

➤ Vietnam shares its borders with China, Laos and Cambodia. Though its total land area rounds off at just 329,560 km<sup>2</sup> the country supports a population over 83 million. Vietnam is well known for its rich culture and picturesque views, but most of its recognition was gained from the Vietnam War, which tormented the country from 1957 to 1975. This popularity together with today's ease and affordability of travel has made the country a marked tourist destination with a booming tourist industry; in just the first half of 2005, 1.7 million tourists visited the nation, a 24% increase since 2004.

# Mystic Vietnam

By David Harasti



THE CAPTIVATING PICTURES OF VIETNAM'S UNDERWATER REALM HELPED ME DECIDE IN A HEARTBEAT, VIETNAM HERE WE COME!

**MOST VISITORS** arrive at Vietnam through Ho Chi Minh City international airport in the south or Hanoi International airport in the north. This time our journey commenced and finished through Ho Chi Minh. Next year, we plan to explore the north, arriving through Hanoi for a different experience.

Ho Chi Minh is the largest city in Vietnam, despite Hanoi being its capital. Also known as Saigon, the first and most stark impression you will get from this city are the bikes, bikes and ever more bikes! Motorbikes are apparently the most efficient form of transportation around Vietnam and the locals manage to fit everything on the back of a bike, including a fridge! If I could give only one tip for travellers to Ho Chi Minh, it would be to note that pedestrian crossings in Vietnam are not like the crossings in Australia. It appears that the rule in Vietnam is for pedestrians to stop as the bikes and cars will not. Crossing the road was kind of like playing 'Frogga' on the old Atari.

Some of the more interesting sites in Ho Chi Minh are the Post Office, Notre Dame Cathedral, The War History Museum, Reunification Palace and the old US Embassy. It is best to find accommodation in 'District 1' as all the major attractions; shops,

markets and restaurants are within easy walking distance. We stayed at the Caravelle Hotel which is without a doubt, one of the most luxurious hotels we have stayed in and it cost only US\$70 a night. A night visit to the Saigon Saigon Bar at the Caravelle is a must. There are many markets in District 1 where you can purchase DVD's, t-shirts, clothes, bags, perfumes and pretty much anything else you can imagine. For those travelling on a shoestring, several budget accommodations are also available along District 1 and 3, with rates beginning at US\$20 a night.

As for diving, Nha Trang is the prime location in Vietnam. It is a coastal town that is fast developing into a major tourist destination in Vietnam. High-rise hotels are being built along the beachfront and it is beginning to look like a mini version of Australia's Gold Coast. There is a huge variety of hotels to select, ranging from the behemoth, five-star Sunrise Resort (US\$100 per room) to the cheaper three-star Green Hotel (US\$30 per room). Restaurants and bars are located throughout the city centre and we found that you can't pass up on a dinner and drink down at the Sailing Club on the main beach. Other good places for food and a 'quiet' drink include Crazy Kym's, The German Beer Garden and The Rainbow Bar.

Rainbow Divers is the largest dive operator in Vietnam and is owned and run by PADI Course Director Jeremy Stein with excellent support from many dive instructors including Grant Martin and Craig Anderson. Additionally, Rainbow Divers was the only dive centre that provided Nitrox and accommodated rebreathers; they were very efficient in providing pure O<sub>2</sub> fills as well as arranging for sorb for my Sports Kiss Rebreather. A note when sending sorb to Vietnam: Prepare for delays at customs as they are likely to suspect it is a hazardous substance. Diving on a rebreather in Vietnam was also an eye opener for the local dive guides who referred to me as 'Rocket Man' because of the two small cylinders on my back!

Rainbow Divers' main shop is in the centre of town and is located at the Rainbow Bar; a diveshop, restaurant and bar all in the same location. After a day of diving most divers would head straight to the bar for a bit of mingling but mostly to share their days' diving experiences whilst sharing a drink.

