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TOUR INFORMATION FOR VIETNAM

These notes are designed to help you prepare fully for the tour. Please read carefully.

ENTERING VIETNAM: United Kingdom citizens will need a passport valid at least six months from date of departure and a Tourist Visa. The visa must be applied for individually. At the time of writing the Embassy of Vietnam is located at 12-14 Victoria Road, London, W8 5RD. (Tel: 0207-937-1912). Their website is <http://www.vietnamembassy.org.uk>

We will send you information about how to apply for a visa, with your final payment invoice.

At the time of writing postal applications are usually dealt with within two weeks from the date they are received at the Embassy, however please check with the Embassy for the most up-to-date information. It is essential that you allow sufficient time for the visa to be processed given that Tet, the Vietnamese New Year, usually falls just before the tour departure and during this period the Embassy maybe closed for up to one week.

There are visa service agencies that can provide you with an information pack on how to obtain a visa. They will also process your application for you however they will charge a handling and processing fee. One such company is Trailfinders Visa Service <http://visas.trailfinders.com> (tel: 0207 368 1504).

As soon as you book on the tour, please email the Sunbird office a colour scan of your passport – the page(s) with your photograph and passport details. This is needed by the tourism authorities in Vietnam. It is then very important that you do NOT change your passport or get a new one, otherwise extra costs may be incurred to make any necessary changes.

It is always a good idea to take a photocopy of your passport and air ticket with you when travelling abroad. They can prove invaluable in helping you get replacements if your originals are lost or stolen. Obviously you should keep the photocopies in a separate bag to the originals.

INTRODUCTORY MEETING: Participants should arrive into Hanoi no later than 17.00. There will be an introductory meeting with your leader followed by dinner.

LANGUAGE: Vietnamese is the official language but English is widely spoken in the cities and by national park staff.

CURRENCY: The local currency is the Dong. Changing US dollar notes will be much easier than changing sterling or other currencies. US dollars are widely accepted and can be changed in most places and also used to purchase items directly. If you intend to use dollars for this purpose we suggest bringing lots of small denomination notes. We advise against travellers' cheques as they can be troublesome to exchange. There are now plenty of ATMs in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, and Dongs can easily be withdrawn in cash using VISA or Mastercard from these ATMs. AMEX Cards are accepted in a few places but VISA and Mastercard are much more useful in Vietnam.

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CLIMATE: Unlike much of Southeast Asia, Vietnam's climate is complex and varied. It is both humid tropical, sub-tropical, and cool. Our tour takes place during the spring in North Vietnam and during what is the dry season in south Vietnam. Day-time temperatures are likely to be in the range 30-35°C (86-95°F) in the south and 20°C - 25°C around Dalat. At Tam Dao, situated at 1,000 metres, and Cuc Phuong, night time temperatures may drop to 5°C (50°F), whilst daytime temperatures are likely to be around 8°C-14°C. In the north we may encounter some rain at times and some quite colder temperatures.

ALTITUDE: Our highest elevation will be at Tam Dao where we will be birding at 930 m/3050 ft. Elsewhere our birding will be in the lowlands or foothills.

PACE OF TOUR AND DAILY ROUTINE: The tour is a relatively strenuous one and requires a good degree of fitness due to the high temperatures in the south, some longish walks and a moderate amount of ascent and descent. Some days may involve some longer walks, however most walking is fairly easy and will include plenty of stops for birding. Some uphill and cross-country walking is required in the sites around Da Lat, as well as Tam Dao in the north.

Our birding days will normally begin around 06.00 with a quick early breakfast before birding. Some days we might take a light packed breakfast. Bird activity usually drops off by 11:00 and lunch would normally be taken at the park headquarters, hotel or nearby restaurant followed by a short break before resuming birding around 14:30 until 18.00, or dusk. There are some three/four hour drives and one long drive of around eight hours.

HEALTH: **It is essential that you contact your own doctor to obtain the latest information on the regions you are visiting.** Please contact your doctor well in advance of your tour's departure as some medication must be initiated weeks before the period of possible exposure.

It is recommended that you are up-to-date on routine vaccinations. It is further recommended that most travellers have protection against Hepatitis A and Typhoid.

