# Vietnam: Culture, Social Change, and Development

**Country Overview & Packing Guidelines**

**Spring 2027**

## Country Overview

### GENERAL INFORMATION

Vietnam is located on the eastern edge of mainland Southeast Asia. It is bordered by Cambodia and Laos to the west, China to the north and the South China Sea to the east. The population of Vietnam is more than 100 million, making it one of the 20 most populous countries in the world. There are 54 ethnic minority groups in the country, but 86% of the population is ethnically Vietnamese.

After opening to foreign investment in a series of economic and political reforms begun in 1986 and continuing until today, Vietnam has had one of the strongest economies in Asia over the past decade and has been a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) since 2007. Manufacturing, information technology and high-tech industries form a large and fast-growing part of the national economy, and agriculture remains an important – though declining – contributor. The country is now the largest producer of cashew nuts producing approximately 30% of the global output, the largest exporter of rice and the second largest exporter of coffee. Other key exports are tea, rubber, and fishery products. Recently, Vietnam's digital economy has grown at an average of 20% per year and contributed 16.5% to the national GDP in 2023. In 2023, Vietnam's digital economy was the fastest growing in Southeast Asia.

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is a single-party state, with a President and Prime Minister elected by the National Assembly. The National Assembly of Vietnam is the unicameral legislature of the government, with up to 500 deputies elected for five-year



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terms. It is constitutionally the highest organ of state power, above the executive and judicial branches.

## CLIMATE AND GEOGRAPHY

| [Ho Chi Minh City]: AVERAGE HIGH/LOW TEMPERATURES (°F) | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| JAN | FEB | MAR | APR | MAY |
| 88/70 | 91/73 | 93/76 | 94/78 | 93/77 |
| SEPT | OCT | NOV | DEC | |
| 88/76 | 88/75 | 88/73 | 87/71 | |

Vietnam has a diverse climate because of its wide range of latitude and altitudes. Vietnam is in both a tropical and a temperate zone. It is characterized by strong monsoon influences, but has a considerable amount of sun, a high rate of rainfall, and high humidity. Southern Vietnam lies entirely within the tropics, which has two main seasons: the wet and the dry. The wet season is May to November. During this period, there are heavy, short-lived downpours almost daily. The dry season is from December to April. From April to July, it is very hot. Hats are essential to avoid sunstroke. During the spring semester, expect hot, dry weather in Ho Chi Minh City and the Mekong Delta; cool days and cold nights in Da Lat (including the night of camping) and Sa Pa, where temperatures can drop below 10°C / 50°F at night; and mild, sometimes drizzly weather in Hue and Hanoi in late March and early April.

## LOCAL CUSTOMS

The custom of handshaking is now achieving popularity due to the Western influence in the country. Men will generally shake hands and say the equivalent of “how are you” and tip their hats when greeting people. Women, especially those in the countryside, still shy away from shaking hands, especially with men from their own country. It is best not to offer to shake hands with a woman unless she offers her hand first.

Whereas Americans often immediately introduce themselves in given situations, the ordinary people of Vietnam think this to be rather bold and like to have a mutual acquaintance make the introduction. They will rarely introduce themselves when going into a home or office until asked to do so. This may be due to their innate shyness and modesty.

## LOCAL DIET

Participating in the local food culture is a central aspect of daily life in the country. Special or restricted diets may not always be fully understood by your host family, although they may have previously hosted a student with similar dietary restrictions. By trying to replicate your diet at home you may miss out on an important part of your host culture.

In Vietnam, meals are typically shared, family-style, with breakfast, lunch, and dinner being the main mealtimes. Meals are often centered around rice (a staple), fresh vegetables, fish, pork, and various herbs and sauces, especially fish sauce, which is ubiquitous in Vietnamese cuisine. While traditional Vietnamese meals are not specifically designed with dietary restrictions in mind, vegetarianism is widely respected, particularly due to Buddhist influences, and many restaurants offer vegetarian options. Vegan options can be more challenging to find since fish sauce and shrimp paste are commonly used even in vegetable dishes. Kosher and halal diets are difficult to accommodate outside of major cities like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, where a few dedicated restaurants cater to these dietary needs. Gluten-free dining can also be challenging, as soy sauce and other gluten-containing ingredients are frequently used in cooking, though rice noodles and rice paper are naturally gluten-free staples. For students with specific dietary needs, it is helpful to communicate them clearly at restaurants, as understanding of these diets varies across the country.

