

Geography

Vietnam is located in the southeastern extremity of the Indochinese peninsula and occupies about 331,688 square kilometers. It borders the Gulf of Thailand, Gulf of Tonkin, and South China Sea, alongside China, Laos, and Cambodia. The S-shaped country has a north-to-south distance of 1,650 kilometers, is about 50 kilometers wide at the narrowest point and has a coastline of 3,260 kilometers.

Vietnam is a country of tropical lowlands, hills, and densely forested highlands, with level land covering no more than 20 % of the area. The country is divided into the highlands and the Red River delta in the north; and the Gai Truong Son (Central mountains, or the Chaîne Annamitique, sometimes referred to simply as "the Chaîne."), the coastal lowlands, and the Mekong River Delta in the south.

RED RIVER DELTA

The delta of the Red River (also known as the Sông Hồng), is a flat, triangular region of 3,000 square kilometers, is smaller but more intensely developed and more densely populated than the Mekong River Delta.

The Red River, rising in China's Yunnan province, is about 1,200 kilometers long. Its two main tributaries, the Sông Lo (also called the Lo River, the Riviere Claire, or the Clear River) and the Sông Da (also called the Black River or Riviere Noire), contribute to its high water volume. (which averages 500 million cubic meters per second, but may increase by more than 60 times at the peak of the rainy season). The entire delta region, backed by the steep rises of the forested highlands, is no more than three meters above sea level, and much of it is one meter or less.

The area is subject to frequent flooding; at some places the high-water mark of floods is fourteen meters above the surrounding countryside. For centuries flood control has been an integral part of the delta's culture and economy. An extensive system of dikes and canals has been built to contain the Red River and to irrigate the rich rice-growing delta. Modeled on that of China's, this ancient system has sustained a highly concentrated population and has made double-cropping wet-rice cultivation possible throughout about half the region.

HIGHLANDS

The highlands and mountain plateaus in the north and northwest are inhabited mainly by tribal minority groups. The Gai Truong Son originates in the Tibetan and Yunnan regions of southwest China and forms Vietnam's border with Laos and Cambodia. It terminates in the Mekong River Delta north of Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon).

These central mountains, which have several high plateaus, are irregular in elevation and form. The northern section is narrow and very rugged; the country's highest peak, Fan Si Pan, rises to 3,142 meters in the extreme northwest. The southern portion has numerous spurs that divide the narrow coastal strip into a series of compartments. For centuries these topographical features not only rendered north-south communication difficult but also formed an effective natural barrier for the containment of the people living in the Mekong basin.

CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

Within the southern portion of Vietnam is a plateau known as the Central Highlands (Tay Nguyen), approximately 51,800 square kilometers of rugged mountain peaks, extensive forests, and rich soil. Before 1975, North Vietnam had maintained that the Central Highlands and the Gai Truong Son were strategic areas of paramount importance, essential to the domination not only of South Vietnam but also of the southern part of Indochina. Since 1975, the highlands have provided an area in which to relocate people from the densely populated lowlands.

COASTAL LOWLANDS

The narrow, flat coastal lowlands extend from south of the Red River Delta to the Mekong River basin. On the landward side, the Gai Truong Son rises precipitously above the coast, its spurs jutting into the sea at several places. Generally the coastal strip is fertile and rice is cultivated intensively.

MEKONG RIVER DELTA

The Mekong delta, covering about 40,000 square kilometers, is a low-level plain not more than three meters above sea level at any point and criss-crossed by a maze of canals and rivers. So much sediment is carried by the Mekong's various branches and tributaries that the delta advances sixty to eighty meters into the sea every year. An official Vietnamese source estimates the amount of sediment deposited annually to be about 1 billion cubic meters, or nearly 13 times the amount deposited by the Red River. About 10,000 square kilometers of the delta are under rice cultivation, making the area one of the major rice-growing regions of the world. The southern tip, known as the Cà Mau Peninsula, or Mui Bai Bung, is covered by dense jungle and mangrove swamps.

The Mekong, which is 4,220 kilometers long, is one of the 12 great rivers of the world. From its source in the Tibetan plateau, it flows through the Tibetan and Yunnan regions of China, forms the boundary between Laos and Myanmar as well as between Laos and Thailand, divides into two branches - the Song Hau Giang and Song Tien Giang - below Phnom Penh, and continues through Cambodia and the Mekong basin before draining into the South China Sea through nine mouths known as the cuu long (nine dragons). The river is heavily silted and is navigable by seagoing craft of shallow draft as far as Kompong Cham in Cambodia. A tributary entering the river at Phnom Penh drains the Tonlé Sap, a shallow freshwater lake that acts as a natural reservoir to stabilize the flow of water through the lower Mekong. When the river is in flood stage, its silted delta outlets are unable to carry off the high volume of water. Floodwaters back up into the Tonlé Sap, causing the lake to inundate as much as 10,000 square kilometers. As the flood subsides, the flow of water reverses and proceeds from the lake to the sea. The effect is to reduce significantly the danger of devastating floods in the Mekong delta, where the river floods the surrounding fields each year to a level of one to two meters.

CLIMATE

Vietnam has a tropical monsoon climate, with humidity averaging 84 % throughout the year. However, because of differences in latitude and the marked variety of topographical relief, the climate tends to vary considerably from place to place. During the winter or dry season, extending roughly from November to April, the monsoon winds usually blow from the northeast along the China coast and across the Gulf of Tonkin, picking up considerable moisture; consequently the winter season in most parts of the country is dry only by comparison with the rainy or summer season. During the southwesterly summer monsoon, occurring from May to October, the heated air of the Gobi Desert rises, far to the north, inducing moist air to flow inland from the sea and deposit heavy rainfall.