

# H'mong bracelets and Fair trade

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by: *Guest Blogger (/blog/author/50)*, 📅 20 May 2013.

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**([http://3things.org.au/wp/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/blog200513\\_tourism.jpg](http://3things.org.au/wp/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/blog200513_tourism.jpg))After a trip to Vietnam, guest blogger Louise Kate Anderson (<http://louisekateanderson.blogspot.com.au/>) wondered about the do's and don'ts of ethical tourism. Should you buy that extremely cheap bracelet from the local woman with a baby on her back, or are you doing her community more harm than good?**

We came at the wrong time of year - it was incredibly misty, the famous rice terraces were muddy, and the beautiful scenery we were hoping for was literally invisible. And yet Sapa was still one of my favourite locations of the ones I visited, mostly due to its cultural heritage. Many people find architecture and history very interesting in their travels. For me, it's the people - meeting them and seeing how they live - and how their lives are so different to mine. Often, different in a bad way - and yet, they are not unhappy.

About 88% of people who live in Vietnam are Vietnamese. The other 12% is made up of about 54 various ethnic minorities, most of which do not necessarily identify with the culture of Vietnam. Approximately 10% of the total Vietnamese population live in the mountain regions, the French used to refer to them as "Montagnards", which translates (kind of) to - "mountain people". Many live in poverty, with a lack of access to healthcare.

A woman from the H'mong tribe with embroidered bags

The mountains around Sapa are inhabited by several hill tribes - including the H'mong, and the Dao. Many of the women make embroidered bags, clothes, pillowcases, toys and other



trinkets for sale to tourists using their surprisingly good English.

Many websites discourage tourists from buying products from children or teenagers in order to keep them in schools within their villages. Every day leaving our hotel we would be followed by the women who talked to us, offered to take us on tours to their own villages and sell us things. Although the conversation and cultural experience was amazing, it became frustrating when we really did not want to purchase any more items, and it was hard to turn them down.

I am wondering if it was in their interests to purchase anything at all from these ladies - there were many similar items

<http://3things.org.au/wp/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/blog-2013-tourism2.jpg> available in markets and shops, and although we wanted to major source of money for these places, and I wonder if the constant stream of hopeful sellers doesn't keep some tourists away. Some signs say not to give to beggars, and yet it is difficult to distinguish what is begging and what isn't. One lady insisted on us purchasing something, and even told us that if we bought something from her, she would leave us alone.

Here is something I posted on Facebook during my trip:

*This holiday has confused my understanding of fair trade. On one hand, being a tourist and far richer than many people here, I feel uncomfortable bargaining too hard or walking away with anything I consider awesomely cheap. Yet, vendors even seem disappointed with a lack of will to bargain. Tourists thoughtlessly paying too much for products or services actually drives up the price for everyone, including locals. There doesn't seem to be much of a concept of a minimum wage, at least not for the tribe people or street vendors, besides how am I supposed to add up the hours it took a blacksmith to make a bracelet which their wives from the h'mong tribe then walk 25km to Sapa every day to sell to tourists? Then again, I don't buy from places like h&m who don't pay their workers enough, but am I doing the same thing by purchasing hand made handicrafts here for the same price as a banana? I wonder how Oxfam calculates fair trade.*

A woman from the Red Dao Hill tribe of Vietnam

Since I've gotten back, I have been thinking that really, as a tourist, I can't really comprehend the lives of people living in these amazingly different places enough to judge whether a lady selling her life's work is begging or not. In places where I saw fair trade shops (and there were quite a few in Hoi An), I did support them, but in terms of deciding what's good for a population whose lives I cannot hope to understand, I think I'll leave that to the local tourism agencies, and entrepreneurial individuals who open stores in the hope of helping the



community, such as **Sapa Sisters** (<http://sapasisters.webs.com/>), a tourist guide centre run by the H'mong.

If I ever go back to Sapa, I think doing a home-stay with the families of the villages would be an amazing experience, and one I think goes a longer way to helping them than buying a few bracelets (as beautiful as they are)!

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### About the author...

*Every now and then, we like to ask a guest to come onto 3things and write for us - whether they be an expert in their field, someone who's done something pretty damn cool, or a great writer who has something 3thingsy to say. This is one of them.*

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