



Interest in Cambodia grows as Vietnam sales *surge*

Image courtesy of Wendy Wu Tours

As travel in Vietnam becomes more 'sophisticated', demand (and sales) to this stunning destination continue to grow.

By Lee Mylne

THE strength of the Australian dollar combined with lower prices and a growing appetite for Australians to tour Vietnam has seen a surge of interest as well as bookings, a trend which has spread to neighbouring Cambodia.

Helen Wong's Tours founder and managing director Helen Wong says the number of bookings has risen at a "very noticeable" pace in 2011 and predicted this rise would continue well into next year, and beyond.

"More and more Australians are opening up to the thought of touring Vietnam as more international quality hotels open," she said.

"Travel in Vietnam has become more sophisticated. And Halong Bay, Saigon, the Mekong Delta, Hoi An and Hue are among a host of hot destinations now on a traveller's wish list.

"Previously, Vietnam had been seen as a country for backpackers or war veterans seeking to return after the conflict of the 1960s and 1970s.

"Now it is hot with those who want to see and experience the country in the comfort of a coach and by staying in international standard hotels.

"Cambodia, in particular Angkor Wat, is also on the wish list. It's one of the world's most valued manmade treasures."

InterAsia Tours director Dan Nebauer says "more and more" independent families and family groups are travelling to Vietnam and Cambodia, typically combining soft adventure activities such as cycling, trekking or sea kayaking with a beach stay.

Nebauer says there is strong demand for small group tours such as InterAsia's "Angkor & Vietnam", as increasing numbers of tourists want to combine Vietnam and Cambodia in the same holiday.

He says travellers are often wanting to travel between the two countries by boat, either cruising from My Tho to Cambodia, by speed boat from Chau Doc to Phnom Penh, or on the more luxurious river cruise options along the Mekong on the popular Pandaw vessels or the more upmarket Heritage Line cruise ships, the *Jayavarman* and *Jahan*.

"Cambodia is now seen to be safer to travel and tourist class accommodation is now available in most towns and small cities," he says. "Instead of the traditional Siem Reap and/or Phnom Penh short stays of three to a maximum six days, more and more tourists now tend to explore Cambodia in depth, spending the entire holiday of two or three weeks in Cambodia and visit not only Siem Reap, Phnom Penh but also other still not well-known but interesting towns and cities such as Sihanoukville, Battambang, Kampot, Kep, and Kampong Thom."

He says that unfortunately – apart from the recent opening of the four-star Ana Mandara Ninh Binh, the first international standard accommodation available in Ninh Binh/Hoa Lu area – most new hotel and resort developments are within the major tourist hubs and cities such as Hanoi, Saigon, Hoi An and China Beach, Siem Reap and Phnom Penh, where a good number of quality international hotels already exist.

Intrepid Travel's general manager global sales James Thornton says special interests are also driving travel to Vietnam.

"One trend we are noticing is an increase in interest from our

passengers on the culinary side of Vietnam," he says. "Our leaders tell us they are getting lots of requests from passengers about cooking classes and advice on where to find the best local restaurants.

"This is certainly linked to the prevalence in Australia and most of the Western world on foreign cuisines, cooking television shows and a general interest in Asian food. Many Australians now are experiencing Vietnamese food in Australia with the growing number of Vietnamese restaurants in the cities."

This year Intrepid introduced a new tour called "Taste of Vietnam" which covers all of the major sights of the country, but has a special emphasis on food-based activities such as cooking classes, guided visits to local food markets and dining in a mix of local and fine-dining Vietnamese restaurants. This is led by an Intrepid local guide with a special interest in food.

"Feedback has been excellent from passengers who have been on this trip," says Thornton.

"Many have learnt how to identify Vietnamese ingredients at a market and then prepare a delicious meal – skills they can bring home after their trip."

