



# TREKKING SAPA TO LAO CHAI

Photos & Article /  
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On a February morning, the clouds that had descended upon the mountain town of Sapa to linger like unwanted guests seemed to have finally given up and made their way home, allowing the comforting warmth of sunshine in many days. It's not clever to waste a winter's day like that in the mountainous region of Northern Vietnam and so along with my fellow volunteers, I set off to hike to the village of Lao Chai, 6 kms away from Sapa.

Sapa is very popular with tourists looking to explore the surrounding villages inhabited by various ethnic minority tribes such as the Black Hmong, Flower Hmong and Red Dzaio people and those aspiring to conquer Mt. Fansipan, the highest peak in Indo-China.

So it was no surprise that we had plenty of company on the trail; enthusiastic hikers of all ages from different countries, Black Hmong women either acting as guides or trying to sell brightly colored scarves and the occasional *xe om* (motorbike taxi) with the riders offering to make our hike easier by dropping us to the point where we could see the terraced fields.

After a while, we hopped on to the motorbikes, watching like eager children as they navigated hairpin bends along the jaw dropping mountain scenery. The minutes flew by quickly, just like the *xe oms*, and we found ourselves standing at the edge of





the road where multiple narrow trails branched off, descending into the water filled terraces. Not sure which one to take, we had just taken a few steps towards one when a woman's voice called out to us, "I show you, this way!"

Of the Black Hmong tribe, she wore an indigo but almost black embroidered jacket and leg warmers, her head covered by a blue checked scarf and a straw basket strapped onto her back. She was standing on the other trail, almost hidden by the tall grass. "I come with you, this way!", she coaxed, her tiny eyes fixed upon us trying to figure out if we were go-

ing to follow. We did not mind the company or the fact that taking her 'help' would set us back by a few thousand Dong each and so we carefully made our way towards her, trying not to slip on the damp earth.

We trudged along cautiously and I realized we were no match for her even with our fancy hiking shoes; she was always more than a few steps ahead, her feet landing nimbly in their simple flip-flops. But she would slow down for us and attentively reach out for our hands in case any one of us needed help. The landscape was spectacular; lush terraces as far as the

eyes could see, buffaloes grazing and children with happy grimy faces from playing in the fields.

"Where you from?", a line that you hear more times than you can count when in Sapa led to her digging into her basket, pulling out scarves and woven bracelets, "You my friend, you buy from me." A seasoned businesswoman, she couldn't be blamed for trying, after all this is how business was done in this part of the world and she didn't know anything else.

Even the English she spoke was an outcome of learning how to engage tourists in conversation so they would buy something.



## Black Hmong Guide

Always more than a few steps ahead



We reached a tourist rest spot and sprawled out on the benches, watching as big and small trekking groups passed by. A young sickly Hmong boy lay with one leg stretched out in front of him, his back leaning against the wall, with eyes indifferent to the crowds of tourists.

Moving on we found ourselves being followed by other grubby nosed children mumbling, "Munn-eey..... munn-eey" in a practiced pity-inducing voice.

The view grew more scenic as we passed the swirling greens of the terraces with just the right amount of sunshine. Stopping briefly for lunch at an unimpressive touristy restaurant where

crowds of Black Hmong sellers surrounded unassuming tourists vehemently persuading them to buy something, we were glad when we were back on the trail again.

We lost our guide there, who after successfully selling me a blue scarf like the one she wore had joined the other ladies as they sat down to chit chat until the next tourist group arrived.

Passing through the village, we saw homes, farms and shops selling handicrafts, embroidered hats and beautifully crafted marble boxes. We ventured further into the village, probably off the trail and reached an area where we didn't see any other tour-

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She flashed me a bright smile and with a wink she said,  
"Haaa, me too!"*







ists. We caught the eye of a young mischievous looking boy playing outside his house who returned with two others. Together, the children giggled at us, proudly showing off their stilt walking skills. Shortly after a Black Hmong woman appeared and pointed us in the right direction to be on our way to Sapa.

Exhausted by the long hours of hiking, we decided to return to Sapa by *xe om*. Luckily, we met two riders who promised to meet us with their motorbikes at the bridge in the distance in 20 minutes.

As we waited for them at the bridge, an old woman called out, "You buy from me!" Tired of being courted by the local women, I yelled out as politely as I could, "No, please we're tired". She flashed me a bright smile and with a wink she said, "Haaa, me too!" as a crowd of little girls hovered around her.

As the motorbikes revved up, she looked up from braiding their hair and waved at us, the girls shouted, "Byeee Byeee!"

~Natasha



Natasha, of [TheBohoChica.com](http://TheBohoChica.com), is a Dubai based traveler, blogger and writer who likes to experience the world in cultures,

cuisines and hiking trails. She loves chaotic & colourful markets, Middle Eastern food, hiking in mountain villages and having her mind blown by the world when she least expects it. She is also a Travel Writer for Hipmunk & currently working on the Hipmunk #CityLove project.

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