

# By Train to Sapa



With only two nights to spare at the end of our week-long, **north-Vietnam adventure\***, we took the nostalgic *Victoria Express train* from Hanoi to the far-northern hill-town of Sapa – overnight there, and overnight back. Far too short, of course, but at least we got a taste of it.

by Verne Maree

The Victoria-Express portion of the train is strictly reserved for in-house Victoria Sapa Hotel guests. Its luxurious carriages are connected to the end of the 10pm service from Hanoi to Lao Cai, and the 9pm service in the other direction, every day of the week except Saturday. The two trains cross in the night. Only one of them has a restaurant carriage; check the schedule in advance to make sure that you're on *that* one at least once.

The two deluxe (two-berth) compartments are at a premium; the other 10 (superior) sleep four. For us, the privacy was important. Twenty years ago, though, I may have been happy to share! There are two washrooms with basins, but no shower facilities, so be sure you're clean before you board the train.

Once through the bleak Hanoi station, bags trundled by welcoming Victoria staff, we're in our private cocoon; it's tiny but cosy with plenty of stowage under the beds, rosewood fittings, white linen and

fresh flowers. On-board manager Sebastian runs a tight train; whiskeys, ice and soda arrive in a trice and soon we're ready for bed.

The motion of the train makes you feel like a baby that's being rocked a bit more vigorously than is strictly necessary, and the earplugs the staff give you are a good idea. It's an eight-hour, 380km journey through the dark until the sky starts to lighten around 5am. You're snaking just above the valley along a steep hillside; to the left are misty green mountains rising above the sprawling Red River. At certain points along the way, the left bank of the river is China.



\*See the June 2007 issue for 'Northern Nostalgia', my article on Hanoi and Halong Bay.



You get off at Lao Cai at 6.30am, from where the Victoria Hotel bus takes you a distance of 34km and an altitude of 1,650m up the mountain to its four-star establishment in Sapa. If you manage to miss the bus, you could consign yourself to the mercies of a motorbike taxi, but the at-times sheer drop to the valley floor makes this option suitable only for those with nerves of steel. We were delighted to see Vietnamese pot-bellied pigs and piglets rooting around on the side of the road. (I wonder, are they just called pot-bellied pigs here?)

Built nine years ago, the hotel has the look and feel of a Swiss mountain resort, all burnished wood, flowering window-boxes, and alpine greenery unexpectedly interspersed with banana trees and other tropical plants. As you enter, you're greeted by the scent of cinnamon, which pervades the hotel. It gets cold in Sapa – even snowing occasionally in January and February – and I can just imagine sipping glühwein in front of the fireplace in its cosy bar on a frosty winter day.

After a hot shower in one of 77 comfortably appointed rooms (there are two suites, too), we did justice to the comprehensive buffet breakfast; and later, had an excellent lunch in the Tavan Restaurant – the soups, green pea for Roy and river-crab for me, were exceptional. In between, we wandered down the hill to explore the shops and markets in the quaint and picturesque town centre. Minority tribeswomen peddled their silver jewellery and loom-woven, hand-dyed throws and cushions, or you could pick up a bottle of assorted pickled creepy-crawlies. One bottle harboured a cobra; another a couple of geckos and a scorpion.

Most people make the trip from Hanoi to Sapa and beyond to make contact



with the various minority tribes, especially the black Hmong, who live in the area. But I feel awkward about having to buy handicrafts or, worse still, hand over cash, as a *quid pro quo* for entering a stranger's home. Those who are comfortable doing so, however, can no doubt get a first-hand insight into a fascinating culture, one you might not find on the Discovery Channel.

The hotel is super. All the staff members are lovely; what's more, they all speak surprisingly good English. And the 80-minute Royal Traditional massage that we had in the spa – a snip at US\$75 for the two of us – was one of the best I can remember having. The masseuses are all trained at the Victoria group's Hoi An hotel, which is worth remembering for our next trip to Vietnam. (The group has five hotels in Vietnam and another in Siem Reap, Cambodia.)

I suggest you take one of a variety of packages that include getting to Sapa from Hanoi, one or more nights in the Victoria Sapa Hotel, meals in the Tavan restaurant, day-trips to markets and other attractions, and even home-stays with minority communities. See [www.victoriahotels-asia.com](http://www.victoriahotels-asia.com).

Because of the popularity of the weekend markets, weekends are a busier and more expensive time to visit Sapa; weekdays are more restful, but probably less colourful, too.





## Minority Report

The mountainous north of Vietnam has 11 provinces, including Lao Cai, where Sapa is situated. It's an indication of the region's social and cultural diversity that 31 of the officially recognized 54 ethnic groups of Vietnam can be found in this area.

Legend has it that the Dragon King of the south married Au Co, a beautiful northern fairy. She laid 100 eggs, which hatched into 100 boys. When the Dragon King began to miss the watery lowlands, he returned home with half of his sons, who became the ancestors of the Kinh, or ethnic Vietnamese. The 50 who remained in the mountains became the forebears of the minority 'hill tribes'.

If you like your history more factual, you'll want to know that the various minority peoples migrated south from China over the course of the past few hundred years. As a result, northern Vietnam is a mosaic of ethnic groups, each with its own history, language, dress, traditions and way of life.

Some of these ethnic minorities number in the millions, whilst others have dwindled to as few as a hundred or so souls. Those who arrived earlier settled in the more fertile, low-lying valleys; later arrivals such as the Hmong (who include the into

Black Hmong, the Red Hmong, the Flower Hmong and the White Hmong) and the Dzao had to settle at higher altitudes in less hospitable terrain, and are still relatively more disadvantaged as a result.

Around Sapa, they live in hamlets of small, wooden huts dotted around the valleys of rice-fields. You are most likely to see members of the Black Hmong community, not only because of their numbers but because these entrepreneurial folk have learnt mass craftsmanship

and become effective (not to mention persistent) salespeople. They are distinguished by their indigo-dyed dress, long, double-wrapped belts and masses of silver bracelets, earrings and chunky necklaces – which they will try their best to sell you.

Shyer and more retiring, the Red Dzao tend to keep to themselves. The women shave their eyebrows and foreheads, tying the rest of their hair up in elaborate red headdresses. Apart from visiting them in their homes by arrangement, you can see them at the popular Saturday markets. [1](#)