Cox & Kings' tour captures the 'spirit' and history of Vietnam

CRUISING spectacular Halong Bay, visiting a Hmong hill tribe and exploring one of the most famous battlegrounds of the Vietnam War are all part of Cox & Kings' 12-day "Spirit of Vietnam" tour.

The escorted small group journey explores the varied sights of Vietnam, from its bustling cities to magnificent countryside and historic temples. Highlights include the fascinating cities of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh, the historic pearls of Hue and Hoi An and the famous Cu Chi Tunnels, an underground wartime fortress dug beneath the jungles of south Vietnam, outside Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon).

The itinerary also includes a drive through the rural valley of Mai Chau surrounded by rolling mountains, lakes, paddy fields, rivers and houses on stilts, a traditional private junk boat cruise around Halong Bay's limestone mountains and a



visit to the Hmong hill tribe village of Xa Linh.

"Spirit of Vietnam" departs from Hanoi and includes 11 nights' accommodation, daily breakfast, sightseeing, transport, services of a tour escort and local guides, and entrance fees for sites on the itinerary. The tour also operates on a fully private basis.

The tour is priced from \$2536 per person (twin share) and is valid for sale until March 10, 2012.

sellingVietnam

Vietnam interest has 'exploded', travel agent says

INTEREST in travel to Vietnam seems to have "exploded" in the past six months, according to travel agent Melissa Demetriadis.

Melissa, who works at Flight Centre Southgate at Sylvania, in New South Wales' Southerland Shire, says some days it seems as if "everyone coming in the door wants to go to Vietnam".

She says the culture, history and food are among the main attractions for her clients, who are usually mature travellers looking for a good package deal that will include their flights, visas, meals and touring.

"It makes everything a lot easier for them, and they usually get to see spots they would not get to by themselves," she says. "Everything is taken care of."

Melissa recommends at least 12 to 16 days in Vietnam. "Anything less than 10 days is not long enough to see all the highlights."

Second-time travellers to Vietnam are also tending more to add Cambodia and/or Laos to their itineraries, she says, while first-timers usually start in either Hanoi in the north or Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) in the south and make their way to the other city.

Getting a group of friends together to book a private tour can be a great way of travelling, says Melissa. "Many people don't realise that if they can get 10 people together – a family group or five couples who are friends – they can have their own private tour, and it will not cost them any more than joining one with strangers."

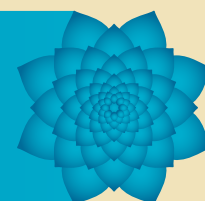
While she has never been to Vietnam, Melissa says the wholesalers she works with – and her colleagues who have been there – are very helpful in recommending the "must-see" destinations and experiences, such as a junk cruise on Halong Bay. "I seem to get at least a couple of enquiries a week, and all of a sudden interest in Vietnam seems to have exploded," she says. "And it is now definitely on my own 'to do' list."

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The Mekong Sun on the Upper Mekong in Laos

APT adds Upper Mekong cruising option in Laos

APT has added cruising the Upper Mekong in Laos to its Vietnam-Cambodia holidays.

Upper Mekong cruising will be on the stylish boutique river ship *Mekong Sun*, carrying up to 28 passengers.

This new initiative is outlined in the new 12-page Vietnam Thailand preview brochure, ahead of the main Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand brochure to be released soon.

This is another example of APT continuing its strategy to expand product choices for its discerning customer base through the agency networks, and to lead with unique and exclusive product in the Australian and New Zealand markets, according to APT's Debra Fox.

"These new luxury soft adventures compliment our core Lower Mekong cruises on *La Marguerite* and *Ms AmaLotus*, by offering the same standard of service, extraordinary places, unique sightseeing, luxury

properties, local dining experiences, the perfect mix of sightseeing and leisure time, APT Signature Experiences, and much, much more," she said.

Three APT itineraries combine the six-day Upper Mekong cruise which starts and finishes in Luang Prabang with Vietnam and Cambodian land touring and cruising. They are priced from \$11,495 per person (twin share).

