The Rise of Tourism

How the Ha Giang Loop is Reshaping Local Life

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores how local communities perceive and experience the impacts of tourism along the Ha Giang Loop, a scenic motorbike route in northern Vietnam known for its dramatic landscapes and cultural diversity. As tourism grows rapidly in the region, it is reshaping daily life, local economies, and identities in both empowering and challenging ways. Grounded in postcolonial theory and Foucault's (1980) concept of power and knowledge, this qualitative study investigates how local voices — incorporating those from ethnic minorities — are included, omitted, and represented throughout tourism progression.

In collaboration with 10 participants, I conducted semi-structured interviews and field observations to examine tourism's effects on livelihoods, infrastructure development, cultural practices, access to opportunity while also highlighting new challenges related to inequality, education, sustainability, and cultural preservation. While tourism has improved the lives of many who hope to see it continue growing, others voiced concerns about exploitation, children's future, unequal power relations, and a lack of training.

The thesis argues that tourism in Ha Giang is still in transition. Although it holds significant promise, without inclusive planning, local leadership, and adequate infrastructure, it risks replicating unsustainable tourism dynamics seen in similar destinations. This research contributes to broader discussions on sustainable tourism and locally involved tourism by centering local perspectives and advocating for models that promote local agency, better education and social equity. Given limited research on the Ha Giang Loop, future studies should assess long-term impacts, gender dynamics and amplify voices of women from ethnic minorities and communities not yet integrated into tourism, such as farmers.

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I promise I'll be back.

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What I've learned during this experience goes beyond words.

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1. Introduction

I made my first trip to Ha Giang in December 2023, at a time in my life when I did not know what to study or what job I wanted to do. This trip was part of a larger journey I undertook in Southeast Asia, during which I enjoyed but also observed with a careful and critical eye, the impacts - both positive and negative - of tourism on local populations and the environment. Among all the places I visited, the Ha Giang Loop left the deepest impression: one of the most beautiful places I had ever seen, offering that sense of adventure so many tourists seek. By motorbike, I rode through villages and towns, past lives, cultures, children, ethnic groups —seeing smiles, glances, outstretched hands, farmers, buffaloes… and then a group of 30 motorcycles speeding by. Was I the only one feeling uneasy? How do locals feel about the growing success of their region?

I thought about it, wrote about it, returned to France, and a few months later began my Master's. There comes the choice for the thesis' topic, it was obvious: The Ha Giang Loop.

The mountainous province of Ha Giang is located in northern Vietnam, bordering China. It is home to 22 ethnic minorities (Thuy, 2024), breathtaking landscapes, rich traditions, and warm-hearted people. Unsurprisingly, the region has seen rapid growth in tourism, with 2,268,000 visitors in 2022 (Thuy, 2024), contributing VND 4,300 billion (approx. €147,200) to the local economy (Vietnam National Authority of Tourism, 2022). The Ha Giang Loop —a relatively new tourism product—is becoming increasingly popular, with travelers spending three to five days exploring the region by motorbike along its winding mountain roads. Since 2010, the Dong Van Karst Plateau has also been part of UNESCO"s Global Geoparks Network.

While relationship dynamics between hosts communities and tourists have been widely studied (Amoamo, 2011; Blackstock, 2005; Britton & Clarke, 1987; Grimwood et al., 2015; Hall & Richards, 2000; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019; Mowforth & Munt, 2015; Rogerson & Saarinen, 2018; Ryan & Aicken, 2005; Smith L. T., 2012; Smith M. K., 2016; Smith V. L., 1989; Urry, 1990; Yang & Wall, 2023), there is still a striking lack of academic research on how tourism is experienced and perceived by local communities in Ha Giang – particularly along the Ha Giang Loop, despite its popularity. Most of the existing, though growing, literature on tourism in Vietnam focuses on more established destinations like Sapa (Huy & Trang, 2025; Kidd, 2023; N Van Huy, 2021; Ó Briain, 2014; Phuong, 2025…) or frames Ha Giang tourism development through « tourists' first » logics (Leng et al., 2021; Nguyen & Tran, 2024, Thuy, 2024). Other studies prioritize environmental impacts over social dynamics (Nguyen & Do, 2024). While these contributions are valuable, they often overlook the voices of those directly affected by tourism on the ground, especially ethnic minorities, women, and those not yet included in the sector.

Moreover, tourism in Ha Giang remains in a phase of active development, and its long-term impacts (both positive and negative) are still unfolding. English-language literature on the Ha Giang Loop itself is nearly non-existent despite plenty of information on travel blogs and promotional websites. In this context, there is a pressing need to scientifically document and understand how local communities are engaging with tourism, benefiting from it, or being left behind, and how they envision the future of their region.

To contextualize this research, the literature review will begin with global perspectives on tourism and local communities, followed by insights into the links between tourism and education, a brief section on ethnic minorities, before narrowing the focus to tourism dynamics in Ha Giang province. This framework will help situate the study in relation to the

research question: **How is tourism reshaping local life and community engagement along the Ha Giang Loop?** Alongside this, the study also looks at **how people on the ground understand and experience these shifts.**

As Ha Giang's tourism continues to expand, this is a crucial moment to understand the lived experiences of its residents and consider how to foster a more sustainable path forward.

This research aims to amplify the voices of local communities, including ethnic minorities, whose perspectives are often underrepresented in decision-making. The study seeks to highlight the socio-cultural and economic opportunities, the challenges they encountered, as well as their resilience and agency in navigating tourism dynamics.

This paper is also about raising awareness for the tourist in all of us to travel more sustainably and respectfully.

The expected impact of this research is to contribute to more inclusive and sustainable tourism practices, not just in Ha Giang but also in other areas facing similar challenges.

2. Literature Review

Tourism can be a powerful tool for economic growth and cultural exchange, but it also brings significant challenges, especially for local communities that are on the frontline to feel its consequences, whether there are positive or negative. Understanding the intricate relationship between tourism and local communities is essential for developing sustainable tourism models that genuinely benefit local populations.

2.1 Tourism and Local Communities

The multiple dynamics and relations between local communities and visitors have been widely studied (Amoamo, 2011; Blackstock, 2005; Britton & Clarke, 1987; Grimwood et al., 2015; Hall & Richards, 2000; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019; Mowforth & Munt, 2015; Rogerson & Saarinen, 2018; Ryan & Aicken, 2005; Smith, 1989; Smith, 1999; Smith, 2015; Urry, 1990; Yang & Wall, 2023).They present a solid theoretical framework for this paper and the situation in Ha Giang. To contextualize and show relevance of the specific case study of Ha Giang, it is essential to highlight global studies on the topic.

2.1.1 Local Communities and Power Imbalances

Power dynamics are central to critical discussions of tourism in the Global South, where local communities often struggle for control over their resources and economic futures (Mowforth & Munt, 2015). Britton's (1987) work on mass tourism highlights how conventional tourism models can reinforce dependency, extracting economic benefits and leaving local communities with limited control over their own development. Foucault's concept of power emphasizes that power is not merely top-down or repressive, but is diffused throughout society, shaping knowledge, identities, and relationships (Foucault, 1980). In tourism, this means that those who shape the narratives and representations of a destination hold significant power over how it is perceived and experienced.

In the same vein, Nash's (1977) critical perspective frames tourism as a modern form of imperialism aligned with Urry's concept of the « tourist » gaze (1990) that highlights the asymmetry of power in tourism. Locals, especially from Global South countries, are often viewed as objects of consumption and curiosity by tourists.

Smith's (2015) analysis cautions against the Gaze's risks of cultural commodification, where traditions may be reduced to staged performances to meet tourist expectations, Nonetheless, locals are not always passive in tourism; Tucker (2005) flips the perspective introducing the "Host Gaze". It highlights local agency through how they watch, evaluate, adapt and sometimes resist to tourists' presence, behaviors and expectations mirroring Foucault's (1980) notion of power as a multidirectional resource in constant negotiation.

Marginalized communities are the most impacted by the Tourist Gaze (1990). In response to this concept of « Othering », Amoamo's study (2011) with Māori people and Smith's (1999) « decolonizing methodologies » highlight how tourism can challenge dominant narratives for marginalized communities, help display their culture and reaffirm their hybrid identities through third- space performance.

Britton and Clarke (1987) argue for a shift toward alternative forms of tourism that prioritize local ownership, job creation, and economic retention. These models seek to empower local communities, reduce economic dependency, and redistribute tourism benefits more fairly. However, Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019) and Mowforth and Munt (2015) advocate that such shifts must also address broader power imbalances to ensure that local voices are not just included, but central to the tourism narrative and call for a degrowth and rightsizing of tourism where locals' interests come first, before those of the tourists (See Figure 1).

