

What's a trip to Ho Chi Minh City without a steaming bowl of pho eaten curbside, while perched on a tiny plastic stool? Or a stroll through Ho Chi Minh City without a stop for tacos al pastor, dished up from a wheeled cart? For connoisseurs of local cuisine, streetside dining is a way to explore delicious foods, many of which are unavailable in restaurants, prepared by dedicated specialists. But it has its risks: of the 70 million Americans who travel abroad each year with [Vietnam visa application](#), it is approximated that 46 percent report varying degrees of food- or water-borne illness. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in fact, advises against consuming street food in developing countries. That's why it's as important as ever to be armed with some street-food savvy when you're on the road.

### **T+L Tip Sheet**

Follow the locals. In a busy marketplace, you can often tell if a stall is reputable based on the line. But pay attention: Ho Chi Minh City street-food guide TUN avoids stalls that draw a primarily young—and less cautious—clientele. Instead, she looks for “a mix of workers, policemen, and older customers.” And knowing local mealtimes means you can beat the crowds to get the freshest foods.

Cleanliness counts. “Keep an eye out for signs of cross-contamination,” says Douglas Powell, professor of food safety at Kansas State University. Check that prep surfaces look clean, cold foods are kept on ice, and raw foods are stored separately from cooked. TUN prefers stands where vendors who handle food don't touch money.

Bring your own utensils. There's no way to tell if chopsticks or forks have been given more than a quick rinse. If possible, watch your food being cooked as they do in restaurants and [hotels in Ho Chi Minh City](#). And avoid precooked seafood in particular, advises Jeff Koehler, author of the forthcoming cookbook *Morocco* (Chronicle Books; \$29.95). Dishes containing raw meat, and ice-based drinks or desserts such as ice cream that may have been made with unfiltered water, are off-limits. Reheated rice is also a breeding ground for bacteria. Look for cooking methods that reduce microbes. Pickling vegetables and using citrus juices can reduce the levels of dangerous microorganisms, Powell points out, but they won't remove your risk entirely. Some spices, such as chilies, turmeric, and epazote, a pungent Mexican herb, also have antibacterial properties.

### **Safety Check**

T+L points out what to look for in a street-food stall before you place that order.

- Kitchens should have separate areas for cooked and raw foods to avoid contamination.
- Semi-permanent stalls, and carts that are clustered together, indicate shared access to clean water and utilities.
- Ingredients are stored in closed containers; cooked food isn't piled into one big heap.
- Vendors should be neatly dressed and handle food and money separately.
- A long line signals quality and cleanliness, but arrive before the crowds for the freshest fare.