

TRAVEL

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ISLANDS TO FIND



Millions of tourists descend on Vietnam's coastal boomtowns like Nha Trang, top and above, and Danang every year. By contrast, Con Dao Island received 20,000 visitors in 2008, of whom only 2,600 were foreign. PHOTOS: AP AND REUTERS

IF YOU GO

How to get there

Getting to Con Dao involves a connection in Ho Chi Minh City. A recent online search found round-trip flights in June from Taipei to Ho Chi Minh City starting at NT\$12,900 for China Airlines and NT\$12,400 for Eva Air. Another search found round-trip airfare between Ho Chi Minh City and Con Dao on Vietnam Airlines in June starting at US\$224; the Vietnam-based travel Web site ivivu.com is a good place to book

Where to stay

- » The newly built rooms at the government-run Saigon Con Dao Resort (18-24 Ton Duc Thang Street; 84-64-363-0779; saigoncondao.com) cover the basics with king-size beds and faux-marble baths; ask for a pool-view room in the main building. Service doesn't cater to Western clientele and will require a Zen-like attitude. Rates start at US\$60 night, including breakfast. US dollars are widely accepted
- » The year-old Con Dao Seatravel (6 Nguyen Duc Thuan Street; 84-64-363-0768; condaostravel.com) has brought the first beachfront bungalows to the island; its 12 rooms, which run US\$60 a night and include breakfast, feature shiny wooden furniture. Sliding glass doors open onto a terrace
- » Six Senses Hideaway Con Dao (sixsenses.com; 66-2-631-9777) plans to bring its "barefoot luxury" concept to the island starting in December, heralding the arrival of Con Dao's first high-end property. Its eco-chic villas will allow guests to enjoy a 1.6km-long private beach and private pools

Where to eat and drink

- » Try Ky (Nguyen Duc Thuan Street; 84-64-383-0294) serves a wide range of local, freshly caught seafood that diners select from tanks. The delicate steamed crab is exceptional
- » For good, basic Vietnamese food, try Phuong Hanh (38 Nguyen Hue Street; 84-64-383-0180), a family-run restaurant that serves dishes like lemongrass beef and fish cooked in a clay pot
- » Pick up a trekker's lunch from the early-morning food vendors at Con Son Market, which sell snacks like sandwiches filled with pate, and freshly grilled waffle-like biscuits
- » Con Son Cafe (2 Ton Duc Thang Street; 84-64-363-0670) is a great place for a morning coffee, an afternoon mango shake or a sunset Saigon beer

Tourism activities

- » Con Dao National Park (29 Vo Thi Sau Street; 84-64-383-0669; condaopark.com.vn) offers the best service and prices for exploring the island and its environs. Treks led by park employees start at about US\$8 a person and boat trips cost roughly US\$65 a day
- » After a two-year hiatus, Rainbow Divers (divetvietnam.com), a big dive operator, reopens its Con Dao office in November; dives from US\$90

Despite, or perhaps because of, its ugly history, Con Dao is one of Southeast Asia's most untouched and breathtaking getaways

BY NAOMI LINDT
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, CON DAO ISLAND, VIETNAM

As the sun's last rays streaked the sky bubble-gum pink and tangerine, the residents of Con Dao Island were calling it a day, and 2.4km-long beachfront promenade that serves as this small Vietnamese island's social hub was filling up as the afternoon heat finally relented.

Teenage boys pulled up on Honda scooters, kicking off their shoes and rolling up their jeans to play soccer on the white sand; young mothers led small charges by the hand into the gently lapping aquamarine water; an elderly woman, her teeth lacquered black in the style of her ancestors, watched a group of children fly colorful, animal-shaped kites on the pier, built in 1873.

If not for the communist slogans being piped out of the town's loudspeakers, it would have been hard to believe this was Vietnam. Where, after all, were the motorbikes, the honking horns, the shiny high-rises and the constant activity that has come to characterize this rapidly developing country?

Until recently, the isolated 16-island archipelago of Con Dao (its largest island, Con Son, is commonly called Con Dao Island), 180km off the mainland's southeastern coast, was a place most Vietnamese wanted to forget. For 113 years, this island was home to one of the country's harshest prison systems, established by French colonists in 1862 and later ruled by South Vietnamese and US forces until Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese in 1975, at which point the prisons were closed. These days, officials on government-sponsored group tours make pilgrimages to the crumbling stone prisons, which have been turned into museums that depict the suffering endured by their comrades.

