

Jaw dropping Ha Giang Province

There are no buses between Bac Ha and Ha Giang via Xin Man the direct and most scenic route to Ha Giang (pronounced Ha Zan). I was about to try to start asking moto drivers how much the trip would cost when I was approached by a couple who had just arrived in Bac Ha for the market and amazingly enough, considering how few people visit the province, were also looking into transportation to Ha Giang. They had been talking to a local hotel about taking a jeep to Ha Giang province on a 3 day trip and were looking for others to share the cost. Doing the calculations, I may have been able to still do it cheaper on my own, but there were a number of unknowns, and I may have ended up on public buses for part of the trip which don't stop for pictures. I took them up on the offer and we headed off on Sunday, market day, towards Ha Giang. Our vehicle was an old USSR era Russian jeep, which is kind of cool but not so comfortable. Still it was much more comfortable than riding on the back of a motorbike with my big bag and camera gear, which would have been my other option. After getting my fill of the market in Bac Ha, we then stopped at another smaller but much more authentic market in the town of Lung Phinh almost completely populated with the extraordinarily colorfully clad Flower H'mong. When they are working in the fields wear colorful clothing, but when the head to the market they put on their "Sunday best." The road ran through some very scenic terrain before dropping down into the valley where the town of Xin Man lay. Another town with a Sunday market, although we arrived at noon just as the market was closing we did see some of the most amazingly dressed H'mong women I've seen as they were walking back from the market on our way into town. We ate lunch in the market, a simple meal of rice and pork (for me, my traveling companions were Jewish so they skipped the



Woman buying vegetables at the Bac Ha market.



The Sunday market at Lung Phinh.

pork), but we were the center of attention and it didn't take long before a crowd had gathered to watch the foreigners eat. Several shots of rice wine, and a few beers later, we continued to Ha Giang.

After spending a night in Ha Giang and obtaining the necessary permit to visit the northern part of the province (Vietnam still considers it a sensitive area ever since their border skirmish with China in 1979), we headed north to the town of Meo Vac. The road to Meo Vac was extremely scenic with karsts limestone peaks looking over mountain valleys sporadically adorned with terraced rice fields. The area was like Sapa mixed with the peaks of Halong Bay. Two of Vietnam's premier tourist locations merged into one fantastic landscape. It is amazing so few people visit one of the most scenic if not the most scenic regions of the country. The real jaw dropper is the road between Meo Vac and Dong Van. We arrived in Meo Vac, where we were going to stay, at about 3:00 pm. Since the weather was very nice and mornings are notoriously cloudy at this time of year we wanted our driver to drive up to the pass between Meo Vac and Dong Van and back to Meo Vac. He refused, despite our attempts to convince him otherwise. I'm not sure if he knew or not that he was pretty much throwing away any chance of a tip at that moment. It worked out for the better anyway as we hired motorbikes to do the trip which was a much better way to see the extremely impressive gorge topped with karsts peaks.

The road is incredible, cut into the side of the gorge high above the river below and climbing up to a mountain pass. It's one of the most scenic roads I've been on. The pictures can't do the sweeping views justice. Although it's not for lack of trying as you will no doubt notice by the number of pictures included in this report. The next day we headed through the gorge again, this time in the jeep, although the weather was nice there is nothing like the 360 degree view from a motorbike and the late afternoon sun. But the view didn't get old the third time either



Little girl clutches a drink at the Lung Phinh Sunday market.



Making friends eating at the market in Xin Man.



Flower H'mong girl and woman at the Lung Phinh Sunday market.



Ornately dressed woman returning from the Xin Man Sunday market.



Plowing a rice field near Quan Ba, Ha Giang Province.



**Replanting a rice field near
Quan Ba, Ha Giang Province.**



**Woman returning from Xin Man Sunday
Market.**



Woman at Xin Man Sunday Market.



Very happy group of tribal people near Meo Vac, they were very eager to have their pictures taken and look at them on the screen..



Perhaps one of the reasons they were so happy this man is carrying a large jug of alcohol, near Meo Vac.



Woman packing up at the Xin Man Sunday Market.



View of peaks across the gorge along the 22 km stretch of scenic highway between Meo Vac and Dong Van.



Tribal woman and girl along the road between Meo Vac and Dong Van.



Tribal women making twine along the road between Meo Vac and Dong Van.



View of the gorge along the 22 km stretch of scenic highway between Meo Vac and Dong Van.



Tribal woman making twine along the road between Meo Vac and Dong Van.



Kids resting along the road between Meo Vac and Dong Van.



View of the gorge along the 22 km stretch of scenic highway between Meo Vac and Dong Van.



The road between Meo Vac and Dong Van.



Our Russian jeep, Ha Giang province.



View of the gorge along the 22 km stretch of scenic highway between Meo Vac and Dong Van.



View of rice patties near the town of Quan Ba, Ha Giang province.