



Heavenly Halong bay

A boat trip into Halong Bay, a world heritage listed site in North Vietnam is a spectacular experience. The beauty of this region leaves you spellbound as you [cruise in Halong Bay](#) alongside hundreds of sheer limestone peaks rising out of the sea, stone mountains clad in jungle, ancient caves and thundering waterfalls.

The area has been protected since 1994 and the trip can be enjoyed to the fullest aboard the luxury of a Chinese-style traditional junk, which is well worth the extra dollars. There are two regions to explore. The main area is Halong Bay itself, where approximately 1,000 boat operators compete for business, taking you to places like Hang Sung Sot Cave (Surprise Cave), which is not that much of a surprise, as you will be sharing it with around 700 people.

The other area is Bai Tu Long Bay (which means Baby Dragon). In comparison, the surprises here are very real. Beautiful secluded beaches, exploring isolated caves by kayak, and the highlight – a candlelight dinner in a cave. Bai Tu Long Bay is home to a group of local fishermen in the Cong Dam Floating Fishing Village. The concept of a floating village is rather new to this century-old subsistence ethnic fishing community a group of families numbering around 160 members. In 1994 the Vietnamese Government convinced the fishermen and their families to come out of the caves and live on the water. The main reason was to preserve and protect the caves and the delicate limestone environment for future generations. One enticement was the promise of a (floating) school.

Prior to this offer, the entire village, mums, dads, grandparents and children were illiterate. However now the children aged 6 to 9 attend primary school. After completion of primary school, children are encouraged to continue on to secondary school on the mainland, however this involves leaving their floating village life, their families and living on dry land in Halong City.

The day we visited, the village elder welcomed us with a serving of green tea in tiny cups and we met some of the 39 children who attend the primary school, which floats on blue plastic barrels. Interestingly, the common Vietnamese practice of two-child families is not practiced in this village because, as a local fisherman told us, “we have nothing else to do”. Girls are encouraged to marry between 17 and 20 years of age. After 20 women are considered “left on the shelf”. Whilst visiting the village, we were offered the opportunity to try our hand at fishing with the experts and we were encouraged to sit and converse, albeit in broken Vietnamese with the friendly village floaters. It was a very interesting cultural exchange and both parties benefitted from finding out about each other’s worlds.

The Cave Dinner

We set off after dark in a small boat convoy. Our destination was Thien Canh Son Cave. The giant stone cliff face loomed out of the dark waters – it was alluring and mysterious, framed against a big dark moonless sky. As we got closer, a line of small torch flame markers came into view. The parade of lights wound up and around the sheer pinnacle island and then disappeared into what could only be the entrance to the cave.

With this limited lighting, 18 boat passengers cautiously ascended the steep trail, torch in hand, and followed the flame markers to the mouth of the cave. Once we were inside, a small Hansel and Gretel narrow pathway, lit by tiny tea-candles awaited us. We entered a world of orange the colour of the inside of the cave walls and followed the trail, descending deep into the cave, through small grottos. At every twist and turn stalagmites and stalactites greeted us, rising and falling in our wake.

Finally we arrived at our destination, the cave restaurant. The shape of the cave leant itself to a perfect dining experience. Several natural stone couches lined the room and to my surprise, the floor of the cave was totally level. An ornate candelabra adorned a natural stone mantel and an 18-seat dining table greeted us. Soft Vietnamese music echoed in acoustic harmony with wine glasses sparkling, a white starched tablecloth, shiny porcelain dinner plates and the final touch – a sprinkling of red rose petals. All were delighted at this very special and unique dinner setting.

Thien Canh Son Cave is a private cave and therefore you are guaranteed exclusivity for the night but exactly how had all this been set up? It turns out that the work that had gone into this perfect presentation had been prepared that very afternoon. While we had all been kayaking and playing soccer on the beach in the afternoon, our crew was busy discretely working on carrying chairs and tables into the cave and creating this exquisite setting, as well as cooking a nine course dinner. Truly remarkable!

Our waiters beamed with pride as they brought through each dish, which was accompanied by hand carved food art, expertly crafted by our head chef. One piece included a replica of our Chinese junk carved out of a pumpkin! All this for one memorable night. It was a truly heavenly, although very earthly, dining experience. Memories like this remained etched in your (travel) soul forever.

Halong Bay is a very romantic destination, combining breathtaking vistas with idyllic sandy coves and a place to lose yourself for a couple of days in the wind and the waves that have created this visual masterpiece on earth.

Fact File:

Halong Bay is located in North East Vietnam.

Luxury Cruise in Halong Bay – Dragon Pearl 1, 2 and 3 operate and tour Bai Tu Long area.

Chinese-junk style New boat, launched July 2010

11 Deluxe Cabins (maximum 22 people)

Indochina Junk support “For a Green Halong” initiative. This includes replacing styrofoam float-barrels with environmentally friendly, long-term plastic barrels, supporting the rubbish project in Vung Vieng fishing village and protection and planting of mangrove swamp in Cong Dam.

Cost: US\$ 240.00 – 2 nights, 3 days sailing adventure inclusive of all meals, kayaks, national park entrance fees, [visa for Vietnam](#) and hotel pick up and drop off. You can book the tour with www.dulichso.com.

How to get there – Pick up from your hotel in Hanoi included in the price. Transfer time – Three hours by private shuttle Hanoi to boat.

Best time of year October and November. Cruise operates all year round.