



Northwest Vietnam

Welcome to the roof of Vietnam, where the mountains of the Tonkin Alps (Hoang Lien Mountains) soar skyward, their long shadows concealing some of the country's best-kept secrets. The landscape is a rich palette that provides some of the most spectacular scenery in Vietnam. Forbidding and unforgiving terrain for lowlanders, the mountains have long been a haven for an eclectic mix of hill tribes. Dressed in elaborate costumes, the Montagnards live as they have for generations and extend the hand of friendship to strangers; an encounter with the Montagnards is both a humbling and heart-warming experience.

For many visitors, Sapa is *the* northwest, an atmospheric old hill station set amid stunning scenes of near-vertical rice terraces and towering peaks. But beyond Sapa the voluptuous views continue, and there are many other options to come face to face with the bold landscapes and colourful inhabitants of this region – Bac Ha, Dien Bien Phu and Mai Chau. For the ultimate motorbike adventure head to Ha Giang, the final frontier in northern Vietnam.

Although many of the roads in this region are surfaced, many are dangerous cliffhangers that are regularly wiped out by landslides in the wet season. The stretch from Lai Chau into Sapa offers some of the best mountain vistas in Southeast Asia, as the road climbs more than 1000m over the Tram Ton Pass. The northwestern roads are always improving, but if you suffer from vertigo, backache or (God forbid) haemorrhoids, you might want to stick to the shorter trips. The northwest loop from Hanoi, via Dien Bien Phu and Sapa, is a gruelling but definitive road trip to discover the secrets of the region.

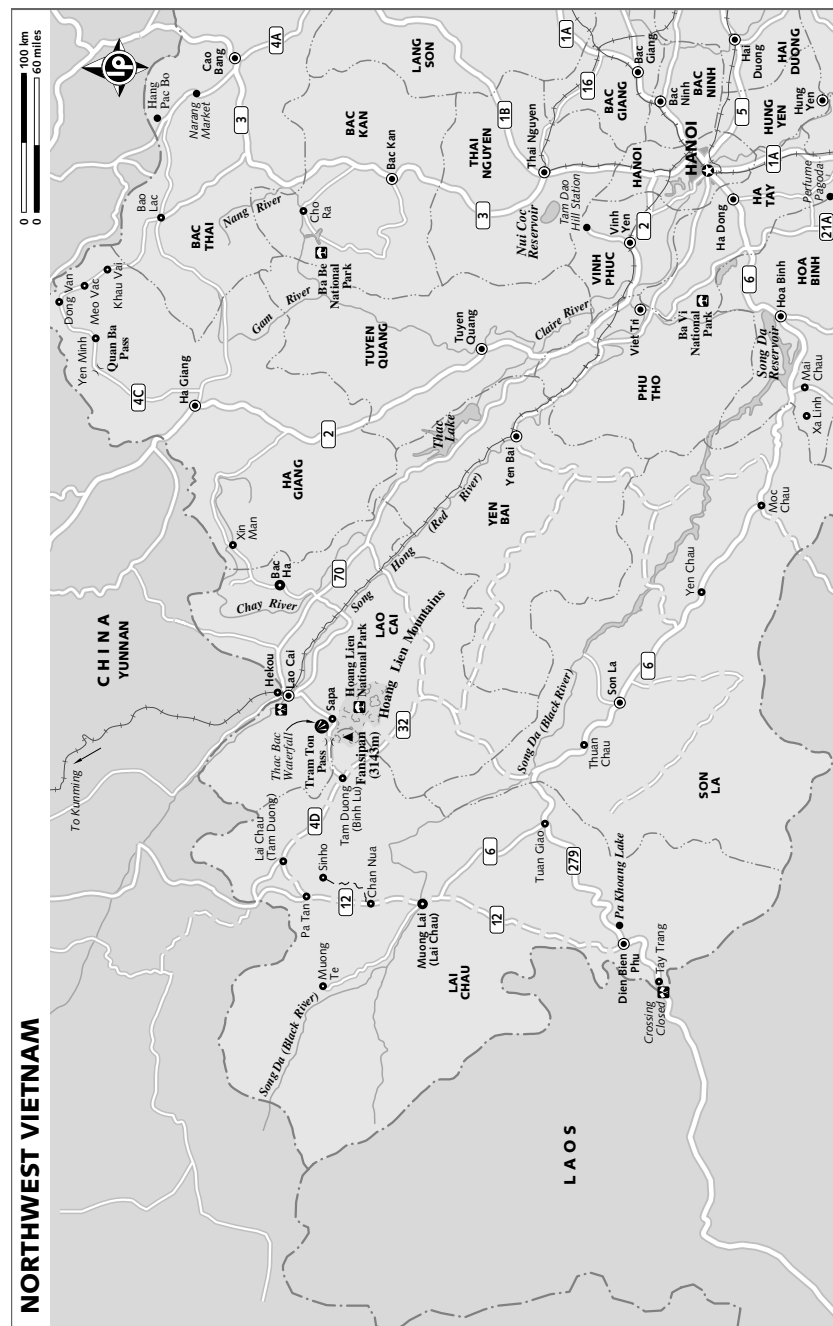
HIGHLIGHTS

- Meet Montagnards, trek through valleys to villages or just drool over the scenery around **Sapa** (p172)
- Learn about local life with a stay in a minority stilt house in the rural villages of **Mai Chau** (p165)
- Make for the minority markets – a blaze of colour when the Flower H'mong are in town – around **Bac Ha** (p181)
- Rise to the challenge of a two-day ascent of Vietnam's highest peak, **Fansipan** (p175)
- Discover how the Viet Minh overcame their French colonial masters in the decisive battle of **Dien Bien Phu** (p169)



■ ELEVATION: 100M-3143M

■ BEST TIME TO VISIT: MAR-MAY & SEP-NOV



History

The history of the northwest is a separate saga from that of lowland Vietnam. The Vietnamese traditionally steered clear of the mountains, as the unforgiving terrain was not seen as suitable for large-scale rice production. For many centuries the area remained inhabited by small groups of minority people who were later joined in the 19th century by new migrants from Yunnan, China and Tibet. For much of the 19th century this was the badlands, a sort of buffer zone between China and Vietnam where bandits roamed. During Ho Chi Minh's leadership of the north, the Vietnamese experimented with limited autonomy in 'special zones', but these were abolished after reunification.

Life for the minorities has been hard, as their most profitable crop is opium, which doesn't go down well with the Vietnamese authorities. Educational and economic opportunities have been more limited, and creeping Vietnamisation of towns and villages is only likely to make things worse. Ironically, it is tourism in centres like Sapa and Bac Ha that is finally bringing an independent income to the minority people.

Getting There & Away

Remote and mountainous, the northwest is the one region of Vietnam where it pays to consider the 'ins and outs' carefully. The main airport in the region is at Dien Bien Phu with daily connections to Hanoi. The most popular way to reach the region is to take the train from Hanoi to Lao Cai, gateway to Sapa and the Tonkin Alps (Hoang Lien Mountains). Whether you take the day train for some scenery or the night train for convenience, this is

the easy entry. It's that or the mountain roads, which can be very unforgiving on a public bus, not to mention more than a little dangerous in the wet season. Try 14 hours on a bus to Dien Bien Phu if you don't believe us. Better is the option of a private 4WD vehicle if you have the funds or can muster a group. Lastly, for the adventurous, there is the Russian Minsk motorbike, the mule of the mountains that can get pretty much anywhere. For experienced bikers only, this is the way to get up close and personal with the northwest.

The most rewarding journey in this region is the 'northwest loop'. Head for Mai Chau, then Son La and Dien Bien Phu, then north to Lai Chau, Sapa and back to Hanoi. The loop is best with a 4WD or motorbike, in case the highways are cut and a bit of off-roading is required. Allow at least a week for this journey, and considerably more time if braving the local buses. And three cheers for the hardy cyclists who pump up and down these roads.

HOA BINH

☎ 018 / pop 75,000

Hoa Binh means peace and it can seem pretty peaceful arriving in this gateway to the northwest after surviving the suburbs of Hanoi. It's the capital of Hoa Binh province, a region that is home to many hill-tribe people, including the H'mong and Thai. Locals have adopted modern Vietnamese garb, but some Montagnards venture into the town's market. Hoa Binh is a handy stop on the road to Mai Chau, but most visitors don't stay overnight.

Information

Hoa Binh Tourism Company (☎ 854 374; fax 854 372) No walk-in office, but staff at the company's Hoa Binh hotels can help with general information.

Main post office Internet access is available here (per hr 3000d), plus international phone services.

Sights

In Hoa Binh there is a small **museum** (admission free; ☎ 8-10.30am & 2-4.30pm Mon-Fri) that has war memorabilia, including a rusty old French amphibious vehicle.

Cross the new bridge towards Phu Tho and to the right you will see the **dam wall** of a vast and impressive hydroelectric station, built by the Russians; over the river is a massive shrine to the 161 workers who died during its construction.

THE ROADS WELL TRAVELLED: CONVERSATIONS WITH JEEP DRIVERS

I didn't plan to be a tourist driver. In the early 1980s I went to Moscow on a scholarship, to take a degree in civil engineering, and hoped to make that my career. Many of us Vietnamese went to study in Russia during that time. I learned to speak Russian, too, of course. That lasted three years, but by the time I came back the political climate here had changed, a Russian education was not highly valued and my degree didn't count for much.

My extended family pooled our money and bought this 4WD. It's a 1993 model and we bought it secondhand in a shipment that came from the US. It registers miles, not kilometres, which was a bit confusing for me at first!

I drive all over the country, but the northwest is the area that tourists want most to see and I go there most often, I suppose at least 30 times a year. Yes, they're long days, but as long as I can have an hour at lunch to eat and rest that's fine. And the tourists usually bring snacks to share during the journey; I really like M&Ms.

Mostly when I drive foreigners there's a guide/interpreter with them, so I don't need to speak another language. You can understand a lot just by gestures and tone of voice and expressions. But I know it would be sensible to learn more English. I can understand some, but I'm not good at speaking it. My last passenger and I had fun learning to say things from the phrasebook; I taught her how to pronounce the Vietnamese and she taught me how to pronounce the English, then we'd test each other on the longer road trips. Foreigners always find it really hard to pronounce Vietnamese, though – too many tones. She left the book with me, so I must keep practising.

I'm usually home in Hanoi for one night and one day a week if I'm lucky. My wife works full-time in an office, but our children are almost teenagers so they can pretty well look after themselves when we're busy. We spend a lot on mobile phone calls though!

Sleeping & Eating

Thap Vang Hotel (☎ 852 864; 213 Đ Cu Chinh Lan; r 150,000d; ☎) Set just off the main street in town, this is a smart minihotel offering hot water, a cold fridge and satellite TV.

Hoa Binh Hotels I & II (☎ 854 374; fax 854 372; s/d US\$23/28; ☎) Straddling either side of the road to Mai Chau, rooms here are set in mock Montagnard stilt-houses. These include reassuring nontraditional amenities like hot water and TV. It's well run compared with some of the state-owned places.

Cuisine is not necessarily Hoa Binh's main attraction, but there are many *com pho* places lining Hwy 6 in the centre of town. Locals venture across the new bridge to a string of *bia hoi* (beer) shacks along the riverbank.

