

SUSTAINING SAPA

With hill tribe communities in Sapa, Vietnam, finding it increasingly difficult to live off a single harvest a year, game changers like Sapanapro (a social enterprise backed by AirAsia Foundation), as well as Sapa O'Chau, a tour operator with heart, have come to the rescue, building on local knowledge to effect social change.

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The Red Dao are recognisable by their red headdresses and the intricate embroidery that adorns their cuffs, lapels, and back. Each woman typically owns seven sets of traditional clothing.

'd barely covered half the distance of my 13km trek up the elevations of Sapa towards Ta Phin village when what was supposed to be a casual hike turned into a race against time, as dark clouds rolled in from behind the mountains. "We have four seasons in Sapa," my guide, Mei, said. "But we like to joke that those seasons rotate every hour instead of every year!"

As the first drops of rain fell, Mei began taking larger strides, prompting me to do the same. With no shelter in sight, I felt the same urgency she did. It was 13 degrees Celsius out, and I wasn't keen on getting drenched in the rain. The locals we passed were already sheltering under makeshift umbrellas of cardboard boxes and discarded roof tiles. As the drizzle turned into a torrent, Mei and I ran along a gravel path, blindly stumbling along the way in our quest to reach Ta Phin, one of the many villages of the ethnic minorities in Sapa.

THE JOURNEY Located 1,500 metres above sea level in the Lao Cai province, some 380km north of Hanoi, the town of Sapa grazes the border between Vietnam and China, so understandably, getting there took some time. A sleeper train whisked me from the concrete jungle of Hanoi to the lush countryside of Lao Cai in nine hours, and this was promptly followed by an hour's drive up the winding hills of Sapa.

A total of 53 ethnic minorities – including the two larger communities of the Black H'mong and Red Dao, with whom I later became acquainted during my stay – live in the highlands of Sapa. As I stumbled through the labyrinth of hotels, restaurants and roadside stalls, I found myself on a hill where I was greeted by serene terraced paddy fields and villages below.

Surrounded by such peace and beauty, I felt an eagerness to begin my journey of discovery into an unknown land with so many diverse communities, unaware of just how much I would eventually take away from this trip.

GIVING BACK TO THE PEOPLE My gateway to the local ethnic groups was through Sapa O'Chau, a tour operator and non-profit organisation in Sapa. Since its founding in 2007, Sapa O'Chau's priority has been to support the ethnic minorities in the area by channelling all profits into developing the local communities.

The company's founder, Shu Tan, a Black H'mong herself, works hard to give back to the community through Sapa O'Chau. Sustained by the company's operational revenues, Shu, with the help of volunteers, diligently tackles social and economic issues such as illiteracy and limited job opportunities.

Driven by a pressing need to support their families, many ethnic residents from Sapa's surrounding villages attempt to secure jobs in town, only to be turned away due to a lack of requisite skills and qualifications. Sapa O'Chau bridges this gap by providing locals language courses in English and French, as well as training to become tour guides, of-



fering them a leg up in their quest to secure gainful employment in the tourism industry. This programme has been a great success, and proof of this is my designated guide, Mei.

A member of the Red Dao minority, Mei's spoken English and local knowledge of the route from Sapa town to Ta Phin village were nothing short of impeccable.

INTO THE HIGHLANDS While 13km isn't far by regular hiking standards, the intense ascents and sharp gravel paths made the trek to Ta Phin an arduous undertaking, as my tired muscles and sore feet readily attested. We had crossed the village of Suoi Ho and had just entered Matra village, both predominantly populated by the Black H'mong community, when the rain began to fall again.

As we trudged uphill, we stumbled across the first signs of shelter within a one-km radius, but when I asked Mei if we could possibly rest in the house until the rain ceased, she

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT Children of the Red Dao are often seen in beautiful embroidered clothes.

The Red Dao herbal bath entails a 20-minute soak in a wooden bucket, and customers are requested not to rinse away the bathwater to maximise the herbs' effects.

Buffaloes that work the field during the rice season are allowed to graze freely after the harvest.