Divers have three boat options when diving out of Nha Trang. The largest boat carries twenty or so divers and visits the closer and shallower dive sites that are more suited for training dives and snorkelers. Our favourite boat was the new speedboat named 'Ocean' that comfortably accommodated ten divers and could access more distant sites including one of the best dive locations we came across - the 'Electric Nose'. They also had a super fast speedboat named 'Eric' that caters for four divers and can be chartered for the day to visit the sites that are not frequently dived. Most of our diving was off the Ocean speedboat, which was the choice boat for small groups and photographers that liked to get away from the chaos of open water classes! That said, I'd also recommend a day of diving from the big boat to sample the complete Rainbow Divers experience, which is essentially sensational food served between dives, and a top crew that is friendly and helpful.



# Over 20 different Dive Sites to choose!

We've chosen to list these as our favourites from Nha Trang:

## Electric Nose

No one on the boat could explain how this site, a huge rock pinnacle emerging from 45 metres and breaking the surface, was so named. But that didn't matter as this is without a doubt one of the single best dive sites that we had been too. Like most dive sites in Vietnam there is an absence of mega fauna but the colours and diversity of soft corals made it one of the most prolific spots for macro life. Over fifty different species of nudibranchs were recorded from this one spot as well as numerous types of shrimps, crabs, flatworms, cowries and mantis shrimps. The nudibranch diversity was incredible and seven of the species we found were new discoveries that have yet to be described. The walls of the pinnacle were covered in a huge variety of soft corals and there was a large swim through that was lavished by thousands of bright yellow sunflower corals. This site was so good that we went back every day and even after four visits we still hadn't managed to explore the entire site.



## Madonna Rock

It was not very difficult to see how this dive site got its name; two large triangular shaped rocks sticking out of the water were reminiscent the conical bra designed by Jean-Paul Gaultier and made famous by Madonna on her 1990 Blonde Ambition tour. There are a couple of excellent swim throughs and caves which were filled with millions of small glass fish. Within the caves you can find many unusual flatworms and shrimp species. This is also a good location for observing ornate ghost pipefish.