Note: if you have special dietary needs, including allergies, please inform the office of Student Health, Safety & Wellbeing prior to the start of your program (studenthealth@sit.edu). We will advise you on realistic expectations about avoiding or incorporating certain foods within the program context.

## MEAL PLANNING

Homestay families generally provide breakfast and dinner during the week and breakfast, lunch, and dinner on the weekend. This is a wonderful opportunity to enjoy traditional meals and immerse yourself in the local culture.

The estimated cost for meals not provided during the program is based on the cost of modestly eating out or buying groceries to prepare your own meals, when cooking facilities are available. If you plan on eating out regularly, you should budget more money. Exploring local food is one of the highlights of living abroad, so give yourself room to savor the experience.

Please remember to budget at least **$2,160.00** for your meals not provided during the semester. For a breakdown of your program's estimated out-of-pocket expenses, please see the table in the Money section of this document.

## SAFETY, SECURITY, AND HEALTH

Maintaining good health is essential to having a successful study abroad experience.

SIT recommends you do research prior to departure about the health, safety, and security specifics of the country(ies) you plan to visit. Consult the U.S. Department of State website and

search their Countries and Areas Archive for international travel information and current travel advisories for each country. Search the Center for Disease Control Traveler's Health page to see travel health notices and vaccine requirements and recommendations for any country(ies) you plan to visit.

It will be critical that you educate yourself about the potential health and safety hazards that may exist in your areas of travel and make informed decisions about what preventative measures to take prior to departure. You should also reference the Health, Access, and Identity information on your program's webpage.

If you have any questions, please reach out to the Student Health, Safety, & Wellbeing Team. Students are thoroughly briefed on safety considerations during in-country orientation and are updated throughout the semester if and when circumstances change. For information regarding safety and security, emergency communications, SIT policies, health and personal property insurance, and general program tips, please read the Safety, Security, and Health document and Student Handbook on your program's predeparture page.

## HOUSING

As many SIT Study Abroad alumni will tell you, the homestay experience can be one of the most rewarding and most challenging aspects of the program. We hope you will become prepared for the experience and committed to moving beyond cultural immersion as you begin to question, distinguish, and analyze the host culture vis-à-vis your own culture and come to a deeper understanding of both.

Family structures vary in every culture. SIT Study Abroad values the diversity of homestay families, and your family may include a single mother of two small children or a large extended family with many people coming and going all the time. Additionally, please bear in mind that, in many countries, the idea of what constitutes a "home" may be different from what you expect. You will need to be prepared to adapt to a new life with a new diet, a new schedule, new people, and new priorities, and expectations.

Each program's homestay coordinator will be responsible for placing students in homestays.

These placements are made first based on health concerns, including any allergies or dietary needs, to the extent possible. Please note to ensure the best fit for students and families, SIT may make final adjustments to homestay placements after student arrival in the country. Therefore, SIT will not provide information about your homestay family before you depart for the program.

We seek to foster increased cross-cultural understanding in students by immersing them in local culture through daily life in a new family and community. Students are expected to assume roles as family members, respecting and following host family norms around communication, visitors, and activities of daily living.

On this program, you will be staying in homestays in Ho Chi Minh City, the SIT Study Abroad program base in Vietnam, and each student will spend about five and a half weeks in total with a homestay family. You will have your own room. During the different Excursions throughout Vietnam, you will pair up with one student to stay in a guest house or hotel in towns or cities.



Most homes will be located within commuting distance of the center of town and SIT Vietnam Center. Most students will commute between 15 and 30 minutes by bus, bike, or ride-hailing service, though there may be traffic jams during rush hours. Students with family in HCMC may not stay with their families during the homestay portion of the semester but may choose to stay with their families during the ISP/ Internship period. All the homestay families will provide Wi-Fi and air-conditioning for students.

## OTHER ACCOMMODATIONS

Students should expect to share a room with one or more students during orientation/launch and while on excursions.

In addition to the homestay in HCMC, other accommodation during the program include guesthouses, hostels, educational institutions, or small hotels. When you first arrive in Vietnam, you will share a hotel room with another student. The rooms are furnished with beds, wardrobes, writing tables, televisions, and all have bathroom facilities (towels and sheets are provided).

During the ISP/Internship period, it is recommended that students choose to make their own accommodations in guesthouses, hostels, and rent a room in a house. Students may choose to stay with a classmate or on their own.

