

Xin chào from Viet Nam

V. A tale of three tourist towns (cont'd) - Luc Yen, Bac Ha & Sa Pa

I am going to Bac Ha on the recommendation of my guidebook. Bac Ha is an underdeveloped tourist town, full of colorful tribespeople and with not too many tourists. That's because foreign travelers flock to a more tourist-oriented place called Sa Pa to see indigenous folk, bask in their quaintness, and buy their fabrics and wares. Sa Pa is the main destination and de facto terminus of the northern segment of the backpacker express. Bac Ha, in contrast, is a 27 kms detour off the main road, in the middle of nowhere's nowhere. What the guidebook fails to mention, however, is that at least 20 of these kilometers are uphill at 10% grade. Prissy triangular signs (the kind that just makes you want to get out a shotgun and redecorate the sign so it would look at home in rural America) indicating a 10% slope appear every few switchbacks. I cannot remember cycling a more difficult length of pavement. Ten percent is the average climb; some U-turns are probably twice as steep. I am pretty sure I can tell the difference between 6-8-10 and 12% grade. It is a skill that comes with practice. I find 12% very difficult to climb and can cycle the incline for only several hundred meters before being forced to rest. Ten percent inclines are taxing, but I can go for several kilometers without taking a rest. Anything under that I don't need to rest more than usual, which is 5 minutes every half hour.

To say that Bac Ha is undeveloped is an understatement. At midweek there is not a single other foreign visitor now in this town, which probably has several hundred hotel rooms. It is Wednesday and apparently backpackers come here only on Sunday, market day. That's when villagers from the surrounding hills arrive to sell their crops to buyers, who are purchasing for the needs of towns and cities. As far as I can tell, the tribes people in Viet Nam do not operate through co-ops or unions; everything is done on the free market. The Viet Nam communist party has followed in the footsteps of its Chinese counterpart in embracing the concept of an open market, at least for agriculture. I suspect that Viet Nam, like China, went through a period of agricultural collectivization, which failed. As sound in theory as the idea is, collectivization seems to fail everywhere it is tried: the Soviet Union, China, etc.

Even though Bac Ha is not much of a tourist town, it is set up for foreigners and has a few hotels as well as a few restaurants that have English/French menus. (Viet Nam is one of the world's only non-French speaking countries that still thinks French is an international language). Operating out of my hotel is a young man who gives tours. Today, I am his only potential customer. I choose a half-day walking tour (\$3) that will take me into the hills to visit villages and schools. Having once been involved in education, I still hold an interest in schools and am eager to visit one. My guide, who graduated from the Ha Noi Agricultural University, is ethnic Vietnamese but grew up among the Flower H'mong and speaks their language. This ethnic minority takes the prize as the nation's most spectacularly dressed people. The women's skirts resemble elaborate bed quilts, embroidered cloth pieced together in dayglow colors. They use flower patterns and flower colors, thus their name.

We set off down the earthen road that immediately becomes a mud road that starts to resemble a muddy tar pit. It rained solidly last night. The mud is about half a foot deep, enough to suck my biking shoes right off my feet. The only other footwear I carry are plastic sandals. I try my guide's galoshes but they are too small. I end up buying a new pair, the correct size, for \$3. They work just fine. The most interesting part of my walking tour is a visit to a school. First, we see a secondary school for day and boarding students and then a junior secondary school for day students; these resemble their counterparts in a typically poor part of China or, I guess, just about anywhere else in the world. The students do not wear uniforms (they do in Ha Noi, though); it is an expense that the parents cannot bear. The students look diligent enough in these schools. They seem to have individual sets of textbooks, classes are divided by age, students stand when they are called on, etc. Nothing surprising. Then, down the road, we run across a third school, one my guide thinks I wouldn't be interested in because it's poor quality. It is a boy's boarding school, at the junior secondary level. This is a one-room school. About twenty boys aged 8-13 live in an adjoining dormitory. All are Flower H'mong. There is a single teacher, not highly qualified according to the guide, who may himself not have graduated high school. This contrasts with the day school down the road where almost all the teachers have some sort of credentials. The boys who attend this boarding school live in the surrounding hills, some about a five-hour's walk away. They go home on the weekends and come back at the beginning of the week, loaded down with all the food that they will need for the week. They cook for themselves; they do everything for themselves, unsupervised, except by the single teacher during class time. There are no girls at the school. Educating females is not a priority in this part of the country. This school is the only educational choice for families who live in the farms on hills out of Bac Hac who want their sons to have an education. I suspect there are places in Viet Nam where even this type of choice does not exist. The parents have hired the teacher, but he is paid by the local government. None of the students has to pay fees, but each must provide his own food. My guide says that the education in this school is not as good as what is found in the day school down the road. Occasionally, however, a student will excel sufficiently by graduation to gain admission to the local high school, which has dormitories for students who must board because they live so far out of town.

