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Enhanced Visitor Experience and Sustainable Tourism in Sa Pa, Vietnam



Dinh Thi Minh Thu
Registration Number: 720815-184-050

Supervisors:
Dr. Stuart Cottrell
Prof. Elery Hamilton-Smith

ABSTRACT

Sa Pa is a mountainous area situated in Lao Cai province, in the Northwest of Vietnam. It consists of six major ethnic groups of H'mong, Dao, Kinh (or Vietnamese), Tay, Giay and Xa Pho and is blessed with beautiful landscapes, the highest mountain peak of Indochina, Fansipan, and the Hoang Lien National Park. Endowed with such valuable cultural and natural assets: Rich cultural diversity, beautiful nature and landscape as well as cool climate, Sa Pa has become a popular tourism resort for many Vietnamese and foreigners. However, known as a mass tourism area, it is at risk of losing original attraction that tourists move to other places instead of Sa Pa. This study aims to provide a basis for ensuring that the quality of visitor experience in Sa Pa is enhanced, thus it explores issues relating to the quality of visitor experience in the area by assessing the understandings and perspectives of stakeholders and service providers, and exploring the experiences, attitudes and values of both international and domestic visitors in Sa Pa. The strength of this study is the integration of the flow concept by Csikszentmihalyi and the multiphase recreation experience model by Clawson and Knetsch to provide a framework and foundation to assess and examine the experience. The findings show that foreign and Vietnamese visitors experience flow differently. Foreign visitors show the relatively standardized kind of expectations of people from well-developed nations visiting those still in the course of development, while Vietnamese tourists do not seek new experiences, but familiar experiences in a new place. The two distinctive ways of experiencing flow between the foreign and Vietnamese tourists that this study has revealed is useful to understand and to have relevant approaches for enhancing visitor experience in Sa Pa.

Key words: *Visitor experience, multiphase experience, flow, consciousness, psychic energy, challenges, skills, sustainable tourism, sustainability, trip cycle, carrying capacity.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	2
TABLE OF CONTENTS	3
LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS	5
LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES	5
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	6
I. INTRODUCTION	7
1. THE STUDY CONTEXT	7
2. NATURE OF THE PROBLEM	9
3. AIM, OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTION	11
4. RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY	11
5. STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS	12
II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	13
1. OVERVIEW OF APPROACHES MEASURING LEISURE EXPERIENCE	13
2. FLOW AS A CONSTRUCT OF OPTIMAL EXPERIENCES	14
3. MULTIPHASE EXPERIENCE	24
4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK	25
III. METHODOLOGY	27
1. DATA COLLECTION	27
2. DATA ANALYSIS	31
3. LIMITATIONS	32
IV. SA PA AND TOURISM IN SA PA	34
1. BACKGROUND	34
2. SA PA TOWN	35
3. MINORITY VILLAGES AND MINORITY PEOPLE	36
4. SA PA DISTRICT PEOPLE'S COMMITTEE (DPC)	38
5. SA PA TOURISM INFORMATION AND SERVICE CENTER (TISC)	39
6. HOANG LIEN NATIONAL PARK	41
7. PRIVATE SECTOR	42
8. SUMMARY	43

V. INTERNATIONAL TRAVELERS.....	44
1. ANTICIPATION ABOUT SA PA	44
2. TRAVEL TO THE SITE	47
3. ON-SITE EXPERIENCE IN SA PA	50
4. RETURN TRAVEL.....	53
5. REFLECTION AND RECOLLECTION ABOUT SA PA TRIP.....	54
VI. DOMESTIC TRAVELERS	57
1. ANTICIPATION ABOUT SA PA	57
2. TRAVEL TO THE SITE	60
3. ON-SITE EXPERIENCE IN SA PA	61
4. RETURN TRAVEL.....	64
5. REFLECTION AND RECOLLECTION ABOUT SA PA TRIP.....	65
VII. CONCLUSIONS.....	68
1. SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS	68
2. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION	71
REFERENCES	75
APPENDIX 1: List of International Tourists Interviewed.....	80
APPENDIX 2: List of Domestic Tourists Interviewed.....	81
APPENDIX 3: List of Key Informants/Stakeholders Met.....	82
APPENDIX 4: Temporary Regulation on Management of Village Tourism Routes in Sa Pa District.....	84

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CBT	Community-based tourism
DPC	Sa Pa District People's Committee
FFI	Fauna and Flora International
FIPI	Forest Inventory and Planning Institute
IUCN	The World Conservation Union
MARD	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
SNV	The Netherlands Development Organization
TISC	Tourism Information and Service Center (now Tourism Information and Promotion Center or TIPC)
TTS	Trade and Tourism Section of Sa Pa district
UNCED	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
UNEP	United Nations Environment Program
VNAT	Vietnam National Administration of Tourism
WCED	World Commission on Environment and Development
WSSD	World Summit on Sustainable Development
WTO	World Tourism Organization
WWF	World Wide Fund for Nature

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure 1: Tourism Concern's Ten Principles for Sustainable Tourism ([page 8](#))

Figure 2: Map of Vietnam ([page 10](#))

Figure 3: Conceptual Framework ([page 26](#))

Figure 4: Map of Sa Pa ([page 33](#))

Figure 5: TISC's Institutional Relations ([page 40](#))

Table 1: Outline of questions used in interviews with visitors ([page 29](#))

Table 2: Outline of questions used in interviews with key informants/stakeholders ([page 30](#))

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I. INTRODUCTION

The intention of this study is to provide an understanding of visitor experience, which aims to serve as a basis to enhance the quality of the visitor experience in Sa Pa. Visitor experience is an important element that needs to be taken into account for tourism to be developed sustainably. Results of this study therefore hopefully could provide useful information for Sa Pa stakeholders to make decisions with regards to sustainable tourism development in the area.

1. The Study Context

Tourism is reputed to be the world's largest economic sector (WTO, 1995). As pointed out, "Clearly, if tourism is to continue to grow, that growth must be firmly grounded in the principles of sustainability, so that the resources and attractions of the planet remain available for the tourists tomorrow" (Pigram and Wahab, 1997: 13). This shows the important role of sustainability in the long-term development of tourism and in provision of the context for tourism planning.

The concept of "**sustainable development**" first came into being in 1987 when it was defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in the Brundtland Report as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." (WCED, 1987: 4) Aspects of sustainable development have then been developed rapidly, especially since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992. During this Conference, known as the Earth Summit, Agenda 21, a comprehensive program of action adopted by 182 governments was developed. It provides a blueprint for securing the sustainable future of the planet into the twenty-first century (Wahab and Pigram, 1997). Later in 1995, the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) adopted a definition of sustainable development, which says "Sustainable development is improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems... If an activity is sustainable, for all practical purposes it can continue forever." (WTO, 1995:30) Most recently, in the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, South Africa, the concept of sustainable development and its principles were reaffirmed and committed by participating countries, including Vietnam (<http://www.johannesburgsummit.org>).

The notion of "**sustainable tourism**" has its roots in the wider concept of sustainable development. Sustainability has special relevance to tourism as tourism demand is directly related to the environment and hence attraction of destination areas. Thus, tourism as an international phenomenon has become a part of the debate on sustainable development. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) defined sustainable tourism as that "which meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future. It is envisaged as leading to the management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems" (WTO, 1995:30). Sustainable tourism implies a balance between tourism and other existing and potential practices in the interest of multi-sectoral sustainable development. Although there is no blueprint for sustainable tourism development, a number of concepts, guidelines, Codes of Sustainable Practice, Codes of Responsible Behaviors have been developed by different international and local tourism organizations and travel industry (WTO, Tourism Concern, The International Ecotourism Society, Responsible Tourism Network, World Travel and Tourist Council, Green Globe, and many others) to raise awareness of the tourism impacts and strive to make tourism more sustainable. For example, one of the concepts frequently

cited in tourism researches and applied in planning tourism practices are the Ten Principles for Sustainable Tourism developed by Tourism Concern (1992). They were produced to coincide with the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and aim to influence the policies and programs adopted by the travel and tourism industry worldwide (Figure 1). These principles emphasize the balance between environmental, socio-cultural and economic aspects of tourism and the need to implement sustainability principles in all segments of tourism for quality experience of not only present, but also future, tourists (Tourism Concern, 1992).

- Ten Principles for Sustainable Tourism**

 1. *Using Resources Sustainably* - The conservation and sustainable use of resources - natural, social and cultural - is crucial and makes long-term business sense.
 2. *Reducing Over-Consumption and Waste* - Reduction of over-consumption and waste avoids the costs of restoring long-term damage and contributes to the quality of tourism.
 3. *Maintaining Diversity* - Maintaining and promoting natural, social and cultural diversity is essential for long-term sustainable tourism, and creates a resilient base for the industry.
 4. *Integrating Tourism Into Planning* - Tourism development which is integrated into a national and local strategic planning framework undertakes environmental impact assessments, increases the long-term viability of tourism.
 5. *Supporting Local Economies* - Tourism that supports a wide range of local economic activities and which takes environmental costs and values into account, both protects those economies and avoids environmental damage.
 6. *Involving Local Communities* - The full involvement of local communities in the tourism sector not only benefits them and the environment in general but also improves the quality of the tourism experience.
 7. *Consulting Stakeholders and the Public* - Consultation between the tourism industry and local communities, organizations and institutions is essential if they are to work alongside each other and resolve potential conflicts of interest.
 8. *Training Staff* - Staff training which integrates sustainable tourism into work practices, along with recruitment of local personnel at all levels, improves the quality of the tourism product.
 9. *Marketing Tourism Responsibly* - Marketing that provides tourists with full and responsible information increases respect for the natural, social and cultural environments of destination areas and enhances customer satisfaction.
 10. *Undertaking Research* - On-going research and monitoring by the industry using effective data collection and analysis is essential to help solve problems and to bring benefits to destinations, the industry and consumers.

(Tourism Concern, 1992)

Figure 1: Tourism Concern's Ten Principles for Sustainable Tourism

Taking part in the global effort, Vietnam commits itself to implementing sustainable development and sustainable tourism. The Vietnam Tourism Ordinance (1999) states “Tourism is an important integrated economic sector bearing in-depth cultural, cross-sectoral, inter-regional and highly socialized characters. Developing tourism aims at satisfying people’s and international tourists’ needs for visiting, recreation, leisure, making contribution to improvement of the community’s intellectual level, job generation and the country’s socio-economic development.” (Vu Tuan Canh, 2003: 30).

Following the Resolution of the ninth National Communist Party Congress, the Government of Vietnam has issued “The Strategic Orientation for Sustainable Development in Vietnam - Vietnam Agenda 21”. This is a framework strategy aiming to ensure sustainable development in Vietnam in the twenty-first century. In this important national document, tourism is considered as one of the country’s priority economic areas for sustainable development, where aspects of sustainable tourism, mutually reinforcing, are encouraged and promoted¹.

Situated within Lao Cai province (Figure 2), formerly Hoang Lien Son province, the multi-cultural Sa Pa, with a population comprising both Kinh and ethnic minority peoples is a key tourism area that is a focus for development by the Government, in the Northwest of Vietnam (Vu Tuan Canh, 2003: 30).

2. Nature of the Problem

Sa Pa under Lao Cai province consists of 18 communes with a population of around 40,000 inhabitants belonging to six major ethnic groups: H’mong, Dao (pronounced as Dzao), Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese), Tay, Giay and Xa Pho (Thernstrom, 2002). This is an area where the Hoang Lien mountains, the tail end of the Himalayan chain, are situated. This mountain range is well known for its rich and unique assembly of fauna and flora, some of which are found nowhere else, and becomes an area of high national priority in the Vietnam’s National Biodiversity Action Plan (FFI Hoang Lien Son Project, 2003). The major summit on the Hoang Lien mountains, Fansipan, is at 3,143 meters above sea level being distinguished as the Indochina’s highest. Hoang Lien National Park situated around Fansipan Mountain. Together with other three national parks in Vietnam, Hoang Lien National Park was recently recognized as an ASEAN Heritage Park due to its high biodiversity values, during a conference on heritage parks of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Thailand in 2005 (Nguoi Viet Online, 6th January 2005).

Tourism in Sa Pa commenced in the early twentieth century, but only has been booming since the early 1990s (Thernstrom, 2002). However, tourism growth is not tourism development – each is conceptually different, although leading in varying ways, to the fulfillment of tourist expansion (Wahab and Pigram, 1997). Several events indicate that Sa Pa is losing its unique characteristics which originally attract tourists. Previous studies (DiGregorio, 1996; Sung A Sai, 1997; Grindley, 1997; Pham Quynh Phuong, 1998; Hoa and Lan, 2000; Thernstrom, 2002) note certain economic, socio-cultural and ecological impacts from tourism. In terms of economic impacts, it is obvious in Sa Pa town and its surroundings that a majority of the Kinh people in town and the lowlands monopolize the service industry, while ethnic minorities benefit very little, almost not in such an evident manner from tourism development. Growing consumerism and urbanization are noticeable. Many cultural activities have turned into money-making ventures, while some traditional practices have been modified or completely disappeared. Moreover, the increase in tourism puts heavy

¹ “The Strategic Orientation for Sustainable Development in Vietnam – Vietnam Agenda 21”. Socialist Republic of Vietnam, August 2004.



Figure 2: Map of Vietnam

Source: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/vietnam.jpg

pressure on natural resources, which is one of the resources tourism is dependent on for its survival. Tourists fuel demand for forest products and place pressure on the waste management system and on infrastructure in general. Particularly, there has been a growing concern that the area is evolving toward mass tourism with such indicators as commercialization, crowding and authenticity loss (Grindley, 1997), thus, decreasing the quality of the tourist experience. Therefore, this study focuses particularly on the quality of the visitor experience in Sa Pa in order to determine ways to improve it.

3. Aim, Objectives and Research Question

Aim

The aim of this study is to provide a basis to enhance the quality of the visitor experience in Sa Pa.

Content Objective

The objective of this study is to explore issues pertinent to the quality of the visitor experience in Sa Pa by:

- assessing the understandings and perspectives of stakeholders and service providers about tourism in the area; and
- exploring the experiences, attitudes and values of both international and domestic visitors in Sa Pa.

Process Objective

Besides pure information collection, meeting and interviewing with visitors provide the opportunity for them to heighten their awareness of their own experience, and particularly in the case of international visitors, to reinforce their personal relationship with contemporary Vietnam culture and hospitality. Meeting and interviewing stakeholders is also part of the process, which make them more positive towards the study and recommendations.

Research Question

In order to realize the study aim and objectives, the following research question was posed:

- What are the most appropriate strategies to help enhance the experiences and satisfaction of visitors?

4. Relevance of the Study

This study is relevant due to its contribution to societal, practical/professional, and theoretical knowledge.

In terms of societal relevance, this study, through enhancing visitor experience, contributes to sustainable tourism development in Sa Pa. This is in light with the current Government policy encouraging the tourism sector to develop in a sustainable manner for the benefit of not only present but also future generations. Moreover, tourism is one of the industries that bring good revenue to Vietnam and income to local people. Contributing to sustainable development of tourism in Sa Pa means contributing to maintaining source of income for the local economy and its people.

In terms of theoretical relevance, it is hoped that this study makes its contribution to more understanding of visitor experience knowledge. Moreover, by using the flow model (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) as a lens integrated into the multiphase experience model developed by Clawson and Knetsch (1966) as the guiding framework, the study contributes to integration of these two models to examine visitor experience.

Lastly, in terms of practical and professional relevance, it is my personal interest in sustainable development and sustainable tourism. Sa Pa is a relevant research area, where more sustainable tourism would bring more benefits to the area and its local people economically, ecologically and socio-culturally.

5. Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organized into seven chapters and appendices.

Chapter 1 sets the background to this study, including the study context, nature of the problem, and the aim, objective and research question, as well as the relevance of the study.

Chapter 2 follows with an explanation about the theoretical basis employed by the study

Chapter 3 deals with the methodological approach adopted in the study. Some limitations of the study are also presented.

Chapter 4 gives a description of Sa Pa and an overview of tourism development in this area.

Chapter 5 presents a detailed account of international tourists in Sa Pa. This chapter is an analysis from in-depth interviews and interactions with them.

Chapter 6 follows with a parallel account of domestic tourists in Sa Pa.

Chapter 7, the last chapter, makes conclusions of the study, including a summary and discussion of the findings, as well as implications and recommendations for action.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This Chapter explains the theoretical basis employed by this study. First, literature review on important approaches adopted on the subject of recreation and leisure experience, namely: visitor satisfaction, benefit, meaning and experience – based, is presented. Second, flow is particularly examined as a construct of optimal experiences that enhance the experiential content of leisure. The multiphase outdoor recreation experience model developed by Clawson and Knetsch (1966) follows to introduce each phase of the experience. Lastly, a working framework using the flow concept and based on the multiphase outdoor recreation experience model developed by Clawson and Knetsch (1966) is developed in order to explore issues related to the quality of visitor experience in Sa Pa.

1. Overview of Approaches Measuring Leisure Experience

A human experience involves a psychological or physiological response to encountering something, so a leisure experience would be any such response to a recreational engagement (Jenkins and Pigram, 2003). More than free time or an activity freely chosen, “recreational experience is commonly defined as an intrinsically rewarding experience that finds its source in voluntary engagement during unobligated time” (Driver and Tocher, 1970:10). Literature suggests a number of approaches and methods used by researchers to understand and measure leisure experiences, including: visitor satisfaction, benefit, meaning and experience – based.

Visitor satisfaction has traditionally been “the principle measure of quality in outdoor recreation” (Manning, 1999: 8). Satisfaction has been defined as “an act of judgment, a comparison of what people have to what they think they deserve, expect, or may reasonably aspire to. If the discrepancy is small, the result is satisfaction; if it is large, there is dissatisfaction” (Campbell, 1980: 22). Adapted from the expectancy-valence theory, this approach bases on visitor evaluation of satisfaction as a comparison between desired and actual outcomes (Williams, 1989). It also recognizes that satisfaction is a multi-faceted construct (Graefe and Fedler, 1986), resulting from confirmation of expectations or positive disconfirmation (Pizam and Milman, 1993). The use of importance-performance scales is one of the most frequently used techniques to look at situational determinants of satisfaction, although there are yet no standardized sets that have been commonly adopted (Manning, 1999).

This approach has been almost entirely dependent upon quantitative methods, with the variables often based on the common-sense assumptions of the researcher. It is of practical use to gain a quick and simple indicator of issues, which may or may not demand attention and to measure the effectiveness of responses to identified problems. In other words, it does not challenge underlying assumptions and the place of a specific experience in its social context but simply fine-tunes existing practices.

Benefit approach, based on the work by Driver and Tocher (1970) is another measure of visitor experience. As defined by Driver (1996: 94), benefit is “an improved condition (e.g. a gain); the prevention of an unwanted condition; or the attainment of a desired condition”. This approach focuses on the psychological outcomes of the recreation experience and includes physical, social, economic and environmental conditions into the notion of the setting for recreation experience (Driver, 1996). It also focuses on a diversity of recreation experience opportunities rather than on mean evaluations (Shafer, 1969). Benefit approach is still based on the expectancy-valence theory in the sense that satisfaction results from the actual psychological outcomes compared with those

desired. Thus besides the recreation opportunity spectrum, the recreation experience preference scales were developed. Out of 54 benefits, Stein and Lee (1995) identified nine benefit domains based on their research, which include: stress relief/nature appreciation/fitness, share similar values, achievement/stimulation, learn new things, independence, improve mental well-being and sense of self, introspection, teach/lead others, and meet new people.

The meaning approach is a measure that focuses on understanding the role of experience in the broader context of visitor's life (Arnould and Price, 1993). As Patterson *et al.* (1998: 449) puts it "what people are actually seeking from their recreation experiences are stories which ultimately enrich their lives." Two closely related concepts of self-affirmation and sense of place are attached to the meaning approach. Self-affirmation refers to a process through which individuals come to confirm their identity (Haggard and Williams, 1992). Sense of place refers to the meaning ascribed to a specific place, and "attachment is likely to be stronger among individuals who focus on the setting itself relative to other aspects of the recreational engagement." (Williams *et al.*, 1992: 33) This approach offers insights into the values of experience through subjective and symbolic meanings.

Experience approach focuses on the nature of the experience as it is experienced and expands the concept of visitor experience. One of the foundations of this approach was the theoretical work of Clawson and Knetsch (1966) that depicts recreation experience as multiphasic from anticipation (a period of imagining and planning), travel to (getting to the site), on-site experience (the actual activity or experience) and travel back (the return trip home) to recollection (the recall or memory of the activity or experience). The techniques of the Experience Sampling Method were developed and adopted. Clawson and Knetsch's basic concept of an evolving state of mind is embedded in a number of researches such as those by Henderson (1996), Hull (1992), Hammitt (1980), Manfredi (1984), Mannell & Kleiber (1997). Many researches using this approach address experience as dynamic, complex and embedded within personal stories (Steward, 1998). They also bring out the fact that there are states of mind that encompass leisure, and optimal experiences are included as one of the states of mind that experiential content of leisure is considered (Steward, 1998). As Mannell (1996: 405) calls it, "optimal experiences are a type of psychological state that people experience and describe as special, out-of-the-ordinary, and/or meaningful". The author also contends that optimal experiences comprise a number of constructs, including flow (Steward, 1998). Flow is the experience individuals seek in their various activities, and leisure activities and settings can be sources of flow. However, flow is experienced under certain conditions in the activity or setting (Mannell and Kleiber, 1997).

2. Flow as a Construct of Optimal Experiences

"Whenever the quality of human experience is at issue, flow becomes relevant. It helps explain why people enjoy their work and their leisure; it also helps explain why in some circumstances people are bored and frustrated."(Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988: 14)

Introduction

Flow as described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990: 4) is "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it." It is an optimal experience, a state of high psychological involvement or absorption in activities or setting (Mannell and Kleiber, 1997). Building on the work of Maslow (1968: 73) who identified "peak experiences" as "moments of highest happiness and fulfillment" and ascribed the motivation to a desire for "self-actualization", a need to

discover one's potentialities and limitations through intense activity and experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988), Csikszentmihalyi developed the concept of flow experience to describe particular types of experience (Jenkins and Pigram, 2003).

Csikszentmihalyi (1975) originally developed the flow model based on extensive interviews with rock climbers, dancers, chess players, basketball players, and surgeons. The model provides insight into how the activities come to be invested with meaning and experienced as optimal. The findings show that intensely absorbing experiences, challenges that matched skills, and in which they lost track of time and their awareness were considered as most rewarding and were best remembered. Subsequently, Csikszentmihalyi's further studies suggested that these flow experiences are "the best moments" and "occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 3). The two most theoretically important dimensions of the experience are challenges and skills, which are in a dynamic balance when flow is being experienced (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; 1988). The challenge includes any opportunity for action that humans are able to respond to, but any possibility for action to which a skill corresponds can produce an autotelic experience. It is this feature that makes flow a dynamic force in evolution, psychological growth and discovery: "no activity can sustain it for long unless both the challenges and the skills become more complex." (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988: 30). Moreover, when goals are clear, when above-average challenges are matched to skills and when feedback is forthcoming, a person becomes involved in the activity.

