

VIETNAM

FROM DAY ONE

An Honest Relocation Guide

Chapter 1 — Why Vietnam, and Why Not

Plus the Author's Message. Complete and unedited.

This is the opening of the book, exactly as it appears in the published edition — including the part most relocation guides leave out: what the move actually cost us.

It ends with ten questions. Answer them honestly, both of you, separately — and you will know more about whether Vietnam is right for you than any brochure could tell you.

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42 Publishing · Perth, Western Australia

Author's Message

Let me start with the thing most relocation guides bury, if they mention it at all.

We don't live in Vietnam. We visit it: ninety days at a time, for three years now.

There is no visa in my passport that says resident. Vietnam doesn't offer one for people like us, and Chapter 4 explains what that means. Like thousands of Westerners across South-East Asia, my wife Sheridan and I are Australian travellers who found a place we keep coming back to: Da Nang, on Vietnam's central coast. Between stays we cruise, we cross borders, we explore the region. Then we return to the same street, the same faces, the same quán where the coffee starts dripping before we've sat down. Officially, we're tourists. What we've learned in those three years is what this book is made of.

I'm telling you this on page one because it sets the tone for everything that follows.

But this book isn't just our story, and that matters. Over our years in the expat community (the coffee mornings, the beach walks, the long dinners where the truth comes out) we've heard hundreds of relocation stories from people who did it every possible way. The teacher on a work permit. The retiree doing the ninety-day rhythm. The couple who went home after six months and were right to. Sheridan has documented much of it in her journals at MyLifestyle.au: healthcare visits, hosting visitors from Australia, the tourist traps, what ordinary Tuesdays are like. This book is a synthesis, our experience tested against theirs. Where I write "this is how it works," it's because we've watched it work, and fail, dozens of times over.

A little about me, because you should know whose advice you're weighing. I'm an international bestselling author, publisher and enrichment speaker, and my professional life, on cruise ships, at conferences and in my other books, is about one subject: helping people navigate change with confidence. Artificial intelligence, retirement, new countries, new languages: the surface changes, but the skill underneath doesn't. Moving to Vietnam is one of the biggest changes a person can choose, and it rewards the same things every big change rewards: honest information, realistic expectations, and the confidence to act on both. That's what this book is for.

Honesty has a cost, and I'll pay it up front. The hardest part of our move wasn't paperwork. It was rehoming our much-loved dog before we left Australia. There was no good way to bring him, and finding him a new family was the price of the life we chose. I mention this now because the brochures never count that cost, and you deserve a book that does. Every big change asks you to give something up. This book will always tell you what.

A word on what this book is not. It's not a travel guide; it won't rank beaches. It's not a legal or financial manual: those decisions belong with qualified professionals, and I'll tell you when to call one. Rules change fast in Vietnam, so throughout the book you'll find Last Fact Checked dates and QR links to a living updates page, because no printed book should ask you to trust it blindly. And it's not a sales pitch. If, by the end of Part 1, you've decided Vietnam isn't for you, the book has done its job just as well.

The structure follows the move itself: **Decide. Prepare. Arrive. Settle. Thrive.**

The goal is not a perfect move. The goal is a confident one.

One more thing. This book has companions, and they're signposts, not advertisements. Easy Vietnamese and the Easy Vietnamese for Expats online course teach you to speak from day one, using The TALK Method™. The Culture of the Vietnamese Language explains the country underneath the words. Sheridan's Living in Da Nang, Vietnam is the practical guide to the city we keep returning to, and her journals at MyLifestyle.au continue the story in real time. You'll find me, and the rest of my work on navigating change, at DavidBunney.com. You don't need any of them to use this book. But you'll see signposts where they pick up a thread this one can only touch.

Someone should have handed me this book at the start. Nobody did. So here it is.

Best wishes,

David Bunney Da Nang, Vietnam — for the next ninety days, anyway

PART 1 — DECIDE

Is Vietnam right for you?



Chapter 1 — Why Vietnam, and Why Not

A mirror, not a sales pitch.

Six in the morning on My Khe beach, and half of Da Nang is already in the water.

Not tourists — locals. Grandmothers in floral swimsuits doing slow aerobics in the shallows. Old men swimming straight out with the unhurried strokes of people who have done this every morning for fifty years. Badminton on the sand. Someone's radio playing something older than the radio. By the time the sun is properly up they'll all be gone, back to shops and kitchens and grandchildren, and the beach will be handed over to the sleepers-in, who will never know what they missed.

Sheridan and I had travelled Vietnam before, but we walked into that scene in our first Da Nang week holding takeaway coffees, jet-lagged and quietly stunned. I remember thinking: people live like this. Not holiday like this. Live like this.

That morning is the postcard. It's real, it's repeatable, and three years later it still catches me. But if a postcard were enough to build a life on, this chapter would be one page long and this book would be a brochure.