## TRANSPORTATION



It is recommended that students commute to class each day by the frequent public buses. You also have the option of traveling by taxi, bicycle, or motorcycle. In recent years however, as public transportation options have changed, motorbikes are becoming one of the dominant forms of transportation in Vietnam. As a result of this shift, SIT Study Abroad staff have evaluated the risks and instituted a policy that permits students to choose to travel as passengers on motorbikes under limited circumstances and only in certain localities where motorbikes are the dominant mode of transportation for local people.

All students will undergo an orientation to the motorbike culture in Vietnam and will receive instructions on how to ride safely as a passenger. Students will be required to sign a waiver before using motorbike transportation and may only ride as a passenger while wearing a helmet. Any violation of the waiver and/or policy may result in immediate dismissal from the program.

## COMMUNICATION

While you may want to be in regular communication with friends and family from home during the term abroad, please bear in mind that different time zones, unreliable phone lines, and changing program activities can complicate communication.

It's important to be clear with family and friends about your availability during the term. Many students recommend making an appointment to call home or to receive a call. You should also consider the impact of constant communication with friends and family at home on your cultural immersion.

Visit our Contact & Communication page for practices on program communication, emergency communication, and home institution communication.

## PHONES AND INTERNET

### Cell Phone Policy

As part of SIT's commitment to student safety and security, all students are required to have a working cell phone capable of making and receiving both local and international calls, including a data plan so that your phone is operational when you are away from wi-fi. If needed, during orientation SIT staff can assist students in purchasing a local SIM card and acquiring minutes for calls and texting. Failure to maintain a working phone capable of making and receiving calls/texts will be considered a conduct violation and a breach of our student code.

Local mobile service in Vietnam is inexpensive, and 4G/5G coverage is good in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, Hue, and most towns. International calls from a Vietnamese SIM card are expensive, so most students stay in touch with home through WhatsApp or Zalo over data or Wi-Fi at no extra cost.

Keep in mind the time difference when calling or receiving an international call. Vietnam is 12 hours ahead of U.S. Eastern Time until March 14, 2027, and 11 hours ahead after U.S. Daylight Saving Time begins that day.

Most places that you stay in Vietnam will offer internet services, and many places have wireless internet available. In addition, there are some up-market coffee shops in HCMC with wireless Internet access. There will be times during the semester, particularly when on an excursion when you will not have Internet access. For this program we expect all students to bring their own laptop to Vietnam. Students take full responsibility for their own belongings.

## MAILINGS

Unlike receiving a package here in the US, receiving a package at your program site is usually **expensive** and **problematic**. Customs agents must inspect all packages and you, as the recipient, are responsible for duty and storage fees. In addition, there are cases of items being lost in the mail or taking so long to reach the recipient that the recipient is nearly back in the US by the time the items are received. For these reasons, sending packages should be done only for emergency situations. Additionally, sending valuables is highly discouraged. Mailing prescription medication abroad is illegal.

For this program, **DHL, FedEx, UPS services are available in country**. Despite cheaper prices, reliance on the US Postal Service is not advised due to delays and unreliability. When given the option, it's always a good idea to send packages certified and with a tracking number that allows the sender to track the package.

If it is necessary for someone to send you mail then posted letters and packages should be sent to the following address:

Student Name
SIT Vietnam Center, 2nd Floor, Song Da Tower, 14B Ky Dong Street, Nhieu Loc Ward, Ho Chi Minh City 72422, Vietnam.
Tel: +84 818 852 008

Packages should be sent to the following address via ***DHL, FedEx, or UPS***:

Student Name
SIT Vietnam Center, 2nd Floor, Song Da Tower, 14B Ky Dong Street, Nhieu Loc Ward, Ho Chi Minh City 72422, Vietnam.
Tel: +84 818 852 008

## MONEY

ATM machines are in abundance throughout Vietnam. Accessing money should not be a problem for you. Many restaurants, large department stores and tourist boutiques take major credit cards, such as Visa and MasterCard. A Visa or MasterCard can also be helpful in emergencies, medical or otherwise.

For your valuable items, such as passports, air-tickets, major credit cards, you should ask the front desk of your guesthouse to place them in the safe box. During your homestay period, you should ask your homestay family to store these things in a safe place, although the homestay family does not take responsibility for their security. Otherwise, you can put these in the locked box in your room.

