

Ha Giang to Cao Bang: To boldly go . .

Arriving back in Ha Giang I had a couple of options on how I was going to reach the Dong Dang and the Chinese border. First was the rather boring and quickest option to back track through Hanoi and then back up to the northeast to the border. Of course this was never really an option for me. I took the road less traveled and armed with only a map, my guide book useless at this point, I set out across the north by local bus. I had determined that there was a direct bus that could get me as far as Bao Lam

about 80 km from Ha Giang and just inside Cao Bang province. From there I had to hope that there was onward transportation to Cao Bang if I was lucky or at least to the next city down the road. Worst case scenario I'd have to pay a guy to take me on his motorbike. I new there was a road on the map I just had no idea what kind of condition it was in and whether or not it was suitable for four wheel transportation, like buses. Not knowing exactly when bus was leaving I got to the bus station early at about 5:30 am. I knew there was at least a scheduled departure at 6:00 am to Bac Me the town before Bao Lam for what that was worth. Asking around at the bus station, which

meant pointing at my destination on the map and repeating "Bao Lam," it became apparent that I would have to catch the bus at another location so I hopped on the back of a guys motorbike who sped through the empty streets of Ha Gaing finally dumping me off at what appeared to be someone's house. I spotted the minibus inside the gate with the destinations Ha Gaing and Bao Lam written across the windshield and ascertained that this must be the driver's house. I tried to establish the time the bus would leave from the woman who was supervising the loading of cargo. I knew in my heart this was a futile attempt and any number I got would likely be meaningless but I wanted to try anyway. She



View of Bao Lam.



Main street in Bao Lam.

thought I was asking the price and quoted me a number that was too high I said no it's too much and climbed in anyway, preparing myself for a battle over the price later on, since I didn't have any alternative options.



View from one of the hills near Bao Lam.



Woman making Vietnamese hat, Bao Lam.

After two hours of driving around town picking up various items of cargo and a handful of passengers we were on our way to Bao Lam, although I knew from the amount of cargo on board it would not be a fast journey as there would be plenty of stops to drop off all the stuff it had taken two hours to collect. Fortunately it was, as I had hoped, a scenic one. The road wound through the mountains following a river hemmed in by steep karst peaks. As we past Bac Me the road began to get progressively worse and I began to worry about my onward transportation options. We arrived in Bao Lam a little before noon, which turned out to be a strip of road along the river in a beautiful setting amongst steep green covered mountains. After some good natured bargaining over the bus fare, ending with me getting my price after “charging the driver” for helping take some heavy cargo off the roof. I then set out to find onward transport. My prospects for getting out of town today did not look good. I did see a parked minibus with the words Bao Lam and Cao Bang but it didn't look like it was going anywhere soon. After a couple phrasebook enquires I determined that there was a bus to Cao Bang that leaves at 6:00 am. I looked around at the beautiful setting and thought to myself well there are worse places to be stuck for a day. Now I had to find some lodging. My first inquiry got a negative response, when I pointed to words for hotel or guesthouse in the phrasebook. I walked over to the market and began asking with the “international sign” for sleep, putting my head on my hands. I was pointed in the direction of a taller building by the river which turned out to be a guesthouse. With the lodging problem

solved I set out to explore the area. It was a friendly place which doesn't see many Westerners so I was a big novelty. I couldn't walk more than 100 feet through town without being invited in for tea. The six hour bus ride to Cao Bang was equally scenic and for the first time in Vietnam I did not have to bargain with the driver over the price and was just charged the same as all the locals. Cao Bang is not much of a city in itself, but again the attraction lies in the scenic countryside surrounding the town. I had hoped to rent a motorbike to explore the area but I could find anyone who



View from the bus near Cao Bang.

would rent me there bike. There was virtually no English in the town which made it even more difficult. I had to settle for paying a motorbike driver to take me to a nearby lake. The countryside was nice rice fields and Karsts unfortunately due to a glitch in either the card or my camera I lost 15 pictures from the ride (all of the best ones of course).

On to China: Back in Nanning again.

I head off to the Chinese border, after getting a street side haircut in Cao Bang. I had to try to make myself presentable to the border officials, hoping that I wouldn't look too impoverished after my stint in Southeast Asia to let back in to China. The crossing was not a problem, thanks to my haircut I'm sure. As I ate in a restaurant in the Chinese border town of Pingxiang waiting for a train to Nanning, I met a man who worked for the forest department and spoke some English. He was also headed to Nanning where he had a house. I saw him again getting off the train in Nanning he offered to help me find a hotel, I was planning to stay in the same place across from the station I stayed in last February and then he invited me to stay at his house. I did the calculation and decided it was unlikely he was hanging out in a restaurant in Pingxiang hoping to happen upon a foreigner who he could then rob, or harm in some other way. So I decided to take him up on the offer and see how the middle class Chinese lived. After I had accepted the invitation and was on the bus I thought of the homosexual angle and was relieved when he talked about his wife, to further reassure myself I tried to steer the conversation in a way to make it clear I was a heterosexual and not interested at all if that was on his mind. He lived in a simple but new apartment building in a complex of many identical cookie cutter units within a gated area. I found it interesting that all the keys were RFID to enter the buildings and pass through the gates. It was a simple two bedroom place dominated by the TV and stereo and Spartan in the way of other furnishings. He and his Vietnamese wife had a side business of buying stuff in China and selling it across the border in Vietnam. His wife was away on a shopping trip so we went out to eat with his younger sister (I think) who was studying English in University. I did my best to her practice but I think she was finding it difficult to understand me judging by some of the responses. I found it was best to let her ask the questions. After dinner, over some peaches and tea (an odd combination), I showed him

some of my pictures of Vietnam, since he had been there several times and lived in Saigon for a while. In the morning he escorted me to the bus stop where I could catch a bus to the main bus station.



Inside my host's apartment in Nanning.