The strains of malaria found in Vietnam are chloroquine-resistant. Useful information on all aspects of malaria, including how to reduce your chances of being bitten can be found at the website <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/malaria/prevention>

The abundance of biting insects varies from year to year and place to place. Generally biting insects are not numerous although mosquitoes and ticks occur locally. A can of spray repellent should provide adequate protection. We recommend using insect repellents with a high concentration of DEET. We recommend bringing an antihistamine if you are sensitive to insect bites.

At the time of our visit there should not be many terrestrial leeches present but there is always a small risk we could encounter a few, particularly after rain. They do not pose any health threat but insect repellent sprayed onto boots and socks works very well against them. Leech socks are available from the Oriental Bird Club www.orientalbirdclub.org

Diarrhoea is less likely in Vietnam than in many other non-western countries, but we suggest bringing medicine such as Imodium and especially some sachets of electrolyte-replacement drinks in powder form to replace vital salts and minerals lost in case of an upset stomach.

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Finally, be sure to bring adequate supplies of all personal medications as it may be impossible to obtain them during the tour.

For further information on health advice refer to the Medical Advisory Services for Travellers Abroad website www.masta-travel-health.com

ACCOMMODATION: In the north we stay at national park accommodations at Cuc Phuong. The accommodation is in simple rooms at the park headquarters with air-conditioning, private bathroom facilities and hot water while at Tam Dao, Phong Nha, Kam Duc and Mang Den we use a comfortable hotels in the respective towns. In Da Lat we stay at a cosy family-run hotel. At Cat Tien National Park the accommodation is similar to those at Cuc Phuong National Park. The hotels in Central Vietnam are the best available at each location and although simple all rooms have air-conditioning and private bathrooms with hot water.

LAUNDRY: We can get laundry done at Cuc Phuong and Cat Tien National Parks, but the best place to get laundry done is at Da Lat, where the hotel we use has a very efficient and economical laundry service.

ELECTRICITY: 220 volts AC in large cities. An international travel plug is useful and can be bought in most airport departure lounges. You may find the following website helpful: <http://www.power-plugs-sockets.com>.

FOOD: Vietnam is rightly famous for its delicious and healthy cuisine. Rice is, of course, the staple and most Vietnamese eat it at every meal. Breakfasts often consist of bread or noodles, though. Our meals will vary from quite fancy to fairly simple depending on our location but always tasty. As is the custom throughout much of Asia, a variety of dishes will be placed on our table by our hosts and the group will share the meal. Usually, we will have two or three vegetable dishes and one or two meat dishes, generally chicken or pork. Meals are eaten with chopsticks in Vietnam but a fork and spoon can usually be provided if preferred. In the cities Western food can be found for variety and the French-style Vietnamese bread is delicious and ubiquitous.

Our tours are all-inclusive and no refunds can be issued for any tour meals participants choose to miss. While we will try to do all we can to accommodate the requirements of all participants, please note that we cannot guarantee all causes of food allergies can be avoided at every destination. Many restaurants offer set menus and are unable to accommodate all special requests within a group. Thus, participants with significant food allergies or special dietary needs should bring appropriate foods with them for those times when their needs can, regrettably, not be accommodated. Our tours are carefully scheduled to insure the best possible birding experience and although the leaders will do all they can to make sure the group eats at a reasonable time, sometimes early or late lunches and/or evening meals cannot be avoided. Any participants who need to eat at specific times may need to bring supplemental food with them.

DRINKS: Bottled water, a soft drink or a beer (or wine if appropriate) are provided at meals, as is coffee or tea. In addition we keep a supply of bottled water on the tour vehicles. Bottled or filtered water may also be provided in some rooms where we stay.

INTERNET AND MOBILE PHONE ACCESS: In the hotels in the main towns free Wi-Fi is generally available. Mobile phones can be useful while on tour but keep in mind that many countries operate on a different cellular technology. Your phone may be incompatible with the local system, so please check with your local carrier. Fortunately, with the advent of smartphones, it is easy to download applications such as Skype or Google Voice, which can make calling home free or very inexpensive.

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Another option is to replace the data ("SIM") card in your phone in-country. The SIM cards, including data can be very cheap. If you wish to use this option you will need to check that your smart phone has a SIM card slot.

