

Riding the roads to nowhere

My second day in Bac Ha I rented a motorbike to head to the market at Can Cau north of Bac Ha and a few kilometers from the Chinese border. I arrived early in the morning before the day tours from Sapa showed up. The market was very colorful but it seems the steady trickle of day-trippers from Sapa had taken its toll on the local flavor with about 1/3 of the stalls devoted to tourist items. This was a fairly high percentage, given only a handful of tourist where there by the time I moved on to explore the back roads by motorbike. I randomly picked a road that was heading further up of the main road and



Self portrait riding a motorbike around Bac Ha.

seemed at least for the moment to be fairly well made. It turned out to be an excellent choice rising all the way up the mountain and into a highland area dotted with villages and fields of rice and corn. I got off the motorbike a couple of times to head out into the fields and mingle with the workers. For the most part were very willing and amused photography subjects, especially when they get to see themselves in the LCD display. I eventually reached a fork in the road with one road going in a direction that would probably intersect the main road back to Bac Ha and the other going roughly parallel in the direction of Bac Ha. I chose the latter hoping it would eventually wind up in Bac Ha. This road started out fine but got progressively worse. After a stream crossing the road had degenerated into a dirt track. I had decided to call it a failed mission and head back to the fork in the road, I had even road back about a half a kilometer, when I ran into a man walking along the road. I asked him if the road went to Bac Ha or



rather I pointed down the road and said Bac Ha. He responded with an affirmative and repeated the name at the time I thought was Bac Ha. I decided to give the road a little more of a chance and motioned for him to hop on the back of my bike. As the now "road," better described as a rutted out track, descended down some steep switchbacks I was wondering if I had made a mistake, both in trying to navigate this road at all and

Lunch with the road workers on a random road near Bac Ha.

to try to do it with another person on the back of the bike. We arrived at a tent before a stream crossing that looked anything but easy. Fortunately this was where my passenger was headed and he invited me in for a drink which turned into lunch as well. Via my phrasebook conversation it turned out he was a road worker and they were in the process of building this road. I also ascertained from him and his fellow workers that he had been misunderstanding my broken attempt at pronouncing “Bac Ha” thinking that it was a different town. I would have to go back to the junction and take the other road. This was a bit of a relief as the road ahead looked borderline unrideable. I thanked my host and offered some money for the meal which was refused and made my way back to the junction.



Flower H'mong Can Cau market, near Bac Ha.



**Flower H'mong baby
Can Cau market, near
Bac Ha.**



**Flower H'mong carrying a baby, Can Cau
market, near Bac Ha.**



**Flower H'mong replanting rice and amused
that I want to take a picture, near Bac Ha.**



Flower H'mong replanting rice, near Bac Ha.



Flower H'mong replanting rice, near Bac Ha.



Flower H'mong girl, near Bac Ha.



View of the landscape near Bac Ha.