

Asian adventure

A group tour takes the stress out of far-flung family holidays, as Lee Hayhurst discovers on a visit to Vietnam

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When you find yourself in a queue to view the dead body of a much-revered father of a nation, you realise this is going to be a holiday like no other. That was how our Intrepid Travel family trip to Vietnam started.

On our first day, we joined hundreds of Vietnamese in Hanoi on their pilgrimage to the mausoleum of Ho Chi Minh, the 20th-century revolutionary who led his country to independence after hundreds of years of rule by invading empires.

He also, of course, saw off a US hell-bent on preventing the country falling to the Communists, and his body lies embalmed in air-conditioned stasis, bathed in an eerie orange light just yards from the modest home from which he conducted the Vietnam war.

Hours earlier we'd met, for the first time, our fellow travellers on this amazing 11-day grand tour of Vietnam's big six attractions: the five Hs (Hanoi, Halong Bay, Hue, Hoi An and Ho Chi Minh City);

and one M (the Mekong Delta).

Our group of 16 had gathered around a restaurant table in the unremarkable but comfy Hong Ngoc Hotel the previous night: eight children aged between five and 13, and eight adults all wondering whether travelling halfway across the world to holiday with total strangers was a good idea.

What lay ahead of us was six long and winding bus journeys, plenty of wandering around temples and historic monuments

in the searing tropical heat, an overnight boat trip, a noisy and largely sleepless overnight train journey, an internal flight and a homestay.

What were the chances of 16 people who had never met before rubbing along just fine in such circumstances?

▶ GROUP STAGES

We needn't have worried. We had remarkably similar origins back home – all but one of the families had or still did live within a



RIGHT:
Hue's Imperial
City

FAR RIGHT:
Lee's daughter
Millie

BELOW:
Halong Bay



3 OF THE BEST SELLING POINTS

Convenience

Target families who want a busy, multi-centre itinerary but lack the time, knowledge or confidence to plan it themselves.

Value

Break it down to a cost per day and most family tours work out cheaper than trying to organise the same journey independently.

Camaraderie

Kids can make friends while parents enjoy other adult company – a great selling point for single parents.

➔ few miles of each other in the outer suburbs of west London. But the group cohesion came in no small part in the form of our constant companion – Intrepid tour guide Bien Tran, or simply Bien as we referred to him.

It took a little while for our ears to get the hang of his Vietnamese accent, but his English was excellent and he immediately became our fixer, tour guide, in-house historian, and political and cultural commentator, not to mention our translator.

My wife and I were keen to revisit Vietnam because we'd been once before, en route to New Zealand, on our pre-children round-the-world backpacking trip in 2001 and remembered being impressed by a country that was good value, hospitable and fiercely proud of its past.

At the time, our itinerary allowed us to experience only the southern third of Vietnam from Ho Chi Minh City to Nha Trang, so we missed out on the Communist north and the country's capital Hanoi, which retains that chaotic feel of a city in a developing country.

Having mastered the art of navigating Hanoi's cluttered



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pavements and crossing its roads without being run over by one of the millions of mopeds that buzz around its streets, the city and its authentic Old Quarter is a great place to acclimatise to Vietnam's dynamic vibe.

▶ SMOOTH SAILING

About a four-hour drive from Hanoi is one of Vietnam's tourist hotspots, the beautiful Halong Bay. Here, hundreds of boats, some on day trips, some on overnight trips, set off daily for the towering limestone islands that emerge from the bay's pristine green waters.

Our boat was not one of the more luxurious on offer, but was perfectly suited to our requirements and even

the rainy season weather couldn't dampen our spirits. At the end of the holiday, our kids rated kayaking in the rain on the morning of the second day as the best thing they did.

Due to its soaring popularity, the Vietnamese authorities strictly limit the number of boats that can operate in the bay. Even so, there are signs here of the booming tourism industry that becomes increasingly apparent the further south you travel.

Departing Halong Bay, we returned to Hanoi to pick up our main bags from storage at the Hong Ngoc Hotel, and to prepare for our overnight train to Vietnam's ancient capital Hue.

When we backpacked, we were talked out of taking the train, ostensibly on safety grounds although probably more to convince us to buy a ticket for a tourist bus, so it was with some trepidation that we settled into our sleeper carriage with our three children.

Once the train had crept slowly down tracks squeezed impossibly between homes in the outskirts of Hanoi, it clattered its way the 435 miles to Hue.

This wasn't a journey for those who value their sleep or creature



→ comforts. But it felt like a true adventure, and at 5am we got up to watch the train cross the notorious 17th parallel, where Vietnam was divided between north and south along the Ben Hai River.

In Hue, we delved into Vietnam's royal history with a tour of the 19th-century Imperial City of the Nguyen dynasty, a visit to a royal tomb and the Buddhist Pagoda of the Celestial Lady, and to a spot overlooking the stunning Perfume River where gun emplacements dating back to the Vietnam war and French colonialism sit side by side.

A real highlight in Hue was the night we ate with a local family which, although optional and not included in the price, we all opted to do.

MEET THE LOCALS

After two nights, it was back on the minibus and on to Hoi An via an amazing mountain crossing just north of Da Nang, the US base that was the setting for *Good Morning Vietnam*.

Hoi An is architecturally stunning but something of a tourist trap – Korean and Japanese visitors were as numerous as Hanoi's mopeds in the town's pedestrianised streets.

However, it was here that we were

able to grab some much-needed beach time at An Bang and take a cycle tour to Tra Que village to meet the iconic Le Van and Nguyen Thi Loi, both in their 90s, married for 70 years and still growing herbs and vegetables in their smallholding.

Hotel Emm in Hoi An was the most modern of the properties in which we stayed, as well as having the best pool. Intrepid chooses hotels suitable for


families, but good pools are hard to come by in Vietnamese cities, so this was a real luxury.

After reluctantly leaving Hoi An, we took a domestic flight to Vietnam's largest and most developed metropolis, Ho Chi Minh City. Our base was the state-run Victory Hotel, which was very well placed for visiting the city's main attractions, but rather quirky.

After a night's stay, we stashed our bags while we ventured into the Mekong Delta by boat to experience a traditional way of life in a land of abundance. We started with a visit to a coconut candy maker, which was followed by a traditional meal of elephant ear fish and a night at a homestay, where the kids fished for shrimps to cook for dinner.

Sadly, our return to Ho Chi Minh City marked the end of the trip, and as we reflected on the last incredible 11 days at our final meal as a group, we marvelled at all we'd experienced.

We were in agreement that we simply couldn't, and probably wouldn't, have done it without the brilliant Bien and the superb organisation of Intrepid Travel.

Travelling with kids is tough enough in unfamiliar and challenging places, so ensuring everything runs smoothly is absolutely vital. That's where escorted tour operators come in, helping travel-loving families such as ours take unforgettable holidays that were simply unheard of when I was my children's age. They're so lucky! 



ABOVE:
Lee's family
in Hoi An; inset,
our guide
Bien Tran

LEFT:
Meeting Le Van
and Nguyen
Thi Loi



Intrepid Travel's
Vietnam Family
Holiday starts
at £807 per
person, including
transport,
accommodation
(in hotels,
overnight boat,
sleeper train
and homestay),
selected meals
and activities,
but excluding
international
flights. Regular
departures begin
on June 29.
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