

Useful words and phrases

The Vietnamese language is a very difficult one to learn. Being a tonal language, with regional variations, it is nigh on impossible for a short-term traveller to get their mouth and tongue around some of the pronunciations (so it is very easy to say something impolite or inappropriate).

The Vietnamese language is derived from the Chinese, though the two languages are now poles apart. It has 6 tones, which means that a word can be said 6 ways and has 6 different meanings! There are also regional variations, (to confuse matters further), so what you learn as polite in Saigon may be quite the opposite in Hanoi.

In the 17th century Alexander de Rhodes (scholar and missionary) introduced the Romanised script which was used by the 'educated' elite.

It was not until 1954 (when Uncle Ho governed North Vietnam) that this Romanised script became the official written script for all the Vietnamese.

Today, English is the most popular second language in Vietnam, so there is bound to be someone around who can help you. Some people also speak French, while others speak Russian, but these are becoming less common.

Having said how difficult it is to learn Vietnamese, don't be put off, have a go, but also be prepared to receive a few laughs at your attempts. Below is a list of often used or useful words and phrases. Pronunciations can vary significantly within Vietnam, especially northern vs. southern. Please find below are some useful words and phrases.

(English - Vietnamese - phonetic pronunciation)

1. Hello! - Xin chào! (seen chow!)
2. Goodbye - Chào (chow!)
3. How are you? - Bạn có khỏe không? (ban co kwe khome?)
4. I'm fine, thank you! – Cảm ơn bạn tôi khỏe (gahm un ban thoy kwe)
5. And you? – Bạn thì sao? (ban ty sao?)
6. What's your name? – Bạn tên gì? (ban thane zee)
7. My name is... – Tôi tên là... (thoy thane la...)
8. Thank you – Cảm ơn (gahm un)
9. You're welcome - Không có gì (khom go zee)
10. Yes - Vâng (vung)
11. No - Không (khome)
12. Excuse me... - Xin lỗi (seen loy)
13. Can you help me? – Bạn giúp tôi được không? (ban zoop thoy duc khom?)
14. I'd like to eat - Tôi muốn ăn (thoy moowan un)
15. I'd like to drink - Tôi muốn uống (thoy moowan oowanh)
16. Good – Tốt (thote)

17. Bad - Không tốt (khome thote)
18. What is this? - Cái này là gì (guy nai la zee)
19. How much - Bao nhiêu (bow nyew)
20. Too expensive – Mắc quá (mahk qwa)
21. Where is the nearest internet shop? – Chỗ internet gần nhất ở đâu? (choh internet kan hnuck uh doh)
22. Where is the nearest bank? - Nhà băng gần nhất ở đâu? (nya bung kan hnuck uh doh)
23. Hotel - Khách Sạn (khack san)
24. Hot - Nóng (nom)
25. Cold – Lạnh (lang)
26. Coffee - Cà phê (cah feh)
27. Hot black coffee - Cà phê nóng (cah feh nom)
28. Hot Coffee with milk - Cà phê sữa nóng (cah feh sua nom)
29. Iced Coffee with milk - Cà phê sữa đặc (ah feh sua dahk)
30. Tea - Trà (chah)
31. You're beautiful - Cô đẹp quá (coh dep qwah)
32. I like - Tôi thích (thoy tick)
33. I love you - Anh yêu em (ang eu-oh em)
34. I am happy - Tôi vui (thoy vuoy)
35. I am tired - Tôi mệt (thoy mate)

We hope this is useful to you, and remember: it changes from area to area and it is okay to make mistakes.