

Tourism and Political Change



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Tourism and Political Transition in Reform-Era Vietnam

Contents

Introduction	2
Tourism development before Doi Moi	3
Doi Moi and changing political and economic alignment	4
Changing governmental roles in tourism sector	5
Foreign direct investment (FDI) in tourism	6
Changes in the accommodation sector	7
Changes in the use of nature areas	8
Levelling of pricing policies	9
Conclusion	10



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12 Tourism and Political Transition in Reform-Era Vietnam

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Introduction

In 1986, the Congress of Vietnam introduced an economic programme called *doi moi* (Renovation), which can be compared to Gorbachev's contemporaneous *glasnost* campaign in the Soviet Union. The Vietnamese Communist Party's new policy called for measures including the decentralisation of the planning system, a reduced number of government ministries and bureaucracies, reliance on the private sector as an engine of economic growth, allowing state and privately owned industries to trade directly in foreign and international markets, and long-term land leases for farmers.

With these political and economic shifts, Vietnam has become a much more accessible and attractive destination in the international tourism market and has been 'rediscovered' by tourists from around the world. Consequently, Vietnam's tourism industry has experienced a period of meteoric growth in recent years. According to the website of the Vietnamese National Administration of Tourism (VNAT) (www.vietnamtourism.com/index/e_index.asp), over 4.2 million international tourists arrived in Vietnam in 2007, compared to 1.3 million in 1995: an increase of over 200% in 12 years. A 2007 prognosis for 2010 foresaw tourist arrivals reaching 6 million and tourism receipts US\$ 4 billion, with a tourism industry workforce of 1.4 million, as compared with 250,000 in 2007 (Hodgson, 2007). Aside from this quantifiable growth, tourism in Vietnam has also changed in character since 1986. Vietnam's tourism industry is experiencing the emergence of new tourism niches, new kinds of attractions and businesses, new breeds of tourists and unfamiliar types of tourism such as eco-tourism and war tourism.

This explosion of tourism is unprecedented in Vietnam, and the Vietnamese government faces the necessity of balancing its socialist ideology and methods on the one hand, with the globalising and commercializing influence of the international tourism market on the other. Not merely a side effect of economic and political changes in Vietnam, growth and change in the tourism sector also generates significant effects on politics, economics and Vietnamese society in general.

The primary purpose of this chapter is to identify relationships between political changes in Vietnam since the beginning of the *doi moi* programme and changes in Vietnam's tourism sector during the same period.

Tourism development before Doi Moi

During the era of French control of Vietnam (1884–1954), the colonial regime attempted to remodel Vietnamese cities to resemble cities in France to give French residents the feeling of being at home while living in an exotic land. The success of the French programme of urbanism in Vietnam is shown by the nicknames ‘Pearl of the Far East’ and ‘Paris of the Orient’ by which the cities of Saigon and Hanoi, respectively, came to be known (Lam, 2000: 52). Many buildings from this time are now famous tourist attractions in Vietnam’s cities. In 1935, the Government General of Indochina established an official Information Tourist Bureau in Saigon under the name of Office Central du Tourisme Indochinoise, to publicise Indochina tourism by advertising in newspapers in Hong Kong, Singapore, Ipoh and Kuala Lumpur (ibid.: 19) where large numbers of Western foreigners resided, in an attempt to attract Western colonial expatriates living in the region to come to Vietnam as tourists. Indochina lay on a crossover route for businessmen travelling from Siam or Penang to Japan or China (Office Central du Tourisme Indochinoise, 1938:26). Air Vietnam, the national airline of Indochina, was formed on 1 October 1951, by a French-Vietnamese consortium.

Even though Vietnam had attracted European tourists since the 19th century, the break-up of the French colony and the political instability during the period of partition following the Geneva Conference of 1954 proved to be major constraints on tourism development. Tourism relations with foreign nations were affected by the political polarisation of the two quasi-states of divided Vietnam. Just as France had tried to mould its colony into a home-away-from-home, the USA and the Soviet Union left their own imprint on the character of developments in the two Vietnams during partition. The influence of the USSR in Hanoi can be seen in buildings from the 1950s and 1960s such as the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, the Ho Chi Minh Museum and the Soviet-Vietnamese Friendship Culture Palace. The tourist flow to North Vietnam during this period was mainly from the Eastern bloc (EIU, 1993: 62). During the US/Vietnam War, tourism in North Vietnam came to a virtual standstill. The Civil Aviation Administration of Vietnam (CAAV) was founded on 1 January 1956 at Hanoi’s Gialam Airport. The first scheduled flights (between Hanoi and Beijing) began on 20 April of the same year, using planes donated by the Soviet Union, with training and aircrew from East Germany. Services expanded very slowly and were re-dedicated to military uses after 1961. In 1967, service between Hanoi and Moscow was initiated (Smith, 2002: 811).

In 1960, the Vietnam Tourism Company was established under the control of the South Vietnamese Ministry of Trade (EIU, 1993: 70). The presence of many thousands of American and Allied servicemen, foreign correspondents and foreign businesses (Saigon Tourist and Saignon Tourism Association, 1990: 11) made Saigon a dynamic and developing city, even during the War years. However, US military flights made up most of the air traffic during this time, and figures from the latter years of the war show a constant decrease in activity by Air Vietnam itself, from 24,000 airline departures and over a million travellers in 1971 to 16,000 departures and 553,000 passengers in 1974 (Airline Traffic, 1976). New business such as restaurants, bars and cinemas opened for the entertainment of military personnel.

Many of the elements of Vietnam’s pre-partition tourism landscape were degraded or destroyed in the course of the War. After reunification under communist rule in 1975,

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