

Saturday, January 6, 2007

We arrived at Lao Cai train station around 6.30 AM. Our private tour guide met us outside the station. We boarded a white mini van and rode about 1 hour from the town of Lao Cai to Sapa. It was drizzling today so it was very foggy. We arrived at our Sapa hotel at 8AM and checked into a room. We went to our room, dropped our bags and brushed our teeth. Newton took a shower. Everyone else did not shower because it was very cold, about 45 degrees, which is 10 degrees colder than Hanoi. Sapa is located in the mountains, and it is quite cool and cloudy here all the time. At 9 AM we went to the hotel cafeteria for breakfast, which was a mix of Vietnamese and American dishes including chicken pho, spring rolls, bread, scrambled eggs and bacon.

Figure 1: Driving into the town of Sapa



We finished breakfast at 10 AM and our tour guide explained our itinerary. We were supposed to visit a temple but had to cancel because the rainy weather made the hike there quite dangerous. Instead, our first stop was visiting a village of Ta Phin people. This village was a half-hour drive from Sapa by windy, mountainous roads. Our van pulled up in a paved parking lot at the front of the village. We got out and were immediately mobbed by a dozen of the local ladies, all of them trying to sell us hand-made trinkets like embroidery, hats, and clothing. The tour guide proceeded to lead us through the village, showing us different huts, the different crops grown here, and the development projects the government was sponsoring here. The entire area was lush with forests interspersed by rice paddies owned by the local farmers. The locals lived in huts made of straw, wood, mud, and occasionally, metal siding. Many also raised farm animals like pigs and chicken. The villagers followed us everywhere we went and tried talking to us. Many of them were more fluent in English than the citizens of Hanoi. This was because during the Vietnam War, many of the locals and their ancestors either did business with or were allies of US soldiers. The villagers following us were all women, some carrying their children. Many of the mothers were quite

young, often in their early twenties or late teens. The village men sat inside the huts relaxing, smoking and drinking. Along with rice and vegetables, tobacco was also grown in this area, though the locals did not make cigarettes out of them. Instead, they smoked the tobacco using the equivalent of bongs.

Figure 2: The Ta Phin village women would follow us everywhere we went, some of them carrying babies



Figure 3: Village huts reflect wealth. Rich villagers had huts with concrete walls, metal roofs, and were connected to the electric grid. Poor villagers had huts with straw roofs and bamboo walls.



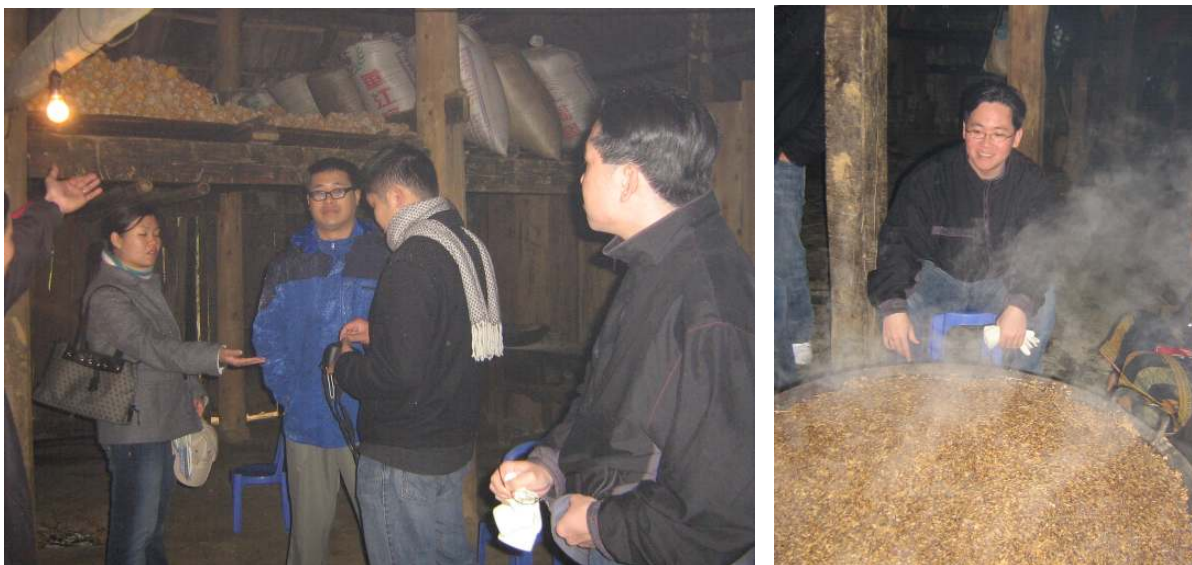
Our tour guide led us inside one of the bigger huts. The ground was concrete, the walls were wooden planks and the roof was aluminum siding. The hut had an open attic for storing rice, corn and other food. The attic was accessible

by a wooden ladder. Two small incandescent bulbs light the hut. The bathroom was an open area in one corner with a showerhead about four feet of the ground. The entire hut was low, as most of the locals were less than five feet tall. Inside the hut was a fire for warmth, several straw beds, and another fire with a cooking pan over it. The pan contained corn being fermented to create alcohol. A lady gave a cup of this alcohol to Newton and Andy to try. It was very strong.

Figure 4: Village men warm themselves around fires inside the huts and sometimes smoke.