Bac Ha suffers a black-out. It's not the first time the electricity has failed me during my Viet Nam trip. More often than not, I have run into power shortages (except, of course, in Ha Noi where the who's who of government reside). Most hotel rooms in rural Viet Nam come equipped with candles. I turn in early.

Except for the fact that it is raining, the 25 km run downhill should be quite enjoyable. I stop midway to rest my hands. Over the past week I have developed blisters from zealously gripping the handlebars (apparently my gloves — used for over 11,500 kms — have lost their ability to buffer the stress), but now I stop to rest different muscles: those that grip the brake levers. On steep downhills like the present ones, I am braking almost constantly, and my muscles ache after just a few kilometers. As I continue on, I look down to check my Catseye, only to find that it has fallen off the handlebar. I turn around, proceeding up the awful uphill I experienced a few days back, and retrace my steps for 4 kms, until I reach the point where I

took a rest. No Catseye. This minor tragedy — the Catseye odometer also tells me my speed, time and distance for the day, accumulated distance for the trip and life of the bike, gives me the maximum speeds for the day, and serves as my watch — gives me something to stew over for the next few hours, until I reach Lao Cai, a border town with China. The map is really confusing; I have no idea which direction I am going as it is too hazy to be able to read directions from the sun (I have been meaning to buy a compass for the last several decades). I find a watch store and buy a Casio knock-off for \$4. For the rest of the odometer's functions I will resort to pen and paper and mathematical calculations. I continue on, looking for the section of town that is supposed to have hotels and restaurants.

I plan to quit cycling for the day and stay the night in Lao Cai. It is only noon, but the next leg of the journey, 38 km to Sa Pa, is supposed to be pure hell. The guidebook states that it "...is straight uphill - unless you've been training for the Olympics, it's hell on a bicycle" (p. 280, 1999 ed.). As you might have guessed, experience has taught me to take my guidebook with a grain of salt. Yet this is quite a serious warning. On the side of the road I see a distance pillar. (It's not a milestone because it gives distance in kilometers. Do you call it a kilometer stone?) On all Vietnamese roads these stunted obelisks appear every kilometer and mark off distance. This one says: Sa Pa, 33 kms. This is quite surprising because (1) I did not know I was even on the road to Sa Pa, and (2) it means I have just done 5 kms of grueling uphill. In fact, I have been on flat city streets. Why should I spend time in this border town — I have always found border towns, such as Shenzhen, to have a certain amount of unwanted sleaziness— when I can be in Sa Pa in a few hours. I have a meal in a roadside café and head into the unknown.

With 30 kms to go, the road starts climbing. It is a more gentle climb than the route into Bac Ha, but it is still an 8-10% grade, and a decent workout. Perhaps an early stage of purgatory, but certainly not "hell on bicycle."

Sa Pa is a backpacker's haven. Restaurants make fruit shakes and serve spaghetti. The town is set in a valley with mountains on all sides. The locals, mostly toothless grandmother types, hound the tourists to buy jewelry, cloth, clothes and opium. Most people take day hikes through ethnic minority villages. I choose instead to stay in my room, which is on the top story of the town's tallest building so I can enjoy the most fabulous view available. My seven windows face an Alps-like vista. This is such a nice place to relax that the entire next morning I spend reading my novel, below the gaze of the mountains. Good book, good view, bike leaning against the wall. What more could I ask for in life? I have chosen for this trip a novel I have read before because I want to run through the corpus of its author. It is a novel for which I also have bought the original Spanish-language edition, as a way to improve my Spanish for my next trips to Spain and South America. I consider it the best piece of long fiction written in the last half of the past century. One might argue that Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* or even Cortázar's *Hopscotch* are greater, more intellectual works, but for my money García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the novel I am now rereading, is far more enjoyable, spiritual and meaningful, not to mention considerably less obtuse. I will read this book only on off-days (that is, days taken off from cycling) when I have at least several hours to spare. I pace myself so I

can finish the novel in five or so sittings. In this 30-day trip, I expect to have about that many cycle-free days.

Sa Pa is set up as a tourist town. Which is why I love staying in my room, with a good view and good book, far above street tourism. From this distance I quite enjoy the ambiance. In contrast, Bac Ha was where I learned more about the hill tribes, thanks to my knowledgeable guide. But it was Luc Yen, the little village I stumbled on at five in the afternoon, where I really experienced local living.

Next: A nail in the coffin of colonialism