



3

Limestone hills frame the lush farms.



2

Minority tribes people don traditional garb everyday.



4



5

You'll meet shy but friendly villagers along the way.

Take in the seldom visited sights of the Ha Giang valley.

# HIDDEN VALLEY

Chris Canty gets into Vietnam's strikingly beautiful northern Ha Giang province on an old Chinese scooter for the weekend of a lifetime. Photography by Koen Maathuis.

**T**he fact that police permission is needed to get to Ha Giang, and that travellers must be escorted by a guide at all times, have kept the tourist numbers low. But this has helped maintain what can now be called Vietnam's final frontier.

I had decided to go there, basically because not many had, and I wanted to get there on a Chinese scooter, because no one said I could.

While millions of riders dodge each other through the streets of Hanoi on their not-so-trusty 125cc terror, thoughts of me travelling long distances and climbing steep mountains had made the locals laugh hysterically. "An old scooter couldn't go through the Meo Vac-Dong Van pass," they insisted, and I could see their point.

My bike, which had only cost me USD300 (SGD489), had no right fibreglass guard due to a "Hanoi kiss" (a crash with no fatalities) the week before, and the yellow smiley heart sticker over the headlight didn't really give off the hardcore adventure bike look I was going for. The horn sounded like a squealing pig, and it had a top speed of 65 kilometres per hour. Any faster and the bike would begin to shake uncontrollably and disintegrate.

But I had faith in my hog.

## CLIMB EVERY MOUNTAIN

For a province visited by so few people, Ha Giang Town surprisingly was only a six-hour ride from Hanoi, the last three hours on an

excellent new highway. While the town itself is pleasant, with a bustling market full of ethnic minorities and a nice riverside setting among surrounding hills, it basically serves as a starting point for the trip further north.

Our police approval forms and escort were organised by the Ha Giang Tourism Office. They are needed because the area is close to the Chinese border and Vietnam has had a touchy relationship with its huge northern neighbour since the late '70s, when Vietnam was attacked.

My guide spoke English fluently, and despite having a much more powerful

motorcycle (it wasn't a scooter) he didn't flinch when he saw my ride. While motorcycling is certainly the most invigorating way to see the area, the tourism office can also organise jeeps for the journey, which might be a better option in the wet season (June to August).

The ride started smoothly as we followed the river, passing huts, villages and rice plantations for the first 20 kilometres, slowing down for the occasional bull, goat and pig that had the right of way. As it was early morning, the mist hung over the hills, disguising their height but not their presence as we entered into the heart of a valley, ready for the climb.

For the next 30 minutes the road rose until we reached a small town with a vibrant market.

## STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND

We attracted many stares, as if the locals had never seen a foreigner before, and they laughed at my "towering stature" even though I'm only 5' 11" (1.8 metres) tall. I hover over the whole town.

An array of ethnic minorities were there, including the Mong people with their large black hats, the Nung people that wore a series of keychains around their neck and waist, and the Lo Lo people with their detailed multi-coloured garments. In Northern Vietnam, what you wear is who you are and instantly signifies where you come from. Their attire is extravagant and



On Sundays, villagers gather at markets to barter for food, clothing and tools.

# 6



Terraced lands  
– steps to  
sightseeing ecstasy.

grand, yet they wear it every day of their lives, changing colours for festivals, or when going to a “love market” where they met other villagers.

Further along the road we came to the Quan Ba Pass, also appropriately known as “Heaven’s Pass”, which looked high above the small town of Quan Ba and the well-known twin hills that resemble... a woman’s body part.

Further along we hit Yen Minh Town, which offered an excellent potato and tofu lunch, and was the start of the Meo Vac Loop, a road that circles through the vastly unexplored region.

### VILLAGE PEOPLE

After passing through the tiny dusty town of Dong Van, we decided to park our motorcycles and walk down the valley to a Mong village.

At first the people were shy when they saw us approach (some looked downright shocked) and since they did not speak Vietnamese (their language is a native tongue unique to their ethnic group), verbal communication was impossible.

However with the aid of a digital camera, taking their photographs and showing it to

## WE GRAVITATED TO THE LIGHT OF A WEDDING PARTY TENT WHERE PEOPLE LAUGHED, ATE AND DRANK TOO MUCH POTENT RICE WINE.

them, we succeeded in making them laugh hysterically, instantly breaking the ice. The young girls were especially excited and playful, while the grandmas simply smiled and held our arms affectionately as we walked.

### KILLER VIEW

We continued the journey, travelling over the 1500-metre high Ma Phi Leng Pass that skirted a huge canyon. The highlight of the trip, the pass offered a great vantage point of the jagged mountains surrounding the canyon on the Chinese side.

Given this view alone, it is hard to imagine why the province has not been firmly placed on every traveller’s itinerary. Despite its isolation (mobile phones won’t work outside of Ha Giang town), homes on the side of the road sold water and bottles of fuel, which was handy because scooters are not known for the size of their tanks. The roads were deserted except for the occasional villager



Get ready to be gawked at – the curious tribes people rarely encounter foreigners.

carrying crops of his back. A hard existence, but needed in an area that survives on farming.

As night started to approach and the cold set in (note to Tiger traveller: bring warm clothing), we rode into Meo Vac and checked into the Nho Que Hotel. It was a basic hotel with only eight rooms and resembled a cheap motel from the ‘60s, but it was clearly the best option the town had to offer. The best thing about it was the large vacant rooftop, where we sat and looked at the sun descend behind the mountains.

Tonight the town had a power blackout (which was common), and the only lights were from candles lighting the fruit stalls on the road, and the occasional pho restaurant. Like others in the town, we gravitated to the light of a wedding party tent (they had a generator) where 30 or more people laughed, ate and drank far too much potent rice wine.

The next day, which was a Sunday, the town burst into activity as hundreds of ethnic minority villages came to the market, ready to barter for an array of animals, clothing, food and traditional tools.

Heading back to Ha Giang Town, we passed more villages, more Sunday markets, and more of the most beautiful scenery I had ever seen. I was thankful it was still relatively hidden, but insistent that more people should see it.

I returned to Hanoi the next day. Although my smiley sticker had started to peel off, my pig-horn died and my scooter now had a top speed of 24.5 kilometres per hour, it was good enough to pass all those who said it couldn’t be done. **Tiger Tales**

\* TIGER AIRWAYS FLIES FOUR TIMES A WEEK TO HANOI, THE GATEWAY TO HA GIANG. BOOK YOUR TICKETS AT [WWW.TIGERAIRWAYS.COM](http://WWW.TIGERAIRWAYS.COM)