

The Majestic Sa Pa



Rice terraces

Nga Ton
San Dimas,
California

SaPa is an incredibly picturesque village, nestled in a valley in the Hoang Lien Son mountain range near the Chinese border in northwest Vietnam. It was originally built by the French in 1922 as a hillside retreat. This little town is situated at an elevation of 1650 meters (about 5,413 feet) overlooking Fansipan, Vietnam's highest mountain at 3143 meters (about 10,312 feet). SaPa is famous for its beautiful scenery, rice

paddy terraces, and many mountain tribes with their colorful costumes and interesting cultures.

Last fall I traveled with Project Vietnam, a medical mission group. After two weeks of volunteer work, I remained for another week to travel on my own and indulge my photography hobby.

In October, the rice fields are golden; the grains are fat, heavy, and ready to be harvested. In November, after the harvest, the rice terraces are empty except for water and small clumps of straw. Some photographers prefer the image of the water-filled terraces reflecting in the twilight. Others prefer to photograph the Red Zao farmers with their red ornate headdresses, bobbing in the golden fields as they harvest. The photo opportunities are abundant and the tourists and locals alike revel in these magnificent sceneries.

The weather in SaPa changes rapidly. They say it is common to experience all four seasons in one single day. This proved to be true on my first visit two years ago. The morning was bright and sunny, and by midday cool and breezy. By late afternoon, dark clouds and rain took over the sky. Sometimes the rain is fleeting and the bright sky with its brilliant sun reappears as if nothing happened. For unpredictable weather such as this, I always carry a thin, clear poncho in the outer pocket of my backpack and a couple of plastic bags to cover my camera equipment.



Goldielocks



Ribbon vendor

The motorcycle is the common mode of transportation all over Vietnam. If one is feeling courageous and wants to have an unique excursion, traveling by motorcycle is the way to go. I found that this is the most fun and inexpensive way to experience a small town like SaPa. The motorcycle drivers also make the best tour guides because



Red Zao women



Colorful merchandise

they know the local attractions and are eager to show off the sights and sounds of their town. The guide and his bike cost about ten dollars a day. If the traveler purchases the guide a meal, not only is the gesture greatly appreciated, sharing a meal will make for an even more unique encounter.

On this second trip to SaPa this past fall, I traveled with Zarah, a young nurse who was my companion in the medical mission. Zarah is very adventurous and proved to be a great travel buddy. To start off our trip, I had a local travel company in Hanoi arrange a train trip and hotel accommodations. November is a popular travel season and advance reservations are always recommended. My first choice would have been to take the Victoria train to the Victoria hotel but it was not available so we booked a private couchette on the Ratraco train and a room in the Hotel Auberge. The couchette was quite comfortable and the room cost us one-fifth the price of the Victoria.

We arrived at the train station around 9:00 p.m. from Hanoi. After settling into our chamber, the train started moving at 10:00 p.m. sharp. The berth was cozy and the air conditioning was a refreshing change from the humidity outside. On the nightstand, there was complimentary bottled water and sweet bread. After about an hour watching Hanoi from our window, we retired to our beds and fell into a deep slumber. We awoke eight hours later in the Lao Cai train station feeling renewed. Lao Cai is the largest city in northwest Vietnam, separated from China by the Nam Thi River. From the train station, we took a minivan to SaPa, a 35 kilometer (about 22 miles) uphill ride via the Hoang Lien Boulevard.

It was 6:00 a.m. when we left the train station. We could see the tips of the pine and bamboo trees poking out from the lingering fog. In a matter of minutes, the sun rose higher, tinting the fog and illuminating the vast expanse of the mountain side. The small paved road seemed



H'mong village

to wind endlessly around the mountain. As we looked down in the valley, a thin river glistened like a silver snake twisting in the green forest. Rice terraces stretched on the hillsides like nature's stairways. On the side of the road, the H'mong people had begun their trek toward the market carrying goods in woven backpacks. Along this road were several small thatch huts and wooden sheds with children looking and waving at the passersby.

We arrived in SaPa while the morning was still young. We stopped by a lake to photograph the multicolored buildings reflected in the water; the backdrop was a blue mountain range, lightly covered by a sheen of white mist. On the street, the tribespeople were busily walking to the market wearing their distinctive style of dress.

The *H'mong* people wear dark blue blouses and loose pants or skirts. The women wear strips of dark blue or black cloth around their legs as leggings; their heads covered with round top hats or colorful scarves. They adorn their ears, necks, arms and ankles with handmade silver jewelry. The *Red Zao* wear red wraps with white trim towels on their heads. Around their necks hang a long bib of colorful embroidery and silver



Nga Ton

Mother and baby



pieces. Altogether the street scene was lively and invigorating.

Hotel Auberge is located on Cau May Street. The architecture is French and it was built on the side of a hill, overlooking the other hotels and facing the mountain range. Our room cost about \$25 and had two full-sized beds, a private bath and balcony. To my disappointment, the hotel did not have an elevator and our room was on the fourth floor: we huffed and puffed all the way up the steep stairs with our heavy luggage. The view from the room was well worth the workout. Each floor had its own terrace with a fountain, benches, and small flower garden, so our rest stops at each floor were interesting and pleasant.

I felt breathless as I stood quietly on our balcony, not just because of the climb up, but because the grandeur of the scenery was astonishingly beautiful. From afar, the Hoang Lien mountain range glowed purple and golden in the early morning sunshine. I could see strands of thick white clouds hovering in the horizon. Down the hill, the roofs of the other hotels were incandescent. On the left, a tall pine tree with spreading branches framed the view. On the right, yellow houses with red clay roofs luminesced like jewels. I wanted to sit on the balcony to witness the changing light but the high sun soon bathed the town in a very bright, contrasty light. We decided this was a good time for our first meal of the day. French coffee, French bread and "Pho," a local rice noodle soup with thin slices of beef, filled our bellies as we enjoyed the warm morning sun on the breakfast terrace.

