

Tourists beef about Vietnam ancient town's entry ticket, authorities justify it

Hoi An Tourism

A top local official has defended the entry fee imposed on visitors to Hoi An, saying it is needed to raise funds for preservation, but promised to soon improve the way it is collected following protests from tourists.

Nguyen Su, the town party committee chief, told Thanh Nien Wednesday he would meet with other authorities to discuss measures to deal with the complaints, and promised to brief the media by weekend on the outcome. He admitted that the unfriendly attitude of some security guards who harassed visitors on the streets needs to be corrected. It is understandable that tourists who have bought the ticket and are staying in Hoi An are annoyed when asked for it each time they return to town, he said. "We told the guards Tuesday to let individual tourists go if they say they have bought the ticket."

In the past week tourists have complained of being harassed or even chased down the streets by guards for the fee. Vo Phung, director of the Hoi An Culture and Sports Center, told Tuoi Tre (Youth) newspaper Tuesday that it was because of their lack of English that the guards have been unable to clearly explain about the new, tightened ticket policy, causing misunderstanding among tourists.

He added that others with good English have been sent out to explain to visitors. Su pointed out that visitors have been required to buy tickets to enter Hoi An since 1995 and the current rates (VND120,000, or US\$6 for foreigners and VND80,000 for Vietnamese) have been in force since 2012.



A ticket allows them to see the town itself and entitles a foreigner to visit five tourist spots and locals, three. In the past ticket booths were placed at some spots, but earlier this month they were put up at every entrance to town to prevent tour guides from bringing in their clients without paying the fee. But with new checkpoints and blue-shirted guardians ready to physically bar people, many visitors vented their anger on tourist forums. "It is right to collect the entrance fees as 85 percent of the revenue will be used to restore ancient houses of local residents," Su said. "These houses form a group of relics. If money is not spent on their restoration, they will collapse."

Hoi An Town in the coastal province of Quang Nam, recognized by UNESCO as a world heritage site in 1999, is an alluring mix of heritage buildings with a unique blend of local and foreign influences, colorful lanterns, craft villages, beautiful beaches, river cruises, and delicious food.

Explaining the reason of setting up more ticket booths, Su said the first purpose is to ensure a fair competition since some tour companies pay for tickets for their clients while others fail to do so and let them just walk around the streets without discovering the vestiges. The visitors then return home and say Hoi An has nothing to offer, he said. Besides, just around 30 percent of the two million of visitors coming to Hoi An every year buy tickets, depriving the town of revenues worth dozens of billions of dong, he said. 'Short-sighted'

Some travel companies agreed with the entrance fee, saying it makes sense for historic sites to levy such a charge to help with their upkeep and provide facilities. "The issue is that tourists are being harassed, and in some cases chased down the street, by aggressive, unfriendly staff who want to charge them for simply walking on the streets," Tim Russell, a Briton who lived and worked in Vietnam for 10 years and is now the director of sales and marketing for the Remote Lands travel agency in Thailand, said. "In many cases the tourists are simply wandering into town for dinner and are being asked to pay VND120,000 each just to get to a restaurant or bar. Even expats who live and work in Hoi An are being targeted," he said in an email to Thanh Nien News.

Mark Bowyer, publisher of the independent online tourism site Rusty Compass, said raising money to preserve and improve Hoi An's heritage offerings is essential and the charge is reasonable for those visiting the historic houses, assembly halls and museums. "But placing uniformed security at all the town's entrances will make it feel more like a prison camp than a heritage site. "By all accounts, the heavy handedness of the implementation is as bad as the policy itself. "It's breathtakingly short-sighted to punish travellers who spend millions each year in the old town's tailors, restaurants and bars with a \$6 tax for the right to part with their cash. There will be less cash in all Hoi An's coffers if this rule stays."

Outrage

Over the past week tourists said they were surprised and disappointed with not only the aggressive guards but also the charge itself given that many people just wanted to walk, shop, or eat in the town.

"It took just a week to disgrace Hoi An worldwide," Mario Piazza said on Another side of Vietnam, a Facebook page. Andy Newton, a New Zealander currently living in Ho Chi Minh City, said on the same page that many foreigners have been to Hoi An more than once and really love the place, and have supported it with their tourist dollars. "But now something that we used to be able to do for free - simply walking around - we would have to pay for, with no additional services or benefits attached. It's a short sighted money grab. Feel free to waste your own money or let yourself be ripped off," Newton said. Local residents said they themselves were sometimes annoyed by the guards.

A woman who owns a shop on Tran Phu Street in the town said her foreign husband was shocked when asked for tickets on the way to home after crossing the An Hoi bridge to have breakfast. Hoi An residents do not carry identification cards all the time to prove they are locals. Besides, there are many foreigners living and working in the town, she said.

Short-term gains

Truong Van Bay, deputy chairman of the Hoi An People's Committee, said the admission fee had been calculated based on a finance ministry directive capping the entry fee at tourist spots to VND20,000.

Thus, a foreigner is allowed to visit six tourist spots with their VND120,000 (\$6) ticket while locals can see four with their VND80,000 ticket, he said. But Jim, a tourist from London, said on popular travel website TripAdvisor that the \$6 ticket is more expensive than the €1/day tourist tax payable by visitors to Rome in Italy. Another tourist, who did not reveal his name, said on the website, "Being regular visitors to Vietnam we certainly won't pay this unreasonable tax. Hoi An is just not that special, the Hue Citadel model does not apply. "Why would I pay VND120,000 just to eat mi Quang (Quang noodles) at the market for VND20,000? Makes no sense. There are plenty of alternatives in this wonderful country and we will now be encouraged to find them." He hoped the Hoi An authorities would be wise enough not to "kill the goose that laid the golden egg."

Russell, the British tourism expert, said Hoi An authorities, if they need some extra money from visitors to help improve conditions and facilities in the old town, can do this in an indirect way by levying hotel or tour operator charges rather than create a bad impression by harassing visitors. "They also need to be transparent about how the money is being spent and account for every dollar to prove that it is being reinvested in maintaining the town. "When will the authorities start to learn from their more successful neighbors like Cambodia and Thailand?"

Nguyen Van My, chairman of the HCMC- based Lua Viet Tours, told Thanh Nien News: "I'm really surprised to know that Hoi An, a shining point of Vietnam's tourism, has a policy of collecting fees to enter the town... which is against the general trend in other countries. "You can sell tickets for visiting a relic, a sightseeing spot, or other specific places. You shouldn't sell tickets to enter a town." He said Hoi An authorities seem to care only for short-term gains and forget long-term benefits. Hoi An, which attracted around 1.25 million visitors last year, earned nearly VND80 billion from selling the entrance tickets.

By The Thinh & Nguyen Tu & Thao Vi