



In for the long haul: (opposite page) bicycles are favoured for transport and haulage.
Busy waterway: (top) the river meets the ocean at historic Hoi An, making it an ideal trading post.
A shaw thing: (above) the rickshaw is still in use in Hoi An.
Winning grins: (left) friendly faces among the hill tribes of the Sapa region.
 Pictures: PHOTO LIBRARY

Nha Trang is beachside, 450km north of Ho Chi Minh City, and a laidback break from the frantic metropolis.

Day and night a snaking line of bars serve drinks to customers on deckchairs in the sand.

But again, it's early mornings that pay dividends.

At sunrise, many residents gather on the beach for daily sports. Unco-ordinated grandmas ease through their tai chi moves as boys dive about in a game of volleyball.

The foreshore is an Olympics of enthusiasm, if not talent, and early risers won't be short of offers to add their own lack of co-ordination to the mix.

Another night on the train, and the tempo eases again where the brown Thu Bon River meets the ocean at historic Hoi An.

Hotels here have complementary bikes and visitors take full advantage of the chance to freewheel around the wide, tree-lined streets.

Hoi An was once the nation's major port. Now almost every other shop in town offers tailor-made clothes and shoes — so the bike basket comes in handy.

From Da Nang to Hue, our first daylight trip, we put blue skies to good use, hanging out of the dining carriage windows taking snaps where the spectacular Hai Van Pass meets the coastline.

Broad, green stalks of corn brush the train windows and the panorama distracts from the perilous lean of the train around the bends. Not that we can justify feeling terror — the local men riding free on the roof of the train have all the claim to that.



» **THE DEAL**

Getting there: Vietnam Airlines has flights to Ho Chi Minh City from \$1215 return. www.flightcentre.com.au

Touring: Franko's Rail Tours of Vietnam include all meals, transport and accommodation.

An 18-day trip is scheduled for September 11-28, and for October 23-November 9. A further seven tours will depart next year.

Tours this year cost \$3530 a person twin-share and include Ho Chi Minh City, Nha Trang, Hoi An, Hue, Hanoi, Sapa and Halong Bay.

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From Hue we cover hundreds of kilometres as we sleep on the train, effectively gaining three days of sightseeing.

Off the train, our itinerary is run like clockwork.

At every restaurant, six or seven courses are organised before we even get there. Seafood is a daily staple for Western travellers.

For an idea of local menus, just watch the roadside action.

Dozens of unhappy-looking chickens hang off the back of butcher-bound motorbikes, and in the north, eight puppies crammed in a small cage clearly aren't pets.

Zen tells us early on that "cho thiet" means dog meat, and one roadside sign after another barks it at you.

"They serve it with cold Tiger beer — would you like to stop?" Our group declines.

But it's up in the mountains that the toughest questions come.

"How many water buffalo does your family have?"

My inquisitor is a 17-year-old named Pa, who walks around with her four-year-old sister strapped to her back.

Pa, an ethnic resident of the northwest mountain village of Lao Cai, is beaming. And so she should be.

Happily prattling since our tour group arrived on the edge of Lao Cai, about 8km out of Sapa town, her constant questions have been showing me up for about an hour.

She speaks five languages: her native Hmong tongue, Vietnamese, French, Russian and English.

She has jumped across the border to China — I haven't. She has a boyfriend. Sadly, I don't. And her family has three water buffalo.

Lao Cai is in a small, lush valley of the Sapa mountains. Spectacular peaks have been painstakingly terraced into stairways of rice paddies by local farmers.

Communist authorities first opened the Sapa region to Western visitors in 1993, heralding a big change for the simple farming communities.

While the men trudge kilometres up and down the steep rice paddies with their water buffalo, the women and girls greet visitors at the edge of the village — and apparently devote their time to asking difficult questions.

I scuff the muddy road with the toe of my sandal. "My family don't own any water buffalo," I admit.

Pa looks at me, concerned, then offers the mandatory Vietnamese advice. "Your family should buy a water buffalo. Then you will find a boyfriend."

Thanks for the tip.

Mary Bolling travelled courtesy of Franko's Rail Tours of Vietnam.