Check current exchange rates: http://www.oanda.com/currency/converter/

If using a debit and/or credit card, you should contact your bank and/or credit card companies regarding your travel plans. If you don't inform these companies that you will be away, they will often assume the card has been lost or stolen and will put an immediate hold on the card. You should also check on costs of withdrawal, as these costs vary and can sometimes be very expensive. Renewing and receiving reissued credit and debit cards while on the program will be an expensive and highly inconvenient process. Before you leave for your program, please check the expiration dates on your cards to ensure that they will not expire while you are abroad. It is also very important that you make photocopies of all your debit/credit card information and leave them with someone you trust in case your card(s) is/are lost or stolen.

We suggest that you budget between US$3,000 to $3500 for out-of-pocket costs not covered by the Tuition and Housing Fees. To determine where you might fall in this range, please examine your spending habits during a typical semester at your home school and consider any exceptional expenditures you may have on the program. Please carefully consider your personal spending habits when creating your out-of-pocket expense budget. Some items to consider are meals not provided by the program, textbooks, Independent Study Project or Internship-related expenses not covered by the program, interpretation services, medical expenses, personal spending, and gifts. Use the average estimates below as a guide to help you plan for out-of-pocket expenses.

Please budget approximately:

| | |
|---|---|
| **Personal spending (from past student suggestions):** | 300 USD |
| **Meals not provided** | 2,160 USD |
| **Books, printing, supplies:** | 100 USD |
| **Up-front medical costs:** | 100 USD per visit |
| **Potential ISP travel expenses:** | 250 USD |
| **Visa:** | 200 USD |
| **Mobile phone and data plan:** | 100 USD |
| **Estimated total:** | 3,210 USD |

Please note that up-front medical costs can vary widely. Though you are completely covered by SIT's travel insurance BlueCross BlueShield, which you can read more about on our Participant Insurance page, you still may need to pay up-front for medical care and then file for reimbursement.

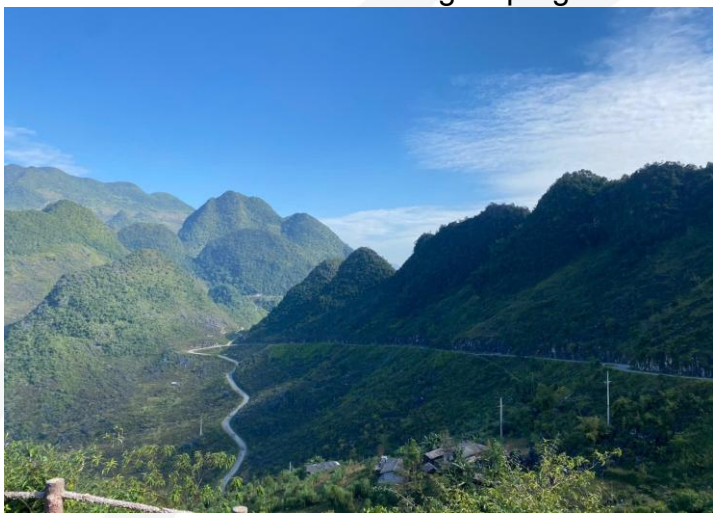
## VISITORS AND FREE TIME

**SIT strongly discourages and will not provide support for any visitors to students during the term,** due to the rigorous nature of the program and the disruption that such visits cause in program flow and group dynamics. Students should be sure that relatives and friends are aware of this policy and that visits are scheduled for dates after the formal conclusion of the program. Students will not be excused from program components to attend to visitors. See the Attendance and Participation Policy.

If a visitor does come while a program is in progress, they must plan their own independent accommodations; SIT Study Abroad homestay families can accommodate only their assigned student and, due to cultural and contractual understandings with SIT, should not be asked to host students' guests.

## INDEPENDENT TRAVEL

Please read our full Independent Travel policy for our definition, guidelines and how to access our independent travel notification form. Please note that independent travel is only allowed during program free time and students will not be excused from program activities to travel. SIT is not responsible for any costs of student independent travel including logistics, preparations, cancelation fees, change fees, and any other costs associated with independent travel. We highly recommend you wait to book any independent travel until AFTER arriving on program and receiving the final academic schedule from your program.



During the program, students follow an intense schedule of classes and field-based learning assignments, even during the ISP. Free time for pursuing an independent interest or hobby during the program will be limited. Your admissions counselor can advise you about particular interests you may have. For example, if you must keep in shape for your next athletic season, if you play a musical instrument and want to know whether to bring it, we can help you to understand your schedule and any concerns or limitations that may exist.

