



SA PA

SOJOURN

FROM COLONIAL HILL STATION TO BOOMING TOURIST TOWN, VIETNAM'S FAVORITE MOUNTAIN RETREAT HAS RECEIVED A MUCH-NEEDED INJECTION OF GLAMOUR THANKS TO ITS FIRST FIVE-STAR HOTEL. YET THE TRUE SPIRIT OF THESE HIGHLANDS IS STILL DEFINED BY THE HILL TRIBES WHO CALL THEM HOME.

BY JOHNNY LANGENHEIM
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES CARNEGIE

Rice terrace views on a Hmong-guided trek through the Sa Pa countryside.

ROLL INTO SA PA in a souped-up Toyota sedan with tinted windows, emerging disheveled from the cool neon-lit cocoon that has rattled us at breakneck speeds along mountain roads that wind their way along the border with China's Yunnan Province. Twelve hours of travel in all, west from Dong Van via Ha Giang and Lao Cai—frontier towns that are home to ethnic minorities known generically as “hill tribes.”

Sa Pa, the capital of the northwestern Vietnamese district of the same name, is no exception, though it immediately feels different. As photographer James Carnegie and I grab our gear from the trunk, I spot a pair of Hmong women peddling trinkets to passing tourists. We've been shooting an adventure sports assignment in remote highlands where tourism is still a trickle, and this is the first time on our trip that I've witnessed such an interaction. Unlike its counterparts to the east, Sa Pa is a boomtown, and the signs of this are everywhere.

The town square is thronged with people: selfie stick-toting Hanoians up for the weekend; backpackers from Europe and America; local street sellers and construction workers; and, conspicuous in their traditional garb, members of the five ethnic minorities that make up around 85 percent of the district's population—Hmong, Dao, Tay, Giay, and Xa Pho. With its hodgepodge of colorful concrete buildings fronted by faux-colonial facades, rutted unpaved roads and smart new avenues, Sa Pa feels like a work in progress, at least until you reach the imposing bulk of the Hôtel de la Coupole. Opened last December as part of Sofitel's MGallery collection of luxury properties, the building is resplendent with domes, rooftop pavilions, and wrought iron-railings and lamp posts: a Belle Époque-meets-art nouveau fancy that's straight out of a Wes Anderson film.

Touted as Sa Pa's first international five-star hotel, La Coupole is certainly making a statement. Its grandeur recalls the Roaring Twenties, the interiors blending period French and Indochine-era elements. Bold is an understatement—but then, this is the latest brainchild of Bangkok-based architect Bill Bensley, one of the most fertile imaginations in hotel design today. I learn later from La Coupole's general manager that Bensley has been a regular visitor to these mountains for the last 20 years.

Entering the hotel via a dimly lit street that's still under construction, we find ourselves in a soaring, scented lobby filled with flamboyant features, including a reception desk backed by oversize spools of colorful silk thread with an installation of old French travel trunks, dressmaker's dummies, and vintage hats arranged above. We sink into plush velvet banquettes and are handed glasses of some zingy tamarind concoction while we're checked in.

Just arriving feels like the height of hedonistic indulgence, probably in part because we've spent the last few days staying in US\$10-a-night homestays. But incongruous as it feels to us, La Coupole is in part an homage to Sa Pa's colonial past.

Situated over 1,600 meters up in the Hoang Lien Mountains, Sa Pa in the early decades of the 20th century was a popular summer retreat for the French *colons*, providing cool respite from sultry Hanoi and Haiphong (average year-round temperatures here hover around

15°C). A military sanatorium was built in 1912, followed quickly by a succession of villas and hotels. Throughout the 1920s and '30s the little *station d'altitude* enjoyed a golden age, with telephone and telegraph service, potable tap water, and electricity from a modern hydropower plant. The postwar years were not as kind, however—both the Viet Minh and French attacked the town during the First Indochina War, after which Sa Pa remained derelict for decades. But since the turn of the millennium, tourism has resuscitated the once abandoned resort and enabled it to reclaim its place among Vietnam's top destinations.