Getting There & Away

Hoa Binh is 74km southwest of Hanoi and accessible by public bus (25,000d, two hours).

Those with transport can visit Ba Vi National Park (p127) and follow a riverbank road to Hoa Binh.

SONG DA RESERVOIR (HO SONG DA)

Stretching west from Hoa Binh is Song Da Reservoir (Ho Song Da), one of Vietnam's largest. The flooding of the Da River has displaced a large number of farmers for about 200km upstream, and is part of a major hydroelectric scheme generating power for northern Vietnam. In 1994 a 500kV power line was extended to the south, temporarily freeing Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) from seasonal power shortages.

Easiest access to the reservoir is by taking a spur road that cuts off from Hwy 6 at Dong Bang Junction (60km west of Hoa Binh and just outside Mai Chau). From the junction it's about a 5km drive to Bai San Pier. There's no obvious jetty here – hang around and someone

MONEY'S TOO TIGHT TO MENTION...

Throughout the northwest of Vietnam, there are very few places to cash travellers cheques, and credit cards are of little use beyond Sapa. Travellers cheques can be cashed at some hotels in Sapa, but commissions are steep. Thankfully, there are now a couple of ATMs in Sapa. Otherwise, Lao Cai is a good place to do a bit of banking. It's generally pretty straightforward to swap US dollars for Vietnamese dong, but the rates can be poor. The moral of the story is to do your banking before departing Hanoi.

SLEEPING ON STILTS

If you are anticipating an exotic Indiana Jones encounter – sharing a bowl of eyeball soup, taking part in an ancient fertility ritual or entering a shamanic trance with the local medicine man – think again. Spending a night in one of Mai Chau's minority villages is a very 'civilised' experience: the local authorities have made sure that the villages are up to tourist standards, so electricity flows, modern amenities abound and there are hygienic Western-style toilets. Mattresses and mosquito nets are provided. While this is eminently more comfortable, it may not live up to your rustic hill-tribe trekking expectations. Tour operators are not helping the situation: somehow they cannot seem to resist slapping up their oversized stickers wherever their groups stop to eat or drink, even if that happens to be on these lovely wooden stilt houses.

Despite – or perhaps because of – modern amenities, it's still a memorable experience and many people end up staying longer than planned. The Thai villages are exceedingly friendly and, when it's all said and done, even with TV and the hum of the refrigerator, it is a peaceful place and you're still sleeping in a thatched-roof stilt house on split-bamboo floors.

Reservations are not necessary. Just show up, but try and arrive before dark, just to get your bearings as much as anything else. You can book a meal at the house where you're staying for around 30,000d, depending on what you require. The women here have learned to cook everything from fried eggs to French fries, but try to eat the local food – it's more interesting. Try to establish the price of meal before departure, as there have been occasional disagreements over the bill.

will come out from a house and ask where you want to go. You'll need a Vietnamese speaker to help make arrangements.

One of the trips you can take is to the **Ba Khan Islands**. The islands are the tops of submerged mountains. The return trip to the islands takes three hours and costs about 250,000d per boat (each boat can seat 10).

Another possible boat trip is to **Than Nhan village**, home to members of the Dzao tribe. The two-hour return trip costs about 180,000d. The boat leaves you at a pier from where it's a steep 4km uphill walk to the village. If you'd like to stay in the village, take the boat one way for 100,000d and get a return boat to Bai San Pier the next day.

MAI CHAU

☎ 018 / pop 47,500 / elevation 300m

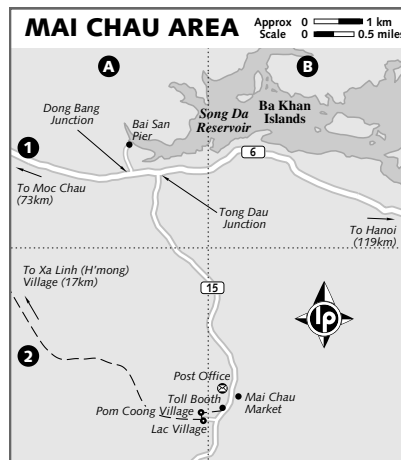
Mai Chau is the heart of a beautiful valley that is a world away from the hustle and bustle of Hanoi. The modern village is an unappealing sprawl, but as you emerge on the rice fields and rural living it is transformed into a real paradise. It's a stunning area, and most people here are ethnic White Thai, distantly related to tribes in Thailand, Laos and China.

Although most locals no longer wear traditional dress, the Thai women are masterful weavers who ensure that there is plenty of traditional-style clothing to buy in the village centre. You will see women weaving on looms under

or inside their houses in the village. Much of the silk looks similar to that seen in Laos. The Thai of Mai Chau are less likely to employ strong-arm sales tactics than their H'mong counterparts in Sapa: polite bargaining is the norm rather than endless haggling.

Sights & Activities

This is one of the closest places to Hanoi where you can experience a 'real' **Montagnard village**. Other attractions here include staying overnight in one of the Thai stilt houses (see



the boxed text, opposite), **walking** through the beautiful valley through the rice fields and **trekking** to minority villages. A typical trek further afield covers 7km to 8km; a local guide can be hired for about US\$5.

There is a popular 18km trek from **Lacvillage** (Ban Lac) in Mai Chau to **Xa Linh village**, near a mountain pass (elevation 1000m) on Hwy 6. Lac village is home to the White Thai people, while the inhabitants of Xa Linh are H'mong. The trek is quite strenuous to undertake in a day, so most people spend the night in a village along the way. Arrange a local guide and a car to meet you at the mountain pass for the journey back to Mai Chau. Be warned that there is a 600m climb in altitude and the trail can be slippery in the rain.

Longer treks of three to seven days are possible. Ask around in the Mai Chau villages of Lac or Pom Coong. Many cafés and travel agencies in Hanoi run inexpensive trips to Mai Chau (see p91). These include all transport, food and accommodation.

Sleeping

There are two accommodation centres in Mai Chau: the village of Lac and the village of Pom Coong. Pom Coong is slightly more rural and less developed than Lac, so opt for it if you have the choice.

Set a few hundred metres back from the 'main' roadside, both villages offer a rustic experience in traditional **Thai stilt houses** (60,000d per person). Villagers will sometimes organise traditional song-and-dance performances in the evenings and anyone is free to join in the fun. A mild word of warning about the showers: the doors may have fairly large gaps between the walls and the occasional opportunist guide or driver has taken the chance to observe the proceedings. Use your towel to good effect.

Getting There & Away

Mai Chau is 135km from Hanoi and just 5km south of Tong Dau junction on Hwy 6. There's no direct public transport to Mai Chau from Hanoi; however, buses to nearby Hoa Binh (25,000d, two hours) are plentiful. From Hoa Binh there are several scheduled buses to Mai Chau (20,000d, two hours) daily. Usually these stop at Tong Dau junction; a *xe om* (motorbike taxi) from there to Mai Chau proper will cost about 15,000d.

Theoretically, foreigners must pay a 5000d entry fee to Mai Chau; there's a toll booth at

the state-run guesthouse on the 'main' road. More often than not, there is nobody there to collect the fee.

MOC CHAU

☎ 022 / pop 113,100 / elevation 1500m

This highland town produces some of Vietnam's best tea and is a good place to stock up. The surrounding area is also home to several ethnic minorities, including Green H'mong, Dzao, Thai and Muong.

Moc Chau boasts a pioneering dairy industry that started in the late 1970s with Australian (and, later, UN) assistance. The dairy provides Hanoi with such delectable luxuries as fresh milk, sweetened condensed milk and little tooth-rotting bars called *banh sua*. Not surprisingly, Moc Chau is a good place to sample some fresh milk and yogurt. Indulge yourself at one of the dairy shops that line Hwy 6 as it passes through Moc Chau.

Should you get stuck in Moc Chau, **Duc Dung Guesthouse** (☎ 866 181; r 120,000d; ☺) is a reliable option to rest a weary head. About 300m from the post office on Hwy 6, it's a basic but friendly family-run pad.

Moc Chau is 200km from Hanoi (54,000d), and the journey takes about five hours by private vehicle. It's a further 120km from Moc Chau to Son La (26,000d).

YEN CHAU

☎ 022 / pop 50,800

Predominantly agricultural, this district is known for its abundant fruits. Bananas aside, all fruits grown here are seasonal – mangoes, plums and peaches are harvested from April to June, longans in July and August, and custard apples in August and September.

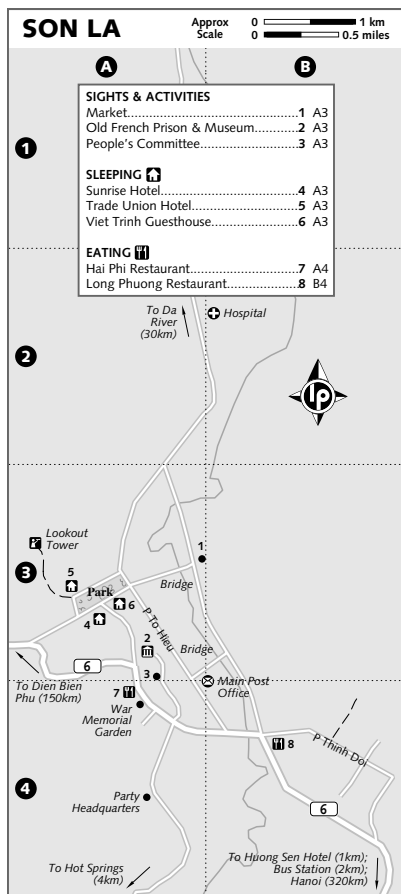
The mangoes are considered to be some of the tastiest in Vietnam, although travellers may find them disappointing at first, as they are small and green rather than big, yellow and juicy as in the tropical south. However, many Vietnamese prefer the somewhat tart taste and aroma of the green ones, especially dipped in *nuoc mam* (fish sauce) and sugar.

Yen Chau is 260km from Hanoi (67,000d), approximately seven hours by road. A bus from Yen Chau to Son La will cost 15,000d.

SON LA

☎ 022 / pop 61,600

Son La has prospered on the back of its location as a natural transit point between



Hanoi and Dien Bien Phu. It may not be one of Vietnam's must-see destinations, but the surrounding scenery is impressive and there are enough diversions to occupy half a day.

The area is populated predominantly by Montagnards, notably the Black Thai, Meo, Muong and White Thai. Vietnamese influence in the area was minimal until the 20th century; from 1959 to 1980 the region was part of the Tay Bac Autonomous Region.

Sights & Activities

The **Old French Prison & Museum** (Nha Tu Cu Cua Phap; admission 5000d; ☎ 7.30-11am & 1.30-5pm) in Son La was once the site of a French penal colony where anticolonial revolutionaries were incarcerated. It was destroyed by the infamous

'off-loading' of unused ammunition by US warplanes that were returning to their bases after bombing raids, but it has been partially restored. Rebuilt turrets and watchtowers stand guard over the remains of cells, inner walls and a famous lone surviving peach tree. The tree, which blooms with traditional Tet flowers, was planted in the compound by To Hieu, a former inmate from the 1940s. To Hieu has subsequently been immortalised, with various landmarks now named after him.

