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Cities of Vietnam

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Introduction

Vietnam is a land of vibrant contrasts, bustling energy, and rich historical legacy. Over the centuries, its cities have borne witness to dynastic grandeur, colonial intrigue, wars, reunification, and the dynamic surge of modernization. Each city in Vietnam tells a unique story—a mosaic of ancient traditions, cultural exchanges, economic aspirations, and the unceasing pulse of daily life. It is within the rhythm of these urban spaces that the heart of the nation beats most audibly, fusing past and future in surprising ways.

The story of Vietnamese urbanization is, at its core, a journey of transformation. Where once Imperial citadels and riverside markets defined the landscape, today, glass-clad towers, bustling industrial parks, and smart city infrastructures shape the horizon. In just a few decades, Vietnam's cities have grown at an unprecedented rate: by 2022, nearly 38% of the country's population resided in cities, compared to less than 20% in 1990. This swift urbanization has been both a challenge and a catalyst, enabling the country to emerge as one of Southeast Asia's fastest-growing economies.

However, the tapestry of Vietnamese cities is woven not just from statistics and development indices, but from a deep reservoir of heritage and community spirit. Ancient and modern coexist in remarkable harmony—pagodas line avenues of French colonial architecture; floating markets thrive beside new transport corridors; and traditional crafts live on in the shadow of giant industrial parks. From the misty mountains of Sapa to the sun-washed shores of Nha Trang, from the imperial heritage of Hue to the cosmopolitan dynamism of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam's urban centers encapsulate the spectrum of the nation's identity.

Tourists and residents alike are drawn to these cities not only for what they offer but for the sense of movement they embody. The push and pull of rural and urban, old and new, east and west are omnipresent, shaping everything from cuisine to architecture, and from public festivals to private lives. Visitors will find in Vietnam's cities an ever-changing landscape: vibrant street food scenes, innovative art districts, historic temples, and cutting-edge technology woven into daily routines. Urban Vietnam is generous and inviting, sometimes chaotic, often surprising, but always compelling.

Yet, rapid growth brings complexities. Urban infrastructure struggles to keep pace with migration; heritage sites face pressure from modern development; and the threat of climate change—especially for delta and coastal cities—requires innovative responses at unprecedented scales. In recent years, Vietnam has made significant efforts to balance progress with sustainability through ambitious smart city initiatives, digital

transformation programs, and renewed focus on green urban planning.

This book invites readers on a journey through twenty-five of Vietnam's most significant and fascinating cities. Each chapter offers a portrait of a city—its history, landscape, culture, economy, and tips for travelers hoping to experience its unique atmosphere. Along the way, we will explore not only the beauty and resilience of these urban centers but also the challenges they face and the collective aspirations that define the future urban Vietnam. Whether you are an intrepid explorer, an urbanist, or simply curious about the soul of this remarkable country, "Cities of Vietnam" is your guide to its beating heart.

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CHAPTER ONE: Hanoi: The Timeless Capital

Hanoi, Vietnam's enduring capital, is a city where history breathes through ancient temples and colonial boulevards, offering a palpable sense of the nation's past and an optimistic vision for its future. More than a mere urban center, Hanoi serves as Vietnam's political and cultural heart, a sprawling metropolis that has earned affectionate nicknames such as "City of Soaring Dragon" and "Thousand-year-long capital of civilisation". Its official name, "Hanoi," translates to "inside the river," a geographical nod to its location within the Red River Delta. With a population of over 8.4 million people and an area covering 3,359.82 square kilometers, it is the second-most populous city in Vietnam and the largest by area.

The city's story stretches back over a millennium, with its origins as Thang Long, meaning "Ascending Dragon," a name bestowed in 1010 CE by Emperor Ly Thai To, who moved the capital there after a vision of a dragon rising from the Red River. This act cemented Hanoi's destiny as an imperial center, a role it largely maintained through various dynasties, each leaving an indelible mark on its cultural and architectural landscape. Even when the Nguyen dynasty moved the national capital to Hue in the early 19th century, Hanoi remained a vital regional hub for administration and culture. The name "Hanoi" was officially adopted in 1831 by Emperor Minh Mang.

French colonial rule, which began in earnest in 1883, brought significant transformations to Hanoi. The French developed it into a modernized city, installing new infrastructure and leaving a distinctive architectural legacy that can still be admired today, particularly in the elegant French Quarter. The Hanoi Opera House, for instance, constructed at the turn of the 20th century, stands as a grand example of French colonial architecture, inspired by Paris's Palais Garnier. The city became the capital of French Indochina in 1902 and remained so until 1945. After Vietnam's independence, Hanoi became the capital of a unified Vietnam in 1976, playing a crucial role throughout the Vietnam War and the subsequent national reunification.

Hanoi's rich cultural heritage is a captivating blend of traditional Vietnamese, Chinese, and French influences. This unique fusion is most evident in its architecture, cuisine, and daily customs. The city's strong Chinese and Confucian influences, in particular, manifest in its less spiced cuisine and more traditional social structures compared to central or southern Vietnam. As the capital for much of its history, Hanoi also boasts a higher concentration of formal cultural institutions and historical sites related to national governance.