Grimwood et al. (2015) argue that discourses of responsibility in tourism often prioritize the perspectives of tourists and tourism operators reinforcing unequal power dynamics. To truly promote responsible tourism, it is essential to include local perspectives and to ensure

that tourism practices are shaped not only by external perceptions of responsibility, but by the lived realities of those directly impacted.

Rogerson & Saarinen (2018) similarly caution through their work on Pro Poor Tourism (PPT). While tourism is often presented as a lever for development in poor rural areas, without meaningful local agency it risks exploiting the very communities it aims to support, reinforcing inequality rather than reducing it.

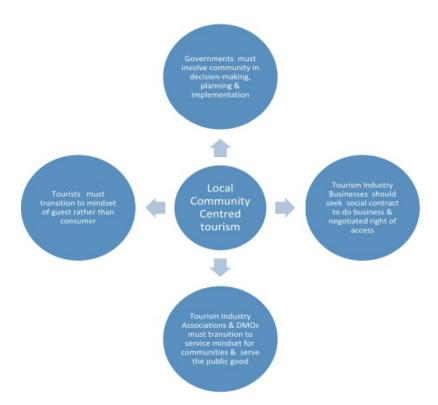These insights set solid concepts for sustainability in tourism.

Figure 1 : Local Community-Centred tourism framework as a mechanism for degrowing tourism.

(Higgins- Desbiolles et al., 2019)

2.1.2 Tourism and Sustainability in The Global South

Mowforth and Munt (2015) emphasize the critical distinction between "involvement" and

"control" in tourism development, arguing that true sustainability requires more than just local participation: it demands genuine control over decision-making. While governments in the Global South often promote sustainability and community involvement, they may simultaneously support transnational tourism projects that undermine these goals.

Cultural sustainability, according to Mowforth and Munt (2015), relies on limiting the most harmful impacts of tourism, promoting respectful behavior, and preserving cultural integrity. Similarly, economic sustainability requires that local communities receive sufficient economic benefits to offset the costs of tourism, but the authors caution that this should not come at the expense of social, cultural, or environmental well-being. They also warn that economic gains can reinforce existing power imbalances, raising the question of who truly benefits from tourism. For Yang and Wall (2009) tourism in ethnic communities can provide economic benefits and cultural revitalization while also perpetuating unequal power dynamics and marginalizing local voices.

Stonich et al. (1995), in their study of tourism in Honduras, found that these effects included increased social differentiation, with marginalized groups relegated to low-paid, temporary jobs. They also documented price increases, reduced access to natural resources, land speculation, a rise in outside ownership of local assets, and environmental degradation.
The size and power of a tourism company significantly influence its approach to sustainability. Larger operators, focused on profit, often practicing greenwashing rather than making substantial changes that could reduce profits (Mowforth & Munt, 2015). Smaller companies, with less pressure for high returns, may be more open to sustainable practices, but the influence of large transnational corporations often dominates the direction of tourism development.

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Mowforth and Munt (2015) brings light to a relevant concept to measure the relationships between tourists and locals: Doxey's irridex. It also raises questions about putting it in correlation with the degree of control from locals on tourism. (See Figure 2)

Table 8.2 Doxey's levels of host irritation extended

Doxey's Irridex	Social relationships	Power relationships
Euphoria	Initial phase of development; visitors and investors welcome	Little planning or formalised control mechanism; greater potential for control by local individuals and groups in this phase
Apathy	Visitors taken for granted; contacts between residents and outsiders more formal (commercial)	Planning concerned mostly with marketing; tourism industry association begins to assert its interest
Annoyance	Saturation points approached; residents have misgivings about tourist industry	Planners attempt to control by increasing infrastructure rather than limiting growth; local protest groups begin to assert an interest
Antagonism	Irritations openly expressed; visitors seen as cause of all problems	Planning is remedial but promotion is increased to offset deteriorating reputation of destination; power struggle between interest groups forces compromise

Source: adapted from Doxey, 1975 and 1976

Figure 2 : Doxey's levels of host irritation extended (Mowforth and Munt, 2015)

They also widely described the concept of « transculturation » where tourism often leads local communities to adapt and assimilate external cultures.

2.1.3 Regulations

Mowforth and Munt (2015) challenge the idea that regulations are setting solid bases for a more sustainable tourism explaining it can also allow certain groups to control the industry, questioning whether tourism should be regulated by the government or by itself.

2.2 Education and Tourism

Education is a critical factor when examining the relationship between tourism and local communities in the Global South. Foucault (1980) emphasizes that knowledge is a form of power, shaping how communities define themselves and control their tourism narratives. This is particularly true in the context of language. Cohen and Cooper (1986), in their fieldwork in Thailand, highlight the unbalanced power dynamics in tourism, where locals are often expected to accommodate to the language of tourists. This pressure is both economic and cultural, as language skills become a precondition for better employment and higher incomes. They also introduced the concept of 'language brokerage', where locals act as informal translators, bridging cultural and linguistic gaps, often without formal training.

In a similar context, Prachanant (2012) found that speaking was the most important English skill for tourism employees, followed by listening, reading, and writing. English, described as the language of hospitality, is essential for guest interaction and customer service. However, employees often struggle with understanding foreign accents, using appropriate expressions, and have limited vocabulary, highlighting the need for specialized training.

However, the ability to access such education is unequally distributed. Maggi and Padurean (2006) argue that Higher Tourism Education in English (HTEE) is critical for economic growth, but they note that educational resources are concentrated in wealthier countries, reinforcing global inequalities.

In Ha Giang, these challenges are pronounced. In 2023, 29% of poor households have at least one person aged 16 to 30 without a degree or training certificate, while 4% have at

least one child aged three to 16 not attending the appropriate level of education (Trinh, 2025). The dropout rate is particularly high among ethnic minorities, with primary attendance at 90%, dropping to 79% at high school.

In some cases, educational changes induced by tourism can also lead to cultural and societal changes. In Sapa, young girls trained as tour guides no longer want to marry local uneducated men with no English skills (Personal communication, 2025).

2.3 Ethnic Minorities and Tourism in Vietnam

While ethnic minorities are not the core focus of this research, they are a crucial part of Ha Giang's tourism landscape and deserve an introduction. Vietnam officially recognizes 53 ethnic minority groups, totaling 14 million people, who face unique challenges in the context of globalization and growing tourism. These communities have historically faced marginalization and structural inequalities, from the Nguyen dynasty through the French colonial period and the governments of North and South Vietnam. The country's population is mainly composed of the Kinh ethnic majority, representing 81.2 million of individuals in 2019 - 85.3% of the population - (McElwee, 2022).

Ó Briain (2014) examines the commodification of ethnic cultures in Sapa, where minority traditions like music and dance are often reinterpreted for tourist consumption, sometimes reinforcing stereotypes and reducing cultural authenticity. While this process can provide economic opportunities, it risks marginalizing minority voices and exploiting their cultural heritage. The situation in Sapa provides a cautionary example for Ha Giang, especially along the Loop where tourism is rapidly expanding but has yet to be studied in depth.

2.4 Tourism Development in Ha Giang Province

2.4.1 Overview of Ha Giang

Ha Giang is a mountainous border province in the Northeast of Vietnam, located over 300 kilometers from the capital, Hanoi. It shares its Northern border with China, covers a total area of 7,927.55 square kilometers, and the capital province has the same name: Ha Giang. For a matter of clarity in this study, it will be referred as Ha Giang City.

Figure 3 : Ha Giang on a Map of Vietnam   Figure 4 : Map of Provinces of Northern Vietnam

Figure 5 : Map of Ha Giang Province

Tourism in Ha Giang can be qualified as what Mowforth and Munt (2015) named new forms of tourism: adventure tourism, ethnic tourism or nature tourism.

2.4.2 The Population of Ha Giang Province

In 2023, the population of Ha Giang province was about 913,000 people including 84% of the population residing in rural areas and 16% in urban areas. The province is home to 19 ethnic minorities (87% of the population) including the Hmong, Dao, Tay, Nung, or LôLô. They live mostly in remote mountainous areas and have rich and diverse cultures, traditions, and festivals (Trinh, 2025). Naturally, the region has attracted the attention of visitors and has become a must-see in Vietnam.

However, poverty remains a significant challenge in Ha Giang. In 2023, the province had a multidimensional poverty rate of 42.61%, nearly eight times the national average of 5.71% (Trinh, 2025). This gap reflects the socio-economic challenges faced by the region, where most of the 59,496 poor households are from ethnic minority communities, primarily dependent on agriculture (Trinh, 2025). According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), factors like remote location and a cultural emphasis on labor over education contribute to poverty and early dropout rates among children, who are often needed to support their families (Trinh, 2025).