With restored vigor, we made our way down to Cau May Street. We hired guides on motorcycles to take us to Cat Cat, a H'mong village a few minutes away. A stone pathway loops around the village and the Cat Cat waterfall can be seen after crossing a wooden hanging bridge. The H'mong earn their living as trekking guides. In addition to selling silver jewelry, the women embroider and sew hats, purses, garments, blankets, and scarves. Most of the villagers display their goods in front of their homes, giving us the opportunity to see them at work. We bought several interesting handiworks and took many candid pictures of the children and women. Already harvested rice fields were filled with gleaming water. Tall bamboo bushes grow along the small, steep, stone stairway, leaves rustling in the cool breeze. A group of young boys joined a flock of native ducks in a little pond. Nearby, a water buffalo lay contentedly under a tree. Zarah spotted a pot belly pig on a hill. I took a picture of her as she tried to go near it, her excitement obvious in her smile.

We happily walked along and soon heard the waterfall vibrating, a contrast to the still and serene water in the rice fields. The wooden,

hanging bridge looked harmless from a distance. It readily tested our nerves, swaying with each step we took. The view of the grand waterfall wiped away all uneasiness and I prepared to take a picture at the end of the bridge. Using a travel tripod, I set my speed to ½ second and aperture at f: 22 to capture the silky water of the Cat Cat waterfall.

Silver Falls, another beautiful waterfall, is 8 kilometers (approximately 5 miles) away from SaPa. Along this road, we saw many chayote farms. Chayote is a climbing vine that grows on bamboo-structured frames. Silver Falls is located on a steep hill and the stairs going up is narrow and lofty. Hidden in lush, green trees and underbrush, this fall cascades down many tiers. At the bottom of the falls, are souvenir and food shops. By this time, we were ready for lunch. We sat under a tent and ordered the local special meal of “Com Lam” and barbecued wild boar on a stick. Com Lam is sticky rice cooked inside a bamboo hollow. When served, the cook peels off one side of the bamboo stick to reveal the steaming rice inside. The rice had a fragrant, tasty flavor and could also be dipped in roasted ground sesame seeds and salt.

Full, we hopped on the bikes and moved onward to Tram Ton. Standing on the hillside, we looked out to Love Falls, appropriately named because of its heart shape. Disappearing at the end of the long valley, the road to Lai Chau and Dien Bien Phu snakes along the hill, thin as a thread. Far away, the top of Fansipan Mountain is lost in the thick white clouds and the valley below is engulfed in a thin, still mist.

We rode back to town in the late afternoon feeling greatly satisfied. After a short nap, we sat on the balcony to have tea and special cakes we purchased in Hanoi. My camera was next to me, ready to photograph the sunset on Hoang Lien Mountain.

For dinner, we indulged ourselves in local delicacies like fried tofu in green onion, fried SaPa stream fish, and fresh vegetable soup found in almost all the restaurants in town. (Meals generally cost around six dollars US for two.) After dinner, we took a leisurely stroll around the town and explored the dress and craft shops.

Back in the hotel, we sat on a bench in one of the cozy courtyards, watching the brilliant full moon playing peek-a-boo in the clouds. The clouds were gliding unusually fast on this night and the stars twinkled brightly. We could have watched the sky all night but sleep finally beckoned us.

The next day, our guides were already waiting for us outside the hotel. Happily, we climbed on their motorcycles and drove to the Red Zao village in Ta Phin. I had taken some photographs of the local people two years ago and on this trip, I brought back their photos to give as gifts. At the first hut that



Reflection

we visited, I spotted the Red Zao woman and her family that I photographed before. They asked us in for hot tea and later extended an invitation to their daughter’s wedding the following week. I regretfully turned down the latter. As a token of gratitude, I purchased a beautiful, expensive embroidered piece from her display.

We continued on the village road to the Ta Phin cave. Here we met several small children selling torches and offering to guide us inside the cave. Zarah spent only ten minutes in the cave as it was very dark and slippery. To hike the entire cave would take several hours. On the way out of the village, we stopped at a bridge to watch and photograph a young boy fishing in the stream, a wonderful subject and I took several pictures of him as he threw his fishing net into the water.

Back in town, we spent the afternoon at the local market. The lower level consisted of vendors selling fresh seafood and raw meats. The upper level was filled with local merchandise. We walked around chatting with the merchants, my camera ready to photograph the colorfully-dressed people. The locals are all too familiar with the tourists and often ask that their products be purchased as compensation for being photographed. By the time we got back to our hotel room in the evening, we had several bags of goods and hundreds of photographs.

The next morning, we visited Ham Rong Park located a few hundred steps uphill from our hotel. Zarah busily photographed the spiders, butterflies and tadpoles as we walked through the orchid forest. We attended a musical with folk singing and dancing.

In the evening, we rode the van back to Lao Cai to take the night train back to Hanoi. The night air was cool and sweetly perfumed by “Milk flower,” a tall tree with abundant milky white flowers. On a last stop on the bank of the river Nam Thi, we watched the city lights reflecting over the dark water. I felt hollow and a little nostalgia mixed with sadness as I said goodbye to this majestic town. 🌀

Any mention of products or services in this article or anywhere else in the *PSA Journal* does not constitute an endorsement or approval of those items.

Photos © Nga Ton