has knocked around 70km off the journey from Da Lat to Nha Trang -- previously the only route was down to Phan Rang and then up Highway 1.

Accom = Dreams Hotel US\$20 / \$35 AUD, incl breakfast. Pay on check out. Dreams Hotel is great! See Lonely Planet for full review, affordable and no hawkers. Book in advance for anywhere in Da Lat, we met a few people out in the cold! Dream hotel Dalat: 151 Phan Dinh Phung street Tel: 063.3833748 Fax: 063. 3837108. <http://www.dreamshoteldalat.com>

Da Lat, stayed second night, lots of outdoor activities. Cooler climate. Tour the area, famous easy riders MC tours, lots to see and do! We did a elephant riding tour with Highland Holiday tours, which also included the Datatla falls and rollercoaster, gondola ride up the mountain, The Crazy House and a city tour of French area.

You can also fly into Da Lat and do downhill mountain bike tour to Nha Trang. Cycle tour from Dalat to Nha Trang with Phat Tyre Ventures AUD\$75 <http://www.ptv-vietnam.com/>

From Dalat, fly to **HCMC** (Flight VN 467 US\$48, 1700h – arr 1750h) Dalat's Lien Khuong Airport is 30km (19 miles) south of town. A taxi between the airport to the city takes about 30 minutes, can book taxi or shuttle bus at Dreams Hotel.

Accom in HCMC = Duna Hotel (1 night) \$30 p.n. Duna hotel Saigon - Address : 167 Pham Ngu Lao Str., Dist.1, HCM City, Vietnam, Tel: (84.8) 8373 699 - Fax: (84.8) 8376 606. Duna Hotel a bit dirty, noisy and stinky, pretty good location though for Pham Ngu Lao. They try to rip you off in booking taxis, ferry tickets or exchanging money, it is better to do these things yourself in the city and not use the hotel services.

Other hotel recommendations (bit posher):

- Hotel Signature Saigon AUD\$47 per night <http://www.signaturesaigonhotel.com>
- Paradise Saigon Boutique, Deluxe: AUD\$85 <https://paradisesaigonhotel.com/>

Cyclo Resto Cooking Class AUD\$25.55

Luke Nguyen's Grain cooking class USD\$48 (+\$24.50 for wine pairing with dinner session) <http://www.grainbyluke.com/>

Overnight trip to **Vung Tau** with battlefield tour.

Accommodation = Tommy's 2 Hotel. Owned by Glenn Nolan, Mob: 0907 378523, email: nolanglenn@yahoo.com.au The website for Tommy's is www.tommysvietnam.com He and his Vn wife Trang, own Tommy's 1, 2 and 3. Booked \$20 p.n. = Tommy 2 is a mini hotel, in a back street about 4 km from Tommy 1 near the ferry. They hire out scooters for about \$7 per day. Taxis about 40,000 dong to hotel at the

most. The Tommys 2 room we were in stunk of cigarettes and not cleaned properly. Double bed no twin share. Glenn very helpful.

Day trip to **Mekong Delta**, Booked a one day Mekong floating market trip with Duna Hotel agent, not a bad trip. \$14. Leave 0730h, drive to Mekong Delta, at Cai Be get on a boat to travel through the floating market (not like in Thailand). Visit local village to see how rice paper, coconut candy, popped rice and other foods are made. Carry on boat to another island for lunch and cycling to explore. After lunch have a trip down local canals on a traditional row boat back to the main boat. Travel back to Vinh Long City, meet bus and return to HCMC.

Or you can book a Mekong tour with Phuong's company - **MEKONG DELTA - TOUR OF BEN TRE** \$95 AUD each

Phuong's company also do a **HO CHI MINH CITY & CU CHI TUNNELS** tour \$91 each. But you can get cheaper options.

In Saigon we also visited the Independence palace and War Remnants Museum. Walked to both, from hotel. 15,000 dong to get in each. Down in the basement of the Independence palace is the operations centre for the Vietnam war, very interesting. Palace closes down for lunch from 11am til 1 pm. Then at 4pm. So need to prob get there early, or go to War Remnants museum first.

