

Morning mist canopies the mountains and caves of Tam Coc; a woman on a bicycle cycles past perfectly green rice fields dotted with bamboo jets; “thit cho” (“dog meat”) signs line the narrow alley walls; vivid plant life juxtaposition old dilapidated Vietnamese houses; and an elderly couple quietly fish in the Kenh Ga canal. You are in Ninh Binh, a small Northern town offering its visitors a unique Vietnamese experience, with its natural beauty charming all.

Almost 100km south of Hanoi, Ninh Binh provides many avenues to explore. Visit the busier areas of Tam Coc, Cuc Phuong National Park, Vietnam’s old capital Hoa Lu, or Bich Dong Pagoda. Alternatively, rent a bicycle or motorbike, take a map and phrasebook, and explore Ninh Binh’s quiet roads and colorful ranges, which are contrasted to the South’s Mekong Delta. Hanoi’s operators transport buses of tourists to the former destinations, but if you want to maximize a journey through a quaint Vietnamese town, be adventurous and do it yourself. But wherever you go in Ninh Binh, will be something magical to remember.

The center of Catholicism in Northern Vietnam, Pham Diet attracts both domestic and foreign visitors. Different to most cathedrals found in Europe, Phat Diem Cathedral blends both Gothic style of architecture, and traditional Vietnamese building. Restoration has begun on the area, and not much damage can be seen despite its bombing in the past.

Visit Phat Diem for unique Vietnamese architecture, which still stands as a “miracle” to Ninh Binh’s 140,000 Roman Catholics.

Phat Diem is 28km out of Ninh Binh town. Renting a motorbike is the easiest option, or alternatively take a “xe om” (motorbike taxi), and car taxi will cost much higher (around 10,000 Dong per kilometer).

Tam Coc Caves

Tam Coc provides boat tours through three main caves in the region. Floating past karst limestone formations jutting into the rice fields, be prepared for a 3-hour boat ride where you can observe villagers in their daily routine. A downside to this trip, is that it is becoming very popular amongst tourists, and you may feel like just another one of the bunches. Tam Coc is only 7 km from the main town, so you can easily get there yourself.

Trang An Caves

Trang An is a quieter, less crowded grotto area similar to Tam Coc. However, it is not always open to tourists until it is fully developed for tourists by 2010. Some groups are allowed through the area on request by contacting Trang An Tourism Co. Ltd.,

Cuc Phuong Park

Cuc Phuong is a beautifully protected sanctuary containing over 50 species of wild orchids and 450 animal species. Limestone mountains surround the Muong tribe houses, while the scenery is nothing less than enchanting. A further 45km out of Ninh Binh, the protected park is a very different way to see Vietnam at its best, and a break from the many pagodas and temples.

Most tour groups go to Tam Coc and Hoa Lu town from Ninh Binh, so there are considerably less foreign visitors at Cuc Phuong. A motorbike taxi to Cuc Phuong

should cost around 100,000 VND while a taxi will cost three or four times that amount. Travel time will be around 1 to 1.5 hours, so be prepared for a long journey if you want to drive or bicycle it yourself. A good option is to arrive at the park entrance in the morning, and talk to the information kiosk. They will provide you with information on bicycle rental, homestays, their many 1- and 2-day tours, and hiring a tour guide.

Kenh Ga (Chicken Canal)

The hot springs of Kenh Ga have been known to have a miraculous healing property. A short 23km from Ninh Binh town, the Kenh Ga provides the best way to observe river life of the locals. Fortunately, the canal receives far fewer visitors as Hoa Lu and Tam Coc, so is a much quieter way of travelling throughout Ninh Binh. Maybe you will cure that skin ailment or stomach bug that you have so unpleasantly received while on your travels! A boat tour around the Canal villages will cost around 40,000 Dong, departing from the main pier. You can only access the hot springs via boat, which will cost around 25,000 Dong. Again, getting to Kenh Ga is easy, either via taxi, or doing it yourself on bicycle or motorbike.

