



The Spirit of Adventure

Northwest Loop

6 days

highlights:

Breathtaking scenery along the way
Colourful hill-tribes
Mountain's cool climate
Great trekking amongst ethnic hill-tribe villages
Homestay experience

itinerary disclaimer

The itinerary attached is correct at time of printing. It may differ slightly to the one in reality. Occasionally our itineraries change as we make improvements that stem from past travellers, comments and our own research. Please note that our brochure is usually released by the end of each year. If you have booked from the previous brochure you may find there have been some changes to improve the itinerary. It is very important that you print a final copy of your Trip Dossier to review a couple of days prior to travel, in case there have been changes that affect your plans

DETAIL ITINERARY

Ha Noi – Mai Chau – Dien Bien Phu – Lai Chau – Sa Pa

Day 1 Ha Noi- Mai Chau

Morning drive from Hanoi to Mai Chau, a beautiful valley in Hoa Binh province. As soon as you get out of Hanoi, the limestone mountain ranges rush up and give the scenery an imposing view. Arrive in Mai Chau late noon, have lunch in Mai Chau and hike around the villages full of house-on-stilts and textile products of local people to learn about the routine life of Thai tribal people. Among the villages you will pass by during this trip, Mai Chau is the closest place where you can meet the hill tribal people, though, due to the ease to reach the nearest town of Hoa Binh, the village is gradually losing its primitive characters. Still, it is the most convenient 1st stop on the long route of the Northwest Loop. The village is inhabited by Thai people, who are believed to be homogenous with the Thai people in Thailand and Southern China. Amongst the 53 ethnic groups of

Vietnam, they are considered one of the most civilized for the delicate dress, for beauty and elegance of women, and for nice, wide, spacious houses-on-stilts, and above all, for hospitality

Overnight: Thai village homestay

Meals included: none

ETHNIC MINORITIES OF VIETNAM

There is nothing better than walking amongst the rice paddy patchwork that makes up the mountains of northwest Vietnam. To awake and wander off from the village among the clouds and watch as the mist rises from the mountaintops is unforgettable. Vietnam is home to 54 ethnic minorities and a number of these have made the mountainous region of the north their base. During our time here we'll meet many of these fascinating people and have the privilege of staying as guests in their villages. As we wander through the mountains we're constantly met by the delighted squeals and smiles of children and we'll see many members of the ethnic groups who still wear their traditional dress. We'll meet people dressed in exquisite hand-embroidered clothes, and others weaving fabrics, embroidering ancient patterns, dying cloth with indigo and using beeswax to create a batik design. The ethnic groups are well adapted to the harsh life on hillsides, and you will see many terraces built into the slopes where rice and vegetables are grown.

Day 2 Mai Chau - Son La – Dien Bien Phu

It's a long day today since the mountain roads do not allow the car's highest speed exceed 45km per hour. Upon leaving Mai Chau the roads begins to deteriorate, however many villages dot the hillsides and undulating terrain make for an interesting journey, you are crossing the most magnificent part of the Hoang Lien Son - the Tonkin Alps, the home of most colourful-dressed Montagnards who still maintain lots of their long-term culture and traditions. We travel to Son La across the Moc Chau Plateau, where located hundreds of immense farms of dairy cattle and where produce the best tea of Vietnam, catch a glimpse of the many tea plantations and see the Black Thai hill tribe people. We keep driving on the winding roads, cross over the Pha Din Pass before heading to Dien Bien via Tuan Giao. The most picturesque scenery is that of Pha Din Pass, which is well-known as a historical site during the French War in 1954, a high and dangerous pass at an elevation of 1300m, and a breathtaking view. We spend the night in Dien Bien city

Overnight: Muong Thanh hotel or similar

Meals included: breakfast

Day 3 Dien Bien – Lai Chau

In the morning we enjoy a walk around to see this fast growing town. Dien Bien is only 35km from the border with Laos. Being the last battlefield of the French during their war with the Vietnamese, which ended with the fall of the French colonial control in Indochina and the replacement of the US Army not so long, Dien Bien Phu now returned to be a green valley inhabited by dozens of the ethnic groups. Visiting the historical sites in Dien Bien will also make your trip more memorable. To name a few, they are Dien Bien Museum, A1 Hill, the shelter of the French general De Castries and the cemetery and memorial of the Vietnamese and French soldiers died during the fierce fight in 1954

The journey north continues on to Lai Chau Town. You should know that soon before 2010, the nice valley of Lai Chau will be underwater in a construction plan of the biggest hydropower station in Southeast Asia. Along the way we see very few other travellers, mostly rural dwellers who are just as interested in finding out about our lives as we are of

theirs. The communication with the people from tribal groups living surrounding Lai Chau like Black Thai, White Thai, Muong and Dzao people will sweep away your tiredness of the long trip. After checking into hotel, you have the option of embarking on a boat for a two hour trip along the Da River, passing through the stunning mountain landscapes. The pace is very relaxed, a perfect way to observe the local lifestyle in close up.

