

Hanoi

Part of the community

A homestay project offers a rare window into the life of the Lolo people – one of Vietnam's smallest ethnic groups



Be it rain or shine, the Lung Cu Flag Tower is always a commanding presence. Located more than 400km north of Hanoi, right by the border with China, the 30m-high flag tower soars over Ha Giang, a province in the northernmost tip of Vietnam known for its dizzying ethnic diversity and ribbon-like roads that coil around jagged mountains.

Beneath the flag tower rests the tiny village of Lo Lo Chai, a picturesque settlement with only a handful of houses. A tight network of lanes wide enough only for bicycles and motorbikes connects the earthen houses with the road. And on a small hill with panoramic views of the flag tower perches an unlikely inn for adventurous travelers: Homie Homestay, founded by Nguyen Huyen Phuong in 2018.

The 33-year-old Hanoian saw the potential of offering a charming homestay in unique surroundings at this beloved landmark – especially the benefits such an initiative could bring to the local community. She began by approaching the most



A COLORFUL LIFE

Vietnam's Lolo ethnic group is known for its fascinating traditional clothing



In Lo Lo Chai village, the Lolo women don multicolored tunics, with ribbons in all colors flowing from their waists to their ankles. Rings of red and purple run down the long sleeves. The traditional headdresses are also vibrant affairs, with fluffy tassels and beads.

promising-looking house and chatting with the family, which turned out to be one of the poorest in the village. She learned that the house was built according to traditional residential design principles of the Lolo, one of Vietnam's 54 official ethnic groups. The layout consists of a two-story residential house overlooking a large courtyard flanked by two smaller structures for rearing animals and cooking. She envisioned establishing and improving the homestay offerings in Lo Lo Chai, in the process teaching the local Lolo business skills and promoting cultural exchange between them and visitors.

Nguyen and her team got to work converting the large central house into guest accommodations – they turned the first floor into a dining room and the second into a dormitory full of comfortable beds. The smaller house built to shelter animals was transformed into two private double bedrooms while the kitchen structure was kept as it was. The family members moved into an attached traditional house to welcome and care for the guests, and running the homestay has now become their main source of income.

The Lolo people, who number only about 3,000 in Vietnam, are best known for their kaleidoscopic clothing, with designs and color palettes varying from region to region.

"While staying at Homie Homestay, you have a chance to experience local food, enjoy traditional music and wear the Lolo traditional clothes," Nguyen says. "But the best thing about the experience is listening to the stories of the people who live right on the border." fb.com/homiedelolo

– Joshua Zukas

IMAGES: HOMIE HOMESTAY