Sophie's Art Tour (AUD\$55) – is worth doing if interested in VNM art history
<http://sophiesarttour.com/>

Dien Bien Phu

Muong Thanh hotel: AUD\$66 per night, make sure they have put clean sheets on your bed!!!
<http://www.muongthanh.vn/en/hotel/Dien-bien-phu-16.html>

War museum

Guided battlefield tour - AUD\$37 Guide, AUD\$107 car – organised through Phuong

Airport transfer in Hanoi - AUD\$19

Airport transfer in DBP: AUD\$10

One way Flight ticket Hanoi - Dien Bien Phu: AUD\$82

Rough Costs (the trip I did with my sister was a budget version, hence the alt recommendations for hotels / surface transport etc):

Flight Hanoi to Hue =	US\$65 each
Accom in Hue (Holiday Hotel) =	US\$20 a night twin share
Open Bus ticket to Da Nang=	US\$11 each
Ha An Hotel, Hoi An=	US\$45 a night twin share
Flight Da Nang to Nha Trang=	US\$48 each
Truong Giang Hotel, Nha Trang=	D200,000 –D300,000 a night twin share
Travel from Nha Trang to Da Lat=	US\$45 each (private car)
Dreams Hotel, Da Lat=	US\$20 a night twin share
Flight Da Lat to HCMC=	US\$48 each
Accom, Duna Hotel, HCMC =	US\$30 a night twin share
Accom Vung Tau 1 night=	US\$20 a night twin share
Ferries to Vung Tau=	D 160,000 each way
Battlefield tour=	US\$40 each
Taxi to HCMC Airport 26 July=	D 100,000 or \$26 AUD (transfer)

Mekong Delta 1 day trip= \$14 or \$95
Plus spending money and extra activities/tours in each place.

Recommendations for Cambodia:

Local Tour guide in **Phnom Penh**:

(Booked for me by Phuong) Miss Srea Cave - sreacave@gmail.com

Pick up at Phnom Penh airport, transfer to the hotel.

Afternoon, visiting Royal Palace, Silver Pagoda and Tuol Sleng genocide regime. Srea is an English speaking guide and will show you the sights incl: Silver Pagoda, the Royal Palace and the National Museum, Wat Phnom followed by Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, the Russian Market and the infamous Choeung Ek 'Killing Fields'.

In **Siem Reap**, check out the great packages offered by the Villa:

Rachel, Fiona, Anthony & The Villa Team

The Villa Siem Reap

153 Ta Phul Road

Siem Reap

PH: 855 63 761036 or 855 92 256691

Even if you're not staying with us you are welcome to join our small group tours - just click www.thevillasiemreap.com/tours.htm

Don't forget our famous 'Aussie BBQ Night' on a Tuesday & Friday and our delicious 'Khmer Tasting Night' on a Wednesday & Sunday.

I booked the 4 Nights Super Value Package at a rate of \$235 for single occupancy in the Superior Double, with 3 day temple pass IAW itinerary on their website. Includes breakfast, temple packed lunches, sunset wine pack on first night, own tuk tuk driver, guide on 1st day of temple exploration etc. Great value and service. Owned by Aussies.

My trip notes below....

On 27th June I was off to Cambodia for five days for a looksie. I started off in Phnom Penh and made it a mission to see everything in one day! My Guide Srear and I covered the Choeung Ek Killing Fields, S21 Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, the National Museum, Royal Palace and Silver pagoda as well as Wat Phnom and the Russian Market, phew long day! I stayed at the OK Guesthouse, bit of a Sh**hole, I'd recommend Billabong Guesthouse to the kids back home, which is where my friends Tracy and Jim stayed.

If Mum told me once, she told me a thousand times, I must take my own toilet paper, because apparently it is scarce over there in Cambodia and they charge US\$1 a roll (unquote). Well, I can tell you all that perhaps my Mother's travelling partner was nicking all the T.paper before she made it to the lil girls' room, because by the end of the trip I had a suitcase full of toilet paper and nowhere to use it, as it was in abundance in all locations!!

