

A foggy endeavour

Wednesday, 24 February 2010

As we continued our journey through the north of Vietnam, I encountered some of the toughest driving I'd ever experienced.

We woke up fresh and ready the next morning for another drive through the mountains. There was some light rain, but visibility was clear on the road out of Lai Chau Town, toward Sin Ho Town, Lai Chau Province.

We set off fast and smoothly on a slightly curvy mountain road, and stopped after a few kilometres to take some pictures of the valley below. We then continued our drive, but had to reduce our speed due to the fog that began getting thicker.

After a few more kilometres, once again, the fog became extremely intense. Our vision was now reduced to only about 20 metres, and the curves were getting tighter and tighter. According to the car's thermometer, the temperature outside was dropping rapidly. It went from 12 degrees Celsius to 8, 6, 5 and then 4.

We drove for about 40 kilometres in these conditions, and it felt like the longest 40 kilometres I had ever driven. The normal sense of distance and time faded away, and as we were surrounded by the intensifying fog, I started to feel as if this drive were going to take forever. Our average speed was about 20 km/h. I could only see the curves just as they approached, and knew only at the last second whether I should lean right or left. For the whole distance, we only encountered a few motorbikes and a couple of local taxis. It seemed like we were the only people crazy enough to think of visiting the remote town of Sin Ho at this time of the year.

Eventually, the fog started to clear up a little bit, just enough for us to see the indistinct shapes of houses and people appearing along the road. Most people were just walking, and houses were all closed, apparently due to the cold and fog.

We kept driving and after a few more kilometres, got out of the fog and into Sin Ho Town. It had taken us three long hours to travel a distance of only 60 kilometres. Everybody was exhausted, especially me, the driver. As we drove slowly into town, it was clear that everything was still closed for Tet. No hotels, no restaurants, no cafés, and no market. We encountered another car carrying Hanoi license plates in the town's centre. We stopped to chat with the driver for a few moments. He was driving his parents on a trip around the region just like us, but was traveling from the opposite direction.

Our initial plan after Sin Ho was to visit the Pu Dao hamlet, which was rated by British travel company Gecko Travel as one of the five most attractive destinations in Southeast Asia. It would be another 60 kilometres from Sin Ho, and we thought that was close. But after the first 60 kilometres, we started to have second thoughts. In addition, the man we met said they just came from Pu Dao, and there was not much to see. We did not believe him entirely, but it was just another reason for us to decide to turn back.

We stopped by a local house and asked for a place to sit and some hot water for our instant noodle. A woman welcomed us into her cosy kitchen. She was of the Dao ethnic group, and their wooden house was in the typical traditional Dao style from the outside, but inside they had many modern amenities such as a TV, refrigerator, gas stove, and water purifier.

After a quick lunch, I took out my laptop computer to try my luck with getting online through mobile networks. I had brought along two USB modems, one was 3G Viettel and the other was 2.5G MobiFone, but it turned out that neither of these worked in the remote area of Sin Ho.

I asked our host if there were computers and Internet in town, and she said there were only a few computers in the local People's Committee, "but they looked like TV sets," and she had never seen a computer like this one, nor heard of what the Internet was.

It was time to leave the town. We said our thanks and goodbyes to the kind Dao family and headed back into the clouds. The fog was no thinner than before, and we endured another three hours of crawling alone and slowly along the curvy mountain pass. Driving was difficult; I started to feel as if the fog had become a solid curtain falling down on us, making for a slow and sluggish ride.

When we got back near Lai Chau Town, the fog suddenly disappeared and it started to rain. The drive back was no less intense than the one in the morning, but we were glad we made it and felt fresh and energised again. It was about 4pm and we did not want to stay another night in Lai Chau Town, so we decided our next destination would be Than Uyen Town, also in Lai Chau Province. To get there we would have to make our way back about 20 kilometres on the National Road 4D from Lai Chau Town towards near the Hoang Lien Son Pass, which connects Lai Chau and Lao Cai Provinces. From there, we turned to the National Road 32 leading to Than Uyen.

As the sun was setting and the fog disappeared, the scenery along the way from Lai Chau to Than Uyen was incredible. However, the rain was getting heavier and at around 6:30pm, when it was completely dark, the rain was at its strongest it wouldn't stop for another hour. We drove in the pounding rain, then finally reached Than Uyen at about 7:30pm. We managed to find a big, attractive looking restaurant near the town centre and went in for a hearty meal. We ordered lots of food to make up for our simple lunch, and when the bill came out, we were shocked to see the total for all four of us was only VND170,000 (\$9).

After that, we also found a hotel for a very reasonable price of VND 150,000 (\$8) per room per night. After finding out that this town was only about 230 kilometres away from Hanoi, and that our last must-see destination of Mu Cang Chai was on that way, we decided to go to sleep early and drive all the way back home the next day.

(Source: Dtinews)