

VIETNAM: LANGUAGE, DIALECTS & ETHICAL COMMUNICATION GUIDE

Language is the bridge to the heart of Vietnam. While many Vietnamese in the tourism sector speak English, attempting to speak the local language shows respect and builds immediate warmth.

This guide introduces you to the structure of Vietnamese, its fascinating regional dialects, essential vocabulary for responsible travel, and the cultural rules of "ethical bargaining."

1. UNDERSTANDING THE LANGUAGE & TONES

Vietnamese is a tonal language. The same syllable can have six different meanings depending on the tone you use:

- **No Tone (Ngang):** Flat and level (e.g., ba - three).
- **Acute Tone (Sắc):** Rising pitch (e.g., bá - governor).
- **Grave Tone (Huyền):** Falling pitch (e.g., bà - grandmother).
- **Question Tone (Hỏi):** Dipping and rising (e.g., bã - poison/bait).
- **Tilde Tone (Ngã):** High broken/glottal rising (e.g., bã - residue).
- **Drop Tone (Nặng):** Low constricted/abrupt drop (e.g., bạ - random).

Traveler Tip: Don't let the tones intimidate you! Locals are incredibly patient and will understand your meaning based on context. Speak slowly, clearly, and always with a friendly smile.

2. THE ART OF "ETHICAL BARGAINING"

Bargaining is a common social practice in Vietnamese open markets. However, in sustainable tourism, bargaining must be done with ethics and cultural awareness. Follow these golden rules to bargain responsibly:

The Sacred Rule of "Mở Hàng" (The Morning's First Sale)



First Sale of the Day

In Vietnam, the very first transaction of the morning is sacred. Sellers believe that if the first transaction goes smoothly and quickly, they will have good luck (vía tốt) and high sales all day.

The Taboo: Never bargain aggressively, argue, or walk away without buying during the morning's first sale. Doing so is believed to bring bad luck (vía dữ) or block their sales.

The Ethical Choice: If you are the first customer of the day (usually around 7:00 AM – 9:00 AM), either pay the asking price if it is reasonable, or negotiate very gently and quickly to ensure a successful transaction.

Put Prices in Perspective

Remember that a difference of 10,000 VND to 25,000 VND (\$0.40 – \$1.00 USD) is a negligible amount for an international traveler, but it can pay for a local street vendor's meal or support their child's school supplies. Don't haggle down to the very last cent just to "win."

Make It a Friendly Game

Bargaining should always be conducted with a smile, light humor, and politeness. Treat it as a friendly conversation, not an aggressive battle. If the price is too high, say "*Đắt quá*" (Too expensive!) with a laugh, and ask politely: "*Bớt chút đi ạ?*" (Can you discount a little, please?).

KNOW WHEN NOT TO BARGAIN

- **Fixed Price Stalls:** Impossible to bargain in supermarkets, convenience stores, or restaurants.
- **Social Enterprises & Cooperatives:** Should not bargain at places like KOTO, Reaching Out, or fair-trade craft shops. The money you pay directly funds charity programs or guarantees fair wages for marginalized artisans.
- **Vulnerable Street Vendors:** Avoid bargaining with elderly street vendors, disabled sellers, or poor farmers selling small piles of homegrown fruit on the sidewalk. Pay their asking price, it is a direct act of charity.

4. ESSENTIAL VOCABULARY FOR RESPONSIBLE TRAVELERS

Greetings & Politeness

Always add "ạ" at the end of your sentences when speaking to older people to show respect.

English	Vietnamese	Pronunciation
Hello	Xin chào	Seen chow
Thank you	Cảm ơn (ạ)	Gam uhn (ah)
Excuse me / Sorry	Xin lỗi	Seen loy
Goodbye	Tạm biệt	Tam bee-et
Yes	Dạ / Vâng	Yah / Vuhng
No, thank you (Polite refusal)	Dạ thôi, cảm ơn	Yah thoy, gam uhn

Sustainable Communication

Use these phrases to refuse single-use plastics at street stalls and restaurants.

English	Vietnamese	Pronunciation
No plastic bag, please.	Không lấy túi nilon ạ	Khong lay tuy nee-lon ah
No straw, please.	Không lấy ống hút ạ	Khong lay ohng hoot ah
No wet wipes, please.	Không lấy khăn ướt ạ	Khong lay khuhn uht ah
Please refill my bottle.	Đổ nước vào chai giúp ạ	Doh nuoc vao chai gioop ah

Dining & Market Basics

Crucial phrases for eco-conscious diners and vegetarians.

English	Vietnamese	Pronunciation
I am vegetarian / I eat vegan	Tôi ăn chay	Toy uhn chay
No meat, please	Không lấy thịt ạ	Khong lay thit ah
Not spicy, please	Không cay ạ	Khong kai ah
How much is this?	Cái này bao nhiêu ạ?	Kai nay bao nyew ah?
Delicious!	Ngon quá!	Ngohn kwah!

Emergency Basics

Keep these phrases in mind for safety.

English	Vietnamese	Pronunciation
Help me!	Cứu tôi với!	<i>Kee-oo toy voy!</i>
Hospital	Bệnh viện	<i>Ben vien</i>
Doctor	Bác sĩ	<i>Bak see</i>