Overnight: Lan Anh hotel or similar

Meals included: breakfast

Day 4 Lai Chau – Sin Ho - Phong Tho - Sapa

Today we head South to Sapa via Phong Tho, the old chief town of Lai Chau province before Dien Bien took over this role in 1993. First stop on the way is Sin Ho which is home land of the Red Hmong, Kho Mu, Mang and Dao ethnic minorities. They are settled there longtime ago and still retain their traditional culture and habits. The trip to Sin Ho is occasionally suspended due to the restriction of the local authority. Departing Sin Ho we make our way past the hilly region to Phong Tho. This timeless town is surrounded by stunning mountain backdrops and lush tea plantations. After lunch in Phong Tho we keep driving on another one of Northern Vietnam's most spectacular roads on the way to Sapa. This bumpy road links to many hill towns and villages. At an elevation of 1,600 meters, Sapa was founded in the early years of the last century as a hill resort for French administrators when the heat on the plain became unbearable. After checking into hotel we can soak up the fresh climate as much as we want by spending our time wandering around this charming town and some legacies of the French period

Overnight: Royal hotel or similar

Meals included: breakfast

Day 5 Sa Pa

In the morning we take a short trek to Catcat village, the village of H'mong tribe in the valley, which remains very generally uncorrupted outside forces. Excellent views of the valley, the magnificent limestone and paddy fields of H'mong village. Enjoy some visits to local families and reach their customs. After the village down into the valley, the Cat Cat waterfall will be visible. A "White curtain" cascade appears, surrounded by flowery valley and deep-green pines. The rocks near the river and waterfall provide a marvelous place for picturesque photos and sunbathing during good weather...

In the afternoon our vehicle will take us to TaPhin valley, around 15kms from Sapa. Here you will see the ruins of the old French Colonial Church by the left-hand side of this dirt road where we stop to get entrance fees to enter the village. Leave your jeep at the end of the dirt road then walk into the village to visit the rich culture and friendly tribes here, we visit the villages of the Red Dzao and Black Hmong minority people, enjoy the view of the valley and visit the caves in the village's outskirts. Our guide will assist you communicating with the locals while visiting around the village. Take a ride back to Sapa for around 30 minutes and you must stop some times on the way to take photos of the fabulous valley. Many "Kodak moments" are awaiting for you a long the way back to Sapa

Overnight: Royal hotel or similar

Meals included: breakfast

Day 6 Sapa - Ha Noi

We drive back to Hanoi (350km) via Lao Cai, taking a brief look at Ha Khau border gate, viewing wonderful landscape and scenery along the way, lunch en route, back to the hotel in Ha Noi for dinner and a toast to the completion of one of Vietnam's most spectacular loops

Your adventure ends upon arrival in Hanoi. If you do not have other arrangements in Vietnam, Vietnam Spirit Travel can book additional nights for you at the starting point hotel

travel style: Independent

If you're looking for something different (perhaps group travel isn't for you) or you want an extension to your trip, an Independent adventure could be just the thing. These private itineraries will take you to a new level of personal experience and self discovery. Transport and accommodation are provided and to give you maximum flexibility, sightseeing and entrance fees are not included except those specified in the itinerary.

group size

N/A as this trip is on a private basis.

accommodation

4 nights in standard class hotels or guesthouses, 1 night homestay

The standard will vary according to where we are and we ask for your patience, as at times things do not work the way you are used to at home. Sometimes there may be no electricity, the plumbing may be temperamental, there is only cold water in the showers or not being served western food for breakfast. These minor inconveniences will become part of the overall experience which you will look back on with a smile!

