

Halong Bay, A Wonder of the World

Halong Bay is a body of water of approximately 1,500 square kilometers in north Vietnam with a 120-kilometer coastline, in the Gulf of Tonkin near the border with China, and 170-kilometers east of Hanoi. Ha Long Bay - means "Bay of the Descending Dragon" in the Vietnamese language.

The bay consists of a dense cluster of 3000 limestone monolithic islands, each topped with thick jungle vegetation, which rise spectacularly from the ocean. Several of the islands are hollow, with enormous caves. Hang Dau Go (Wooden stakes Cave) is the largest grotto in the Halong area. French tourists visited in the late 19th century, and named the cave Grotte des Merveilles. Its three large chambers contain large numerous stalactites and stalagmites (as well as 19th century French graffiti).

Some of the islands support floating villages of fishermen, who ply the shallow waters for 200 species of fish and 450 different kinds of mollusks. Many of the islands have acquired their names as a result of interpretation of their unusual shapes: such names include Voi Islet (elephant), Ga Choi Islet (fighting cock), and Mai Nha Islet (roof). 989 of the islands have been given names. Birds and animals including bantams, antelopes, monkeys, and iguanas also live on some of the islands.

The bay was World Heritage listed by UNESCO at the 18th meeting of the Committee of the World Heritages of UNESCO (in Thailand on December 17th, 1994). It is one of Vietnam's most popular tourist destinations.

Halong Bay has been the setting for local naval battles against Vietnam's coastal neighbors. On three occasions in the labyrinth of channels between the islands the Vietnamese army stopped the Chinese from landing. In 1288 General Tran Hung Dao stopped Mongol ships from sailing up the nearby Bach Dang River by placing steel-tipped wooden stakes at high tide, sinking the Mongol Kublai Khan's fleet. During the Vietnam War, many of the channels between the islands were heavily mined by the navy of the United States, some of which pose a threat to shipping to this day.

The surrounding land region of Halong City is rich with high grade coal deposits, and is operated by the Vietnamese government.

Caves & Grottos

Halong Bay's limestone islands are dotted with caves of all sizes and shapes. Most of these are accessible only by charter boat, but some can easily be visited on [Halong bay cruise tour](#).

Hang Dau Go (Grotto of Wooden Stakes): Known to French as the Grotto des Merveilles (Cave of Marvels), is a huge cave consisting of three chambers, which you reach via 90 steps. Among the stalactites of the first hall, scores of gnomes appear to be holding a meeting. The walls of the second chamber sparkle if bright light is shone on them. The cave derives its Vietnamese name from the third of the chamber. This chamber is said to have been used during the 13th century to store the sharp bamboo stakes that Vietnamese folk hero and war general, Tran Hung Dao, planted in the bed of the Bach Dang River to impale Mongolian general Kublai Khan's invasion fleet. It's the closest cave site to the mainland. Part of the same system, a nearby cave Hang Thien Cung has "cauliflower" limestone growths as well as stalactites and stalagmites.

Hang Sung Sot (Surprising Cave): is a popular cave to visit. It too has three vast and beautiful chambers, in the second of which there is an astonishing pink-lit "penis rock" (really, it's the only way to describe it), which is regarded as a fertility symbol. It too requires a hike up steps to reach it, and a loop walk through the cool interior takes you back to the bay. Hang Bo Nau, another impressive cave can be visited nearby.

Hang Trong (Drum Grotto): is so named because when the wind blows through its many stalactites and stalagmites, visitors think they can hear the sound of distant drumbeats.

Bai Tu Long Bay

There's more to northeastern Vietnam than Halong Bay. The sinking limestone plateau, which gave birth to the bay's spectacular islands, continue some 100 km to the Chinese border. The area immediately northeast of Halong Bay is known as Bai Tu Long Bay.

Bai Tu Long Bay is every bit as beautiful as its famous neighbor. Indeed, you could say it's more beautiful, since it has scarcely seen any tourist development. This has its positives and negatives. The bay is unpolluted and undeveloped; however, as yet there's no tourism infrastructure. It's pretty hard travelling around and staying here, and unless you speak Vietnamese, it's difficult to get information.

Bai Tu Long Bay's islands

Van Don Island (Dao Cai Bau): Van Don is largest and most populated and developed island in the archipelago. However, there is no tourism development here yet. Cai Rong is the main town on the island, which is about 30km in length and 15km across at the widest point. Bai Dai (Long Beach) runs along much of the southern side of the island and is hard-packed sand with some mangroves. Just offshore, almost touching distance away, there are stunning rock formations similar to those in Halong Bay.