Partly based on the intellectual setting of Maslow's work, Csikszentmihalyi's flow experience shares some important characteristics with peak experience. They both are fundamentally different from what occurs during everyday life, involve focused attention on specific stimulus, result in an altered sense of time and result in loss of consciousness of the self (Walker, 1998). However, flow experience differs from peak experience in that the former varies in intensity while the later is "all or nothing" (Mannell, 1996). Moreover, other distinct characteristics of flow include a sense of control over one's actions, and tasks having clear goals and immediate feedback (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The flow model is therefore more useful for understanding the involvement dimension of experiences than the notion of peak experience. Recognizing the degree of flow from modest to intense peak-like involvement, the model identifies factors that contribute to the achievement of this state (Mannell and Kleiber, 1997). While it suggests that some activities have greater potential for being high involvement, the source of this high involvement is more in the mind of the person as it is in the activity; it is not only the real challenges presented by the situation that count, but those that the person perceives; it is not the skills people actually have that determine how they feel but the ones they think they possess (Mannell and Kleiber, 1997). Tinsley and Tinsley (1986) also have flow as the central element in their theory of leisure experience and benefits. They also found out that the experiences accompanying leisure activities can vary in level of involvement, but the leisure state occurs only when an intense flow experience is achieved. Other studies (Csikszentmihalyi and Lefevre, 1989; Mannell, Zuzanek and Larson, 1988) revealed that flow was experienced more frequently in work or obligatory non-work tasks than in simplistically defined leisure. The concept of flow has been found useful by psychologists (who study happiness, satisfaction and intrinsic motivation), by sociologists and anthropologists (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) put the term autotelic experience as the key element of the optimal experience. "Autotelic" derives from two Greek words, *auto* meaning self and *telos* meaning goal. It refers to a self-contained activity, that "is done not with the expectation of some future benefit, but simply because the doing itself is the reward" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 67). The autotelic experience, or flow, is an intrinsically rewarding and enjoyable experience. When the experience is autotelic, the person is paying attention to the activity for its own sake; when it is not, the attention

is focused on its consequences. Csikszentmihalyi and his associates further carried out studies to find out what makes an experience enjoyable. The studies included long interviews, questionnaires and other data collected over a dozen years from several thousand respondents. Based on these data and analysis, together with the flow model, suggested steps towards enhancing quality of life where major components of enjoyment were identified. Regardless of culture, stage of modernization, social class, age or gender the respondents described this state in very much the same way or identical terms, as identified by these studies. Optimal experience and the psychological that make it possible seem to be the same the world over.

“Control over consciousness leads to control over the quality of experience.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 22) In the following pages, flow will examine the process of achieving enjoyment experience through control over one’s consciousness. Particularly, the common characteristics of flow and the conditions that make flow experience possible, will be presented.

The following section examines common characteristics and conditions of flow based on Csikszentmihalyi’s theoretical model to help understand quality of visitor experience.

2.1. Characteristics of Flow

Csikszentmihalyi’s studies identified a number of characteristics or elements of flow, which make enjoyable experience so gratifying (Csikszentmihalyi 1990: 49). They include:

- A challenging activity that requires skills
- The merging of action and awareness
- Clear goals and feedback
- Concentration on the task at hand
- Paradox of control
- Loss of self-consciousness
- Transformation of time

a) A challenging activity that requires skills

Csikszentmihalyi’s studies (1990) suggest that universally, flow occurs within sequences of activities that are goal-directed and bounded by rules – activities that require the investment of psychic energy (i.e. attention which is required to make mental events such as remembering, thinking, feeling and making decisions happen) and that could not be done without the appropriate skills.

Flow activities have as their primary function the provision of enjoyable experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). An activity needs not to be active in the physical sense and the skill necessary to engage in it needs not to be a physical skill. For example, it could be reading that requires concentration of attention, and has a goal and the rules of written language; the skills involved include any capacity for manipulation of symbolic information (literacy or ability to translate words into images etc.).

An activity contains opportunities for action, or in other words, “challenges” that require appropriate skills to realize. Optimal experience requires a balance between the challenges perceived in a given situation and the skills a person brings to it. If one does not have the right skills, the activity is not challenging and it becomes simply meaningless. Any possibility for action to which a skill corresponds can produce an autotelic experience. Csikszentmihalyi (1990: 74) found out in his studies that every flow activity, whether it involved competition, chance or any other dimension of

experience, “provided a sense of discovery, a creative feeling of transporting the person into a new reality. It pushed the person to higher levels of performance, and led to previously undreamed-of states of consciousness”. The key to flow activities is the transformation of the self by making it more complex, the growth of the self or the motivation to enjoy. In explaining the reason that complexity of consciousness increases as the result of flow experiences, Csikszentmihalyi argues that no activity can sustain for long unless both the challenges and the skills become more complex (Csikszentmihalyi, 1982a) because we will grow either bored or frustrated as time goes. But then the desire or motivation to enjoy ourselves will again push us to stretch our skills or to discover new opportunities to use them. It is this feature that makes flow a dynamic force in evolution.

Csikszentmihalyi also emphasized that a person is involved in a flow activity, he or she will not necessarily have the appropriate experience. It is not only the challenges presented by the situation, but also those that the person is aware of, that count, and it is not skills we actually have but the ones we think we have. How we feel and experience the flow is influenced by objective conditions but consciousness is not. It is important to direct psychic energy in patterns that are enjoyable but if they do so or not is up to us.

In Csikszentmihalyi's studies, flow or enjoyment comes at a very specific point: Whenever the opportunities for action perceived by the individual are equal to one's capabilities and skills. “Enjoyment appears at the boundary between boredom and anxiety when the challenges are just balanced with the person's capacity to act.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 52)

b) The merging of action and awareness

When all relevant skills are needed to cope with the challenges of a situation, one's attention is completely absorbed by the activity. The attention is concentrated only on relevant stimuli and there is no excess psychic energy left over for other information to be processed. One of the most universal and distinctive features is that people become so involved in what they are doing and their attention is completely absorbed by the activity to make relevant skills to cope with challenges of a situation. The activity therefore becomes “spontaneous and almost automatic”. It is the focused attention and concentration that for this reason the optimal experience is called “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Quarrick (1989: 18) also mentioned a similar concept, which is a part of optimal experience, called “absorption” - “a particular kind of attention that is qualitatively different from the orientation maintained in everyday life”.

Csikszentmihalyi's studies (1990) on dancers, rock climber and chess players show the same results. The experienced purpose of the flow is to keep on flowing, not looking for utopia. There is no reason for doing such activities except the activities themselves – it is self-communication. The flow experience appears effortless. Because flow produces harmony within the self, attention is invested totally in the activity at hand. While concentration lasts, consciousness works smoothly and action just follows action. This produces that “merging of action and awareness” so typical of enjoyable activities – one simply does not have enough attention left to think about anything else. The action carries us forward and reflection is not required, which usually happens in our normal life. The usual preoccupations of everyday life no longer intrude to cause psychic entropy in consciousness. Lapse in concentration and attention will dilute or even erase the flow experience.

c) Clear goals and feedback

They are the basic reason to achieve complete involvement. Such involvement in a flow experience is possible because goals are clear and feedback immediate. It is difficult to become immersed in

an activity in which one does not know what needs to be done or how well one is doing ((Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). There are certain activities that require a long time to accomplish, but the components of goals and feedback are still very important to them (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

The goals of an activity, however are not always as clear as those of tennis and the feedback is often more ambiguous than the simple. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) mentions exceptions when it holds true for all activities that are creative or open-ended in nature. For instance a music composer may know that he wishes to write a song, but does not know the notes he is writing down are right or wrong. But this reveals that unless a person learns to set goals and gauge feedback in activities, he will not enjoy them. In some creative activities where goals are not clearly set in advance, a person must develop a strong personal sense of what he intends to do. According to Csikszentmihalyi, without internal guidelines it is also impossible to experience flow. Sometimes the goals and the rules governing an activity are invented, or negotiated on the spot.

What constitutes feedback varies considerably in different activities. The kind of feedback we work toward is in and of itself often unimportant. What makes it valuable is the symbolic message it contains: I have succeeded in my goals (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This knowledge creates order in consciousness and strengthens the structure of the self. Also according to Csikszentmihalyi, most of feedback kinds can be enjoyable as long as it is logically related to a goal in which one has invested psychic energy or attention to. However, each of us is sensitive to a certain range of information that we learn to value more than most others do. We will likely consider feedback involving that information to be more relevant than others might.

d) Concentration on the task at hand

While flow experience lasts, one is able to forget all the unpleasant aspects of life. "This feature of flow is an important by-product of the fact that enjoyable activities requires a complete focusing of attention on the task at hand – thus leaving no room in the mind for irrelevant information" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 58). Because of the deep concentration on the activity at hand, the person in flow forgets his or her problems and loses temporarily the awareness of self that in normal life often intrudes in consciousness. Only a very select range of information can be allowed into awareness and all the troubling thoughts that ordinarily keep passing through the mind are temporarily kept in abeyance. This is one of the reasons why flow improves the experience quality, "the clearly structured demands of the activity impose order, and exclude the interference of disorder in consciousness" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 58). The "I" takes over (Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett, 1971) instead of "me" (Mead, 1970 in Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) during flow. The self is fully functioning and uses all the attention for the task at hand not being aware of itself doing it. At the most challenging levels, the high engagement in the activity is much more complex than what one usually encounters in normal life, resulting in experience of a "transcendence of self". The concentration of the flow experience – together with clear goals and immediate feedback – provides order to consciousness inducing the enjoyable condition of psychic negentropy.

e) Paradox of control

"The flow experience is typically described as involving a sense of control – or, more precisely, as lacking the sense of worry about losing control that is typical in many situations of normal life" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 59).

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), what involved actually is the possibility rather than the actuality of control, but in principle, in the world of flow perfection is attainable. A sense of control

plays an important part in flow experiences even for activities that involve serious risks; to an outsider these risks would seem to be much more potentially dangerous than those of normal life. The motivation of those who enjoy dangerous activities is how their enjoyment drives not from the danger itself but from their ability to minimize it. The positive emotion they enjoy is the perfectly healthy feeling of being able to control potentially dangerous forces.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990: 61) also stresses that what people enjoy is “not the sense of being in control, but the sense of exercising control”. Activities that produce flow experiences even the risky ones, are constructed as to allow the practitioner to develop sufficient skills to reduce the margin of error. He gave an example of rock climbers who recognized two sets of dangers: objective and subjective ones. The first kind is the unpredictable physical events (storm, temperature etc.) that they may encounter during the activity and can never be completely foreseen. The second kind is the dangers that result from the climber’s lack of skills. He concluded “the whole point of climbing is to avoid objective dangers as much as possible, and to eliminate subjective dangers entirely by rigorous discipline and sound preparation” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 60).

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) also points out that almost any enjoyable activity can become addictive in the sense that instead of being a conscious choice, it becomes a necessity that interferes with other activities. “When a person becomes so dependent on the ability to control an enjoyable activity that he cannot pay attention to anything else, then he loses the ultimate control: the freedom to determine the content of consciousness. Thus enjoyable activities that produce flow have a potentially negative aspect: while they are capable of improving the quality of existence by creating order in the mind, they can become addictive, at which point the self becomes captive of a certain kind of order, and is then unwilling to cope with the ambiguities of life” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 62).

f) Loss of self-consciousness

As mentioned earlier, when an activity is thoroughly engrossing, there is not enough attention left over to allow a person to consider any other temporarily irrelevant stimuli. Similarly, our own self disappears from awareness too (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The loss of the sense of a self separate from the world around it is sometimes accompanied by a feeling of union with the environment.

Preoccupation with the self consumes psychic energy because in everyday life we often feel threatened. Whenever we are threatened we bring the image we have of ourselves back into awareness, so we can find out whether or not the threat is serious, and how we should meet it. Everyday we are reminded of the vulnerability of our self and each time this happens psychic energy is lost trying to restore order to consciousness. But in flow there is no room for self-scrutiny due to the fact that enjoyable activities have clear goals, stable rules, and challenges well matched to skills, thus there is little opportunity for the self to be threatened.

“Loss of self-consciousness does not involve a loss of self, and certainly not a loss of consciousness, but rather, only a loss of consciousness of the self” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 64). The person in flow still keeps control of his or her psychic energy and he or she is aware of what happens in the body or in the mind. The optimal experience involves a very active role for the self. Being able to forget temporarily who we are is enjoyable. When not preoccupied with our selves, we actually have a chance to expand the concept of who we are. “Loss of self-consciousness can lead to self-transcendence, to a feeling that the boundaries of our being have been pushed forward (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 64).

This feeling is not just an imagination, but is based on a concrete experience of interaction with "other". This interaction produces a rare sense of unity with these usually foreign entities. When a person invests all psychic energy into an interaction, he or she becomes part of a system of action greater than what the individual self had been before. "This system takes its form from the rules of the activity; its energy comes from the person's attention" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 65). But it is a real system – subjectively as real as being part of a family, a corporation or a team – and the self that is part of it expands its boundaries and becomes more complex than what it had been. This growth of the self occurs only if the interaction is an enjoyable one, that is, if it offers nontrivial opportunities for action and requires a constant perfection of skills. It is also possible to lose oneself in systems of action that demand nothing but faith and allegiance.

There is one important and at first apparently paradoxical relationship between losing the sense of self in a flow experience and having it emerge stronger afterward. It almost seems that occasionally giving up self-consciousness is necessary for building a strong self-concept. The reason is that "in flow a person is challenged to do her best, and must constantly improve his or her skills. At the time, she doesn't have the opportunity to reflect on what this means in terms of the self – if she did allow herself to become self-conscious, the experience could not have been very deep" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 66). But afterward, when the activity is over and self-consciousness has a chance to resume the self that the person reflects upon is not the same self that existed before the flow experience. Then it is time to be enriched by new skills and fresh achievements.

g) Transformation of time

Another common feature of flow experiences is a distorted sense of time. In general people report that time seems to pass much faster – hours seem to pass by in minutes when consciousness is fully active and ordered. Occasionally the reverse occurs: a few seconds stretch out into what seems to be infinity. The clock no longer serves as a good analog of the temporal quality of experience.

However it is not clear whether this dimension of flow is a by-product of the intense concentration required for the activity at hand or it is something that contributes in its own right to the positive quality of the experience. Although it seems likely that losing track of the clock is not one of the major elements of enjoyment, freedom from the tyranny of time does add to the exhilaration we feel during a state of complete involvement. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Autotelic experience

The key element of an optimal experience is that it is an end in itself – the activity that consumes one is intrinsically rewarding (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). When all the above-mentioned elements are present, consciousness is in harmony and the self – invisible during the flow – emerges strengthened. The quality of the flow experience makes it autotelic (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Autotelic nature literally means having self-contained goals, the goals that are "just an excuse to make the experience possible" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988: 34). The activity is done not with the expectation of future benefit, but simply because the doing itself is the reward. Thus one's attention is paid to the activity for its own sake, not for its consequences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Whatever we do is neither purely autotelic nor purely exotelic (activities done for external reasons only), but a combination of the two. There are things that we are initially forced to do, but they turn out to be intrinsically rewarding during the course of time. Most of enjoyable activities are not natural at first, they demand an effort that initially one is reluctant to make. But normally once the

interaction starts to give feedback to the person's skills, it usually begins to be intrinsically rewarding (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Csikszentmihalyi also points out that an autotelic experience is very different from the feelings we have in the course of life. So much of what we ordinarily do has no value in itself, but we do it because we have to or we expect some benefit. Life passes in a sequence of boring experiences over which a person has little control. The autotelic experience or flow lifts the course of life to a different level. "Alienation gives way to involvement, enjoyment replaces boredom, helplessness turns into a feeling of control, and psychic energy works to reinforce the sense of self, instead of being lost in the service of external goals. When experience is intrinsically rewarding life is justified in the present, instead of being held hostage to a hypothetical future again." (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 69)

As mentioned earlier when dealing with the sense of control, flow could be a potentially addictive power. As Csikszentmihalyi (1990: 69) points out "optimal experience is a form of energy and energy can be used either to help or to destroy.... Energy is power but power is only a means". The goals to which it is applied can make experience either richer or more painful. Thus flow experience is not in an absolute sense. It is good only in that it has potential to make life richer, more intense and meaningful, and because it increases the strength and complexity of the self. But whether the consequence of any particular instance of flow is good in a larger sense needs to be evaluated in terms of more inclusive social criteria (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The source of energy can be misused so it should not be ignored, as "water can be both good and bad". The task is to learn how to enjoy without diminishing other people's chance to enjoy theirs.

To summarize, common characteristics of flow as a construct of optimal experience include: A sense that one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears and the sense of time becomes distorted. An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it. It is the order in consciousness that is gained.

2.2. Conditions of Flow

We have seen what are the common characteristics of flow experience and how all the experience can be joined into a meaningful pattern. Flow is the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Csikszentmihalyi has identified the following conditions under which the experience is shaped:

- Flow activities
- Flow and culture
- The autotelic personality
- The people of flow

a) *Flow activities*

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) pointed out from his studies that there are many activities that can result in flow experience, such as making music, rock climbing, sailing, and so forth. In common, they have rules that require the learning of skills, they set up goals, they provide feedback and they make

control possible. In addition, they facilitate concentration and involvement by making the activity as distinct as possible from the so-called “paramount reality” of everyday existence.

Flow activities have as their primary function the provision of enjoyable experiences. The way they constructed helps participants achieve an ordered state of mind that is highly enjoyable. They offer opportunities to go beyond the boundaries of ordinary experience. In flow experience, participants stretch skills to meet the challenges provided by the situation and seek to actualize their potential.

Any flow activity, whether it involved any dimension of experience, also provides “a sense of discovery, a creative feeling of transporting the person into a new reality. It pushed the person to higher levels of performance and led to previously undreamed-of states of consciousness.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 74) In short it transformed the self by making it more complex. In this growth of the self lies the key to flow activities.

b) Flow and culture

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) points out that culture is characterized by relativism, thus any comparison that is not strictly factual runs the risk of being interpreted as irrelevant. Moreover, because every evaluation across cultures must necessarily involve at least one set of values foreign to one of the cultures being evaluated, the very possibility of comparison is ruled out (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

However if the desire to achieve optimal experience is the foremost goal of every human being, the difficulties raised by cultural relativism is less severe, “each social system can be evaluated in terms of how much psychic entropy it causes, measuring that disorder not with reference to the ideal order of one or another belief system, but with reference to the goals of the members of that society” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 78). This is the starting point: One can compare this society is better than another if a greater number of its people have access to experiences that are in line with their goals. The next point of comparison would be identification if these experiences lead to the growth of the self on an individual level, by allowing as many people as possible to develop increasingly complex skills” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) also points out that cultures differ from one another in terms of the degree of the pursuit of happiness they make possible. He mentions that there are many instances of culture that have succeeded in creating a context in which flow is to achieve. Few cultures have attained a good fit between the psychological needs of their people and the options available for their lives. They have succeeded in evolving a set of goals and rules so compelling and so well matched to the skills of the population that its members are able to experience flow with unusual frequency and intensity. Cultures enhance flows.

Compared with people living a few generations ago, it is ironic however that there is no indication that we enjoy life more than our ancestors did, although availability of leisure is greater (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). As he further pointed out we need the skills to make use of them and need to know how to control consciousness.

In addition to the external conditions, or the structure of flow activities, we need to consider also the internal conditions that make flow happen.

c) *The autotelic personality*

The impediments to flow are first located within the individual himself. The second condition which affects whether an optimal experience will occur is individual's ability to restructure and control consciousness so as to make flow possible. When a person cannot control psychic energy, true enjoyment is not possible. Csikszentmihalyi commented: "Attentional disorders and stimulus over inclusion prevent flow because psychic energy is too fluid and erratic. Excessive self-consciousness and self-centeredness prevent it from the opposite reason: attention is too rigid and tight. Neither extreme allows a person to control attention. Those who operate at these extremes cannot enjoy themselves...and forfeit opportunities for the growth of the self" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 85).

Besides, there are also powerful environmental obstacles to enjoyment. Some are natural, some social in origin.

The social conditions that inhibit flow might be more difficult to overcome. Two important concepts are *anomie* and *alienation*. *Anomie* meaning "lack of rules" is the name the French sociologist Emile Durkheim gave to a condition in society in which the norms of behavior had become muddled (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). When it is no longer clear what is permitted and what is not, when it is uncertain what public opinion values, behavior becomes meaningless. People who depend on the rules of society to give order to their consciousness become anxious. *Alienation* is the condition in which people are constrained by the social system to act in ways that go against their personal goals. "When a society suffers from *anomie*, flow is made difficult because it is not clear what is worth investing psychic energy in; when it suffers from *alienation* the problem is that one cannot invest psychic energy in what is clearly desirable" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 86). The author also points out that these two societal obstacles to flow, *anomie* and *alienation*, are functionally equivalent to the two personal pathologies, attentional disorders and self-centeredness. At both individual and collective levels, the obstacles preventing flow experience is either fragmentation of attentional processes (as in *anomie* and attentional disorders) or their excessive rigidity (as in *alienation* and self-centeredness). At the individual level, *anomie* corresponds to anxiety while *alienation* corresponds to boredom.

d) *The people of flow*

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), the traits that mark an autotelic personality are most clearly revealed by people who seem to enjoy situations that ordinary persons would find unbearable. When adversity threatens, they reassert control by finding a new direction in which to invest psychic energy, a direction that lies outside the reach of external forces. When aspiration is frustrated, a person must seek a meaningful goal around which to organize the self. These are the "strategies for wresting control back to own consciousness" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 92). In order to achieve this internal control, it was proposed that "non-self-conscious individualism or a strongly directed purpose that is not self-seeking" plays an important role (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 92). Because they are intrinsically motivated in their action, they are not easily disturbed by external threats and have free psychic energy to analyze their surroundings objectively to discover new opportunities for action. Csikszentmihalyi suggested that this might be a key element of autotelic personality. Those who are concerned with protecting their self, fall apart when the external conditions turn threatening. Without interest in the world, a desire to be actively related to it, a person becomes isolated into himself/herself.

Summary

In the preceding pages, the flow concept was presented and discussed. Moreover, flow characteristics and conditions that make it possible were explained.

Flow experience is one in which there is order in consciousness. This happens when psychic energy – or attention – is invested in realistic goals, and when skills match the opportunities for action. The pursuit of a goal brings order in awareness because a person must concentrate attention on the task at hand and momentarily forget everything else. The period of struggling to overcome challenges is what people find to be the most enjoyable times of their lives. A person who has achieved control over psychic energy and has invested it in consciously chosen goals cannot help but grow into a more complex being. By stretching skills, by reaching toward higher challenges, such a person becomes an increasingly extraordinary individual. Conditions of the flow experience were also presented which gave details for flow activities, flow with culture, autotelic personality and the people of flow. “Flow” is the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake.

3. Multiphase Experience

A number of researchers have attempted to use the flow concept to measure leisure experiences. One of the first studies to attempt to monitor on-site experiences, particularly the visitor moods, was reported by More and Payne (1978). They found that negative moods decreased significantly; however, they also found positive moods decreased. This suggested that the on-site experience is just the most visible part of the total leisure experience, the “tip of the iceberg” (Mannell and Kleiber, 1997). Recreation experience is multiphasic.

Clawson and Knetsch (1966) were ones of the first to suggest that recreation experience is characterized as multiphasic. Widely known, their work (1966) has ever since been one of the basic principles in econometric analysis of travel and tourism and used in the planning literature. It even has relevance beyond outdoor recreation (Stewart, 1998). Particularly, supported by the Clawson and Knetsch’s model, Hammitt (1980) conducted a study of a university field trip to Mud Lake Bog in Michigan and found significant changes in mood across the five phases of the experience. From the original five phases, some recent authors have identified still further phases, of which two of the more important are the sense of arrival experienced by the visitor and their experience of farewell on departure, while some others have begun to investigate the multiphasic nature of the on-site experience such as Hull (1996) who found support for the dynamic and complex nature of the recreation experience in a seven-week period of study.

Clawson and Knetsch (1966) outlined the total experience as typically consisting of five major, specific, yet non-mutually exclusive phases, which include: anticipation, travel to the site, actual on-site experience, travel back and recollection. According to them, outdoor recreationists gain satisfaction or dissatisfaction from each phase of the experience. The five major phases (Clawson and Knetsch, 1966: 33-36) include:

Phase 1, anticipation

This is a period of imagining and planning the trip. The thinking may be very brief or may extend over weeks or months. Anticipation may far outrun the later reality. By and large, advance planning should be based upon realistic factors. If the anticipation and planning lead to a positive decision, the outdoor recreation experience goes farther.

Phase 2, travel to

This is the getting to the recreation site. In almost every instance, some travel is required. Of significance, the satisfactions and dissatisfactions of travel to the site vary greatly between individuals, between routes and between end objectives or areas visited. At the best, some persons or groups may enjoy the travel itself. On the other hand, many travelers seem to regard the trip itself as a necessary nuisance.

Phase 3, actual on-site experience

This is the actual activity or experience at the site. This is a part of the total recreation experience, but it may be the basic reason for the whole experience and the remaining parts of the total experience may be built around it. In some outings, several sites may be involved with intermediate travel between them. Each of the sites is important and the experience at each contributes to total enjoyment.

Phase 4, travel back

This is the return trip home. It is unlikely to be the same as the travel to the site although the route might be the same. Memories of the trip and anticipation of the work are certainly different from the thoughts on the outbound trip.

