

# VIETNAM (*Việt Nam*)



## QUICK FACTS

**Population:** 92 million  
**Area:** Slightly larger than New Mexico  
**Capital:** Ha Noi (9 million)  
**Languages:** Vietnamese (official), English (increasingly favored as second language), some French, Chinese, Khmer, and mountain area languages (Mon-Khmer and Malayo-Polynesian)

## EDUCATION

Historically, education

was one of the few avenues of social mobility for peasants. Education is divided into five levels: pre-school, primary, secondary, high school and higher education. Primary education (grades 1-5) is compulsory. Grading is done on a 10 - point scale, 10 being the highest score. Students are ranked within their own classroom, where first place goes to the student with the highest total score for the semester, making education competitive. In addition to content, students' handwriting is also emphasized. The literacy rate for age 15 and over, is 94%. Traditionally rote learning was key and little emphasis was placed on inquiry-based or critical thinking. Studies show Vietnamese students outperform their American counterparts in math and sciences but are weaker with critical and analytical skills.



Children in traditional Vietnamese garb "Ao dai"

*Viet Nam is officially known as the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam ( Cộng hòa xã hội chủ nghĩa Việt Nam). The name Viet Nam literally means "South Viet," and was adopted in 1945. The official national language of Viet Nam is Vietnamese, a tonal monosyllabic language spoken by the majority of the population. In its early history, Vietnamese writing used Chinese characters. In the 13th century, the Vietnamese developed their own set of characters, referred to as Chữ nôm. In the 17th century, Portuguese missionaries developed the Romanized Vietnamese script that is used today.*

## RELIGION

Officially, Viet Nam is an atheist state. While the majority of the population report themselves as "non-believers," the majority practice informal religious customs that combine Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. Breakdown: "Non-believers" 80.8%, Buddhist 9.3%, Catholic 6.7%, Hoa Hao 1.5%, Cao Dai 1.1%, Protestant 0.5%, Muslim 0.1%.

## ETHNICITY

The largest ethnic group, the Kinh, are 85.7% of the population and live mainly in the deltas and coastal plains. As a largely homogeneous social and ethnic group, the Kinh possess significant political and economic influence over the country. However, Viet Nam is also home to over 50 other ethnic minority groups, which include the Hmong, Dao, Tay, Thai, and Nùng, many of which inhabit the mountainous regions of Viet Nam.

## FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS & CUSTOMS

Households in Viet Nam are often comprised of three or four generations living under the same roof. Western distinctions of "immediate" and "extended" family resonate much less in many Vietnamese cultures. Socially speaking, children are expected to care for their parents in old age, hence the multi-generational families that include grandparents and great-grandparents. Typically, Vietnamese place great importance on officially recognized and traditional marriages. Money is a common gift for many occasions such as weddings, birthdays, graduations and New Year. "Thank you," "please," and other polite words easily and frequently used by Americans are saved for poignant exchanges in Viet Nam. The omission of these niceties in everyday-speech by Vietnamese should not be construed as impoliteness. The Lunar New Year (Tet) is the largest holiday celebration. Other major holidays include "National Day" on Sept. 2, May 1 - International Labor Day, April 30 - Liberation/ Reunification day. However, April 30 is seen as "the fall of Saigon" by many Vietnamese Americans.





## CONTEMPORARY VIET NAM

Viet Nam became independent from Imperial China in 938 AD, but it was later colonized by the French in the mid-19th century. Viet Nam gained independence from the French in 1954 after Vietnamese forces defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu. Following independence, a period of instability ensued in which two declared states claimed governing authority: the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam (DRVN) leading from northern Viet Nam and the Republic of Viet Nam (RVN) in the southern part of the country. Conflict between the two sides quickly intensified due to heavy foreign intervention during the Vietnam - American War, which ended with a DRVN victory in 1975. Vietnam was then unified under a Communist government, but was left politically isolated and impoverished from decades of war.

In 1986, the government initiated a series of social and market reforms called “Đổi Mới”, which transformed the country. These reforms led to economic growth and integration in international trade and markets. By 2000, Viet Nam had established diplomatic relations with most nations and its economy had become one of the fastest-growing in the region. Economic reforms reduced poverty levels from about 60% in the early 1990s to 20.7% in 2010, according to the World Bank. The country also made considerable progress in education. However, Viet Nam still suffers from high levels of socio-economic inequality while also facing problems of environmental degradation and corruption.

## VIETNAMESE IN THE USA

Prior to 1975 most Vietnamese living in the U.S. were family members of American servicemen or scholars of Viet Nam. A considerable number of Vietnamese immigrants arrived after 1975 when the Viet Nam - American War ended. With the U.S. defeat, many Vietnamese with connections to the American-backed Republic of Viet Nam (RVN) were air lifted out of the country while others left on ships. The second wave of immigrants came after 1977 when people faced threats of being placed in communist “re-education camps.” Many left on over crowded boats. These people came to be known as the “boat people.” The next three groups came with the U.S. Orderly Departure Program, the Homecoming Act in 1987, and finally the Humanitarian Operations program that admitted families of re-education camp survivors. Vietnamese immigrants today are typically relatives of the above groups who have been sponsored to come to the U.S. Most Vietnamese populations in America reside in California, Texas, Washington, Florida, and Virginia. In 2010 there were 1.5 million people in the U.S. who identified themselves as Vietnamese. It is important to note that the majority of Vietnamese immigrants—especially the older generation who did not grow up in the U.S.—are loyal to, and identify with, the RVN. For this reason many Vietnamese in America do not identify with the official Vietnamese flag below, but rather the red-striped flag of the RVN.



Sapa, Viet Nam

## NAMES

Vietnamese names generally consist of three parts: family name, middle name and given name, used in this order. Individuals can be referred to by their whole name, given name, or a hierarchic pronoun. These pronouns reveal familial and/or social relationships, as well as differences in age or attitude of the speaker towards the person.

## FAMOUS VIETNAMESE

Arguably, the most famous Vietnamese person is Hồ Chí Minh, also known as “Uncle Hồ.” He was a communist revolutionary leader who was above all a nationalist, but also a communist. He led the Viet Minh coalition which ultimately defeated French colonialists at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954. His image is ubiquitous in Viet Nam today.

## VIETNAMESE WORDS

Hi .....	<i>Xin chào!</i>
Bye .....	<i>Tạm biệt</i>
Good morning .....	<i>Chào buổi sáng</i>
Yes .....	<i>Vâng</i>
No .....	<i>Không</i>
Please.....	<i>Làm ơn/xin vui lòng</i>
You're welcome.....	<i>Không có chi</i>
Thank you .....	<i>Cảm ơn</i>
How are you? .....	<i>Bạn khỏe không</i>
I do not understand .....	<i>Tôi không hiểu</i>
Do you understand? .....	<i>Bạn hiểu không</i>
What is your name?.....	<i>Bạn tên gì?</i>
My name is .....	<i>Tên tôi là...</i>
Where are you from? ....	<i>Bạn từ đâu đến?</i>



The flag of Viet Nam was first adopted in 1940; Red symbolizes revolution and blood while the yellow star represents the unity of workers, peasants, intellectuals, youths and soldiers in building socialism.



## USEFUL LINKS

- [CIA World Factbook: Viet Nam](#)
- [National Geographic: Viet Nam](#)
- [Ethnomed Culture Profile: Viet Nam](#)
- [New York Times Country Profile: Viet Nam](#)