

## Sapa, Vietnam

Words by Adam Horler | photos © Andrew J Loiterton | film by [Jon Moore](#)

To the outside world, Vietnam is associated with many things; years of war, endless rice fields, exceptional cuisine. What it is most certainly not associated with, is riding mountain passes on road bikes.

The hillside town of Sapa, located at the edge of north-west Vietnam by the Chinese border, was the start and end point for the second ride of the Rapha Continental Asia. Sapa, a market town in Lao Cai province, lies in the shadow of Phan-Xi-Pang (pronounced 'fan-si-pan'), at 3,143 metres the highest mountain in the region. Phan-Xi-Pang belongs to the Hoang Long Sien mountain range, the south-eastern outpost of the Himalayas, known by some as the "Roof of Indochina". At 1,500 metres above sea level, Sapa has a subtropical climate in summer and a very temperate climate during the winter.

We arrived during the rainy typhoon season (the same time of year as the hurricane season in the West). We knew there was a risk of tropical storms but, experience tells us, this is often the best time of the year to see Asia, a time when local culture shines through unhindered by tourism.



The weeks leading up to our expedition were spent storm-watching and we were fortunate to be in Sapa between two big weather systems that brought seven typhoons to north-east Asia; kismet, or so we thought. We sent an advance party a day ahead to check the routes and logistics, aware that Vietnam's infrastructure is not the most organised. It was a good job we did, as word quickly came back that a rethink might be needed on a number of fronts:

"Day one route currently has a massive landslide across the road about 70km in, no way we will get the bikes through. Day two is little more than a dirt track, mountain-bike material. We need to change hotels, there's a huge landslide 4km from the entrance and we could not get the van through. May also put a stop to day three's loop."



Undeterred, the rest of us gathered at Hanoi airport to catch the overnight 'express' train to Sapa; it would take more than eight hours to cover the 317km to Lao Cai province. As with any journey of this nature, getting there is half the fun, especially when it comes to carting bikes and luggage through the mazy streets of Hanoi and across rail tracks to board an old, slow sleeper train.

From Lao Cai it was an hour's transfer up to the equally sleepy Sapa, with its 36,000 inhabitants, nestled up in the valley. The guys had managed to book us into another hotel, run by a French patron, who turned out to be cycle-racing fanatic. The revised plan was to ride two out-and-backs from Sapa, taking in a total of 347km and 8,934m of climbing, short of the original plan by about 120km and 2,000m respectively.



With one at 41km and another at 30km, the climbs in the area are long, pretty steep and often Alpine in profile, as is the landscape – the French name for the mountains in this region is the Tonkin Alps. Stands of pine and jagged peaks can

beguile you in to thinking of the Colombier or Galibier but then you round the next corner to be confronted with steep slopes carved into rice terraces. The descent and climb to Lao Cai and back to Sapa is the most Alpine-like, with switchbacks and some sweeping, snaking (and very fast) sections.

On the first day, it poured with rain non-stop and we found ourselves riding for long stretches on roads undergoing resurfacing. The continued rainfall also ensured there was plenty of mud and debris.

A highlight of the day was our diversion to a small Hmong settlement along a road once barred to tourists as a consequence of Christian missionary activity in the area; the Hmong traditionally practice shamanism and venerate their ancestors. It's very likely we were the first outsiders to go up this road for some time and certainly the first to do so on road bikes.



Heading north, away from Sapa, we turned right into a beautiful valley that felt like it was just ours for the day. After navigating some pretty muddy, wet sections, we ended up going as far down the valley as we could before we hit a road that was simply too rough to ride. More stones and boulders than dirt, it was a reminder that landslides remained a very real threat in the area.

We rode back the way we came, which called for a long, 41km climb out of the valley and to the highest pass above Sapa, at 2,006 metres.

The drag out of the valley included a stop for a mechanical in another Hmong village, where pot-bellied pigs, chickens and water buffalo roamed around. The children and women of the Hmong seem to do all the heavy work, carrying tremendously heavy loads from one place to another, while the men travel about on their motorbikes. This is far from an unusual sight in Asia and I have seen old ladies carrying 60kg sacks of pebbles up steep slopes.

The following day gave us good weather with just a couple of short showers and periods of intense heat. We again headed north but continued up and over the highest pass and down into the valley below. About 6km into the descent we hit an unmade construction road that continued for another 20km or so. We continued along the valley floor as we skirted round the Phan-Xi-Pang range.



The final climb back to Sapa turned into a competition with small victories all round. An unseen mechanical meant one of us was left straggling with nothing but the occasional rallying call from the support car to keep him going as the others had ridden out of sight. It was a lonely trudge home.

Travelling back to Hanoi on the sleeper later that night, we shared experiences and discussed the dramas of the trip. It was awe-inspiring riding but we were lucky to ride with so little incident. A week later, another typhoon passed through the area and 19 people died in landslides and flash floods.

This trip would not have been possible without Long Troc from xedap.org, not to mention the great logistical support in Vietnam from Dan and Joe of Marco Polo Travel Adventure Company (Vietnam Mountain Bike). Thanks also to the management of the Victoria Sapa Resort & Spa.

The haunting beauty of the region had a profound effect on all of us that were lucky enough to ride in the area and the hope that we might someday return is perfectly captured in the words of *Call of the Mountains*, a traditional Hmong folk song:

"The mountains call me, they always have. They're calling me now, and I will be back there someday."







