Vietnam: the untold story

Despite a long coastline, the country is only now figuring on divers’ maps of Asia – all the more reason to make your visit soon.

Text by Gemma Price    Photos by Caroline Istas
It’s a little-appreciated fact that the world-famous oceanic explorer and ecologist, Jacques Yves-Cousteau, first discovered his passion for diving off Vietnam’s Whale Island decades ago. All the same, the country does not readily spring to most people’s minds as one of Asia’s idyllic dive destinations.

That’s a shame for although it can’t offer much in the way of big pelagic species, its warm tropical waters and year-round season (helped by a coastline you can zip up and down according to season) means diving is playing an increasing role in the country’s tourism. A decade or so ago, backpackers travelling the country were surprised to hear that diving was available at all. Now dive shops report a growing number of visitors who specifically come to Vietnam to dive.

Many are first-time divers, factoring in open-water certification as part of their trip, but Vietnam is also making a name for itself as a frontier dive destination for experienced divers keen to explore new waters. It helps that authorities are working to repair the damage done by years of destructive fishing – whereas the first dive centres reported numerous dynamite explosions on every dive in the mid-1990s, now the tell-tale ‘boom’ is rarely heard. The big pelagics have yet to return to many areas, but the recent establishment of marine parks means that the underwater flora and fauna is now under a degree of protection and the diversity is once again being given the chance to grow again.

**Phu Quoc**

*When to go: mid-Nov to early June*

This is Vietnam’s largest island, with 600sq km of forest and beaches, located 65km off the country’s southern coast.

The former site of a prisoner-of-war camp which held 40,000 inmates during the Vietnam War, today its once-again sleepy and unspoilt setting makes Phu Quoc an irresistible lure for nature lovers and those keen to dive rarely visited stretches of reef.

Dive sites to the north of the island are similar to those found throughout much of Vietnam in that there are few larger fish or pelagics such as mantas or sharks. Turtle Island is the main venue here, where you will discover acropora corals, vast fields of gorgonians and deep-red honeycomb corals. Large orange elephant-ear and barrel sponges dot the reef everywhere; blue-ringed angelfish serenely skirt the coral branches; and if you look carefully you might spot the well-camouflaged stonefish resting on the bottom. Snoop around in the cracks and crevices of the eastern nudibranch gardens for nocturnal bamboo sharks too. Typically around 50cm in length, they are very easy to miss in the murk, despite their distinctive white spots.

To the south of Phu Quoc, the pristine hard and soft corals found ringing the mass of small islands along the coastline are also home to a huge variety of colourful reef and coral dwellers. Here you can expect to see fairy basslets and damselfish among many other species that characterise Vietnamese waters, as well as — if you’re very lucky — the wonderful but elusive dugong.

**Con Dao Island**

*When to go: all-year-round*

One of Vietnam’s premier yet less-frequented dive spots, this island, 200km from HCMC, was once known as Poulo Condore and considered a Southeast Asian version of Devil’s Island. It was here that the infamous Con Son Prison Complex was established by the French colonial authorities early in the nineteenth century, with prisoners used to...
While the big pelagic species are missing from many underwater scenes in Vietnam, the reef growth and attendant smaller marine life is often surprisingly rich.

Con Dao has an great range of sites: shallow coral reefs down at around 12m, underwater rocky seascapes and wall dives reaching down to 30m or so; with the chance to see rays, sharks, hawksbill and green turtles, and – an exceptional treat – dugongs. At present there’s a full-time dive centre making around five dives a week, but the limited flights from HCMC are often a bottleneck. Though there are up to five flights a day, the plane is small and you should book ahead to be sure of a seat. You may be lucky if you just show up: but others have been known to wait up to two weeks!

**Nha Trang**

**When to go:** mid-Jan to mid-Oct

Vietnam’s best-known dive destination has been enhanced since the establishment of the Hon Mun Marine Park three years ago to protect the islands off this central coastal town. The park is a huge draw for visitors, thanks to the variety of accessible protected sites and the close to 400 species of hard coral that are found in the area, according to recent biodiversity assessments.