According to the Vietnam National Authority of Tourism and the Ha Giang Provincial Department of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, Ha Giang's post-COVID tourism rebound began with a 60,000 increase in international tourists in 2022 compared to 2021.

This recovery was supported by promotional activities, including participation in major events like the Vietnam International Travel Mart (VITM) and regional cultural festivals. The province has invested in tourism infrastructure, including travel guides, maps, and facility upgrades and is now focusing on using local culture to preserve traditions through the development of tourism (Vietnam National Authority of Tourism, 2024).

2.4.3 Presentation of the Ha Giang Loop

There is no scientific paper to introduce the Ha Giang Loop, but many travel blogs and advertisement content are available on the web demonstrating its popularity.

The Ha Giang Loop has emerged as a popular tourist route, initially attracting adventurous motorcyclists eager to explore the dramatic landscapes and winding roads of Vietnam's Northeastern mountains. In the wake of the post-COVID tourism rebound, the loop has grown in popularity, now drawing visitors from around the world. The classic route begins and ends in Ha Giang City, following the QL4C highway through four districts: Quan Ba, Yen Minh, Dong Van, and Meo Vac.

Figure 6: Ha Giang Loop classic route map. By Google Maps.

This journey takes travelers through the Dong Van Karst Plateau Geopark, a UNESCO site known for its striking limestone formations and rich geological history, as well as through remote ethnic villages where diverse cultural traditions converge.

While the loop was once the domain of solo bikers, it has quickly developed into a full-fledged tourism industry. Today, visitors can choose to ride their own motorbikes, join small "easyrider" groups, or even travel in larger convoys of 10 to 35 bikes. Accommodations range from traditional homestays offering local hospitality to larger hotels catering to bigger tour groups, and meals often include "happy water" (locally distilled rice or corn alcohol), adding a distinctive cultural touch to the journey.

2.4.4 Tourism Development

However, this rapid growth comes with its share of challenges. The surge in tourism has brought economic opportunities to the region, but it also raises concerns about over-tourism, cultural commodification, and the environmental impact on fragile ecosystems. As the loop becomes more commercialized, there is a risk that its unique cultural and natural heritage could be compromised if tourism development is not carefully managed.

Academic studies on tourism in Ha Giang are mostly from Vietnamese researchers and focus on community-based tourism (CBT). Leng et al. (2021) and Nguyen and Tran (2024) discuss the potential of CBT to improve human resources, infrastructure, and professionalism in local communities. However, these studies primarily aim to meet tourist standards, often overlooking local needs and perspectives in favor of economic growth. This reflects the 'implementation gap 'described by Stoffelen & Vanneste (2016), which argues that tourism should adopt a region-oriented approach rather than focusing solely

on tourist experiences. Thuy (2024) takes a different approach, examining Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) in Ha Giang, highlighting the region's potential but also its infrastructure challenges, environmental concerns, and cultural erosion. While this study provides more concrete recommendations, including local participation through training and capacity-building, it also emphasizes the need for sustainable tourism.

Despite these contributions, a clear research gap remains, particularly regarding the Ha Giang Loop, which has yet to be studied academically despite its crucial role in the region's tourism dynamics.

3. Research Design

This research is guided by the foundational ideas of Michael Crotty (1998) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), blending a constructivist approach to knowledge with a decolonizing perspective. This framework acknowledges the power dynamics in knowledge production and seeks to empower local voices, emphasizing the importance of community-driven narratives and reflexive research practices.

3.1 Epistemology and Theoretical Perspective

My research draws on a social constructivist epistemology (Creswell, 1994; Guba & Lincoln, 2011), emphasizing that knowledge is socially constructed and subjective, shaped by my background, values, and experiences. I approach my study with the understanding that multiple truths exist, and objectivity is impossible. This perspective frames my inductive approach to data analysis, where participants' voices are central to my findings, and I seek to understand how tourism shapes lives in Ha Giang. I have also integrated elements of an

advocacy/participatory worldview (Creswell, 1994; Heron & Reason, 1997), focusing on empowerment and understanding rather than adhering to a strict political agenda.

This aligns with a phenomenological methodological approach (Heidegger, 1962; Husserl, 1931; Merleau-Ponty, 1962), which seeks to capture the lived experiences of participants and understand how they make sense of their world.

By focusing on the subjective, embodied, and situated nature of experience, this study aims to explore how tourism is perceived, experienced, and negotiated by local communities in Ha Giang, while still acknowledging the researcher's role in co-constructing meaning of the study.

3.2 Methodology and Methods

This research employs a qualitative design to explore how tourism is reshaping local life and community engagement along the Ha Giang Loop. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews (Merton, 1956; Kvale & Binkmann, 2018), allows the research to adapt to the emergent nature of fieldwork, capturing the depth and complexity of participants' experiences. It balances structured questions and spontaneous insights, allowing researchers to explore deeper meanings while remaining focused on the research topic, compared to structured and unstructured interviews. These interviews were conducted with individuals from various ethnic groups, focused on socio-economic dynamics, education, and perceptions of tourism. Questions included prompts such as « Are they any challenges your community faces due to tourism? », « What benefits tourism have brought to your community ? Do you think they are equally distributed? », or questions about their agency and wishes as « What would you change in how tourism is operating along the Loop ? ».

The full interview guide can be found in Appendix A (original version). The goal was to amplify participants' voices and authentically represent their perspectives, exploring how tourism has changed their personal and community lives, created opportunities, and presented challenges.

Initially, the PhotoVoice method (Wang & Burris, 1997) was intended as the primary methodology, aiming to foster creative expression, deeper engagement, and freedom for participants.

As an outsider, I was hoping this art-based method would overcome language barriers and facilitate first contact. However, upon arrival in Ha Giang City, I realized that the level of English was not as strong as I remembered, and my PhotoVoice approach was often misunderstood. Many potential participants needed more guidance, making it difficult to maintain a participant-led approach. Faced with these challenges, I decided to rely on semi-structured interviews instead. This shift reflects a broader strength of qualitative research: its ability to remain flexible and responsive to local conditions and participants' needs, rather than adhering rigidly to pre-established methodology (Marshall & Rossman, 2014).

I also incorporated participant and non-participant observation (Aktinson & Hammersley, 1998) to capture the everyday interactions and unspoken dynamics of local life. My observations were guided by the foundational work of Goffman (1959) and Park (1915), focusing on social roles, interactions, and community settings. I kept a daily journal to reflect on my positionality and interpret what I was seeing, helping me distinguish between what I was actually observing and what I thought I was observing.

To better understand the multiple local cultures and traditions, I visited the Vietnam Ethnology Museum in Hanoi and the Ha Giang Museum in Ha Giang City which showcase the history, geography, and cultural diversity of the region.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

This research was submitted to the Ethics Committee of the University of Groningen after completing the ethics checklist and in consultation with my supervisor. Given the language and cultural barriers in Ha Giang, I prepared a detailed informed consent form, but due to language barriers, asking participants to read and sign it could have caused unnecessary confusion or discomfort. I obtained oral consent from all participants, explaining the voluntary nature of their involvement, their rights to withdraw at any time or skip questions for example, and the purpose of the study in person, in line with university guidelines. I also made clear how I would protect their confidentiality and anonymity, and obtained verbal consent to audio record the interviews. All names and specific identifying details were anonymized to protect participants 'privacy.

Drawing on the ethical principles outlined by Smith (2012) in Decolonizing Methodologies, this research aims to center local voices, challenge dominant narratives, Western assumptions (including mine) and respect the cultural context of Ha Giang. This means building relationships based on respect, reciprocity, and relational accountability, although I was aware of the power dynamics between researcher and participant. My role was not to bring solutions but on the contrary capture locals' precious knowledge, and to empower my

participants to define their own stories and representations, although always limited by my

positionality.

Reflecting on the ladder, as a 25-year-old, white Western French woman with a

background in tourism studies, I recognize that my perspectives are shaped by my

experiences and cultural context and is shaping the narratives and stories that my

participants shared with me as well, and by extension, the results of this research. I have

visited Ha Giang before, first as a tourist and now as a researcher –but also still as a tourist,

that I was also probably in the eyes of my participants. I carry with me the memories of my

first trip, my observation of rapid tourism growth, and a sympathy for local communities.

To challenge these preconceptions, I have tried to root myself in the present, to listen,

observe, and understand, not just passing by.

Though I could not collaborate with an NGO or live with these communities for a year, I

have tried to remain humble and reflective, keeping a field journal to document my thoughts

and reflections and found some guidance in the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012). This

research is not just my work, but our work, the fruit of deeply human exchanges with the

people of Ha Giang.