The 18-day "Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand Adventure", from \$8195 is billed by APT as the lead-in package. The price includes Ho Chi Minh City, a seven-night Mekong cruise, port charges and tipping, 52 meals including Dine Around Dinners, soft drink, local beer and spirits available at all times on the Lower Mekong cruise, small boat excursions to the floating markets in Cai Be, Vinh Long and Sa Dec and on to Siem Reap and its Angkor temples, then to Northern Thailand, the old kingdom of Chian Sean and Bangkok.

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Wendy Wu releases special interest tours

WENDY Wu Tours is currently highlighting a series of specific category tours within its Vietnam program which will appeal to special interest sectors of the market. Marketing manager Amanda Bruno said that consumer demand, particularly from repeat travellers, was looking for travel activity in lesser known and lesser travelled areas of Asia.

She said that the first group of unique tours and destinations are grouped under the general heading of "Historical and Cultural Tours".

Typical of these tours is the "Vietnam and Laos Discovery" itinerary taking in the World Heritage-listed towns of Hoi An and Luang Prabang, spectacular Halong Bay, local villages along the Mekong Delta and much more. This 15-day tour starts from \$3860 per person (twin share) from Sydney, Melbourne Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth.

A complete range of tours is available. Wendy Wu's fully-inclusive group tours



Phousi Hill temple, Laos

include return international economy airfares, accommodation with all meals, English-speaking guides, sightseeing, transport, visas for Australian passport holders and fuel surcharge and tipping.

Vietnam Holidays' special deals with VN

SPECIAL packages from Vietnam Holidays are on offer to both Vietnam and Cambodia, flying with Vietnam Airlines.

The Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi Special is priced from \$799 per person, including taxes, for a return economy flight ex Brisbane, with domestic connections to Sydney or Melbourne.

A four-night package from Sydney and Melbourne is priced from \$980 per person (twin share), including return economy airfares with Vietnam Airlines, four nights' accommodation at Hong Ngoc 1 Hotel and breakfast daily. These special fares are for travel between October 4 and November 18, and from January 23 to March 29, 2012.

A Cambodia-Siem Reap special is priced from \$1062 per person (twin share), including return economy airfares from Melbourne with Vietnam Airlines, four nights' accommodation at Angkor Way Hotel and daily breakfast.

It also includes a free stopover in Ho Chi Minh City or Hanoi, and is valid until November 18. The fare from Sydney is \$1079 per person.



The Huc (Rising Sun) Bridge, Hanoi (photo by Lee Mylne)

A special add-on Siem Reap three-day getaway is available, priced from \$352 per person (twin share). It includes two nights' accommodation at Apsara Holiday Hotel, a two-day tour to Angkor Wat, Ta Prohm, South Gate of Angkor Thom, Bayon, Baphoan, Elephant and Leper Khan, Terrace of Srasang and Prasat

Kravan with an English-speaking tour guide, all admission costs to itinerary attractions, a one-hour traditional foot massage, breakfast daily, three lunches, two dinners and a traditional dinner dance show.

Vietnam Airlines has daily non-stop flights from Sydney and Melbourne to Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi.



Orient-Express' 'affordable' deal

LA RÉSIDENCE d'Angkor, an Orient-Express hotel on the banks of Siem Reap's tree-lined river, is offering a "Great Affordable Escape" package priced from \$247 per room per night.

Built in traditional Khmer style and located near the UNESCO World Heritage site of Angkor Wat, the 54-room hotel has quiet gardens, a swimming pool and spa, and is also close to the town's busy craft markets, restaurants, galleries and the fascinating Tonle Sap Lake with its "floating village". All rooms have a private balcony overlooking the pool or the river.

This package includes round-trip airport transfers, daily buffet breakfast for two, one three-course dinner for two, free bottled water daily, and internet access. Guests can also take part in Wednesday and Saturday meditation sessions with local monks.



