

Ethical Tourism Comes to Vietnam

by David Atkinson
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Business is good for Mai Kim Quyen. Tucked away amongst the rabbit warren of small streets, opposite a French café with an ochre façade, her shop *Hoa Nhap* (Reaching Out) Handicrafts, acts as an outlet for handicrafts made by disabled people across the country. And, since her home town of Hoi An became known as the most picturesque stop-off on Vietnam's burgeoning Lonely Planet ant trail, the visitors have come in droves.

Vietnam first opened to tourism in 1993 after the *Doi Moi* (new thinking) reform policies opened the country to the West. Quyen practices her English with tourists and ploughs the money they spend in her shop back into the *Tien Bo* (progress for the disabled) computer project she founded with her husband Le Nguyen Binh.. *Tien Bo* is a self-help group run by, and for, disabled people with a view to enhancing each member's personal independence.

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says Binh, who lost the use of his legs aged 16 in an accident. “People think we can't do anything but we

don't want charity, we want to work.” “Disabled people have a right to earn a living,” says Quyen. “We founded the shop one year ago to provide quality products which in turn generate income for disabled craftspeople who previously depended on the Government disability allowance (US\$4 per month) to survive and the support of their families to survive.”

A short bike ride across town, her wheelchair-bound husband, Binh, is busy overseeing classes at Tien Bo's computer training centre, which helps a hundred students a year enter the workplace. “Disabled people don't need sympathy, they need training,” says Binh, who lost the use of his legs aged 16 in an accident. “People think we can't do anything but we don't want charity, we want to work.”

Travelling in Vietnam earlier this year, I'd been introduced to Quyen by my guide from Intrepid Travel, a UK and Melbourne-based travel company who put ethics above greenbacks on the road. Intrepid use locally-owned accommodation, transport and guides to ensure profits from their trips go back into the community. In addition, they help support local projects and encourage travellers to visit them – and support them financially - as part of their tour itinerary. It's totally optional and, if they decline, nobody gets annoyed.

In Vietnam, Intrepid back a range of projects across the country, ranging from the Tich Thien school for orphans in Bau Ham, 45km north of Saigon to the Nguyen Nga vocational school for handicapped children in the Qui Nhon province 200km north of Nha Trang. These projects face a constant battle to survive but, with Intrepid's help, donations from tourists make a big difference.

Tourism Concern found that 96% of independent travellers said they felt that tourism should be fairer, and 35% were willing to pay an extra 5% for a holiday that 'gives extra benefits to local people and/or is

environmentally sound'. Buzzwords like *sustainable* and *ethical tourism* are big business these days. Increasingly banded around since the events of September 11 last year, the vogue to be 'responsible' marks an attempt by the travel industry to reinvent itself while also tapping into a new-found sense amongst people to take responsibility for their actions across the globe.

The market is set to see exponential growth over the next five years as more companies come on board and awareness of options grow. The first moves are already underway. With developing countries like Vietnam, Morocco, India and the Dominican Republic currently receiving up to five million tourists per annum according to World Tourism Organisation (www.world-tourism.org), 2002 has been declared International Year of Ecotourism by the United Nations.

Furthermore, recent research by Tourism Concern, a pressure group aiming to promote ethical and fairly traded tourism,

found that 96% of independent travellers said they felt that tourism should be fairer. 35% were willing to pay an extra 5% for a holiday that 'gives extra benefits to local people and/or is environmentally sound'.

"There's a growing desire amongst travellers to engage themselves personally with bigger issues such as environmental destruction, human rights abuses, poverty and ecological diversity," says Andreas Kornevall, director of www.workingabroad.com, a gateway site, promoting the world's largest selection of responsible excursions to 45 countries. "It's the positive aspect to globalisation," he adds, "people are now able to get directly involved."

But how does the current vogue for responsible tourism translate to street level? "Many tourists experiencing the severe street poverty of Saigon feel they want to help. However, they mostly end up doing more harm by giving money direct to beggars and street kids," says Nguyen Thi Bao Chau, scholarship programme director for the Saigon Children's Charity (www.saigonchildren.com), which sponsors children through to high school leaving age, covering their teaching fees, cost of books and uniform. "Giving money only encourages more people onto the streets; you should only give money in return for a service," adds Chau, who is also involved with building schools in poor rural areas. "Giving money makes people feel good about themselves but a far better option is to book your tour with a company which contributes a share of its profits to local community projects."

Further north, in the beach resort of Nha Trang, Kimmy Le battles the dark side of tourism each day. Kim escaped Vietnam in 1980 with the boat people but returned as a teacher in 1996 after many years living in Canada. She was horrified to learn upon her return that European paedophiles were preying on local shoeshine and postcard boys, making Nha Trang the sex tourism capital of a Vietnam newly-opened to tourism.

"I started selling US\$3 t-shirts [slogan: 'Child Sex is a Crime'] to tourists on the beach and opened the bar three years ago to help raise funds for a children's centre," says Kim, setting out tables for the 40 children who arrive at Kim's café bar each morning for a 10am English lesson followed by lunch. "I'm working with Interpol from seven countries and have so far only brought one prosecution against a German man," she adds. "It's hard for one person to take this on but I can't let the children down. What I need are people who are prepared to stick around and help, not travellers who just hand over US\$5 and then head for their next destination."

With Vietnam celebrating next year its tenth year of mass tourism, the effects of tourism are increasingly more insidious than the explosion of Internet cafes and fake Nikes in areas like Hanoi's Hang Bac. But while many travel companies appear keen to offer more responsible travel options, consumers need to check their credentials carefully to weed out the bandwagon-jumpers from the genuinely concerned.

"There are many non financial ways that local communities we work with can be rewarded," says Darrell Wade, Director, Intrepid Travel. "It doesn't matter if we're building a school near Saigon or developing a home stay in a remote hill tribe village, we need to ensure that we are wanted by the local community, that we spread the benefits, that we respect local customs and that there is long term sustainability built into the project. If we achieve this, then we build cross cultural understanding, while also assisting development," he adds. "And the world moves forward."

Back at the shop, Quyen is busy serving a group of backpackers picking up woven fabric purses and throws as presents. According to research by the Institute of Southeast Asian studies, five million of Vietnam's 75 million population are disabled; 30 per cent of them victims of war-related injuries. In the first decade after 1975, 50,000 children were born with deformities as a result of Agent Orange. "I hope that people learn something about Vietnam when they come to my shop," says Quyen. "Most of all, I hope they can see that people with disabilities have a value as productive citizens making their contributions to society at large."

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