I flew to Siem Reap on the 28 June and did the 4 day Super Value package offered by the Villa guesthouse. Great package, I'd highly recommend to anyone going to SR to book in with these guys. Owned by Aussies, clean, affordable, trendy, friendly and professional and their package hits all the highlights! I didnt want to leave! The four days were a whirlwind in a Tuk tuk covering:

- shopping in the Old and Centre markets,
- Artisans Stone and Wood centre visit - an NGO helping disadvantaged youth,

- sunset picnic at Angkor Wat,
- a private guide and driver to explore Angkor Wat at my leisure,
- a guided tour in the ancient city of Angkor Thom to explore temples including the famous Bayon, Phimeanakas, Royal Palace, Kleangs, Preah Pithu Group, and unlock the secrets of the Terrace of the Leper King and Elephant Terrace.
- An early morning visit to Ta Prohm before the masses arrived. This is a very special picturesque temple and was used for some of the filming of Tomb Raider.
- a second day of temple explorations including visits to Preah Khan – Temple of the sacred sword, Ta Som, Banteay Kdei, Banteay Samre, just to name a few. (Was starting to get a bit sick of temples by now)
- A trip to The National Silk Centre out in the wops past rice paddies, buffaloes and local villages. I had a really interesting tour of the farm including; breeding of Cambodian Silk Worms, silk extraction process and the methods of creating some amazing pieces. The centre also exhibits some fantastic old looms as well as traditional Khmer dance costumes.
- Siem Reap town offered exploration of many galleries, restaurants, cafes, local markets and a very affordable aromatherapy massage at the Villa.
- I also stopped in and had lunch at the Butterfly Garden (also a charity) with many beautiful butterflies – until the afternoon monsoon hit.
- On the last day of the package I visited Kbal Spean, which involved a 1.5 km walk through the jungle, to the river that is a temple because the Hindu motifs are carved into the riverbed.
- Then I was off to Banteay Srei, the most intricately carved temple in all of Angkor.
- Stopped in at the Landmine Museum.
- And went on a boat trip of the floating fishing village and Tonle Sap Lake.

Trip Notes for Laos:

Finally, I have to tell you about Laos. I got back yesterday from a 5 day tour of Laos that started with 2 nights in **Vientiane** (the Capital) where I saw a famous temple or two, well ok, five! Including:

- the Wat Sisaket – temple of a thousand Buddhas,
- Wat Prakeo – the original home of the emerald Buddha that now lives in Bangkok,
- and the famous That Luang Stupa (the golden one in all the guide books, that houses a piece of the Lord Buddha – hair or a breastbone – bit iffy on the detail there).

Also climbed up the Patouxi (Laos version of the Arc de Triumph in Paris), had lunch overlooking the Mekong River, and explored the central markets.

The next day I went out past the Lao-Thai friendship bridge to the Buddha Park for some photos of various statues of Buddhist and Hindu legends.

I also visited the duty free market and the Ban Nong Bonathong weaving village as well as an active temple where I was blessed by the head monk (hopefully he didn't bless me with a future bearing many children...as my guide couldn't actually understand his chanting). And

we chatted to a shy young novice for a while, who actually wants to get out of being a monk and become a tour guide...hmmm.

The next day I flew to **Luang Prabang** (the former capital), which is a fantastic, scenic delight and now a UNESCO world heritage town. The first day I visited the main Stupas/temples in town (there are about 36 altogether), the national museum, climbed to the top of Mount Phousi for the view and the gilded Stupa and then explored the night street market and restaurants (read: booze up with backpackers).

The next day I did a river long-boat tour along the Mekong to Pak Ou Caves via Ban Xanghai village to sample the best of the local rice whiskey. We also stopped in Ban Kienglek to see the manufacture of Jute Sar paper and more weaving. You may see me on Aussie TV at some stage; some Maori Rugby player (I think he plays for the Warratahs) was doing a documentary of the area the same time/places I was on the Mekong river cruise. He is raising awareness for the Landmine issue in Laos and I think I may have ended up in a few of their shots. If anyone knows his name I'd like to know!

The final day (yesterday) I got up at 0515h to see the monks out on the street receiving offerings. After breakfast, I visited Phosi Market and continued on to the Khouangsi Waterfalls, which were turquoise coloured and really pretty and peaceful. We also stopped at the Ban Na Oun minority Hmong tribe village to see their way of life and handicrafts and saw the moon bear sanctuary, which had rescued bears from the bile trade and cruelty.