Phase 5, recollection

This is the recall or memory of the activity or experience. After the experience is over, the person(s) recall to memory one or more aspects of the total experience. S/he may share these recollections with friends and relatives. When the total recreation experience makes a major impression, the recollection will be strong and lasting. If the experience is a brief and common one quickly followed by a similar one, each experience will make only a dim impression. Recollection may produce feelings quite different from the actual experience. This phase also provides a starting point for anticipation of another by the same person or by others.

4. Conceptual Framework

This study uses the flow concept developed by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) as a lens through which to explore visitor experience in Sa Pa based on Clawson and Knetsch's experience model.

For the course of the study, a conceptual model was developed (Figure 3). This conceptual model interrelates different concepts, based on the flow theory introduced by Csikszentmihalyi and the multiphasic recreation experience model developed by Clawson and Knetsch, which were used in the research.

The integration of the two models, flow and multiphasic experience, is an attempt of this study to examine visitor experience, taking Sa Pa as a case. Particularly, the conceptual model that this study uses intends to help understand how and how far the visitors experience the flow or approach the experience of flow, in each stage of their experience. Common flow characteristics are used as typical lenses to each stage to examine their experience.

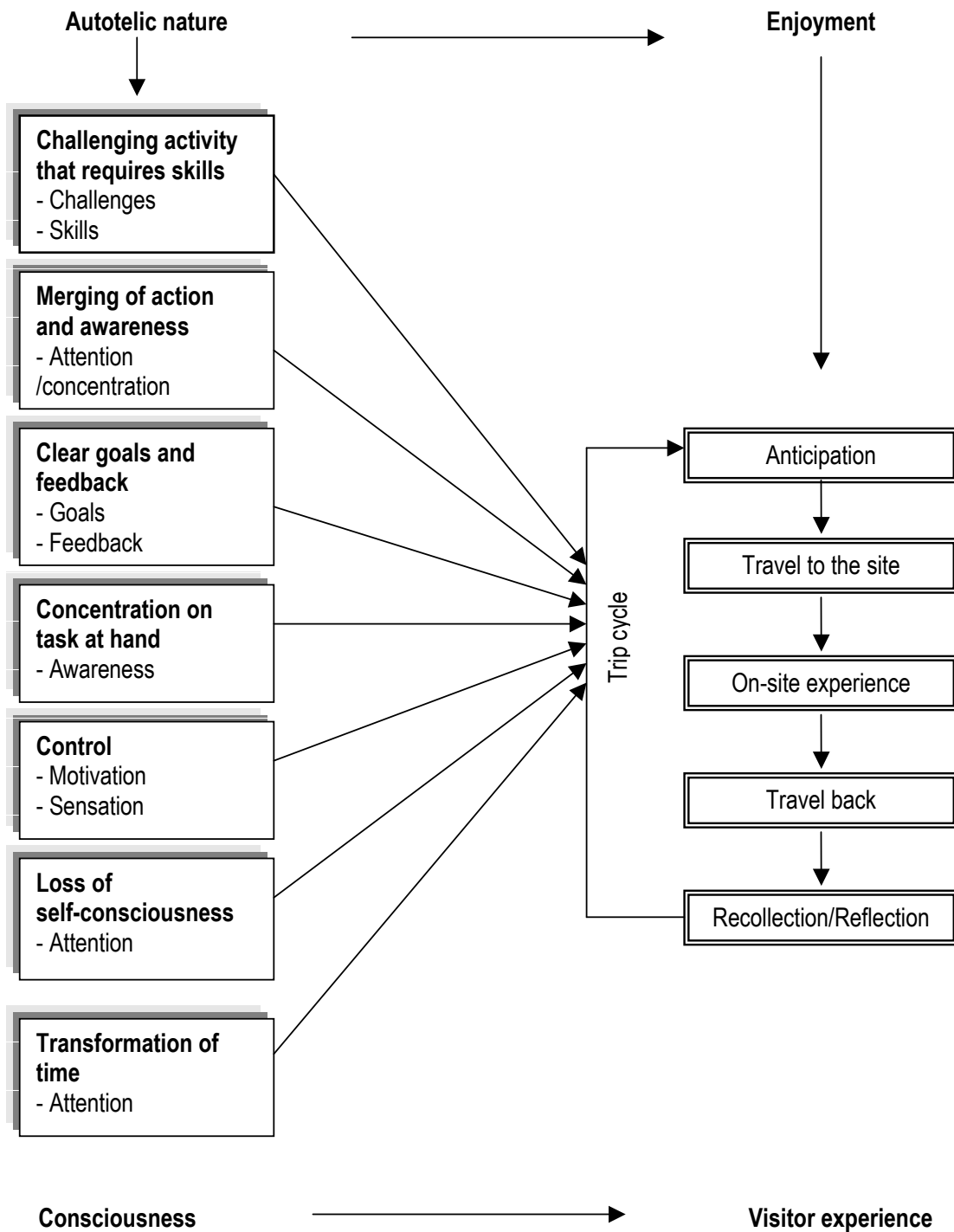


Figure 3: Conceptual Framework

III. METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a constructivist ontology, which asserts that there are multiple realities to explain a phenomenon (Jennings, 2001). The focus was on the emic points of view, that is, the perceptions and values of the observed as contrasted with those of the observer. The methods in this study are essentially qualitative rather than quantitative. The key and important strength of the qualitative approach is that it can provide a comprehensive, complete and whole perspective (Maas, 2003). Maas (2003) also points out that the qualitative approach is often used when:

- The researcher wishes to gain a deep insight into one or a few objects processes that are restricted in time and space.
- The research is focused on meanings and attitudes of people.
- The researcher accepts that the concepts, terms and issues be defined by the research subjects in the course of the research and not by the researcher in advance.

Prompted from the above, as the objective this study is to explore issues relating to the quality of visitor experience, the qualitative approach was therefore chosen and Sa Pa was taken as a case study, to gain a profound, holistic and deep insight into the particular situation of Sa Pa, within a restricted time and geographical area. In-depth and semi-structured interviews with visitors (both foreign and Vietnamese) uncovered their meanings and attitudes they attributed to their recreation experience. Moreover, this approach provided an insider's point of view of how visitors identified their attitudes, beliefs, and values, which were not influenced by the researcher.

The remainder of this Chapter explains the study methodology in details. Adopted specific methods, particularly interviewing, participant observation and content analysis are presented through the processes of data collection and data analysis.

1. Data Collection

First, secondary data were gathered during end of September and beginning of October 2004 through a literature review to gain the necessary background information about the research area. This was mainly done in Hanoi, when visits to IUCN, FFI, SNV resources were made to collect relevant documents. I also took opportunities to meet with relevant people from these organizations to get an initial overview of the latest tourism development in Sa Pa, and to explore possible and potential contacts that might well inform my research during my fieldwork. In addition, access to literature from Wageningen University library was also made at the beginning and after the fieldwork to sharpen the methodology used in the study.

Later, the fieldwork in Sa Pa took place from middle of October to middle of November 2004 when I resided in Sa Pa to gather primary data. Although having had been to Sa Pa several times before, I spent several days to "enter" the fieldwork situation, to update myself and to network as well as establish necessary contacts in the field.

The main part of the fieldwork was on-site data collection, which was based on in-depth semi-structured interviews, both formal and informal, with participant observation to complement the interviews. "Interviewing is the best method for pursuing a subject in-depth, operating in a discovery mode, and creating interaction with an individual." (Henderson, 1991: 71) The interviews were conducted with two groups: Visitors (both foreign and Vietnamese) and key informants/stakeholders (local management, National Park management, TISC staff, hotels, tour operators). Totally 23 foreign and 21 Vietnamese visitors were interviewed without separation

between individual and group interviewing in order to provide the most convenience for interviewees. Full lists of international and domestic tourists interviewed were attached as Appendices 1 and 2 respectively. Most of the interviews with visitors lasted between 45 – 60 minutes, while some were as long as 90 minutes or more, and some were 30 minutes depending on their knowledge and time availability. Selection of key informants/stakeholders to be interviewed was based on the snowball approach, which is to the opinion of the researcher the key informants themselves are the best to suggest whom she should meet to inform her study. These meetings were conducted almost in parallel with interviews with visitors for possible reflection and feedback between the two sources of data. A full list of 21 key informants/stakeholders met is attached as Appendix 3. Each meeting was usually 60 minutes or longer.

Visitors and tourists

Visitors interviewed were those who had spent at least two days in Sa Pa or were on the last day before their departure, in order to have their more comprehensive impression about their trips. For this reason, several appointments for the interview had to be made in advance, but for others, I did immediate interviews with visitors after approaching them directly in hotel lobbies, restaurants, bars or in streets (they had been in Sa Pa for several days). However, no matter where I approached them, the interviews were mostly conducted in comfortable and quiet enough settings (usually over a cup of coffee or drinks in restaurants, or in a quiet place in the hotel lobbies we scheduled to talk while visitors were waiting for the bus). I did not separate out interviews, but most of them were conducted with a visitor or a couple of visitors (with regards to foreign visitors). Interviews with bigger groups (four or five members) happened with Vietnamese visitors. As a result, the names recorded represent the whole group interviewed (either couple or bigger group), except that differentiated opinion is noted and thus recorded as a separate entry. Full lists of international and domestic tourists interviewed were attached as Appendices 1 and 2 respectively. Due to visitors' convenience, most of interviews were not tape-recorded as initially planned, especially those with Vietnamese. Some showed inconvenience with tape-recording explicitly and others implicitly, but it was obvious that no tape-recording, but note-taking made the interviewees feel more comfortable and the talks were more open.

Before introducing the study and officially interviewing visitors, some personal questions were exchanged to break the gap and build a more intimate relationship between the interviewer and interviewee(s). This is particularly important with Vietnamese visitors. Although there are types of structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviewing, Ely *et al.* (1991) points out that all interviews have a structure, and the difference is that how this structure is negotiated. Thus, during the interviews, a list of key issues and questions was used in order to keep the interviews inside the framework of the study. These questions were used as a starting point for more insight information to be explored. I tried to probe and attempt to get the interviewees to express the meanings embedded in their glossed descriptions.

Table 1 in the following page shows the questions used to probe visitors during the interviews, together with corresponding categories. Baseline information about the visitors was also gathered to have a general overview of them as well as their general self-appraisal of their visits.

Table 1: Outline of questions used in interviews with visitors

<i>Phases of experience</i>	<i>Questions</i>	<i>Themes</i>
1. Anticipation	• What did you want to do or to see in Sa Pa?	Motivation; Awareness; Interest
	• What (or how much) did you know about Sa Pa?	
	• How did you know about Sa Pa?	
	• What did you expect your trip to Sa Pa to be?	
2. Travel to the site	• How did you enjoy your travel to Sa Pa?	Modes of travel; Comfort
3. On-site experience	• What did you do during your trip?	Activity
	• What do you think you will tell your friends and relatives at home about your trip to Sa Pa?	
	• What would you recommend Sa Pa to others?	
	• Will you come to Sa Pa again?	
	• What would you like to do or to see if you come to visit Sa Pa for the second/next time?	
4. Return travel	• In general, how was your travel back home from Sa Pa? (Good, bad or OK)	Modes of travel; Emotion
	• How did you feel when you were traveling back? Please explain why, if possible.	
	• What did you do or think of when you were traveling back?	
	• Anything inconvenient during your return travel? Please explain.	
	• Any things else that you want to reflect about your return travel?	
5. Recollection and reflection	• What was the best thing about your trip?	Activity; Emotion
	• What was the worst thing about your trip?	
	• What did you tell your friends about your trip to Sa Pa?	
	• What did you recommend your friends?	
<i>Addition:</i> Baseline information about the tourists interviewed	• Name	Demographic information; Self-appraisal of the visit
	• Sex	
	• Age	
	• Nationality (foreigners) and Cities/provinces of origin (Vietnamese)	
	• Kind of tourist (independent traveler(s) or in an organized tour)	
	• 5-point scale self-appraisal of the visit from being awful (1 point) to excellent (5 points)	

Key informants/stakeholders

Verschuren and Doorewaard (1999) point out that experts with relevant experience are good sources of knowledge. In this research, they are key informants and stakeholders who are involved and have experience as well as knowledge in tourism management and operation in the area. The

choice of these experts was based on locating those with relevant experience and knowledge in tourism in Sa Pa and suggested by the snowball approach. From the first day of collecting secondary data to the last day of fieldwork, 21 key informants were met, both formally and informally. Unlike interviews with visitors, interviews with key informants were mostly arranged in advance. They normally took place in key informants' offices, where they were made sure to be comfortable and convenient. A full list of key informants interviewed is attached as Appendix 3, and they were mostly interviewed individually. After a couple of pilot interviews with tape-recording, I decided not to tape-record, but take notes, to ensure comfort of the interviewees. This was particularly important to Vietnamese managers, even when they "diplomatically" agreed (two first interviews). It was my observation that they were not comfortable to be totally open in discussion or honest to express their opinions. Only interviews with two foreigners were comfortably tape-recorded given the already close established relationship between the interviewer and interviewees.

Like interviews with visitors, before introducing the study and officially interviewing visitors, some personal questions were exchanged to break the gap and build a more intimate relationship between the interviewer and interviewee(s). During the interviews, a list of key issues and questions was used in order to keep the interviews inside the framework of the study. These questions were also used as a starting point for more insight information to be explored. As pointed out by Kvale (1983), it is important for the interviewer to lead interviewee to certain themes and to clarify ambiguities without directing them to express specific meanings. Probing was often used for this purpose and to gain deeper understanding of the opinions they had just shared.

Table 2 below shows the questions used to probe key informants/stakeholders during the interviews, together with corresponding categories.

Table 2: Outline of questions used in interviews with key informants/stakeholders

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Questions</i>	<i>Themes</i>
Demand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What do visitors request? What do you feel you should be providing but cannot at the moment? 	Information Service
Supply	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are there any requests which you cannot meet? 	
Means	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What would be the best means to provide to visitors? 	

Observation

Participant observation complemented both interviews with visitors and meetings with key informants. It was made in Sa Pa town, in TISC office and in some surrounding destination areas of minority villages to observe tourist patterns and the situation of Sa Pa in general. The locations to observe were suggested by interviews with visitors or meetings with key informants. In return, some of the issues arisen while observing were brought to the next discussion or interviews where appropriate.

Observation was also a good complement to on-site literature review. This literature ranging from a policy, a new regulation or a research was cross-checked with observation to have an in-depth understanding, which could be brought into discussion in the next interviews.

Permission was asked in advance where required to avoid any possible problem or confusion.

2. Data Analysis

Tesch (1990) describes qualitative analysis as the process of developing an organizing system in order to help determine what individual statements reveal about the phenomenon being studied. The organizing system used in this study was to explore dominant themes or issues relating to visitor experience in Sa Pa, from the perspectives of international visitors, domestic visitors and stakeholders, and to present the ways these themes or issues were featured.

Data were organized according to themes based on the flow with support of the experience phases. During the course of study, five data sources were used, analyzed and triangulated:

- Documentation: Literature review
- Key informants/Stakeholders: Interviewing
- International tourists: Interviewing
- Domestic tourists: Interviewing
- Participant observation: Observation

The analysis began with in-depth exploration of individual interviews, mostly note-taken and some tape-recorded, to identify dominant themes relating to visitor experience based on each phase of Clawson and Knetsch's (1966) recreation experience model. The guiding interview questions helped orient the interviews, but did not prevent expansion of meaning or clarification for understanding from interviewees. Coding was used for identifying themes:

- *Motivation, Interest and Awareness* in the Anticipation phase
- *Modes of Travel and Comfort* in the Travel to the Site phase
- *Activity* in the On-site Experience phase
- *Modes of Travel and Emotion* in the Return Travel phase
- *Emotion and Activity* in the Reflection/Recollection phase.

Given the nature of the qualitative study, after several interviews or meetings (normally at the end of a day), an initial analysis was made in order to prepare for the next ones. This was useful and necessary because the next interviews were more focused and things could be cross-checked for clarity.

The interviews were normally triangulated with participant observation and document analysis during the process. Apart from obtaining more data, triangulation was used to check the consistency of the data sources and to prevent any biases. Themes arising were cross-checked from the different sources (interviews between foreign and Vietnamese tourists, interviews between tourists and key informants, observation and document analysis). This was done to increase the trustworthiness and credibility of the research.

Interviews were done either individually, in couples or in small groups depending on the convenience of the interviewee(s). However, for record only one representative of the group was noted. The interviews with international visitors were conducted in English and the interviews with domestic visitors in Vietnamese, thus scripts for Vietnamese visitors' interviews had to be transcribed and translated into English, although the interview contents were taken notes in Vietnamese by the researcher.

Personal reflection on interviews

For both foreign and Vietnamese tourists, most of the interviews were not conducted strictly following the questions and steps designed. The tourists preferred telling me their stories and I used the questions to keep them go in the right track. On one hand, I found it good because it gave a full sense of comfort for the tourists to tell their experience in the way they liked, but on the other hand, sometimes it was not easy to control their stories.

Tape recording, especially with Vietnamese officials is not recommended to use during the interviews. I myself was not experiencing with strongly opposed reaction with tape recording, but encountered with situations (early interviews) when time was wasteful for no useful information gained. Without tape recording, but note taking, conversations were much more open, honest and frank.

3. Limitations

The nature of the qualitative research methods utilized in this study poses certain limitations. First, it is small scale, due to time limitation. Overall, the fieldwork lasted two months, so the number of tourists interviewed was limited. October and November were the time in the year when international tourists are dominant in comparison with domestic ones. Therefore, generalization to a larger population is not possible on a statistical ground, although may be possible on logical grounds (Maas, 2003). Second, the time constraint also resulted in the last two phases including the return travel and recollection that could not thoroughly investigated: Only quick contacts and simple email follow-up were done when the researcher returned to the Netherlands. In a more comprehensive study, this should be dealt more properly with more thorough follow-up approaches.

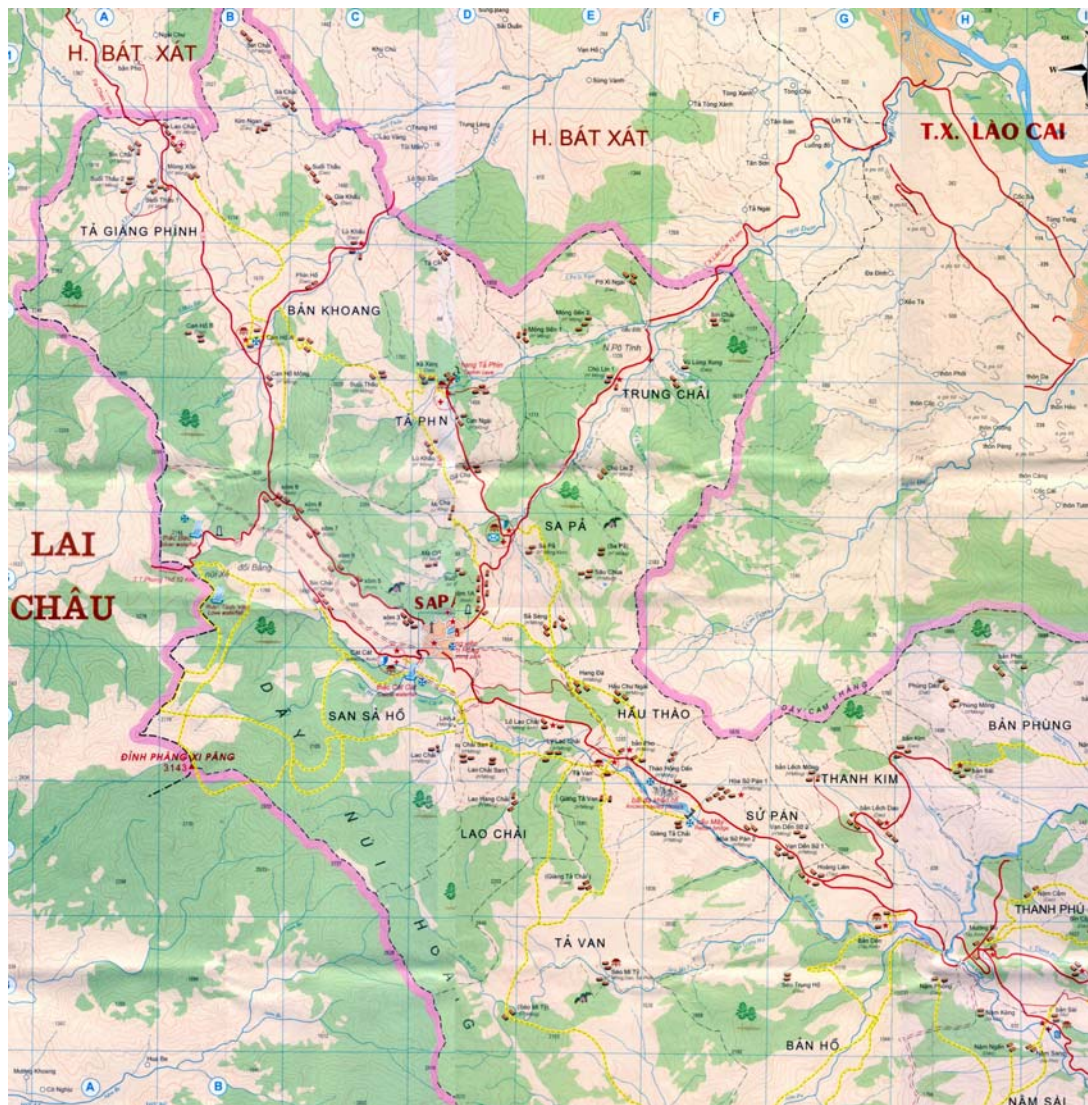


Figure 4: Map of Sa Pa

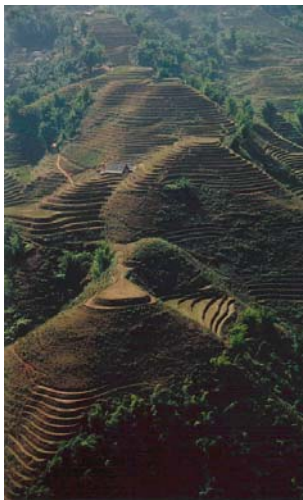
Source: Sa Pa Sustainable Tourism Project

IV. SA PA AND TOURISM IN SA PA

In the previous Chapters, background to the study, including the study context, nature of the problem as well as the aim, objectives and research question, was discussed. The study aims to provide a basis for ensuring that the quality of visitor experience in Sa Pa is enhanced, thus it explores issues relating to the quality of visitor experience in the area by assessing the understandings and perspectives of local stakeholders and service providers, and exploring the experiences, attitudes and values of both international and domestic visitors in Sa Pa. A theoretical framework was developed to realize this aim. It uses the flow concept as a lens through which visitors experience as multiphasic is looked at. The methodology was also presented.

This Chapter continues with content analysis of documentation in combination with observation to give a general picture of Sa Pa and tourism in Sa Pa. In order to explore issues relating to visitor experience in Sa Pa an overview of the situation is needed. First, some background information about Sa Pa and Sa Pa tourism is introduced. Second, an overview of different stakeholders and their roles in tourism development of the area follows. This helps to understand the broad context that plays a critical role in promoting quality of visitor experience in Sa Pa.

1. Background



Terraced hills

Sa Pa (spelled as Cha Pa by the colonialists) is a mountainous district, bordering China and situated within Lao Cai province (formerly Hoang Lien Son province) of Northwest Vietnam (Figure 4). It is home to six major ethnic groups: H'mong, Dao, Kinh, Tay, Giay and Xa Pho. The ethnic groups make up the vast majority (almost 86%) of the district and the Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) are only 13.7% of the total population, who are almost all resident in the capital town of Sa Pa. The largest population group is H'mong, accounting for 53% of the total district population, followed by Dao making up 24%, Kinh 13.7%, Tay 5.7%, Giay 1.5% and Xa Pho 1.5%. Each minority group has their own characteristics in terms of house styles, farming, cuisine, and traditions which differentiate them from one another, yet go on well together in social and economic relationships. There are also some other groups inhabiting in the district, but only in very small numbers (Thernstrom, 2002; Hoa and Lan, 2000).

