

From Cu Chi to Hoa Lo: A Trip Across Vietnam

If I could pick anywhere to visit, I would choose to visit Vietnam. In 2017, I took students from the club I sponsor to Vietnam to visit different war memorial sites. This club revolved around interviewing veterans from different conflicts and publishing their stories, and the Vietnam War was the theme of the book we published for that year. Visiting Vietnam was a powerful experience that connected me to both our nation's history and Vietnam's history before, during, and after the war. While an incredible opportunity for the students and I, the duties of a chaperone prevented me from really getting absorbed into the history of Vietnam and the Vietnam War. Visiting Vietnam by myself would allow me the time and flexibility to appreciate its history and culture more deeply.

I would likely start my travels the same way that I did in 2017, by visiting the Southern capital of Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), paying particular attention to the outdoor markets, French colonial district, and the Imperial Palace. I would also take the time to visit nearby areas affected by the Vietnam War. The Cu Chi Tunnels and Mekong Delta are amazing places to see the various challenges and effects of the Vietnam War. The War Remnant Museum, while certainly smacking of Communist propaganda, is a vivid depiction of the affects of the war on civilians, journalists, and soldiers.

I would begin making my way to Central Vietnam, stopping at cities like Da Nang, Hoi An, and Hue. While Da Nang contains fewer attractions for the average tourist, China Beach and the museum dedicated to the indigenous Cham peoples. Hoi An is a beautiful coastal city that retains the artistic culture of Vietnam both before and after Western colonization. Booming outdoor markets flanking silk workshops offer visitors a chance to see the process of traditional silk manufacturing, with an added bonus of inexpensive, high quality silk products. In the city of Hue, cruising along the Perfume River will allow me to visit various historical and cultural landmarks, such as the numerous Buddhist pagodas' and the former Imperial Palace of Vietnam.

Along my last leg of the journey, moving into the northern provinces, I would like to stop at the village of My Lai, commemorating one of the worst American atrocities of the Vietnam War. Moving into the northern capital of Hanoi, the waves of grey marking the entrance into true Vietnamese communism will guide me to some of the most somber parts of my trip, the Hoa Lo Prison, also known as the Hanoi Hilton. A former political prison repurposed for housing American POWs in the Vietnam War, depictions of Vietnamese political prisoners, the guillotine exported from France, and the wall commemorating their independence take center stage, leaving the American POW section woefully subject to Communist propaganda will be an eye-opening and controversial experience. However, I would also end the trip by attending a traditional Vietnamese Water Puppet Show to enjoy a cultural excursion before returning back home to the United States.

While social media is the most ubiquitous method of documentation, I would be more likely to chronicle my visit with pictures and a slideshow. This is for two reasons: (1) This would allow me to share my experience and travels with older members of my family who are not active on social media and (2) I would use this presentation for my class to teach them about the history and culture of Vietnam. This could even act as a supplemental resource when discussing the Vietnam War as well.