A narrow road leads uphill to the prison, off the main highway. Nearby is a People's Committee office with a small **museum** on the top floor, where there are some local hill-tribe displays and a good bird's-eye view of the prison ruins. The prison itself is at the back, the entrance beneath a faded sign marked 'Penitencier'.

Perched above the town, a **lookout tower** offers a sweeping overview of Son La and the surrounding area. The climb is steep and takes about 20 minutes, but the view from the top is worth the effort. The stone steps leading up to the tower are immediately to the left of the Trade Union Hotel.

You can find a small selection of colourful woven shoulder bags, scarves, silver buttons and necklaces, clothing and other Montagnard crafts at Son La's **market**.

A few kilometres south of town are **hot springs** (Suoi Nuoc Nong). There's a rather soupy small communal **pool** (admission free), and several privately run concrete **cubides** (admission 5000d) where water is pumped into private bathtubs. Unless you particularly like sharing other people's bathwater, you can probably give it a miss. To get here, start opposite the museum road and follow the trail past the party headquarters building.

The township of Thuan Chau is about 35km northwest of Son La. Try and pass through early in the morning when the small daily local **market** is full of incredibly colourful hill-tribe women. Between 9am and 10am, a steady stream of women can be seen walking, cycling and motorbiking home to their villages along the main road.

Sleeping & Eating

Almost all travellers journeying between Hanoi and Dien Bien Phu spend the night in Son La. There are plenty of hotels in town, some of which double as brothels. There is a

cluster of welcoming hotels on Đ 26/8 that are the exception to this rule.

Viet Trinh Guesthouse (☎ 852 263; 15 Đ 26/8; r 80,000d; ☎) One of the cheapest options in town, the large rooms include hot showers. It's pretty clean for the price, but English is in short supply.

Sunrise Hotel (☎ 858 798; fax 859 799; 53 Đ 26/8; r US\$10-15; ☎) A little further up the road is this smart establishment. The rooms come with all the trimmings like hot water and satellite TV and the tiles are clean enough to double as mirrors, which might be slightly unnerving.

Huong Sen Hotel (☎ 851 980; 228 Đ Truong Chinh; r 150,000-200,000d; ☎) The newest place in town, this is on the superhighway to Hanoi. Rooms are spick 'n' span and also include a smart bathroom.

Trade Union Hotel (Khach San Cong Doan; ☎ 852 804; congdoanhotelsonla@yahoo.com.vn; s/d/t US\$10/15/20; ☎) A rare species in the provinces, this is a warm and welcoming government-run hotel. The large rooms come with all the trimmings and include a hearty breakfast. There are also some newer VIP rooms for US\$35 if you are feeling very important. There's a reliable restaurant upstairs that fills up in the evening.

Long Phung Restaurant (☎ 852 339; Pho Tinh Doi; mains 10,000-40,000d) Located at one of the busier junctions in town, this restaurant is the place to sample some of the minority dishes from around the region. Consider the sour *mang dang* (bamboo shoots) soup, a speciality of the Thai minority people, washed down with sticky rice dipped in sesame seed salt.

Hai Phi Restaurant (Hwy 6; mains 15,000-50,000d) Son La is famous for its *lau* (goat meat) and here they serve up Billy in every shape and size. Try the highly prized *tiet canh*, a bowl of goat's-blood curd dressed with a sprinkling of peanuts and veggies. Or go for the more mainstream, but tasty, goat-meat steamboat.

Getting There & Away

Son La's bus station is 2km southwest of town. Buses run from 4am to noon between Son La and Hanoi (78,000d), taking about 10 hours or so, assuming there are no serious breakdowns. Regular morning buses also run to Dien Bien Phu (50,000d, five hours).

Son La lies 320km from Hanoi and 150km from Dien Bien Phu. By 4WD or motorbike, the Hanoi-Son La run typically takes eight hours. Son La to Dien Bien Phu takes another four hours.

TUAN GIAO

☎ 023 / pop 94,900 / elevation 600m

This remote mountain town is at the junction of Hwy 42 to Dien Bien Phu (three hours, 80km) and Hwy 6 to Muong Lay (three hours, 98km). Few people spend the night here unless they are running behind schedule and can't make it to Dien Bien Phu. However, if you are taking your time through the northwest, it is a logical place to bed down for the night.

Tuan Giao Hotel (☎ 862 613; r 150,000-200,000d) has been recently renovated, although you wouldn't necessarily know it when you arrive. The rooms aren't bad, including hot showers, but the beds are pretty hard, even compared with sleeping on the floor in Mai Chau. It's about 150m from the main junction in the direction of Muong Lay.

One of the only real restaurants in town, **Hoang Quat Restaurant** (☎ 862 482; dishes 15,000-40,000d) is a popular lunchtime stop for small groups touring the northwest, but it is almost deserted by night – a telling sign that few people overnight here. It is about 500m from the junction towards Dien Bien Phu and has a small selection of Vietnamese favourites and Western classics.

Most travellers approach Tuan Giao from Son La (two hours, 75km). The government is continuing the new road from Son La this way, carving new cuts into the mountain, but it will be some years before it is ready for use. Few travellers use the direct road from Tuan Giao to Muong Lay, as most are visiting Dien Bien Phu. It's a wild road, and also a wild ride, for experienced motorbikers, but it does offer some of the best scenery in the region.

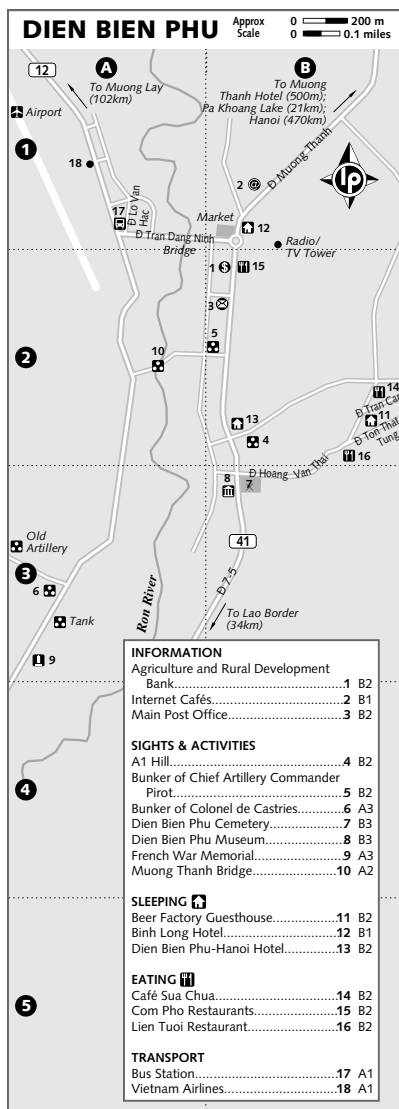
PA KHOANG LAKE

A beautiful body of water, Pa Khoang Lake is 17km east of Dien Bien Phu, on the road from Son La, and 4km off the highway. About 15km drive around the lake's edge, or an hour's boat ride plus a 3km forest walk, is the **bunker of General Giap**, the Vietnamese commander of the Dien Bien Phu campaign. There is little left to see, but for war junkies it is an essential stop on the trail of Vietnam's legendary military tactician. There is also a remote **Thai village** that can be visited across the lake. Hire a motor boat (US\$15 return) to the bunker or villages, and stay for a spot of lunch.

DIEN BIEN PHU

☎ 023 / pop 25,000

Dien Bien Phu is famous as the site of a battle that was truly decisive. The French colonial forces were roundly defeated at the hands of the Viet Minh on 7 May 1954 and the days of their Indochina empire were finally numbered.



Dien Bien Phu, known as DBP for short, now enjoys the prestigious status of provincial city, like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, although it is not quite in the same league. Set in one of the most remote parts of Vietnam, the town is 34km from the Lao border in the flat, heart-shaped Muong Thanh Valley, surrounded by steep, heavily forested hills. The size and look of the city is surprising considering the remote location, especially if you managed to survive getting here overland.

History is the main attraction here and the scenery is more stunning on the journey to or from Dien Bien Phu than around the town itself. Not surprisingly, the majority of travellers who come here now are French – Dien Bien Phu seems to hold the same sort of fascination for them as the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) does for Americans.

For centuries Dien Bien Phu was a transit stop on the caravan route from Myanmar and China to northern Vietnam. The town itself was established in 1841 by the Nguyen dynasty to prevent raids on the Red River Delta by bandits.

The area is inhabited by Montagnards, most notably the Thai and H'mong. The government has been encouraging ethnic Vietnamese to settle in the region and they currently make up about half of the Muong Thanh Valley's total population.

Orientation & Information

It may enjoy the same status as metropolises such as HCMC and Danang, but in reality Dien Bien Phu is an overgrown village when it comes to navigating. The Ron River splits the town in half, but most of the accommodation and attractions are on the east bank. To the west is the airport and what might pass as suburbs.

Internet access is available at several little cafés along Đ Muong Thanh.

Agriculture and Rural Development Bank (☎ 825 786; Đ7-5) Represents Western Union and can change cash.

Main post office (Đ7-5) Post and phone services and internet access.

Sights & Activities

The site of the decisive battle is now marked by several monuments, including the **Dien Bien Phu Museum** (☎ 824 971; admission 5000đ; ☎ 7.30-11am & 1.30-4.30pm), an informative if dry look at one of Vietnam's finest hours. Across the river the

bunker headquarters (admission 5000đ; ☎ 7.30-11am & 1.30-4.30pm) of the French commander, Colonel Christian de Castries, has been re-created, and there are old French tanks and artillery pieces nearby. There is a monument to Viet Minh casualties on the site of the former French position, known to the French as Eliane and to the Vietnamese as **A1 Hill** (admission 5000đ; ☎ 7.30-11am & 1.30-4.30pm), where bitter fighting took place. The elaborate trenches at the heart of the French defences have recently been re-created.

The old **Muong Thanh Bridge** is preserved and closed to four-wheeled traffic. Near the southern end of the bridge – though not much more than a crater in the ground overgrown with weeds – is the **bunker** where Chief Artillery Commander Pirot committed suicide.

A **memorial** to the 3000 French troops buried under the rice paddies was erected in 1984 on the 30th anniversary of the battle. The stylishly designed **Dien Bien Phu Cemetery** commemorates the Vietnamese dead, and you can catch a good view over it by climbing the

stairs inside the main entry gate. Looking over the endless headstones begs the question: are there any victors in war?

Sleeping

Beer Factory Guesthouse (Khách San Cong Ty Bia; ☎ 824 635; r 150,000-180,000đ; Đ Tran Can; ☎) A beer drinker's idea of heaven, unfortunately the mini-bar does not include free draught beer. This brewery-run guesthouse is clean and good value, and the popular rooms include hot water and TV. Just mind your head on the stairs up, particularly if you have taken advantage of the countless *bia hoi* pubs lining the nearby streets.

Binh Long Hotel (☎ 824 345; 429 Đ Muong Thanh; tw US\$12; ☎) A small and friendly family-run place, the rooms here are all twins. The rooms aren't exactly huge, but the cleaners take their job very seriously. Rates include breakfast.