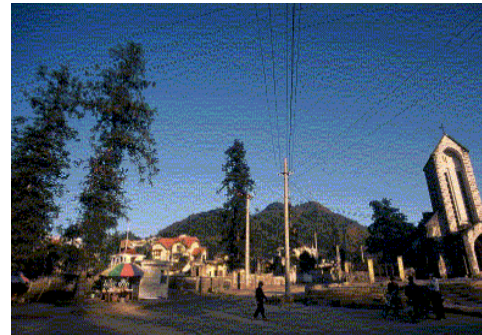
Situated in the monsoon tropical area, Sa Pa yet is characterized by the relatively moderate climate due to its high altitude. The average temperature in the year is from 15-18°C being very cold in winter with snowing at some time and cool in summer. This is the only place in Vietnam where snow can be seen. During summer, it is like all four seasons in one day: Spring in the morning, summer at noon, autumn in the afternoon and winter in the evening (Giang Seo Phu, 2004). Sa Pa encompasses the Hoang Lien National Park, which houses a vegetation complex unique in the region (MARD and FIPI. 2003), and the highest mountain in Indochina - Fansipan at 3,143 m above sea level.

Endowed with such valuable cultural and natural assets: Rich cultural diversity, beautiful nature and landscape as well as cool climate, Sa Pa has been long known as a tourism resort. Dated back early last century, during the colonial period, Sa Pa was discovered by the French and it was first

built as a rest town, mainly for medical purpose for French officials. After being liberated from the French, Sa Pa turned into a rest and holiday town for Vietnamese state servants and officials (Giang Seo Phu, 2004). However, it was until the reopening of Lao Cai province in 1991, Sa Pa has been experiencing a tourism boom. This was time when Vietnam's *Doi Moi* (open door) policy was introduced and every economic sector, including tourism was encouraged to develop (Sa Pa Sustainable Tourism Project, 2004). For only about twelve years of *Doi Moi* policy implementation, there has been a dramatic change in tourism development in Lao Cai province, particular in Sa Pa district. According to Sa Pa Trade and Tourism Section (TTS) statistics (2004), the number of tourists coming to Sa Pa reached as high as 85,000 in 2003 in comparison with only 1,000 in 1990. For the first six months of 2004, around 65,000 tourists (both foreign and Vietnamese), an increase of 40% of the same period in the previous year came to visit Sa Pa. Income from tourism services in the first half of 2004 was reportedly gained 25 billion VND (approximately 1.6 million USD) (Sa Pa TTS, 2004).

2. Sa Pa Town

According to the legend, "Sa" means "sand" and "Pa" means "village". Sa Pa town itself, at about 1,600 meters above sea level, lies to the north of Hoang Lien mountains. The town is the administrative center of Sa Pa district and also the tourism hub. It is where most hotels, guesthouses, restaurants, bars, shops and other services are concentrated. According to the first six-month 2004 report by TTS (Sa Pa TTS, 2004), there are 88 hotels and guesthouses, both state-owned and private, of different scales and standards, in the area, an amazing increase in



Sa Pa town

comparison with only two guesthouses in 1990 (DiGregorio, 1996). They range from the resort type, four-star or three-star hotels, or as simple as family-run guesthouses or homestays catering tourists and visitors of different demands and budgets. Along with it, tour companies, including both local and foreign-invested, such as Topas, Handspan, Nature Tour, Green Bamboo etc. have opened offices in Sa Pa town to do their business. The town is the departure point for most tours to minority villages. Moreover, infrastructure and service conditions have been dramatically improved to facilitate more development of tourism in the district: The main highway Lao Cai-Sa Pa, roads within town, water and power supply, drainage and sanitation, electricity and a telephone network (Thernstrom, 2002).

Being an economic center of the district, the town is dominated by Kinh (Vietnamese) people, who came to settle down permanently here as reportedly known first in 1960 (Thernstrom, 2002). Obviously, the townspeople are bigger money earners from tourism in comparison with minority people. They actively participate in tourism and service industry running hotels, restaurants and trade activities (Hoa and Lan, 2000). Ethnic minority people, who live mainly in vicinity of the town, participate in tourism mainly as providers of goods and services, to both tourists and businesses of the town. Here lies the question of equality in tourism benefit sharing between local (Kinh) people and ethnic minorities.

3. Minority Villages and Minority People

Although most of tourism expenditures are spent and transacted in Sa Pa town, where the Kinh townspeople dominate, many tourist activities take place in the vicinity where minority population is located. Being culturally diverse with ethnic groups of H'mong, Dao, Tay, Giay and Xa Pho, Sa Pa is characterized by its minority people and villages. In most guidebooks (Lonely Planet, Footprint, Guide du Routard) and promotional materials, the diverse minority culture is a highlight and treks to these villages are often recommended. According to TTS statistics, 84% of the total number of international tourists to Sa Pa come for ethnic minority culture concerns.

Trekking and Homestay

The richness of the cultural identities of the ethnic minorities makes Sa Pa a fascinating destination for tourists. Trekking to minority villages can be within one day or longer, in which the later requires homestay in minority villages.

To the south, in the valley of the Hoa Ho River, the first village is a H'mong one, Lao Chai. Next is Ta Van village, populated by H'mong and Giay, but only Giay have guesthouses. Lao Chai and Ta Van are very close to each other, but Ta Van provides homestay while Lao Chai doesn't. However, Ta Van homestay rotation was reportedly causing inter-community conflicts. Some homestays have received certification before others, yet they have not received any visitors, while other people who had certification afterwards were receiving quite a



An H'mong village

few numbers. Further down is Ban Ho, after having passed Giang Ta Chai (Dao) and Su Pan (H'mong) along Muong Hoa stream. Ban Ho also offers homestay for tourists as Ta Van. However, only the Tay in Ban Ho hosts guests, while the Giay here does not have any guesthouses. This is in contrast with Ta Van village, where the Giay hosts guests and the H'mong doesn't. The other villages in the area that provide homestay to tourists are Thanh Phu (Tay), Nam Sai (Tay) and Sin Chai B (H'mong).

In the north of Sa Pa, trekking is not as developed as that in the south due to the distance from the town, which makes it difficult for trekking companies to organize (Thernstrom, 2002). The village that most frequently receives tourists in any large number is Ta Phin (H'mong and Red Dao), close to Thac Bac (Silver Waterfall) that attracts a lot of Vietnamese tourists. Besides, Sa Pả (with accent on "Pa"), Trung Chai and Ta Giang Phinh receive very few tourists. The reason is that these places are considered not to have any special tourism resources to offer.



Tay dance

With the aim to assist better benefit sharing equality at destination minority villages, community-based tourism (CBT) has been introduced in the area. In 2001, with support from the District and assistance from IUCN, SNV and the Ford Foundation, Sin Chai village of the H'mong was involved in CBT. The CBT project aims "to help locals to profit from tourism while conserving the natural environment that draws

visitors to this beautiful region”, using participatory planning methods during the project development and the strong involvement of the local community during its implementation stages (CBT Sin Chai Village brochure). A community Trekking Management Board and a Tourism Development Fund were founded to support to the CBT. According to a discussion with key informants, a large share (75%) of the income generated goes directly to the homestay families, 15% is given to the Trekking Management Board for their effort and the rest 10% is forwarded to the public fund, which is used for maintenance and improvement of roads and facilities, including building a Community Center which serves as a meeting place for visitors and guides. With CBT, this mechanism assists in a more equitable distribution of benefits resulted from tourism to all village members, not only to those who directly are involved in homestay provision. However, there have been some shortcomings that hampers the effectiveness of the project, particularly cooperation and coordination between the project and provincial authorities should be strengthened, CBT products need to be refined as well as marketing and promotion should be enhanced. CBT products should base on indigenous knowledge and resources to attract more tourists and keep them coming back. In addition to that, CBT needs much more support the provincial management to link it with existing provincial and national policies such as the poverty alleviation or 135 program, ethnic culture restoration program etc., to be more effective and sustained. SNV currently continues helping Sa Pa district to develop another CBT model in Ban Ho. It is hoped that the lessons learnt from the previous model (and also Ta Van) will be useful for Ban Ho to make it a success. Development of a genuine CBT project is time-consuming, and local capacity building support is obviously needed.



A Dao woman



An H'mong girl

Minority Participation in Tourism

Ethnic minority people themselves are the main attractions in Sa Pa. Besides, they participate in tourism in two ways: The first is the sale of goods: Handicrafts, forest and agricultural products, drinks or refreshment to tourists in popular destination villages; The second is provision of services: Porters, tour guides to villages and Fansipan, accommodation or homestay in villages, payment for photographs, cultural performances (DiGregorio, 1996). In general, ethnic minorities participate in tourism in Sa Pa is at low level, in comparison with the Kinh.

Spectacles

This is a result from the commercialization of culture. Tourists come to Sa Pa to see minority people: The way they live and work, the traditions they possess, or simply the way they dress. One of the most well-known cultural events which does not exist any more due to the commercialization is the weekend “love market”. For long, it has been the selling point for tourism in Sa Pa.



Dao minority

Sale of goods

Ethnic minority people sell handicrafts directly to tourists. They come from the nearest minority villages to the town, mostly from Ta Phin and Lao Chai, and are often H'mong or Dao elderly women or young girls. Some of them spend nights in the town to save traveling time and to increase the selling. The products regularly offered include embroidered clothes, hats, bags, silver jewelry, and traditional musical instruments. Besides, minority people also participate in tourism through provision of forest and agricultural products. This is in response to the tourist demands and higher standard of living of Kinh townspeople. The forest products include wood, medicinal and ornamental plants (especially orchids), honey, mushroom and songbirds. Agricultural products include cardamoms, potatoes and corn.



An H'mong sells handicrafts

Provision of services

The services include tour and mountain guiding (Fansipan). To be a tour guide, they have to be over 17 years old, have a guiding certificate provided by TTS or VNAT and sign a contract. Ethnic girls are known as good foreign language speakers (mostly English or French) though they cannot write. At the moment there are around 30 ethnic guides out of total 120 in Sa Pa. They are hired by tour operators to do the guiding for tourists. Ethnic locals also provide homestay for tourists. A few men give street performance of traditional music and ethnic dance to earn money. Some others provide their labor in construction, and some girls make money by being spectacles for photographs by tourists.



H'mong tour guides

4. Sa Pa District People's Committee (DPC)

DPC plays a key role in tourism development in the area. It is responsible for development of policies, tourism infrastructure and facilities, and management of daily public services to tourists.

During the time of this study, a new "Temporary Regulation on Management of Village Tourism Routes in Sa Pa District" dated October 12th, 2004 was developed and issued by the People's Committee of Sa Pa District (Sa Pa DPC, 2004). According to the DPC, this new regulation aims to better manage the trekking activities, that are getting uncontrolled, and also to ensure safety of the tourists as well as security of the district (Appendix 4). Before issuing this regulation, a workshop where representatives of tour operators and travel companies were invited to make inputs was organized in September 2004. One of the things worth noting is that trekking routes to minority villages are now limited to only six authorized routes with specified homestay locations, if required (Sa Pa DPC, 2004:2) as follows:

- Route 1: Sa Pa – Cat Cat – Sin Chai – Sa Pa
- Route 2: Sa Pa – Cat Cat – Y Linh Ho – Lao Chai – Ta Van – Sa Pa
- Route 3: Sa Pa – Lao Chai – Ta Van – Ban Ho – Thanh Phu – Nam Cang – Sa Pa

- Route 4: Sa Pa – Lao Chai – Ta Van – Su Pan – Thanh Kim – Sa Pa
- Route 5: Sa Pa – Ta Phin – Mong Sen - Takco – Sa Pa
- Route 6: Climbing Fansipan

Villages are identified for homestay:

- In Ta Van commune: Ta Van Giay village
- In Ban Ho commune: Ban Den village
- In Thanh Kim commune: Topas accommodation place
- In Thanh Phu commune: Muong Bo village
- In Ta Phin commune: Commune's center and Sa Xeng cultural village
- In San Xa Ho commune: Sin Chai village

In addition to the above, new requirements related to tourist guides, a touring card and ticket are imposed. In general, travel agents and tour companies are in support of this Regulation, but there is also a concern related to the effectiveness of the Inter-sectoral Visitor Management Task Force, that is responsible for clearing procedures for village tours. Some argued that bureaucracy might take place.

This new regulation took effects the 1st November 2004.

5. Sa Pa Tourism Information and Service Center (TISC)

Founded in April 2003, Sa Pa Tourism Information and Service Center (TISC), now Sa Pa Tourism Information and Promotion Center (TIPC), is a part of the Trade and Tourism Section (TTS) of DPC. Apart from the administration from the provincial and district People's Committees, the Center currently receives active technical and advisory support from SNV and financial assistance from the Bread for the World.

Serving a broad range of stakeholders, from the district, businesses, ethnic minority people and tourists, this Center aims to provide a link between them and to be "the first [center] of its kind in Vietnam, promoting independently sustainable tourism" (Sustainable Tourism Support Project, 2002). Particularly, TISC is assigned with the following tasks and functions:

- Provision of tourist information and tourism promotion services in Sa Pa.
- Coordination of training on tourism managerial and vocational skills.
- Support to pro-poor tourism development initiatives in Sa Pa.

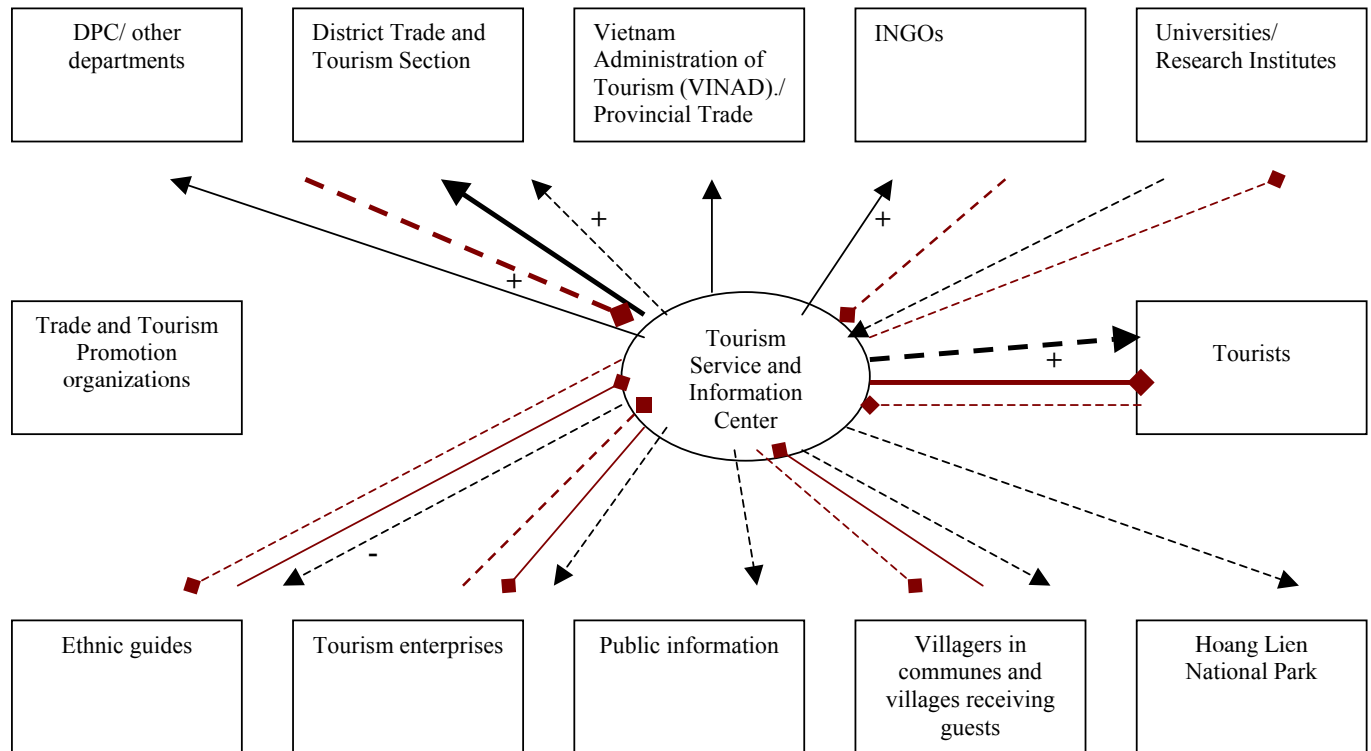
The Center operates in accordance with mechanism for Governmental units having earnings and self-financial management (Sa Pa Sustainable Tourism Project, 2004:4).

TISC targets, clients and partners are various, linking both central and local levels. Figure 5 in the following page illustrates TISC's relations with other institutions and organizations. From this diagram, as in any other tourism destinations, where the relationships are complex and multifaceted, TISC is potential to play an effective role in bridging different stakeholders in the area, particularly ethnic minority people, government management, Hoang Lien National Park and private sector for a common goal. Its status, on one hand, as being part of and supported by, the



TISC (now TIPC) office

government system, in the Vietnam context, is advantageous. On the other hand, its broad range relationship with INGOs and other international organizations complements its strengths to serve its central role in tourism development in the area.



Notes:

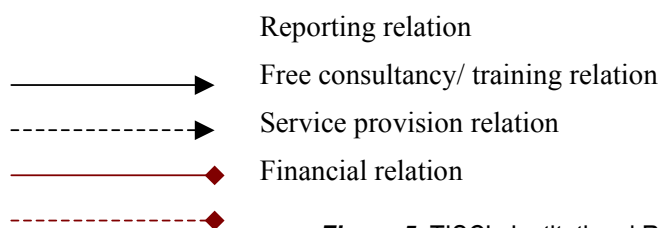


Figure 5: TISC's Institutional Relations

Source: Sa Pa Sustainable Tourism Project

However, TISC is still young in its operation. In a study on the institutional development and organizational strengthening for TISC in August 2004, which aimed to review its strengths and weaknesses as well as develop strategic orientation for TISC operation, several shortcomings were identified (Sa Pa Sustainable Tourism Project, 2004):

- TISC capacity in promotion and advertising of Sa Pa tourism is weak
- There is limited cooperation between TISC and tourism enterprise community in Sa Pa
- TISC support to local communities in their participation in tourism activities is limited.

However, given its advantageous status TISC will be able fulfill its tasks and functions to play its role in promoting sustainable development of tourism in Sa Pa if right strategies are implemented.

Results of the study reveal the following strategies for TISC (Sa Pa Sustainable Tourism Project, 2004):

- TISC to be an address for consultancy and information services
- TISC human resources to be ensured both in terms of quantity and quality
- TISC to be a training center specialized in tourism management and a unique organization specialized in promotion for tourism and tourist sites in Sa Pa
- TISC involvement in tourism development for the poor and ethnic people, and development of remote areas.

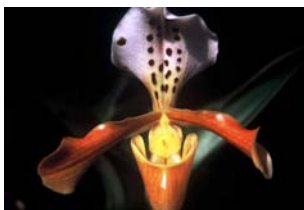
6. Hoang Lien National Park



Hoang Lien
National Park

Situated around Fansipan mountain, Hoang Lien National Park was established in July 2002 based on the former Hoang Lien Nature Reserve. The Park covers an area of nearly 3,000 hectares including four communes of Sa Pa district, Lao Cai province and two communes of Than Uyen district, Lai Chau province. The majority of the local population living inside the National Park is from Sa Pa district which includes four minority groups of H'mong, Dao, Giay and Tay in 15 villages. H'mong people account for the majority (71%) of the population (MARD and FIPI, 2003). Local communities are some of the poorest in Vietnam and heavily dependent on the land and forest resources, and now also on tourism. Many minority villages are located in scenic areas or near scenic spots such as Cat Cat, Lao Chai, Sin Chai, Ta Van which are popular tourist attractions in Sa Pa.

Hoang Lien National Park possesses unique tiered forest ecosystems, where the end of tropical flora and fauna, subtropical elements and superimposed on that the last trickle of Himalayan elements not found anywhere else in Indochina, could be found here (TISC, 2003). It is home to over 2000 flora and 500 fauna species, many of which are listed in the Red Book. This National Park's biodiversity is one of the highest in comparison with other national parks and protected areas in Vietnam, including endemic species (MARD and FIPI, 2003). The most recent recognition of Hoang Lien National Park as one of the four ASEAN Heritage Parks in Vietnam by ASEAN confirms its high biodiversity values.



Orchid

Hoang Lien National Park has a potential in ecotourism, especially in adventurous tourism climbing up the Fansipan peak. The current trekking routes to Fansipan include Nui Xe – Fansipan, Sin Chai – Fansipan, Cat Cat – Fansipan, and a round of Sa Pa – Nui Xe – Fansipan – Sin Chai (or Cat Cat) – Sa Pa, and back. Although there is no official figure of the number of tourists coming to trek Fansipan, the estimate is high (MARD and FIPI, 2003). However, there is a concern over the management and operation of these trekking activities with regard to protection of natural resources, which is also a base for tourism development, from tourism impacts. “Ecotourism” is a buzzword that you can hear in Sa Pa (and also in Vietnam in general). Hoang Lien National Park and Fansipan peak are often used as an ecotourism destination promoted by many tour operators, but ecotourism is not simply just having nature as a destination. “... What do you do with waste? What do you do with hazardous chemicals? How do you transport? Do you buy locally? Are you encouraging wildlife? What are you doing with your sewage? ...It is these kinds of nitty gritty things that will make the difference between ecotourism being a force for the environment or simply being another threat” (Figgis,

1993). At the moment, trekking to Fansipan falls mainly within the responsibility of the National Park², but according to many stakeholders (including the Park management themselves) their capacity is low. There are currently international conservation efforts in this area, among which is the FFI three-year “Community-based Conservation of the Hoang Lien Son” project. The project has been operating since July 2003 over three provinces, including Yen Bai, Son La and Lao Cai, and Hoang Lien National Park is one important area for conservation. With the goal “to assist communities to maintain the cultural and biological diversity of the Hoang Lien Son mountain forests within an appropriate cross-provincial legal and policy framework” the project also works in cooperation with the National Park management and tourism authorities to ensure proper tourism development in the area, including Fansipan trekking (FFI Hoang Lien Son Project, 2003) which do not damage the natural resources. This obviously requires a high degree of cooperation and goodwill from all stakeholders concerned to make this effort a success.

7. Private Sector

There are 88 guesthouses with a total of 1,350 rooms or 2,600 beds in Sa Pa (TTS, 2004). Most of these hotels and accommodation are private, including family owned. Few are state-run. Despite of accommodation overcapacity in Sa Pa, construction of new buildings keeps undergoing in every corner of the town. Overall, styles and architecture of the newly built hotels are a strong complaint from tourists. People’s Committee of Lao Cai Province in cooperation and with assistance with Region Aquitaine, France has recently carried out a comprehensive study covering numerous sectors and development in Sa Pa. As a result, an Urban Development Regulation which sets requirements, including those for architecture of accommodation was issued in September 2004³. Generally, this Regulation has been welcome by local people and businesses.



Tourist accommodation

There are few travel agencies, specialized in trekking in Sa Pa. The main ones include Phu Thinh (or Topas), Duc Minh, Viet Hung, Lao Cai Tourism, Hung Vi (or Handspan), Khanh Hai and Loan Tien (or Cat Cat) (TTS, 2004). In addition, most of the local hotels also have a travel desk which offers trekking services, which are very similar to those offered by travel agents in Hanoi and they are places that many tourists in Sa Pa choose to book a tour. Many hotels come into cooperation with tour companies in Hanoi to host more guests such as Darling hotel with Tulico, Green Bamboo with Eco Tours, Chau Long with Handspan. Recently, Topas, an environmental concerned tour company also has been taking care of Victoria hotel trekking tours.

There exists a Hotel Association that brings together around 64 hoteliers as members. The Association has been in cooperation with other organizations to facilitate its member to increase

² See Appendix 4, “Temporary Regulation on Management of Village Tourism Routes in Sa Pa District” dated October 12th, 2004, Article 8 “Formality order for issuing a touring card”.

³ “Sa Pa Urban Development Regulation, 2004” consists of 4 volumes: *Volume 1* specifies general and specific requirements; *Volume 2* sets requirements related to architecture and landscapes in Sa Pa; *Volume 3* provides planning for conservation and renovation of the Center area of Sa Pa; and *Volume 4* maps out traffic, electricity and water systems for Sa Pa.

their skills through training courses such as those on English, computer skills, and hotel hospitality. However, as many hotels commented, the Association operation is not as effective as it should be.

Besides, there are international NGOs or universities/projects that involve their activities in Sa Pa, such as IUCN, SNV, FFI, Frontier, Hanoi Open University, British Columbia University, Vancouver Tourism, Bordeaux University etc. Their activities focus in areas of capacity building, training and awareness raising, policy making support, product development, culture preservation or nature conservation.