3.4 Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling strategy (Naderifar et al., 2017),

starting with local contacts I made during my first trip to Ha Giang a year ago. Initial face-

to-face recruitment was crucial in this context, as personal connections played a significant

role in establishing trust and building rapport. From there, some participants referred me

to others, expanding my network.

I also posted a call for participants in the Facebook group 'The Ha Giang Loop', adding a different dynamic to my recruitment, as this approach allowed people to approach me directly rather than me reaching out to them.

Additionally, some participants were recruited through direct, spontaneous interactions while I was staying at their homestays for example. Some participants where working in companies where I bought services, which could introduce a bias. Other weaknesses regarding recruitment include language barrier, access to technology from potential participants, or their interpersonal relationships with their acquaintances.

The 10 participants represented a diverse range of ages, backgrounds, and roles in their communities, providing a broad spectrum of perspectives (See Figure 6). Four belonged to ethnic minority group. However, despite my efforts to include a wider range of voices, my sample was limited to individuals directly involved in the tourism sector, creating a significant bias and marginalizing other important perspectives that would have been valuable for this study.

Names (Fictive)	Ethnic group	Sex	Involvement in tourism	Age	Village or District
Nina	Kinh*	F	Homestay and Tour Operator (TO) owner, opened her structure in 2024.	30-35	Phương Thiện
Noah	Kinh	M	Homestay and TO owner, opened his structure in 2016.	35-40	Dong Tien and Ha Giang (city)
Ron	White Hmong	M	Homestay owner, lives with his family, welcomes tourists everyday and share Hmong intangible heritage (music, food, dance) with his guests.	30-35	Lao Xa
Dori	Kinh	F	Homestay owner from Hanoi, manager in a homestay in Sa Pa for 3 years, then moved to Dong Van to open hers.	40-45	Dong Van
John	Táy	M	Easyrider since 202, drives tourists on the loop almost every day.	25-30	Quang Binh
Clara	(American)	F	TO owner, just launched her women-led company, in Vietnam since a year.	25-30	Ha Giang
Sana	Dao	F	Receptionist/employee in a rental shop since 2023, involved in tourism since several years: before worked in travel agency and restaurant in Dong Van.	30-35	Cao Bo
Nathan	Dao	M	Local tour guide since end of 2023 in a small company, drives tourists on the loop almost every day.	20-25	Lung Vai - Puong do Ha Giang
Alex	Kinh	F	Receptionist in a Spa & Retreat structure since April 2025, works in tourism while waiting to pursue her politician career.	25-30	Ha Giang
Tanya	Kinh	F	Homestay and TO owner since recently, worked in tourism in Ha Giang since several years.	20-25	Ha Giang

Table 1 : Table of participants.

*Kinh people are the majority ethnic group in Vietnam (see 2.3 « Ethnic minorities and tourism in Vietnam »).

3.5 Data Collection

Fieldwork took place in April 2025, a period of moderate tourist activity, a time conducive to greater calm -although still in period of moderate activity - and more availability for the participants, and still a valuable period to analyze tourism dynamics.

The initial aim was to have few participants located in Ha Giang City but mostly along the loop and off the main road of the loop to capture different perspectives, ethnic people, status (farmers, homestay owner, seller…). However, with such a short amount of time that left small place to bond with potential participants, individuals were mostly interviewed in Ha Giang City and its surroundings: seven out of nine participants. One participant was interviewed online while he was on the loop and me in Ha Giang City. The two participants interviewed on the loop have been chosen near the main road of the Ha Giang Loop but also a bit further from it to see nuance in their tourism impact.

Nine interviews were conducted in person, one through video call, lasting between 40 to 70 minutes. Nine out of ten interviews were recorded, all with the agreement of my participants. One participant didn't wish to be recorded. They were recorded either on their place of work during calm times, or around a coffee, or a lunch when possible, to allow a more neutral setting. Interviews were conducted in English. When some were struggling with it, Google Translate was used to facilitate communication while not preventing it. I used the translating application with four participants.

3.6 Analysis

Data was transcribed using Otter.ai after each interview and then printed for manual coding. The data analysis followed an inductive approach, with themes identified through hand-coding, highlighting with stabilos, margin notes, and Post-its. This hands-on process allowed for a deeper connection to the data, ensuring that participants 'meanings and perspectives remained central. I also kept a methodology journal for descriptive and reflective notes, providing valuable context for understanding the data.

I read through the data several times to make sense of what participants were really telling me, being mindful of language barriers and my own preconceptions. Codes and categories were created, merged, renamed, split, and reorganized throughout the process, reflecting the emergent nature of the analysis. For example, 'environmental impact 'initially seemed like a central theme, but as the analysis progressed, it appeared less significant and was merged into the broader category of « concerns and challenges ».

I also developed cross-cutting themes like « ethnicity » and « gender » recognizing their importance across multiple broader themes. My positionality played a critical role in this process, as I had to decide what stood out, what felt important, and what should be included in each category. To balance this, I incorporated in-vivo coding, using participants' own words like « Sa Pa », « Tiktok », « children », and « karaoke » to reduce the risk of imposing my own interpretations.

This iterative approach to data analysis reflects my effort to capture the complexity and diversity of my participants' experiences, providing a solid foundation for the findings that follow

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4. Results - Tourism in Ha Giang: Voices from the Loop

The following findings are organized around interconnected themes that emerged during fieldwork, offering a comprehensive picture of Ha Giang's evolving tourism landscape. While each theme stands alone, they are deeply interrelated. Socio-economic shifts shape and are shaped by tourism, while education influences both current challenges and future aspirations.

Ethnic minorities are a thread running throughout, central to Ha Giang's tourism identity and often most affected by its impacts. Their perspectives are key to amplifying underrepresented voices and questioning dominant tourism narratives. Infrastructure and institutional support appear both as barriers and enablers of growth, while future-oriented themes reflect local hopes and concerns.

My participants included a diverse mix of community members: easyriders, homestay owners, tourism staff, and small business operators. Both men and women from various ethnic backgrounds, aged 20 to 45, were interviewed (see Figure 6). This diversity provided a nuanced view of the opportunities and challenges tied to tourism.

4.1 From Hardship to Hospitality: Ha Giang's Economic Shift

Understanding the socio-economic dynamics of Ha Giang is essential to grasp how tourism operates along the Loop. The region is one of the poorest in Vietnam as one of my participant, Nina, described with agriculture was the only source of livelihood for a long time because of the region's remote location.

Nonetheless, tourism has recently become a more lucrative alternative, rushing many locals into the industry without long-term planning - as stated by few interviewees.

4.1.1 Tourism Opportunities - A Better Life

While walking, exploring, and connecting with people in Ha Giang, it became clear that tourism and tourists are broadly welcomed by the population bustling around the sector.

All participants consider first the significant benefits of tourism, describing how it has created new jobs and increased incomes. In many cases, it goes beyond traditional tourism structure as four interviewees noted that tourism also benefits coffee shops, restaurants, and spas opening to support the growing influx of visitors, supporting entire communities.

In the personal introduction he gives to his customers, Noah, a homestay and tour operator (TO) owner, draws attention to Ha Giang's economic instability : unstable youth jobs, lack of elderly pensions, exhausting farm work. Tourism offered him - and many others - an escape from poverty and a way to support his community.

Nathan, a 22-year-old Dao man taught himself English in a few months to become a tour guide, sharing his culture with visitors. His earnings help supporting his family. For some, tourism is not necessarily an end in itself or a long-term goal, but rather an economic stepping stone working toward other professional projects in different sectors: Alex uses tourism to earn money to pursue her career as a politician in China.

Today, for many, tourism is at the center of their daily life. Seven of my participants rely exclusively on tourism for their livelihoods and tourism is also finding its place at the heart of the traditional lives of ethnic minorities. Most of my ten participants either belong to an ethnic minority or employ staff from these communities.

However, the balance between tourism and traditional work can be challenging. Two participants continue to farm alongside tourism jobs, and others assist their families on days off. Sana, a Dao woman, explained how her life has changed, moving from a traditional farming routine to office work with tourists from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. She appreciates this more comfortable lifestyle, but her family still grows tea and cinnamon, maintaining a connection to their cultural roots.

4.1.2 Motivations for Entering the Tourism Sector

My participants' motivations for working in tourism were diverse, often centered on sharing and human exchange and not only on financial benefits.

As a matter of fact, four mentioned the pursuit of income and a better life while another one worked in tourism to afford her master's degree. Many explained their involvement in tourism as a way to proudly share the local ethnic culture with visitors. For example, Ron, a White Hmong, opened a homestay to bring visitors into the Hmong culture and traditional music. A few added that they were drawn to tourism not only to preserve their culture but also to meet people from various horizons.

