



HO CHI MINH (SAIGON): MOBILE URBAN AREA

BASIC INFORMATION		World Rank	Similar to
Urban Area Population (2006)*	6,550,000	38	Bogota, Chennai
Projection (2025)	10,040,000	31	Tehran, Chennai
Urban Land Area: Square Miles	240	153	Bangalore Tehran, Birmingham
Urban Land Area: Square Kilometers	620		
Density: Per Square Mile	27,300	131	Seoul-Incheon, Delhi, Mandalay, Guiyaquil
Density: Per Square Kilometer	10,550		
*Continuously built up area (Urban agglomeration) Land area & density rankings among the approximately 750 urban areas with 500,000+ population. Data from Demographia World Urban Areas data. See: ¹ <i>Demographia World Urban Areas Population & Density</i> <i>Demographia World Urban Areas: 2025 & 2030 Population Projections</i>			

21 November 2008

Perhaps nothing personifies Ho Chi Minh City like the motorbike (Slide 1 and many more). There are reports (unconfirmed) that there are 4 million motorbikes in Ho Chi Minh City --- a rather impressive number for an urban area with less than 7 million people. Slide #1 is typical of what will be seen every day. More on this later.

There is much that is fascinating about this urban area, with its core city, Ho Chi Minh, renamed shortly after the Americans were chased out of the country. The act both honored the modern founder of Viet Nam (whose picture is on all of its currency) and was doubtless also intended as an insult to the Americans. Before being called Saigon, the city itself was called Saigon-Cholon, the latter part of the name denoting the urban area's Chinatown, Cholon, which is still evident in districts 5, 6 and 11.

LOCATION

Ho Chi Minh City is located in the southern part of Viet Nam, on the Saigon River and north of the Mekong River delta. It is approximately 900 miles (1,500 kilometers) south of Hong Kong, 700 miles (1,100 kilometers) north of Singapore, 1,000 miles (1,600 kilometers) west of Manila and 500 miles (800 kilometers) east of Bangkok.

¹ <http://www.demographia.com/db-worldua.pdf> and <http://www.demographia.com/db-worldua2015.pdf>.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The Ho Chi Minh urban area covers parts of three provinces --- Ho Chi Minh City (which is itself a province), Dong Nai and Binh Duong. The city itself is divided more than 23 districts, 18 of which are in the urban area. Districts 3, 10 and 11 have population densities of more than 100,000 per square mile (40,000 per square kilometer), while other parts of the urban area are considerably less dense.

Ho Chi Minh is Viet Nam's largest urban area, with more than 6.5 million people. It is relatively dense, at 27,300 per square mile (10,550 per square kilometer), which makes it among the 130 most dense of the more than 750 urban areas in the world of more than 500,000. Nonetheless, like other major southeast Asian urban areas, Ho Chi Minh City is generally low rise, with residential buildings of from one to three stories being typical.

Ho Chi Minh City has grown strongly from a population estimated at approximately 3.0 million just after the conclusion of the American war. Continued strong growth is inevitable, as Viet Nam, now little less than 75 percent rural, moves to its urban areas. By 2030, more than 40 percent of Viet Nam's citizens will live in its urban areas. This, of course, simply reflects that pattern of urbanization that is occurring throughout the world. Urban areas are where the opportunities are. Just as Europe, North America and Japan moved to urban areas in the last century, Viet Nam will in the 21st. The United Nations projects that Viet Nam will be 57 percent urban by 2050.

GETTING TO HO CHI MINH CITY

Ho Chi Minh City is best reached by air, from various points. There are direct and connecting flights from Europe, the rest of Asia and North America (Slides 2-13). There is also passenger train and bus service from points north, such as Hanoi, where connections can be made to China. Our taxi was stopped by a 14-car passenger train, with two double-deck cars, at 4 a.m.

THE URBAN FORM

Ho Chi Minh City straddles the Saigon River and others. The urban area is built in an area of significant wetlands (Slide 2). Much of the population is located to the west of the Saigon River. Two city districts and the urbanized part of Binh Duong province are located to the east between the Saigon River and the Dong Nai River. The suburb of Bien Hoa is located on the other side of the Dong Nai River, connected to the core of Ho Chi Minh by the Hanoi Highway at a distance of nearly 20 miles (30 kilometers).

Typical of Asian urban areas, the central business district sprawls over several square miles. There are a number of tall buildings, but they are not concentrated as would be expected in many western central business districts. There is considerable construction throughout the urban area, most notably large high-rise condominium buildings and, to a lesser degree, townhouses and detached housing.