8. Summary

This Chapter reviews Sa Pa tourism and different stakeholders involved with each having a role in the process. TISC can potentially play an important role in sustainable tourism development given its advantageous status bridging all stakeholders involved, which can contribute an equally significant part. This will require holistic cooperation and good will from all stakeholders involved, which will result in a better tourism environment in Sa Pa, and thus experience of visitors will be accordingly enhanced.

This Chapter serves as a situational background where findings of the fieldwork research follow in the next two Chapters, Chapters V and VI. Given distinct characteristics between international and domestic tourists and visitors, the findings are presented in a separate Chapter for each type of tourists: International tourists in Chapter V and domestic tourists in Chapter VI. As each phase of the experience can produce enjoyment or flow in its own way, the findings will be presented according the 5 phases of the recreation experience.

V. INTERNATIONAL TRAVELERS

In Chapter IV, an overview of Sa Pa and tourism in Sa Pa was presented. Sa Pa is endowed with outstanding natural and cultural resources which are a good basis for tourism development. Involved in this process are different stakeholders with different interests, which certainly contribute in different ways to sustainable tourism development in the area.

This Chapter follows with an analysis and findings of the fieldwork research relating to international visitor experience in Sa Pa. The methods employed are content analysis of the interviews, which are complemented by participant observation. First, the international segmentation is briefly reviewed. Second, analysis and findings of the fieldwork research, using flow experience as a lens to look at the five-phase visitor experience model, are presented.

Overview of the International Segmentation in Sa Pa

Well-known as a mountainous resort since the French colonial period, Sa Pa has attracted a lot of international tourists and visitors every year. It is almost *the* destination in the north of Vietnam suggested to tourists by people and guidebooks.

Coming to Sa Pa are people of different nationalities. According to TTS statistics (2004), Sa Pa received more than 22,000 tourists of 44 nationalities in the first three quarters (January – September) of 2004. Amongst them, European visitors represent the highest number, followed by Australian, North American and Asian (South Korean, Japanese, Chinese). Foreign tourists travel in organized tours or are independent travelers who travel individually, in couples or in small groups. For those traveling in organized tours or in groups, they book an all-inclusive tour (transport, accommodation and trekking) in Hanoi with local travel agents or companies or book a package in their home countries. Winter is the season in the year when foreign visitors predominate. In a week, Friday to Monday is the busiest time when foreign tourists want to make advantage of the weekend.

1. Anticipation about Sa Pa

Travelers to a certain area are driven by motivations. In case of an ethnic minority area, foreign tourists are interested in enjoying indigenous and exotic people, visiting to native homes and villages, experiencing truly alien scenes, traveling through landscape to observe man-land relationships. Anticipation, including planning, of a trip happens around what tourists are motivated by or their goals, to make the best out of the trip.

An overwhelming majority of international tourists interviewed came from developed countries. Their motivations to come to Sa Pa were minority people (12 people, 53.2%), the scenery/nature including the Fansipan Mountain (5 people, 21.7%), and trekking or walking (6 people, 26.1%). These themes kept appearing during interviews and they coincide with other researches about Sa Pa in the past.

Ethnically diverse culture has been the selling point of Sa Pa in guidebooks and promotional materials for a long time. All aspects related to ethnic people: their culture, daily life, customs, habits, tradition, lifestyles, clothing, work and leisure, perception, etc. interest tourists and are provided to tourists. One of the tourists interviewed said:

"Well, I am particularly interested in ethnic cultures. For me anything related to cultures would count: the way they [local ethnic minorities] live, they behave, they work, they dress... I like experiencing local cultures that are not yet affected by kinds of development or modernization." (Daniel, 27)

Unlike Vietnamese visitors, foreign tourists were interested to experience an exotic and memorable setting. Particularly, H'mong and Dao groups, which are the poorest communities, are characterized by their isolated settlements. Thus, they have retained their own indigenous culture and attracted tourists.

"I like visiting H'mong villages in Sa Pa and enjoying their genuine culture. They are of course different from H'mong people in the United States, who live in concretes." (Rudman, 23)

That is also the reason why the Sa Pa weekend "love market", even though it no longer exists in a natural manner is still a highlight in guidebooks and promoted by travel agencies and tour operators attracting tourists as an interesting cultural trait of Sa Pa. However, the fact that foreign visitors are much more attracted by the culture is a concern. Sa Pa is currently in competition with other areas offering a similar product already. And there is evidence that it may not be long before Sa Pa loses its authenticity and remote feel, and visitors begin to go elsewhere.

"...Many friends of mine who had been in Sa Pa advised me to visit Bac Ha. They even said it is now an alternative of Sa Pa because Sa Pa is too crowded already. I am going to Bac Ha tomorrow". (Bassot, 27)

Not as much as the cultural aspect, nature in Sa Pa is also an attraction that drives foreign tourists to come to Sa Pa. It includes and encompasses landscapes, scenic spots, mountains, rice fields or the environment in general. This interest was drawn from the fact that tourists had an impression from guidebooks and other sources of information about Sa Pa as a primitive area. As most tourists interviewed came from developed countries (from Europe, Australia or from some parts of Asia like Japan) they were inclined to get closer to the nature and escaped themselves from the modern busy life with all kind of pollution and noise. Unlike Vietnamese tourists, foreign tourists are usually interested in trekking, hiking or walking. Ethnic minority villages are destinations for their trekking and visit when they learn about ethnic culture while going into the nature too. For almost all tourists interviewed they enjoyed exploring the area, interacting with ethnic people (though limited due to the language barrier or with the help of tour guides) and communing with the nature. Fansipan Mountain was absolutely a repeated word by many tourists. Foreign tourists are keen to experience truly alien scenes and travel through landscape to observe man-land relationships. A tourist interviewed remembered:

"Sa Pa has beautiful landscapes that you can never feel bored with. It is wonderful to trek to ethnic minority villages." (Esther, 24)

To plan for the trip, tourists interviewed reported they were looking for basic information about Sa Pa before their departure. They got information through various information sources, which provided them feedback to their goals.

Guidebooks are a common and traditional source that is used to consult. An overwhelming majority of tourists interviewed (17 tourists, 74%) mentioned Lonely Planet and few others mentioned Guide du Routard or Footprint as a source of information before their trip to Sa Pa. These guidebooks are written solely by foreigners and updated periodically, normally every year. Although landscapes and

nature are mentioned, diverse ethnic minority culture is the selling point for Sa Pa in the guidebooks. Lonely Planet even has a full section about ethnic minority people in Sa Pa. The tourists interviewed who particularly had an interest in and their goal was to enjoy local ethnic minority culture in Sa Pa, reflected positively. One of them said:

"The guidebook [Lonely Planet] was useful. I bought it when I was at home... From it [the guidebook] I knew about ethnic cultures here. They have a good section on ethnic minority culture" (Albert, 35)

Along with evolvement of technology, internet is also used widely in tourism sector to promote tourism destinations. <http://www.sapa-tourism.com> is a part of cooperation program between Region Aquitaine, France and Lao Cai province, Vietnam which promotes the image of Sa Pa to the world. Another government website is <http://www.sapatourisonline.com> currently partly completed and managed by TISC. Both websites provide tourists with general information about Sa Pa regarding minority culture, details of some destinations, and touring and logistical arrangements. Alongside with the government, the business sector, including Topas, a tour company (www.topas-adventure-vietnam.com), Dragon Travel (www.optiontours.com) etc. also makes use of internet to attract tourists to Sa Pa. Having their own websites, in addition to introducing Sa Pa uniqueness and providing tourists with basic information, they also sell their tours on-line. Besides, on-line travel diaries written by previous travelers to Sa Pa were mentioned by many tourists interviewed. One of them expressed:

"... yeah the world is so small now with invention of internet. I got information about Sa Pa mainly from internet like reading travel diaries by people who had been here" (Marc, 39)

and another:

"... you know, because I could find "fresh" information and personal impressions about Sa Pa. Through them I knew what ethnic minorities live here, their customs, lifestyle and so on. The stories and anecdotes are nice and interesting to read" (Vivian, 25)

These on-line travel diaries obviously did not give direct feedback to the tourists in relation to their goals, but were useful indirect "informant" about salient characteristics of Sa Pa that are definitely valuable. Story telling usually makes readers more interesting to read and easy to remember, and more importantly gives them enjoyment while reading. This is why clear goals and immediate feedback constitute an element of flow experience for tourists and visitors (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

Besides, mushrooming travel agents and café tour operators in Hanoi are also popular places that tourists visit for information about Sa Pa before they decide for a trip (they are in Vietnam already). Brochures or leaflets combining simple cultural, natural attractions and touring information are the common means these travel agents and tour operators use. However, there was a comment about this type of information provision where the "seller" tried to sell tours, thus the information seems too be too commercialized and for promotion purpose only.

"I felt not very much happy when approached Sinh Café for information. They gave me too little information about what I was interested – bird watching – but most of the time convinced me about their service quality and tried to sell their tour." (Sapiolo, 37)

Although face-to-face communication usually brings immediate and direct feedback, but for tourists interviewed, several felt it was not the best way to ask for information they were interested.

Moreover, it resulted in a sort of discomfort and annoyance, and unpleasant feeling as the tourist above reflected.

Another source of information is word-of-mouth, which comes from either friends at home or fellow travelers that tourists meet on their travel. Word-of-mouth usually led tourists to choose to travel as independent travelers due to more flexible schedule they could have for things they wanted to do in Sa Pa.

"On the way from Hue to Hanoi, we met a nice young guy who recommended us to spend time in Sa Pa... a place of ethnic minorities, because I told him that we were interested in ethnic cultures. We had a very nice talk together.... That's why we decided to come" (Olga, 39)

This is an effective way because travelers are easy to make friends while they are on travel and it is interactive – they can have direct immediate feedback and reflect on the feedback to match their goals or find out relevant information to support their goals.

Despite of the immediate feedback that information sources provided, a majority of tourists interviewed also reflected that getting information about Sa Pa is challenging. The challenge is embedded in the fact that the tourists encounter with a large amount of information (sometimes conflicting) provided by different sources and they have to invest attention and abilities to absorb and select which information is relevant to their goals. This contained "a bundle of opportunities for action" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 50) that required appropriate skills to realize. However, in return this gave them a kind of enjoyment and stimulated them to gain more. A couple of tourists told me:

"The more we read about Sa Pa, the more interesting we found out about it. And we decided we would go to visit" (Lemat, 32)

From interviews with foreign tourists, it is revealed that motivation, interest and awareness are common things shared. Minority people, scenery/nature and trekking/walking are attractions that motivate foreign tourists to come to Sa Pa. The anticipation and planning for their trips are based on what they expect and the goals of their trips. To plan for the trip, tourists were clear about their goals, their interests and their expectation about the trip. The varied sources of information provided them with immediate and interactive feedback, some of which made them enjoyable and some however made them annoyed (tour operators who were trying to sell tours rather than providing information required by tourists). Generally, the tourists did not base on information from one single source, but from several sources. In addition, information getting also represented challenges and numerous opportunities for action, for tourists interviewed where they had to invest their psychic energy, use skills and abilities to absorb and select information, which were relevant and useful for their own goals and purposes. This in turn has given them kind of enjoyment to explore about Sa Pa and stimulated them to gain more. This characteristic will no doubt have an effect on the next phases of their experience.

2. Travel to the Site

Following the anticipation phase, tourists start off their trip. Travel is required and it plays a part in total tourist experience. From interviews with foreign tourists, it is revealed that travel included both travel to Sa Pa and within Sa Pa between sites of activity. For most foreign tourists, they started their trips to Sa Pa from Hanoi, either on an organized tour with a tour operator or as independent travelers. In Sa Pa, some travel between sites of visit took place. Modes of travel and comfort were arisen as themes in this phase from interviews with the tourists.

For foreign tourists interviewed who were on organized tours (5 people, 21.7%) to Sa Pa, the travel involved a night train from Hanoi to Lao Cai and a bus drive from Lao Cai to Sa Pa. For independent travelers, most of them had the same arrangement: a night train and bus drive (16 people, 69.6%), while only a couple (8.7%) took a car for the day time drive (13 hours) from Hanoi to Sa Pa.

As we can see, the most popular travel means to Sa Pa is a night train from Hanoi to Lao Cai and a bus drive from Lao Cai to Sa Pa. Most of tourists interviewed who took a night train reported that the experience (9 hours) was just all right. The trains depart Hanoi by 21:00 and 22:00 and reach Lao Cai around 06:30 in the next day. One of the tourists interviewed commented:

"Well, I found it just OK... no complaint.... the service was good enough, though minimum. Not as perfectly good as you were in your bedroom, I took a reasonably good sleep that night, and in the next morning I found myself in Lao Cai already" (Lemat, 32)

However, there were two couples and six individual travelers found it a bit unpleasant. This was due to the discomfort of sleeping beds within too tight cabins that they were arranged for. For sleeping carriages, there are two types: one with four beds, which are called "soft beds" in a cabin, and the other with six beds, which are called "hard beds" in a cabin. The hard bed cabins were complained by foreign tourists who found hard to sleep due to the tight room the bed could provide. One of them told his story:

"I booked a tour from Hanoi and they put me into a six-bed cabin... yeah, you know how it is like... they call it hard bed type. The cabin was too small for six people, three of whom were foreigners. The beds were too tight and low – made to service Vietnamese people I guess. I tried to have some sleep, but really hard. I felt quite tired when reaching Lao Cai in the next morning. I could not do anything that morning, but rest in my hotel room" (Shaul, 49)

This travel experience represents a challenge for some tourists, who are not familiar with Vietnamese type of traveling. Some tourists interviewed managed the situation by involving their personal "skills" to make the experience more enjoyable or at least less frustrating or boring. One of them actually reported that he had good chats and conversations with his cabin passengers. They shared with each other fresh experience about Vietnam and Sa Pa. Look at what he said:

"We sat down, arranged our luggage.... After a while, felt bored with having nothing to do and it was too early to sleep, I started talking with the man in the opposite bed.... At the end, you know what, I ended up with emails of all my cabin passengers and a promise to write to them when I am back home." (Hans, 60)

As Csikzentmihalyi (1990) pointed out, enjoyment comes when the opportunities for action perceived by the individual are equal to his or her capabilities. The particular tourist used his "skill" to cope with the "challenge" to make the experience less boring or frustrating. He has managed to turn the situation to be less unpleasant.

Among the tourists interviewed, only one couple took a car to travel from Hanoi to Sa Pa. When asked, they said the reason was that they wanted to combine sight seeing on the way in the daytime. They followed an advice from a tour operator. However, the couple reported it turned out to be disappointing and too exhausting for them. It took them much longer than they had expected (13 hours instead of around 9 hours) and the drive was not as pleasant as they had thought (bad

roads, busy traffic etc.). This travel experience was so bad that they decided to take a night train instead of using the car for their way back to Hanoi. Look at what they said:

"We regret to travel by car, not by train. It took soooooo long time, although the tour operator had said it would be around 9 hours – yet it turned out to be 13 hours! The bad road, the time delay... We decided that on the way back to Hanoi, we are going to take a night train"(Ilona, 34)

The couple had a very bad time of travel, which as they reported even ruined at some extent their nice impression they had had about Sa Pa.

When tourists who take a night train reach Lao Cai station, a bus drive from Lao Cai to Sa Pa is required. One can take motorbike taxis, which are plenty available in front of the station. All the foreign tourists interviewed took minibuses to further their trip to Sa Pa. Generally, the tourists considered the drive positively. The travel time was around one hour and a half. Although they all had to manage to be in a tight place (in comparison with non-Vietnamese bodies) within the minibus with other passengers, both foreign and Vietnamese, they found the drive all right and looked forward to the coming experience in Sa Pa. Imagination came into their mind from what they had learnt from Sa Pa before departure. A tourist reflected:

"After being a bit confused at first at so many motorbike taxis at the station insisting for service, we finally managed to locate our van. There were seven or eight foreign and Vietnamese tourists in the van already waiting for us so that we could depart. The drive was nice... it was my first time to visit Sa Pa. I did not take a nap as most Vietnamese on the van did, but looked out through the windows to have some sight seeing. After a while, we had a chat with a German couple sitting in front of us about the area. They had been in Sa Pa twice and that was their third time since they came to Vietnam. Nice talk too."(Sam, 25)

When in Sa Pa, travel is also required for tourists since most, if not all, foreign tourists coming to Sa Pa are involved in trekking to ethnic minority villages. The travel in this case actually is part of the activity itself. For very limited areas, the travel includes a means of transport to bring tourists to the area of visit, especially those of far distance. In comparison with domestic tourists, foreign tourists demand for transport is much less. For some distance area, sometimes they prefer walking. Foreign tourists interviewed mostly rented motorbike taxis and Russian zeeps to get to areas such as Ban Ho, Thanh Phu, Sin Chai, far areas.

The experience was reportedly enjoyable for all of them. Especially the experience of sitting behind a motorbike taxi: no helmet, you count totally on the skills of the driver etc, the feeling of being in risk however gave tourists a kind of enjoyment. You had to concentrate your attention on the drive. Tourists may not feel enjoyable at the very moment they experience, but later when recall it, that is the feeling they have. One of the tourists interviewed reflected about his own experience:

"My heart like stopped beating when he [the driver] turned around... yeah, it was really adventurous. But now it's fun (laughing)" (Albert, 35).

Among the 23 foreign tourists interviewed, five of them did rent motorbikes to take a drive themselves during their trips. These tourists reflected particular enjoyment in driving by themselves. They considered this driving is part of their activity experience. All their attention is concentrated on the driving. As Csikszentmihalyi (1990: 53) pointed out their action and awareness is merged.

"It was wonderful to drive by yourself. I just felt like enjoying it so much" (Albert, 35)

The second phase of experience is travel to the site. This includes both travel to Sa Pa and travel within Sa Pa between on-site activities. Modes of travel and comfort are repeated themes as revealed by the tourists interviewed. When traveling to the site, the impression is very fresh as they just started the journey. A majority of foreign tourists interviewed reported that they took a night train and then a bus to reach Sa Pa. Only one couple took a car drive from Hanoi, which at the end turned out to be a frustrating and exhausting experience. Most of the tourists who took a night train felt the travel was just OK, some did not, but some of them did not managed to turn the situation into a better experience by using their “skills” to meet the “challenge” the situation posed on them. While on site, only limited travel with either motorbike taxis or zeeps depending on the distance of the destination areas is required. Foreign tourists interviewed found it interesting together with the feeling of being risk. Particularly, for tourists who rented motorbikes to drive by themselves expressed enjoyment, since they were absorbed by this drive and their attention is fully concentrated on it.

3. On-site Experience in Sa Pa

As revealed by interviews with foreign tourists, trekking and visiting minority villages are the things that foreign tourists cannot miss to do in Sa Pa. They either go to near villages such as Cat Cat, Ta Van, Lao Chai and Ta Phin which can be reached in a day and which is easily accessed by road. To visit those places, one day or less than one day trekking without homestay is required and tourists enjoy the scenery and contacts with minority people. For those who go on longer trekking such as Giang Ta Chai, Ban Ho, Su Pan, Thanh Phu, Sin Chai, or climbing Fansipan peak, their travel agencies organize homestay in ethnic minority villages in their three or four day trips.

All foreign tourists interviewed went on trekking and visited a minority village. While on trekking, they took photographs, visited minority households and viewed the scenery. Foreign tourists interviewed expressed that they enjoyed trekking, no matter it was just a short walk of one hour or two within a day or a longer trip, including Fansipan climbing, of several days with homestay in local ethnic minority villages. They often hired guides for hiking to the villages, almost all being Kinh from Sa Pa town or from Hanoi. Some tourists, particularly those travel alone or in couples hired minority guides directly by making friends with minority street selling girls and asking them to be guides (normally within or less than a day). For long trekking, tourists made homestay in minority villages. As enjoyment can occur in activities that are goal-directed and bounded by rules – activities that require the investment of psychic energy and that are done with appropriate skills (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 49), trekking represented a challenging activity that requires skills and can produce enjoyment or flow. A tourist expressed:

“It has been a long exhausting day of trekking until we reached the H’mong village. But the feeling was great because finally we made it” (Olga, 39)

It was most clear for tourists who climbed the Fansipan Mountain. This is an adventurous tourism activity that requires strict rules to protect the climbers. In Sa Pa this activity attracted mainly foreign tourists. Some tourists just organize the trekking by themselves, but most of others go through tour operators.

“We had a group of six and started off our journey very early in the morning. The climbing was hard... sometimes dangerous, but we managed it... I really enjoyed it though exhausted of course” (Marquis, 37)

According to the tourists interviewed, trekking provided them enjoyment because this activity has a clear goal that they have to concentrate their attention in order to reach it: whether it is the top of Fansipan or an ethnic minority village of destination. At the end it provided a feedback that is in relation to the set goal: reaching the destination, the success in meeting the goal. Certain activities require a very long time to accomplish like this, but the components of goals and feedback are still extremely important to them. A tourist confessed:

"It was indeed an award that finally you reached the village. It was really worthwhile because the village was beautiful and the minority people were nice to meet" (Anushka, 22)

This was the feeling, as reported by the tourists interviewed, when action and awareness were merged, the sense of control was involved, the self-consciousness was lost, their attention was completely absorbed by the activity. As pointed out by Csikszentmihalyi (1990: 53), "there is no excess psychic energy left over to process any information but what the activity offers". A tourist who climbed Fansipan Mountain described:

"I thought about nothing. Really. I thought about nothing but my climbing, moving ahead." (Charles, 28)

When one loses self-consciousness, the usual sense of time is lost too.

"Time passed so fast.... No, I forgot time... really.... until the guide said it was time for lunch and we stopped to eat" (Charles, 28)

The tourists interviewed had a guide to accompany for trekking. Some were in an organized tour so the guide, normally a Kinh person from Hanoi was organized in advance. Some hired a local guide from the hotel where they were staying. The local guide was normally a H'mong girl, who was part of the network of local guides for that hotel and was paid 30,000 VND (about US\$2) for one-day guiding. Some others just picked up an H'mong girl selling things on the streets, made friends with her and asked her to take them to visit her own village. The later case was described as the most comfortable and preferred arrangements as their "contract" is based on friendship rather than a formal contractually bound arrangements and the local guide could be better paid. This was described more enjoyable. A tourist couple told me their story about their guide, a young and kind H'mong girl, aged 11, whom they made friends with in Sa Pa town and asked her to be their tour guide.

"We are friends, so our conversations were very open. Although her [the H'mong girl] vocabulary is limited, it was good enough for her to answer simple questions about her minority customs and life... She was very nice, willing to tell us everything she thought that would be interesting for us, even not waiting for us to ask. We were talking all the way to her village. A nice trekking, time seems to fly fast" (Esther, 24)

These girls know their villages better than anyone else because these are their homes, so they could tell a lot of stories. Kinh tour guides, who might be better at communicating foreign languages, could not tell better stories about ethnic minority people as these girls could. After the trip, some tourists paid their local ethnic tour guide directly, some offered meals to them or bought their handicraft products (scarves, clothing, embroideries etc.), to thank for their nice guiding.

For longer day trekking, homestay is required. Ban Den (Ban Ho) of Tay minority is an official homestay and tourists found it pleasant to stay there. Some others complained about hygiene in

some places, but homestay was usually reported as a great experience by foreign tourists interviewed. One of them said:

"Homestay gives you a much better feeling of how locals live" (Marquis, 37)

However, although most of tourists enjoyed their trekking, the landscapes and their encounter with minority people, most of them said that their experience would have been much nicer if they could have known more about culture and place that they were visiting. Kinh tour guides did not know much or deeply about ethnic cultures, especially when being asked with "why" questions. Their common answers were to start with "I think..." or "I guess..." which were not convincing. The local tour guides, H'mong girls, although they know more about their own traditions and customs, were having trouble with their English vocabulary. One of tourists interviewed told me:

"The guide of our group was helpless. He spoke bad English and could not understand what we asked. When we were at the village, he could not communicate with the ethnic people either and the locals could not speak English. So even we wanted to know more about the local ethnic culture, we could not" (Alain, 32)

Tourists visit local villages with a goal to explore new cultures. Once the feedback could not meet the goal, the experience could not be enjoyable for them. It becomes unsatisfactory and unhappy.