Quan Lan Island (Dao Canh Cuoc): The main attraction here is beautiful, 1km-long white-sand beach shaped like a crescent moon. The water is clear blue and the waves are suitable for surfing. The best time to play in water is from about May to October - winter is too chilly. However, at the present there are no tourist facilities. The northern part of the island has some battered ruins of the old Van Don Trading Port. There is little to show that this was once part of the major trading route between Vietnam and China. Deep-water ports, such as Hai Phong and Hon Gai, long ago superseded these islands in importance. Boats or Junks cruise take about 6~7 hours to get from Halong City to Quan Lan Island via Bai Tu Long Bay.

Van Hai Island (Cu Lao Mang): Ancient Chinese graves have been found here, indicating that this region has seen considerable maritime trade. There are many good beaches, but a sand-mining pit (used to make glass) is destroying the place.

Ban Sen Island (Dao Tra Ban): Also know as Tra Ban Island, this is closest major island to Van Don Island, making it easy to visit. However, there are no tourist facilities and as a visit will mean an overnight stay, be prepared to be sufficient.

Co To Island (Dao Co To): In the northeast, Co To Island is the farthest inhabited island from the mainland. Its highest peak reaches a respectable 170m. There are numerous other hills, and a large lighthouse atop one of them. The coastline is mostly cliffs or large rocks, but there's at least one fine sandy beach. Fishing boats usually anchor just off here, and you can walk to some of them during low tide. There is a small and very basic guesthouse on the island. Ferries bound for Co To Island depart Van Don island on Monday, Wednesday and Friday at unspecified time-check the schedule in Cai Rong. The return from Co To to island on Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. There are no boats on Sunday. The journey takes about 5 hours.

Cat Ba Island

Cat Ba Island is situated in Ha Long Bay, 50 km to the east of Hai Phong City, in Northern Vietnam. It is the largest of 366 islands in the Cat Ba Archipelago, and has a surface area of about 140 square km. In November 2004, the Cat Ba Archipelago was approved as UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. The Cat Ba Archipelago shares the distinctive rugged appearance and scenic beauty of the Ha Long Bay Area, that was declared a UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site, in 1994. The area is one of the best examples in the world of a Karst landscape invaded by the sea. Some 1500-2000 large and small islands and cliffs rise steeply from the shallow marine waters. Many of these islands reach towering heights of 50 to 100m with sheer vertical cliffs on all sides.

Spectacular rock relief and bizarre rock formations provide evidence of a long history of erosion and landscape evolution through the sculpturing power of water. The greatest part of the islands' mountain range like most of the smaller offshore islands of the Archipelago, are covered by tropical moist limestone forest. Cat Ba Island also has coral terraces, sandy beaches, freshwater wetland areas, tidal flats, mangrove forests and willow swamp. Spectacular scenery and a high diversity of landscapes make Cat Ba a special place and it has become a main destination for national and international tourists.

The People

Cat Ba Island is currently inhabited by almost 12000 people, living in 6 communes - of which Cat Ba Town with 7820 people is the largest. Photos of people and floating villages

The area has two ethnic groups, namely the Kinh and the Chinese-born Vietnamese that are intermingled and not separated into different areas or communities. Based on archaeological remains, it seems that people have inhabited the Cat Ba area for at least 6000 years. Local livelihoods in the villages are built on subsistence agriculture and fishing. Comparatively new sources of employment and income at the local level are shrimp and fish-farming, and tourism.

The National Park

Cat Ba National Park was established in 1986. At 85 square km the park covers more than half of the main island. Including some smaller islands, the park currently comprises 98 square km of total land area. An additional 54 square km of inshore waters also belong to the national park. Cat Ba National Park was Vietnam's first national park to include both terrestrial and marine ecosystems.

It is recognized nationally and internationally for its importance to biodiversity conservation. This is not only because the island has a high number of different ecosystem and habitat types, but also because it possesses a great variety of plant and animal species, many of which, like the Golden-headed Langur, are now rare and endangered.

In Vietnam's Biodiversity Action Plan, Cat Ba National Park is listed in the highest category regarding its value for biodiversity conservation.

High terrestrial biodiversity

- About 800 vascular plants, including 25 species in the Red Data Book of Vietnam, 265 taxa for timber, 357 taxa for medicinal plants and 65 taxa for economically important food plants have so far been recorded.
- Large and partly rare mammals include the Golden-headed Langur, the Southern Serow (*Capricornis sumatraensis*), Rhesus macaques (*Macaca mulatta*), Leopard Cat (*Prionailurus bengalensis*), black giant squirrel (*Ratufa bicolor*), and civet cats (*Viverricula indica*, *Paradoxurus hermaphroditus*).
- The cave, land snail and butterfly fauna is rich including the most northerly cave-adapted crab species, plus four species of true cave snails.

Source: [Get Vietnam Visa](#)