

Richard Baines, A Plantsman's travels in Northern Vietnam 26th March 2021 (via Zoom)

Richard Baines, Curator at Logan Botanic Garden at Stranraer since 2007, gave us a fascinating account of the multinational expedition he led in the northern mountainous region of Vietnam in 2014 to collect and research the plant material of the area.

Starting in Hanoi, a bustling and young city where the greatest danger is crossing the street full of mopeds coming from all directions, the team made their way to the mountains where there were very real risks of serious accidents on the steep and treacherous terrain.

Richard illustrated his talk with photographs not only of the plants they found but also of the life of the people they met, from colourful markets to remote settlements, and of the spectacular scenery.

Plant samples were collected both as herbarium specimens which, once pressed and preserved, were shared with botanical institutes in Hanoi, and as seeds. The main focus of the expedition was the many species of rhododendron growing there but many other rare plants were recorded. Logan Botanic Gardens acts as an important ex-situ conservation facility for rare specimens, some of which are no longer found in the wild. Conservation is particularly important as pressures on local habitats include climate change, agriculture, and commercial timber production.

Among the challenges of the trip were the altitude, the humidity, and the wildlife. Along the way they were careful not to disturb the snakes, but leeches were less easy to avoid. Sleep in some of the camps could be disturbed by rats and cockroaches. Other wildlife was less of a threat, and included pot-bellied pigs, 2-foot-long worms, and porcupines. In fact one porcupine that Richard was less than happy to meet was one served to him in a local restaurant. Richard declared himself to be a bit of a picky eater, but he seemed to have adapted well to the local diet.

Reported by Julie McGlashan