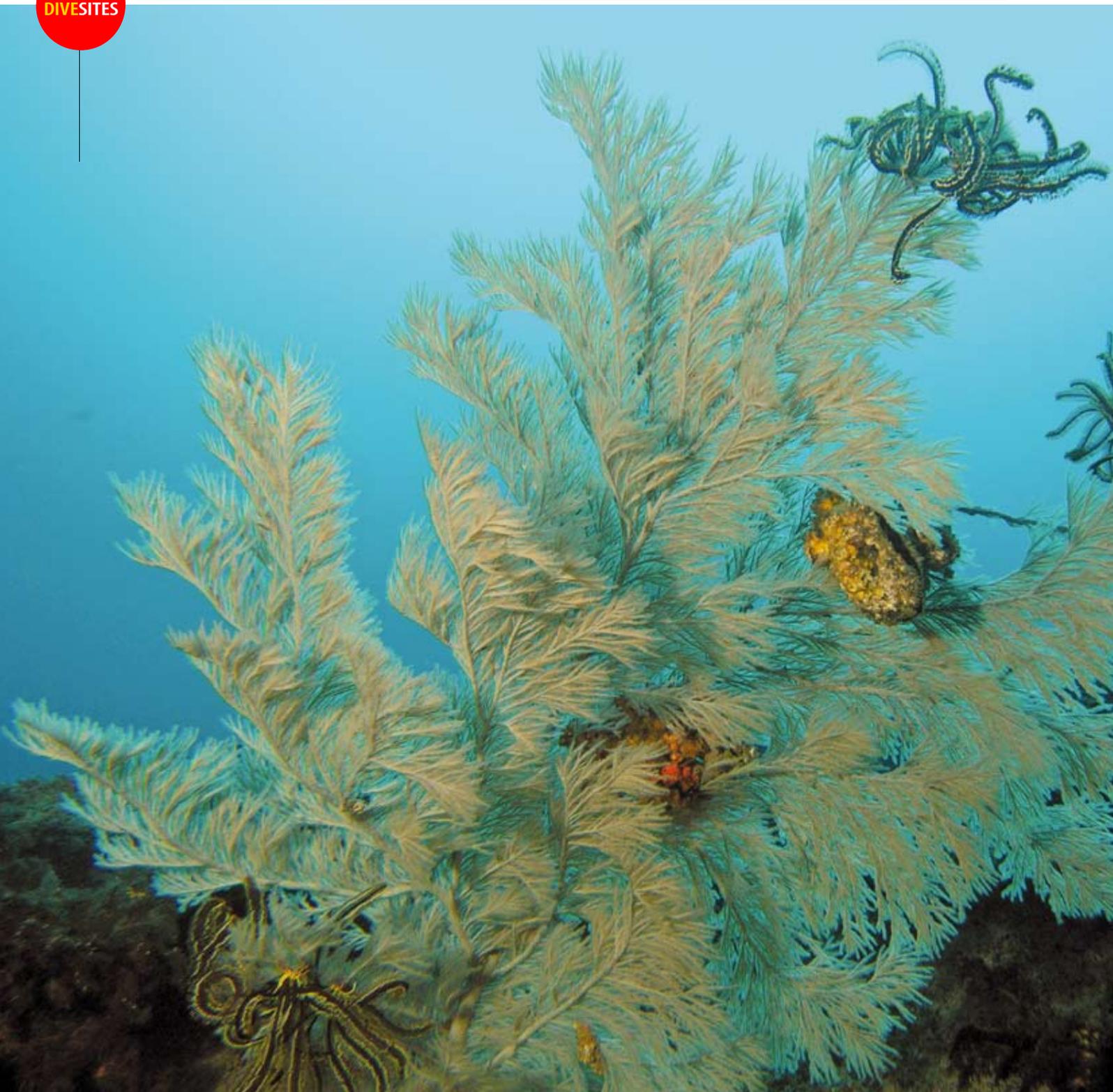
## Moray Beach

This is a very popular site with all the dive boats and hence it can be quite crowded underwater with several students on their training dive. This is an excellent location to photograph anglerfish, ribbon eels, devil scorpionfish and out on the sand you can find sea whips with host shrimp and gobies as well as Saddleback anemonefish. In the shallows the coral density is vast with large colourful soft corals and hard plate corals that many small tropical fish species hide in.

