

Vietnam

Footprint

Claire Boobyer

"Great travelling companions, constantly entertaining and they know what they're talking about."
Michael Palin



T33-847481, and the **Halong Bay Service Stock Company**, T33-844190, which hires out both traditional wooden boats and metal-hulled ones. Foreign-language speaking guides can also be hired here.

Because it takes about 1 hr to get into the bay proper, 1 long trip represents better value than 2 short ones. A tour of the bay including a cave or 2 and a swim needs 4-5 hrs. A number of day trips are on offer:

Route 1 goes to Thien Cung Grotto, Dau Go Cave, Dinh Huong islet and Ga Choi islet (3-4 hrs); **Route 2** follows the same route plus Sung Sot Grotto and Ti Tov Beach (7-8 hrs); **Route 3** goes to Me Cung Cave, Sung Sot Grotto and Ti Tov Beach (7-8 hrs); **Route 4** sails to Tam Cung Cave, Sung Sot Cave and Luon Cave; and **Route 5** goes to Bai Tu Long, Ngoc Vung Island and Quan Lan Island (2 days). Trips leave 1 Apr-30 Sep 0730-0830 and from 1 Oct-31 Mar 0800-0900. Tickets for visits to the cave can be bought at the tourist wharf or at the caves and are around 30,000d.

Boat charter A 10- to 15-person boat for 4 hrs costs 280,000d, for 8 hrs 490,000d. **Buffalo Tours**, 94 Ma May St, Hanoi, T4-828 0702, www.buffalotours.com, operates the luxury *Jewel of the Bay* boat in Halong Bay on a daily basis. This comfortably furnished boat with capacity for 10 includes children's toys, a deck for sunbathing and star-watching; enormous quantities of superb food are served and the staff are welcoming. Kayaks can be used to explore from the boat. It also operates a day cruise.

Cruise Halong Co, 1 Vuon Dao St, Bai Chay, Hanoi, T4-984 2807, www.cruisehalong.com. The *Halong Ginger* is a luxury junk cruising

the waters and is a beautiful sight on the bay with its proud orange sails. It has just 10 spacious cabins, restaurant, lounge, 2 bars, shop and a library. Kayaking, snorkelling and cooking classes are available.

Emeraude Classic Cruises, c/o Press Club, 59A Ly Thai To St, T4-9340888, www.emeraude-cruises.com. The best way to see Halong Bay in style is on the reconstructed French paddle steamer, the *Emeraude*. There are 39 cabins with extremely comfortable beds and nice touches (gift-wrapped biscuits) and old-style fans although the bathrooms are on the tiny side. There's a sumptuous buffet lunch and more delicious food than you can eat for dinner. Entertainment includes a Vietnamese spring roll demo, swimming off the boat, squid fishing, t'ai chi exercise on the sun deck at dawn and a massage service. There's a sundeck and a chic, partially covered bar from where to admire the sun and the stars.

Life Heritage Resort Halong Bay, www.life-resorts.com. This rapidly expanding company will be offering 22 private deluxe boats for guests from March 2009, which will take the Halong Bay experience up a notch in the privacy and luxury stakes. Each boat will come with a living area, sun deck, DVD player and TV and its own captain and staff. Therapy treatments will be available on board.

The **Huong Hai Junk Halong Company** (www.halongdiscovery.com) also operates in the bay.

Tour operators

Quang Ninh Tourism, T33-626127, www.halong.com.



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