Other buildings constructed by the French have been converted into cafes and private homes in the main town, which consists of little more than a daily market, a few seafood restaurants and a couple of souvenir shops selling shells, carved wooden canes, and Ho Chi Minh paraphernalia. The few signs along the quiet streets lined with flame-trees and bougainvillea tout pearls of wisdom such as "With the party comes peace, comfort, and happiness."

But despite, or perhaps because of, its ugly history, Con Dao is one of Southeast Asia's most untouched and breathtaking getaways. Its past, coupled with its remoteness, have spared it from the million-plus hordes that descend on coastal boomtowns like Nha Trang and Danang every year. (According to government figures, in 2008 Con Dao received 20,000 visitors, only 2,600 of whom were foreign.)

A lack of development and, until recently, of access (the number of 45-minute flights from Ho Chi Minh City has gradually increased from a handful per week four years ago to three times a day now) has also helped to keep the islands' beaches empty and immaculate. The azure waters are brimming with Vietnam's best coral reefs, and the forests bustle with macaque monkeys and black squirrels, one of several species indigenous to Con Dao.

Indeed, efforts to preserve Con Dao's natural beauty are unrivaled in the rest of Vietnam. Of the archipelago's total area, 83 percent is protected by the Con Dao

National Park, including more than 130km² that make up the country's first marine reserve.

With help from organizations like the World Wildlife Fund and the United Nations Development Program, the park has just won approval for a US\$16.5 million development plan through 2020, which will finance natural resource protection, research and eco-tourism.

Though the government hopes to more than double the islands' population to 13,500 by 2013 through a series of ambitious residential and tourism projects, for now, Con Dao's slow, friendly rhythms and spectacular beauty remain largely undisturbed.

On a recent visit, except for a film crew shooting a coming season of *Koh-Lanta*, the French adaptation of *Survivor*, foreign tourists were scarce. One of them was Fred Burke, a 51-year-old managing partner of Baker & McKenzie, an international law firm with offices in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi.

"This feels like some sort of secret Tahiti," he said, referring to the lush, rolling hills and sharp cliffs that abut the sea. "Most of the popular seaside destinations in Vietnam are being degraded with trash on the beach, inadequate wastewater treatment, noisy motorbikes and Jet Skis. It's a complete surprise to find an amazingly beautiful place like Con Dao with almost nobody here."

Despite its rich beauty, Con Dao is still far from being a luxury destination. Right now there is only a smattering of simple, Vietnamese-run lodgings and restaurants. But the much anticipated arrival late this year of a Six Senses resort, from the Bangkok-based company known for introducing eco-luxury to the region's most unspoiled up-and-coming locales, suggests that Con Dao might soon become part of the international travel scene.

Though English is not widely spoken and most travelers cater to Vietnamese tour groups, independent travelers can still partake of the islands' treasures. The Con Dao National Park arranges guided treks through dense tropical jungle and to remote beaches like Dam Tre Bay, a deep, sheltered cove that is home to golden fields of swaying seaweed and giant clams with electric blue lips. There are also snorkeling trips to Bay Canh islet, where fine sand lures endangered hawksbill and green sea turtles during the May to September nesting season.

But cruising the winding cliffside roads on a rented scooter might be the most memorable way to experience Con Dao, where the only traffic is the occasional black-haired goat or wild pig. Hidden down a sandy track marked "Mieu Cau," about 13km northeast of town, is Dam Trau Beach, a crescent-shaped expanse of golden sand and sapphire water fringed by feathery casuarinas, the peace disrupted only by the arrival of flights from Ho Chi Minh City.

Head west to encounter rolling dunes and Con Dao's main port, Ben Dam, where spearmint-green, sun-beaten fishing boats bob in the turquoise water. The island's prettiest beach, the boulder-peppered Bai Nhat, emerges only with the low tide. If you're lucky, that will happen in late afternoon when the sun drops behind the 300m-high Love Peak, so called because it looks like two heads nestled together.

Chances are you'll have the beach to yourself.

[SOCIETY]

What's that 'pho'?

French loan words in Vietnam hark back to the colonial days

BY DAN BLOOM
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Pho is a French word? Who knew?