One aspect that tourists interviewed mentioned typically is the level of development in Sa Pa, which was something out of their expectation. With the growing numbers of tourists coming to Sa Pa, Kinh people and businesses try to meet the tourist demands. Hotels and service facilities are booming without advance planning or with little control from local authorities. However, what Sa Pa has gained with it is quantity, not quality. All tourists interviewed commented on the commercialization of the town, losing its "authenticity" which originally attracted them to come. Reality has proven this by the increasing number of foreign tourists going to Bac Ha instead of spending time in Sa Pa. The commercialization also manifests in the culture of Sa Pa. The original "love market" no longer exists and is replaced by a performance of it upon request. Tourists are aware of this commercialization of culture in Sa Pa, and they are also aware of the contradictions of their own presence. Many cultural activities have turned into money-making events due to their presence. Here lays the question of limit, the carrying capacity that a culture and a physical area can cope with. Tourist experience no doubt is affected by all these factors. Moreover, as depicted in guidebooks and introduced by tour operators, Sa Pa is imagined as a totally remote and quiet area. The reality is much different, as expressed by one of the tourists interviewed:

"I did not expect that tourism has reached to this level in Sa Pa. It is actually developed already, especially the town... quite sad... traffic, construction, noise... I think many hotels with their misfit architecture have been seriously ruining the natural landscapes" (Rinke, 44)

This reflects that what tourists anticipate might not be the same as what it is like on site. The feedback is different and is not what is expected, then the experience is less enjoyable and even not enjoyable at all.

From interviews of foreign tourists, it is revealed that foreign tourists generally had enjoyable experience in trekking, exploring ethnic minority cultures and nature. The activities were challenging that required skills from tourists, especially those who enjoyed Fansipan climbing. When tourists had an enjoyable experience, their action and awareness were merged, the self-consciousness was lost, they concentrated on what they were doing because the activities

undertaken had clear goals for them and provided feedback that is logical to the goals, they exercised a sense of control over what they were doing and the sense of time was nonexistent. However, there are things that also directly affect tourist experience as reflected by the foreign tourists interviewed. Particularly, commercialization, unplanned and mismatched development as well as uncontrolled construction have ruined the nice image of Sa Pa as a natural primitive mountainous area. The local ethnic minority guides were regarded as positive, who added more values on tourist experience. They could also be able to narrow the gap in the lack of culture and nature information that is demanded by tourists. It also shows that what is expected or anticipated at home might not be the same as what it is like on site, which affects at certain extent the tourist experience.

4. Return Travel

Quick email follow-up with foreign tourists interviewed about their reflection on the travel home was made after they quit the site.

The foreign tourists interviewed took the same arrangements as they came, i.e. bus from Sa Pa to Lao Cai station and train from Lao Cai to Hanoi. Most of the arrangements for bus and train were made through the hotel where they were staying.

"I booked a seat in a bus to go to the station with Mimosa [hotel] and also asked them to buy a train ticket. They did all well. On the day I depart, I got those two tickets from them" (Yu, 27)

There has been a system in place with regards to arrangement for tickets for tourists. Each time the hotel does the ticket booking and buying service, they charge 10,000-15,000 VND (around USD1) for their service, depending on the hotels. This was observed from my own experience while I was staying in Sa Pa for this study.

The arrangements are flexible, because tourists can ask for this service from any hotels. One tourist responded:

"I had a meeting with a friend in Ninh Hong Hotel restaurant, so booked bus and train tickets with them. After our meeting, we left for Hanoi together" (Arita, 32)

The foreign tourists went back to Hanoi and from there they either flew back to their home country or continued traveling to another location in Vietnam as part of the tour in the next day.

The time the bus left is convenient for tourists, 19:00 depart from Sa Pa. When they got to the Lao Cai station, tourists had around an hour or more, depending on their train time, for their supper.

Most of the tourists responded reflected more or less the difference between the coming and returning travel. On the way here, their memories were fresh; on the way back they were tired, and started to think about their next day plan. A tourist responded:

"I was a bit tired when I got on the train after a day trekking, but was glad to have been in Sa Pa. In the next day, Hue followed Sa Pa as we planned it" (Esther, 24)

The emotion of being happy to have been to Sa Pa also shows that the tourist experienced more a less a flow: A clear feedback that he has succeeded in his goal (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

In response to the question of any inconvenience in relation to their return travel the tourists encountered, among the tourists responded, there were still three people complaining about the bus which was too tight, especially for foreigners.

"The van was small; too many passengers in a van together with their luggage" (Rudman, 33)

There was one complaint from a tourist about the service related particularly to Ninh Hong hotel.

"I booked them a soft bed in the train, but it turned out a hard bed. Yet, they did not inform me of this change and still charged me with the price of buying a soft bed. I talked with some of my cabin passengers and they had the same problem" (Hans, 60)

This is a bad sign, as it obviously affected the mood of the tourists, and decreased the nice image as well as the experience of their trip to Sa Pa, at the last minutes.

From what the foreign tourists shared, it is shown that modes of return travel were similar to those of coming travel. The comfort was gained, though there was difference noted with regards to their emotion and mood: on the way to Sa Pa they were fresh, while on the way back they were tired, memories about the trips was nice and the next planning started coming to mind. There was also some inconvenience noted upon their departure related to logistic arrangements.

5. Reflection and Recollection about Sa Pa Trip

Foreign tourists were asked about their reflection about the trip right before they depart the site for home, which was also followed up by simple emails later on.

Foreign tourists reported that the things they enjoyed most or the best things about their trip to Sa Pa were trekking, minority people, and landscapes. These are also the things that originally attracted them.

Mostly coming from developed countries, foreign visitors are keen to explore other places and other cultures as diversion, new experience, enquiry and learning. Trekking provides them excellent opportunities to explore minority cultures and enjoy the scenery. One of the tourists interviewed said:

"Before coming to Sa Pa, a friend of mine who had been here told me that one thing I should not miss doing in Sa Pa is to trek to ethnic minority villages. And now I know why – I am going to advise the same to my other friends if they have intention to visit Vietnam or Sa Pa" (Charles, 28)

Sa Pa has been long famous for its diverse ethnic minority culture. With trekking, foreign tourists could visit ethnic minority villages and explore their cultures, customs, traditions and lifestyles. Most of the ethnic groups still retain its typical cultural traits. Foreign visitors particularly are interested in homestay with minority groups, a "genuine experience" as one of the tourists expressed:

"I like homestay with ethnic minority people most. I had an experience with homestay in Ban Ho. It was wonderful to enjoy such a genuine experience" (Charles, 28)

One man even mentioned particularly local food as the best thing he has experienced in Sa Pa.

In addition, interacting with local people is also valued by foreign visitors interviewed. Although there is normally a language barrier, interaction is interesting. A tourist wrote:

"There's nothing more interesting to get to know about a local culture than from the locals" (Olga, 39)

Nature is also a source of tourism. It is blessed with a beautiful setting overlooking a deep valley set against Hoang Lien National Park, with the highest mountain peak in Indochina, Fansipan, with terraced rice fields. While trekking foreign visitors also take photographs.

"You can take very nice pictures in Sa Pa. The scenery is just beautiful. I like it most" (Yu, 27)

The worse thing about the trips of foreign visitors interviewed is the level of development. Some showed concerns over the massive development of new buildings in Sa Pa town and the noise of the truck traffic to support the building. They feared Sa Pa will change very quickly to the worst.

"It is terrible to see and hear construction every where in Sa Pa. They are destroying beautiful Sa Pa and ruining visitor experience" (Canal, 30)

The overdevelopment would lead to worsened commercialization of culture as some tourists feared. "Love market" is an example of commercialization of culture when it becomes a money-making event. The original meaning of the market is no longer existent.

However, Sa Pa was still regarded as a nice place to visit. Most of the foreign visitors interviewed told their friends, family and relatives about Sa Pa positively, and recommend them to come to visit. The reasons are varied: to trek, to explore ethnic cultures, and even to enjoy local food prepared by locals.

From what the foreign tourists responded, it is shown that emotion is involved when tourists are back home and reflected or recollected about their trip. The emotion can be positive or negative or both, along with evaluation of their total experience. This also is shared between family members, friends and colleagues with recommendation for this experience to be repeated or not. Responses from tourists also show that some of them had good feedback to their goals – a characteristic of flow mentioned by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), that made them satisfied with their experience in Sa Pa.

Summary

From interviews of 23 foreign tourists and their responses, there have been examples of people who appear to be experiencing or approaching the experience of flow in all the five stages of the trip cycle: anticipation, travel to, on-site experience, return travel and reflection/recollection. However, the flow characteristics the tourists experienced were varied between stages.

- "Challenges and matching skills" and "clear goals and immediate feedback" were emerged as two flow characteristics in the Anticipation phase. They were identified in relation to aspects of motivation, interest and awareness of the tourists.
- In the Travel to the Site phase, where modes of travel and comfort aspects of experience were involved, "challenges and matching skills", "merging of action and awareness", "clear goals and immediate feedback" and "concentration on the task at hand" were observed from responses from the tourists interviewed.

- The On-site Experience dealing mostly with activities the tourists undertook is the only phase that saw all seven flow characteristics as identified by the flow model (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990): “challenges and matching skills”, “merging of action and awareness”, “clear goals and immediate feedback”, “concentration on the task at hand”, “sense of control”, “loss of self-consciousness” and “transformation of time”.
- “Clear goals and immediate feedback” was seen both in the Return Travel phase, where modes of travel and emotion were touched upon as areas of concern, and Reflection/Recollection phase, where emotion and activities were mentioned by the tourists interviewed.

VI. DOMESTIC TRAVELERS

In the previous Chapter, analysis and findings of the fieldwork research relating to international visitor experience in Sa Pa were presented. This Chapter follows with a parallel account of domestic tourists in Sa Pa. Similar to those of international visitors, the methods employed are content analysis of the interviews, which are complemented by participant observation. First, the domestic segmentation is briefly reviewed. Second, analysis and findings of the fieldwork research using flow experience as a lens to look at the five-phase visitor experience model are presented.

Overview of the Domestic Segmentation in Sa Pa

Vietnamese are familiar with the name “Sa Pa” as a domestic tourism destination because many have studied it at school. It is mentioned in poems and literature as a mythically beautiful spot dipped into the fog, the only place in Vietnam where snow can be seen. As an ideal resort to escape from the heat of the city Sa Pa receives the highest number of Vietnamese tourists in the summer months. TTS statistics show that for the first three quarters (January – September) of 2004, around 56,500 Vietnamese visitors coming from different parts of the country (Hanoi, Hochiminh and other provinces) spent time in Sa Pa. They normally travel with friends and relatives in couples or in small groups.

1. Anticipation about Sa Pa

As traditionally characterized as a hill resort, Sa Pa attracts Vietnamese tourists due to mainly its cool climate and scenery or nature in general. Tourists interviewed mainly came from the North of Vietnam (Hanoi, Hai Phong, Lao Cai, Quang Ninh, Hai Duong, Yen Bai, Thai Nguyen, 13 people accounting for 62%), some from the South (Hochiminh and Can Tho, 4 people accounting for 18%), and the rest from the center (Hue and Da Nang, 4 people accounting for 18%).

Coming from lowlands, domestic tourists are interested in Sa Pa climate, that is an escape from the heat and humidity of the city. They came to Sa Pa with a clear goal of enjoying the cool weather. One of the tourists interviewed said:

“Every year my family visits Sa Pa in summer to enjoy cool weather and avoid the hot Hanoi. This year my long separated sister who lives in France visited us. We decided to take her to Sa Pa because the weather is very nice here.” (Huong, 44)

Furthermore, when talking with tourists I found it more than just an enjoyment feeling – tourists regarded Sa Pa climate as “healthy”. As a young man revealed:

“The air in Sa Pa is fresh and healthy due to high elevation. Whenever I visit Sa Pa I have deeper sleeps and a better taste in eating!” (Thien, 33)

In addition to the climate, scenery or nature in all of their broad meaning is the interest that tourists name after the climate. “Scenery” and “nature” are interchangeable terms by Vietnamese tourists, and most of the times they are mentioned as the cause of the healthy climate in Sa Pa. Due to the lack of publicity it receives or employs, Hoang Lien National Park was not regarded as part of Sa Pa attraction or the interest by the tourists interviewed. However, the “scenery” or “nature” it represents was. Like in any “forest” (a term Vietnamese visitors use to describe what is understood the National Park), they were interested to know more about what kinds of fauna and flora there are

inside the forest. This also includes Fansipan mountain, known as the highest mountain in Indochina. Tourists want to get not only the experience but also the knowledge out of their trips.

"We live in a city, so always eager to see and experience in a forest. For all of us this is our first trip to Sa Pa, and it is a very interesting trip." (Ha, 22)

Ethnic minority people constitute an interest to Vietnamese visitors, although it is less attractive to them than to foreign tourists. Vietnamese visitors are interested in getting to know cultures that are different from theirs due to curiosity. As a young Vietnamese visitor confessed:

"I have seen ethnic minority people on TV, but never met them in their normal life. That is a reason why I am here" (Ha, 22)

This may include the minority people themselves as spectacles, customs and traditions. Like foreign tourists, the weekend "love market", a name that causes embarrassment to local people is still mentioned by Vietnamese visitors as a special cultural attraction, although it now no longer exists. A key informant who is a tour operator that I talked to also mentioned that a number of Vietnamese tourists are still asking about the "love market" mostly because of their curiosity. However, it is tourists' presence and interference contributed to the disappearance of this interesting cultural activity. The presence of the tourist themselves with cameras curiously hunting for pictures shy the minority people away, thus destroyed and kill the meaningful and unique minority cultural trait. Now for some occasions visitors still can enjoy the "love market", but in a form of performance, not in a natural way as it was before and this disappoints tourists. So is "Thang co" soup, which customarily accompanied H'mong community activities, that now disappears in Sa Pa. Once mass tourism takes place, things get commercialized and professionalized. They turn out to be money-making events losing their genuine meanings that originally attract tourists.

Vietnamese tourists interviewed were clear about what they wanted to see and experience in Sa Pa, what the goal of their trips is and they normally looked for information before departure to have a basic knowledge about the area. The primary source of information they used included word-of-mouth; they talked with friends, colleagues, relatives etc. This kind of direct and interactive feedback made their trips more enjoyable due to high credibility. The interviewees I talked to confirmed that the tourists were suggested to go by these people who told their own stories or personal experiences in Sa Pa.

"My first trip to Sa Pa was in 1998, when a friend of mind told me about this place as a worthwhile area to visit after her holiday trip with family. Since then – almost every year I come to Sa Pa for holiday." (Huy, 32)

Vietnamese tourists interviewed did not get information from a single source, but combined with several other sources. They also relied on tour companies and travel agents for information, though most of them did not use their services to arrange the trip. When asked about the reason, the tourists interviewed confessed that they preferred flexible schedules to do their own things they liked while tours with travel agents or companies are fixed schedules and more costly.

"They are service companies, so they charge customers for profits, which is high to my family living standard. Moreover, they have fixed schedules which are time and place bound. If we can make it ourselves, we can do whatever we like with how much time we want within the budget we have. It is better for my family." (Lien, 35)

The travel agents, particularly café operators are numerous in Hanoi. Located in the old quarter, Sinh Café, Green Bamboo, Kangaroo, Trang Long, Topas etc. are well-known and Sa Pa is always on their agenda. However, the information tourists get from them is mostly promotional, very basic and similar to each other, because their primary aim is to sell the tours. These comments from Vietnamese tourists are similar to those made by the foreign tourists.

"The information provided by travel agents is the same: too much promotion, tour selling ..."
(Huong, 44)

Internet nowadays is popular, but many Vietnamese still seek information based on traditional methods. They talk with friends or relatives, visit travel agents or phone to them to find out more information. Brochures, leaflets are useful for them; they are handy. One of the reasons that internet is not a most used method for information is that it is still costly to many Vietnamese people. Only 9 out of 21 interviewed (most of them are young Vietnamese) made use of internet for information and the webpages mentioned included ones of tour companies or travel agents such as Dragon Travel, Topas.

Through interviews, Vietnamese tourists interviewed showed clear goals for their trip to Sa Pa and the immediate feedback they seek through information sources. This constitutes an element of their flow experience, according to Csikszentmihalyi (1988).

Despite of the immediate feedback that information sources provided, a majority of tourists interviewed also reflected that getting information about Sa Pa is challenging. The challenge is embedded in the fact that the tourists encounter with a large amount of information (sometimes conflicting) provided by different sources and they have to invest attention and abilities to absorb and select which information is relevant to their goals. However, in return this gave them a kind of enjoyment and stimulated them to gain more. Some people even realized that there were things interesting that they did not know before. A young man told me:

"I got quite excited when finding out more about Sa Pa. For example, the National Park. I did not know that there was a national park existing here, and moreover, it has such high biodiversity values." (Hoa, 24)

From interviews with Vietnamese tourists, it is revealed that cool climate and scenery or nature are two attractions that motivate Vietnamese tourists to come to Sa Pa. The anticipation and planning for their trips are based on what they expect and the goals of their trips. To anticipate and plan for the trip, Vietnamese were clear about their goals, their interests and their expectation about the trip. The varied sources of information provided them with immediate and interactive feedback. Generally, the tourists did not base on information from one single source, but from several sources. Information getting also represented challenges and numerous opportunities for action, for tourists interviewed where they had to invest their psychic energy, use skills and abilities to absorb and select information, which were relevant and useful for their own goals and purposes. This in turn has given them kind of enjoyment to explore about Sa Pa and stimulated them to gain more. Actually they even enriched their own knowledge about Sa Pa, some things that they did not know before. This characteristic will no doubt have an effect on the next phases of their experience.

2. Travel to the Site

Following the anticipation phase, tourists start off their trip. Travel is required and it plays a part in total tourist experience. From interviews with Vietnamese tourists, it is revealed that travel included both travel to Sa Pa and within Sa Pa between sites of activity. For tourists coming from Hanoi, they took a night train from Hanoi to Lao Cai and a bus drive from Lao Cai to Sa Pa. For tourists coming from other locations, depending on the proximity, they either took a car, a train or just a motorbike (two young girls from Lao Cai).

For tourists coming from Hanoi, the 9-hour night train was reportedly as a long journey, but it did not affect the trip very much since it was a night train, "people need to sleep anyway" (extracted from an interview with a young Hanoian girl). The trains depart Hanoi by 21:00 and 22:00 and reach Lao Cai around 06:30 in the next day. Most of tourists interviewed who took a night train reported that the experience was good in terms of the service. One of the tourists interviewed told about her experience:

"The train trip went well to me. I got on the train at 21:00, eat the bread they provided on the train, chatted with my companion for a while, then went to sleep. At first it was a bit difficult as the train was usually shaking while going, but gradually I got used to it and came into asleep. I woke up once, I think so, in the middle of the night, but soon returned to my sleep. The next morning, I was waken up by my friend who informed me that we were arriving at Lao Cai." (Ha, 37)

Young Vietnamese tourists were young people, so they enjoyed their trip, including this period of travel. They chatted and talked with each other. For them, both 4-bed and 6-bed cabins are fine, though the latter may provide a better comfort. One of them commented:

"We bought tickets late so could not get the soft beds. However, we think it was fine, no matter soft beds or hard beds. We could sleep well in either type of bed" (Cuong, 25)

When tourists who take a night train reach Lao Cai station, a bus drive from Lao Cai to Sa Pa is required. One can take motorbike taxis, which are plenty available in front of the station. All the foreign tourists interviewed took minibuses to further their trip to Sa Pa. Generally, the tourists considered the drive positively. The travel time was around one hour and a half. They found the drive all right and looked forward to the coming experience in Sa Pa. Imagination came into their mind from what they had learnt from Sa Pa before departure. A young girl reflected:

"I hate going in a car because I usually have carsickness whenever traveling by car. When arriving in Lao Cai station, I got quite excited because this is my first time to Sa Pa. I was looking forward to it. The drive was not bad. I even wanted to talk with my friend, but she was sleeping" (Trang, 23)

For other tourists who took a car to Sa Pa, they were family or friend groups. Knowing each other, the drive for them was enjoyable. A tourist reflected:

"We made several stops on the way to Sa Pa for picture taking or whenever we felt tired. The good thing of going in a car is that you can have sightseeing along the way – if by train, you cannot, but only sleep." (Kim, 30)

When in Sa Pa, travel is also required for Vietnamese tourists. Generally, they prefer visiting areas that are close, thus require less walking, or farther areas by means of transportation to get there. The distance is not perceived the same as foreigners do. For example, for foreign tourists Ta Van is

the area that they are happy to walk to, but for most Vietnamese tourists, Ta Van is normally reached with support of transportation like motorbikes. Vietnamese tourists do not like walking, though sometimes they do and enjoy it. One of the tourists interviewed revealed:

"I don't like walking a lot, but did have a good walk to the Cat Cat village. People told us that Cat Cat is a good place to visit and it is not too far, so we set out to see it.... we kept regular paces to be not too tired... finally we reached it. It was nice after a walk and you now could join the "fruits" – enjoying the village and the scenery" (Ha, 22)

For some far areas such as Ban Ho, Thanh Phu, Sin Chai Russian zeeps were rented, but motorbike taxes were a frequent choice for transportation between short and far distances for Vietnamese tourists. Sometimes they hired motorbikes per day to drive by themselves. One of the tourists said:

"It is more fun to drive a motorbike by yourselves to explore the area and you can go as far as you want. It also gives you joy when you have to manage challenging roads that you do not normally deal with when you are in the cities" (Huy, 32)

Tourists could enjoy themselves with challenging drive, where for sure skills and attention of tourists have to be invested.

The second phase of experience is travel to the site. This includes both travel to Sa Pa and travel within Sa Pa between on-site activities. The impression was very fresh as they just started the journey. Vietnamese tourists interviewed who were from Hanoi took a night train and then a bus to reach Sa Pa. Others who were from other parts of the country either managed to come to Hanoi first to take a night train or used a car to Sa Pa. Most of the tourists interviewed reflected that the trip involving travel to Lao Cai, and Lao Cai to Sa Pa was very fine. While on site, Vietnamese tourists preferred using transport and avoided much walking. Most of the time they used motorbike taxes or zeeps depending on the distance of the destination areas. Some Vietnamese tourists rented motorbikes to drive themselves. They also found themselves enjoyed in the way, while still communing with nature or visiting ethnic minority villages as traveling.

3. On-site Experience in Sa Pa

The experience by Vietnamese tourists is characterized as holiday aiming mainly to enjoy relaxation. Tourists interviewed reported that they visited scenic sites to take photographs, enjoy the scenery, view ethnic minority cultures and buy minority handicrafts, or they just came to enjoy the climate. They went for trekking, but most used the town as the base and joined the shorter, within a day or just for few hours, walk or trekking only.

Vietnamese tourists interviewed expressed that they enjoyed trekking, though most of them preferred short trekking or walks of just few hours or within a day. Enjoyment can occur in activities that are goal-directed and bounded by rules – activities that require the investment of psychic energy and that are done with appropriate skills (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 49). This is how a challenging activity that requires skills can produce enjoyment or flow. The trekking or walk to ethnic villages itself represented a challenging activity for the tourists that required certain skills. Reaching a village or a spot of beauty was the aim and the goal after a period of time they were investing attention on the walk and involving trekking skills. The feeling was great, a kind of accomplishment as expressed by one of the tourists interviewed:

"I don't like walking a lot, but did have a good walk to the Cat Cat village. People told us that Cat Cat is a good place to visit and it is not too far, so we set out to see it.... we kept regular paces to be not too tired... finally we reached it. It was nice after a walk and you now could join the "fruits" – enjoying the village and the scenery" (Ha, 22)

Moreover, with the trekking activities, tourists can enjoy themselves as they normally set a clear goal and are responded with feedback. The goals are normally clearly set in advance or at least people have a personal sense of what they intend to do. A group of three young amateur photographers/students told their story:

"We rented a zeeep to go to Sin Chai and Ta Van, because we knew the scenery there was wonderful for us to make beautiful photos. And we did not regret – the area was just excellent and we spent the whole day over there" (Nhan, 23)

The feedback the young amateur photographers got obviously enjoyable that produced optimal experience for them. The feedback was logically related to their goal in which they invested attention. This is also applied to people who come to Sa Pa simply for the climate reason, a total relaxation purpose. The feedback just meets their goals, which make them satisfied with the trip. A middle age couple I met responded:

"What are we doing here? Just enjoying the climate. You know, Hanoi is so busy, noisy and dusty, so we decided to come to Sa Pa to relax, enjoy the cool climate and the fresh air. And you see, we are having a good time. I even eat more than normally (laughing). I think it is all because of the healthy climate here" (Huong, 44)

Not only this couple, it is interesting to note that several Vietnamese tourists I interviewed mentioned about climate, which is more than just an enjoyment feeling, but regarded it as "healthy" climate conditions. Looking back in the past, Sa Pa climate has traditionally been special and bracing for convalescence. According to a medical book published in 1920, the climate in Sa Pa suites "people with chlorosis⁴, anaemia, previous history of malaria, neurasthenia, phobia, overworked people and hypochondriac women; chronic bronchitis with associated emphysema or asthma can also be cured" (Region Aquitaine, 2004:14).