Please keep in mind that accommodation as shown in the itinerary is subject to availability at time of booking. The closest available alternative will be substituted if our first choice hotels are not available. This trip operates on a twin share basis (two single beds in one room) except when we are in a home-stay where we are one big happy family. Single supplements are only applicable to single travellers who wish to have their own room

transport

private Air-conditioned vehicles

physical rating * easy

You are required to carry your pack on and off trains and buses, up hotel steps, etc. Your itinerary includes an easy paced trekking of several hours in on hilly terrain, in conditions that are likely to be hot and muggy. You may raise your heart rate a little bit on this trip.

important notes

1. During the months of October and November Vietnam is prone to heavy rains. While we continue to run successful trips during this period please note that our itinerary is subject to change as the conditions require.
2. Please note that mobile phones on a GSM or Global Roam network may work in some less rural cities on this trip

PASSPORT & VISAS

The visa requirements for your trip vary depending on where you are from and where you are going. We keep the information up to date as much as possible, but rules do change. It is important that you check for yourself.

For the most up to date information please refer to our Vietnam Travel Facts page

For information on the location of your nearest embassy or consulate we recommend the following website: http://dir.yahoo.com/Government/Embassies_and_Consulates/

If the visa application form requires a contact address in the destination, please give either your starting point hotel or the address of our postal address (which you will find in the Contact Us page)

VISA SERVICES

A large number of our travellers have found it beneficial to use a specialist 'Visa Service'. As it is their business to obtain visas every day, these companies build up good working relationships with the various embassies and consulates. They are usually able to obtain a visa more quickly than you would, especially if a destination is not represented in your home country or if you live too far away to visit an embassy in person, a visa service can be invaluable. Visa service companies do charge, but you should weigh this up against the convenience and time you will save.

It is your responsibility to ensure that you are in possession of the correct visas for your holiday and onward travel. Vietnam Spirit Travel cannot accept responsibility for anyone who is refused entry to a country because they lack the correct documentation.

INSURANCE

You must be comprehensively insured as a condition of travelling with Vietnam Spirit Travel. Insurance should include coverage for personal accident, medical expenses, baggage loss, and cancellation or curtailment of your holiday. We will ask you to confirm your insurance details as part of our travel registration process at the start of your journey. If you do not have appropriate insurance we will insist you obtain insurance. We reserve the right not to provide the services booked with us until insurance is purchased

HEALTH

There are no specific health requirements for entry into Vietnam. However, you should consult your doctor for up-to-date information and prescriptions for vaccinations, anti-malarial requirements and any reasonably foreseeable illnesses whilst travelling in Vietnam. We recommend that you carry a First Aid kit as well as any personal medical requirements (including a spare pair of glasses). Please be aware that for legal reasons our leaders are prohibited from administering any type of drug including headache tablets, antibiotics, etc. Please ensure that you are adequately prepared. Vietnam Spirit Travel recommends the services of International SOS for all the medical requirements of our travellers and staff when travelling in Vietnam. International SOS's 24 hour clinics have expatriate doctors and specialists, and can be found at the following locations:

Website: www.vietnammedicalpractice.com

HANOI

Van Phuc Compound, 298 I Kim Ma Road, Ba Dinh District, Hanoi, Vietnam

24-hrs Emergency Tel: +84 (0) 4 843 0748, Fax: +84 (0) 4 846 1750

Email: hanoi@vietnammedicalpractice.com

HO CHI MINH CITY

Diamond Plaza, 34 Le Duan Street, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

24-hrs Emergency Tel: +84 (0) 8 822 7848, Fax: +84 (0) 8 822 7859

Email: hcmc@vietnammedicalpractice.com

DANANG

50-52 Nguyen Van Linh Street, Nam Duong Ward, Hai Chau District, Danang, Vietnam

Tel: +84 (0) 511 582 700, Fax: +84 (511) 583 049

24-hrs Emergency Tel: +84 (0) 913 917 303

Email: danang@vietnammedicalpractice.com

MEDICAL REQUIREMENTS

Our adventures bring together people of all ages. It is very important you are aware that, as a minimum, an 'average level of fitness and mobility' is required to undertake our easiest programs. Travellers must be able to walk without the aid of another person, climb 3-4 flights of stairs, step on and off small boats, and carry their own luggage. Travellers over the age of 70, or travellers with a preexisting medical condition, are responsible to ensure that they have the necessary fitness and mobility to comfortably complete their chosen trip. While our leaders\guides work hard to ensure that all our travellers are catered for equally, it is not their responsibility to help individuals who cannot complete the day's activities unaided

money exchange

Currency exchange rates often fluctuate. For the most up to date rates please refer to the following website: <http://www.oanda.com/>.