The most popular spots are Electric Nose, a spectacular deep wall dive with resident giant stingrays and bumphead parrotfish; Rainbow Reef, home to many hard and soft corals; Madonna Rock, a dive with exciting swim-throughs and caves to explore at 25m; and Moray Beach, slightly shallower at 18m, and home to beautiful corals and giant morays.

The surrounding islands offer many more little-explored dive sites, and frogfish, paperfish, devil scorpionfish, dragonettes, flying gurnards, cowfish, small manta rays, large stingrays, shy turtles, and a white-tip shark nick-named Eric are all potential sights you may come across while exploring the park.

As with many reef-ringed areas, the waters off Nha Trang have claimed numerous boats over the years, but unfortunately there is no real wreck diving available as locals have already salvaged everything above 50m.

**Whale Island**

**When to go:** mid-Jan to mid-Oct

A real desert island paradise, Whale Island crowns an archipelago 80km north of Nha
Trang, with sites accessible from both beach and boat for beginners and experienced divers. Choose from wall dives down to 40m, vibrant coral gardens at around 10-15m, bracing drift dives and nudibranch-spotting forays. There is a great range of corals, and while sharks and manta rays have yet to return to these waters, you can expect to see stingrays, leopard rays, angelfish that span half a metre in length, and many other colourful aquatic species.

Named for the three rock pinnacles that break the surface, Hon Trau Nam, or Three Kings, is the most beautiful and spectacular of the sites, and at 20-35m is more suited to experienced divers. The sea floor here is carpeted with yellow, white and purple corals, and its labyrinth of fissures and rocky caves are home to a multitude of creatures.

At Hon Tai (Ear Island) you can watch black and red painted frogfish lounging on the flat fronds of the coral plateau; and at Van Phong Bay’s Bai Su site, the barren silty bottom offers an interesting range of invertebrates, including the rare fire urchin shrimp, and brightly-coloured dorid nudibranches.

Finally, White Rock is one of the furthest sites from Whale Island, but the trip is well worth it. Sheer walls drop down to the depths with leaf scorpionfish resting on the tips of craggy pinnacles and huge black rays skimming over gorgonians and black coral outcrops.

A mantis shrimp scuttles about off Whale Island. The beautiful markings disguise a confrontational nature and claws that pack an almighty punch.

In general, both visibility and water temperatures are at their most conducive during the summer months at all sites. The one exception is Phu Quoc which is so far south that the converse is true. There the water is at 28˚C or higher, year-round, while further north, most other sites get down to the low twenties in the winter.

There are decompression chambers at Nha Trang and Danang, both operated by the Vietnamese navy.

### Getting there

### Dive operators
(All PADI-accredited)
- Cham Island Diving Centre, Hoi An, tel: (84-510) 910 782, laochamsailing@gmail.com
- Indochine Divers, HCMC, tel: (84-8) 832 8952, info@indochinedivers.com
- Octopus Diving, Nha Trang, tel: (84-58) 521 629
- Sailing Club Divers, Nha Trang, tel: (84-58) 521 629, thediveshop@sailingclubvietnam.com

### Cham Island (off Hoi An)

**When to go:** Feb to Sept

If exploring the watery grave of long-sunk ships is your thing, then you should put Hoi An top of your list. You need to make sure you have permission from the Vietnamese military authorities first though and in practice this often means that, although you may get the nod, you will then be attached to a commercial salvage team.

There are a number of wrecks at various depths, protected from scavenging locals by the military which monitors and controls all off-shore territory. For example, at Ba Na, just south of Cameron Bay, there is a big Japanese transport resting on the bottom. Sunk in 1942, it is just one of 156 ships known to have been lying in Vietnamese waters since World War II, many of which remain untouched and unexplored and with a full cargo-hold.

Though many wreck sites remain off-limits to recreational divers, you can still easily join one of the daily dive trips to nearby Cu Lao Cham Marine Park. Some 25 minutes off-shore, this magnificent park encompasses eight islands which in turn harbour at least 155 species of corals, 202 species of fish and 84 species of molluscs.

One of the best features about this protected area is the absence of the hordes of glass-bottomed boats that buzz around some of Vietnam’s more frequented sites. Another is the unusual range of species, including some pelagics – wrasse of all sizes, angelfish, large anemones and their resident clownfish, lionfish and even potato cod. △△