

**Client:** PCC Global PR Media Coverage  
**Source:** The Daily Telegraph (Travel)  
**Date:** 29 September 2012  
**Page:** 3  
**Reach:** 584089  
**Size:** 378cm2  
**Value:** 12148.92



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# Travelnews



## Village visits banned at Ha Long Bay

The authorities in Vietnam are attempting to clamp down on hawkers in Ha Long Bay, following a spate of incidents in which tourists have been swindled.

The picturesque Unesco World Heritage Site, which is renowned for its 2,000 limestone outcrops, is home to an estimated 650 floating houses, the residents of which make a living by fishing in the bay and selling seafood, snacks and souvenirs to people on tour boats.

However, reports have emerged of travellers being hassled and ripped off by the fishermen.

Earlier this year, a holidaymaker claimed he was forced to pay VND 11.5m (£340) for a 6kg fish, with hawkers threatening to tie up the tour boat if he refused. A captain

was recently attacked by two vendors when he tried to prevent them from boarding his boat to sell to tourists.

These, and other incidents, have prompted the authorities to ban all tour boats from stopping at the floating houses and villages in the bay. A "tourism inspection force" has been established to enforce the ban and captains who refuse to comply risk losing their license.

James Jayasundera, founder of the luxury tour operator Ampersand Travel, said the ban would disappoint some visitors, who enjoy photographing the floating villages, but agreed the situation had got out of hand.

He said: "It's quite tough on the people who really do live on

floating houses, but many of the people who sell to tourists don't – they stay on the mainland and head out to Ha Long each day. Tour boat captains will often get a cut for agreeing to take tourists along.

"It's a bit of racket – wherever there is money people will try to take advantage of it. The Vietnamese authorities want to maintain the bay's World Heritage status, and overall it seems like the right move."

Mr Jayasundera added that the country's growing popularity among holidaymakers – the first direct flights from Britain to Vietnam were launched last December – meant foreigners must increasingly face a hard sell from locals, in Ha Long Bay and beyond.

The ban would mostly affect independent backpackers, who sign up for day-long tours with travel agents in Hanoi. A number of high-end operators, including Ampersand, run boat tours that do not visit the villages. However, a spokesman for Exodus, a company whose packages previously included such trips, said it was disappointed by the blanket ban.

"Incidents of tourists being threatened need to be addressed, but [the visits] give an insight into the lives of the people in the bay, and we've received no complaints from travellers," he said.

Safety standards in Ha Long Bay were reviewed after the sinking in February last year of a tour boat which resulted in 12 deaths.