The same natural attributes that attracted the colonial French are

Overlooking the Kim Son Bao Thang Tu Pagoda atop Mount Fansipan.



THE FIRST THING WE SEE IS
AN ENORMOUS BUDDHA MEDITATING
ON A LOTUS FLOWER, THE LARGEST
STATUE OF ITS KIND IN VIETNAM.



THE DETAILS

Getting There

While an airport for Sa Pa is on the drawing table, for now, most visitors take the overnight train from Hanoi, an eight-hour trip. From the railway station at Lao Cai, it's another hour's drive to Sa Pa.

Where to Stay

Hôtel de la Coupole - MGallery
84-21/4362-9999;
hoteldelacoupole.com;
doubles from US\$108.

Trekking

Community-based tourism operator **Ethos Spirit** (ethosspirit.com) offers numerous guided treks into the Sa Pa countryside; textile workshops with hill tribe artisans are also available, alongside a variety of cultural tours and village homestays.



now drawing a steady flow of mostly domestic tourists, who seem especially taken with the banks of chill mist that roll off the slopes of Mount Fansipan—at 3,143 meters, Vietnam's highest peak—and sweep through town all day long. The mountain has become a major draw in its own right, with the construction of a cable car in 2016 that's capable of shuttling up to 2,000 visitors to the summit every hour—around the same number that climbed these slopes each year before it was built. Last year, 3.2 million people visited Sa Pa town, twice as many as four years earlier.

The cable car is on our to-do list, but first I want to learn more about the ethnic groups that make up the majority of the population here and indeed all over the mountainous hinterlands that connect Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, and China. And for that, we're meeting an Englishman.

Phil Hoolihan pulls up on a dirt bike clad head to toe in leathers, and we make for the rooftop of Le Gecko Café, a backpacker-friendly spot serving French and Vietnamese food and excellent coffee. The place is a testament to the country's burgeoning café culture, which took root in the 19th century under the French but is now definitively local.

"It's not the mountains that make Sa Pa unique, it's the culture. It's the people," Hoolihan says with the conviction of someone who's

spent two decades living among them. He first came to Sa Pa in 1997 as part of a research team tasked with assessing the social impacts of nature reserves on rural villages. It proved to be the beginning of a lifelong relationship and in 2012, Hoolihan and his Vietnamese wife Hoa cofounded Ethos, a community-based tourism enterprise that evolved out of 15 years of charitable work with local people.

"A lot of our guides I've known since they were kids. They learned English from us," he adds. "The Hmong have an outstanding facility for language." Ethos's *raison d'être* is to generate income, create opportunities, and improve welfare standards for the minority communities of northwestern Vietnam, and it's a model that's proving popular with visitors: the company's treks and tours are currently rated as Sa Pa's number one outdoor activity on TripAdvisor.

As we're chatting, a Hmong woman arrives at our table wearing the customary outfit of her people: an embroidered tunic and trousers, complete with shoulder bag, all made from hemp. She introduces herself as Ker, our guide for tomorrow's trek. I'm keen to know more about the highly regarded traditions of textile weaving and dyeing that exist here and she promises—in perfect English—to arrange a demonstration.

The Hmong are relative newcomers to Southeast Asia. They migrated from southern China in the 18th and 19th centuries to



The exuberantly designed indoor swimming pool at Hôtel de la Coupole. Opposite: Spools of hill-tribe thread backdrop the hotel's reception desk.



A walkway bridges the two wings of Hôtel de la Coupole. Opposite, from left: Inside the hotel's lobby; rainbow trout tartare at Chic.



out the textile stalls on the building's second floor. Following Ker upstairs, we find a corner of the market that is exclusive to ethnic crafts, filled with cushion covers and wall hangings and rolls of cloth whose motifs all carry meanings specific to a given tribe. "We make all of our clothes by hand from hemp and indigo plants that we grow ourselves," says Ker, gesturing at the textiles surrounding us. They're the color of a clear sky at dusk.