The official currency in Vietnam is Dong(VND). The Dong at the time of writing trades at approximately 16,000 VND to USD1. The US dollar, preferably crisp clean bills, can be used to directly purchase goods and services along with the local currency,. Travelers checks can be cashed at authorized foreign exchange outlets and banks and require presentation of passport. There is normally a 2 to 5 percent transaction fee for cashing, however it can be difficult to change traveller's checks outside the big cities. Other major international currencies may be exchanged in the main cities, where Visa and MasterCard may also be used for cash advances. ATMs are available in most large towns throughout Vietnam. Most hotels offer exchange services at a reasonable rate. It is not possible to exchange Vietnamese Dong outside the country so convert or spend all your Dong before leaving. Black markets are reemerging in Vietnam but are considered a danger and best avoided

Make sure that the Vietnamese notes you receive are not torn, this because many shops and restaurants will not accept them. Also try not to change too much money at one time, as you will end up with a large wad of notes.

spending money

Every traveller is different and therefore spending money requirements will vary. Some travellers may drink more than others while other travellers like to purchase more souvenirs than most. Please consider your own spending habits when it comes to allowing for drinks, shopping and tipping. Please also remember the following specific recommendations when planning your trip.

final payment

Your final payment needs to be paid in US\$ cash to our representative on day 1 of the tour. We recommend that you organise before arriving at your destination. If this is not possible, money exchanges and banks can be found at the Airport upon arrival, or close to the starting point hotel, where its possible to obtain US dollars. Charges or commisions may apply.

meals

5 breakfasts are included

While travelling with us you will experience the vast array of wonderful food available in Vietnam. Generally, to give you the maximum flexibility in deciding where and what to eat, not all meals are included in the trip price. Your group leader/guide will be able to suggest favourite restaurants during your trip.

meal budget

please allow USD10 each day for meals not included

You will also need to allow enough money for the following:

Money for drinks and shopping.

Tipping is very much appreciated by local guides, hotel staff, drivers and restaurant staff. As a guide, allow US\$5-8 per day

emergency fund

Please also make sure you have access to an additional USD400 as an 'emergency' fund, to be used when circumstances outside our control (eg. A natural disaster) necessitate a change to our planned route or unforeseen incidents such as an outbreak of Avian Influenza. This is a rare occurrence!

For comparability, all prices in this dossier are quoted in one currency. We use the US Dollar since that is familiar to most. However, once on tour you will need to pay for all goods and services in the local currency.

SUPPLEMENTARY TOUR INFORMATION

arrival complications

We don't expect any problems, and nor should you, but if for any reason you are unable to commence your trip as scheduled, as soon as possible please contact our management, requesting that you speak to or leave a message for us. To do this, please refer to our Emergency Contact. If you have pre-booked an airport transfer you will be met on arrival at Hanoi Airport. Our representative will be holding a sign with your name when you exit the airport terminal. If for any reason you cannot locate the person please call our management and if you have not made contact with our representative within 30 minutes of clearing customs and immigration, we recommend that you make your own way to the starting point hotel. If you take a taxi directly from the airport expect to pay around 150,000 Dong (approx. US\$10). Use a metered taxi and avoid taxi touts. Providing you were eligible for a transfer you will then be reimbursed for this cost on arrival.

emergency contact

Vietnam Spirit Travel's Hanoi Office can be reached on Tel: 84 4 7192898
Hotlines 84 1685 734 016 and 84 987 876 013 or alternatively email
emergency@vietnamspirittravel.com

pre and post tour accommodation

If you require extra nights accommodation before or after your tour, we will be happy to organise this for you. The rates for this service are shown in the price section. Our pre and post tour accommodation rates include the cost of a hotel room along with local taxes, booking services and administration expenses. It is therefore likely that hotel rates available locally will be lower than those offered in our brochure. It is not compulsory for you to book your pre/post tour accommodation through Vietnam Spirit Travel. Any extra nights accommodation required should be booked at the same time that you book your tour. We will always try to book extra nights accommodation in the same hotel that has been designated as the Starting Point for your tour, but in certain circumstances, this may not be possible. If your extra accommodation is prior to the start of the tour your voucher should be presented to the hotel reception upon check-in. If the extra accommodation is after the end of your tour, the voucher should be presented when the accommodation included in your tour has ended

keeping in touch-communication while on the road

If you need to be contacted while travelling we recommend that you set up an email address that can be accessed on the road, rather than relying on postal mail. Email cafes are becoming increasingly commonplace and cheap throughout Vietnam, and have quickly become the preferred way for our leaders/guides and travellers to stay in touch. If someone wishes to contact you in an emergency while you are on one of our trips we recommend that they refer to our Emergency Contact at emergency@vietnamspirittravel.com or fax 08 4 7192898 or call our hot lines 84 1685 734 016 or 84 987 876 013

