



# Northwest Vietnam

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## Best Places to Eat

- » Sapa Rooms (p130)
- » Red Dao House (p130)
- » Viet Emotion (p130)
- » Ngan Nga Gia Huy (p135)
- » Café Pho Co (p139)

## Best Places to Stay

- » Mai Chau Nature Place (p119)
- » Hmong Mountain Retreat (p127)
- » Truong Xuan Resort (p137)
- » Pan Hou Village (p137)
- » Rocky Plateau Hotel (p140)

## Why Go?

A landscape of towering evergreen peaks, fertile river valleys and scattered hill-tribe villages, sparsely populated northwest Vietnam is the country's most dramatic and mountainous region.

This is also the heartland of hill-tribe culture, and the region's markets are enlivened by the scarlet headaddresses of the Dzao women, the indigo fabrics of the sociable Black H'mong, and the Flower H'mong's beautiful brocaded aprons.

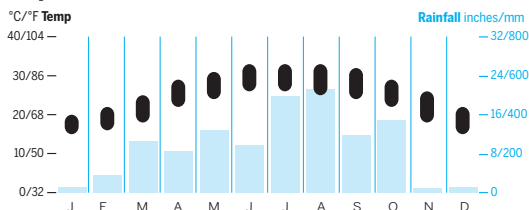
Sapa is a great base for superb hiking and stunning vistas of Fansipan, Vietnam's highest peak, and from this old French hill station the fabled northwest loop road crosses high mountain passes to Dien Bien Phu, before crossing lush lowland valleys south to Mai Chau.

To the northeast, Bac Ha is home to a fascinating Sunday market, and the incredibly scenic province of Ha Giang hugs the Chinese border.

Public bus services and road conditions are improving, but many travellers explore the region by motorbike or 4WD.

## When to Go

### Sapa



**Jan–Feb** The coldest (and foggiest) months with temperatures down as low as 0°C in Sapa.

**Mar–Jun** The weather is often excellent, but rains intensify from June onwards.

**Sep–Dec** Settled weather and a good time to be around Sapa.

## History

The history of the northwest differs to lowland Vietnam. The Vietnamese traditionally avoided mountains, believing the terrain was not suitable for large-scale rice production. For many centuries the area remained inhabited by scatterings of minority people, joined in the 19th century by migrants from Yunnan, China and Tibet. This was the 'badlands', a buffer zone of bandits between China and Vietnam. During Ho Chi Minh's leadership, the North Vietnamese experimented

with limited autonomy in 'special zones', but these were abolished after reunification.

Life for the minorities has always been difficult. Their most profitable crop was opium, but the authorities have clamped down and very little is now produced. Educational opportunities were limited, but new schools in remote areas now provide most children with education. Economic prospects remain limited, so many highlanders move to cities in search of work.



## Northwest Vietnam Highlights

- 1** Walk misty mountain trails through sublime scenery and hill-tribe villages around **Sapa** (p125)
- 2** Escape from busy, busy Hanoi by trekking, kayaking and biking in the **Mai Chau** (p118) region
- 3** Make for the minority markets – a blaze of colour when the Flower H'mong are in town – around **Bac Ha** (p134)
- 4** Negotiate Vietnam's newest travellers' frontier, the improbably scenic mountains and valleys of **Ha Giang** (p137) province
- 5** Explore the bunkers, museums and war memorials of **Dien Bien Phu** (p121), the end of the road for the French in Vietnam