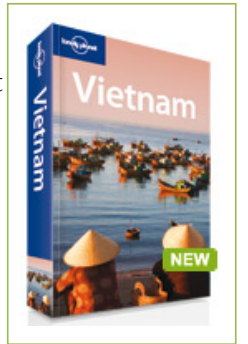


Enabling the disabled

Lonely Planet Vietnam , 2009

For the nine million or so Vietnamese who are disabled, chances are they won't have the opportunity to go to school or pick up skills that will let them earn a living as independent adults. Most schools aren't equipped to receive students with disabilities and employers don't see the disabled as having employable skills. Most disabled people are cooped up at home with few or no friends, entirely dependent on their families or the government for support.



It's a dismal prospect, but one that individual Vietnamese and expatriates are working hard to change through businesses that train, employ and empower the disabled – and this is where your tourist dollar can make a difference. In Hoi An, Mr Binh Nguyen Le has been running the fair-trade shop Reaching Out since 2001. Wheelchair-bound due to botched medical treatment when he was 16, he understands all too well the frustrations faced by disabled young people. At Reaching Out, he hires disabled workers who first receive training in new craftsmanship skills, then start work in a comfortable workshop located behind the shop (and open to visitors).

Besides giving the disabled an employable skill, Mr Binh runs his business on fair-trade policies: workers work eight-hour day, are paid salaries about 35% above the norm, and receive health and social insurance. True to its name, Reaching Out also contracts disabled workers all over Vietnam , paying them a better rate than they would get from other middlemen. Profits go into expanding the business to train and employ more disabled workers. (...)

By visiting some of these charities, such as Reaching Out or Bread of Life, you can see the cheerful, confident vibe they have. In the words of Nam , a disabled artisan at Reaching Out, “working here is so much better than feeding buffalo”.