

## VIETNAM:



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## Day Seven - Hill Tribes and Cascading Mountainsides, Sapa

June 15th, 2007 by ben



'Baboo, baboo, you buy baboo', the chorus of cute baby bamboo vendors on the road out of Sapa had me smitten. Better still, I probably would be needing assistance of some sort for my descent into the cascading terraced valleys en route, south east of the town, to my home stay in the H'mong ethnic minority town of Ta Van, so a bamboo stick actually had some practical value. 5,000 dong, approximately 17 pence, was all they were asking but how to choose the vendor? In business, as in life, its survival of the best adapted, and when it comes to the tourist dollar, cuteness makes a direct link with the value for money mindset of pleasure seeking traveller, so I chose the smallest of these munchkin salesman, purchased his staff and was on my way.



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The H'mong people are the largest ethnic minority group in Vietnam. They number around half a million people and mainly populate, along with many other fascinating minority groups, the northwest of the country, a mountainous area known as the Tonkin Alps. The H'mong migrated from somewhere in China sometime in the 1800's and along with their mesmerising traditional dress, a colourful array of beautifully patterned skirts, aprons, leggings and cylindrical hats are animists, endowing the mountains, trees, valleys and rivers with spiritual identities and the like. To visit and experience the culture and vitality of these people, Sapa, which we had reached on a time convenient, air-conditioned and comfortable overnight sleeper from Hanoi, is the best place to start. Sapa is a former French Hill Station, which prior to the recent tourist-boom, a boom strongly associated with these beautiful people, had fallen into ruin. In Sapa a number of tours are available for ventures into the surrounding countryside and the hill tribes - H'mong, Dzao, and Tay - that populate them.



"Only seven more hours", yelled back Ping, our guide, smiling as she trudged on ahead. "It will be great!" We had just done what should have been a two-hour trek in four hours. Both Morgan and Naouel, a Parisian girl, and only other member of our tour, have only brought sandals on the trip and descending the muddy track in the rain proved problematic. She was joking of course. Ping always is. Despite never having had a lesson Ping's English is impeccable and like most of the H'mong people we have met on our trek, she has a spark and wit that made our trip through the valleys, across rice paddies, past water buffalo and flowing rivers, simply awesome.



Unlike most of the H'mong people, having already been paid, she was not trying to sell us anything. An entourage of H'mong women and children in traditional dress had accompanied us the whole way, helping us with the difficult terrain. But nothing comes free, and departing ways before lunch they reminded us of their assistance thus obligating us to purchase their various wares. Bags, mouth harps, armbands, bracelets, earrings, shirts and cummerbund like belts, all very beautiful, were



shoved in our faces as we made purchases as best we could to meet with our enforced obligation.



Finally arriving at our Home Stay, Morgan and I went for a quick swim in the river. We then met Astrid, another French girl and two Aussie lads, Hugh and Mat who would be staying with us. At night, after a massive feast, the 'Happy Water' (rice wine) came out and, lucky to be blessed with a great bunch of cool young people, festivities continued, into the wee hours (aided by the additional inebriating qualities of Tiger Beer – there is seemingly no place in this country in which Tiger Beer can not be purchased).

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