Comfort is also important : after three years managing a homestay in Sapa, Dori moved to Ha Giang for its peacefulness and reopened a homestay.

Some found themselves integrated into the tourism industry almost by chance; one woman attributed her job to fate, explaining that she was offered a position simply because she spoke English.

4.1.3 The « Easyriders » - The Backbone of Ha Giang Tourism

They are to the Ha Giang Loop what sherpas are to Mount Everest – a critical pillar supporting the tourism industry. They are often from ethnic minorities and guide most travelers as only a handful of tourists attempt it independently. This high-demand, well-paid job offers year-round stability, especially for those with less education. Some participants raised concerns about some companies that are cutting off on easyriders' salaries influenced by Hanoi agencies taking large commissions. Unfortunately, this exploitation shows their limited agency.

Among my participants, one worked as an easy rider and another as a local tour guide, offering firsthand insight into these dynamics that will be further discussed in this paper.

4.1.4 Locals' Agency

Regarding locals' agency in tourism, opinions were challenging to capture because of the different understandings of the question and the awareness on the matter. Some interviewees felt local control was limited because of lack of education and understanding of tourism, but also their fear of large projects. Only a single participant spontaneously advocated for ethnic minorities' choice. Others either didn't fully grasp the question or couldn't be asked due to language barriers.

At the heart of the issue of local decision-making power is also the competition with external actors especially large tourism businesses based in Hanoi, which are increasingly aware of Ha Giang's tourism potential. According to several participants, who feel powerless, there are serious current and future concerns about the race to acquire land. For locals, especially those with fewer financial resources, it can be harder to develop their own tourism businesses on their land. When companies from Hanoi buy land, it is often to build large cement structures. Several participants voiced their disapproval of this kind of construction, wishing to preserve local architectural styles. This reflects a significant lack of agency in shaping tourism development, a situation even more critical for ethnic minorities, since it is mostly their lands that are being affected.

4.1.5 Gender Issues

Although gender was not the central focus of this research, several moments during fieldwork revealed how deeply gender dynamics shape who participates in tourism, under

what conditions, and at what cost. Gender imbalances were mentioned spontaneously by two female participants. Nina explained that women often juggle childcare, household work, and farming, while men typically focus on fieldwork and socializing, limiting women's opportunities, especially in education.

As Clara pointed out, a crucial issue is the lack of women in tourism, the industry being built for men. Her male employer acknowledged this problem and decided together to create a women- focused TO company, which is a novel initiative in Ha Giang.

It's worth noting that those asking for money in exchange of an "authentic" photo along Ha Giang's winding roads are mostly women and children, especially from ethnic minorities.
Of the six women I interviewed, only one belonged to an ethnic minority group – suggesting a limited inclusion of these women in the tourism sector. This could partly explain why some resort to begging.

Another observation points to the exoticization of women and children. As the most vulnerable groups, they also align most closely with the tourist's imagined "authentic" image: laughing irresistibly cute children; women embodying exotic beauty with their colorful attire and flower bouquets. At several Ha Giang Loop hotspots, I witnessed women and children commodifying themselves for tourist photos.

This raises critical questions about gender roles in tourism: men often work as guides or drivers, occupying higher-skilled positions, while most women are relegated to the background as cleaners or cooks, placed in more passive roles. Children, meanwhile, are naturally even more vulnerable.

Though gender dynamics are not explored in depth in this study, this issue is not only relevant but critical, and deserves to be investigated as a standalone subject in future researches.

4.1.6 Perceptions of Tourism

Beyond the tangible changes in daily life, participants also shared how they emotionally and personally perceive the impact of tourism – from feelings of pride and gratitude to emerging concerns about its long-term effects.

All participants described tourism as a positive force, and some felt it has been particularly beneficial for ethnic minorities, creating jobs and opportunities to broaden their horizons, and meeting new people.

Many are grateful about what tourism is bringing to their daily life and personal fulfillment.

> *" So many people come to Ha Giang to follow me, I enjoy so much, I am very lucky."*
>
> *-John*

Indeed, tourism helped Alex and Tanya to learn languages, gain confidence, and connect with the world.

Tourism also nourishes hopes and dreams : Nathan asks for more tourists in his village because this would attract government support for better roads and improved homes and thinks about all the projects he will realize thanks tot tourism.

Dori, saw tourism as more than just a source of income: to her, it is a way to create better futures for children and open up to the world.

However, some participants expressed concerns, fears and acknowledged the downsides of tourism that will be mentioned later in this paper.

This section has shown how tourism has brought significant and positive changes to many lives along the Ha Giang Loop – offering not only a path out of poverty and agricultural hardship, but also the hope of a better future. Yet, beneath this optimism, certain challenges have begun to emerge.

4.2 Education: the Root Challenge

Education, especially English proficiency, emerged as one of the most critical challenges for participants, deserving its own section. While some local people are still speaking their dialect, English has become essential to access the better life tourism can provide.

4.2.1 English - The Holy Grail

English came up right away when I asked about challenges: five participants expressed frustration or regret about not speaking it better.

Ron said with frustration how it is limiting his ability to share his culture. During our interview, he took pleasure to tell me the story of his people through Google Translate. English is also simple a way to connect: Sana, from the Dao ethnic minority talked for her family and explained their struggle to communicate with tourists despite their friendliness and desire to connect.

Not speaking it can also be a barrier in their professional daily life: John sometimes face difficulties to understand his customers' needs.

For the lucky ones who can speak it, like Noah, it represents the bridge to a better future.

"English changed my life." - Noah

The best jobs in tourist as tour guide or receptionist, are reserved for those who speak it. Without English or a degree, incomes can be as low as 5 million VND per month (around €170), a significant disadvantage even in Vietnam as noted by Tanya. She was offered a tourism job due to her English skills, a privilege in Ha Giang.

"I didn't choose a tourism job, tourism chose me." - Tanya

4.2.2 Training and Community Efforts

The lack of English speakers in Ha Giang has its roots in the region's limited resources despite government's effort. Indeed, two participants noted the lack of native English teachers. As a result, people within the industry often take the initiative. Tanya holds evening English classes open not only for her employees but to any local drivers of the city. Some welcomed native-English speaker improve staff English skills and teaching. This allows to make the industry more accessible to others, and thus spreading its positive economic impacts throughout the community demonstrating the important potential of locals' agency.

Clara, an American living in Ha Giang, became teaching English, mostly to young men, reflecting how the tourism industry is male dominated and closing the vicious circle of non-accessibility to the tourism industry for women.

4.2.3 Tourism's Education Dilemma: Opportunity or Obstacle?

From a broader perspective, tourism's impact on education is also significant and should not be overlooked.

A common and urgent concern that emerged was the impact of tourists giving money to children.

Several participants worried this practice encourages children to skip school, leading them to a « miserable life ». Clara noted that for some families, children begging has become a source of income. From my observations, I saw children asking for money and mothers with babies on their backs waiting for tourists to take photos and tip them. I witnessed tourists giving children candies and money – unaware of the long-term harm, and paradoxically, keeping them away from the education that could offer them a better future. Others consider tourism as a lever for children's education: Dori believes it provides children with access to English and future job opportunities, keeping them from labor in the mountains and Clara mentioned one family that moved to the city to ensure their child could attend school.

4.2.4 Access to Education: A Divided Reality

While opinions are somewhat divided, access to education is also uneven.

On one hand, the four Kinh participants had better access to education, went to university and had English courses, often in Hanoi. In contrast, ethnic minorities had fewer opportunities, with some not attending school or learning English by themselves. One Dao participant learned English independently, while another paid high fees to secure English classes for her children, thanks to her income from tourism. However, Nathan noted that some families in the mountains still struggle to pay even modest school fees (1-2 million VND per year - €35-70). To add to that, long distances and limited family support for children of the mountains make education even less accessible, as mentioned by Nina and as I testified myself during fieldwork. It's worth noting that population from the mountains are almost exclusively from ethnic minorities.

4.2.5 Self-Learning and Digital Resources

To fill this gap, locals find resources elsewhere. Some used digital media to learn English; Nathan and Clara's students (before taking classes) credited TikTok, YouTube, and movies for helping them develop language skills to become tour guides. This trend highlights a lack of accessible English courses within the local education system.

Conversely, Tanya invested in private English lessons using tourism income to finance her education. She also plans to study French to broaden her opportunities.

4.2.6 Towards Better English Skills

This being said, locals are resourceful and draw on their strong sense of community to find their way in the linguistically demanding world of tourism. Many hope for more English classes for both children and adults, particularly drivers. To address this, Clara suggested creating an English center with a more structured teaching approach.