Muong Thanh Hotel (☎ 810 043; fax 810 713; Đ Muong Thanh; r US\$15-25; ☎) Deservedly the most popular place in town, this is the residence of choice for many tour groups, so book ahead.

THE SIEGE OF DIEN BIEN PHU

In early 1954 General Henri Navarre, commander of the French forces in Indochina, sent 12 battalions to occupy the Muong Thanh Valley to prevent the Viet Minh from crossing into Laos and threatening the former Lao capital of Luang Prabang. The French units, of which about 30% were ethnic Vietnamese, were soon surrounded by a Viet Minh force under General Vo Nguyen Giap that consisted of 33 infantry battalions, six artillery regiments and a regiment of engineers. The Viet Minh force, which outnumbered the French by five to one, was equipped with 105mm artillery pieces and anti-aircraft guns, carried by porters through jungles and across rivers in an unbelievable feat of logistics. The guns were placed in carefully camouflaged positions dug deep into the hills that overlooked the French positions.

When the guns eventually opened up, French Chief Artillery Commander Pirot committed suicide. He had assumed there was no way the Viet Minh could get heavy artillery to the area. Now it was a reality, Dien Bien Phu would only end in defeat. A failed Viet Minh human-wave assault against the French was followed by weeks of intense artillery bombardments. Six battalions of French paratroopers were parachuted into Dien Bien Phu as the situation worsened, but bad weather and the Viet Minh artillery, impervious to French air and artillery attacks, prevented sufficient French reinforcements and supplies from arriving. An elaborate system of trenches and tunnels allowed Viet Minh soldiers to reach French positions without coming under fire. The trenches and bunkers were overrun by the Viet Minh after the French decided against the use of US conventional bombers – and the Pentagon's proposal to use tactical atomic bombs. All 13,000 men in the French garrison were either killed or taken prisoner; Viet Minh casualties were estimated at 25,000.

Just one day before the Geneva Conference on Indochina was set to begin half a world away, Viet Minh forces overran the beleaguered French garrison at Dien Bien Phu after a 57-day siege. This shattered French morale and forced the French government to abandon its attempts to re-establish colonial control of Vietnam. For the full story of this incredible siege, pick up a copy of *Hell in a Small Place – The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* by legendary French reporter Bernard S Fall.

Split into several buildings, try for the newer wing, as the old wing is showing signs of age. Facilities include a swimming pool, plus a huge barn-like restaurant. Throw in karaoke and 'Thai Massage' (honest), and it is *the* place to be in DBP.

Dien Bien Phu-Hanoi Hotel (☎ 825 103; fax 826 290; 279 Đ 7-5; r 250,000-350,000d; 🍷 🍷) Possibly the smartest hotel in town right now, it is a bit business-like and somehow lacks the coy charm of the Muong Thanh. All the rooms are well finished, with satellite TV, minibar and snappy bathrooms. Breakfast included.

Eating

Given the size of the town, there are surprisingly few dining options. Some of the better restaurants are located at the bigger hotels, including the Muong Thanh.

Lien Tuoi Restaurant (☎ 824 919; Đ Hoang Van Thai; mains 20,00-50,000d) Long popular for a combination of good Vietnamese and Chinese food, this eating establishment is a good choice after a long day on the road. The menu is in English and French with some imaginative translations. It is about 400m up the road from the cemetery.

There is a superb little Café Sua Chua opposite the Beer Factory Hotel, turning out some of the tastiest *pho* in the northwest and it is always heaving with locals. There are also a few decent local *com pho* joints on Đ 7-5.

Getting There & Away

The overland trip to Dien Bien Phu can be more intriguing than the actual battlefield sites for which the town is so celebrated. Of course, you miss out on this if you fly.

AIR

Vietnam Airlines (☎ 824 948; fax 825 536; ✈ 7.30-11.30am & 1.30-4.30pm) operates daily flights between Dien Bien Phu and Hanoi. The office is

just before the airport, about 1.5km from the town centre, along the road to Muong Lay.

BUS

The bus station is on Hwy 12, at the corner of Đ Tran Dang Ninh. There is a direct bus service that runs from Hanoi to Dien Bien Phu (120,000d, 14 hours) leaving at 6am and 8am.

Buses to Muong Lay (35,000d, three hours) leave in the morning. Daily buses to Son La (50,000d, four hours) start at 4.30am, but for normal people who like to get up at normal times there are regular departures until noon.

Although the bus is cheap, it's not really much fun. Buses are so packed that the only scenery you get to admire is the armpit of the person sitting next to you. If overloaded vehicles, bad roads and bad brakes worry you, definitely fly or travel overland by 4WD or motorbike.

CAR & MOTORBIKE

The 470km drive from Hanoi to Dien Bien Phu on Hwys 6 and 42 takes at least 12 hours (if you're lucky). Conceivably it could be done in a single direct journey, but almost everyone stays overnight in Son La. Speaking from experience, it's no picnic hanging on to the hairpins on a motorbike in the dark!

MUONG LAY

☎ 023 / pop 19,600 / elevation 600m

Formerly known as Lai Chau, this small town is nestled in a pretty valley carved from spectacular mountains by the Da River, and makes a good lunch or overnight stop for people travelling between Dien Bien Phu and Sapa.

Beneath Muong Lay's beauty lies a difficult existence for locals. Despite a marked increase in tourist numbers, for most of the people it's a hard living. Far from busy trade routes,

BORDER CROSSING: TAY TRANG/SOP HUN

The Lao border at Tay Trang, gateway to Phongsali province, is only 34km from Dien Bien Phu. Persistent rumours circulate about this crossing opening to foreign tourists soon, but at the time of writing it was still closed. OK, so we've said it for a few years now, but it really is likely to open during the lifetime of this book. Keep your ear to the ground and do your homework in Hanoi. Check out the motorbiking website *GT Rider* (www.gt-rider.com) for the latest, as these guys are eagerly waiting for it to open.

normal commerce is limited and the town has only been really successful in harvesting cash crops such as opium and timber. Needless to say, opium harvesting does not find favour with the central government, which has been trying to discourage the Montagnards from producing poppies.

If the opium business is falling on hard times, the same must be said for the timber industry. In recent years the forest cover has been reduced and flooding has increased dramatically. Around 140 people lost their lives in 1990 in a devastating flood on the Da River that swept through the narrow valley. An even worse flood in 1996 killed 100 people and cut all roads into town for two months; the ruins of the flooded former cultural hall can be seen in the middle of town.

It seems that this kind of flooding will become a permanent feature of Muong Lay. There is a massive dam under construction, just above the current Song Da Reservoir, and this will fill the valley with water. When this comes to pass (not before 2010), this will be the largest hydroelectric station in Southeast Asia. It also could mean that in the future the only way to visit Muong Lay will be by submarine.

Being underwater, however, would at least keep things cooler. Odd as it might seem, in summer Muong Lay is one of the hottest places in Vietnam. June and July temperatures can soar as high as 40°C.

Sleeping & Eating

Lan Anh Hotel (☎ 852 682; fax 852 370; r US\$10-20; 🍷) These guys run a tight ship, which is pretty fortunate given the town will be under

water in the next few years. One of the most switched-on hotels in the northwest, it offers helpful tourism information, good food and a steady stream of cold beer. The main compound has wooden Thai-style stilt houses with wide fan-cooled balconies. The hotel has expanded into a mishmash of buildings dotting the nearby street. More expensive rooms come with air-con and hot water. The hotel also offers an extensive program of tours and boat trips around Lai Chau. It's situated just past the market, to the right before the bridge.

Song Da Hotel (☎ 852 527; r 120,000d; 🍷) How to compete with the Lan Anh? Given the town is going under, literally, these folk have given up trying. The rooms are rather run down, but it could be an option for those wanting to avoid other tourists. It's located on the road to Dien Bien Phu.

Getting There & Away

Most travellers arrive from Dien Bien Phu (three hours, 103km), although there's also the rocky road option of Hwy 6 from Tuan Giao (four hours, 96km). The road from Lai Chau to Sapa (six hours, 155km) is one of the most beautiful drives in Vietnam, particularly the final climb up over the Tram Ton Pass.

Public buses make the run to/from Hanoi, as well Dien Bien Phu (35,000d, three hours) and Sapa (53,000d).

MUONG TE

☎ 023 / pop 43,900 / elevation 900m

Muong Te is one of Vietnam's most remote outposts, 98km northwest of Muong Lay along the scenic Da River. The majority of the population is ethnic Thai, although they have assimilated enough to be nearly indistinguishable from the Vietnamese. Other minority groups found in the area include the Lahu (Khuu Xung), Si La and Ha Nhi.

Apart from a small Sunday **market** and some nearby **villages**, there is not much to see or do in Muong Te. The only accommodation available in town is the shabby People's Committee Guesthouse, which also has a small restaurant.

SINHO

☎ 023 / pop 8500 / elevation 1054m

Sinho is a scenic mountain village that is home to a large number of ethnic minorities. It should attract more tourists, but the police

ALL CHANGE IN THE NORTH

There's been a lot of confusing name changes in the northwest in the past couple of years. A large chunk of old Lai Chau province, including the provincial capital, is due to go under water in a few more years. The government struck first and created the new province of Dien Bien Phu and relocated the province of Lai Chau to the northeast. The old town of Lai Chau is now Moug Lay; the old town of Tam Duong is now Lai Chau, the provincial capital of the new province; and the old town of Binh Lu is now Tam Duong. Confused? So were we. More than a few travellers have been jumping off the bus in the new town of Lai Chau, hunting for the popular Lan Anh Hotel. No, that's in Muong Lay – the old Lai Chau. Aarrghh!

GET OFF MY LAND!

Follow the road from the signposted turn-off on Hwy 12 towards Muong Te for about 8km to encounter a peculiar historical relic: an ancient poem carved in stone by 15th-century emperor Le Loi, who had succeeded in expelling the Chinese from the region. The poem was left as a warning for any other potential invaders not to mess with Le Loi. The translation from Chinese reads:

Hey! The humble, coward and frantic rebels, I come here to counter-attack for the sake of the border inhabitants. There existed the betrayed subjects since the beginning of human history. The land is no longer dangerous. The plants' figures, the whisper of the wind, and even the singing of the songbirds startle the mean enemy. The nation is now integrated and this carved poem an amulet for Eastern peace of the country.

An Auspicious Day of December, The Year of the Pigs (1432)

To find this vestige, look for the narrow flight of steps marked by a small stone placard reading 'Di Tich Lich Su – Bia Le Loi' on the roadside overlooking the river.

have a poor reputation here and there is a 'You ain't from around here look' on the faces of many locals. Strange, but true. There is a colourful Sunday **market**, although the dingy People's Committee Guesthouse has the only beds in town and they have to be pressured into accepting foreigners.

Sinho is a 38km climb on a treacherous dirt road that is one of the most spectacular runs in the region. The turn-off is about 1km north of Chan Nua, on the road from Muong Lay, and it takes about 1½ hours each way. The road has been under construction for years, but it is still not complete. However, the road from the new Lai Chau to the north is in pretty reasonable shape and is helping to slowly put Sinho on the map.