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Explore Vietnam with Orion Expeditions

ORION Expedition Cruises' nine night "Vietnam Explorer" itinerary includes four UNESCO World Heritage sites. Whether it is threading along the Saigon River – en route to an overnight in the heart of Saigon – or venturing across the Mekong Delta and upstream to explore the Mekong River, the purpose-built 100-passenger expedition ship *Orion II* is able to sail secluded backwaters and access rivers where larger ships cannot venture.

Passengers will visit the ancient capital of Hue, walk the narrow streets of Hoi An,

cruise the waters of Ha Long Bay and see the architecture of My Son in the mountains of the lost kingdom of Champa.

Departures are on November 18 and 27, December 6, and March 12, 21 and 30, 2012.

Fares start from \$7335 per person (twin share) for ocean suite accommodation, and include meals, entertainment and educational programs, port and handling charges, excursions and tender transfers, government fees and taxes.



Luxury resort options open up in Vietnam

EXCELLENT value on luxury accommodation such as spa resorts is bringing a new style to travel in Vietnam, according to Travel Indochina product manager for Vietnam, Eric Finley.

"There is a lot happening at that end of the market, with more and more properties on the four and five-star levels opening up," he says.

Several new properties are included in Travel Indochina's new brochure, including "fantastic beach resorts" in

already popular areas such as Da Nang and Hoi An.

These include the opening of Ca Lam Villas at the eco-friendly luxury resort of An Lam Ninh Van Bay Villas, part of Epikurean Hotels, Villas and Hideouts. The An Lam villas at Ninh Van Bay, outside Nha Trang, have introductory rates starting from \$292 per night on a "stay for three nights, pay for two" promotion.

Longer stays benefit from similar discounts – "stay four, pay for three" –

and are valid until December 19.

A 15 per cent early bird reduction applies to stays of three nights or longer when booked 30 days or more in advance. An Lam and other resorts, including the new Fusion Maia spa property at Hoi An, are offering all-inclusive rates which extend to unlimited spa treatments, says Finley.

"This is a new concept in Vietnam and represents really great value. The Fusion Maia has villas with private plunge pools and a beachfront

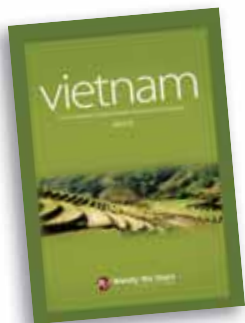
location, and rates from \$167 per person (twin share)."

Finley says the strength of the Australian dollar has absorbed price increases and enabled travellers to get excellent value on Vietnam holidays.

Good deals are also available on three star hotels in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, with some rates even coming down, he says, and year-round lead-in price at some hotels as low as \$25 per person (twin share).

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Helen Wong's Tours packages best of Vietnam with Angkor Wat



Image credit: Helen Wong's Tours

ASIAN specialist Helen Wong's Tours has a number of group tours which combine the best of Vietnam with Cambodia's monumental treasure, Angkor Wat.

The 14-day "Angkor and Discovery" itinerary, priced from \$4890 per person (twin share), begins with a flight from Australia to Siem Reap to marvel over the UNESCO World Heritage site during a two-night stay.

A cruise of Cambodia's Tonle Sap follows before boarding the flight to Ho Chi Minh City and a journey along the Mekong Delta.

Vietnam's "living museum" of Hoi An is

also on the itinerary along with the capital Hanoi and the beautiful Halong Bay, another UNESCO World Heritage-listed region.

The price includes return air fares from Australia, internal Asian flights, daily breakfast and lunch and some dinners, stays in four- and five-star hotels, an evening cultural show, some transfers, sightseeing and entrance fees, Cambodia and Vietnam visas for Australian passport holders, departure taxes, security charges, fuel surcharges, the assistance of English-speaking guides, and a travel kit and cabin bag.