CLOTHING: Shorts and t-shirts can be worn in towns and villages but please remember this is a relatively conservative country. These are less practical for birding in the forest where long trousers and long-sleeved shirts should be worn as a barrier against any biting insects and thorny vegetation. In the field and especially when birding in forests, subdued colours are recommended. The following items are basic:

Long-sleeved quick-drying shirts (for jungle wear)	Sweater/sweatshirt
Short-sleeved cotton shirts (for city wear)	Warm outer jacket
Lightweight, tight weave cotton trousers	Sandals
Sturdy footwear (light-weight hiking boots)	Lightweight waterproof jacket
Gloves and warm hat for early mornings in the north	Sun hat
Leech socks (optional)	

MISCELLANEOUS ITEMS: You may find the following items useful:

Notebook and pencil	Alarm clock
Small rucksack/shoulder bag	Head torch with spare batteries
Insect repellent	Water bottle
Small folding umbrella	Pocket knife with bottle opener
Earplugs if you are a light sleeper	Face towel or large handkerchief
Sunglasses and sunscreen	Personal medication

Optional: Telescope & tripod), spare binoculars and spare spectacles (in case of loss or damage), field guide, swimwear.

Although a telescope and tripod may be useful at a couple of sites there will be no opportunities for scanning through ducks, waders or gulls, and the vast majority of birding will be within forest where binoculars are sufficient and a telescope a hindrance. The leader will always carry a telescope where necessary.

The most effective insect repellents are those containing at least 35% of the active ingredient diethyltoluamide (DEET). The higher the percentage, the greater the effectiveness. However, care must be taken to avoid getting the repellent on to optical equipment as it dissolves rubber and plastic and can damage coated lenses. A reasonably effective alternative, which isn't corrosive, is Mosi-guard, produced by MASTA, and we recommend this. It is available in most high street chemist (including those at the airport). Camping supply stores sell a product containing permethrin 0.5%, which must be applied directly to clothing in advance of wearing and allowed to dry. This non-staining, odourless chemical is non-toxic to humans and protective on clothing through several launderings. Please make sure you never to spray insect repellent inside the vehicle or when you are standing close to other participants – it may drift on to their optical equipment.

LEADER'S EQUIPMENT: The leader will provide the following items for group use:

Telescope and tripod	Small first-aid kit
Reference books	Maps
Laser pointer	Playback equipment

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LUGGAGE: Our Final Information document, which will be sent to you approximately three weeks before departure, will give details about baggage weight and size restrictions imposed by the airline used for this tour.

If possible, please bring your luggage in soft-sided bags or cases (rather than large hard 'Samsonite'-type suitcases) as these pack more easily into our vehicles during the tour. Please note that on many tours there are no porters to carry your luggage so please ensure that **no bag is so heavy that you are unable to lift and carry it yourself**. As a general rule, in addition to using your luggage labels, it is a good idea to fix identification to the *inside* of each piece of luggage.

PHOTOGRAPHY: Scenery and memory shots will be plentiful and simple to obtain. Taking good photographs of forest birds is very difficult as light is often limiting. Cat Tien National Park will probably provide the best photo opportunities for birds. Memory cards may be difficult to obtain and will certainly be more expensive than at home so you should bring with you all that you expect to need. Camera equipment should be packed in moisture and dust-proof bags as a precaution. If you wish to 'digiscope' please ensure that you bring your own telescope.

There will be plenty of opportunities to take photos of birds, mammals and scenery and the leaders will do all they can to accommodate anyone wishing to take photographs. However if you are a serious photographer please bear in mind that this is first and foremost a birdwatching tour. Please do not allow your photographic desires to conflict with other participants' birdwatching activities.

TRANSPORT: Ground transportation is by air-conditioned mini-bus. Domestic flights are operated by Vietnam Airlines and Jetstar. We will take a short boat trip in shallow waters at one site near Cuc Phuong. Participants should be able to ride in any seat in tour vehicles and are expected to change seats with others daily.

SMOKING: Smoking and vaping is not permitted in the mini-buses or when the group is gathered for meals, checklist, etc. If you share a room with a non-smoker, please do not smoke in the room.