LAI CHAU

☎ 023 / pop 94,400

Formerly known as Tam Duong, this remote town lies between Sapa and Muong Lay and is set in a verdant valley of conical peaks that resemble diminutive volcanoes. While the town is nothing special, the countryside around is sublime and it's a handy lunch stop between Muong Lay and Sapa.

The local **market**, about midway through the town on Hwy 12, is worth exploring. The majority of people are Montagnards from nearby villages, although ethnic Vietnamese make up the largest single group. If you're not in a rush to get to Sapa or Muong Lay, you could base yourself in Lai Chau for a day or so and explore the surrounding areas.

The drive from Lai Chau to Sapa along Hwy 4D, threading through the Fansipan

Mountain Range near the Chinese border, is a beautiful stretch of road.

Sleeping & Eating

Tay Bac Hotel (☎ 875 879; r 120,000-150,000d; 🏠) The most atmospheric beds in town are found here, in an attractive Thai-style wooden house at the rear. Rooms come with air-con and hot water, and they boast a 'safe big car park'.

Tuan Anh Restaurant (meals 10,000-30,000d) offers the best food in town for those on a lunch run. Other nearby *com pho* spots like Phuong Thanh are cheap and cheerful. Be aware that canine fare is popular: dog lover takes on a whole new meaning in Lai Chau.

SAPA

☎ 020 / pop 36,200 / elevation 1650m

The Queen of the Mountains, Sapa sits regally overlooking a beautiful valley, lofty mountains towering over the town on all sides. Welcome to *the* destination in northwest Vietnam, gateway to another world of mysterious minority cultures and luscious landscapes. The spectacular scenery that surrounds Sapa includes cascading rice terraces that spill down the mountains like a patchwork quilt. The mountains are often shrouded in mist that rolls back and forth along the peaks, offering tantalising glimpses of what lies in wait on a clear day. The valleys and villages around Sapa are home to a host of hill-tribe people who wander in to town to buy, sell and trade.

In a beautiful valley close to the Chinese border, Sapa is a former hill station built in 1922. History has not always been kind to Sapa, and the series of conflicts that swept

over Vietnam nearly saw it wiped off the map. From WWII, successive wars against the French and the USA, not forgetting the more recent border skirmish with China in 1979, took their toll. The old hotels built by the French were allowed to fall into disrepair and Sapa was forgotten by all but a handful of residents.

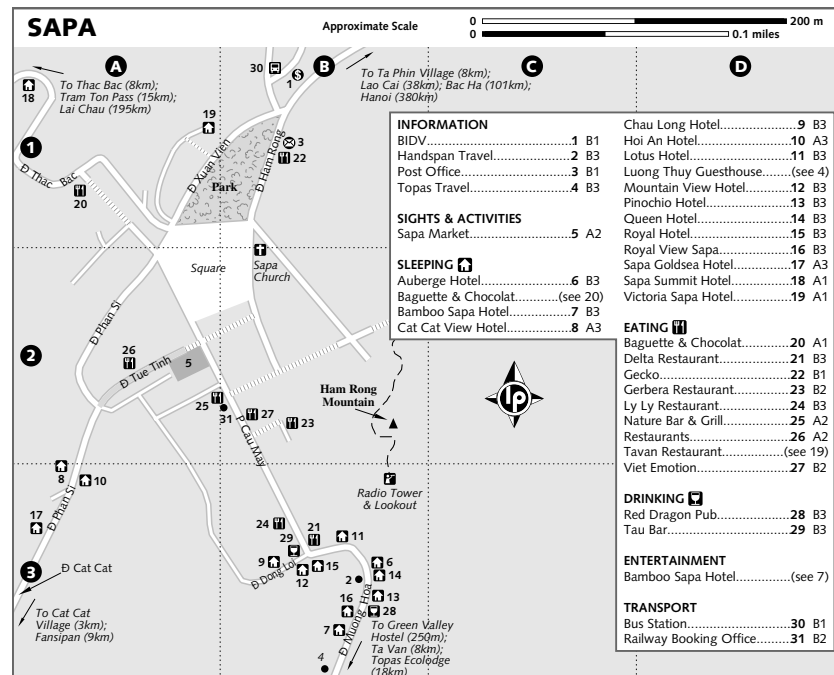
With the advent of tourism, Sapa has experienced a renaissance. Bad roads have been upgraded, many streets have been given names, countless new hotels have popped up, the electricity supply is reliable and the food has improved immeasurably. Inherent in all of this prosperity is cultural change for the Montagnards, many of whom are now well versed in the ways of the cash economy and are reaping the financial rewards of the tourism influx. The downside is a building boom that has seen one hotel after another raise the roof in a continual quest for better views. Height restrictions are rarely enforced and the Sapa skyline is changing for the worse.

Another inconvenience that will not change is the weather. If you visit off-season, don't

forget your winter woollies. Not only is it cold (like 0°C), but winter brings fog and drizzle. Quite why the French alighted on this spot is difficult to comprehend: it must have been one of those rare clear days when the views are to die for. The chilly climate does have its advantages, however. The area boasts temperate-zone fruit trees bearing peaches and plums, and gardens for raising medicinal herbs.

The dry season in Sapa lasts from around January to June. January and February are the coldest (and foggiest) months. From March to May the weather is often excellent, and the summer is warm despite the rains between June and August. The window from September to mid-December is a rewarding time to be in Sapa, though there is a bit of lingering rain at the start and the temperature dips by December.

Sapa would be of considerably less interest without the H'mong and Dzao people, the largest ethnic groups in the region. The billowing red headdresses of the Red Dzao are visible all over town, a surreal sight amid the accelerating development. The H'mong are more numerous and canny traders. Their



villages may look medieval but most will have a mobile phone and an email address to stay in touch. Traditionally, they were the poorest of the poor, but have rapidly learnt the spirit of free enterprise. Most of the Montagnards have had little formal education and are illiterate, yet all the youngsters have a good command of English, French and a handful of other languages.

If possible, try to visit during the week, when Sapa is less crowded and more intimate. Crowds flock to Sapa for the Saturday market, but a smaller market is held every day. There is plenty to see on weekdays, and there are lots of interesting villages within walking distance of the centre.

Orientation

There is some confusion regarding Pho Cau May and Đ Muong Hoa. Note that places on the western side use Pho Cau May as their address while locations on the eastern side use Đ Muong Hoa.

MAPS

The *Sapa Tourist Map* is an excellent 1:60,000 scale map of the walking trails and attractions around Sapa, plus an inset of the town. The *Sapa Trekking Map* is a nice little hand-drawn map showing trekking routes and the town, produced by Covit. Both cost 20,000d.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet access is available in countless hotels and travel offices around town, usually from 5000d per hour.

MONEY

The banking situation has improved considerably in Sapa, with a real bank complete with an ATM. Most hotels accept US dollars, but expect a worse exchange rate than in Hanoi.

BIDV (☎ 872 569; Đ Ngu Chi Son; ☎ 7-11.30 & 1.30-4.30pm) Currently the best all-rounder in town, with an ATM, plus exchange of travellers cheques and cash. It is by the lake in the new part of town.

POST

Main post office (Đ Ham Rong) International phone calls can be made here, but for postal services it's better to hang on and consign things from Hanoi, as it is much faster. Internet access is also available.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

There are several reliable travel companies in Sapa for trekking, mountain biking and other adventure activities, as well as those recommended under below.

Handspan Travel (☎/fax 872 110; www.handspan.com; 8 Pho Cau May) A popular outfit for trekking and mountain biking, it offers overnight tours to nearby villages and markets, with a combination of trekking and biking.

Topas Travel (☎ 871 331; www.topas-adventure-vietnam.com; 24 Muong Hoa) A Sapa-based ecotourist operator offering trekking, biking and village encounters, it employs many of its guides from the minority groups in the region. It also operates the Topas Eco Lodge (p177).

Sights & Activities

The easiest trek in town is to follow the steps up to the **Sapa radio tower** (admission 15,000d) for killer views of the valley.

Montagnards from surrounding villages don their best clothes and go to the **Sapa market** most days. Saturday is the busiest day, and the town is choking with tourists as the evening 'love market' is a big magnet for organised tour groups from Hanoi. If you'd rather enjoy Sapa at a more sedate pace, avoid the Saturday market.

The love market is speed dating minority style. Tribal teenagers trek into town to find a mate. It's all very coy, but unlike many of the more remote love markets in the region, it has become very commercial in recent years. These days there are more camera-toting tourists than love-sick Montagnards, as well as a smattering of opportunist prostitutes on the scene.

TREKKING TO LOCAL VILLAGES

It is quite easy to undertake day hikes through the valleys around Sapa without the assistance of a guide. However, for overnight stays in villages and longer treks into the mountains, it is advisable to hook up with a local guide. Where possible we suggest the use of minority guides, as this offers a means of making a living. There are endless options for trekking. Pick up a decent map and plot your course. The villages and the surrounding landscape are now part of Hoang Lien National Park.

The nearest village within walking distance is **Cat Cat** (admission 5000d), 3km south of Sapa. Like everywhere in this area, it's a steep and very beautiful hike down; if you're too exhausted or unfit to hike back up, there are

plenty of *xe om* ready and willing to cart you back to your hotel.

Another popular hike is to **Ta Phin village** (admission 5000d), home to Red Dzao and about 10km from Sapa. Most people take a *xe om* to a starting point about 8km from Sapa, and then make a 14km loop through the area, passing through Black H'mong and Red Dzao villages. Most hotels offer guided day and half-day treks; depending on the number of people and what, if any, vehicles are needed, expect to pay somewhere between US\$10 and US\$30.

There are also community-based tours to the nearby H'mong village of **Sin Chai** with an overnight in the village to learn about textiles or music and dance. Other popular communities to visit include the Giay village of **Ta Van** and the Black H'mong village of **Matra**.

Long-standing (and still recommended) places to ask about guided treks include **Au-berge Hotel** (☎ 871 243), **Cat Cat View Hotel** (☎ 871 946) and **Mountain View Hotel** (☎ 871 334). There are also several tour-booking offices on the main street.

FANSIPAN

Surrounding Sapa are the Hoang Lien Mountains, nicknamed the Tonkin Alps by the French. These mountains include Fansipan, which at 3143m is Vietnam's highest peak. The summit towers above Sapa, although it is often obscured by clouds and is occasionally dusted with snow. The peak is accessible all year to those in good shape and properly equipped, but don't underestimate the challenge. It is very wet, and can be perilously slippery and generally cold, so you must be prepared. Do not attempt an ascent if the weather is terrible in Sapa, as limited visibility on Fansipan could be treacherous.

The summit of Fansipan is 19km from Sapa and can be reached only on foot. The terrain is rough and adverse weather is frequent. Despite the short distance, the round trip usually takes three days; some very fit and experienced hikers do it in two days, but this is rare. After the first morning you won't see any villages: just the forest, striking mountain vistas and perhaps some local wildlife such as monkeys, mountain goats and birds.

No ropes or technical climbing skills are needed, just endurance. There are no mountain huts or other facilities along the way (yet), so you need to be self-sufficient. This

means taking a sleeping bag, waterproof tent, food, stove, raincoat or poncho, compass and other miscellaneous survival gear. Hiring a reputable guide is vital and, unless you are a seriously experienced mountaineer, finding porters who will carry your gear is also strongly recommended.

