

Off the wagon: Vietnam's binge-drinking problem

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A scantily clad DJ gyrates to ear-splitting music as the crowd of drinkers orders more towers of lager: welcome to The Hangover, one of a new crop of 'beer clubs' raising concerns about Vietnam's drinking culture.

Beer goes for as little as 30 US cents a glass in Vietnam, making the communist country one of the cheapest places in the world for a tippie. And over the last few years, [alcohol](#) consumption has been rising at one of the fastest rates anywhere.

Vietnamese used to mainly enjoy their booze perched on the small plastic chairs that festoon curbside [beer](#) joints.

But increasing wealth has brought new [drinking](#) options to a country that has no real notion of alcoholism and no specific word for a hangover.

Bars are still mainly the preserve of well-heeled expatriates and the Vietnamese elite. So beer clubs—with their music and air-conditioning—have sprung up over recent months as funkier alternatives for young, local drinkers, many of them committed to the cause.

"The purpose of drinking is to get drunk. It will be a waste if you are not drunk," 21-year-old Vo Van Bao told AFP outside The Hangover, where he had come on a recent Thursday evening with friends.

Despite the well-used "vomit sink" in the bathroom, The Hangover's owner, who declined to give his name, told AFP he was aiming to create

a family-friendly establishment.

"I want my people, my clients, to come into my club and have a little food, have a little beer, have a little fun and go home," he said.

Vietnam is the third-largest beer consumer in Asia, behind Japan and China, and the leading consumer in Southeast Asia, out-drinking even wealthier Thailand, according to industry figures.

The rate of beer drinking in Vietnam has increased by more than 200 percent over the past 10 years, state media recently reported, due in part to rising disposable incomes and to demographics—a million people reach the [legal drinking age](#) of 18 each year.

Trouble brewing

For now Vietnam barely makes it into the world's top 100 per capita alcohol consumers, according to World Health Organization statistics, far behind big-drinking Russia, Britain and France.

But the statistics are skewed because fewer than two percent of Vietnamese women drink alcohol at all, according to WHO technical officer Phuong Nam Nguyen.

That leaves it to the men, one-quarter of whom drink at "harmful" levels—defined as six or more drinks per session, WHO research indicates.

"It is becoming a serious health challenge in Vietnam," Phuong told AFP.

"There are many associated problems—liver cirrhosis, road traffic accidents, domestic violence."

Sixty percent of domestic violence incidents in Vietnam are linked to alcohol, government research shows, and excessive [alcohol consumption](#) is resulting in rising incidents of diseases such as cancer and diabetes.

Efforts to restrict consumption—from a proposed 10:00 pm alcohol sales ban to plans to limit beer sales to air-conditioned venues—have been widely mocked in the state-run press and rapidly abandoned.

State media reports say drinkers in Hanoi alone are expected to down nearly 200 million litres of alcohol for the forthcoming Tet lunar new year festival.

It is all part of Vietnam's robust drinking culture—one local saying declares: 'A man without alcohol is like a flag without wind.'

"This (idea) is deeply rooted in our culture and will take a long time to change," said WHO's Phuong.

What's your poison?

Beer is particularly big business in Vietnam, which consumes around three billion litres annually.

The market is dominated by three companies and every major town has its own brew—from Beer Saigon in southern Ho Chi Minh City, to Beer La Rue in the central areas, to Hanoi beer in the northern capital.

International drinks giants are hoping to persuade Vietnam's beer drinkers to move onto harder liquors, despite heavy taxes and a ban on advertising spirits.

With a population of some 90 million, half of whom are under 30, and a rapidly expanding middle class, Vietnam is a key market for companies

such as Diageo, which produces Johnnie Walker whisky among other brands.

The company says consumption is not actually that high, with Vietnamese drinking less than the French per capita, but the country remains an enticing business prospect.

"There is a fake perception that Vietnam is drinking too much, it isn't true," said Stephane Gripon, general manager for Diageo in Vietnam.

"They drink in a reasonable way and their consumption of spirits is... still very low," he added.

That is not always the case for Vietnam's beer boys.

On a recent Wednesday lunchtime in the capital Hanoi, 42-year-old construction engineer Nguyen Van Thanh sat with a friend drinking at a bia hoi—a roadside restaurant serving fresh-brewed beer. Around 10 empty beer bottles were on the table.

"I drink every day, beer or spirits. I know it is not good for my health, but it's hard to give up this habit," he told AFP.

"Sometimes, I can do business only if we've drunk together. It's also hard to say no when you're invited to drink—we say 'no alcohol, no party'."

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