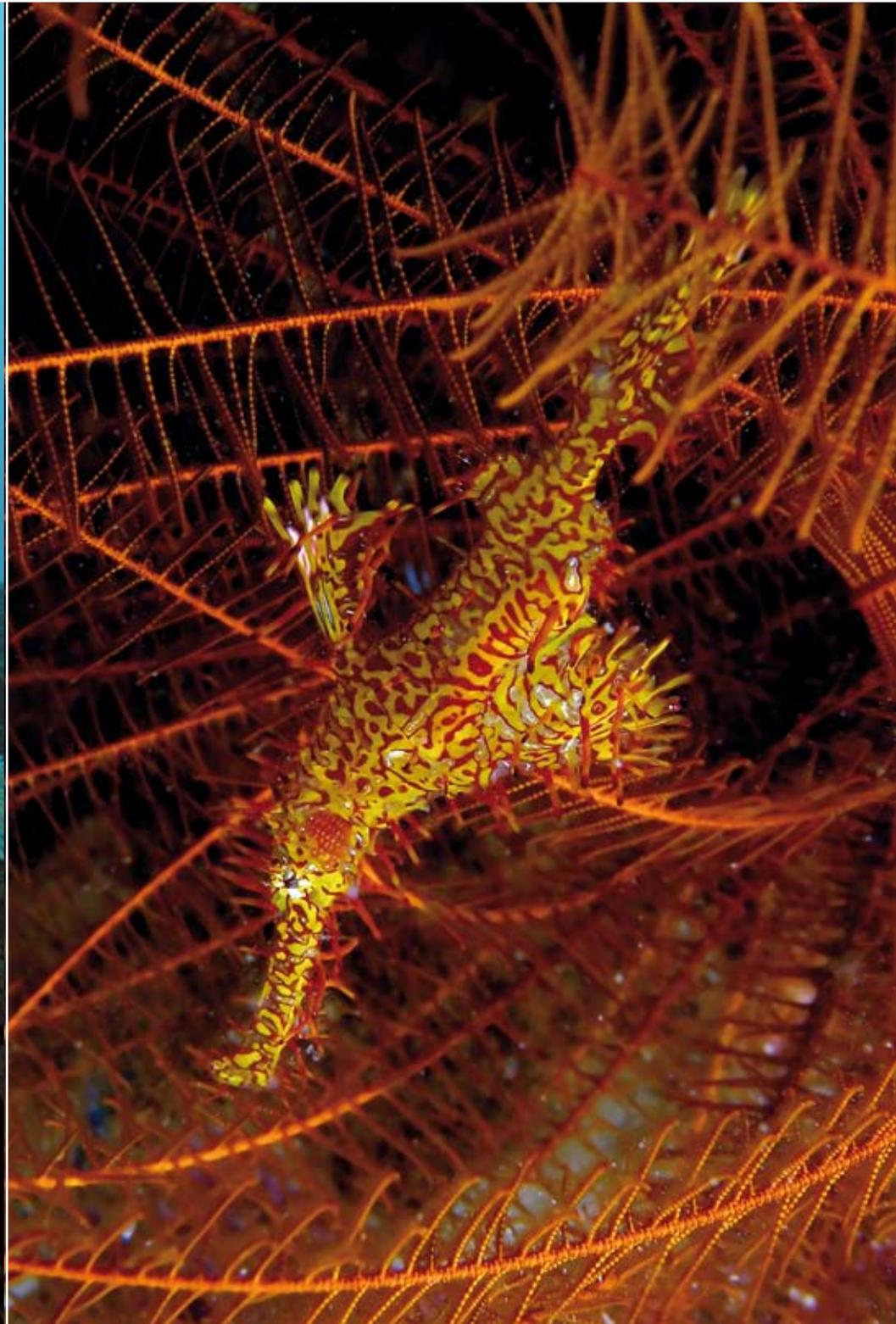


**THE WALLS OF THE PINNACLE WERE COVERED IN A HUGE VARIETY OF SOFT CORALS AND THERE WAS A LARGE SWIM THROUGH THAT WAS LAVISHED BY THOUSANDS OF BRIGHT YELLOW SUNFLOWER CORALS.**





**WE ONLY HAD TIME TO DO ONE SHORE DIVE AT WHALE ISLAND, BUT MANAGED TO FIND TWO SPECIES OF FROGFISH, TWO SPECIES OF SEAHORSES,...**



**...11 DIFFERENT NUDIBRANCHS, DEVILFISH, STONEFISH,  
LEAF SCORPIONFISH, TWO TYPES OF MORAYS, PIPEFISH  
AND MANY OTHER TYPES OF FISHES AND CORALS.**

**( THE SNORKELLING RIGHT OFF THE BEACH  
WAS ALSO WORTHWHILE AND A GOOD  
EXCUSE TO COOL OFF FROM THE HEAT! )**

## Whale Island

Every year between April and July, the whales and the whale sharks come to stay in the archipelago and feed on the masses of krill and plankton. The diving out of Whale Island was spectacular with dives conducted from January through to October. Rainbow Divers has their own dive shop on the island right next to the wharf and each morning the boat departs for two to three dives. The furthest dive site is just over an hour's journey, and is well worth the effort. Some of the dive sites we visited were:

### White Rock

This is one of the furthest sites from Whale Island however the journey is well worth it as it is an incredible site. Sheer walls drop from the surface down to depths of 40 metres with several huge pinnacles emerging from the depths. The bottom of the site is covered in black coral trees and gorgonians and on the sandy bottom huge black rays can be seen. The walls are covered in soft corals, nudibranchs and if you are fortunate you may find a leaf scorpionfish resting on top of the pinnacles.