For recommendations on trekking guides, see the earlier sections on Trekking to Local Villages (opposite) and Travel Agencies (opposite). If you organise the climb through a local operator, you'll find yourself paying an all-inclusive rate of around US\$90 per person for a couple, US\$80 per person for a group of four and US\$70 per person for the sensible maximum group size of six.

Weather-wise the best time for making the ascent is from mid-October to mid-December, and again in March, when wildflowers are in bloom.

TRAM TON PASS

The incredible road between Sapa and Lai Chau crosses the Tram Ton Pass on the northern side of Fansipan, 15km from Sapa. At 1900m this is the highest mountain pass in Vietnam. Even if you are not planning to carry on around the northwest, it is well worth coming up here to experience the incredible views from the top of this pass. Descend by mountain bike before returning by truck or rent a motorbike to make the short hop to the new Tam Duong (Binh Lu). This is a seriously spectacular ride.

On the Sapa side of the mountain the weather is often cold, foggy and generally miserable. Drop down a few hundred metres below the pass on the Lai Chau side and it will often be sunny and warm. Ferocious winds come ripping over the pass, which is not surprising given the temperature differences – Sapa is the coldest place in Vietnam while Lai Chau is the warmest. Tram Ton Pass is the dividing line between two great weather fronts – who says you can't see air?

Alongside the road, about 5km towards Sapa, is **Thac Bac** (the Silver Waterfall). With a height of 100m, it's a big one, and the **loop track** (admission 3000d) is steep and scenic.

Sleeping

Hotels are popping up like mushrooms around Sapa. Luckily the mushroom mantra of 'keep them in the dark and feed them shit' that applies to the attitude of so many

budget hotels in Hanoi is not common here. However, prices can fluctuate wildly according to the volume of tourist traffic and they often double on busy weekends. Look around and negotiate. Needless to say, it's wise to avoid the weekend rush. Accommodation is pre-arranged for travellers on tours booked in Hanoi, although it is worth checking the standard of the hotel in advance so you don't get any unpleasant surprises.

There are now dozens of accommodation options, from a solid string of cheap guesthouses to a luxury resort. The hotels named here generally offer rooms and/or balconies with views – the scenery is, after all, one of the main reasons for visiting Sapa. However, be aware that the building boom can wipe out a view overnight: always check the view before you rent the room. It is a real shame the local government hasn't done more to enforce height restrictions on the valley edge. New hotels can be better value than the older ones, so it is worth taking a look if you hear of somewhere that's just opened. Almost no hotels have air-conditioning as it is never hot enough to warrant it.

This is not an exhaustive list of places to sleep: there are plenty of other hotels in town that are also good value, especially in the newer part of town, but they lack the scenic setting.

Beware of hotels using old-style charcoal burners for heat, as the fumes can cause severe breathing problems if the room's not well ventilated. These caused a number of deaths in the early years of tourism, but most hotels have switched over to electric heaters or open fireplaces for the winter.

BUDGET

Lotus Hotel (☎ 871 308; 5 Đ Muong Hoa; r US\$4-10) Occupying a strategic corner in the centre of town, this place is enticingly good value. Staff are friendly, the rooms are pretty spacious and many include balconies with views across to the valley. All rooms have hot water, TV and a fireplace.

Pinochio Hotel (☎ 871 876; 15 Đ Muong Hoa; r US\$4-8) This is a real labyrinth of a place that winds its way up the hillside. Make the effort to climb the stairs to the top, as the rooms here have balconies, views and easy access to the rooftop restaurant.

Queen Hotel (☎ 871 301; fax 871 783; Đ Muong Hoa; r US\$5-10) One of the old-timers in town, this

place remains popular thanks to the fun and friendly staff. Size matters when it comes to price, but all rooms have hot water and TV. Aim high for views.

Hoi An Hotel (☎ 872 220; Đ Phan Si; r US\$10) One of the newer hotels in town, at least at the time of writing, this is consequently great value. The rooms are desirably decorated with sparkling bathrooms and the views should remain uninterrupted for some time.

our pick Mountain View Hotel (☎ 871 334; fax 871 690; Đ Cau May; r US\$8-18) Location, location, location. This hotel has just that, sitting in the centre of town, but offering 180° views of the valley below. The owner was one of the first female trekking guides in Sapa and has reinvested wisely. Invest the US\$18 for doubly dramatic views from corner rooms. All rooms come with hot water and TV.

Other good possibilities that are located a short stroll down the valley:

Green Valley Hostel (☎ 871 449; 45 Đ Muong Hoa; r US\$4-8) The Hostelling International choice in town, this place has cheap, comfortable rooms and unobstructed views.

Luong Thuy Guesthouse (☎ 872 310; 28 Đ Muong Hoa; r US\$4-8) A little closer to town, this is another bargain with small rooms, but big views from the balconies.

MIDRANGE

our pick Cat Cat View Hotel (☎ 871 946; www.catcat-hotel.com; Đ Phan Si; r US\$10-30; ☎) Deservedly popular for its friendly and honest service, this is a sprawling complex draped over the hillside. The small wing across the road has cheaper rooms, while those way above reception, with all the trimmings, are a few dollars more. It's worth the trek, as the views are breathtaking.

Sapa Summit Hotel (☎ 872 967; 10 Đ Thac Bac; r US\$10-30; ☎) A new hotel on the road to Thac Bac, this is currently the best deal in town. Rooms include wooden floors, real satellite TV, central heating and sharp bathrooms. The gardens are lovingly laid out and include day facilities for those awaiting the night train.

Baguette & Chocolat (☎ 871 766; www.hoasuaschool.com; Đ Thac Bac; r US\$18) Run by the popular Hoa Sua group helping disadvantaged youth, this is a tiny four-bedroom guesthouse above the excellent bakery. The elegant little rooms are thoughtfully decorated, but it's essential to book ahead. Rates include a great breakfast downstairs.

Auberge Hotel (☎ 871 243; auberge@fpt.vn; 7 Đ Muong Hoa; r US\$15-28; ☎) Akin to a Sapa institution,

this place has been around as long as the mist over the valley. As usual, it pays to wind your way up through the bonsai garden for clear views. The more expensive upper-floor rooms have fireplaces and fine furnishings. It's a good place for travel and trekking information, plus credit cards are accepted.

Topas Eco Lodge (☎ 871 331; www.topas-eco-lodge.com; bungalows US\$25) With a striking setting overlooking the voluptuous valley below, Topas Eco Lodge is located in Tan Kim village, about 18km from Sapa and much lower in altitude, so it can be warmer and clearer in the winter months. Featuring solar power, waste-water management and minority staff, let's hope this is first of many such ventures. The Lodge can provide transfers at extra cost for arrival and departure.

Bamboo Sapa Hotel (☎ 871 076; bamboosapa@hn.vnn.vn; Đ Muong Hoa; s/d US\$29-39; ☎) One of the first serious midrange hotels to open in town, it is still going strong. Standards are three star with large, airy rooms and breezy balconies with extensive views.

Royal View Sapa (☎ 872 989; www.royalsapa.com; 16 Pho Cau May; r US\$30-65; ☎) Brazenly breaching all the height restrictions in town, this consequently has top views of the valley. Smart touches include a well-stocked minibar and ample bathtubs. There is also a lift and a terrace café for dining with a view.

Other places that are worth checking out: **Royal Hotel** (☎ 871 313; royalhotel_sapa@yahoo.com; Pho Cau May; r US\$12-20; ☎) A well-established hotel that sees a lot of our business.

Sapa Goldsea Hotel (☎ 871 869; www.sapagoldsea-hotel.com.vn; Đ Phan Si; r US\$17-45) Creature comforts on the road to Cat Cat is what you get at this modern hotel.

TOP END

Chau Long Hotel (☎ 871 245; www.chaulonghotel.com; 24 Đ Dong Loi; r US\$32-180) The Chau Long was long a smart midrange hotel that famously resembled a castle. When the neighbours started obscuring the views, the owner bought them out and built a smart new four-star hotel. It has big valley views and all the amenities you might expect. If the new wing prices are as steep as the valley walls from US\$115, then opt for the old wing, where just US\$32 buys a piece of the action.

Victoria Sapa Hotel (☎ 871 522; www.victoriahotels-asia.com; r from US\$165; ☎ ☎ ☎) This is the place where Sapa becomes Switzerland: a delightful mountain lodge with stylish service and smart

rooms. This hotel has it all: sweeping views from the restaurant, two bars, a heated indoor swimming pool, a fitness centre and a tennis court. Visit the website for the two- or three-day discount packages for a real deal. Hotel guests can travel between Hanoi and Lao Cai in the resort's *Victoria Express* (luxurious train carriages à la *Orient Express* attached to the regular night train). Return berths start from US\$95 without meals during the week to US\$280 with all meals at weekends.

Eating

Most of the busier hotels have reasonably priced cafés, which get more popular as the weather worsens. There's a string of popular restaurants worth checking out below the market on Đ Tue Tinh as you head in the direction of Cat Cat village.

our pick Baguette & Chocolat (Đ Thac Bac; cakes 6000-15,000d; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) On a cold and wet day, this place is a welcome retreat for a warm cocoa and delectable gateaux. The menu keeps growing and now includes some Asian greatest hits for around 40,000d. Or indulge in comfort food from home, with pizzas, salads and baguettes. Takeaway picnics are a smart option for trekkers.

Nature Bar & Grill (Pho Cau May; meals 15,000-50,000d; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) It's easy to sink into the comfy furnishings and while away an afternoon or evening. The extensive menu includes authentic Vietnamese cuisine and a few Western exiles for good measure. Speaking of measures, they also shake up a good cocktail. **Viet Emotion** (☎ 872 559; 25 Pho Cau May; mains 20,000-40,000d; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) A smart new café-restaurant on the main drag, this place has an original menu of specials, including goose. If that sounds too exotic, there are good shakes and more familiar food.

Gerbera Restaurant (☎ 871 064; Pho Cau May; mains from 20,000d; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Set just a staircase above the main drag, this restaurant has an unending menu of Vietnamese favourites. From the upstairs panorama room, there are some great views over town and the mountains beyond.

Ly Ly Restaurant (36 Pho Cau May; mains US\$1-5; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) It may not be obvious from the name, but this little eatery has morphed into the town's first and only Indian restaurant. Curries, dhal, nan and lassis, it's possible to indulge in a Mumbai masterclass here.

Gecko (☎ 871 504; Đ Ham Rong; mains around US\$5; 🍴 lunch & dinner) The original French restaurant in Sapa, not counting the 1920s of course, this is authentically housed in an old colonial-era property. The set menus are good value at just US\$6 for something simple or US\$10 for a banquet of Vietnamese cuisine. The bar is a possible retreat on a cold night.

Delta Restaurant (☎ 871 799; Pho Cau May; mains US\$5; 🍴 lunch & dinner) The taste of Italy in Sapa, Delta turns out the most authentic pizzas in town. Pastas and home-cooking complete the picture.

