

SAFETY AND SECURITY

Vietnam is a relatively safe country for visitors, including women travelling alone. In fact, given the country's recent history, petty crime in Vietnam's major cities has risen along with rising numbers of tourists. That said, petty crime is on the rise – though it's still relatively small-scale and shouldn't be a problem if you take common-sense precautions.

PETTY CRIME

As a tourist, you're an obvious target for thieves (who may include your fellow travelers): carry your passport, travelers' cheques and other valuables in a concealed **money belt**. Don't leave anything important lying about in your room: use a safe, if you have one. A cable lock, or **padlock** and chain, comes in handy for doors and windows in cheap hotels, and is useful for securing your pack on trains and buses. It's not a bad idea to keep \$100 or so separate from the rest of your cash, along with insurance policy details and photocopies of important documents, such as the relevant pages of your passport including your visa stamp.

At street level it's best not to be ostentatious: forego eye-catching jewelry and flashy watches, try to be discreet when taking out your cash, and be particularly wary in **crowds** and on **public transport**. If your pack is on the top of the bus, make sure it's attached securely (usually everything is tied down with ropes) and keep an eye on it during the most vulnerable times – before departure, at meal stops and on arrival at your destination. On trains, either cable-lock your pack or put it under the bottom bench-seat, out of public view. The odd instance has been reported of travelers being drugged and then robbed, so it's best not to accept food or drink from anyone you don't know and trust. Bear in mind that when walking or riding in a cyclo you are vulnerable to **snatchers on motorbikes**; don't wear cameras or expensive sunglasses hanging round your neck and keep a firm grip on your bags. If you do become a target, however, it's best to let go rather than risk being pulled into the traffic and suffering serious injury.

The place you are most likely to encounter street crime is in **Ho Chi Minh City**, which has a fairly bad reputation for bag-snatchers, pickpockets and con artists. Be wary of innocent-looking kids and grannies who may be acting as decoys for thieves – especially in the bar districts and other popular tourist hangouts. It's best to avoid walking alone at any time outside Districts One and Three. We recommend you take taxis rather than cyclos when travelling at night; taxis in Vietnam are numerous, metered and inexpensive. To assist in finding your way back to your hotel, make sure you obtain a hotel address card to show drivers.

It's important not to get paranoid, however: crime levels in Vietnam are still a long way behind those of Western countries, and violent crime against tourists is extremely rare.

If you do have anything stolen, you'll need to go to the nearest **police station** to make a report in order to claim on your insurance. Try to recruit an English-speaker to come along with you – someone at your hotel should be able to help.

MILITARY AND POLITICAL HAZARDS

Not surprisingly, the Vietnamese authorities are sensitive about **military installations** and strategic areas – including border regions, military camps (of which there are many), bridges, airports, naval dockyards and even train stations. Anyone taking photographs in the vicinity of such sites risks having the memory card removed from their camera or being fined.

Unexploded ordnance from past conflicts still poses a threat in some areas: the problem is most acute in the Demilitarized Zone, where each year a number of local farmers, scrap-metal scavengers or children are killed or injured. Wherever you are, stick to well-trodden paths and never touch any shells or half-buried chunks of metal.

BEGGARS, HASSLE AND SCAMS

Given the number of disabled, war-wounded and unemployed in Vietnam, there are surprisingly few **beggars** around. Most people are actually trying hard to earn a living somehow, and many day-tours include a visit to a factory that employs disabled workers to produce handicrafts or local products.

At many tourist spots, you may well be swamped by a gaggle of children or teenagers selling cold drinks, fruit and chewing gum. Although they can sometimes be a bit overwhelming, as often as not they're just out to practice their English and be entertained for a while. They may even turn out to be excellent guides, in which case it's only fair that you buy something from them in return.

A common **scam** among taxi drivers is to tell new arrivals in a town that the hotel they ask for is closed or has moved or changed its name. Instead, they head for a hotel that pays them commission. This may work out fine (new hotels often use this method to become known), but more often than not it's a substandard hotel and you will in any case pay over the odds since the room rate will include the driver's commission. To avoid being ripped off, always insist on being taken to the exact address of your chosen hotel.