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According to a recent survey by the WTTC (The World Travel & Tourism Council) Vietnam has the 6th highest growth rate in tourism in the world. And with moves afoot to rectify some of the fundamental problems like pollution, it seems that the number of tourists visiting this South-east Asian country will continue to increase.

From the highlights of Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) in the south and Hanoi, Sapa and Ha Long Bay in the north, there is a lot on offer in all levels of the tourist industry.

In Ho Chi Minh City, once the visitor masters crossing the road and dodging the tens of thousands of motor-bikes, the most popular destination is actually a two hour journey from the city centre at Cu Chi. A labyrinth of underground tunnels totalling 250km, these were used to hide from the Americans during the Vietnam War. The tour can be organised by any one of a number of tour operators. En route, a visit to the workshop of the disabled (predominantly people affected by 'agent orange' and their offspring), is mandatory.

In the north, Hanoi offers a quieter experience than Saigon although the pace is still a little frantic for some. The highlight here is the Ho Chi Minh Museum with it's wonderful displays and impressive gardens and walkways.

Sapa is a town of mountain dwellers at an elevation of 1600 metres. There are countless trekking opportunities and the scenery is spectacular. The people you meet as you wander through the hills are happy and industrious. They'll walk with you for hours in the hope that you'll eventually buy something from them, but don't care at all if you purchase nothing. Their smiles and laughter are perhaps the most contagious in the world.

At Ha Long Bay, there are opportunities to either float quietly on an old junk as you ply the waters of the Tonkin Gulf at plankton pace, or hop in a fast boat and take it all in as you zoom past dramatic mountains of rock in every direction. Many people believe that this is the best ocean experience available in all of Asia. Staying on board overnight on one of the slower vessels enables the visitor to enjoy the starry night sky in all its dazzling beauty and to sleep with the sound of the sea gently lapping at the hull.

Many visitors to Vietnam are choosing a relatively new way of holidaying here, by staying away from the tourist hotels to experience an interaction with local communities and being a part of a family, even if only for a night or two. The Homestay network is growing and is well worth the time to investigate the many options available.

To forego some of the usual creature comforts is not everyone's idea of a holiday, but for those who do, a rich assortment of experiences awaits. Imagine sitting in a bamboo home on stilts above the water, sipping rice wine and listening to stories of the lives of these people, as a meal is prepared in the next room. A highly popular homestay destination is the Mekong Delta. Those lucky enough to come here will take away memories of sight and sound unique even to Vietnam. To enjoy a spectacular sunset across the waters of the Mekong, catch a glimpse of the new moon in a twilight sky and marvel at the chatter of voices from the kitchen or the distant laughter of children at play, are memories that only those who stay with a family will experience.

That having been said however, there are also experiences which fall in between the usual hotel style holiday and the homestay experience. One example is to be found at Jungle Beach, 60 kilometres north of Nha Trang on the east coast. Tel: 058-622-384 and email: syl@dng.vnn.vn

Owner Sylvio Lamarche from Canada believes that this area offers a great deal. He paddled in on a kayak 5 years ago and decided to stay. So far he's built 15 beach huts with plans for nine more. Situated at the foot of imposing mountains, Jungle Beach is extremely laid back. For \$AU22 per person a night, you get not only your room but all the food you can eat, with menu changes daily. Kilometres of fine white sand greet you and there's swimming and snorkelling opportunities here and around the nearby rocks.

Future plans include a communal spa, sunken decks and canoe hire. The highlight of a stay here varies depending on who you ask, but it seems a toss up between the chance of night swimming marvelling at the phosphorescence you create as you glide through the water, or the possibility of spotting the black shank douc langur monkey (*Pygathix Cinereus*), whose home is the jungle of the nearby hills.

However you decide to enjoy your visit to Vietnam though, you'll leave with memories of spectacular scenery, rich history and a population of friendly obliging people.

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There are many highlights to South-east Asia but also a considerable number of drawbacks. In Cambodia there are the magnificent and impressive 13th century ruins at Angkor Wat near the town of Sien Riep. There is so much to see, it's possible to spend days in this one locality alone. The capital Phnom Penh too is well worth more than just a passing visit.

