

Ho Chi Minh City Quick City Guide

At a Glance

Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), still called Saigon by everyone on the ground, is Vietnam's financial engine and busiest transport hub with a population exceeding 14 million following the 2025 merger of surrounding provinces. Vietnamese is the official language (Southern dialect), but English is widely spoken among younger people and in tourist areas; French and Cantonese are also present in specific communities. The currency is the Vietnamese đồng (VND); USD conversion is roughly 24,000–25,000 VND to \$1. The climate is tropical wet/dry; December–February is the most pleasant window, while March–April brings brutal heat (up to 40°C) and May–October sees intense afternoon downpours and flooding. Time zone is UTC+7 (ICT). Calling code is +84. Power sockets are Type A/C (220V).

First 48 Hours

Hour 0–2: Land, cash, SIM. Tân Sơn Nhất (SGN) is the main airport, just 8 km from the city center. Ignore taxi touts inside the terminal; walk out to the official stands for Mai Linh or Vinasun taxis (150,000–250,000 VND) or order a Grab from the sidewalk (120,000–200,000 VND). For budget travel, take Bus 109 (20,000 VND + bag fee) to Pham Ngu Lao or Bus 152 (5,000 VND) for a slower ride. Before leaving the arrivals hall, buy a local prepaid SIM (Viettel, Vinaphone, or Mobifone) at the counters; passport required. Exchange a small amount of cash at the airport for immediate costs, but wait for better rates in the city.

Hour 2–6: Check in and eat. Drop your bags in **Pham Ngu Lao** (District 1), the obvious first-night landing zone dense with guesthouses and food. Walk to the nearest bus stop or flag a GrabBike. Find street food within 200 meters of your hotel. If you are in District 1, hit **Com Tam Cali** (32 Nguyen An Ninh) for 24-hour broken rice or **Bun Thit Nuong Nguyen Trung Truc** (1 Nguyen Trung Truc) for grilled pork vermicelli (go early). Avoid eating at tables facing heavy traffic immediately; let your stomach adjust.

Day 1 evening: Pick one sight for sunset. **Bitexco Financial Tower** offers views from the 49th floor (240,000 VND), or walk to **Nguyen Hue Walking Street** to see the French colonial architecture and the People's Committee building lit up. Alternatively, take the **Saigon Waterbus** from near Hotel Majestic for a river view.

Day 2 morning: Hit the **War Remnants Museum** and **Independence Palace** early. Arrive at the War Remnants Museum by 08:30 to beat the tour buses; be prepared for graphic imagery. Walk 10 minutes to Independence Palace to see the 1975 reunification tanks. Finish with a coffee at **The Workshop Coffee** (27 Ngo Duc Ke) or **Shin Coffee** (13-15 Nguyen Thiep) for specialty pour-overs in heritage buildings.

Where to Stay

- **District 1 (Pham Ngu Lao/Bui Vien)** — **Best For:** First-timers, nightlife, budget backpackers, social scene; **Nightly USD:** \$8–25; **The Catch:** Noise until 02:00, pickpockets, tourist scams
- **District 1 (Ben Nghe/Dong Khoi)** — **Best For:** History, French colonial vibes, upscale dining; **Nightly USD:** \$40–150+; **The Catch:** Expensive, traffic gridlock
- **District 3 (Da Kao/Turtle Lake)** — **Best For:** Budget-conscious nomads, café culture, local atmosphere; **Nightly USD:** \$15–30; **The Catch:** Slightly further from main tourist strip
- **District 2 / Thu Duc (Thao Dien)** — **Best For:** Long-stay expats, families, Western amenities, riverside; **Nightly USD:** \$25–50; **The Catch:** Far from center (20+ min in traffic), pricey rents
- **District 7 (Phu My Hung)** — **Best For:** Quiet suburban comfort, modern malls, families; **Nightly USD:** \$20–45; **The Catch:** Isolated from city action, requires Grab for everything
- **Cholon (District 5/6)** — **Best For:** Culture seekers, authentic Chinese-Vietnamese food, lowest rents; **Nightly USD:** \$10–20; **The Catch:** Minimal English, fewer coworking options, chaotic markets
- **Phu Nhuan** — **Best For:** Airport proximity, authentic street life, budget nomads; **Nightly USD:** \$12–25; **The Catch:** Less tourist infrastructure
- **Binh Thanh** — **Best For:** Access to Landmark 81, mix of local/expat; **Nightly USD:** \$15–35; **The Catch:** Traffic bottlenecks to District 1

