

Bridging the Income Gap – In Style

It's rural Vietnam, deep in the farmlands of Southeast Asia. A lone peasant, his skin dry and leathery from a lifetime of work in the endless sunshine, flicks his makeshift whip at the rump of a large grey oxen pulling at a plough that looks like it was designed centuries before; black, wet mud turns heavily behind them, and the pair take another monotonous step forward.

From the direction of the road comes a humming sound: the farmer turns his head in time to see a shining white limousine pass swiftly by, carrying another wealthy foreign guest overland to the posh resort on the coast. For a moment, two worlds occupy the same space – and then it passes, leaving the farmer and his bull alone again in the field that neither will ever leave.

In developing countries like this one, it's not easy for luxury travelers to be entirely without a sense of guilt. Not many tourists can comfortably sink a fork into a fifty-dollar slice of salmon when there are people who don't even make that much in a year wandering past the restaurant. Then again, not everyone who wants to see the beauty of Vietnam for themselves can endure the rough, backpacker-style eco-tours advertised by the Responsible Travel industry.

It's perhaps unfortunate that the visitors whose spending could make the most difference in the developing world rarely get the chance to see their tourist dollars go to genuine charitable causes.

When Definite Journey – a luxury operator based in Saigon – launched with its ethical travel program last April, it was a conspicuous marriage of opposites. Announcing its intention to 'Redefine Luxury', the firm promise to bridge the income gap by hosting first-class tours with ethical travel components, and making donations to charitable community development on each traveler's behalf, deducting from profits earned directly from the tours. Guests on these programs experience the finest of Vietnam's emerging luxury industry – five star hotels, beachside resorts, deluxe cruise liners and private yachts – while resting peacefully in the knowledge that their money is directly benefiting the needy in the areas they are visiting.

If the business model seems a little counter-intuitive, it was an obvious move for the company's founder Minh Nguyen – who served as a Buddhist nun before receiving instructions to leave her temple for the purposes of establishing a business of this very nature. Training in one of the country's most prestigious luxury travel firms – while dabbling in the stock market on the side – the petite Nguyen, who owns only two sets of business clothes and a pair of brown Buddhist pajamas, took only four years to amass the funds and experience required to put together a multi-national team to launch her concept.

Nguyen, a noted whiz-kid from a small provincial town – who won a national prize in the science of foreign trade before entering the temple – is no stranger to charitable work. She is the co-founder of Compassionate Hearts, an NGO dedicated to assisting the poor, sick, and elderly in remote Vietnamese

communities. According to Nguyen, her intention is that along with Definite Journey's growth, a greater percentage of the firm's takings will go towards funding the community hospitals and scholarships for needy children organized by her charity.

Definite Journey specializes in premium small-group tours through some of Vietnam's most spectacular landscapes and greatest metropolitan areas, as well as operating individualized versions of those programs by private arrangement for clients who prefer traveling alone. The firm also caters for businesses seeking MICE solutions in Vietnam, or that are otherwise looking to conduct travel for business purposes throughout the Indochinese region. They arrange packages with various focuses by arrangement, such as golf, helicopter tours, eco-tours, and cuisine explorers.

Definite Journey's program developer John M. John – previously a lecturer in tourism under direct appointment of the Government of the Maldives – observes the recent surge in luxury-standard tourism investment in Vietnam, predicting a major boom in the industry within the next few years. Definite Journey is poised to ride that coming wave, for the benefit of disadvantaged Vietnamese communities – the very backbone of a country set to redefine the Southeast Asian tourism business within the next decade.

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