

VIETNAM – A BRIEF CULTURAL GUIDE

Vietnam is renowned for its spectacular scenery and its warm and friendly people, who have a unique and rich civilisation with 54 ethnic groups. According to the World Bank, the country has enjoyed “strong economic growth with remarkable development record over the past 30 years”. The political stability of the country has helped to make Vietnam an attractive destination for both businesses and holiday-makers.

The Save Vietnam's Wildlife (SVW) Volunteer Coordinator is available to answer questions, provide advice and offer support when needed.

It is up to you to work to understand the culture of the community you are living and working in and the culture of your workplace, neighbours and work colleagues. Always remember that no matter where they come from, people are individuals with distinct and varied personalities, likes, traits and preferences. While this document provides some basic information on Vietnamese culture, potential volunteers should undertake their own research to gain a better understanding and appreciation of Vietnamese social norms.

Workplace Orientation and Induction

Upon arrival, SVW will provide a workplace orientation and undertake an induction checklist. Take this opportunity to actively participate in this process and ask about any additional information you feel you need. The SVW Volunteer Coordinator and/or your supervisor will also provide you with an orientation tour and introduce you to key people and colleagues in your working environment.

Remember that you are in a different cultural setting and most of the SVW colleagues you will be working with and people within the community you will be living in will have limited or no English language skills. Using apps such as Google Translate (while not always perfect) can often help you communicate your needs to colleagues, shopkeepers and others.

Be prepared to spend time observing, learning and building relationships with your work colleagues. Existing SVW volunteers that commenced prior to your arrival may also be able to provide you with initial support. It is expected that during your first week with SVW you will be mainly focused on orienting yourself to your new environment and getting to know your colleagues and what is expected of you.

Cultural and Society

Family and Kinship

Social relations in Vietnam are strongly governed by a sense of community, but their relative importance are prioritized in the order of family, friends, and working relations. Therefore, family is prioritised over other things, even work, and it should come as no surprise that employees may take leave from work to look after their sick parents or for family visits.

The traditional Vietnamese family is expanded to include grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins who participate in a hierarchical system within which all important decisions are made. The oldest male in the family is the head of the family and the most important family member, with his eldest son serving as the second leader of the family. Children will live with their parents as long as they want, before they get married, at least.

Religion

Vietnam is generally irreligious, however four great philosophies and religions have shaped the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people: Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and Christianity. These religions coexist and mix with mother worship cult, ancestor worship, popular beliefs, superstition and ancient Vietnamese animism. It is a rich and finely balanced fusion and you can feel free to talk philosophy and religion with your Vietnamese friends and acquaintances. Most will be extremely happy to take you to their pagodas and explain their rituals.

Figures of respect

Respect for parents and ancestors is a key virtue in Vietnam. Elderly people and teachers are also held in high regard in this country. It is important that you show respect in general, as it will usually be shown to you by most Vietnamese in most situations.

Friendships and relationships

Vietnamese are friendly and warm. Even in a business environment, employers and colleagues will treat you as part of an extended family, taking care of you when you are ill, visiting you on weekends and holidays, inviting you to their weddings, funerals, housewarmings, and so on. If you are unsure what protocols apply, ask the Volunteer Coordinator or colleagues for advice on what you should and shouldn't do when you are invited to local events.

Don't be offended if newly made friends and people you meet poke into every detail of your personal life, for example asking your age; depending if you're older or younger than the person you are talking to, they will call you Em or Chi/Anh which translates as older brother or younger sister.

Humour can be a valuable tool in Vietnam and Vietnamese people truly love to have a laugh about almost anything. Someone who can tell a good joke and make people laugh will be appreciated, find it easier to fit in and may even be taken more seriously by colleagues and local people.

Gender and male-female relationships

In general, Vietnamese are proud to mention that their constitution guarantees equal status for both sexes; however, separate gender roles for men and women, a legacy of Confucian teachings, are still very much ingrained. Younger generations (especially the city dwellers) are discovering the challenge of balancing their family ambitions with their professional ones, and the traditional Vietnamese ideas on feminism with global trends.

While touching is very common with people of the same sex, it may cause embarrassment to have physical contact or display of affection toward opposite sex. It is also rare to see Vietnamese couples affectionate or kissing in public (even in nightclubs) but a bit of cuddling goes on around the lakes and parks in the big cities like Hanoi and HCMC. Nonetheless, times are changing, and many young people are adopting more open manners, especially towards foreigners.

Homosexuality is not criminalized in Vietnam and a ban on same-sex marriage was abolished in 2015, so while things are changing slowly gay couples are neither recognized nor protected by law. Conversations about marriage equality and protections for LGBT people have begun at the government level, and in recent years the country has also hosted annual Pride events.

You are encouraged to talk with the SVW Volunteer Coordinator or your supervisor regarding any uncomfortable situations you may experience, whether in the workplace or in daily life.