Specific hotel picks:

- **Mai's Red Dot Guesthouse:** Backpacker staple on Bui Vien; cheap, noisy, social.
- **The Common Room Project:** Design hostel/pod hotel in Phu Nhuan; strong Wi-Fi, nomad-friendly.
- **C Central Hotel De Tham:** Budget option in District 1; walkable to bars and street food.
- **Hotel des Arts Saigon – MGallery:** Boutique luxury in District 3; rooftop pool, French-colonial style.
- **Lief Mojo Sai Gon:** Trendy budget hotel in District 3; shared kitchen, rooftop terrace.
- **Park Hyatt Saigon / The Reverie Saigon:** Splurge icons in District 1; ultimate luxury and security.

Getting Around

- **Grab (Car/Bike):** Dominant ride-hailing app. Fixed prices eliminate haggling. GrabBike is cheapest and fastest in gridlock. Requires local SIM.
- **Metro (Line 1):** Opened Dec 2024. Connects Ben Thanh to Suoi Tien. Fares 7,000–20,000 VND. Hours 05:00–22:00. Pay with contactless

Visa/Mastercard.

- **City Buses:** Over 170 routes. Fares 5,000–7,000 VND. Air-conditioned. Flag aggressively ~100m before the stop; they may not fully halt.
- **Taxis:** Use only **Mai Linh** or **Vinasun**. Insist on meter. Rates vary by company; avoid unbranded cabs.
- **Xe Om (Motorbike Taxi):** Street drivers quote 5–10x the going rate. Short hops should be 20,000 VND or less. Use apps instead.
- **Cyclo:** Three-wheeled pedal carts. Good for slow sightseeing. Agree on total price and route *before* starting to avoid scams.
- **Saigon Waterbus:** Commuter ferry on Saigon River. One stop near Hotel Majestic. Cheap and scenic.

Eat This

- **Pho — Venue:** Pho Hoa Pasteur (260C Pasteur St, Dist 3); **Cost / Note:** Landmark since 1960s; classic beef pho.
- **Pho — Venue:** Pho 2000 (1-3 Phan Chu Trinh, Dist 1); **Cost / Note:** Bill Clinton ate here; tourist-friendly, near Ben Thanh.
- **Banh Mi — Venue:** Banh Mi Huynh Hoa (26 Le Thi Rieng, Dist 1); **Cost / Note:** Loaded, meat-heavy; expect long queues afternoon.
- **Banh Xeo — Venue:** Banh Xeo 46A (46A Dinh Cong Trang, Dist 1); **Cost / Note:** Anthony Bourdain visited; closes early, go for lunch.
- **Com Tam — Venue:** Com Tam Cali (32 Nguyen An Ninh, Dist 1); **Cost / Note:** 24-hour branch; broken rice with grilled pork.
- **Bun Thit Nuong — Venue:** Bun Thit Nuong Nguyen Trung Truc (1 Nguyen Trung Truc, Dist 1); **Cost / Note:** Popular street stall; sellouts happen, eat early.
- **Lunch Lady — Venue:** 23 Hoang Sa St, Dist 1; **Cost / Note:** Iconic street food; no menu, different noodle soup daily; arrive before noon.
- **Modern Vietnamese — Venue:** Quan Bui (17A Ngo Van Nam, Dist 1); **Cost / Note:** Colonial townhouse vibe; good for groups.
- **Pizza — Venue:** Pizza 4P's Ben Tre (8/15 Le Thanh Ton, Dist 1); **Cost / Note:** Japanese-Vietnamese fusion; house-made cheese.
- **Coffee — Venue:** The Workshop Coffee (27 Ngo Duc Ke, Dist 1); **Cost / Note:** Specialty pour-over; laptop-friendly.