TRAVEL INSURANCE: Travel insurance is essential and we insist that you take out suitable cover as soon as your tour is booked. If you are bringing expensive optical equipment or other valuable items, please make sure they are also adequately insured on your home contents policy, as most travel insurance policies do not cover very expensive individual items. We suggest you carry such items as part of your carry-on luggage. You may wish to consult your insurance broker regarding coverage. Please also ensure that your policy covers you in the event of a medical emergency or the cancellation of a trip. Medical costs abroad can often be extremely expensive. Please note that Sunbird is not liable for any medical or repatriation costs resulting from injury or illness during a tour.

If you wish, insurance can be arranged by Helen Fisher, Bullerwell Independent Insurance Brokers, 13 Goldington Road, Bedford, MK40 3JY. Tel: 01234-866964. Please contact Helen for a quote and she will send the schedule directly to you.

TIPPING: All tour-based tips are included in the tour price. These include tips to local guides, drivers, hotel porters, and waiters and waitresses. You only need to pay tips for personal services such as room service or drinks from the bar.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Robson, Craig. 2015. Helm. *A Field Guide to the Birds of South-East Asia (Concise edition)*. Craig Robson's award-winning fieldguide features up-to-date colour illustrations of every bird you are likely meet in Vietnam. **Recommended.**

Lê Quy Minh and Craik, Richard. 2019. Lynx. *Birds of Vietnam*. This is a newer book with updated, albeit contentious, taxonomies.

Sterling, Jane; Hurley Martha Maud and Le Duc Minh. 2006. Yale University Press. *Vietnam: A Natural History*. This book is the first comprehensive account of Vietnam's natural history in English. Illustrated with maps, photographs, and thirty-five original watercolour illustrations, the book offers a complete tour of the country's plants and animals along with a full discussion of the factors shaping their evolution and distribution.

Monastyrskii, Alexander and Devyatkin, Alexey L. 2003. *Butterflies of Vietnam: An Illustrated Checklist*. Excellent small book on the butterflies of Vietnam, professionally produced with good colour photographs and well organised text. There is a dual English-Vietnamese introduction, and notes on the checklist, followed by the checklist, which gives scientific names and north/south location within Vietnam, followed by the colour plates (photographs).

Francis, Charles M 2008. New Holland. *A Field guide to the Mammals of Southeast Asia*. A superbly thorough field guide covering close to 500 species found within Myanmar, Thailand, Peninsula Malaysia, Singapore, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia. Each species is beautifully illustrated with the plates followed by comprehensive text for each mammal.

Francis, Charles M. 2007. New Holland. *A Photographic Guide to the Mammals of Southeast Asia*. This guide provides a comprehensive overview of the wide variety of wildlife to be found in Southeast Asia. Over 192 key species are included in the book, each description supported by a clear colour photograph taken where possible in the mammal's natural habitat. This photographic guide covers all those mammals recorded from mainland SE Asia, from Myanmar through Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia and south to Malaysia.

Das, Indraneil 2010. New Holland. *A Field Guide to the Reptiles of Southeast Asia: Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Peninsular Malaysia, Singapore, Sumatra, Borneo, Java & Bali*. The first comprehensive guide to the reptiles of mainland Southeast Asia including Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore. A detailed account with key identification characteristics, habitat and behaviour is included for each species, from crocodiles, tortoises and turtles, to lizards and snakes. Every recognised species is described, and 74 magnificent specially commissioned colour plates by top wildlife artists depict 700 major species in meticulous detail.

Travel Guides and maps:

Ray, Nick et al. 14th edition 2018. *The Lonely Planet Travel Guide to Vietnam*. A useful guide book. Lonely Planet also produce a Vietnamese phrasebook.

Vietnam ITMB publishing. Scale 1:1,000,000. A double-sided map of the whole country

Vietnam Northern and Southern: Reise Know-How Verlag. Scale 1:600,000. Two maps covering the country in more detail.

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ORIENTAL BIRD CLUB: The Oriental Bird Club publications (*Forktail* and their Bulletin) regularly include information about Vietnam. Please support this charity which aims to raise money to support conservation projects, encourages an interest in the conservation of birds, and liaises with and promotes the work of existing societies within the region. You will find their contact details and further information about the Club at www.orientalbirdclub.org

FINAL INFORMATION: Final information with instructions for meeting the group, hotel addresses, etc. and your air tickets will be sent out about three weeks before the start of the tour. Other news will be communicated as necessary. If you have any questions, please contact us.