

Explore Con Dao's heroic history and eco-tourism experiences

Craving the soul-restoring warmth of an island getaway? The type that'll get you on beaches, over reefs, in forests, atop mountains? Con Dao – a historically important haven for creatures great and small – should be on your radar.

In 2022, Travel + Leisure magazine included Con Dao among the “Top 10 Islands in Southeast Asia”. Thanks to its heroic past and biodiversity, it's featured on the bucket lists of travellers who love history and nature. Most of Con Dao – an archipelago of 16 islands off the coast of Vung Tau – comprises protected, biodiverse areas. Think lush tropical forests, vivid coral reefs, and sanctuaries for endangered turtles and migratory birds. Given its history – once being the largest penal colony in the Indochina era – Con Dao has a dark past. Now, it has a bright future – thanks to its eco-tourism and long-standing significance as a place for pilgrimage.

Con Son, the archipelago's biggest island, has had many names. The famous Italian explorer Marco Polo called it Sondur and Condur in 1292, while the French colonialists referred to it as Grande-Condore. Its charming town features French colonial architecture, a lovely beachfront promenade, and gorgeous seaside scenery.

From Con Son, Con Dao's other islands are just a boat ride away. To explore some of the best coral reefs in Vietnam, book a snorkelling trip to Tai Islet, Bay Canh Islet or Cau Islet. During turtle-breeding season, most visitors head to Bay Canh Islet, to see Vietnam's turtle-conservation efforts in action.



Con Dao's natural wonders

Con Dao is a jungle paradise where you can escape from life's stresses. The majority of the archipelago forms the Con Dao National Park – 6,000 hectares of tropical forest and 14,000 hectares of marine area. Hike through swathes of cooling forests to mountain peaks for views of dramatic coastal cliffs and all the ocean blues you can dream of. Remember to look up: From May to September, thousands of birds migrate here. Avian fauna you won't find anywhere else in Vietnam includes the red-billed tropicbird, masked booby, and Nicobar pigeon. Other endemic animals include the Con Dao black giant squirrel and the Con Dao long-tailed macaque.

The park's marine ecosystem includes mangroves, coral reefs, and deserted beaches to explore. Marine conservation is taken seriously here to protect the many marine species found in the park's shimmering waters. In addition to black whales, dolphins and turtles, these are the only waters where you'll find the rare dugong in Vietnam.

Along with dugongs, sea turtles are severely endangered. That's why the image of turtle hatchlings crawling to the sea is so moving. Since their survival rate is only 1/1000, one's filled with hope upon seeing a baby turtle begin its journey. Some 90% of Vietnam's turtles return to Con Dao to lay their eggs annually. These include the endangered green turtle and hawksbill turtle. During the breeding season (April–October), visitors can watch this natural marvel, and even help release tiny hatchlings into the sea. Wish them luck (and a long life) as they bravely enter the big blue beyond. Thanks to Con Dao's sea turtle conservation programme, over 150,000 rescued baby turtles have been released into the sea, with a hatching rate of 87%.



The beaches of Con Dao

Craving ‘vitamin-Sea’? There’s no shortage of beaches on Con Dao...

Lo Voi beach is northeast of the Con Son promenade. Despite its central location, it’s seldom crowded. Lo Voi means “lime kiln”. The name harks back to when prisoners dove for coral to be fired into limestone, in a kiln established in 1864.

Southwest of town is An Hai Beach, where surrounding mountains ensure that the sea is calm. Poplar trees offer shady respite from the sun. In the early morning, the pier gets busy with fishermen returning with their catch – great for photo opportunities.

Further north is Dam Trau Beach, near the airport. Watching the planes overhead is such fun, US Travel + Leisure magazine named this among the world’s 25 best beaches.

Dam Tre Bay, within the national park, is another pristine bay of clean aquamarine waters surrounded by cliffs. Hike there or go by speedboat. The bay is great for swimming in, but be aware of the tides and currents. Want to overnight to enjoy some stargazing? Basic accommodation is available at the Ranger Station.



Con Dao historical sites



As it was a penal colony for over 100 years, Con Dao serves as a reminder of the horrors of war. Prisoners were held in such appalling conditions in this so-called “Hell on Earth”. Learn more about the island’s centuries-old history at the Con Dao Museum, where over 2,000 photos and artifacts reveal Con Dao’s past. Visiting Con Dao’s former prison is a sobering experience. Mannequins depict how soldiers were treated during both the French colonial period and the Resistance War against America, and the “tiger cages” show the inhumane solitary confinement conditions. Here, you’ll also learn about celebrated Vietnamese resistance fighters.



Sacred places of Con Dao

Given its complex history, it’s no wonder Con Dao is spiritually important. Many Vietnamese pay respects to the martyrs who lost their lives at the Hang Duong cemetery, home to over 1,900 graves. The most notable is that of Vo Thi Sau, an activist who was killed by the French when she was 19.



Other spiritual locations include the Van Son Pagoda and the An Son Temple. The temple was built to honour Lady Phi Yen, another fabled woman-turned-saint. A ceremony is held at her shrine on the 18th day of the 10th lunar month. The Van Son pagoda was built in the 1960s, for prison officials to worship. Climb the 200-odd steps for stunning views from the top.



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