

## Natural order

With its rippling rice terraces, stilt-house villages, and soaring limestone peaks, the Pu Luong Nature Reserve is poised to become one of northern Vietnam's most appealing destinations. But can it do so without losing its unspoiled appeal?

BY JOSHUA ZUKAS

**T**he peak of The Beast looms intimidatingly large. It's not yet dawn, but Nguyen Dang Trung can already make out the jagged contours of the imposing mountain. He senses the horde of competitors in hot pursuit, which steels his spirit, powers his legs, and spurs him up the muddy track. The increase in pace melts the other runners away one by one, and after an intense uphill struggle Nguyen finally conquers the summit.

Now all alone, he stops suddenly, not to catch his breath but to inhale the views. The early-morning sun illuminates the landscape, rousing the emerald rice terraces in the valley below. Wisps of cloud cling to neighboring peaks, which sit suspended like floating castles. The fantastical vistas nourish Nguyen's soul, but he can't indulge for more than a second. If he is going

to win this race, he needs to begin the descent and keep his lead.

This isn't the first time Nguyen has vanquished The Beast, which is what runners call the 900-meter mountain that forms the most challenging section of the Vietnam Jungle Marathon (VJM), an international event held annually in the Pu Luong Nature Reserve. Nor will it be the last. After years of on-and-off jogging and a failed half marathon, Nguyen fell in love with trail running during the first VJM in 2017. It's also where he won gold in 2020.

"I have a special relationship with Pu Luong," he says. "It's unlike anywhere else in the country."

As the crow flies, Pu Luong is located less than 100 kilometers southwest of Hanoi. But

**POLE POSITION**  
Above: Stilted accommodation at Pu Luong Treehouse in the village of Ban Don.



ringed by sharp limestone peaks and inaccessible by train or highway, the nature reserve has been overlooked by Vietnam's relatively recent — and rampant — tourism development. Sa Pa, in the mountainous northern province of Lao Cai, became the country's most popular highland destination largely because it was accessible by train when roads were still poor. Mai Chau, another tourist hot spot, is as far from Hanoi as Pu Luong, but it takes half the time to get there by car. Pu Luong's comparative seclusion has meant that it could conserve its natural beauty in a way that Vietnam's other mountain destinations could not.

That was precisely what David Lloyd, director of sports and marketing at Hanoi-based Topas Travel, the organizer of the VJM, was looking for. "I wanted somewhere with world-class trails and stunning scenery that would give runners a real sense of adventure," says Lloyd, who first visited Pu Luong in 2014. He needed somewhere that few people had heard of, felt remote, and hadn't been concreted over. Pu Luong ticked all the boxes.

"VJM has the sense of stepping back in time," Lloyd continues. "Especially as the trails pass through picturesque ethnic minority villages." Pu Luong is home to members of the Thai ethnic group, one of the more visible minorities in northern Vietnam. Famed for their weaving dexterity, dance traditions, and terraced rice cultivation, the Thai — who are unrelated to the Thais of Thailand — live in small villages of thatched stilt houses that ornament the undulating hills.

Threaded by streams and footpaths, Ban Don is one such village. "I fell in love with the area, especially Ban Don," says Hanoian Le Thi Phuong Dung, remembering her first visit to Pu Luong in 2013. "The breathtaking scenery was so special — and the local people so friendly — that no words could

describe the effect the village had on me."

Le was so inspired that in 2016 she bought a small hill in Ban Don and built Pu Luong Treehouse, a rustic lodge with only a handful of rooms. To blend with the aesthetics of the village, Le created four thatch-roofed "tree houses" set high on log stilts with panoramic views of the nearby rice terraces. It was important to Le that her property didn't blemish the scenery, which is why she felled few trees, used local building materials, and designed structures that pay homage to Pu Luong's indigenous architecture.

Le's philosophy caught on, and since Pu Luong Treehouse opened in 2018, other boutique hotels have sprung up across the 17,000-hectare reserve. But while the landscape remains mostly untarnished, Le feels uneasy about Pu Luong's future. "I worry that the place will develop too much and lose its charm," she says.