Of the 10 participants, one was a native English speaker (American), six demonstrated what I would describe as average to good English proficiency (four Kinh and two from ethnic minority groups), and three had limited English (two ethnic minorities and one Kinh). These assessments are based on my personal impressions during our interactions and interviews, and I acknowledge the subjectivity of this evaluation, as I am not a native English speaker myself. All were involved in tourism.

Lack of English skills and limited educational opportunities emerged as the biggest challenges linked to tourism in Ha Giang. While this is a challenge common to all in the region, findings showed that the educational gap between remote ethnic minorities and

Kinh people remains important.

4.3 Ha Giang's Tourism Identity and Representation

The identity of Ha Giang and its tourism landscape is complex, evolving, and multifaceted, shaped by its landscapes, people, and the rapid growth of the Loop. This section captures how participants perceive Ha Giang's tourism identity, reflecting both cultural pride and modern challenges.

4.3.1 Genesis of Tourism

Ha Giang's tourism boom was recent, with most growth happening post-COVID (2022-2023) as described by most participants. Some linked earlier signs to the 2010 UNESCO designation, and one of them to the 2023 award naming Ha Giang Asia's Leading Emerging Destination. Tourist demographics have shifted too: interviewees mentioned that international visitors arrived first, followed by a rise in domestic tourism. Today, locals must cater to both groups – with different expectations and travel habits – requiring rapid adaptation in how they work, engage, and structure daily life.

The role of social media, especially TikTok and YouTube was and is still crucial in promoting Ha Giang's landscapes, contributing to its rapid popularity noted several participants. The Ha Giang Loop's identity begins in Hanoi, the starting point for foreigners. It's heavily promoted throughout the city, especially in the touristy Old Quarter, making it unmissable. Some stated that Hanoi largely shapes the narrative and flow of tourism to Ha Giang, raising concerns about local control and agency over how tourism develops on the ground.

4.3.2 The Ha Giang Loop: Fragmented Identities

As the Ha Giang Loop experiences tourism since recently and has many different options to offer, the region is not settle on a single type of tourism .As a matter of fact, the Loop's party-oriented identity with tourists coming to party and sing karaoke is growing, as I observed on social media - and on the ground - and as a few participants confirmed. Clara highlighted that some companies market the Loop as a party destination on TikTok, attracting younger tourists.

Yet, Ha Giang is also about authenticity and cultural connection. Ron shares his Hmong culture, playing traditional music each night for his guests. I had the chance to experience this, watching him share his culture with pride and passion, creating a genuinely authentic experience. Others, like Dori offers cooking classes and village tours, emphasizing the desire of locals and visitors to connect together.

This is also how locals display Ha Giang's identity: an authentic, intimate adventure to experience with locals where traditions and ethnic minorities are at the heart of it.

Nathan takes visitors to small villages for charity trips during the low season, while Sana's village attracts a few tourists interested in traditional tea-making. One participant argued that Ha Giang city itself is becoming a destination, with more tourists spending time in the city. From my observations, I saw some travelers coming not for the Loop, but to hike, relax, and enjoy nature, suggesting a potential diversification in Ha Giang's tourism identity.

4.3.3 Tourism Options in Ha Giang

While the tourism market in Ha Giang is recent, it is strongly exploited by various type of companies.

All my participants worked in small-medium companies, although large operators also play a significant role in shaping the Loop's tourism landscape. Several mentioned big groups with concerns, describing them as profit-focused with lower quality services. Nathan and Tanya specifically pointed out the « big three » : Mama, Bong, and Jasmin, which often dominate the market and offer low-cost packages in large groups, often at the expense of quality and worker welfare.

Indeed, participants raised an important issue : these companies often underpay their Easyriders, most of whom are from ethnic minorities, creating economic and social imbalances. This reflects a broader ethical issue, as these companies can undermine local businesses that prioritize fair wages and safety.

In contrast, smaller companies like Noah's, prioritize safety, personal experiences, and ethical practices. They limit group sizes to ensure better guest experiences and fair treatment for staff. Similarly, Nathan and Thuy works in structures that caps groups at less than 10 people per group, reflecting a commitment to sustainability and quality over quantity.

While intimacy in tourism is often achieved through smaller group experiences, another crucial factor comes into play: gender. As mentioned earlier, Clara recently founded a women-led company to balance the sector dominated by men.

> *"Tourism is very new here and right now, it's really built for men."* - Clara

Her company aims to challenge this by creating opportunities for women travelers and local female workers, marking a significant cultural shift in Ha Giang's tourism landscape.

4.3.4 What Makes Ha Giang, Ha Giang

It is essential to understand the very essence of Ha Giang in order to grasp how the region fits into the tourism sector. Even more importantly, it allows us to recognize what matters most to the local population, therefore what should be valued and preserved amid the turbulence created by tourism.

When invited to share what they appreciated most about Ha Giang, nine out of 10 participants mentioned the people and their friendliness. From my observations, it is also what takes your heart as a tourist when you are in Ha Giang. Secondly come the natural landscapes as a key element for locals. Food, atmosphere, fresh air, safety were subsequently described by interviewees.

Noah summed it up well, noting that visiting Ha Giang is "not only to see the view" but also to "bring something for weak people", reflecting the human side of tourism experiences.

4.4 Infrastructure and Institutional Support

As tourism continues to expand in Ha Giang, questions of infrastructure and institutional support have become increasingly central.

Before the post-COVID tourism boom, Ha Giang's infrastructure was limited and of average quality, one participant noted.. As tourism grows, several mentioned increasing attention from the government to this part of the region investing in infrastructure and repairing roads along the Loop. While this benefits both tourists and local communities around the Ha Giang Loop the contrast is apparently striking with the western side of Ha Giang, where the it does not pass, and therefore remains neglected, Nina pointed out.

Infrastructure and institutional support can be seen through community aspect, as its very strong in Ha Giang and in Vietnam in general. Clara mentioned a community-based tourism initiative in Quan Ba district, in the village of Nam Dam where the government funded traditional Dao homestays with the condition they build traditional houses. Owners contribute a small community fee per booking, ensuring benefits are more evenly distributed. Visitors are not supporting one family but a whole community. When I visited this village, I found beautifully preserved homestays but felt it lacked the promotion it deserved.

Overall, many called for stronger tourism institutions, government supervision and regulations especially regarding fairer salaries for easy riders and ethnic minorities, sometimes paid poorly by tour operators. Restrictions for large groups, improving roads, provide safety training for drivers and to stabilize competition between companies also came up. More importantly, two participants urged local authorities to address the children begging issue.

Locals seem divided about stating the quality of development in the region but overall call for more regulations, organizations and committees reflecting a broader need for structured support. Most participants were not aware of which institutions and organizations exist, revealing a lack of transparency and public awareness from the government.

4.5 Concerns and Challenges

While education remains one of the most significant challenges in Ha Giang, participants also raised numerous other concerns, reflecting a mix of environmental, cultural, and social issues.

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4.5.1 The Sa Pa Syndrome

Sa Pa came up frequently in conversations, often as a reference point, and many times a cautionary one, when participants reflected on the future of tourism in Ha Giang.

Sa Pa emerged from the discourse of nine out of 10 of the participants as both a warning and a comparison for Ha Giang's tourism future. Sa Pa, in Lào Cai province, experienced a massive tourism boom, leading to rapid development but also significant environmental and cultural loss. Nina described deforestation and the replacement of traditional tilt houses with cement buildings as part of this transformation.

Several participants voiced concern about land being sold to outside companies - especially Hanoi - often at unfair prices, and drew a parallel with what ethnic minorities experienced in Sa Pa. Dori lamented that group-focused investors are prioritizing profit over sustainability, risking Ha Giang's cultural identity.

> *"I think to earn money is good, but if you only earn quick money then you lose the culture."* - Noah

Others concerns were expressed about the difficulty of balancing authenticity with profit, or the lack of local agency, feeling too small to influence the direction of tourism, mirroring the exponential tourism growth of Sa Pa with little conservation of what's truly « authentic ». While recognizing Sa Pa's tourist appeal, Tanya worried Ha Giang would become a similar overdeveloped « Sa Pa number 2" within a decade.

Indeed, and somewhat paradoxically given the general excitement around tourism, a sense of concern about over-tourism and its impact on nature was expressed by four participants.

Dori felt powerless to act, while Sana pointed to the difficult choice between preservation and a better life. This illustrates the growing dilemma locals face as they must often choose economic survival over the landscapes and natural environment they deeply cherish.

4.5.2 Cultural and Environmental Challenges

As tourism grows in Ha Giang, environmental concerns are becoming increasingly visible, both in what participants shared and in what I observed during fieldwork.