We recommend that family and friends don't try to contact you through phoning hotels en route, as our hotels are subject to change, and our hotel receptions often don't have English speaking staff.

your fellow travellers

As you travel on a trip you will be exposed to all the pleasures and maybe also some of the frustrations of travelling in a group. Your fellow travellers will probably come from all corners of the world and are likely to be of a variety of ages too. We ask you to be understanding of the various needs and preferences of your group - patience with your fellow travellers is sometimes required for the benefit of everyone's travel experience. Remember too that you have responsibilities to the group. If you are requested to be at a place at a certain time, ensure that you don't keep the rest of the group waiting. We have found time and time again that the very best trips we operate are those where the dynamics within the group work well - this takes just a little effort on your part.

your tour guide

All Independent trips are accompanied by an experienced local English speaking guide. The aim of the guide is to take the hassle out of your travels and provide information on the places you are travelling through including historical, cultural, religious and social aspects, offer suggestions for things to do and see, recommend great local eating venues and introduce you to our local friends so as to help you have the best trip possible

what to take

Try to pack as lightly as possible (try to stay under 15 kg /33lb). It is in your own interest as you will have to carry your own luggage at times. Please make sure you bring good walking boots or shoes particularly in the colder winter months. Hanoi is a wonderful city for shopping so you should leave room for your purchases.

checklist

Travel documents: passport, visa, travel insurance, air tickets, voucher

Health requirements arranged

Money: travellers cheques/cash/credit card Money pouch

First Aid kit

Day pack to carry your personal needs during the day

Alarm clock Torch/flashlight

Mosquito repellent

Hat, sun cream and sun glasses

Refillable water bottle

Tampons can be difficult to buy in Vietnam

Vietnam travel guide - great for history and general information

Light raincoat in the wet season (May to Oct)

Warm clothes for the winter months (Nov to Feb).The mean temperature in Hanoi in January is just 16 degrees celsius and in mountainous areas can drop to near zero in

December/January. Bring a winter weight sweater and trousers and jacket when travelling in these months.

laundry

Facilities are offered by most hotels for a charge. There will be times when you may want to or have to do your own laundry so we suggest you bring nonpolluting/biodegradable soap

local dress

When packing be aware that dress standards are conservative throughout this region. Loose, lightweight, long clothing is both respectful and cool in the predominantly hot Asian climate. In winter months the extra length will keep you warm! Generally speaking, neat and tidy clothing is also appreciated in Vietnam. Shorts should be knee length and singlets/ tanktops are also not recommended.

a couple of rules

Illegal drugs will not be tolerated on our trips. Possessing or using drugs not only contravenes the laws of the land but also puts the rest of the group at risk. Smoking marijuana and opium is a part of local culture in some parts of the world but is not acceptable for Vietnam Spirit travellers. Vietnam Spirit Travel's philosophy of travel is one of respect towards everyone we encounter, and in particular the local people who make our destinations such special places. The exploitation of prostitutes is completely contrary to this philosophy. Our group leader/guide has the right to expel any member of the group if drugs are found in their possession or they use prostitutes.

a word of warning

As Vietnam embraces capitalism with open arms it is also falling victim to some of the problems of the West. Some parts of city centres are now a favourite hangout for pickpockets. If doing some exploring on your own carry only the necessary minimum with you and use a well-hidden money belt. Valuables, including your passport, should be left in the hotel safe - organize this at reception. There is no need to get paranoid, just be cautious.

feedback

After your travels, we want to hear from you! This is so important to us and at the end of the trip we ask you to complete an online survey. Please visit our feedback page on the website.

Before you travel it is essential that you read carefully this dossier which you can download from our website.

We regularly update our dossiers. Please check our website to ensure that you have the most up to date copy

The itinerary and supplementary information has been compiled with care and provided in good faith. However it may be subject to change, and DOES NOT form part of a contract between the client and Vietnam Spirit Travel