## CODE OF CONDUCT AND POLICIES

SIT maintains a Code of Conduct and clear institutional policies regarding student behavior through a commitment to mutual learning and respect for others. Visit the policy page for detailed policies around academic integrity, alcohol and drug use, anti-harassment and non-discrimination, attendance and participation, credit hours, equal education opportunities, grading, housing, independent travel, prohibited activities, religious holiday observance, sexual harassment and misconduct, and withdrawal among others.

# Packing Guidelines

## LUGGAGE

Please pack lightly and include only necessary items. You should be able to carry all your luggage significant distances on your own. Try to minimize both the number of bags and weight of your bag(s) since you will likely be acquiring more belongings while abroad. We recommend a small daypack, which will also be useful for short excursions when on the program.

If carrying prescription medications, you should carry a letter from your doctor to prevent any concerns at customs or in transit. (Please see the "General Health Tips" section in the Safety, Security, and Health pre-departure document.)

Please check the current requirements of the Transportation Security Administration (http://www.tsa.gov) as well as those of the airline on which you are flying for domestic and international baggage restrictions.

## CLOTHING GUIDELINES

Vietnam is becoming more open to contemporary influences and global trends, but you will find that the dress code for college students is still conservative. By following local customs, you will show your respect for the people you meet here. Even on a hot day, long and short-sleeved shirts and blouses, long pants and skirts are good choices for most occasions, especially when you might meet people older than yourself. In most situations, you should avoid sleeveless shirts, short skirts, shorts and torn clothing. These can be considered very disrespectful, and so if you wear them, it is possible you may be criticized – even by complete strangers! Keep in mind you should wear proper clothes when you visit religious sites.

You should wear smart casual clothing to class on all campuses of different colleges/universities throughout the semester, although jeans and t-shirts may be fine with some of your younger teachers. You can wear less formal clothing when you are in your hotel or homestay, but please use your judgment when going out with friends, since you might encounter situations where conservative dress is more appropriate. There are many inexpensive markets to buy any clothes you might need, although larger-sized clothes and shoes are not readily available.

There will be formal occasions when you meet lecturers from local universities or attend functions with homestay families and other guests. For these occasions, you will need to dress in a more formal style. This means a nice dress and dress sandals for women, nice pants and shirt and good shoes for men.

For traveling, you should bring wash-and-wear and light-colored clothes that you can wash by hand and dry quickly. It may get cold during the excursions to the north or in the mountains, so you should bring some warmer items, such as sweaters and windbreakers. Dampness and the lack of heating can make it feel colder than it is.

Tailor-made garments are inexpensive in Vietnam. You may want to pack less and have things made.

For the rainy season, you will need a rain jacket or a rain poncho (which can be easily bought in Vietnam).

## EQUIPMENT

Students do not need to bring bed linens or pillows, though they should bring one towel. Students also do not need sleeping bags, tents, or other camping equipment; the program arranges these for the one night of camping in Bidoup–Nui Ba National Park near Da Lat. Bring warm layers for that night. Students can bring mosquito nets, but many rooms use electric fans as a method of keeping mosquitoes off your body.

It is a good rule whenever you travel to pack all your gear inside your pack in Ziploc and/or garbage bags. If you are bringing expensive camera gear, have a strategy to protect your camera and lenses from moisture and humidity.

## COMPUTERS AND OTHER ELECTRONICS

You are required to bring a laptop computer. It will be your personal property and responsibility. It is recommended that you insure your computer, smartphone, or other valuables for full coverage in the event of loss or theft(SIT insurance does not cover personal property).

Not all computer manufacturers have service centers in Vietnam, so even if your computer is covered by an international warranty, service may not always be available. Students in the past who have had computer problems have not been able to get their computers repaired in a timely manner here. If your computer breaks down, you will still be expected to soldier on and do your work.

Free Wi-Fi is widely available in cafés, hotels, and homestays. Back up your work regularly to cloud storage or an external drive, since repairs can take a long time.

If you use a shared or public computer, log out of all accounts when you finish. Keep your own laptop's operating system and anti-virus software up to date.

Please see the following website for information about electricity, voltage and electrical adapters. http://www.worldstandards.eu/electricity/.

If you plan to bring electrical equipment you will need to bring a voltage adapter and plug converter. The voltage in Vietnam is 220v, AC 50 Hz. There can be frequent power surges, and the current is not always stable. Keep in mind that you might need to have a two-prong adapter if your computer has a three-prong grounded plug because most of the wall outlets in Vietnam are equipped with two ground prong.