EMPOWERING THE PEOPLE

AirAsia Foundation is the philanthropic arm of the AirAsia Group, established to bring about social change through entrepreneurship via its social enterprise awards, which come with seed funding and mentorship. The Foundation also takes advantage of AirAsia's strong network to enhance opportunities for award grantees. To date, the foundation has assisted 13 social enterprises, benefitting a whopping 3,278 family- and community-members across the Asean region. All AirAsia Foundation grantees have effected change in their respective ways, from job creation to environmental preservation. Working hand-in-hand with deserving and dynamic social enterprises, AirAsia Foundation aims to find sustainable solutions to social challenges drawing on the passion, fortitude and spirit of innovation AirAsia is known for. www.airasiafoundation.com





shook her head and pointed to a leafy branch hanging above the front door. “The leaves mean that a woman in the family has just given birth or a ritual was just performed,” she said. “And during this time, visitors are not allowed into the house.”

As most of them are animists, the Black H'mong generally worship spirits, and believe that their homes are inhabited by ancestral and nature spirits. They also practise rituals to appease these spirits. Not one for breaking taboos, I followed Mei up the trek, still in search of shelter from the rain that was showing no sign of letting up.

As we continued our hike, Mei shared her knowledge of the Black H'mong. I learned that they originated from China, and had migrated during the 18th century into Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand. Apparently, the Red Dao also share similar Chinese origins and are believed to have migrated to Vietnam as early as the 13th century, but beyond that, specific information about these communities is hazy, at best.

As we dodged hogs, buffaloes, and ducks, Mei explained that despite belonging to different ethnic groups, the Black H'mong and Red Dao share many similar traits, one of which is their love for embroidery. Black H'mong and Red Dao women spend considerable time painstakingly embroidering their own clothes and those of their family members. Needlework is not just a passion but also important from a social perspective, as it signifies a woman's marriageability in both cultures.

MEETING THE RED DAO When I finally reached Ta Phin village, I was drenched to the bone. Mei introduced me to a group of women huddled together, busily at work on their cross-stitch designs. Many of them did not have eyebrows, and I later learned from Mei that shaving eyebrows and hairlines was a sign of marriage and beauty in the Red Dao community.

My host was Man May, a Red Dao woman who lived with her husband and two children. Her house is one of the homestays supported by Sapa O'Chau, providing visitors

the opportunity to experience everyday life among locals.

My hosts lived almost exclusively off fire for most of their energy needs, with one or two light bulbs and a refrigerator being the only draw of electricity. As the sun set and darkness began to swallow the land, I found myself crouched in my undershirt next to the kitchen fire for warmth. Flames and fluorescent glows mingled into dancing lights on our faces, and as the family worked to prepare dinner, I pitched in with the abysmal cooking skills I had. Before we dove in, our host offered us a cup of rice wine, which is another universal staple connecting the Black H'mong and Red Dao – they love pairing rice wine with their meals.

HERBAL MASTERS The Red Dao are masterful herbalists, and I had the opportunity to witness their expertise first-hand during my hike from Sapa, when Mei and I came across a woman who was involved in a motorcycle mishap. Fortunately, she only suffered mi-



ABOUT SAPANAPRO

Sapanapro is a social enterprise owned and managed by Red Dao members to sustainably develop the community's deep knowledge of herbal therapies. In 2015, the organisation received a grant from AirAsia Foundation to improve its spa facilities and to train its members in sustainable harvesting methods. These efforts are also aimed at developing the community tourism potential village of Ta Phin, a traditional Red Dao village within easy reach of Sapa. Sapanapro has a host of indulgent therapies on-site, with the mainstay being the Red Dao herbal bath. It also offers bathing medicines that can be bought at the establishment, or through its various distributors. Sapanapro is a successful grantee under the AirAsia Foundation.

📍 TA CHAI VILLAGE, TA PHIN COMMUNE, SAPA DISTRICT, LAO CAI PROVINCE, VIETNAM
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nor scrapes, and as she immediately began scouring the surroundings for specific leaves, crushing them into an antiseptic paste for her injuries, it was obvious that traditional remedy know-how was second nature to the Red Dao.

Earlier on during our hike, Mei had a field day pointing out the herbs and other plants along our trek that could be used as home remedies. She plucked a blue flower and explained that its essence worked great for sinus problems. Then, she showed me a yellow fruit that when boiled, made a great toothache remedy, but was otherwise poisonous!

Another signature home treatment for the Red Dao is the herbal bath – a spectacular show of their deep knowledge of healing herbs. This centuries-old practice is known to nourish the skin, relieve minor ailments and enhance vitality. To keep alive the knowledge of home-grown remedies practised by generations of Red Dao, an entrepreneurial endeavour has emerged in Ta Phin to support the Red Dao community – Sapanapro.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE

Man May's daughter helping prepare dinner for the night.

