

Elevated view of hairpin turn in a mountain road near Nha Trang

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This elevated view shows a sharp, hairpin turn in a mountain road near Nha Trang. Driving in the highlands of Southeast Asia can be both spectacular and terrifying for foreigners. In many regions of Southeast Asia, steep forested mountains make roads difficult to build and maintain except in narrow strips along the sea coasts or river valleys. The challenging geography and thin, easily eroded tropical forest soils are major reasons why Southeast Asia was settled and populated later than adjacent regions of China and South Asia. The result, however, is that forests in Southeast Asia remained more diverse in species for a longer time period than more developed regions. In areas where Southeast Asian farmers routinely shift the plots on which they farm (called swidden farming,) mountain forests have a chance to grow back in a natural way. They then maintain at least some of their plant and animal species diversity, especially when compared to permanent agricultural fields.



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