



Trekking in Vietnam



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The market town of Sapa, lies on the Hoang Lien Son mountain range near the Chinese border in north west Vietnam. I arrived on the night train from the Vietnamese capital Hanoi, for 3 days trekking. I had been promised some of the most stunning scenery in South East Asia and the view from the town didn't disappoint. As morning mist lifted over the mountains I surveyed endless valleys of sweeping rice fields in a mixture of yellow, brown, orange and green. Dotted amongst them were clusters of small huts, which were the villages of the local tribes. We followed the path into the valley, and watched in awe as the magnificent scenery came to life. We saw a herd of water buffalo wallowing in a pool of mud and one being expertly ridden by a young boy.

Our guide explained about the two dominant ethnic groups in Sapa, the Black Hmong and the Dzao. These tribes had to occupy the least hospitable land at the highest altitudes because they were the last to arrive in the area in 18th century. It wasn't long before we met a Black Hmong girl of about 10 years old. She was wearing an indigo dress with a long belt wrapped several times around her waist, many silver bracelets and a large silver necklace.

The girl had a round red mark about the size of a 2p coin on her forehead, it seemed strange so I asked her about it. Her English was good and with a little help from our guide she explained that she had not been feeling well so her mother had used a traditional remedy to cure her. Her mother had taken a buffalo horn, red hot from the fire and placed on the girl's forehead. Apparently this is a common treatment for headaches. The girl was quite happy and seemed to feel better but I felt relief that I had packed my Paracetamol!

She accompanied us on our hike for a couple of hours, expertly jumping streams and avoiding ditches, before racing ahead to her village which was where we were to spend the night. When we arrived, hot and sweaty from our trek, she and her friends took us down to the river to have a swim and cool off. We dived in eagerly as the girls watched from the side, laughing at us getting carried away by the strong current of what had appeared to be a gentle mountain stream.

When we'd dried off we went back to our lodgings. We would be spending the night in a simple wooden house with clean mattresses and mosquito nets for us all. We sat on the porch as the sun went down and reflected on our experiences so far. The tribes might have had to contend with the poorest land when they