One of the most popular dishes from Vietnam to make it to restaurant tables around the world, from New York to London, is *pho*. There's *pho bo* and *pho ga* and *pho tai* and more.

And while the jury's still out, it is widely believed by linguists and word sleuths that the word *pho* is not a Vietnamese word, but in fact comes from the French term *pot au feu* (pronounced "poh oh fuh"). The word was likely introduced to Vietnam by French colonialists more than 100 years ago, according to longtime Vietnam resident Didier Corlou, a top French chef in Hanoi. Corlou told a food seminar in Hanoi in 2003 that *pho* most likely was a transliteration of the French term for hot pot.

The list of French "loan words" still used in Vietnam today is gaining recognition as young Vietnamese become more curious about their nation's past, 23-year-old Abby Nguyen of Ho Chi Minh City told the *Taipei Times* in a recent e-mail exchange.

Before the Americans got involved in a long and protracted war in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, the French had been heavily involved in the country for more than 300 years, she said. From 1853 to 1954, Vietnam was a French colony. As a result, Vietnam's colonial past has left an indelible mark on the country's language.

The Vietnamese word for cheese, for example, *pho mat*, comes from the French word *fromage* — say it out loud slowly — and cake is called *ga to*, from the French word *gâteau*.

The word for butter — *bo* — comes from the French word *buerre*.

During a recent research expedition via keyboard and the Internet, this reporter came across more than two-dozen "loan words" from French still used in Vietnam today, in addition to *pho mat* and *ga to* and *bo*.

To understand all this, it helps to know a little French, but even if you never studied French in high school or college and you don't know *bonjour* from *bonsoir*, "amusez-vous bien." That means: "Enjoy!"

Liver pate is called *pa* in Vietnam today. *Pate chaude*, according to Californian foodie Andrea Nguyen of the Viet World Kitchen blog, is called *pa so*.

There's more, according to sources in Vietnam and overseas. *Ba* — father in Vietnamese — comes from the French word *papa*, many linguists believe.

Va li comes from the French word for suitcase — *valise*.

Bia comes from the French word for beer, *biere*.

A doll is called a *bup-be* in Vietnam, from the French word *poupée*.

What to call the necktie on that senior civil servant giving a press conference on Hanoi television? It's a *ca vat* — from the French word *cravate*.

Doc comes from the French word *docteur*, which is not far from the English word doctor.

Phac to comes from *facteur*, the French word for mailman.

Phim means "movie" and comes from the French word *film*.

A *pha* is a headlight on a car or motorscooter, from the French word *phare*.

Motorscooters and motorcycles are themselves called *moto* — from the French term *motocyclette*.

If you make a mistake in France, it is called a *faute*. In Vietnam today, people often say *phot* for mistake.

Bit-tet is from the French term *bifteck* — beefsteak, or just plain steak.

Coffee is called *ca phe*, from the French word *cafe*.

Wine is called *vang (vin)*.

Soap is called *xa bong (savon)*.

A circus is called *xiec* (from the French word *cirque*).

Ben Zimmer, a noted US-based word maven who writes the weekly "On Language" column for the *New York Times*, pointed this reporter to the work of Milton Barber, whose 1963 paper, *The Phonological Adaptation of French Loan Words in Vietnamese*, was eye-opening, to say the least.

MaryJo Pham, a senior at Tufts University in Boston who was born in Vietnam and came to the US as a young girl, said she has been informally collecting French loan words used in Vietnam over the years.

"*Piscine* is still in use for 'swimming pool,'" she said in an e-mail.

"And *eyclo*, or '*rich lo*' in Vietnamese, is what we call a bicycle-drawn rickshaw."

"Yogurt — *yaourt* in French — is called *da ua* in Vietnamese. Ice cream is called *ca rem* from the French word *creme*."

A clothes zipper is called a *phoc mo tua* in Vietnamese, from the French word *fermeture*, Pham said. A woman's bra is called *su chien* from the French word *soutien*, she added.

"You can see how some French loan words influenced the actual transliteration of words — for motorscooters, women's bras, coffee, frozen yogurt, baguette sandwiches — things that were and are indispensable to daily life in Vietnam," Pham said. "Bo for butter, from the French *buerre*, is still definitely in use in Vietnam. And *phim* for movies, film, cinema, yes."