### Bai Su

This site is within Van Phong Bay and has entirely different marine life to the open ocean sites. This was the only dive site that we were fortunate enough to find a pair of yellow ghost pipefish living in a crinoid. The bottom topography at about 18 metres is rather barren and silty but this is where we found many unusual invertebrates and fish species including the rare Fire Urchin shrimps. The shallower region (less than 10 metres) was a pure coral garden with many different species of hard and soft corals covering the reef. This is also an ideal place for snorkelling.

### Beach Shore Dive

We only had time to do one shore dive at Whale Island, but managed to find two species of frogfish, two species of seahorses, 11 different nudibranchs, devilfish, stonefish, leaf scorpionfish, two types of morays, pipefish and many other types of fishes and corals. The maximum depth at this site was only about 12 metres but was one of the most diverse shore dives we'd ever done! We spent 100 minutes in the water and I would have stayed longer if my camera battery hadn't died.

The snorkelling right off the beach was also worthwhile and a good excuse to cool off from the heat! A valuable lesson I learnt was that you must be very careful when moving over some of the shallow areas, as the long-spined needle urchins can be incredibly painful should you get pierced! At the end of the snorkel we exited the water directly at the bar and cooled off with a local beverage whilst watching the spectacular sunset over the mountain ranges and lagoon. Other activities available on Whale Island include sailing, kayaking, volleyball, island walking and it is also an excellent location to photograph local birds and wildlife. [SD](#)



## Vietnam



**Getting There:** Many airlines fly into Vietnam daily from most major cities. There are regular flights with Cathay Pacific from Hong Kong and from Singapore with Singapore Airlines as well as flying direct with Vietnam Airlines. Internal flights are with Vietnam Airlines. From Asia, Sri Lankan Airlines or Emirates Air via Colombo, and Malaysia Airlines and Singapore Airlines. There are direct flights from Australia on Malaysia Air via Kuala Lumpur or Singapore Airlines via Singapore



**Entry/Visa requirements:** Tourist visas valid for a single 30-day stay cost about US\$40.00 in Bangkok. Getting it can be a hassle, so it's best to contact your travel agent.



**Language:** Vietnamese (official), Russian, French, Chinese and English



**Climate:** Hot and humid, around the low 30°Cs (high 80°Fs). Vietnam is a place of many seasons and when one region is wet, cold or steamy hot, there is always another part of Vietnam that is sunny and pleasant. Basically, the south has two seasons: the wet (*May to November, wettest from June to August*) and the dry (*December to April*). While the north has cool, damp winters (*November to April*) and hot summers (*May to October*).



**Best time to go:** Take the Tet Festival (23rd day of the 12th month of the Lunar calendar) into consideration when planning a trip. Travel becomes very difficult, hotels are full and many services close down for at least a week and possibly a lot longer.



**Best time to dive:** From April through to August and we found that conditions in July were perfect.



**Electricity:** 220V 50Hz



**Currency:** 1 USD = 15,928.00 VND (*Vietnam Dong*)



**Dive operators:**

Rainbow Divers: [www.divevietnam.com](http://www.divevietnam.com)  
Blue Diving Club: [www.vietnam-diving.com](http://www.vietnam-diving.com)  
Sailing Club Divers: [www.sailingclubvietnam.com](http://www.sailingclubvietnam.com)  
Indochine Divers: [info@indochinedives.com](mailto:info@indochinedives.com)  
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Scuba Zone: [hungvunguyen2001@yahoo.com](mailto:hungvunguyen2001@yahoo.com)

**More information :**

Hoi An Beach Side Resort: [www.hoiantourist.com](http://www.hoiantourist.com)  
Whale Island Resort: [www.whaleislandresort.com](http://www.whaleislandresort.com)  
Caravelle Hotel: [www.caravellehotel.com](http://www.caravellehotel.com)  
Vietnam tourist information: [www.vngold.com](http://www.vngold.com)

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