ECONOMY AND COMMERCE

Decades of war left Viet Nam as one of the world's poorest countries. Over at least the past decade, however, Viet Nam has done very well economically. Its government has followed reforms similar

to those implemented by former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, with the market incentive producing unprecedented prosperity. Viet Nam's growth rates have been among the highest in the world and the nation appears to be proceeding at a pace following China by perhaps a decade or two.

The Central Intelligence Agency estimated the gross domestic product per capita at \$2,600 in 2007, slightly less than one-half that of China (purchasing power parity basis).

Ho Chi Minh City is nearly ringed by new industrial parks. Many are to be found between the Saigon and Dong Nai Rivers, such as the Viet Nam-Singapore Industrial Park (VSIP), which is in the Thu Doc district (Slides 165-174, 187, 188) , to the northwest of the core and on the east side of the Saigon River. This large development contains many commercial facilities that have the parking lots that would be expected in developed world nations --- except that they are for motorbikes, not cars (Slide 171). There are also major industrial and commercial developments in the western fringes of the urban area and in Bien Hoa (Slides 114-123).

HOUSING

Ho Chi Minh City, like other urban areas in the developing world, tends to have very high density housing. Much of the housing is in less than four story buildings and a good share of it is in single story buildings. As in the Chinese urban areas, there new developments of luxury high rise condominiums, throughout the urban area and especially in the 7th district, which is to the south of the core. Most of the single story housing is not detached. There is also considerable new town house development --- attached single family development, with units of from two to three stories, which are found, for example, in the 7th district and the Thu Doc district (Slides 175-180, 183-185, 221, 222) However, detached housing is being developed, also especially in the 7th district (Slides 3, 186, 212, 213, 225-228). Further, single family houses, often up to four floors, are found along major thoroughfares between the Saigon River and the Dong Nai rivers, generally set back behind the buildings fronting the street (Slides 160, 163). Virtually all of the detached housing has accommodation for cars, whether in garages, car ports or parking spaces on the property.

Much of the housing in the Ho Chi Minh City urban area is very narrow --- perhaps less than 10 feet wide (3 meters). A colleague from Cairo University advised that property taxation is at least in part determined by the frontage width of a structure. The result is a strange type of architecture in the older parts of the urban area, where narrow towers protrude above the building line for two or three stories (Slides 95, 205, 233). Similarly, many of the new and older detached houses appear to be particularly narrow, which may be tax related as well (Slides 162, 163).

There appears to be little informal housing, which is unusual for a nation with such a low gross domestic product per capita (Slides 230, 231) Some modest rural housing will be found on the urban fringe. We found a small settlement adjacent to a new town house development near the Viet Nam-Singapore Industrial Park (Slides 181-184)

TRANSPORT

Ho Chi Minh City is the province of the motorbike. There are reports that as much as 95 percent of urban travel is by motorbike. Bus service is very limited. Metro lines are under construction. Officials sometime express a deep inferiority complex about all this, doubtless fed by interests

standing to make substantial profit from making Ho Chi Minh City a “world class city.” The reality is that, with its motorbikes, Ho Chi Minh has achieved, on minimal incomes, a level of urban mobility equal to that of the United States or Europe.

There was a major bus service expansion a few years ago, yet the numbers of people attracted to the bus have been small. Doubtless, political officials have been led to believe that people will flock to the metro and leave their motorbikes behind. They won't, any more than they have given up their cars to ride trains in European urban areas. The great advantage about personal mobility --- be it cars or motorbikes --- is that it gets you from where you start out to where you are going, directly and without transfer. As a result, fixed public transport services can compete for only those trips for which it is faster. That's not very many. Citizens of Ho Chi Minh City are not deterred by its frequent rain, as they are always prepared to continue their motorbike journeys with rain protection (Slides 214-215). There are the usual complaints about air pollution from the motorbikes, not without justification. But the solution is available just to the north, in China, where electric motorbikes are now widely in use and cost as little as \$300.

Ho Chi Minh City's motorbike phenomena is a sight to behold. Waves of motorbikes stop at signals. On many four lane roadways (two lanes in each direction), the right lane (they drive on the right) seems reserved for motorbikes. The average number of passengers on a motorbike probably exceeds that of the average car in Europe or the United States --- surely it does during commuting periods.

Traffic signals in Ho Chi Minh City have a short cycle --- often less than 25 seconds. Whether this is efficient or not, it does have a serious calming effect on traffic. With red signal lights having short duration, there is the perception of slowly, but continually moving traffic. This doubtless makes driving in Ho Chi Minh City less stressful. There are probably significant safety benefits, as both car and motorbike traffic operates more slowly than it would elsewhere.