Why Not Go

Travellers who want to party will not enjoy Ninh Binh, as it does not provide much Western fare, and no nightclubs or bars catered to foreigners.

Why Go

Photos, photos, photos. If you're a keen photographer, use the vivid colors and scenery as the focal point of your pictures. The lakes, rivers, caves, plant life, quiet roads, and rice fields all provide a much quieter backdrop than nearby Hanoi. Come to Ninh Binh if you like to enjoy the natural world at its best.

Where to Stay

As Ninh Binh is not a major city, hotels here are much cheaper than Hanoi, although providing excellent rooms and service. Many [hotels in Ninh Binh](#) provide free pickup from the bus station, so negotiate this into the deal. The town itself is relatively small, and most hotels are in the main center. Transport to surrounding areas is not difficult to arrange, either with the hotel, or via rented bicycles, motorbikes or car taxis.

For the budget traveler:

Ngoc Anh Hotel

30, Luong Van Tuy R | Ninh Binh, Vietnam

Ngoc Anh hotel is a favorite amongst travelers, as it provides excellent service, and does not charge huge commissions on services like other hotels. Rooms have wifi, hot water, and staff help with planning your trip, motorbikes/bicycles for rent, and maps for the area. A great family run hotel, charging around \$10 per night.

For magnificent views of Tam Coc:

The Long Hotel Restaurant Ninh Binh

Tam Coc, Bich Dong | Ninh Binh, Vietnam

With excellent views stretching out over Tam Coc, The Long hotel includes an extensive menu in their restaurant. At \$30 to \$50 a night, this hotel is slightly more expensive, but worth it for the quality of the rooms, free wifi and free breakfast.

Where & What to Eat

Ninh Binh is famous for its local goat meat specialty. Ensure that you take a phrasebook with food listings, so you know what you're eating.

Sit at any of the local food stalls in the town. The huge bia hoi on Tran Hung Dao is popular with locals, provides good local specialties, and beer on tap. Look for the "bia hoi" sign.

Many tours go through bigger restaurants such as Anh Dzung Hotel-Restaurant (Bich Dong street). They have very cheap set menu's, but not everyone will like listening to the tourist crowds as they eat. Thanh Thuy's Guesthouse (128 Le Hong Phong St) is known for its delicious food, however open tours also stopover here for lunch.

Cafe Loc, (2B Tran Hung Dao street) provides fruit shakes and good coffee, with an English and Russian speaking owner.

Nightlife

There are no bars or nightclubs catered for foreigners, neither for Vietnamese clientele. Many hotels have a bar incorporated into their restaurant, but they don't get particularly busy.

My to do List

1. try the local specialty – goat meat
2. hop on a bike or motorbike and adventure out of the main town
3. visit a village in the Kenh Ga Canal, and watch the locals row the boat with their feet
4. cycle from Hoa Lu to Tam Coc amongst limestone cliffs
5. Watch and listen for the many animal species in Cuc Phuong National Park
6. listen out for young locals shouting out "tay oi!" ("foreigner!") to you

Stay Away From

Ninh Binh is a relatively safe town, and most locals are curious and excited to see foreigners. Most families will lock up their houses by 9:30 and it instantly becomes deserted, so walking around the streets at night time is not recommended, but not entirely unsafe.

Getting There

Ninh Binh is located only 93 km from Hanoi, and a bus will take you directly there. For the cheapest option, ask your hotel in Hanoi where the nearest bus station is and what times buses leave for Ninh Binh. There will be hundreds of buses at the station with their destinations listed on the front. Hop on one of the Ninh Binh buses, and pay the fare (via hand signals or pen and paper). It is 2 hours to Ninh Binh and local cost is around 40,000 Dong. Alternatively, let the hotel arrange everything for you, and to take you to the bus station. They will charge a higher price, but it will be much more convenient.

Source: [Đặt khách sạn](#)