The best way into Vietnam is by boat along the Mekong River. It is by no means a beautiful experience for the majority who visit the area, but it is rewarding. To see how the people live on the water is certainly worthwhile. But there is no sanitation, so it's advisable to keep your mouth shut on windy days when the tiniest droplet of water blown in on the breeze could find its way to the lips of an unsuspecting visitor and lead to all manner of health problems.

Other highlights of this part of south-east Asia are the waterways of Ha Long Bay, truly a breathtaking part of Vietnam, and being ocean there's less chance of disease in the waters. Also spectacular are the hills of the Sapa region in the north-west, where the people are friendly in the extreme and their lifestyles a pleasure to experience. The scenery too is awe inspiring.

The major cities of Saigon and Hanoi are worth a visit. Saigon though in recent years has seen the introduction of the motor-bike and it is a bewildering experience to behold as thousands of the modern day beast, descend on you from all directions. The incessant blowing of horns in this and other parts of Asia is a tiring experience too.

Not all of south-east Asia is as one would expect. The coastal regions of Thailand for example are sadly lacking in pollution control and the evidence of an uncaring population is everywhere. The postcards and glossy books of the region depict pristine beaches bathed in glorious sunshine, but this is far from the reality of most places. When the tide is out, confirmation of mankind's lack of thought for his environment is spread far and wide. Rusty cans, broken bottles and plastic in astonishing quantities are a sad indictment of modern man's approach to his world.

Thailand too wins my prize for the worst restaurant staff in the world. Meals are never synchronised to arrive together and some never make it to the table at all. Repeated requests fall on deaf ears. I experienced one humorous moment when a group of six asked for cutlery with which to eat their meal. The meals had arrived without any implements to eat with, and when the waiter returned, he brought six knives. When asked for forks, he came back with two more knives. Drinks arrive without glasses. Glasses arrive without drinks. One restaurant 'Sunrise Tropical Resort' at East Railay Beach off the Krabi coast is particularly worthy of mention. A staff member asked my friend and me to leave in the strangest manner I've yet experienced in a restaurant anywhere. We'd entered the place noticing their very presentable smorgasbord breakfast and asked at reception if we could join what appeared to be guests from their own rooms and others too. We were welcomed and offered a seat, stating that we could order either from the smorgasbord or a la carte. We sat down and waited many long moments before being served. A gruff man came over finally and as I started my order, he said this: 'You go, you no guest.' I asked what he meant, saying that we'd been shown a seat and offered a menu by the receptionist. "You no stay

here, you go...I manager, go - you no guest." So we did, but not before telling him we'd been welcomed and seated by his staff. People like this really lose out in the end. That evening as a group of eight were about to go in and have dinner there, I told one of them this story, and after deliberation they unanimously decided to go elsewhere.

I find it depressing in the extreme to see this sort of thing happening. There is no excuse for poorly trained staff, especially at the management level.

It is also depressing to see locals lying about in a state of lethargy waiting for a customer for their boat or to sell them something: "Hullo sir, you want buy?" "You want boat ride?" "You want eat my restaurant?" My advice would be for half of them to actually work and put in a day's genuine effort, and the other half to start cleaning up their environment. Working in shifts of day on, day off, the whole filthy face of Thailand's potentially beautiful coastline could be quickly cleaned up. Education on keeping it that way and preserving what they have for future generations would be the responsibility of the authorities, but it's not an impossible task. Then they'd probably discover that the discerning tourists, those who actually stay away from the place at the moment, would start coming in increasing numbers and everyone would be better off.

Other parts of Asia are a delight to visit. Nepal, after years of Maoist rebellion and a monarchy with closed eyes, has a population of truly wonderful, generally honest and hard-working people. They go out of their way to please visitors and are always willing to negotiate a fair price...whether it's for accommodation, a carving or a rickshaw ride.

In India, they are insistent to the point of being rude and rarely take no for an answer.

In Tibet, the people are perhaps the most genuinely straightforward in the whole region. Their Chinese neighbours however are often the exact opposite.

South-east Asia and many of her neighbours could well do with a combined tourist awareness and staff-training campaign, but I know that's only a dream when so many and varied cultures are involved. Those that work hard and put in an effort to progress in the true sense of the word will be the successful countries of the future, the ones who our children and grandchildren will grow to love and respect.