Indeed, four participants raised environmental concerns mentioning deforestation, landslides linked to hotel construction, or pollution from littering. One participant blamed party tourists, while another noted that locals also contribute to the problem, littering being a « Vietnamese bad habit » and is satisfied that tourism is gradually changing mindsets.

From my observations, plastic waste is a significant issue, with few trash bins and little awareness about recycling, and a total causal relation with tourism is sometimes difficult to establish with certainty. However, one participant noted that some local companies are starting to recycle, a small but promising step.

Noise is another concern, with three respondents mentioning the karaoke problem. Loud music can disrupt entire villages, especially for ethnic minorities who wake up early to work in the fields. This issue can be explained with the struggle locals face to confront or correct tourists, fearing it will hurt their businesses, Nina argued.

From my observations, this is a significant problem closely linked to the party identity of the Ha Giang Loop, unlikely to fade without regulation.

> *"This is not Ha Giang. All of this is destroying Ha Giang slowly and slowly."* - Nina

4.5.3 Social and Economic Challenges

Beyond environmental concerns, several participants raised socio-economic challenges linked to tourism. The sector in Ha Giang is still largely male-dominated (although currently changing), as Clara pointed out. For example, easyriders often sleep altogether in the same shared dorm, making it uncomfortable for women.

From my observations, the sector is still largely run by and composed of men, but I saw more female easyriders on the Loop in 2025 than during my first visit in 2023; suggesting slow progress.

Tourism also excludes certain groups. Tanya mentioned that elderly people struggle to join the industry because they cannot drive or speak English, limiting their opportunities.

Another interviewee noted that easyriders often sacrifice family time for their jobs, hoping for a future where they can bring their children along driving cars instead of motorbikes.

Large tour groups are a source of critics from many, creating safety risks with high-speed driving on narrow roads putting locals and children going to school at risk.

An important challenge for small-medium companies to settle in Ha Giang's fierce tourism industry is marketing and promotion with two participants lacking of visibility and working on attracting more customers through social media.

4.5.4 Inequalities and Competition

Tourism in Ha Giang does not benefit everyone equally and competition has grown stronger. Two participants mentioned the unequal distribution of tourism benefits, noting that only the most popular locations earn significant income.

Villages located outside of the loop like Sana's, that offers unique Dao culture and tea-making experiences, struggle to attract visitors.

Some also expressed frustration over the intense competition in the tourism industry. Noah mentioned that large companies often delete negative reviews, something unfair to both tourists and smaller businesses that follow the rules, especially regarding the importance that tourists attach to reviews to make their choices nowadays.

As mentioned earlier, a striking inequality is underpaid easyriders working in big companies.

4.5.5 Uncertain Future

When the conversation turned to what lies ahead, participants expressed a mix of hope and concern. One feared that as education improves, ethnic minorities may leave the easyrider profession for better jobs, potentially undermining a core part of Ha Giang's tourism industry. Another had previously worked in Sa Pa, and worried that Ha Giang would become equally crowded and commercialized.

While these concerns and challenges are real and urgent, many participants shared inspiring ideas to envision a better tourism future that addresses these issues and is shaped on their own terms.

4.6 Hopes and Future Visions

Many participants shared ambitious plans for the future, often tied to tourism.

Nina, who recently opened a homestay and tour company, hopes to preserve Ha Giang's cultural richness and protect its environment by planting 10 trees for each customer to prevent landslides. She also dreams of creating a girls' academy in the mountains, taught by women, to empower the next generation.

In the same vein, Clara envisions a more inclusive tourism industry with more women in leadership, starting with the launch of her own tour operator.

Nathan is saving money to open his own homestay, wishes to welcome more tourists to small companies like his.

Charity also fuels many hopes. Nathan already supports his community by donating clothes and food. He hopes to encourage tourists to donate 5,000-10,000 VND (less than €0.50) per visit to provide local children with warm jackets and school supplies. Tanya organizes children's days and conducts projects to bring electricity to remote villages.

Finally, John, local driver hopes tourism will always be part of his life,

> *"So that we will always have jobs, better incomes, and less hardship."* -John

Together, these findings reveal the complexity of Ha Giang's tourism landscape, where the pursuit of a better life has continuously reshaped the Loop's identity. While tourism has driven development–especially in the eastern region–challenges around fair pay, access to English education, over tourism, and environmental pressure are becoming increasingly urgent. Ha Giang is full of creative and ambitious minds, and these insights shed light on how tourism shapes their lives and aspirations.

Despite government efforts, participants highlighted the need for stronger institutional support to make sustainable solutions a reality.

The findings also underline key disparities: Kinh people tend to occupy higher-paying roles and business ownership, while ethnic minorities often engage with tourism as a way to share their culture and improve everyday life. These dynamics will be explored further in the following discussion.

5. Discussion: Unpacking Power and Building a Sustainable Tourism Future in Ha Giang

The success of the Loop is still a relatively new phenomenon that must be better apprehended and understood now to allow a more stable and sustainable future for the region and its populations.

5.1 Economic Sustainability First

Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019) advocate for a local-centered tourism model, prioritizing communities first, then tourists. However, my findings suggest this is not yet the reality in Ha Giang. As I testified with my participants, English is taught primarily for tourists, not for locals, reflecting a tourist-first approach. Participants also mentioned the lack of local agency making true community-based tourism challenging.

Reflecting on this and my own assumptions, I realized we often view tourism through a Western lens, focusing on its negative impacts. Nonetheless, for many in the Global South, tourism is a lifeline, providing jobs, opportunities, and a better quality of life. Participants in this study were happy to share their stories, and their enthusiasm for tourism challenged my preconceptions.

Ha Giang is not Venice or Barcelona —it has long been an isolated and poor region, where tourism has become one of the only industries offering a path to a better life. While the downsides of tourism may still be emerging, it's important to recognize that we cannot expect the local population to focus on those impacts when economic survival remains the priority.

It may currently be in the Euphoria or Apathy stages of Doxey's levels of host irritation (Mowforth & Munt, 2015), where local people are still welcoming and optimistic about tourism's potential. Perhaps the conversation about degrowth is premature here, though it may become relevant as the region's tourism industry matures.

5.1.1 Power Relations

Amoamo (2011) describes how tourism can be a platform for cultural performance and self-representation, a concept reflected in Ron's power to preserve, share and affirm Hmong culture through live music. She also discussed power dynamics; in Ha Giang they remain uneven, with ethnic minorities that are often underpaid and marginalized within the tourism industry.

Urry's tourist gaze (1990) was not reflected in my participants' discourse but it does from my observations with the commodification of women and children in exchange of pictures in hotspots. In this case, tourist retain control over gaze and interaction.

Participants also expressed powerlessness over land sales, noise pollution, or large companies showing how external forces can shape local life without always local consent.

At the heart of where power stands is mobility, this research is a reminder that tourism is often a choice and a privilege for Westerners and urban middle-upper class Vietnamese that are traveling to Ha Giang. This asymmetry is transparent when it comes to see who gets to move freely, and who has the choice to move. To break out of their sedentary lifestyle, when they want to, the locals in Ha Giang have to make many efforts, and for them the tourist industry is not always an option and doing tourism themselves is rarely considered. Very few participants, thanks to their inclusion in the sector, have begun to travel to discover their region, but visiting other countries is a more distant project.

Those who make decisions, take benefits and adjust how the sector is operating often stem from broader structural inequalities that can reveal postcolonial dynamics.

5.1.2 Postcolonial Tourism Geographies

Women and children from ethnic minorities are sometimes exoticized and consumed as cultural « products ». Grimwood et al. (2015) emphasize the importance of local voices in shaping tourism responsibility, yet my findings reveal that responsibility is often defined by outsiders, creating a post-colonial dynamic where locals are disempowered. Westerners giving money to children and women to help them perpetuates a « white savior complex » while it is, in reality, keeping children away from school, causing more harm than good. Discovering that locals were aware of these practices and saw it as one of the biggest problem tourism brought demonstrates their lack of agency in designing tourism. Locals should dictate the rules, not tourists.

Mowforth and Munt (2015) highlight the difference between involvement and control in tourism. While some locals, as homestay owners, have a degree of agency, others, like easyriders, are involved but lack real control over their working conditions and income. This imbalance indicates a broader economic dynamic where large operators dominate the market, often prioritizing profit over sustainability.

In that logic, Hanoi-based agencies are imposing an external model of value, development and behavior to capitalize on Ha Giang and its people.

Intertwined in these dynamics are race and ethnicity. Despite Ha Giang's region being composed by 87% of ethnic minorities, it seems to have a symbolic hierarchy with mostly Kinh people occupying central roles with more agency. They often own or manage businesses, while ethnic minorities -when they are included in the sector- work as easyriders, cleaners, cooks, with sometimes little control over their working conditions relegated of being the « face » of Ha Giang tourism.