The three examples above from the interviews with domestic tourists also show that the enjoyable experiences allow people to exercise a sense of control over their action or lacking the sense of worry about losing control that is typical in many situations of normal life.

In Sa Pa, Cat Cat village is regularly visited by Vietnamese tourists given its proximity. There are few other areas that are reportedly frequent choices by Vietnamese visitors. To the south are Lao Chai, Sin Chai, Ta Van villages (especially the rattan bridge crossing the Hoa Ho river valley) and to the north is Ta Phin village. All of these villages are popular backdrops for travel photos. Thac Bac (Silver Waterfall), 12 kilometers west of Sa Pa on the road to Lai Chau is a place of choice of Vietnamese tourists due to its spectacular view of the valley it provides and its beauty for travel photos it offers. In general, Vietnamese tourists prefer short walks and use a means of transport to get to the site of interest. Motorbike taxis (*xe om*) are a popular transport that provides them a good sightseeing during the drive. The drive itself provides an interesting, pleasure and enjoyment for tourists who are involved. One tourist said:

⁴ 'Chlorosis' is now a redundant term, but at the time, referred to an anaemic condition specific to young women.

"Each of us took a motorbike taxi. It was amazing to see the landscapes at two sides when we were on the drive. At first we were a bit scary with hilly motorbike drive, but then this fear disappeared quickly and we just felt like admiring the beautiful nature" (Trang, 23)

This is what Csikszentmihalyi (1990: 58) mentioned as one of the most frequent dimensions of the flow experience. It requires a complete focusing of attention on the task at hand, thus leaving no room in the mind for irrelevant information. While it lasts, one is able to forget all the unpleasant aspects of life, even the fear, as the case of the young tourists above. This example can also be explained by another element of flow experience: the loss of self-consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 62). As he pointed out (1990: 63) "the loss of the sense of a self separate from the world around it is sometimes accompanied by a feeling of union with the environment". In flow there is no room for self-scrutiny. Because enjoyable activities have clear goals, stable rules, and challenges well matched to skills, there is little opportunity for the self to be threatened.

Majority of Vietnamese tourists visiting Sa Pa prefer scenic areas, where they take travel photographs of each other, over visits to minority villages. Among the tourists interviewed during my study, I encountered with three newly married couples who came to Sa Pa for their honeymoon. This is not a surprise to me since Sa Pa has quite a number of scenic and romantic spots in addition to the favorable climate. The most favorite scenic place to them is Ham Rong (Dragon's Jaw) mountain, a place that hardly any Vietnamese wants to miss when they come to visit Sa Pa. Known as the "miniature of Sa Pa" located conveniently within Sa Pa town boundaries, Ham Rong provides fascinating landscapes with different kinds of flowers and indigenous plants typical of the Tay Bac (Northwest of Vietnam). This area also offers a panorama of Sa Pa town, Hoa Ho river valley with its surrounding terraced rice fields and minority hamlets, and the forests of Fansipan. A newly married couple reported:

"Our friends told us that Dragon's Jaw is a place that we should not miss. And that is true. We took a lot of pictures of ourselves there. We seemed to forget about everything, but the beautiful landscapes, flowers and picture taking, and enjoyed ourselves. We totally forgot about time, until it was getting dark – he [the husband] watched the time, and it was almost 6:00 pm" (Hai, 26)

One of the distinctive features of flow is the merging of action and awareness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 53), as the case of the newly married couple explained. It means that the person's attention is completely absorbed by the activity. There is no excess psychic energy left over to process any information but what the activity offers. All the attention is concentrated on the relevant stimuli only. People become so involved in what they are doing that the activity becomes spontaneous; they stop being aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing. Also, the newly married couple was enjoying themselves so much that the time even did not exist for them.

Most of tourists interviewed mentioned photographs taking and communing with nature to be the reason for them to visit these scenic places. Besides, Ta Phin and Ta Van are villages that they come to view the living conditions of minority people. Given the increased tourist traffic in these areas, waste management is a concern raised by many tourists. Public toilets and refuse collection are not available. From discussions with key informants and interviews with tourists, many agreed that Vietnamese visitors are more demanding on amenities, and also more polluting than foreign tourists. They complained about lack of recreation facilities, which make Sa Pa boring, especially at night.

The findings show that ethnic minority is less an attraction to Vietnamese visitors than foreign tourists. However, Vietnamese visitors interact with minority people in one way or another while

visiting Sa Pa, which can produce enjoyment for their stay. In Sa Pa town, while buying minority handicrafts they encounter with street sellers, mostly old women or little girls of H'mong or Dao group. While visiting their villages, visitors get to know about their customs and traditions as well as their living conditions. However, as most Vietnamese experienced difficult conditions themselves, they are not very much interested viewing the living conditions of minority people. They are keener on minority traditions and customs such as the cultural landscape of "love market" which drives their curiosity. Many Vietnamese visitors interviewed however, complained about minority street sellers who are hawking too aggressively or nagging when trying to sell handicrafts to tourists, the experience as described by many tourists as "disturbing" and "annoying". This causes a relational problem and makes tourists try to get rid of them instead of buying their products. However, the contact is far different when tourists are on trekking or in the villages, where the relation is very friendly. Generally, Vietnamese visitors interviewed revealed that they found the ethnic minority culture fascinating although at the beginning, they did not have much interest in or appreciation of it. One of the tourists interviewed shared her thought:

"I think generally ethnic minority people are good and honest. They are really kind and hospitable especially when you homestay with them" (Hieu, 25)

One of the things that kept appearing during my interviews with Vietnamese tourists is the demand for information while visiting minority villages or trekking. 15 out of 21 domestic tourists interviewed either were not happy with the information provided by their guides (those on organized tours) or could not find relevant information needed. The information concerned relates to aspects of the nature, scenery that occur during their treks or minority cultural customs during their visits to minority villages. This would make their experience more enjoyable. While information about touring seems to be readily available in many hotels and tour operators in Hanoi and Sa Pa, the kind of more detailed information about culture and nature or environment is not easy to get. Moreover, 17 out of 21 tourists interviewed even did not know about TISC, that is supposed to be the focal point for information for tourists to Sa Pa.

From interviews of Vietnamese tourists, it is revealed that Vietnamese tourists generally had enjoyable experience in short trekking and the cool and healthy climate of Sa Pa. The activities are challenging that require skills from tourists, especially those who enjoyed Fansipan climbing. When tourists had an enjoyable experience, their action and awareness were merged, the self-consciousness was lost, they concentrated on what they were doing because the activities undertaken had clear goals for them and provided feedback that is logical to the goals, they exercised a sense of control over what they were doing and the sense of time was nonexistent. However, there are things that also directly affect tourist experience as reflected by the Vietnamese tourists interviewed, particularly the guides who seem not much helpful as expected. The demand for more on-site information about culture and nature was raised by the Vietnamese tourists interviewed too.

4. Return Travel

The tourists interviewed took the same travel arrangements as they came, i.e. bus from Sa Pa to Lao Cai station, except for the groups who rented their own car, and train from Lao Cai to Hanoi. Unlike foreign tourists, some Vietnamese tourists bought train tickets at the Sa Pa ticket agency and some bought tickets via their hotels. One Vietnamese tourist said:

"To be certain, I bought a train ticket at the ticket agency when I was walking by their office the other day" (Lan, 49)

The other:

"Our groups booked and bought tickets from Hoang Tu hotel. Good job. No complaint" (Thien, 33)

All the tourists responded went back their home after Sa Pa without visiting any other places as a tour.

The time the bus left is convenient for tourists, 19:00 depart from Sa Pa. When they got to the Lao Cai station, tourists had around half an hour or more, depending on their train time, for their supper. For those who rented their own car, they left earlier, to avoid driving in the evening.

Like foreign tourists, the Vietnamese tourists responded reflected more or less the difference between the coming and returning travel. They were tired now; remembering about the time in Sa Pa but at the same time looking forward to be home soon.

"My trip to Sa Pa was nice, but on the bus I started missing my friends at home. I am tired too." (Trang, 23)

Although a question about any inconvenience in relation to their return travel the tourists encountered was posed, there was no typical reply to this question from the Vietnamese tourists responded.

From interviews with Vietnamese tourists, it is shown that modes of return travel were similar to those of coming travel. No particular complaints about comfort or inconvenience were noted. As similar to foreign tourists, Vietnamese visitors reflected on the difference of their emotion and mood between their coming and return travels: on the way to Sa Pa they were fresh, while on the way back they are tired, and the next planning started coming to mind.

5. Reflection and Recollection about Sa Pa Trip

Vietnamese tourists were asked about their reflection about the trip right before they depart the site for home, which was followed up by simple emails later on.

The best thing about their trips is reportedly the climate and scenery. Vietnamese visitors are characterized as "holiday" tourists, so they tend to focus on relaxation and enjoy their stay. A tourist said:

"Climate is the best thing I could say about my trip. It is very special, pleasant and healthy" (Lan, 49)

Many other tourists interviewed also mentioned the same thing, using the word "fresh air". This is the thing that one normally cannot enjoy in big cities.

Vietnamese visitors regarded scenery as the best thing too. That is the reason many visitors take pictures whenever they come to a place.

The worst thing about the trips of some Vietnamese tourists interviewed was the fact that it was a bit boring for them – no entertainment facilities, especially at night. Some others complained about the abundance of information, yet the lack of needed and interested information whenever needed.

Although there are many places that provide information free for tourists, there is no “formal” source of information that tourists and even tour operators can count on for reliable and accurate information. Even for TISC which is responsible for information provision for tourists, it does not have a database about culture and environment of Sa Pa.

“I did go there [TISC], but it wasn’t of much help” (Thien, 33)

When asked about their reflection about their trip to Sa Pa, most Vietnamese visitors said in general they were happy with the trip. However, they added if Sa Pa had entertainment facilities to accommodate visitors and tourists, their trips would be more satisfactory. As mentioned above, Vietnamese tourists are more on recreational tourism, their activities center upon convivial entertainments and thus demand for these facilities. The best thing about their trip therefore is the climate and fresh air that they enjoyed, which they could not do so in cities, as most of the visitors confessed.

One interesting thing I noted is that for many visitors their attitudes towards ethnic minority people and minority culture more or less changed at the end of their trips, as they reported. They enjoyed interacting with minority people, although with difficulty because few minority people could speak Vietnamese. They also shared how amazed they were when witnessing H’mong or Dao little girls naturally talking and communicating with foreign tourists in English, the ability that Kinh (Vietnamese) kids could hardly be able to.

Most of tourists thought that they would come to Sa Pa again.

From what the foreign tourists responded, it is shown that emotion is involved when tourists are back home and reflected or recollected about their trip. The emotion was mostly positive, but typical for “holiday” tourists. Responses from tourists show that some of them had good feedback to their goals – a characteristic of flow mentioned by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), that made them satisfied with their experience in Sa Pa. Their experience is also shared between family members, friends and colleagues with recommendation to visit.

Summary

From interviews of 21 Vietnamese tourists and their responses, there have been examples of people who appear to be experiencing or approaching the experience of flow in all the five stages of the trip cycle: anticipation, travel to, on-site experience, return travel and reflection/recollection. However, the flow characteristics the Vietnamese tourists experienced were not very much clearly expressed, though the following was noted.

- “Challenges and matching skills” and “clear goals and immediate feedback” were emerged as two flow characteristics in the Anticipation phase. They were identified in relation to aspects of motivation, interest and awareness of the tourists.
- In the Travel to the Site phase, where modes of travel and comfort aspects of experience were involved, the same two flow characteristics: “challenges and matching skills” and “clear goals and immediate feedback” were observed from responses from the tourists interviewed.
- The On-site Experience dealing mostly with activities the tourists undertook saw most flow characteristics as identified by the flow model (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990): “challenges and matching skills”, “merging of action and awareness”, “clear goals and immediate feedback”, “concentration on the task at hand”, “sense of control”, “loss of self-consciousness” and “transformation of time”.

- "Clear goals and immediate feedback" was seen both in the Return Travel phase, where modes of travel and emotion were touched upon as areas of concern, and Reflection/Recollection phase, where emotion and activities were mentioned by the tourists interviewed.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

The overall aim of this thesis is to provide a basis for ensuring an enhanced quality of visitor experience in Sa Pa. Clawson and Knetsch visitor experience model with support of flow concept as a lens are used as a guiding framework to explore issues relating to the quality of visitor experience in the area. In order to realize the aim and objective, this study particularly assesses the understandings and perspectives of stakeholders and service providers, as well as explores the experiences, attitudes and values of both international and domestic visitors in Sa Pa. The methods employed by this study were interviewing, participant observation and content analysis provided tools to analyze visitor experience in Sa Pa. In this concluding Chapter, data and findings are discussed and followed with implications and recommendation for action.

In order to realize the study objective, the following research question was asked: What are the most appropriate strategies to help enhance the experiences and satisfaction of visitors?

This study was carried out over a period of two months from October – November 2004 in Sa Pa. During this period of time 23 foreign tourists and 21 Vietnamese visitors were interviewed for the purpose of this qualitative study. 21 key informants/stakeholders were interacted and used to explore and inform the research. Participant observation was made to complement the interviews with tourists and interactions with key informants/stakeholders for more understanding of tourist patterns.

The scope of this study, theoretical framework and methodology have been discussed in Chapter I, II and III. The following Chapters IV, V and VI have presented an overview of tourism development in Sa Pa and analyses of behavior patterns of foreign and Vietnamese visitors that constitute visitor experience. Having been explored through the five phases of the recreation experience model with support of the flow concepts, these patterns have resulted in a number of findings, which will be presented and discussed below.

1. Summary and Discussion of the Findings

Visitor experience in Sa Pa has been looked at and explored on the basis of five phases of Clawson and Knetsch's recreation experience model through the lens of Csikszentmihalyi's flow experience. Many researchers see recreation experience as multi-phasic, "a package deal; all parts having a potential role..." (Hammit, 1980: 114). Each phase, anticipation, travel to the site, on-site experience, travel back, and recollection contributes its part to the total experience.

Flow helps to understand what makes an experience so gratifying and enjoyable, thus direct ways for improvement and enhancement of the experience quality. Control of consciousness is important to know to build enjoyment into the visitor experience. Any changing external conditions could be most effective to enhance the experience quality if consideration of control of consciousness is also taken.

Analyses reflect that from the **anticipation phase**, visitors are clear about their goals, their interests and their expectation. For foreign visitors, who are interested in enjoying indigenous and exotic people, visiting to native homes and villages, experiencing truly alien scenes, and traveling through landscape to observe man-land relationships, minority people, scenery/nature and trekking/walking are the main attractions in Sa Pa for them. For Vietnamese tourists who are more to relaxation holiday, their goal is to enjoy the climate and scenery/nature. The challenge of getting

information relevant to the goals from different sources to prepare for the trip requires investment of attention and relevant skills. The feedback they get could be enjoyable, which they would bring to the next phases. Obviously, the total experience is not only the one-site one, since the before-activity is important and even influences the quality of activities undertaken on-site.

This shows that information is important not only in attracting tourists to come, but also in influencing the quality of their experience. Therefore, understanding their purpose, their goals, their motivation and providing relevant information is necessary for management. In addition, any efforts to support and facilitate the skills are also helpful. However, the distinct characteristics between foreign and Vietnamese visitors should be considered in order to have the right strategies.

From interviews with both foreign and Vietnamese visitors, it shows that the **travel to the site** phase is an indispensable part of the total experience. For any activities, some travel is required, to and within the site. For some people, travel is an enjoyment, for others travel may be nuisance. However, enjoyment can be gained if the person is aware of the challenge and use his skills, as simple as socializing, to cope with the situation or to make it more enjoyable. Not commonplace, but for some people, some travel within the site which involves some risks – high challenge, high investment of attention and skills means enjoyment, possibly not right at that moment but later on when they remember. Concentration on the activity is high, which also leads to the loss of time and self-consciousness. This can be considered as part of the activity itself.

The above reveals that increasing convenience and comfort for tourists for traveling could turn experience more pleasant and enjoyable, especially for people who consider traveling as nuisance.

On-site activity is the main part of the visitor experience. One can get all the elements of enjoyment or flow, depending on intensity of one's involvement in activities.

For foreign visitors, they are involved in trekking and visiting minority villages. For Vietnamese visitors, they are also involved in trekking, but in less intense because they tend to take short walks or do short trekking. Analyses from interviews reflect that trekking, including Fansipan climbing particularly provides tourists enjoyment since it has a clear goal that tourists have to concentrate their attention to achieve. The feedback is very clear, like an award after efforts made. Certain activities require a very long time to accomplish but components of goals and feedback are extremely important. When tourists have an enjoyable experience, their action and awareness are merged, the self-consciousness is lost, they concentrated on what they are doing because the activities undertaken have clear goals for them and provided feedback that is logical to the goals, they exercise a sense of control over what they are doing and the sense of time was nonexistent.

Guiding is an important issue regarding the quality of experience. To explore new cultures, foreign tourists expect guides to be a bridge. Analyses show that ethnic (H'mong) girls seem to be perfect match for this job. Helpless guides (as some tourists interviewed mentioned Kinh guides) just turn visitor experience into annoyance, unpleasant and frustration. When feedback does not meet the goal, enjoyment is not possible.

The above shows that trekking is a favorite activity, particularly to foreign tourists. Visit to ethnic villages and homestay should be encouraged, which will make the trekking more enjoyable. Using ethnic girls as tour guides is an excellent idea and should be more encouraged. So far, the girls who have been doing in this job are limited.

Return travel is the return trip home. It is not the same as the travel to the site when tourists were fresh traveling to the site – now they are tired. For most foreign and Vietnamese interviewed, they were happy with their trip although there were things unpleasant that need to be fixed. The feeling of fulfillment and satisfaction occurs.

Recollection is when the experience is over. For foreign visitors trekking was the best memories when they had chances to get to know ethnic minority cultures. They shared the feeling with friends and relatives at home. Some recommended friends to visit Sa Pa, and some themselves wanted to come back to Sa Pa again. For them the worst thing is the construction and noise from construction and the traffic. For Vietnamese tourists, the best thing was the relaxation they enjoyed and the beautiful nature they viewed and took pictures of. Most of them complained about the lack of entertainment facilities, which to them made Sa Pa a bit boring.

The integration of the flow concept and the five-stage trip cycle as shown in the Conceptual Framework (page 26) has proved useful. In each phase of recreation experience, visitors appeared to be experiencing or approaching the experience of flow and the degrees of flow experienced were varied. The total visitor experience, which is multiphasic, could be enjoyable with flow contributing to each phase of the experience.

In addition, the findings also include the fact that there is a common gap between what visitors were aware, anticipated or expected before departure and what is really happening on site, for both foreign and Vietnamese visitors. However, reactions to these unexpected facts are different between foreign and Vietnamese visitors.

- A high level of development is the first impression. A lot of building construction and crowded vehicle traffic, mostly in the Sa Pa town, to meet the tourist demands is far from what foreign visitors envisaged from guidebooks they read at home. They feel being disturbed and unhappy because what they were looking for is a quiet and remote area where they can enjoy the scenery and new experience with ethnic minority people. On the contrary, most Vietnamese visitors do not feel so much disturbed, but see this as a good sight of infrastructure, service or entertainment investment.
- Crowding problem is also included. However, it mostly affects foreign visitors rather than Vietnamese visitors. It is in relation to cultural component, where Asian in general and Vietnamese in particular are so used to crowding living that it does not concern them. The perception of and tolerance towards crowding are very different between foreign (particularly westerners) and Vietnamese visitors.
- The level of commercialization is available in Sa Pa. Many visitors, both foreign and Vietnamese, are aware of the commercialization of culture in Sa Pa, and they are also aware of the contradictions of their own presence. Many cultural activities have turned into money-making events due to their presence. Some even have disappeared (e.g. the weekend “love market”) because visitors would not know the rules, although they probably bring a set of expectations based upon their own social values and behavior. This is also true to Vietnamese visitors as ethnic cultures are as alien to them as to foreigners although they may be more familiar.
- Certain information is lacking. Although there seem to be an easy access to certain information, but in most cases the information is either lacking or conflicting. There is no official database that can provide trustful information to visitors or relevant and interested

businesses, even with TISC that is assumed to take this responsibility. Particular information required includes features of Hoang Lien National Park and its fauna and flora resources, history of the area and its peoples, local ethnic cultures, traditions and customs. The materials about Sa Pa available were mostly written by westerners with western perspectives.

Finally, despite the differentiation between the two groups of visitors, the findings reveal that ethnic minority cultures and the natural environment keep being key resources that Sa Pa tourism is currently based in. The sustainability of these resources determines the sustainability of Sa Pa tourism through the sustained visitor experience.

2. Implications and Recommendations for Action

The analyses show that tourism characteristics in Sa Pa reflect two distinctive ways of appropriation of landscapes and of experiencing minority cultures.

Foreign visitors show the relatively standardized kind of expectations and responses of people from well-developed nations visiting those still in the course of development. They explore other places and other cultures as diversion, new experience, enquiry and learning or even the pursuit of peer status and recognition. They are therefore keen to know customs of indigenous and exotic people, experience truly alien scenes and observe man-land relationships.

From interviews with foreign tourists, it is revealed that minority people, scenery/nature and trekking/walking are attractions that motivate foreign tourists to come to Sa Pa. The anticipation and planning for their trips are based on what they expect and the goals of their trips. The varied sources of information provide them with immediate and interactive feedback, some of which could make them enjoyable, especially when the information provided is relevant and useful for their own goals and purposes. This shows how important information is to market Sa Pa and enhance visitor experience. Foreign tourists could also enjoy their travel when experiencing local modes of travel, even sometimes when they feel at risk. They particularly enjoy trekking, exploring ethnic minority cultures and nature. The challenging activities that require certain skills such as Fansipan climbing especially attract foreign tourists. The local ethnic minority guides are an added value as appreciated by the tourists while enjoying indigenous cultures and nature. They actually play a role in narrowing the gap in the lack of culture and nature information that is demanded by the tourists. Positive memories can bring flow to the tourists when they are back home and recollect their trip.

Vietnamese visitors, on the other hand, ride upon the change and they are inevitably a part of it. Their visits appear to represent an escape from their normal urban environment almost along the colonial tradition of retiring to the hill stations in summer. However, they are not ready to abandon too much of their everyday life and want to retain the comfort and enjoyment of their “normal” entertainment. Therefore, they want to relax or commune with nature, but their activities still center upon convivial entertainment with high demand for amenities and comfort. As relatively inexperienced travelers, who have grown up in a culture where recreational travel is not seen as part of a normal lifestyle, they do not seek new experiences, but familiar experiences in a new place.

From interviews with Vietnamese tourists, it is revealed that cool climate and scenery or nature are two main attractions that motivate Vietnamese tourists to come to Sa Pa. Information plays an important role for Vietnamese visitors. Many local people know Sa Pa by the name but there are many things about Sa Pa that people want to find out, which could bring flow to them. Enriching

knowledge about many aspects such as history and nature is a demand of many Vietnamese tourists. Vietnamese tourists generally enjoy short trekking and the cool and healthy climate of Sa Pa. Some young Vietnamese like challenging activities such as trekking to Fansipan, but most of the local tourists prefer comfortable and easy relaxing manner. Emotion and mood are also reflected when the trip is finished and the Vietnamese visitors are at home recollecting about it.