Tavan Restaurant (☎ 871 522; US\$4-12; 🍴 lunch & dinner) The restaurant at the Victoria Sapa Hotel is one of the best in town, with a full complement of fine European food and the best in Asian fusion. Open to nonresidents, you can finish off with a local liqueur at the bar.

Drinking & Entertainment

Considering the number of travellers to Sapa, organised entertainment is relatively scarce and the bar scene slow. For most, an evening out is the guesthouse balcony, particularly when the fog rolls in.

Red Dragon Pub (☎ 872 085; 23 Đ Muong Hoa) Don't let yourselves be put off by the quaint tearoom downstairs, as upstairs is a little drinking den of a Brit-style pub that fills up most evenings. Befitting a respectable pub, there is a serious range of beers and some good pub grub. The tearoom downstairs is a good stop for bangers and mash or herbal teas during the day.

Tau Bar (☎ 871 322; 42 Pho Cau May) As the night warms up, the only place to be is Tau Bar.

Claiming to be 'slightly lounge', Tau brings a different kind of cool to the mountains of the north. There is a DIY jukebox on the computer, the cocktails are mixed by a pro and there is a pool table that always pulls a crowd.

Bamboo Sapa (☎ 871 076; bamboosapa@hn.vnn.vn; Pho Cau May) This popular hotel hosts a free traditional hill-tribe music-and-dance show from 8.30pm Friday and Saturday.

Shopping

Sapa is emerging as the top shopping destination in the mountainous north. Most of the items are clothing, accessories and jewellery produced by the multitude of minority peoples in the area. More recently some Vietnamese designers have also been getting in on the act, producing clothes and household furnishings inspired by tribal motifs and patterns. Check out some of the stores on Pho Cau May for the best selection of designer gear.

Lots of the minority women and young girls have gone into the souvenir business; the older women in particular are known for their strong-armed selling tactics. One frequent Sapa sight is a frenzy of elderly H'mong women clamouring around a hapless traveller to hawk their goods, which range from colourful ethnic garb to little pouches of opium stashed away in matchboxes. When negotiating prices, you do need to hold your ground, but go easy when it comes to bargaining. They may be persistent, but are not nearly as rapacious as Vietnamese vendors.

A word of warning on the clothes: as beautiful and cheap as they are, the dyes used are natural and not set. Much of the stuff sold

has the potential to turn anything it touches (including your skin) an unusual blue/green colour – check out the hands and arms of the H'mong for an idea. Wash the fabric separately in cold salt water as it helps to stop the dye from running. Wrap anything you buy in plastic bags before stuffing it in your luggage.

Getting There & Away BUS, MINIBUS & MOTORBIKE

Sapa's proximity to the border region makes it a possible first or last stop for travellers crossing between Vietnam and China.

The gateway to Sapa is Lao Cai, 38km away on the Chinese border. Buses to points west such as Lai Chau and Dien Bien Phu pass through a few times a day from Lao Cai, the main transport hub. Sapa's bus station (for minibuses in this case) is in the north of town.

Minibuses make the trip from Lao Cai regularly between 5am and 5pm (25,000d, 1½ hours). In Sapa, minibuses wait in front of the church but do not run to any particular schedule. However, in Lao Cai minibuses wait for the train that arrives from Hanoi. If you are arriving from China, you can pick one up at Lao Cai bus station.

The advertised rate of hotel minibus services to Bac Ha (110km) for the Sunday market is around US\$10 per person; departure from Sapa is at 6am and from Bac Ha at 1pm. It's cheaper to go to Bac Ha by public minibus, changing buses in Lao Cai.

Driving a motorbike from Hanoi to Sapa is feasible, but it's a very long trip, so start early. The total distance between Hanoi and Sapa is 380km. The last 38km are straight uphill – unless you've been training for the Olympics, it's hell on a bicycle.

TRAIN

The train trip between Lao Cai (gateway station to Sapa) and Hanoi has become much more comfortable with the advent of a soft-sleeper class and private rail carriages hitching a ride on the main train. Currently, a sleeper ticket between Hanoi and Sapa can be booked only through hotels and agencies in Sapa, but in Hanoi you can book at the station. There is an official **Railway Booking Office** (☎ 871 480; 🕒 7.30-11am & 1.30-4pm) on Pho Cau May in Sapa which charges a 7000d service fee for seats, 10,000d for a sleeper.

Ticket prices start at 79,000d for a hard seat (bad choice!) to 223,000d for an air-conditioned soft sleeper, and rise by about 10% at weekends. There are also several companies operating special private carriages with comfortable sleepers, including the affordable **ET Pumpkin** (www.et-pumpkin.com) and the more luxurious and expensive **Victoria Express** (www.victoriahotels-asia.com).

The day train leaves Lao Cai at 10.20am, while two night trains depart 8.35pm and 9.15pm, with the later express service including the private carriages. The journey takes about 10 hours. From Hanoi the all-stations day train departs at 6.15am and the night trains depart at 9.20pm and 10pm respectively.

Getting Around

The best way to get around Sapa is to walk, and almost everywhere it's steep! Anyone training for the Tour de France can rent a bicycle for the day, but you might spend half the time pushing it up steep, steep hills. For excursions further afield you can hire a self-drive motorbike from about US\$6 a day, or take one with a driver for about US\$10. Cars, 4WDs and minibuses are also available for hire through hotels, guesthouses and travel agents. Rates vary widely depending on the destination and the distance.

LAO CAI

☎ 020 / pop 35,100 / elevation 650m

Lao Cai, the end of the line so to speak, is right on the Vietnam–China border. The town was razed in the Chinese invasion of 1979, so most of the buildings are new. The border crossing here slammed shut during the 1979 war and only reopened in 1993.

Today Lao Cai is a major destination for travellers journeying between Hanoi or Sapa and Kunming in China, but Lao Cai is no place to linger with Sapa just an hour or so away.

The border town on the Chinese side is called Hekou – you would have to be an enthusiast of Chinese border towns to want to hang out there.

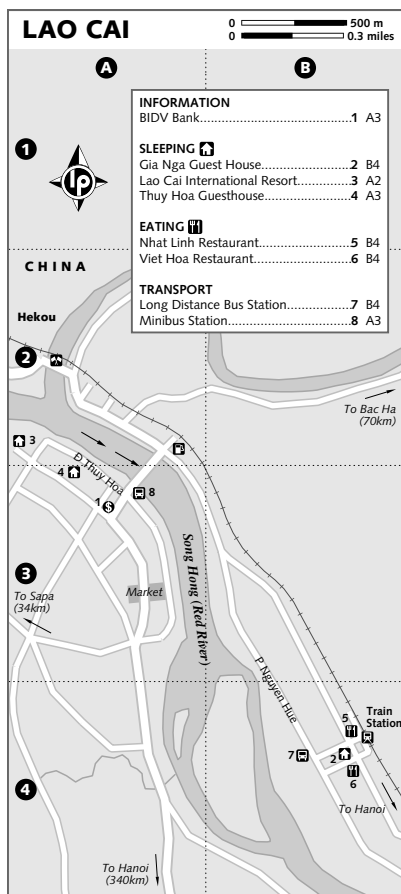
MONEY

Be especially wary of black marketeers, especially on the Chinese side – they frequently short-change tourists. If you do black-market dealings, it's best to change only small amounts.

PROCLAIMING INDEPENDENCE

When it comes to budget hotels in Hanoi, everyone seems to be trying to sell a tour. While this can be a cheap and convenient way to see Halong Bay, it is really not necessary for Sapa and the surrounding villages. Sapa is easily accessible by a combination of train and bus, finding a good hotel is very straightforward and it's an adventure to hike or bike around the valleys on your own. If you get pressured into a tour, then you have no choice over what you see and do in and around Sapa. Perhaps you want to stay a day longer, perhaps you want a smarter room, perhaps you want a homestay in a Dzao village or perhaps you want to drop off the top of the Tram Ton Pass on a mountain bike? Too late, you've signed on the line. There are lots of good tour operators (some affiliated to the popular hotels) based in Sapa who specialise in the area. Our recommendation would be to travel here independently and make arrangements as you go. This brings choice and flexibility – what travelling independently is meant to be about.

If you are still set on taking a tour, check out the list of recommended agents in the Hanoi chapter (p91).



Directly across the bridge on the west bank of the river, the **BIDV Bank** (Đ Thuy Hoa) can exchange cash and travellers cheques, and also has an ATM.

Sleeping & Eating

Gia Nga Guest House (☎ 830 459; Pho Moi; r 100,000-150,000d; 📶) No need to stay here, but the owner pioneered a popular deal to offer a shower (20,000d with towel and soap) to freshen up after the night train.

Thuy Hoa Guesthouse (☎ 826 805; fax 824 689; 118 Đ Thuy Hoa; r 170,000-185,000; 📶) If you happen to be in the market for views across the Red River to China, this is a comfortable guesthouse. All rooms come with hot water and TV.

Lao Cai International Resort (☎ 826 668; laocai hotel@hn.vnn.vn; 88 Đ Thuy Hoa; r US\$70-85; 📶 📺 📶) Still claiming to be the 'ultimate choice' – perhaps the management hasn't travelled the 38km to Sapa. The rooms are pretty smart and include safety deposit boxes, which are handy if you happen to land a big win in the casino downstairs. Chinese currency accepted.

Nhat Linh Restaurant (☎ 835 346; Pho Nguyen Hué) A reliable little travellers' café outside Lao Cai station, the friendly staff and extensive menu make this the obvious stop before or after a long train ride.

Viet Hoa Restaurant (☎ 830 082; Đ Phan Dinh Phung; mains 25,000-75,000d) The biggest restaurant in town, this is the place for local luminaries wanting the best of Vietnamese and Chinese cuisine. As well as weddings, they accept 'merry making party'.

Getting There & Away

Minibuses to Sapa (25,000d, 1½ hours) leave regularly until late afternoon from the station next to the Red River bridge. Minibuses to Bac Ha (28,000d, two hours) leave several times daily; the departs last at 1pm.

Lao Cai is about 340km from Hanoi. Buses make the journey (85,000d, nine hours), leaving early in the morning from the **long distance bus station** (Pho Nguyen Hué), but most travellers sensibly prefer taking the train. See *Getting There & Away* under Sapa (p179) for details on train travel between Hanoi and Lao Cai.

BAC HA

☎ 020 / pop 70,200 / elevation 700m

Long touted as the weekend alternative to Sapa, this small highland town doesn't have the same dramatic location of its more il-

BORDER CROSSING: LAO CAI/HEKOU

The Lao Cai–Hekou crossing is popular with travellers making their way between Yunnan and northern Vietnam. The border is open daily between 7am and 5pm. China is separated from Vietnam by a road bridge and a separate rail bridge over the Red River. Pedestrians pay a toll of 3000d to cross.

The border is about 3km from Lao Cai train station. This journey is easily done on a *xe om* (15,000d).

lustrious neighbour, but it is calmer when Saturday comes. It fills up to choking point on Sunday morning, when visitors flood in to meet the Flower H'mong at the morning market.

Compared with Sapa, tourism is still in its infancy here and during the week the town has a deserted feel. Bac Ha is a good base to explore the surrounding highlands. Around 900m above sea level, it is noticeably warmer than Sapa. There are 10 Montagnard groups that live around Bac Ha: the colourful Flower H'mong are the most visible, but other groups include Dzao, Giay (Nhang), Han (Hoa), Xa Fang, Lachi, Nung, Phula, Thai and Thulao.

