

In a country where seven out of 10 people earn a living from the land, Mother Nature is the most influential member of the family. To the Vietnamese, she's a moody matriarch with an intense, erratic personality, as evidenced by bouts of blistering sun and driving monsoon rains. But under cover of the *nón lá*, the traditional cone hat made of tightly woven bamboo or palm leaves, the residents of this pocket of Southeast Asia have learned how to defy her. ⚡ For centuries, the Vietnamese have celebrated the day-to-day struggle to put rice on the table

in proverbs such as "The sun is good for cucumber; the rain is good for rice plants," and "A bowl of rice is traded with a bowl of sweat." Underneath the *nón lá*, they put those proverbs to the test, withstanding the seasonal cycles of torrential rain and

unrelenting heat with remarkable aplomb. ⚡ So it comes as no surprise that the *nón lá* is an unofficial national symbol, more evocative of the country than rice paddies or dragons. Each is an exact replica of the next, distinguished only by the silk or chiffon chin strap that keeps it from soaring off with the slightest breeze. But the *nón lá* is hardly a fashion accessory. Rather, it's the Swiss

Army Knife of headwear, used as an umbrella, sun protection, a shopping bag for grocery runs, and a shade-giving sleep aid—sometimes all in one day. From the fingerlike canals of the Mekong Delta all the way to Hanoi, practically every man, woman, and child knows the hat is a working essential.

In the countryside, the cones look like straw-colored lampshades afloat on a green sea of swaying rice stalks. In the markets, you'd →



*Vietnam's*  
*Nón Lá*