From the above analyses, it is revealed that foreign and Vietnamese visitors experience flow differently. Flow seems more important and to occur more often amongst foreign tourists, who come to explore a foreign culture for a new experience. Everything could be a challenge for them as they cannot experience these in their home countries and thus enjoy the experience. However, the ways the foreign tourists are challenged are not very much relevant to the Vietnamese tourists. Very much characterized as “holiday” tourists, Vietnamese tourists do not welcome a total abandon of their normal comfort – actually consider this comfort as means to gain enjoyment for their holiday. This leads to one comment that Vietnamese people may experience flow in ways which do not quite fit totally with Csikszentmihalyi. Flow may be developed and expressed in serenity and peacefulness. Unlike foreign tourists, Vietnamese tourists do not place exotic or challenging physical experience as highest attractions to them, but just experience serenity with friends, family or relatives, which could give them flow. These two distinctive ways of experiencing flow between the foreign and Vietnamese tourists that this study has revealed is useful to understand and to have relevant approaches for enhancing visitor experience in Sa Pa. The integration of the flow concept by Csikszentmihalyi and the multiphasic recreation experience model by Clawson and Knetsch provides a very good framework and foundation to assess and examine the experience.

Moreover, tourism is undoubtedly of great importance to Sa Pa growing economy. The sustainability of the visitor experience is vital to the survival of tourism, and in turn the sustainable tourism ensures a quality visitor experience. The findings highlight several issues, which also warrant some thought and attention for enhanced visitor experience in Sa Pa.

Using Resources Sustainably

Natural, social and cultural resources are “raw materials” of the tourism industry. They need to be conserved and used sustainably for the long-term visitor experience. The cultural tourism is very easily lost when the “authenticity” of the attraction is lost due to high visitor numbers. A visible example is Bac Ha, which has emerged as an alternative to Sa Pa for the last few years. The key issue in sustainability is balance.

Reducing Over-consumption and Waste

The quality of tourism experience depends also on the reduction of over-consumption and waste in the destination area. Topas is known as an environmentally conscious tour company that encourages its tourists to reduce waste and consumption during the trekking through guidelines and awareness raising. This requires a cooperation and participation of business sector in Sa Pa who organize tours. Information and education is necessary to promote this. Ecolabel might be a good incentive to encourage for tour operators who are committed themselves to have a green profile.

Maintaining Diversity

Natural, social and cultural diversity is essential for tourism development in Sa Pa. Tourist segmentation is not homogeneous in Sa Pa so the tourism diversity will be able to meet the

demands of different tourists and visitors, ensuring visitor experience of different targets. Maintaining and promoting this diversity can be included right at the beginning phase of the Trip Cycle to stimulate visitors.

Integrating Tourism into Planning

There is very little forward planning taking place in Sa Pa. Recently the Urban Development Regulation was launched. This is a good sight anyway and people are ambitious for a better face of tourism here, by which contributing to an enhance experience of visitors and tourists. As revealed by the study results, there have been a lot of problem related to mass development of tourism in Sa Pa or commercialization. Although Plog (1972: 4) pointed out “Destination areas carry with them potential seeds of their own destruction, as they allow themselves to become more commercialized and lose their qualities which originally attracted tourists”, but the decline is not inevitable and with sound planning and management it is possible for the downturn to be checked and viability sustained.

Supporting Local Economies

In Sa Pa ethnic people are the owners of the tourism attractions. They heavily rely on the natural resources and now tourism. Support to local economic activities, which take into account environmental consideration means to protect the foundation of resources where visitor experience depends on.

Involving Local Communities

Quality of tourism experience is improved with involvement of local communities. At the moment ethnic minority people in Sa Pa participate in tourism by being spectacles themselves, sellers of goods (agricultural, forest and handicraft products etc.) and providers of services (tour guides, porters to Fansipan, accommodation in villages, cultural performances etc.). Interacting with the locals during the trip undoubtedly enhances visitor experience and their goods enrich visitor knowledge about the minority cultures.

Consulting Stakeholders and the Public

Tourism is an industry that interacts with many sectors and a multitude of government functions, and should therefore be developed with a view to such multidimensional characteristics. They need to cooperate and communicate for a common image of the destination. At the moment in my opinion the coordination and cooperation between tourism sector in Sa Pa is weak, when businesses compete harsh, but not cooperate. There should be a mechanism for tourism sector and the National Park, one of the attractions to work along well. Only with this, could visitors benefit from a healthy tourism where their experience and enjoyment be gained at the utmost.

Training Staff

Skills of guides, the level of professionalism, dedication and hospitality – all contributes to the visitor experience. Although there were some training courses organized, there is a high demand on staff training in all kinds of tourism skills such as guiding, reception, hotel, hospitality as mentioned in one report on the demand of tourism businesses in Sa Pa (Nguyen Thi Mai Anh, 2004). Language training is needed too for tourism government staff and National Park.

Marketing Tourism Responsibly

Sa Pa Tourism marketing is a weakness (Nguyen Duc Hoa Cuong, 2004). For a total visitor experience, information about the destination area is required for each phase. At the moment, information about Sa Pa, its peoples, cultures and the environment is lacking. The other which are available are inconsistent or conflicting. There is no official source that tour operators and businesses can consult when there is a need. There neither has been an official database for reliable information. A common marketing strategy about Sa Pa does not exist yet. TISC who has a privileged status over other tour operators and tourism businesses might play a critical role in marketing Sa Pa and responsible tourism in Sa Pa. TISC will also be in the best position to be a “reliable address for information” about Sa Pa and its human, culture and natural resources.

Undertaking Research

Quality experience can be strengthened by being researched or monitored, which will help to solve any arisen problems. The demands for tourist experience are varied and changing, thus research could help keep up with this demand.

Cutting through all the points mentioned above is the **carrying capacity** concept which to me is a central point for any visitor experience. It represents the maximum use without causing negative effects on the resources or a community, or reducing visitor enjoyment. According to WTO it comprises physical, ecological, cultural, tourist social and host social elements.

- Physical carrying capacity is the level beyond which the available space cannot provide for tourist visits without a clear deterioration of the tourist experience
- Ecological carrying capacity is the level of visitation beyond which unacceptable ecological impacts will occur either from the tourists or the amenities they require.
- Cultural carrying capacity represents the number of visitors beyond which the cultural, historical and archaeological resources start to deteriorate in time
- Tourist social carrying capacity is the level beyond which visitor satisfaction declines unacceptably because of overcrowding
- Host social carrying capacity is the level beyond which growth will be unacceptable in terms of detriment to the host community in its traditions, ethics, value system or quality of life

(WTO, 1994:24-25, 60-62)

Consideration of carrying capacity together with sound planning and policy development will ensure favorable conditions for Sa Pa tourism to be developed and sustained, visitor experience be reached. It is therefore suggested that a more sustainable tourism and more sustainable approach should be taken for long term quality of experience to be met.

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APPENDIX 1: List of International Tourists Interviewed

(Fieldwork, October – November 2004)

	<i>Name</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Nationality</i>
1.	Rinke Lerol	m	44	Dutch
2.	Anushka Ratnayake	f	22	American
3.	Esther Veldkamp	f	24	Dutch
4.	Daniel Aeyelts	m	27	Dutch
5.	Sam Jackman	m	25	British
6.	Yu Ling	f	27	Chinese
7.	Canal Marta	m	30	Spanish
8.	Vivian Oosterkamp	f	25	Dutch
9.	Alesandro Cambon	m	25	Italian
10.	Marc Verra	m	39	Dutch
11.	Marquis Raymon	m	37	Swedish
12.	Ilora van der Sman	f	34	Dutch
13.	Lemat	m	32	French
14.	Shaul Baruch	m	49	Danish
15.	Olga Filer	f	39	Russian
16.	Spencer Albert	m	35	English
17.	Arita Akiko	f	32	Japanese
18.	Hans van den Brink	m	60	Dutch
19.	Alain Calleman	m	32	French
20.	Charles Barthou	m	28	French
21.	Rudman Harvey	m	33	American
22.	Sapiolo Luciano	m	37	Italian
23.	Bassot Marie	f	27	French

APPENDIX 2: List of Domestic Tourists Interviewed

(Fieldwork, October – November 2004)

	<i>Name</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Cities/Provinces</i>
1.	Phi Thi Thanh Hieu	f	25	Lao Cai
2.	To Thuy Ha	f	22	Hanoi
3.	Nguyen Thi Huong	f	44	Hanoi
4.	Nguyen Thi Lan	f	49	Hochiminh
5.	Phan Hong Ha	f	37	Hue
6.	Nguyen Thi Kim	f	30	Hai Duong
7.	Huynh Tien Long	m	18	Lao Cai
8.	Mai The Toan	m	28	Da Nang
9.	La Thi Loan	f	39	Yen Bai
10.	Tran Thuy Lien	f	35	Quang Ninh
11.	Tran Van Hai	f	26	Hue
12.	Phi Thi Hoa	m	24	Hai Phong
13.	Nguyen The Cuong	m	25	Hai Phong
14.	Nguyen Dieu Linh	f	31	Lao Cai
15.	Nguyen Hoai Phuong	m	26	Hue
16.	Bui Thi Loan	f	33	Can Tho
17.	Nguyen Thi Lien	f	32	Thai Nguyen
18.	Nguyen Ngoc Thien	m	33	Hai Duong
19.	Tran Dinh Huy	m	32	Quang Ninh
20.	Nguyen Tran Mai Trang	f	23	Hochiminh
21.	Dong Van Nhan	m	23	Hochiminh

APPENDIX 3: List of Key Informants/Stakeholders Met

(Fieldwork, September, October and November 2004)

1. Mr. Nguyen Huu Van
Party Secretary
Sa Pa District Party
2. Mr. Hau A Lenh
Chairman
Sa Pa District People's Committee
3. Mr. Do Du Bac, Head
4. Mr. Ha Quang Minh, Officer
Sa Pa Trade and Tourism Section
5. Mr. Pham Quy Thang
Information staff
Tourism Information and Service Center (TISC)
6. Mr. Nguyen Tien Khoat, Director
7. Mr. Pham Tien Dung, Tourism Management Board
Hoang Lien National Park
8. Dr. Sheelagh O'Reilly
Team Leader
Hoang Lien Son Community-Based Conservation Project
Fauna & Flora International Programme, Vietnam
Forest Protection Station, Hoang Lien National Park
9. Mrs. Nguyen Thi Kieu Vien, SNV Sustainable Tourism Program Manager
10. Mr. Nguyen Duc Hoa Cuong, SNV Advisor
SNV, The Netherlands Development Organization
11. Mr. Brian P. White
Coordinator
Bachelor of Tourism Management Program
Capilano College, Canada
12. Mr. Peter Wharton
Botanical Garden and Center for Plant Research
University of British Columbia, Canada
13. Mr. Greg Vandeborne
Community-based Tourism Project
Sa Pa

14. Mr. Duong Thanh Tan
Sa Pa Tour Operator
Lao Cai Tourism Company
15. Mr. Le Thanh Hung
Head of Sa Pa Branch
Green Bamboo
16. Mr. Hans Christian Nielsen, Manager
17. Ms. Nguyen Thi Tran Quynh, Sa Pa Office staff
Topas Adventure Vietnam
18. Mr. Bui Dinh Te
Sa Pa Tour Operator
Handspan
19. Mr. Quang Thang
Manager
Sa Pa Nature Tour
20. Mr. Nguyen Van Tri
Front Office Manager
Victoria Hotel
21. Ms. Dao Thi Quyen
Mountain View (Ninh Hong) Hotel

APPENDIX 4: Temporary Regulation on Management of Village Tourism Routes in Sa Pa District

(Attached to the Decision of the District People's Committee of Sa Pa, No. 145/QD-CT,
dated 12th October, 2004)

Chapter 1 General Provisions

Article 1: This Regulation stipulates the following activities: Formalities for visitors to take part in a village tour; Permitted itineraries; Locations along the itineraries permitted for accommodation; Obligations of tour operators and visitors when undertaking village tours; Formality order for issuing a touring card.

Article 2: Concerned local authorities, Commune People's Committees, Tourist Management Task Force, tour operators, tour guides and tourists should closely work together in order to implement strictly this Regulation and other relevant legislations when managing and undertaking village tours within Sa Pa district.

Article 3: Sapa DPC would like to develop this Regulation in order to ensure sufficient management of travel business, sound and well-planned exploitation of tourism resources, safety for tourists while touring and at the same time to maintain a balance between exploitation and preservation, making contribution to enhancing the service quality and facilitating tourism in Sa Pa to go along sustainable development.

Chapter 2 Specific Provisions

Article 4: Tourists who want to take part in a village tour shall have:

- 4.1. A touring card
- 4.2. Sightseeing tickets
- 4.3. A tour guide meeting requirements as stipulated in the Article 9 of this Regulation to accompany their group

Article 5: Permitted itineraries

5.1. Itinerary I: Sa Pa - Cat Cat - Sin Chai - Sa Pa

The tour starts from the center of Sa Pa town, passing Cat Cat ticket-control station to visit Cat Cat village, then trekking along a trail or trans-village road to visit Sin Chai village and come back to Sa Pa town.

5.2. Itinerary II: Sa Pa - Cat Cat - Y Linh Ho - Lao Chai - Ta Van - Sa Pa

The tour starts from the center of Sa Pa town, passing Cat Cat Ticket-control Station and trekking along a trail to visit Y Linh Ho village. From there trekking on another trail to visit Lao Chai San and Ly Lao Chai villages. From Ly Lao Chai to visit Ta Van and then come back to Sa Pa town.

5.3. Itinerary III: Sa Pa - Lao Chai - Ta Van - Ban Ho - Thanh Phu - Nam Cang - Sa Pa

The tour starts from the center of Sa Pa town, passing Bai Da Co ticket-control station to visit Lao Chai village, then trekking along a stream bank to visit Ta Van village (*or taking the same route as itinerary II*). Then trekking along a mountain-side trail across Truc (bamboo) forest to visit Giang Ta Chai village. From there crossing Su Pan to visit Ban Den village and then trekking on a trail to Thanh Phu and then visit Sin Chai A, Sin Chai B and Nam Kenh villages. The tour ends by coming back to Thanh Phu and Sa Pa town.

5.4. Itinerary IV: Sa Pa - Lao Chai - Ta Van - Su Pan - Thanh Kim - Sa Pa

The tour starts from the center of Sa Pa town, passing Bai Da Co ticket-control station to visit Lao Chai village, then trekking along a stream bank to visit Ta Van village (*or taking the same route as itinerary II*). Then trekking along a mountain-side trail across Truc (bamboo) forest to visit Giang Ta Chai village. From Giang Ta Chai crossing Su Pan to Thanh Kim on a trans-village road to visit Lech village and come back Sa Pa town.

5.5. Itinerary V: Sa Pa - Ta Phin - Mong Sen - Takco - Sa Pa

The tour starts from the center of Sa Pa town along the main road or crossing Ma Tra and Giang Tra villages to Ta Phin ticket-control station before visiting Ta Phin commune, Van Hoa Sa Xeng village. Then trekking along a trail to visit Mong Sen village. From there moving to Takco pass and then coming back to Sa Pa town.

5.6. Itinerary VI: Climbing Mount Fansipan

Starting from the center of Sa Pa to Tram Ton pass and then climbing Mount Fansipan

5.7. Other routes can be added when conditions are met.

Article 6: Locations in the itineraries permitted for accommodation

- Ta Van commune: Ta Van Giay village
- Ban Ho commune: Ban Den village
- Thanh Kim commune: Accommodation place of Topas
- Thanh Phu commune: Muong Bo village
- Ta Phin commune: Commune central area and Sa Xeng cultural village
- San Xa Ho commune: Sin Chai village

Article 7: Inter-sectoral visitor management Task Force

The Task Force was set up under the decision of the Chairman of Sa Pa District People's Committee, No.115/QD-UB, dated 11/8/2004. The Task Force shall undertake the following responsibilities:

- Organize registration of and manage temporary residence of foreigners and Vietnamese in Sapa District.
- Manage, guide and issue touring card for tourists and tour operators inside and outside Sapa district.
- Manage of revenue of local hotels, guesthouses and travel companies.
- Make daily statistics of overnight tourists in each hotels and guesthouses, tourists visiting villages and inform incumbent authorities to coordinate management.
- Collaborate with the town's police office in unplanned or periodic inspections of tourism activities according to the Task Force's assigned responsibilities.

Location and working time of the Multi-department Task Force:

- Task Force's office: At the District Trade and Tourism Division.
- Working time: every day. Daytime working follows office hour, Nighttime working is from 08:00PM to 11:00PM.

District Police Office and Trade and Tourism Department work in daytime to advice and issue touring card.

District Police Office, Sa Pa Tax Branch Office, and Immigration Team of PA35 Department of the Provincial Police Office work in nighttime to register and administer temporary residence of tourists in the district, and manage tax collection.

In addition to the regulated working time as mentioned above, the Task Force is subject to work overtime in case of urgent issues happened under their responsibilities.

Article 8: Formality order for issuing a touring card

Before organizing a tour, tourists and tour operators are required to undertake formalities to obtain touring card at the Task Force's office. (Tourists traveling in the Fansipan trekking route only need to register their personal data with the Task Force for their information and administration. Hoang Lien National Park will be responsible for issuing touring card and managing tourists on the route).

1. For individual visitors

Individual visitors shall contact directly with the Task Force (big groups of visitors can appoint their representatives) to submit group personal particulars, selected itinerary, locations for accommodation, tour duration and submit the guide hiring contract. As soon as all formalities are on hands, the Task Force will directly issue 01 touring card for each group of visitors.

2. For visitors going with local and from-outside tour operators

The tour operator shall submit a tour registration form (*in a designed format*) to the Task Force. The form must be stamped with signature and full name of the company's director or an authorized person (*if there is an authorization letter*). As soon as the tour registration form is considered regular, the touring card will immediately be released by the Task Force.

Article 9: Tour guides

The following tour guides are allowed to work with foreign tourists in Sa Pa district:

- Tour guides having tour guide license issued by VNAT or Lao Cai Provincial Trade and Tourism Department and currently are working for licensed tour operators in the district.
- Local ethnic minority tour guides having a certificate of attending a village cultural ambassador training course issued by Provincial Trade and Tourism Department and are currently working for licensed tour operators in the district or Sa Pa Tourism Information and Service Center.
- Tour guides working for licensed tour operators based outside the district must have a national tour guide license in order to be allowed to work with foreign tourists in the village trekking routes in the district.

Tour operators shall submit the number of their tour guides with personal particulars to the District Trade and Tourism Department (in writing form with stamp, signature and full name of the company's director). In case there is any change in number of tour guides (more or less than the

initial number of tour guides registered), the tour operator shall, within 3 days, send a notice in writing form with a list of additional or reduced tour guides and their personal particulars to the District Trade and Tourism Department.

Article 10: Sightseeing ticket

Tourists traveling in these village tourism routes are required to buy sightseeing ticket according to Lao Cai Provincial People's Committee regulation.

Tour groups, which have purchased route sightseeing tickets are free of sightseeing fees when visiting Cat Cat tourist spot.

Article 11: Obligations of incumbent parties in organizing and undertaking visits in village tourism routes:

1. For Tour operators:

- Must have a plan and measures to ensure tourists' safety and security when organizing visits to village tourism routes in the district.
- Must have measures to educate and facilitate tourists in keeping environmental cleanness and protection of natural resources. Utilization of recycling materials and environmental friendly facilities in operation of the tours is encouraged.
- Manage tourists to visit as contracted tour program. It is prohibited to violate operating outside permitted visiting routes and destinations, duration and overnight stays.
- Avoid being taken unfair advantages of tourist activities to violate national security, social order and security, and local traditional customs.
- Manage tour guides according to Chapter 3, Decree No. 27/2001/ND-CP issued by the Government dated 05/06/2001.

2. For tour guides:

- Conform and advice tourists to conform this Regulations and other relevant legislations.
- Guide tourists to visit according to registered itineraries, routes, visiting destinations and duration, and overnight staying spots.
- Be responsible for advising and facilitating tourists in keeping environmental cleanness and protection of natural resources.
- Be responsible for ensuring safety and security of tourists.
- It is prohibited to organize and guide visits to village tourism routes when tourists have not undertaken yet all formalities as regulated.

3. For tourists:

- Visit as per routes, destinations, duration, and overnight staying spots registered by themselves or tour operators.
- Protect environment, natural landscapes and beauties.
- Respect local traditional customs and lifestyles.
- Follow regulations on safety and security. The propaganda and distribution of illegal documents, books and newspapers are strictly prohibited. It is also strictly prohibited to bring along and make use of explosives, weapons, poisons and other drugs.

4. For commune and town People's Committees:

- Coordinate with Trade and Tourism Department, district police office, Task Force in organizing and managing visits and accommodation for tourists in the commune and town as regulated.

- Manage temporary residence adequately and accurately.
 - Do not allow to cause any inconvenience to tourists and tour operators.
 - Provide facilities, advise tourists and regularly carry out activities in keeping environmental cleanness and protection of natural resources.
5. For Trade and Tourism Department and District Police Office:
- Closely coordinate with commune and town People's Committees in deploying this Regulation.
 - Regularly direct and heighten awareness of the members of the Task Force in raising their responsibility for better undertake their tasks.
 - Provide information, raise awareness, encourage and facilitate local tour operators, tourists and communities in executing stipulations in keeping environmental cleanness and protection of natural resources.
6. For Task Force:
- Conform and organize operations as per this regulation.
 - Organize registration of tourists and tour operators in a swift and simple manner. It is prohibited to cause any inconvenience to get illegal benefits.

Chapter 3

Awarding and handling violations

Article 12: Awarding

Organizations, individuals with outstanding performance contributed to sustaining a healthy tourism environment in Sa Pa shall be awarded or requested for awarding according to regulations.

Article 13: Handling violations

1. Government officials who violate stipulations in this Regulation will be disciplined according to working regulations of their organization and other relevant legislations.
2. Travel businesses, tour guides, and tourists who violate stipulations in this Regulation will be disciplined according to Regulation No. 49/CP dated 15/08/1996, Regulation No. 50/2002/ND-CP dated 25/04/2002 and other relevant legislations.
3. In addition to disciplines as stipulated in the Item 2 of this Article, travel businesses will be subject to additional punishments as the following:
 - 3.1. Withdrawal of business registration license from 1 to 6 months shall be imposed when:
 - Intentionally violate organization of visits to village tourism routes without purchase of sightseeing tickets.
 - Intentionally violate organization of visits to village tourism routes without registration for touring card or visits outside registered routes, destinations, duration and overnight staying spots.
 - 3.2. Permanent withdrawal or requested for withdrawal of business registration license shall be imposed when violence occurred for many times.
4. Tour guide, in addition to be disciplined as stipulated in the Item 2 of this Article, will be subject to additional punishments as the following:
 - 4.1. Withdrawal of guide license from 1 to 6 months shall be imposed when:

- Intentionally re-violate guiding tours outside registered routes, destinations, duration and overnight staying spots.
- Guide visits to village tourism routes when tourists have not undertaken yet all formalities as regulated.

4.2. Permanent withdrawal of guide license shall be imposed when violence occurred for many times.

Chapter 4 Implementation Provisions

Article 14: The Trade and Tourism Division and Sa Pa Police Station shall be designated to coordinately implement this regulation.

- They shall provide training activities and guidance on how to implement the regulation's provisions directly for tour operators, hotels, guest-houses and restaurants located in the town.
- They shall inform outside travel businesses of the content of this Regulation for their active implementation.
- They shall provide training activities and guidance on how to implement the regulation's provisions to communal people's committees and households for coordinate management.

The Sa Pa Trade and Tourism Division shall be responsible to translate into English major contents on this Regulation and place it at ticket-control stations, the Information Center and communes and the town to inform tourists for their execution. They shall give instructions to ticket-control stations to seriously supervise necessary formalities before allowing tourists to go on tours.

Article 15: The communal people's committees shall be designated to coordinate with the Trade and Tourism Division and Sa Pa Police Station to manage tourist's travel and accommodation according to regulation. Tourists taking an itinerary without fulfilling all requirements stipulated in Chapter 2, Article 4, shall be handed over to the communal people's committees to draw up a minutes on handling violation under their decentralized administrative jurisdiction, or be sent to the District People's Committee for consideration if otherwise.

Article 16: Stipulations in this Regulation shall replace stipulations in the Chapter 4 of the Temporary Regulation on Management of tourism services businesses in the district accompanying the Decision No. 165/QĐ-UB dated 18/11/2002 issued by Sapa District People's Committee.

During the implementation process of this regulation, if there is a need for any amendment or supplement, the Trade and Tourism Division and Police Station of Sa Pa district shall report to the District People's Committee for consideration and decision accordingly.

FOR THE PEOPLE'S COMMITTEE OF SA PA DISTRICT.