At Sapanapro, the herbal bath ingredients are cooked in a vat until only the essences remain, after which they are channelled into the baths or sent for further processing to be packaged into retail products.

A glimpse of the myriad Hmong motifs on display at Sapa O'Chau's handicraft workshop.







Terraced paddy fields are a common sight within the mountainous regions of Sapa. Here, they form a striking pattern of green and gold hues.



PACKING LIST

Planning your own trekking adventure in Sapa? Don't forget these essentials.

MOSQUITO REPELLENT Due to the wet landscape, bringing along mosquito repellent is highly recommended.

HIKING BOOTS While some trails may be easy, sharp rocks underfoot can make for a bad hiking experience.

SUNSCREEN Sapa is prone to strong sunshine, so remember to stay protected.

WEATHER APPROPRIATE GEAR Do your research on suitable attire to wear, as Sapa has climates that range from 30 degrees Celsius to below-zero temperatures!

HIKING BACKPACK Do keep in mind that an ill-designed backpack can chaff your shoulders after hours of hiking.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE

Rice wine is generously served during meals with the Red Dao.

Women of the Red Dao spend much of their free time embroidering, as a full set of clothes can take up to a year to finish.

The route from Sapa to Ta Phin village offers a great opportunity to take in spectacular views.

A FLOURISHING TRADITION A social enterprise backed by AirAsia Foundation, Sapanapro was established in 2007 by a group of Red Dao women together with scientists from the University of Pharmacy and the Hanoi Agriculture University. Initially conceived as a products-based company, catering mainly for the sale of herbal remedies to end consumers, Sapanapro has grown from strength to strength, and works tirelessly to improve the livelihoods of locals in Ta Phin village by training them in sustainable harvesting techniques, as well as business development skills, empowering them to commercialise traditional medicinal products and services so that they may harness their deep knowledge of herbal remedies to become self-sufficient and independent. Currently, over 50 per cent of the company is owned by Red Dao shareholders.

Sapanapro also purchases forest produce directly from Red Dao foragers at fairer prices; this offers local foragers the choice to bypass middlemen who often underpay, enabling them to earn a decent wage.



But possibly the most exciting of Sapanapro's initiatives is the establishment of a spa that offers traditional treatments including the famous Red Dao herbal bath, as well as herbal therapy products for post-partum health restoration, women's health, relaxation therapy and foot massages. Sapanapro has created job opportunities for over 100 members of the Red Dao community, and potential for further growth looks bright.

Today, Sapanapro is led by Ly Lao Lo, a member of the Red Dao minority, who is proud that the enterprise emulates his vision to help local communities prosper through their herbal medicinal skills. I jumped at the chance to experience the age-old tradition of his people when Ly invited me to try out the famed herbal bath.

The bathing ritual was not unlike taking a dip in a Japanese *onsen* (hot spring bath); however, instead of sitting in a bath, I was required to crouch in a big wooden pail. The fragrance wafting from the bath water reminded me of wolfberries, and the heat was a comfort against

the cool draft that was coming in through the windows. The view from the bathroom was simply breathtaking, with its vantage point affording an eagle's eye view of Sapa's mountainous terrain and the village dwellings spread across it, all while I enjoyed my herbal soak.

I am not sure if it was the comforting heat or the medicinal bath mix taking effect, but I definitely felt a post-bath bliss, and had an overwhelming urge to take a nap – a phenomenon the locals call *say thuoc*. A 10-minute siesta in the relaxation area, and I was as right as rain, and ready to make my way back to Sapa from the village.

CHANGING THE GAME Social enterprises like Sapanapro and Sapa O'Chau have made a colossal difference in uplifting the local communities. The ethnic minorities of Sapa now have much to look forward to – better income, better education for their children, and a better life for themselves and their family.

With the help of Sapa O'Chau, children who once walked 15km daily just to get to school

are now boarded in Sapa town, and can focus on their education without the exertion. Sapanapro's success story involves benefiting more than 200 families to date, and its steady annual growth means that it can continue to assist more families in the future.

These entrepreneurial ventures have not only opened up their homeland to the world, so that visitors can share in their rich ethnic heritage and culture, they have also brought local communities together to build a more prosperous future for everyone.

And after getting to know both ethnicities during my visit, I've learned not only about what makes their cultures unique, but what ties them together as well – their way of living off the land and their warm hospitality towards visitors. Perhaps the most memorable part was learning not about the differences between people, but how similar we all are in the end. ③

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