So here's the deal for the next few pages. I'm going to tell you what Vietnam gives you, plainly, because it's a lot. Then I'm going to tell you what Vietnam asks of you in return, with the same plainness, because it's also a lot. Then I'm going to tell you what the move cost us personally, because the biggest costs never make it into the spreadsheet. And at the end, instead of a conclusion telling you what to think, you'll get a set of questions only you can answer.

This chapter is a mirror, not a pitch. Vietnam doesn't need you to love it. It was doing fine before you read this book, and it will do fine after. The only person with something at stake in this decision is you, which is why you deserve plain speech instead of enthusiasm.

What Vietnam gives you

Money stops being the boss. We'll do the full numbers in Chapter 2, but here's the headline: for most Western couples, a comfortable life in Vietnam costs a fraction of the same life at home. Not a deprived life; a good one. Meals out without checking the menu prices. Help with the housework if you want it. A massage because it's Tuesday. The point isn't luxury. The point is that the background hum of financial anxiety (the one so constant at home you've stopped hearing it) goes quiet. For retirees on fixed incomes and remote workers on Western salaries, that silence is worth more than anything you can buy with the savings.

You feel safe. Violent crime against foreigners is rare. Sheridan walks home at night without the mental risk-calculation Australian women run automatically. In three years, the closest we've come to feeling threatened is a disagreement over a parking spot — not ours. (Petty theft and scams exist and Chapter 18 covers them; traffic is the real danger here, and Chapter 12 doesn't sugar-coat it.)

The warmth is not a myth. Vietnamese people, especially outside the biggest tourist crushes, are curious, patient and quick to absorb you into the pattern of a street. Learn ten words of Vietnamese and use them badly, and doors open that money can't. The woman at our local quán started making my coffee before I ordered somewhere around month one. By month three she was correcting my pronunciation. By the end of the first year we were invited to her daughter's wedding. That progression is available to anyone willing to show up repeatedly and try.

The place is alive. Vietnam is young, fast, optimistic and building. Whole streets change between visa runs. There's an energy here that many Western countries have lost: a sense that next year will be better than this year and everyone's working on it. Some expats find it exhausting. Most of us find it contagious.

You're in the middle of everything. From Da Nang, we can be in Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore or Siem Reap in a few hours for the price of a tank of petrol at home. The ninety-day rhythm (Chapter 4) forces you out regularly anyway, and South-East Asia rewards the habit. We've seen more of the region this way than most people manage in a lifetime of annual leave.

What Vietnam asks of you

Now the other column. None of these are complaints. They're the terms of the deal, and you should read them the way you'd read any contract — before signing.

Noise. Vietnam is loud. Roosters, karaoke, construction, horns, the neighbour's television, a wedding marquee erected overnight in your street with a PA system that would embarrass a stadium. The noise is not a malfunction — it's the sound of a culture that lives outdoors and together. You will either make peace with it or you won't, and earplugs are cheaper than resentment.

Heat, and the wet. The tropics are non-negotiable. There are months when you're wet from a shower to the car door, and months when the rain simply doesn't stop. Aircon helps and costs money (Chapter 19). The climate is a genuine deal-breaker for some bodies and some temperaments, and no amount of loving the food fixes it.

Bureaucracy, and the ninety-day clock. Chapter 4 covers this fully, so the one-line version: there is no retirement visa, most long-stayers live on a quarterly rhythm of exits and re-entries, and every plan you make rests on permission that renews four times a year. Some people carry that lightly. Some never stop feeling it.

Distance from the people you love. This is the heavy one, and it lands later than you expect. Grandchildren grow between visits. Parents age. Weddings, funerals and hospital dashes happen nine flying hours away, and you will miss some of them. Video calls are wonderful and insufficient. Before you move, have the conversation about who you're leaving and what you'll do when the phone rings at 3 am. Because eventually, it rings.

Being forever foreign. You can be welcomed here, embedded here, even loved here. You will never be from here. Most days that's fine, occasionally it's lonely, and once in a while (when the paperwork stalls, or the conversation swirls past you in a language you've only half-learned) it's exhausting. The expats who last have made peace with being permanent guests. The ones who need to belong the way they belonged at home tend to go home.

Heard in the Community: who thrives, who goes home

Years of coffee mornings and long dinners produce a pattern you can almost set your watch by.

The ones who thrive arrive curious. They build routines fast — a regular quán, a market lady, a swim time. They learn some language, badly and cheerfully. They go toward the culture instead of building a bunker against it, and they treat the frustrations as weather: real, temporary, not personal.

The ones who go home usually fall into one of three groups. The bargain hunters, who came for cheap paradise and discovered that a discount on a life you don't enjoy is no bargain. The bubble dwellers, who recreated their home country inside an expat enclave and then wondered why the magic never arrived. And the reluctant partners — one half of a couple chasing a dream the other half never truly shared. That last one is the saddest and the most preventable, and it's why the self-assessment at the end of this chapter is written for two.

