



Time For Vietnam?

Vietnam is one of Asia's most exciting countries writes Terry Brennan. An intriguing blend of ancient and recent history, friendly locals and interesting dive locations makes it a destination well-worth consideration ...

TRUTH BE told, Vietnam wouldn't be your first choice destination in south-east Asia if your considerations were purely diving ones. However the broader attractions of this remarkable country make it worthy of deliberation for the diving fraternity.

First though, the general attractions. To those of us of a certain vintage, Vietnam has a real allure. Reports from the war in Vietnam were the backdrop to our childhood or youth. It seems hardly credible that those purveyors of the 'Red Menace' could actually be among the friendliest people in the world. But they are.

The real appeal of Vietnam is its people. In the cities they are courteous and helpful; head out to the villages and everyone you pass shouts: 'hello'.

My favourite anecdote from a recent visit was in Da Nang, a growing city of 1 million people. I was paying for my

Coke and added a few Dong to the bill. The man tried to give me my full change. However I persisted and he was clearly baffled. His wife intervened to explain it was a tip which caused him great hilarity. Of course it's a different story at the big hotels and popular restaurants but my tale reflects something of the nature of the country.

Nha Trang

So what about the diving? There are half a dozen potential centres. Nha Trang is the best-known dive destination. The resort itself has a lively reputation as the beach capital of Vietnam and attracts an international crowd.

The recently established Hon Mun Marine Park covers the islands surrounding the central coast town and is a huge draw for visitors. Around a 40 minute cruise by boat, Hon Mun Island offers

the opportunity for long dives with great macro life.

One recent visitor told us: "I saw some pretty big Nemos, lots of dragon fish, and some triggers. Pretty good rock and coral formations as well. And with it being a protected area it seems to be getting better."

Respected dive blogger Dave Harasti liked Nha Trang too. He highlighted Electric Nose as his favourite local site: "No one on the boat could explain how this site, a huge rock pinnacle emerging from 45 metres and breaking the surface, was so named. But that didn't matter as this is a top site. Like all dive sites in Vietnam big fish life is absent but the colours and diversity of soft corals made it one of the most prolific spots for macro life.

"Over 50 different species of nudibranchs were recorded from this one location as well as numerous types of shrimps, crabs,

flatworms, cowries and mantis shrimps. The nudibranch diversity is incredible and seven of the species we found are new discoveries that have not been described yet.

The walls of the pinnacle are covered in a huge variety of soft corals and there is a large swim-through that is encased in thousands of bright yellow sunflower corals. Well worth a return visit."

Dave also bigged up Madonna Rock which has a couple of excellent swim throughs and caves, filled with millions of small glass fish including unusual flatworms and shrimp species. A good location to observe ornate ghost pipefish.

Popular Nha Trang dive centres include the centrally located Rainbow Divers, and Mark Scott's Diving Viet Nam.

In the centre of the country, historic Hoi An is a great place to visit and is close to the alluring Cham Islands. The largest of the eight islands is the only one to be inhabited and is made up of tropical beaches, wild jungle and authentic fishing villages. This gives you a unique chance to spend part of your vacation off the beaten track. Dive sites around the islands range from coral gardens and reefs, wild rock formations and underwater pinnacles and means a variety of dive sites to suit all levels.

Hoi An/Cham Island

Cham Island Diving Centre in Hoi An offers courses for beginners, day trips to the islands, overnight stays plus a range of PADI courses. Lodo at the centre told **SCOTTISH DIVER:** "The multi-national team here has developed a great portfolio of top dives. Our favourites include The Junction which features a coral garden and swim throughs (we even spotted Whale Shark here a few years back) and Rang Manh where you'll find a huge selection of fish of all sizes; it's also home to an Eagle Ray and our boast it is that we make a new discovery every dive.

"We also visit the the Crazy Pineapple regularly which has impressive rock foundations, wall drop offs and caves, and is also a hunting ground for big game fish."

After diving be sure to explore Hoi An

fully. It is a graceful historic town which has a delightful, even magical, ambience. Once a major port, it boasts grand architecture and a beguiling riverside setting. Hoi An owes its easygoing provincial demeanour and remarkably harmonious old-town character more to luck than planning. Had the Thu Bon River not silted up in the late 19th century – so ships could no longer access the town's docks – Hoi An would doubtless be very different today.

For a century, the city's allure and importance dwindled until an abrupt rise in fortunes in the 1990s, when a tourism boom transformed the local economy. Today Hoi An is once again a cosmopolitan melting pot, one of the nation's most prosperous towns, a culinary mecca and an important tourism centre. This revival has preserved the face of the Old Town and its incredible legacy of tottering Japanese merchant houses, Chinese temples and ancient tea warehouses.

Con Dao

Good judges claim that the outstanding diving in Vietnam is at Con Dao, the mysterious archipelago off the south coast of Vietnam. Here the coral is relatively untouched and very impressive. The marine life is the best in the country, boasting turtles, rays, giant barracuda, cuttlefish and cobia as well as a whole host of tropical reef fish. You can dive most times as there is good visibility pretty much year round and with 16 islands to choose from there is plenty of variety.

There are now two dive operators exploring the waters around Con Dao - Dive! Dive! Dive! and a Rainbow Divers branch at Six Senses. Having dive insurance is mandatory in Con Dao due to its remote location.

Phu Quoc

Things are a little livelier at the other dives resort of the south coast of Vietnam - Phu Quoc, although it is still a relatively unspoilt destination. Underwater action is largely restricted to the dry season, November to May. Diving is relatively

new to Phu Quoc island, only having been introduced in 2002, so divers have the opportunity of exploring many areas around the island still largely unexplored.

We liked the sound of Turtle Island, located in the north west of Phu Quoc near Bao Dai beach, about a 30 minute boat ride from the main town of Duong Dong. Turtle island is only 50m in length - just a few palm trees and bushes - with a sandy beach, ideal for snorkelling. The waters surrounding the island are relatively shallow reaching no more than 10m, with an interesting range of hard corals and elephant ear and barrel sponges covered in sea worms and surrounded by small yellow damselfish, stonefish, some blue ringed angelfish and the occasional coral grouper and parrotfish.

It would be wrong to bill Vietnam as a diver's paradise. But it is an extraordinary country with incredibly friendly people. It has a fascinating cultural heritage - check out the Cham temples at My Son (if you visit Hoi An) and the Imperial palaces at Hue; a remarkable scenic quality - Halong Bay, Sapa, Mui Ne; a unique modern history - don't miss the War Remnants Museum in HCMC and innumerable public buildings from the French colonial period.

But Vietnam is changing quickly, visit soon before the charm and mystery of this wonderful land is lost to the modern world.

Images: Opposite page - Big Rock; and sea horse; and below: snorkelling gets interesting and a shoal of colourful fish dart past the camera!

All images were shot at Cham Island and are reproduced courtesy of Cham Island Diving. For more information about Lodo, Gildas and the team at the Hoi An-based Cham Island Diving Centre, visit their website: www.vietnamscubadiving.com

