

## CULTURE AND CUSTOMS

*Vietnam has an age-old and special culture that is closely attached to the history of the formation and development of the nation. The Vietnam you see today is steeped in ancient rites and traditions that have survived throughout the bumps and scrapes of history. Though sharing the same Southeast Asian cultural origin and has been influenced in different ways by the Chinese, Khmer, French and American cultures over the years, the most prominent feature of the Vietnamese culture is that it was not assimilated by foreign cultures.*



The Culture of Vietnam which is the agricultural civilization based on the **wet rice cultivating** is one of the oldest of such in the Asia Pacific region. The Vietnamese national culture emerged from a specific living environment: a **tropical country** with **many rivers** and the **confluence of great cultures**. The interference with the great cultures throughout history and the natural conditions of the wet-rice agriculture exert together a remarkable impact on the material and spiritual life of the nation, the characteristics and psychology of the Vietnamese.



Traditionally, Vietnamese life has revolved around **family, field and faith with the rhythm of rural existence** continuing for centuries at the same pace. For the majority of the population who still live in the countryside, these constants have remained unchanged, with several generations sharing the same roof, the same rice and the same religion. For most Vietnamese people, connection to family and community is paramount – whether they are from rural villages or living in the fast-paced cities. Most festivals and holidays are spent with the extended family - participating in rituals, feasting on special foods, giving symbolic gifts and paying respects to ancestors.



Vietnamese religious culture has long been influenced by its powerful neighbours and, more recently, colonial powers – a process which has produced some **unusual hybrid religions**. Four great religions and philosophies have shaped the spiritual life of the Vietnamese: **Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism** and later, **Christianity**. Over the centuries, Confucianism, Taoism and

Buddhism have become simplified, intertwined, vietnamised and have fused with popular Chinese beliefs and Vietnamese animism to create the **Tam Giao (Triple Religion)** – a core religion that is shared by all Vietnamese. Vietnam is often regarded as a Buddhist country. The reality is rather more complex. Although up to 85 percent of the population regularly visits Buddhist pagodas, only 16 percent would be considered strictly Buddhist. Most Vietnamese people practice a form of religion that is an interesting mix of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism called Tam Giao, although there are also a large number of practicing Catholics living in Vietnam. When discussing religion, most Vietnamese people are likely to say that they are Buddhist, but when it comes to family or civic duties they are likely to follow the moral and social code of Confucianism and turn to Taoist concepts to understand the nature of the cosmos.

In Vietnam, the usual Asian rules of conduct apply. As with many other Asian nations, the **concept of face** is extremely important to the Vietnamese. Face is a tricky concept to explain but can be roughly described a quality that reflects a person's reputation, dignity, and prestige. Thus, it is unseemly to show too much emotion. Losing your temper in Vietnam means a loss of face. Keep a cool head and remain polite, you'll have a greater chance of getting what you want.

The traditional Vietnamese **form of greeting** is to press your hands together in front of your body and bow slightly. These days, this charming custom has been replaced by the Western handshake. When trying to gain the attention of a Vietnamese, try not to point or gesture excessively. This is regarded as rude. Call out their name if possible, if not beckon by using whole hand, palm downwards.

You should always take your **shoes off** when visiting private houses or before entering religious sites. A donation is expected when visiting a temple or pagoda. And you should wear appropriate clothing. For men and women it is advisable to cover your shoulders and wear knee-long skirts or trousers, particularly at religious sites. Nude sunbathing is considered totally inappropriate, even on beaches. As in the other countries of South-East Asia, do not touch people on the head as it is regarded as spiritually the 'highest' part of the body.

**Photography** is restricted at ports, harbours and airports, and it is polite to ask for permission before taking photographs of people, especially of ethnic minorities.