Eating Strategy

Eat street food for dinner (20,000–50,000 VND), casual local restaurants for lunch (50,000–150,000 VND), and splurge on mid-range spots like Quan Bui. **Cholon (District 5)** is best for authentic Chinese-Vietnamese cuisine. Do not drink tap water; ice with round holes is commercially purified. Watch for motorbike snatch theft when eating at street-side tables.

Top 10 Sights

Attraction	Time / Cost	Pro Tip
War Remnants Museum	2–3 hrs / ~40k VND	Arrive 08:30; graphic imagery; heavy emotional impact.
Independence Palace	1–2 hrs / ~40k VND	See the tanks that crashed the gates in 1975.
Saigon Central Post Office	30 min / free	Gustave Eiffel design; still working; great photos.
Jade Emperor Pagoda	1 hr / free	Taoist temple (1909); intricate carvings; quiet escape.
Bitexco Financial Tower	1 hr / 240k VND	Skydeck on 49th floor; better value than Landmark 81.
Ben Thanh Market	1–2 hrs / free entry	Go for experience, not prices; haggle hard or go to North Side.
Notre-Dame Cathedral	15 min / free	Exterior only; closed for renovations since 2020.
Saigon Opera House	1–2 hrs / varies	French-colonial venue; catch A O Show if budget allows.
Landmark 81	1–2 hrs / varies	Tallest building; located in Binh Thanh; great views.
Cholon (Thien Hau Pagoda)	2 hrs / free	Largest Chinatown; dedicated to sea goddess Mazu.

Day Trips

- **Cu Chi Tunnels:** ~70 km northwest; half-day tours from District 1; Viet Cong tunnel network.
- **Mekong Delta:** Full day; Cai Rang floating market, Ben Tre canals; avoid cheapest bus tours with forced shopping stops.

- **Cholon (District 5):** Half-day; world’s largest Chinatown; Thien Hau and Quan Am pagodas; authentic food.
- **Vung Tau:** Beach city; accessible by bus from Mien Dong station or hydrofoil; weekend getaway.

Safety & Etiquette

HCMC is generally safe regarding violent crime, but **petty theft and snatch theft by motorbikes** are rampant, especially in District 1 and around Ben Thanh Market. Never hold your phone loosely near the street or leave bags on chair backs. Scams often involve “friendly locals” inviting you to homes or shops; politely decline unsolicited help. Dress modestly for temples (cover shoulders and knees); remove shoes where indicated. Do not touch anyone’s head or point feet at people/altars. The “American War” is a sensitive topic; do not initiate discussions about it. Handle money with your right hand. Traffic is chaotic; cross streets slowly and steadily—do not run or stop abruptly.

Budget Snapshot

- Accommodation — **Lean: 10; Comfortable: 25; Flashpacker: 60**
- Food — **Lean: 6; Comfortable: 15; Flashpacker: 30**
- Transport — **Lean: 3; Comfortable: 8; Flashpacker: 15**
- Coworking/coffee — **Lean: 3; Comfortable: 8; Flashpacker: 15**
- Insurance/health — **Lean: 2; Comfortable: 5; Flashpacker: 10**
- Miscellaneous — **Lean: 4; Comfortable: 10; Flashpacker: 20**
- **Total — Lean: 28; Comfortable: 71; Flashpacker: 150**
- Lean — **Daily USD: \$28; Weekly USD: ~\$196; 14-Day USD: ~\$392**
- Comfortable — **Daily USD: \$71; Weekly USD: ~\$497; 14-Day USD: ~\$994**
- Flashpacker — **Daily USD: \$150; Weekly USD: ~\$1,050; 14-Day USD: ~\$2,100** Assumptions: 2026 prices in Vietnamese đồng converted at roughly 24,500 VND per USD. Insurance reflects a pro-rated daily cost of annual travel medical coverage.

Quick Links

- National Immigration Portal: <https://xuatnhapcanh.gov.vn>
- Vietnam Railways (Trains): <https://dsvn.vn>
- Tan Son Nhat Airport: <https://www.hochiminhcityairport.com>
- HCMC People’s Committee: <https://tphcm.gov.vn>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs: <https://mofa.gov.vn>
- Bus Hotline: 1022 (Press 9)