Crossing the street can be a challenge in Ho Chi Minh City, because of the motorbike waves. The simple answer is to only cross the street with signal protection, but that is even dangerous because some motorbike riders do not obey the signals. However, crossing without signal protection is an viable option that can easily be learned. It is simply a matter of moving gradually across the street, and deftly dodging the traffic by anticipating which side of you the next motorbike (or car) will travel. It is not nearly so intimidating as advertised.

The streets of Ho Chi Minh City exhibit a characteristic that can be seen in photographs of American cities in the early 20th century --- a plethora of electric wires (example, Slide 234). Another unusual feature of Ho Chi Minh streets is that in the core, the sidewalks seem literally full of people that are not going anywhere. In some cases, they offer delicacies from vending carts. Other people sit or recline on chairs and lounges and while others stand around. Navigating sidewalks in Ho Chi Minh City can be as difficult as crossing the street against the motorbikes.

EATING IN HO CHI MINH CITY

The local food is superb. My rule is to never frequent a restaurant that takes credit cards. That way, there is a good chance of getting genuine local food. The experience is a happy one, though language difficulties make it virtually impossible to enunciate any recommendations. There are, within the core of Ho Chi Minh, a plethora of good local restaurants. Ordering can be difficult, since many

establishments have menus only in Vietnamese. Moreover, given the humble status of these restaurants --- low prices, good food, they will not be found in any of the tour guides.

It is a particular treat to eat in the alley to the west of the Cho Ben Thanh Market. There are open air restaurants, under tents. It is best, however, to obtain a table well inside the restaurant, to avoid the volume of vendors who seek to sell their wares to those too close to the street.

Tap water should be avoided. The hotels usually provide bottled water, though it can be purchased inexpensively in small grocery stores or stands along sidewalks. Generally, bottled water should be relied on in all but the most affluent nations. This practical advice is the result of having contracted “Montezuma’s revenge” on every continent but Australia and Antarctica.

<http://www.rentalcartours.net>

<http://www.demographia.com>

<http://www.publicpurpose.com>



Typical Motorbike Scene

1



Landing : Saigon River & Dong Nai River Wetlands

2



Landing : Detached Housing & Golf Course

3



Landing

4



Landing

5



Landing

6



Landing : Saigon River

7



Landing : Saigon River

8



Landing

9



Landing

10



Landing

11



Landing: Central Business District (Core)

12



Landing

13



Motorbike Scene

14



Central Business District

15



Central Business District

16



Central Business District

17



Central Business District

18



Central Business District

19



Central Business District

20



Central Business District

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Central Business District

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Central Business District

23



Central Business District

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Central Business District

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Central Business District

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Central Business District

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Central Business District

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Central Business District

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Central Business District

30



Central Business District: City Hall

31



Central Business District

32



Central Business District & Cathedral

33



Central Business District: Notre Dame Cathedral

34



Central Business District

35



Central Business District

36



Central Business District

37



Central Business District: Opera House

38



Central Business District

39



Central Business District: City Hall

40



Central Business District: Cho Ben Thanh Market

41



Central Business District: Cho Ben Thanh Market

42



Central Business District

43



Central Business District

44



Central Business District

45



Cholon

46



Cholon

47



Cholon & Electricity Lines

48



Cholon

49



Cholon

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Cholon

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Cholon

52



Cholon & Modern Market

53



Cholon

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Cholon

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Cholon

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Cholon

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Cholon

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Cholon

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Cholon

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Cholon

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Cholon

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Western Districts

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Western Districts

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Western Districts

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Western Districts

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Western Districts

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Western Districts

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Western Districts

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Western Districts

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Western Districts

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Western Districts

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Western Districts

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Western Districts

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Western Districts

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Western Districts

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Western Districts

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Western Districts

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Cholon

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Cholon

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Cholon

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Cholon

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Cholon

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Cholon

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Central Business District

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Central Business District

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Central Business District

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Central Business District

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Central Business District: Sheraton Saigon Hotel

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Central Business District

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Central Business District

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Central Business District

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Central Business District

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Central Business District

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Central Business District

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Central Area

96



Central Area

97



Central Area

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Central Area

99



Central Area

100



Crossing the Saigon River

101



Crossing the Saigon River

102



Hanoi Highway toward Bien Hoa (Districts 2-9)

103



Hanoi Highway toward Bien Hoa (Districts 2-9)