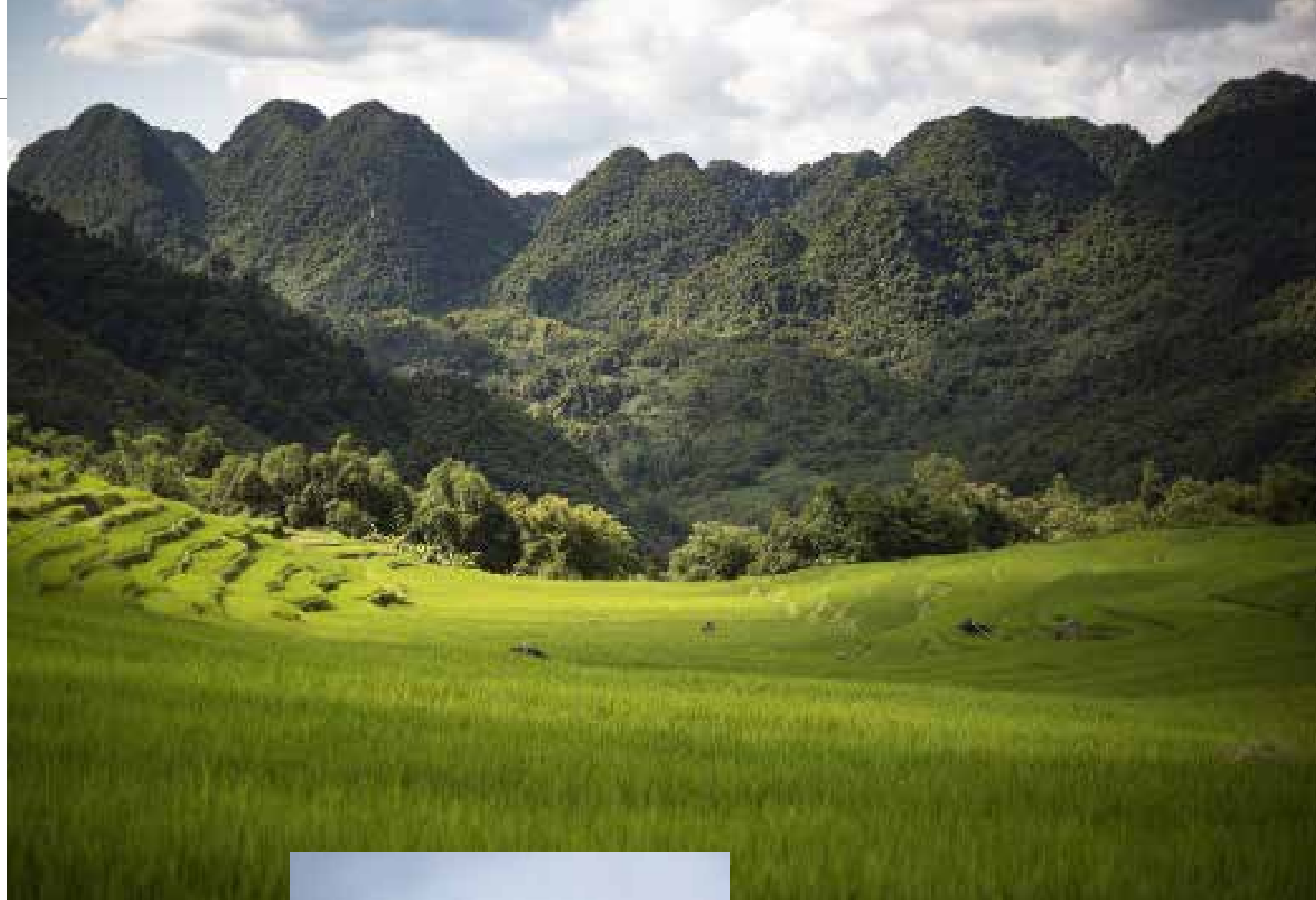
According to Le, if Pu Luong is to avoid the pitfalls of other destinations — such as the gigantic concrete hotels found in Sa Pa or cramped homestay clusters in Mai Chau — then the local government and people will need to mobilize. Local tour guide Lo Van Nam agrees. "We all need to work together to maintain Pu Luong's beauty," he explains. "If not, investment projects will destroy the place day by day."

Lo became one of the area's first trained tour guides back in 1998 and opened a homestay two years later in his home village of Kho Muong. Framed by towering karst peaks in a remote valley north of Ban Don, Kho Muong offers a good glimpse into local life. While the term "homestay" is used flexibly in the Vietnam's more popular mountain destinations,



### The Details

**Pu Luong Treehouse** ([puluongtreehouse.com](http://puluongtreehouse.com); doubles from US\$48) can organize private transport for the four-hour drive between Hanoi and the Pu Luong Nature Reserve. Homestays elsewhere in the area can be arranged via **Topas Travel** ([topastravel.vn](http://topastravel.vn)), organizer of the **Vietnam Jungle Marathon** ([vietnamtrailseries.com](http://vietnamtrailseries.com)).



### GREEN MILES

From top: Scenic views from Ban Don village; trail runner Nguyen Dang Trung. Opposite: Le Thi Phuong Dung and a wooden bathtub at her Pu Luong Treehouse.

where many have evolved into guesthouses to accommodate more visitors, in Pu Luong they've maintained their authenticity for the most part, with guests sleeping in traditional houses and eating meals with the family.

Lo recognizes that authenticity is key, but that development is still important. He remembers growing up when roads were poor and education was nonexistent. Now that the area is developing, in part thanks to tourism, his grandchildren can walk on paved roads to ever-improving schools. Still, like Le, he believes that pressuring the local government to implement policies that preserve Pu Luong's natural beauty is crucial to sustaining both agriculture and tourism. District authorities do impose building restrictions and must greenlight any new developments, but there is a growing fear that powerful investors can bend the rules.

Despite these concerns, many remain optimistic about Pu Luong's future, especially as sustainability and conservation are becoming increasingly relevant to tourism development master plans. While decision makers still admire successful tourism destinations like Sa Pa, there's also an opportunity to identify and learn from their mistakes.

"The landscape is what makes the place unique," says Lloyd of the VJM. "I'm confident that tourism development will not lead to the loss of that uniqueness." ●