Back downstairs, we pick up ingredients for the lunch we'll have in the hills: chicken and eggs to make Hmong spring rolls, and organic vegetables that include familiar things like broccoli and garlic but also endemic greens such as *su su*—a sort of creeper with spiraling shoots—and spinach-like *cai meo*. Rounding a corner, I'm suddenly greeted by a severed dog's

head, its jaws set theatrically in a rictus snarl and its paws laid out carefully to the side. It's an unwelcome reminder that dog meat is popular in Vietnam, especially in the north where it is served on special occasions. When Ker's basket backpack is full to the brim, we take a taxi out of town to begin the trek.

Our leisurely route through a valley takes us past terraced rice paddies, fields of corn and cassava, rustling stands of bamboo, and the odd huddle of houses. In one dirt yard a sow lies on her side, her litter of piglets frantic for her teats. The local dogs eye us with suspicion—understandably, perhaps. Along the way, Ker points out the plant from which indigo dye is derived, *Indigofera tinctoria*. She instructs me to rub a leaf between my hands, which acquire a greenish-blue hue. The stains wash off, but for Hmong women who work with the dye all their lives, their palms are permanently tattooed.

There are more than 90 villages and hamlets in the Sa Pa District, but only five or so of them are on the tourist radar. That's a mixed blessing for the Hmong, says Ker—they don't want hordes of tourists flocking to their communities, but they are interested in the kind of small-scale "cultural" tourism that gives them some agency. When we arrive at Ker's own home in the village of Sa Sinh, her husband Hong and daughter Za come out to greet us. James and I help prepare lunch, cutting vegetables and filling the spring rolls.

It's the best meal I've had so far this trip—fresh country fare accompanied by fragrant and punchy chili sauce and shots of heady rice wine that Hong dispenses every five minutes. We're more than a little merry by the time we say our goodbyes. CONTINUED ON PG.115

escape persecution by the Manchu overlords of the Qing Dynasty, who branded the Hmong and other minorities as Miao, a term synonymous with "barbarians." They have been self-sufficient outliers for the last 300 years, their historic semi-nomadism perhaps driven by their refugee status and the fact that they have long lived hardscrabble lives confined to mountain backwaters with low agricultural productivity.

Their outsider status in Vietnam was not helped by the fact that the CIA recruited Hmong in neighboring Laos to help fight their covert war against the Viet Cong, as they attempted to prevent the transfer of troops and arms along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Tens of thousands of Hmong sought asylum in the United States after the war and today there are Hmong communities scattered across the country, from California to Kansas to—as anyone who's seen the Clint Eastwood film *Gran Torino* knows—Michigan.

As James and I head back to the hotel, I notice how many restaurants, shops, and homestays reference Hmong culture in some way or another—in their name, decor, food, or entertainment. "All the businesses in Sa Pa are owned by Kinh," Hoolihan had told us, referring to the lowland people who comprise more than 85 percent of Vietnam's population. "But they almost never employ Hmong workers." Sa Pa, like all boomtowns, appears to have its winners and its losers.

WE JOIN KER EARLY THE NEXT MORNING and walk over to Sa Pa's central market for provisions, taking a quick detour to check

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On the walk back to town, we visit a friend of Ker's who demonstrates how the Hmong weave their clothes. She shows us not only her handloom but also the stiff hemp stems that are softened and stripped to make thread, as well as a barrel of fermenting indigo that must be tended just like sourdough starter. "The whole process takes 12 months, from the growing and harvesting to the dyeing and weaving," Ker explains. "The garments are completed in time for the lunar New Year celebrations."

Back in my deluxe room at Hôtel de la Coupole, I resist the urge to sink into the cumulonimbus comforts of my bed, opting instead to do a few laps of the hotel's heated indoor swimming pool. Dubbed Le Grand Bassin, it's another hymn to art nouveau elegance, complete with marble pillars, chandeliers, mosaic tiling, plush daybeds, viewing balconies, and floor-to-ceiling windows. Enormous faux-bronze statues of Olympian figures in swimsuits preside over the pool. It should feel kitsch, but after a day of sensory overload, the fantasy elements strike a perfect balance.