104



Hanoi Highway toward Bien Hoa (Districts 2-9)

105



Hanoi Highway toward Bien Hoa (Districts 2-9)

106



Hanoi Highway toward Bien Hoa (Districts 2-9)

107



Hanoi Highway toward Bien Hoa (Districts 2-9)

108



Hanoi Highway toward Bien Hoa (Districts 2-9)

109



Hanoi Highway toward Bien Hoa (Districts 2-9)

110



Dong Nai River Crossing to Bien Hoa

111



Bien Hoa

112



Bien Hoa

113



Bien Hoa: Industrial Park

114



Bien Hoa: Industrial Park

115



Bien Hoa: Industrial Park

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Bien Hoa: Industrial Park

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Bien Hoa: Industrial Park

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Bien Hoa: Industrial Park

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Bien Hoa: Industrial Park

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Bien Hoa: Industrial Park

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Bien Hoa: Industrial Park

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Bien Hoa: Industrial Park

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Bien Hoa

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Bien Hoa

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Bien Hoa

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Bien Hoa

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Bien Hoa

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Bien Hoa

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Bien Hoa

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Bien Hoa

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Bien Hoa

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Bien Hoa

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Bien Hoa

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Bien Hoa

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Bien Hoa

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Bien Hoa

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Bien Hoa

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Bien Hoa

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Bien Hoa

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Bien Hoa

143



Crossing Dong Nai River Toward Bin Duong Province

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Bin Duong Province

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Bin Duong Province

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Bin Duong Province

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Bin Duong Province

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Bin Duong Province

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Bin Duong Province

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Bin Duong Province

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Bin Duong Province

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Bin Duong Province

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Bin Duong Province

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Bin Duong Province

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Bin Duong Province

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Thu Duc District

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Thu Duc District

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Thu Duc District: Viet Nam-Singapore Industrial Park

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Thu Duc District: Viet Nam-Singapore Industrial Park

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Thu Duc District: Viet Nam-Singapore Industrial Park

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Thu Duc District: Viet Nam-Singapore Industrial Park

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Thu Duc District: Viet Nam-Singapore Industrial Park 163



Thu Duc District: Viet Nam-Singapore Industrial Park 164



Thu Duc District: Viet Nam-Singapore Industrial Park 165



Thu Duc District: Viet Nam-Singapore Industrial Park 166



Thu Duc District: Viet Nam-Singapore Industrial Park 167



Thu Duc District: Viet Nam-Singapore Industrial Park 168



Thu Duc District: Town Houses

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Thu Duc District: Town Houses

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Thu Duc District: Town Houses

171



Thu Duc District: Town Houses

172



Thu Duc District: Town Houses

173



Thu Duc District: Town Houses

174



Thu Duc District: Near Viet Nam-Singapore Industrial Park 175



Thu Duc District: Near Viet Nam-Singapore Industrial Park 176



Thu Duc District: Near Viet Nam-Singapore Industrial Park 177



Thu Duc District: Town Houses 178



Thu Duc District: Town Houses 179



Thu Duc District: Detached Housing 180



Thu Duc District: Near Viet Nam-Singapore Industrial Park 181



Thu Duc District: Near Viet Nam-Singapore Industrial Park 182



Thu Duc District: Golf Resort 183



Thu Duc District: Golf Resort 184



Thu Duc District 185



Thu Duc District 186



Thu Duc District

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Thu Duc District

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Thu Duc District

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Thu Duc District

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Saigon River Crossing: Thu Doc to Bin Thanh District

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Bin Thanh District

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Bin Thanh District

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Bin Thanh District

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Bin Thanh District

195



Central Business District

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Central Business District

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Central Business District

198



Central Business District

199



Central Business District

200



Central Business District

201



Crossing to the 7th District

202



7th District: Hypermarket

203



7th District: Planned Development

204



7th District: Development Under Construction

205



7th District: Detached Housing

206



7th District: Detached Housing

207



7th District: Motor Bikes in the Rain

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7th District: Motor Bikes in the Rain

209



7th District

210



7th District

211



7th District

212



7th District

213



7th District

214



7th District: Town Houses

215



7th District: Town Houses

216



7th District

217



7th District

218



7th District: Detached Housing

219



7th District: Detached Housing

220



7th District: Detached Housing

221



7th District: Detached Housing

222



7th District

223



Crossing from the 7th District: Informal Housing

224



Crossing from the 7th District: Informal Housing

225



Central Area

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Central Area

227



Central Area: Electrical Wires

228