

Ha Giang mountains



Pa Then women



A journey through Ha Giang

Two of the more well-worn phrases in travel writing are 'the road less travelled' and 'off the beaten track'. Increasingly they are being used to convey the scarcity of such routes in a world criss-crossed with plane trails, coach tours and package deals. It is therefore all the more gratifying when you do actually come across somewhere where one of these phrases could justifiably be applied. Ha Giang province in Northeast Vietnam is one such place. Mark Hotham explains.



Ploughing the fields

Harvest time, Sung La village



Ha Giang, Northeast Vietnam

To date, Ha Giang barely merits the most cursory of mentions in guidebooks. For years it has been kept off the traveller's radar through a combination of poor infrastructure and it being a politically sensitive area for the government due to its proximity to China. Permits were zealously guarded by a Kafka-esque bureaucratic machine that dissuaded all but the most dogged of visitors. So when I was told that Audley had finally managed to get a permit to visit the area I jumped at the opportunity.

Ha Giang, one of the most remote provinces in Vietnam, is without doubt one of the most stunning. Almost entirely devoid of modern commerce and industry, its landscape remains as it has done for thousands of years, unaffected by the heavy hand of modern civilisation. The mountains that rise as you travel north towards the border with China form cone-like clusters, adorned with primary forests and waterfalls, the valleys carpeted with rice paddies and picturesque villages. The population is made up of numerous ethnic minority tribes, though the relentless 'Vietnamisation' of remote areas in Vietnam means that more and more Viet are moving into the area. Travellers are few and far between; indeed, it is likely that you will not see any others during your time here.

One of the most alluring aspects of travel in this region is the abundance of local markets where you will see many of the indigenous minority groups that live in this area. Market days are a key social adhesive for these remote communities and are bustling centres of activity. Every town of any size has its own market day when people come down from the mountain villages to trade, gossip, socialise and sometimes, find love. Locals invariably come in their traditional dress, bringing a bold array of beautiful colours to the market. It can seem a strange juxtaposition to see the women adorned in the most beautiful and striking colourful outfits standing amid the hustle and bustle of a thriving market. The men dress less colourfully, usually in black, and often spend their time at the market drinking corn wine with their friends whilst the women do the trading!

Of the many highlights of my trip to Ha Giang, one that stands out is the market at Dong Van. Stepping out of the hotel at dawn, I crossed the quiet main street of this tiny mountain town and walked into the market square where traders were starting to set up their stalls, limestone mountains looming ominously in the background. Many had come down from the mountains the night before and slept on the street overnight in order to be



Man and donkey at Dong Van Market

Flower child, Sung La





Dzao women, Meo Vac market



Mother and child at Meo Vac market



ready for the day ahead. They came in all colours of the rainbow, often with elaborate headdresses, heavily laden with the various produce they wished to trade – vegetables, fruit, herbs, corn wine, chickens, buffalo meat, farming tools, brightly coloured cloth and plastic flip flops. As some men began brewing a giant vat of a local delicacy called Thang Co (an intriguing frothy mix of animal innards and herbs which I decided to leave to the locals) I wandered around the market apparently unnoticed by the locals as I took my photographs. Around 7am it started to get busier and there were people from the various minority groups – White Hmong, Dao Lanten, Tay and Nung – mixing socially and exchanging goods and gossip.

Officially there are 54 ethnic minority groups in Vietnam (or ‘brotherly nationalities’ as the government likes to call them), some eleven of which live in Ha Giang province. There is one minority, though, which has so far eluded official documentation. The Dao Ao Dai minority (pronounced Zao Ao Zai) live in the very upper reaches of the mountains but at the market of Meo Vac we were lucky enough to see a couple of ladies from this elusive group in their long, dark, traditional dresses and red and black embroidered headgear. Meo Vac is possibly

White Hmong girl with golden smile



Hmong woman



White Hmong girl selling corn wine, Dong Van



Zao Lanten lady



Traders at Meo Vac market



Ha Giang, Northeast Vietnam

the biggest market in the whole province and attracts traders from miles around. Here you can see, in addition to the minorities already mentioned, Giay, Hmong, Co Lao and Xuong minorities. Goods on offer include live animals such as horses, pigs, buffalos, chickens and dogs, and in one area, I found a large group standing around listening to some surprisingly good local music. I managed to ease myself through the gathering only to find a stereo was responsible for the beautiful voice I could hear. It seems that CDs have found their way into the mountains ahead of us.

These local markets are manna from heaven for photographers, but everywhere you look in Ha Giang you cannot fail to find inspirational subject matter. The stunning scenery, full of impressive mountain backdrops and vertiginous mountain passes, tumbling waterfalls, lush bamboo forests and quintessential Vietnamese villages with buffalos tilling rice paddies all provide a feast of photographic opportunities. One scene in particular sticks in my mind. It was on the third day as we drove from Ha Giang town to Dong Van. We drove down through a pass in the mountains onto a valley floor which was littered with paddy fields, fruit orchards and vegetable

and flower patches. In the middle of this scene, nestled against a small crease in the mountains was the tiny village of Sung La, home to 'Pao's House'. This is the home of a family from the Lo Lo tribe whose house was featured in a major new Vietnamese film called The Story of Pao. It is an incredibly scenic spot and for me summed up the beauty of the whole region.

It is difficult to accurately convey in the limited space available here just how amazing a trip in this region is. The thrill of knowing that so few westerners have visited before is amplified exponentially when you see the spectacular landscape unfolding before you. Over the course of the eight days that I spent exploring this province I saw some of the most inspiring and photogenic vistas I have seen in all my time travelling throughout Asia. Hotel facilities remain basic and food has yet to pander to the Western palate, meaning that travel in this region will not be to everyone's taste, but for those willing to 'rough' it a bit, the rewards are more than commensurate. How often can you truly say you've been on that 'road less travelled'?

Mark Hotham
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www.audley.co.uk/features/hagiang
To view more images from Ha Giang and sample itineraries

FACT FILE

A ten night trip to Ha Giang, including return flights and two nights in Hanoi starts from £1,935 per person. Please call Mark on 01993 838 112 for details