THE NEXT MORNING we opt for the complete Fansipan cable car experience, which starts by taking a train from the station housed in the same building as La Coupole. Sun Group, the conglomerate behind all of this, is one of Vietnam's biggest real estate developers and is playing a major role in laying down leisure infrastructure through its Sun World subsidiary in secondary cities like Danang on the central coast, where it has built a sprawling, Disneyland-esque theme park.

James and I scramble onto the old-fashioned carriage, avoiding selfie sticks wielded like pikes as the little train sets off on the two-kilometer ride up the mountain to the gondola base station. An elderly lady points at me and laughs, apparently at my improbable height, before instructing her friends to take photos as she stands next to me by way of comparison.

There is no denying the spectacle of the cable car ride. We sail high over rice terraces and evergreen forests and steep mountain ridges before pulling into a white dome that serves as the upper station. There is another cable car that takes passengers all the way to



A Hmong woman trekking to the market in Sa Pa.

the peak of Fansipan, but we decide to walk the last section.

The first thing we see as we emerge is an enormous Buddha meditating on a lotus flower, apparently the largest statue of its kind in Vietnam. Dancers in Hmong outfits are performing for the tourists that pour out of the station every few minutes. We clamber up the 600 steps that lead to the peak, passing bodhisattva statues, pagodas, and restaurants en route.

The top of the mountain has effectively been transformed into a theme park, but it is also a working monastery, with monks' quarters and a temple. The whole thing is a strange mix of sacred and profane—thousands of us glued to cell phones and cameras, intent on capturing the moment, while the bodhisattvas offer a silent invitation to simply be in it.

CONTRARY TO MY EXPECTATIONS, foreigners make up a tiny proportion of the guests at Hôtel de la Coupole. "The vast majority of our guests at the moment are Vietnamese," confirms general manager John-Pierre Joncas. "It really reflects the economic boom that's happening here at the moment."

A Canadian from Montreal, Joncas has a penchant for fine art and design that makes him a perfect fit for the hotel. "The inspiration here is Indochine meets haute couture meets hill-tribe culture," he explains. Many of the artifacts in the 249-room hotel are originals garnered from Bill Bensley's personal collection. The walls are adorned with hand-painted pages of *La Mode Illustrée*, the 19th-century precursor to *Vogue* or today's

fashion catalogues. Each floor of the hotel features unique artworks and antiques.

Joncas takes us up to the roof, where a narrow bridge connects the two wings of the hotel and the twin galleries that house the on-site restaurant Chic and the burlesque environs of Absinthe, the hotel bar. The divans and Roman statuary and hand-drawn graffiti of naked showgirls all suggest wicked decadence, though the place is decidedly sedate when we visit and I settle for a classic Old Fashioned instead of unleashing the green fairy.

At Chic, Indian chef Shaik Basha serves what he calls classic French comfort food with some nods to Vietnamese cuisine. "We always use local ingredients," he explains. "Our tartare, for example, uses dill because there is no parsley here, but the flavors and cooking techniques are still classically French." And so is the presentation. Food arrives on white plates stamped with the hotel emblem: a tartare of locally farmed rainbow trout; Hmong-style air-dried beef and mango salad; a hearty pot-au-feu beef shank; and finally, Vietnamese coffee crème brûlée.

The next day, stretched out in the air-conditioned comfort of a minibus that will bring us to Hanoi in about six hours, I spot a couple of Hmong women with their children striding toward town. Hoolihan told me they often walk for hours to come and sell their wares. A tough, resourceful, and creative people habituated to living on the fringes. And yet they are in many ways the beating heart of Sa Pa's identity—a fact that shouldn't be forgotten amid Hôtel de la Coupole's bid to revive the elegance and indulgence of bygone times. ●