Living in rural areas

Most volunteers will experience a warm welcome in rural Vietnam, with neighbours who are eager to form relationships and lend a helping hand. Life can be quite different from the large cities and you should be prepared that as a foreigner you will stand out in the street. This is particularly the situation in PU Mat, where there are very few Westerners present and the SVW volunteer program is not as well established. Communication can also prove to be more challenging in rural locations with fewer locals likely to speak English, or any other foreign language. There will be more to learn and adjust to culturally in rural Vietnam, and of course more to experience. People in rural areas are less connected to the modern world and Western influence, and foreigners are more of a novelty, with staring or even asking rather personal questions being quite common. You will also notice people tend to marry and have children at a younger age in rural areas, and women will often assume traditional roles within the household while men tend to be in positions of authority both in the home, workplace, and wider community.

The people in rural Vietnam are very sociable, and won't think twice about asking for photos with you. They also might want to connect online or ask for your phone number, so you will have to decide what is appropriate. It is not unusual to spend breakfast lunch and dinner, after work coffee or drinks out with friends, family or colleagues and they might think that it is odd, or be concerned, if you choose to eat some meal alone or do an activity without the company of friends. As a foreigner in a rural setting, you might find yourself being held in even higher regard than in urban areas. The work culture is quite different in rural areas, often being more relaxed, open and friendly. Your work colleagues are more likely to be friends outside of work and they will probably take a keen interest in you as a foreigner.

If you are one of few foreigners in a rural location, you will need to develop an appropriate strategy to cope with isolation, and work hard to form a support network.

Protocols and Culture of the workplace

The Vietnamese are proud of their independence and history, and believe that the past hostilities in defence of their national territory have galvanised the country into a strong resilient economy. Employee commitment is high in Vietnam and this is closely connected to organisational benefits with positive influences on productivity, quality and competitiveness. These committed employees are less likely to quit their jobs, less likely to be absent, more likely to engage and have higher levels of satisfaction.

The Vietnamese workforce is young and positive. They are bright, optimistic about the future, eager to learn, and focused on improving their socio-economic conditions.

Meetings, Conversations and Discussions

When meeting someone in Vietnam, a warm greeting can start with an long handshake, followed by a hug of the shoulders and a bout of hand holding that can last the whole discussion. Vietnamese would be impressed hearing someone speak some Vietnamese as it indicates an interest in Vietnam and Vietnamese people. A very common Vietnamese word used at the first meeting is “Xin Chao”, which can be used for greeting people of different ages and bidding farewell to them.

For business meetings, the focus should be placed on work related issues. Start-off conversation with comments about weather or traffic, and then ask work-related questions. If it is a social meeting, focus can be placed on family, which is extremely important to most Vietnamese. In this context, it is culturally acceptable to ask questions about a person's age, marital status or parents. Vietnamese appreciate when such personal questions are asked, as these convey that a person cares about their lives.

Vietnamese tend to avoid direct confrontation, and keeping face in the public is very important. They usually prefer to speak in an indirect manner, particularly on sensitive or controversial issues. At the workplace, many discussions take place behind the scenes in order to seek agreement or consensus on these issues. Sitting on the table, slouching, or pointing your finger at someone would be considered rude, and should be avoided.

Workplace structure/ hierarchy

In a hierarchical society like Vietnam, the top-down approach remains preferred, and decisions are usually taken by the head of the organisation. However, consultations and building consensus play an important role in the decision-making process, particularly in public-sector organizations such as governmental agencies and other entities that are owned and/or run by the government (e.g.: state-owned enterprises, universities, schools, hospitals, etc.). In addition, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) still play a crucial role in most public-sector organizations. For instance, while CPV representatives do not run these organizations administratively, they still have the right to review (and even revoke when necessary) major decisions made by managers/administrators, particularly with respect to personnel issues.

Vietnamese people tend to keep their distance from their immediate supervisors/managers and do not disclose their feelings and thoughts directly to their bosses. Therefore, they usually share their work-related concerns with co-workers and/or family members or relatives and seek feedback or advice from these people. Should Vietnamese be interested in discussing sensitive or controversial issues with their supervisors/managers, they would prefer to raise these issues in an indirect manner. To avoid direct confrontation at the workplace, they tend to conduct one-to-one informal discussions regarding their problems/challenges rather than raising them during formal meetings.

Attire/ What to wear

In an office environment the dress code is semi-formal. Men usually wear tucked in shirts, no ties. Women don't dress as formally as western style suits but still dress quite stylishly. For women, they usually wear shirt and pants or tailored dresses. Although it may be unbearably hot in summer, sleeveless shirts in the office are generally not appropriate. Jeans and trainers are not encouraged in the Government offices but are fine with local community organisations, or NGOs. In a rural locations it is recommended you dress more conservatively, even after work hours.