

For most Westerners, the terms “jungle” and “Vietnam” combine in one way only – the urban jungle of mega-metropolis of Hanoi, where the only nature one can see are the blooming cherry blossoms and Godzillas. Few Westerners have ever heard about the jungle-clad Phu Quoc, the largest of the Vietnam archipelago’s islands in Kien Giang prefecture; fewer still have ever set their foot there. And yet, the island is well worth a visit for its untouched nature, great snorkelling and empty beaches.

The interior of the island is mountainous, lush, and empty. The human population of about 2000 concentrate along the circular coastal road, leaving most of the island’s 289km<sup>2</sup> to the jungle and its inhabitants. The most famous, and in the same time most elusive of those is the Phu Quoc – a small feline, easily spotted on posters, souvenir stalls and road signs, but rarely seen in the wild (although my husband strongly argues to have glimpsed one). Other critters, much easier to spot, include turtles, snakes, birds, coconut crabs, beach crabs, mud skippers and a myriad of butterflies and other insects.

Phu Quoc has just a few [luxury hotels in Phu Quoc](#); visiting off-season, one has the island largely to himself. The low number of tourists means the infrastructure is somewhat underdeveloped, but there are some restaurants and shops open off-season. The traffic on the narrow roads is practically non-existent, so visiting the island by car, or even on bicycles, is highly recommended.

The activities on the island are reserved for nature lovers. One can paddle up one of the rivers bordered by mangrove forests, or take a hike into the jungle. The toughest hikers can take a strenuous 22km long cross-island trek. What makes Phu Quoc special is the total freedom, rarely possible in other jungle destinations – one can explore the jungle without a guide or a minder, as there are no hostile locals or dangerous animal to recon with, except for an occasional, and highly avoidable, habu viper. One can also take a trip to one of the wild, empty beaches, to snorkel with schools of tiny, iridescent blue fish in the crystalline waters. Snorkelling off a boat and diving trips can also be arranged, although during our stay in November 2010 the sea was too rough for the small boats to leave the safety of the harbour.

Practicalities:

- Both VNA and Vietjet operate several flights a day from most major Vietnamese cities to Phu Quoc airport
- Two ferry companies service from Rach Gia port; the boat trip takes under one hour. There are two ports on Phu Quoc – Rach Gia and Kien Giang. If the sea is rough, the ferries go to Phu Quoc only, and a bus to Kien Giang is provided for free (ask for a ticket while buying your ferry ticket)
- The best snorkeling spot is Bai Trong beach. The sea there is quite shallow and teeming with marine life. By low tide, the water gets too shallow to snorkel, so plan carefully. There is a public toilet, a parking lot, a decent restaurant, and a souvenir shop above the beach. The public bus stops near the parking lot as well. The beach is famous for its star-shaped sand, although the tiny stars are becoming scarce.
- The biggest river on the island is the Phu Quoc. There one can hire canoes to paddle up the river, or go for a cruise with a river boat. The cruise goes up the river, where the passengers disembark and hike up the trail to two waterfalls (without a guide).
- The best web page about hotels and visa is [getvietnamvisa.com](http://getvietnamvisa.com)
- We stayed at the wonderful Intercontinental resort – read my review of it on Tripadvisor.