

## A Guide to the Countryside: The Traditional Village in Vietnam

Written by Steven K. Bailey

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Most travelers to Vietnam inevitably start with either Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) or Hanoi. Truthfully, it would make more sense to start with a tiny village in the Vietnamese hinterland and then work your way up to a big city. Most of Vietnam is small, agrarian communities, after all. Unfortunately, the nature of international travel, with its reliance on jumbo jets and airports, makes such a modest start to Vietnam impossible. You cannot avoid spending time in Saigon and Hanoi and getting out to the countryside requires a bit more effort. The effort is well worth it, however, and you should make sure you spend at least some of your trip in a traditional Vietnamese village. If Saigon is the heart of Vietnam, and Hanoi the brain, then the villages are the cells that make up the rest of the national body.

When you head out into the Vietnamese countryside take along *The Traditional Village in Vietnam* for background information. This book from The Gioi Publishers of Hanoi is a detailed study of various aspects of the Vietnamese village by those who know it best: Vietnamese scholars. The basic premise of the book is that without a working knowledge of the Vietnamese village one can never understand the nation as a whole.

*The Traditional Village in Vietnam* is not a traveler's guidebook. Rather it is a collection of academic papers written by scholars from the University of Hanoi and elsewhere. Originally published in the quarterly journal *Vietnamese Studies*, these papers cover a diverse selection of topics, all related to village life. Subjects range from how to build a traditional village home--complete with architectural schematics--to the price of buying village titles before 1945. In Thuong Son, for example, you would have paid ten piastres to be a "literature official" and seventy piastres to be "honorable."

Opening this book is like lifting the lid off a treasure chest full of obscure but fascinating details. For example, we learn that if a woman married a man from outside her village, then tradition dictated that the groom donate a preset amount of bricks to pave the village lanes. Many villages once paved their thoroughfares exclusively through this community marriage tax. In at least one village, however, if a woman married a man from within the village then the groom had to give the village the fixings for a celebration: one piastre, a tray of sticky rice, a chicken, two bottles of alcohol, and 100 betel nuts. Did you know that "needling the rice sacks" is an old folk saying that means, roughly, to stir up trouble? Perhaps the greatest surprise in *The Traditional Village in Vietnam* is the occasional authentic Vietnamese insect squashed flat between the

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pages like a pressed flower.

Of particular interest is Huy Vu's paper on the Ha Nam area. Ha Nam is a remote region north of Haiphong that still retains much of its traditional village flavor. For those travelers who want to get off of the beaten track and explore isolated communities, Ha Nam might be the place to do it. Huy Vu's paper will provide the historical background you need before setting out on such an expedition. But you needn't go as far afield as Ha Nam. Village life begins just beyond the Saigon and Hanoi city limits. Pack *The Traditional Village in Vietnam* into your bag and jump aboard the nearest outbound bus. The villages of Vietnam await.

*Traditional and handicraft villages through the length of Vietnam from North to South have become such a typical symbol of Vietnamese daily life as well as Vietnamese traditions that have been going for thousands of years. Leaving behind the modern and fast-paced city life in big cities of Vietnam, these villages that stand for a countryside and old Vietnam always bring calm and peacefulness to its visitors. Some interesting day tours that offer one day of leisure exploring the traditional villages around big cities in Vietnam can be found at [CityInsight.vn](http://CityInsight.vn) such as day tour visiting the countryside of [Hoi An](#) , the handicraft village in [Nha Trang](#) , the [traditional handicraft villages in Hanoi](#) etc.*

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