Going home isn't failure, by the way; Chapter 24 is entirely about that. But most of the returns we've watched were predictable from the first month. The questions below are designed to make them predictable from your armchair, before the house is sold.

What it cost us: Loki

Every move has a line item that never appears in the budget. Ours was a dog.

Loki was eleven years old when we made the decision to go: a big-hearted male who had been part of our family for his entire life. Eleven years of beach mornings and food dropped under the table. And more than that: Loki had seen us through medical recoveries, the way dogs do, lying beside the bed through the slow weeks, appointing himself to the job no one asked him to do and doing it better than anyone. He wasn't a pet. He was family, and everyone reading this who has had such a dog knows exactly what I mean.

And we couldn't take him.

We looked at every option, the way you do: twice, three times, hoping the answer would change. The flights, the heat, the quarantine, his age. Every path led to the same place: bringing an eleven-year-old dog into the tropics for our dream was a decision for us, paid for by him. So we did the harder thing. We found him a new family — good people, a good yard, the kind of home you'd choose if you were choosing for yourself — and we said goodbye to our mate.

I'm not going to dress that up. It was the worst day of the whole move, worse than any airport, any paperwork, any wobble since. Three years later it still catches one of us occasionally, usually at the sight of some scruffy Da Nang street dog asleep in a doorway.

I tell you this for two reasons. First, because this book promised you the real costs, and this was ours. The brochures count dollars; the true inventory includes a dog's face at a gate. Second, because whatever your version of Loki is (and you have one: a garden, a grandchild's Saturday sport, a mother in care, a workshop full of tools) you should name it now, out loud, at your own kitchen table. Not to talk yourself out of the move. To make sure that if you go, you go having counted everything, so the cost never arrives disguised as regret.

Big changes don't ask for payment in money. They ask for it in pieces of the life you already have. Vietnam has been worth it to us — I want to be clear about that. But "worth it" is a sentence you can only say honestly if you knew the price when you paid it.

The mirror: ten questions before Chapter 2

Answer these, both of you, separately, then compare. There are no scores. The value is in where your answers differ, and in the questions you find yourself wanting to skip.

1. Have I spent time in Vietnam outside a holiday — or am I extrapolating from two lovely weeks?
2. Can I live at ease knowing my permission to stay renews every ninety days? (Read Chapter 4 before answering.)
3. How do I handle heat, rain and noise in practice, based on evidence from my own life rather than theory?
4. Who am I leaving, and what happens when the 3 am phone call comes?
5. What is my Loki, the thing I'll have to give up that no spreadsheet will show?
6. Am I going *toward* something, or just away from something? (Away works for about six months.)
7. Will I learn some of the language, or am I assuming English will carry me? (It won't, and Chapter 16 explains why that's good news.)
8. If my partner is coming: do they want this, or do they want *me* to have this? Have I asked them plainly?
9. What's my Plan B if the rules change or the dream doesn't fit, and is it funded?
10. If I imagine an ordinary wet Tuesday in month eight (no beach, no novelty, aircon humming, family far away) does the life still appeal?

That last question is the whole chapter in one sentence. Anyone can love Vietnam on the postcard morning. The move works for the people who can love it on the wet Tuesday.

Straight Talk

If the honest answer to several of these questions is “I don’t know,” that’s not a stop sign — it’s an itinerary. Chapter 9 is about the scouting trip: two to four weeks designed to answer precisely these questions with evidence instead of hope. Book that before you sell anything you can’t buy back.

You’ve seen both columns now — what Vietnam gives, what it asks, and what it took from us. If you’re still reading, the next question is beautifully concrete: what does this life cost per month? Chapter 2 has the tables.

Companion note: The cultural texture in this chapter—the quán, street life and meaning behind the noise—is explored further in The Culture of the Vietnamese Language. Sheridan’s ongoing journals of everyday Da Nang life are available at MyLifestyle.au.

You have the questions. The book has the answers.

Chapter 1 asked what you would have to give up. The remaining twenty-three chapters deal with everything that follows: what an ordinary month actually costs, why there is no retirement visa and what people do instead, the ninety days before you fly, your first thirty days on the ground, and the honest chapter about knowing when it is not working.

- › Part 1 — Decide · real numbers, real friction, the visa truth
- › Part 2 — Prepare · the 90/60/30 countdown before you fly
- › Part 3 — Arrive · a script for your first thirty days
- › Part 4 — Settle · healthcare, language, culture, safety
- › Part 5 — Thrive · work, family, legality, and going home well

The honest guarantee

Read it. If you find a topic about relocating to Vietnam that this book should have covered and didn't — or if you simply don't believe you received US\$47 of value — email me within 30 days and I'll refund you in full. No questions.

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