One of Hanoi's most iconic and evocative areas is the Old Quarter, often referred to as "The 36 Streets." This labyrinthine district, with a history spanning over a thousand

years, began as a collection of workshop villages that clustered around the Imperial Citadel of Thang Long. By the 13th century, these villages had evolved into specialized craft guilds, with artisans from the same profession gathering in specific areas. Each street often specialized in a particular trade, leading to names like "Hang Bac" (Silver Street) or "Hang Gai" (Silk Street), a tradition that, in many cases, persists today. These "tube houses," narrow and deep, were a result of a Nguyen dynasty tax on street frontage, a architectural style still common in the Old Quarter. The Old Quarter is a living museum, where ancient traditions blend seamlessly with the rhythm of modern life. Visitors can wander through bustling streets, explore family-owned shops, and observe the daily routines of Hanoians.

At the heart of Hanoi lies Hoan Kiem Lake, or the "Lake of the Returned Sword," a tranquil oasis steeped in legend and deeply intertwined with the city's identity. The legend tells of Emperor Le Loi, who, in the 15th century, received a magical sword from the Golden Turtle God in the lake, which he used to defeat Chinese invaders. After achieving victory, the emperor returned the sword to the turtle, who then disappeared into the lake's depths. This tale has solidified the lake's status as a cultural and spiritual symbol of Vietnamese independence and resilience. In the middle of the lake stands the picturesque Turtle Tower (Thap Rua), an iconic symbol of Hanoi that is especially stunning at sunrise or sunset. Ngoc Son Temple, accessible via the vibrant red Huc Bridge, also graces the lake's waters, dedicated to General Tran Hung Dao, a national hero.

Beyond the Old Quarter and Hoan Kiem Lake, Hanoi is home to a wealth of historical and cultural attractions. The Imperial Citadel of Thang Long, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, offers a fascinating glimpse into Vietnam's imperial past, with archaeological excavations revealing layers of history spanning 13 centuries. Here, visitors can explore ancient palace foundations, military bunkers, and French colonial buildings. Another significant site is the Temple of Literature, Vietnam's first national university, founded in 1070. This serene complex honors Vietnamese scholars and showcases traditional Vietnamese architecture.

The Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, located in Ba Dinh Square, is a solemn and revered landmark, serving as the final resting place of President Ho Chi Minh. The mausoleum, inspired by Lenin's Mausoleum in Moscow but incorporating Vietnamese elements, was constructed between 1973 and 1975, a testament to the deep respect the Vietnamese people hold for their leader. Visitors can pay their respects to the embalmed body of Ho Chi Minh, a profound experience for many. Nearby is Ho Chi Minh's simple stilt house, where he preferred to live and work, offering a contrast to the grandeur of the mausoleum.

Hanoi also boasts a number of beautiful pagodas and temples. The One Pillar Pagoda, built in 1049, is renowned for its unique architectural design. Tran Quoc Pagoda, one of the oldest Buddhist temples in Vietnam with a history of over 1400 years, sits

gracefully on the banks of West Lake. Bach Ma Temple, considered the oldest temple in Hanoi, dates back to the 9th century and is located in the Old Quarter. These, along with Quan Thanh Temple, are part of the "Four Guarding Temples of Thang Long," believed to protect the city.

For a more unconventional experience, Hanoi Train Street offers a unique spectacle. This narrow railway bypass sees trains pass mere inches from residential buildings and cafes several times a day. Once a local curiosity, it became a popular tourist attraction, though access has been restricted due to safety concerns. Nonetheless, some licensed cafes still offer limited access, allowing visitors to experience the thrill of a passing train while sipping coffee.

Economically, Hanoi is a major player in the northern region of Vietnam, consistently demonstrating strong growth rates. Its gross regional domestic product (GRDP) has shown impressive figures, contributing significantly to the national GDP and state budget. The city's economy is diverse, with strong performances in services, industry, and construction. Hanoi is actively promoting digital transformation, with a focus on smart city infrastructure and e-government initiatives. The city has also become an attractive destination for foreign direct investment (FDI), particularly in real estate, manufacturing, and commercial ventures. Its central location, robust transport infrastructure, and a skilled workforce further enhance its competitive edge.

Despite its dynamic growth, Hanoi faces a number of urban challenges common to rapidly developing metropolises. Rapid population growth and an increasing number of private vehicles contribute to significant traffic congestion. The city's infrastructure, particularly its drainage system, struggles to keep pace with urbanization, leading to frequent flooding, especially given its location on a river delta. Environmental pollution, including air and water quality, remains a concern, with untreated wastewater often discharged into rivers and lakes. Additionally, urban management issues such as sidewalk encroachments and construction violations persist.

In response to these challenges, Hanoi is actively pursuing smart city initiatives. The city has implemented smart cards for public transport and public Wi-Fi, and is focusing on digital transformation in public administration. These efforts aim to enhance urban services and improve the quality of life for its residents. While progress is being made, the city acknowledges the need for stronger governance and a long-term vision to fully realize its potential as a smart and sustainable urban area.

Hanoi remains a city of profound charm and resilience. It is a place where the past is not merely preserved but actively lived, where ancient traditions infuse modern life with a unique character. From its thousand-year-old history as the "Ascending Dragon" to its present-day role as a vibrant economic and cultural hub, Hanoi offers visitors an unforgettable journey through the heart and soul of Vietnam.

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