One of Bac Ha's main industries is the manufacture of alcoholic home brews (rice wine, cassava wine and corn liquor). The corn hooch produced by the Flower H'mong is so potent it can ignite! Bac Ha is the only place in Vietnam where you'll find this particular moonshine; there's an entire area devoted to it at the Sunday market. Swill some down before deciding whether to buy a buffalo or cow.

Sights & Activities

MONTAGNARD MARKETS

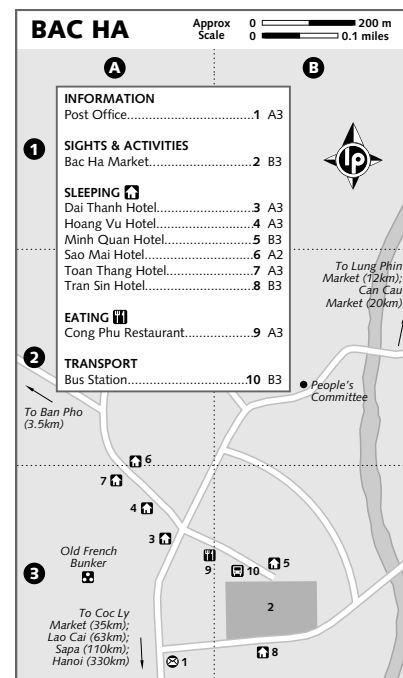
There are several interesting markets in and around Bac Ha, most within 20km of each other.

Bac Ha Market

This lively and crowded concrete bazaar is the main market in Bac Ha proper. It draws large numbers of Flower H'mong from the surrounding hills. The women embroider elaborate floral motifs on their skirts, making a technicolour dream for photographers. Items on sale include water buffaloes, pigs, horses, dogs and chickens: hardly convenient purchases for most visitors. Tourists stick to buying handicrafts, textiles and the local firewater. The market operates only on a Sunday. Get here early to experience it without the razzamatazz of day-trippers from Sapa.

Can Cau Market

This is one of the biggest open-air markets in the region, specialising in livestock. It's 20km north of Bac Ha and just 9km south of the Chinese border. Can Cau attracts a large number of Chinese traders, evidenced by the



booming dog trade here. The market is only open on Saturday.

Lung Phin Market

This small market is between Can Cau market and Bac Ha town, about 12km from the town. It's less busy than other markets, and is open on Sunday. It is a good place to move onto once the tour buses arrive in Bac Ha from Sapa, and has a very real feel.

Coc Ly Market

This Tuesday market is about 35km from Bac Ha. You can get here via a fairly good road, or by road and river; hotels in Sapa and Bac Ha can organise trips.

TREKKING TO LOCAL VILLAGES

Villages around Bac Ha provide an opportunity to see how Montagnard people live. **Ban Pho** is nearest, and the villagers live simply. The Flower H'mong villagers are so hospitable – some of the kindest people you'll meet in Vietnam. Ban Pho is a 7km return trip from Bac Ha. Take a loop route to get there and back.

Other nearby villages include: **Trieu Cai**, an 8km return walk; **Na Ang**, a 6km return walk; and **Na Hoi**, a 4km return walk. Ask at your hotel for directions.

Sleeping

There are quite a lot of hotels in Bac Ha these days, but very few stand out from the pack. Room rates tend to increase on weekends when tourists flock to town for the Sunday market; it can be hard to find a room.

Dai Thanh Hotel (☎ 880 448; r 60,000d) If you're counting the dong as much as the dollars, this hotel continues to be one of the cheapest in town. Rooms include hot water, TV, mozzie net and ceiling fan – a real steal.

Toan Thang Hotel (☎ 880 444; r 80,000d) Set in a sweet but solid wooden house, the rooms here are very good value. All include a fan, local TV and a hot-water bathroom.

Sao Mai Hotel (☎ /fax 880 288; r US\$10-25) Opposite the Toan Thang, this place offers the beds of choice for most tour groups. Avoid the shabby, cheaper rooms in the older concrete building, as life is much better in the newer wooden houses. The restaurant-bar here is one of the leading watering holes in town, plus it holds regular dance shows for visiting groups in the courtyard car park.

Minh Quan Hotel (☎ 880 222; r 120,000-150,000d) Most people are here for the market, so why not enjoy a bird's-eye view of the Sunday action from this comfortable hotel? Rooms include smart bathrooms and some have immense views of the mountains beyond.

Other places worth a look:

Tran Sin Hotel (☎ 880 240; r 100,000d) Another hotel that overlooks the market; get a balcony to follow the action.

Hoang Vu Hotel (☎ 880 264; r 120,000d) Big rooms with balconies, but small views. Reliable tour information is available.

Eating

Many of the hotels have restaurants, but if you want to break out, make for the **Cong Phu Restaurant** (☎ 880 254; mains 15,000-30,000d). No, the waiters don't look like extras out of a Bruce Lee movie, but they do offer wholesome meals. The menus are large photocopies in English; just tick the boxes and the food will arrive.

Getting There & Away

Minibuses depart from Lao Cai for Bac Ha (28,000d, two hours) around 6.30am and 1pm daily. Buses from Bac Ha leave for Lao Cai

between 5.30am and 1pm. The road is well maintained and the rural scenery sublime.

Locals on motorbikes will do the Lao Cai–Bac Ha run for about US\$10, or even Sapa–Bac Ha (110km) for US\$15, but it's a long way to be on the back of a bike. Sunday minibus tours from Sapa to Bac Ha start at US\$10, including transport, guide and trekking to a minority village. On the way back to Sapa you can bail out in Lao Cai and catch the night train back to Hanoi.

Bac Ha is about 330km (10 hours) from Hanoi. Some cafés in Hanoi offer four-day bus trips to Sapa, with a visit to Bac Ha included.

HA GIANG PROVINCE

Ha Giang is the final frontier in northern Vietnam, a lunar landscape of limestone pinnacles and granite outcrops. On a map: it juts up like a boil into southern China, or at least that is how the Chinese seem to view it. The far north of the province has some of the most spectacular scenery in Vietnam and the trip between Dong Van and Meo Vac is a mind-blower for motorbikers, but not much fun on buses. It should be one of the most popular destinations in this region, but is one of those rare provinces that still requires a travel permit and the bureaucratic baloney keeps most at bay.

Ha Giang

☎ 019 / pop 45,000

Ha Giang is somewhere to recharge the batteries on the long road north. The scenery is a good taste of things to come, with limestone outcrops soaring skywards over the town. Those heading further north to explore the districts of Yen Minh, Dong Van, Meo Van and Bac Me need to arrange a permit (per person US\$10) here.

INFORMATION

Travel permits can be arranged through the provincial police, with offices on the right bank of the River Mien, or through your hotel or **Ha Giang Tourist Company** (☎ 867 054; Pho Tran Hung Dao). It is easier to avoid the stone-faced police. The tourist company can also provide guides, which are officially required and cost US\$15 per day plus board and lodging.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are some great-value hotels in Ha Giang. As there are few foreigners, foreigner pricing doesn't seem to exist.

KHAU VAI LOVE MARKET: SPEED DATING FOR THE MINORITIES

Scenery aside, the other major drawcard in Ha Giang is the annual love market of Khau Vai. Forget the weekly jamboree in Sapa: this love market takes place but once a year and draws H'mong, Dao and Tay from all over the region.

The love market is speed dating minority style. Original swingers, the good folk of Khau Vai have been wife swapping, and husband swapping for that matter, for almost 100 years. Youngsters come to find a mate. Old flames fan the dying embers of a lost passion. It is adult friend finder before the internet made it easy. However, they are not in the market for Westerners.

It takes place on the 27th day of the 3rd lunar month in the Vietnamese calendar. For those of us that don't know our dogs from our dragons, that is usually sometime from late April to mid-May, essentially three months after Tet or Vietnamese New Year. Khau Vai is about 20km southeast of Meo Vac.

Hai Dang Hotel (☎ 866 863; 15 Pho Nguyen Trai; r 100,000d) A real bargain and opposite the bus station. Normally this could be a negative, but for those making the road trip north, the buses pull out early, so convenience is king.

Huy Hoan Hotel (☎ 861 288; 14 Pho Nguyen Trai; r 100,000-250,000d) The smartest place in town with slick rooms, big beds and a lift: not something you'd expect in these parts.

Sao Mai Hotel (☎ 863 019; Pho Nguyen Trai; r US\$10) One of the first places when approaching on the road from Hanoi, this is the best all-rounder in town. Enjoy hot water, TV and comfortable beds. There's karaoke at all hours, though.

Thanh Thu Restaurant (Pho Tran Hung Dao) One of the best eateries in town run by a friendly family who look after diners. Bring a Vietnamese phrasebook, as there is no English menu.

Be careful venturing into local *pho* shops for a quiet breakfast. We popped in for some noodles and stumbled out having done 20 shots of *xeo* with the friendly locals. And it was only 8am.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Ha Giang is 290km north of Hanoi (76,000d, seven hours by bus) on Hwy 2. It is also possible to get here from Bac Ha, but the tough road is only for the strongest 4WD or very experienced bikers. The route passes through the lively towns of Xin Man and Huong Su Phi and is very beautiful. There are daily buses north to scenic towns like Meo Vac, but it's much better to explore the beauty of Ha Giang with your own wheels.

Around Ha Giang

It's all about the motorbike trip north to the districts of Dong Van and Meo Vac, nestled against the border with China. Leaving Ha

Giang, the road climbs over the **Quan Ba Pass** (Heaven's Gate). Poetic licence is a national pastime in Vietnam, but this time the romantics have it right. The road winds over a saddle and opens up on to a vista straight out of Lost Valley of the Dinosaurs. Like Halong Bay, it's dizzying to think of the forces of nature that carved out these incredible limestone towers.

Dropping into **Yen Minh** through pine forests, it is worth stopping for a drink before the final leg into the surreal scenery near China. **Dong Van** is just a small, dusty outpost, but don't be disappointed as it is the gateway to the best road trip in Vietnam: the 22km that snakes its way along the mountainside to **Meo Vac**. The road has been cut into the side of a cliff face and far below are the distant waters of the Nho Que River and, towering above, the rock face of this mighty gorge. Take your time and soak it up, as this journey is one to savour.

Meo Vac is a district capital hemmed in by mountains and, like many towns in the north-west, it is steadily being settled by Vietnamese from elsewhere. There are several small faceless guesthouses in town, charging 60,000d for a basic room with shared bathroom. Best is the **Viet Hung Guesthouse** (r 60,000d) with comfy beds and a TV, located on the road to Khau Vai district. You need to show your travel permit when checking in at any guesthouse. There are a couple of *com pho* places around town, plus the market has some food stalls.

Looking at a map it's seems possible to continue from Meo Vac to Bao Lac in Cao Bang province. However, Ha Giang authorities are dead against this and will do their best to stop you. Approaching from Cao Bang Province, there is little they can do but force you to carry on to Ha Giang city. However, be prepared for a hefty fine and a lot of negotiation.

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