## GIFTS

As you might imagine, it is best to be prepared with a gift to offer your homestay family in gratitude for their hospitality and as a means to share a part of your culture with them. We suggest one or two gifts that the whole family can enjoy. You may also wish to consider gifts for people outside your homestay family. Try to choose gifts that represent you or the part of the country and/or community you live in. Think about what your city, state, or local artisans produce. Draw upon your personal interests or hobbies for ideas. Pack a couple of small gifts for children, such as small games, bubbles, or a Frisbee. Even if your homestay family does not have small children, chances are that you will engage with children in your homestay community. Once you are on the program and learn more about the local culture, you will discover other ways to thank your family. Remember to bring pictures of your friends and family to share.

Former students have recommended calendars, picture books, postcards, music, or souvenirs from your college bookstore as gifts.

Gifts are an important form of social interaction in Vietnam. Successful lightweight gifts in the past have been framed photographs of yourself or family, T-shirts, calendars or posters with scenes of your home locations. CDs, small musical instruments (harmonicas, recorders, etc.), match box cars, small toys, fancy soaps and cosmetics, shampoos, lotions and bottles of perfume have also been popular gift items for homestay brothers and sisters.

Photographs of you, your family and friends, your home, school or town, are an excellent means of bridging language and cultural gaps. When selecting photographs to share with those you meet in Vietnam, you should remain aware of Vietnamese attitudes regarding dress and displays of affection between men and women. It may be taken as a sign of disrespect rather than informality to appear disheveled or untidily dressed. Photos of women in bikinis will not likely result in greater cultural understanding but instead lead to greater confusion over what are already many conceptions of women in the West. Similarly, photos in which men and women openly display affection for each other can often result in embarrassment and/or discomfort to Vietnamese unaccustomed to what appears to them to be inappropriate public behavior or a serious relationship. Extreme affluence, as demonstrated by photos of many homes, cars, and boats may also have an effect of which you should be aware.

## WHAT YOU CAN AND CANNOT OBTAIN IN COUNTRY

In Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) you will be able to obtain soap, toilet paper, cosmetics, deodorant, razor blades and other items but specific brands may not be available. Indeed, most basic consumer items are available in Vietnam.

Sun hats are very nice to wear in HCMC. If you do not have a wide brim hat there is a better selection and variety in Vietnam. If you have a bigger than average head, you may want to purchase one before arriving in Vietnam.

## ALUMNI CONTACTS

If you have further questions, please contact your admissions counselor and/or ask an alumni contact:https://studyabroad.sit.edu/admissions-aid/application-process/contact-a-former-student/.

Don’t miss the Packing List on the next page!

# Packing List

These packing guidelines are based on suggestions from past students and your academic director.

Packing List sample:

## GENERAL

- 1 nice outfit suitable for a social event
- Lightweight clothes including pants, long-sleeved shirts, light T-shirts
- Underwear and socks (10-day supply)
- Warm pajamas or nightgown
- Slippers or flip flops (for use inside house. Flip flops not recommended for use outdoors because of the cobble stone sidewalks and roads.)
- 1 pair comfortable sneakers
- 1 pair of sandals
- 1 pair of nice shoes
- Rain gear (waterproof jacket, poncho, or umbrella)
- 2–4 pairs pants or jeans
- 1 skirt and/or dress
- 5–6 mixed long and short-sleeved t-shirts
- 2–3 blouses or button-down shirts
- Sweater
- Jacket or fleece
- Scarf
- Bathing suit
- Optional – workout clothes

## TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

- Passport
- 2 photocopies of your passport stored separately from your actual passport
- Photocopy of visa
- 2 passport photos
- Any relevant vaccine records/documents

## HEALTH/TOILETRIES

- Adequate supply of any medications you use regularly
- Small first aid kit (most supplies can be bought here)
- Extra eyeglasses and/or contact lenses
- Sunscreen (at least SPF 30)

- Sunglasses
- Wide-brimmed hat or baseball cap (for sun protection)

## OTHER IMPORTANT ITEMS

- Medium-sized day pack (to pack clothes for 3–4 days for excursions)
- Small, quick-drying towel
- Flashlight
- Vietnamese/English dictionary or translation app
- Reusable water bottle
- Small luggage lock
- Laptop computer *(required)*
- Students are encouraged to bring a battery-operated carbon monoxide detector