Nonetheless, while ethnic minorities that are not included in the tourism sector are further marginalized, tourism also gave a chance to some other ethnic people to have a better life.

5.1.3 Intersectionality

The intersection of ethnicity and gender is crucial in this study that demonstrates - in the participants sample as well as in the results - that women from ethnic minorities were doubly discriminated against. They have fewer opportunities to enter the industry, to get an education, and to be represented as active agents of tourism in the same way as male ethnic minority easyriders or local guides.

However, as mentioned earlier, it is about to change.

5.1.4 Environment is Calling

Environmental sustainability was mentioned only by some of the participants, who often prioritize economic survival over environmental concerns. However, the urgency to address these issues is growing as tourism expands. Simple infrastructure changes, like trash bins and recycling, could mitigate these impacts, but awareness and resources must be mobilized from the government.

5.2 Education is Power

Tourism is not just an economic activity : it's a field of power relations and findings demonstrated that education is at its core.

Foucault's (1980) concept of knowledge as power is evident in Ha Giang, where English is both a gateway to economic mobility and a barrier for those who lack it. However, Ron was not speaking English but use the knowledge of its culture to have power over traditional tourism narratives.

Cohen and Cooper (1986) and Prachanant (2012) highlighted the economic pressure for locals to learn tourists 'languages to access tourism jobs, which aligns closely with my findings. In Ha Giang, English is both a gateway to economic mobility and a barrier for those without education.

Maggi and Padurean (2006) also describe English as the "lingua franca" of tourism, a view shared by many of my participants. However, access to higher tourism education in English (HTEE) remains concentrated in wealthier regions. Although this article is a bit dated, it's still operating through more opportunities in Hanoi, while more remote areas like Ha Giang continue to struggle with educational inequalities, further marginalizing local communities.

5.3 Ha Giang's Lack of Data

Figures in Trinh's (2024) research reflect the persistent poverty in Ha Giang, as described by Noah, particularly among ethnic minorities facing high dropout rates and limited resources. While some studies (Leng et al., 2021, Nguyen & Tran, 2024) call for community-based tourism, the core issue remains the lack of resources to support sustainable models. Without these foundations, community-based tourism cannot truly succeed.

From my participants' perspective, the government is starting to support tourism development, but there is a clear need for more resources, regulations, and local control. The absence of reliable data on the Ha Giang Loop further complicates this, highlighting the need for more and longer research on the ground to understand its impacts and potential.

From my side, more figures about tourism in the Ha Giang Loop would have helped to provide more context and understanding on the current situation, however the Ha Giang Provincial Statistics office website was unaccessible. A few extra months would have allowed me to take more time on-site to obtain figures or documents to help me.

5.4 Limitations and Critical Thinking

5.4.1 Gender Disparity

Despite female-inclined participants sample, there is a considerable lack of women in the tourism industry around the Ha Giang Loop tourism industry. As it has been pointed out by one of my participants, the tourism is mostly built for men, and there's an urgent need for more inclusivity in this industry if we do not want to further marginalize women from having a better life and more equal chances. This issue is sadly reflecting in my sample that includes only one woman from ethnic minority.

5.4.2 Participants Sample

Unfortunately, I did not manage to capture perspectives from locals that are not included in the tourism sector which represent an important bias for my research. Maybe tourism is only seen as a good thing in the eyes of people who are part of it. The main reason was the strong language barrier, that would probably have been possible to overcome if I had several months, or a year, to conduct this research.

I included participants that did not grow up in Ha Giang region, while being not as knowledgeable about the evolution of tourists, they provided different insights.

5.4.3 Positionality

An important bias to acknowledge in this study is my positionality. Indeed, I am a Western tourist that has potential power to publish a research about the Ha Giang Loop and tourism.

Considering the region's reliance on tourism, it is understandable that local participants may be hesitant to discuss its negative impacts or voice support for slowing or limiting its growth.

5.4.4 Data Collection and Time

Some interviews took place in neutral settings like cafés and restaurants, while others were conducted at participants' workplaces. I also slept at two of my participants homestays. These aspects could represent potential biases to the answers given.

Without an interpreter, I relied on Google Translate for participants less comfortable with English. While this avoided the influence of a subjective intermediary, it sometimes led to misunderstandings or simplified conversations. Some questions were skipped or adjusted depending on the context or comfort of the participant. Since Vietnamese differs greatly from English, participants may have shortened their answers or expressed their thoughts differently when speaking, an important consideration when assessing the accuracy of the findings.

And then, of course, there is time. Exploring such a complex and important topic within the constraints of a master's thesis was ambitious, and a longer timeframe would have allowed for a deeper and more nuanced understanding.

5.5 Towards Sustainability

The future of tourism in Ha Giang depends not only on continued development but on ensuring that this growth is fair, inclusive, and rooted in long-term sustainability.

In Ha Giang, online reviews are critical for travelers' choices, and therefore for businesses as well. However, one of my participants explained how some large companies delete negative reviews, creating a skewed picture of quality and trustworthiness. This unfairly advantages big operators, while smaller businesses that play by the rules are sometimes struggling to have many customers. Given how essential reviews are to local livelihoods, regulations on the matter is crucial for truly sustainable tourism.

Although this research focuses on the Ha Giang Loop, conversations with locals highlighted the potential of diversifying tourism beyond it. One participant, for instance, mentioned that tourists from Hanoi visit her community to observe tea harvesting and buy local tea. Agritourism could open new opportunities for ethnic minorities outside the Loop and help distribute tourism benefits more evenly. It may also offer visitors, especially non-Asian travelers, a richer cultural experience while supporting local livelihoods.

While many of my participants noted that the government is starting to regulate and develop infrastructure around the Loop, many called for more organizations, committees, and regulations. I believe the core of the challenge lies here, closely linked with education. The government must take action and foster synergies across sectors and nations to create a sustainable tourism industry that prioritizes the people of Ha Giang, as well as its environment and economy. After all, what truly makes Ha Giang, Ha Giang is its people.

5.6 Future Areas for Research

Future areas for research include first studies about the Ha Giang Loop to acknowledge the current tourism dynamics.

Furthermore, it should imperatively incorporate ethnic minority women and their inclusion in the tourism industry as well as their access to education. A special attention should be dedicated to people living in the region that are not included in the tourism sector like farmers. Other studies as the role of social media in shaping tourism along the loop as well as longitudinal studies on tourism development would be of great utility.

6. Conclusion

This research has shown that Ha Giang holds remarkable potential for tourism, thanks to its breathtaking landscapes, rich ethnic diversity, traditions, music, agritourism, and meaningful human exchanges. In the eastern part of the region, tourism is booming and has opened new paths for local communities striving for a better life. Many have become homestay owners, tour operators, easyriders, and café owners – roles that enable them to support their families, nurture new ambitions, and contribute to their communities.

Yet, poverty remains present, and tourism risks deepening inequalities, especially for ethnic minorities. Participants expressed concerns as the lack of access to education - particularly English courses – that continues to exclude non-English speakers from a sector that could otherwise empower them. While tourism is still in its early phase, negative impacts are beginning to appear, though many locals remain overwhelmingly positive and hopeful.

To ensure a more inclusive and sustainable future, government support and regulation will be crucial – not only to protect the environment and manage growth but also to strengthen education and build local capacity. People are ready for change; they just need resources and guidance.

Sustainable tourism must start by listening. The people I met were creative, insightful, and full of dreams that deserve to be realized. Their voices should shape the future of Ha Giang.

Further research should continue to explore the evolution of the Ha Giang Loop, the inclusion of ethnic minority women in tourism, and the experiences of those not yet touched by the industry. These voices, too, are essential.

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Appendix A - Interview Guide

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself ? (Name, age, ethnicity, village, occupation)

2. How long have you lived in this area ?

3. What do you enjoy most about living here ?

4. How would you describe your daily life in your community ?

5. What are your main sources of livelihood ?

6. Have you noticed an increase in tourists over the years ? If so, when did you start noticing the change ?

7. How are you involved in tourism ?

8. What led you to work in the tourism sector ? Do you feel everyone in the community has the same opportunities to work in tourism ?

9. How has tourism changed your daily life ? What opportunities did it bring for you ?

10. Have you noticed any changes in your community's traditions and culture due to tourism ?

11. Are they any challenges you and your community face due to tourism ?

12. What benefits tourism have brought to your community ? Do you think they are equally distributed ?

13. Do you feel that your community has a say in how tourism is developing here ?

14. If you could change something, what would you change in how tourism is taking place along the Ha Giang Loop ?

15. From your point of view, do you have any ideas in how tourism can better support locals and their culture ?

16. How do you imagine the future of tourism in your region ?