Figure 5: Rice and corn are stored inside the huts as shown in the left picture. Old corn is fermented and brewed to make a strong drinking alcohol as shown in the right picture



We left the hut and walked around some more. Newton enquired the tour guide as to why the children were all at home, as Saturdays in Hanoi is a school day. He replied that in the countryside, many villagers would keep their children at home to work on the farm, or make trinkets to sell to tourists like us. The villagers look different from Vietnamese in general, and are a racial minority separate from the Vietnamese people. The women wore traditional clothes but the men wore modern, Western-style clothing. As we walked back to the mini-van, the villagers increased their selling pressure. Andy bought some small trinkets but Newton and Casy did not get anything. As we drove away from the village, we asked our tour guide if the locals in all the villages would mob us. He said yes, so we told him we did not want to go to another village. Instead, we drove to Cat Cat to see a famous waterfall.

Figure 6: The waterfall at Cat Cat. To get there we had to hike on rocky paths and cross a red bridge



Figure 7: Our tour guide (left) showed us some of the crops grown in this region, such as indigo (at right).



We went back to the hotel for lunch at noon. Our trip covered breakfast, lunch and dinner at this hotel but not the drinks. Casy and Newton got Vietnamese coffee and ginger tea for 30,000 VND. Lunch consisted of steamed fish, fried vegetables, rice, stir-fried noodles, and pho. In addition, Ha ordered a black chicken soup dish that can only be found at Sapa. The tour guide said we could rest and call him when we are ready to walk around Sapa Market. After lunch we headed to our hotel room and took turns showering. Our room, like most rooms in Vietnam, had tile floors, which made it quite cold. Central heating or air conditioning is not built into most buildings, so a plug-in heater or cooler usually provides heating or cooling. This was the case here as the room had one heater plugged in on a wall. It took a while to heat up so the room was quite cold. The bathroom was nice with marble tiles, sink and bathtub. Unfortunately, the hot water heater was quite small so one had to wait about 10 minutes for the water to heat up. There was also no shower curtain so the floor got wet really quick.

Figure 8: Lunch at the hotel. Ha orders a special black chickens soup dish



Ha and Phong took a nap while Andy, Casy and Newton went with the tour guide to the market. Ha asked us to buy her a bracelet so we tried to find one. We saw a Hmong lady on the street selling them so Andy asked her the price. A dozen Hmong ladies immediately mobbed him trying to sell him trinkets like bracelets, rings, and cheap jewelry. Casy and Newton walked away. Newton instead went to look at Vietnamese old coins. He bought some coins for 50,000 VND. The Hmong is an ethnic minority in Vietnam and have different facial features than the Vietnamese people. They have unique clothing; the Hmong women wear black robes with blue, green, white or red stripes. They also wear headbands and large metal earrings.

Figure 9: Our hotel (top left) and our room (top right) with its two beds. At bottom left are a fire-hose and a warning against child-sex tourism. The fire-hose indicates the hotel is quite new, and the sign indicates an awareness of a problem common to Asia. Below right is our bathroom.



Figure 10: The view from our hotel window. Our hotel was the last one on the street so looking out one side (left) one sees the city. Looking out the other side (right) one sees construction.



The tour guide took us into the city market. We walked first through the food section where fruits, vegetables, and fresh meat were sold. We could not stand the smell of the meat so we quickly passed that section and went to where the clothing and souvenirs were being sold. Casy bought a blue scarf for \$2 and a wallet for 50,000 VND. Andy bought some silver bracelets for Casy and her sister, Velwyn. Casy bought 2 key chains from a Hmong girl for 10,000 VND. Newton bought Sapa cake from a street vendor for 5,000 VND. We then left the outdoor market and walked around the indoor tourist shops. We stopped inside a clothing store and Newton bought a Vietnamese shirt.

Figure 11: Hmong people trying to sell trinkets to tourists like Andy.



Figure 12: Shopping for local clothes inside one tourist shop



Figure 13: A Catholic Church built by the French sits in the center of Sapa, with the marketplace beside it



At 4 PM we went back to our hotel room to pack and eat dinner. We ordered ginger tea and black tea for 20,000 VND. We were still full from lunch but did not want to waste the food so we stuffed ourselves. Andy asked the tour guide if we could see the China – Vietnam border. The tour guide asked the driver, and he thought about it. We left our hotel at 5 PM and drove one hour from Sapa to the border. We arrived there ~6 PM and stayed for ½ hour taking pictures. The border was a small river about 50 feet across with steep banks about 20 feet high on each

side. We were in the town of Lao Cai on the Vietnam side. There was a small city on the Chinese side that looked richer and newer than Lao Cai. Specifically, the buildings were taller, bigger, with brighter lights. The cars on the other side looked newer and more expensive also. A big metal bridge spanned the river, but we could not cross as that required paperwork on the Chinese side. Watchtowers with protruding guns sat on the Chinese side, but not on the Vietnamese side. Our tour guide told us that many Vietnamese try to cross into China looking for better jobs, while Chinese might cross here looking for cheap shopping. The watchtowers are to prevent Vietnamese crossing the border illegally by swimming across the river. We then drove to Lao Cai station. Our train did not leave until 8.20 PM so we sat at a coffee shop and chatted until 8 PM. Our tour guide was very good so Casy and Newton tipped him and the driver 100,000 VND. Phong, Ha, and Andy tipped them too.

Before we left we bought corn to eat inside the train for 2,000 VND. A problem arose when trying to board the train. The people checking the tickets did not let us go inside the gate, saying we had the wrong tickets. It turned out they oversold the ticket. Ha phoned the tour guide, who came back and argued for us. Luckily we bought 1 cabin so they could not kick us out or mix us with other people. Inside the train we played poker. Casy got dizzy because she ate too much and lay on her stomach while playing poker. After 1 hour she stopped playing and had to lie down. She wanted to throw up but could not. Andy and Newton chatted because they could not sleep. The train was scheduled to arrive in Hanoi the next morning at 4 AM. The train ride back to Hanoi was as noisy and rough as the ride here.