



## **What About Vietnam – S5 - E14 - Phong Nha – The family fun destination with something for everyone**

**Kerry Newsome:** Xin chào and welcome to the What About Vietnam podcast. Today I'm going to be broaching a subject that seems to be coming up more and more for me as I'm working with travellers, new travellers in particular to Vietnam. And that's a growing trend around families travelling to Vietnam for their holidays. It's probably only come to the fore mostly in the last 12 to 18 months, but I do see a growing trend of Westerners really looking for a holiday destination where their kids can come and experience a different culture. They can discover and learn a little bit of history. And, you know, they can get distracted from their tablets and their devices and get their heads out of that. In particular, I've had some very encouraging feedback from some clients. you know, saying their kids, whilst they were a bit ambivalent about coming, they got here, they had a great time. And, you know, words like epic holiday and just the best time. We got to do things, you know, we never get to do at home. Even mum and dad did things that we just never thought that they would do. And one of the places that seems to grab that kind of experience and really highlight it is Phong Nha. And today I'm lucky to be joined by Ben Mitchell, who not only is a family man, but also runs the Phong Nha Farmstay, and on a daily basis is meeting and greeting families and helping them get a better understanding of the region and, you know, doing what he can and sharing his knowledge to help make their trip really worthwhile and really extra special. So I'd like to welcome Ben to the show.

**Ben Mitchell:** Thanks Kerry

**Kerry Newsome:** Okay, so for everybody, let's start with the basics, like when we talk about Vietnam and we talk about the main stops on a tourist map, where does Phong Nha sit in relation to that and what's the best way to get there?

**Ben Mitchell:** Well, Phong Nha is located in northern central Vietnam. Pretty well halfway between Hoi An, another family favourite, and Hanoi, which is the hub of visiting all the different areas in the north.

**Kerry Newsome:** Like for me, this trip, I decided to go to and then I came across by train. And that was a cinch. That was into Dong Hoi, then got picked up by car, and I'm here in like 35 minutes. So we know that we can get to Dong Hoi, which is the main city by air, it's a proper airport, so you can fly from Hanoi or you can fly from Saigon into Dong Hoi. train, the reunification train runs top to bottom, so you can pick that up in various places to come to Dong Hoi, once again, very easy and a comfortable train. Number three is private car, so that's an option. And I have done that for some of my travellers so that, you know, maybe they're a big family group or their family you know, is coming with a second family. So there's two families traveling together. So it might be more economic and more, you know, palatable to them to come by, you know, a small mini bus and that to get to here. But it's, while it's not on the tourist map, it's not that far off the tourist map. Would you agree?

**Ben Mitchell:** Yeah, it is. Dong Hoi is our gateway, so we've got the airport there connecting us with Saigon and Hanoi. The train station, as you say, it's a good place to break the journey between the north and the central of Da Nang. It's 35 minutes with a private car from Dong Hoi station or airport out to us at Phong Nha. As far as those public transport ways of getting in and out, I would say the train and the plane are good. The buses, I'm not sure I'd put my family on the local buses or the overnight buses. They call them sleeper buses. It's a bit of an oxymoron. You don't get much sleep, but they are very cheap. And they are very convenient because, you know, getting from Ninh Binh or Hanoi to Phong Nha, they bring you straight in and out of here. The same with heading south. So cheap and convenient, but probably not the best way to do it. As far as getting south from here, a lot of the best things to see are in between these destinations of Phong Nha, Hue, Hue, Da Nang or Hoi Hoi An. So by getting a private car, you can actually visit some of these really cool places in between, which is not possible if you're on the train or the bus or obviously flying over the top.

**Kerry Newsome:** I want to set up everybody. So when you're thinking about coming to Vietnam and you're wanting to know, plan out your trip, how many days you've got to spend. I just want to make sure that you consider this as a destination that you probably need to allow a few days to really take it in, to enjoy it at a pace. So I'm going to get Ben to talk a bit more about that. But ahead of that, I also want to talk to you about the safety angle. Now, a lot of people think about caving and they think about trekking and jungles and, you know, all of that kind of aspect of a place. They consider that, oh, they might have to have a level of fitness or health or, you know, all of that side of thing. I really don't want you to consider that or see that as a hindrance to come here. Sure, you're going to have to think about age groups and whether you can withstand certain levels of heat or you've got some levels of endurance, but you don't have to be a health freak or you don't have to be super fit to come here. There's all different levels of experience, but you also have to check out things like your travel insurance and things like that. Can you speak a little bit more to that, Ben, because that safety bit does come up a fair bit.

**Ben Mitchell:** Yeah, there's the safety aspect of it with caving. And a lot of people sort of go, oh, caves? Oh, hang on. No, we won't be going there. We're about holidaying in Vietnam. We're not cavers. A lot of people go, cave? I've heard about that. It's \$3,000. And it takes, like, multiple days to do. So we won't be going there. But Phong Nha does have a lot more to offer for the tourist, traveller, visitor, family travel. It has a lot more to offer than just

coming here for caves. As far as safety goes, all of the different activities in the area to do with the National Park and the caving are heavily monitored by the government.

**Kerry Newsome:** Yeah, and I mean, like, you know, I'm going to take for granted that everybody that listens to my show has got really good level of common sense. So you're going to come equipped with, you know, hats, slip, slop and slap as far as sunscreens are concerned, maybe some bug spray, you know, like good walking shoes, you know, just making sure you've got comfortable gear to get around in to do these kind of things. But don't think you've got to do any pre-setup or pre-exercise or anything prep-wise to come and experience this because you're going to see all levels, all sizes, all age groups experiencing different aspects of the park, as Ben said, and also of the caves. And, you know, at my age, I certainly, you know, thought, you know, I better make sure I'm kind of at my best level of fitness, but I really found it very easy and we're going to talk more about that in a minute. What I do want to talk about and really pick Ben's brains about is the range of activities here. Because as he said before, it's not just about the caves. The caves is definitely its drawcard and it's certainly where Vietnam tourism painted and really put the focus on. But there's so much more. So Ben, let's kind of spread our wings here and talk about some of the broad range of activities that are available to families here.

**Ben Mitchell:** Two things I'd say. One is that There's something here for everyone, no matter what your level of adventure is or your level of mobility. And the other thing is that Phong Nha really has what is the essence of the atmosphere of rural Vietnam. 15, 16 years ago, I used to love going to Hoi An and jumping on a bicycle and riding around through the delta behind Hoi An, through the rural countryside, all the farming and the little laneways and things. Over the years, that area has become very heavily developed nowadays and it's very different to what it was like back then, but coming here, it very much has that feeling of when you walk out the front of your homestay or your hotel or your farmstay or your accommodation, Yeah, you're in Vietnam, in rural Vietnam, and to walk out of the village even and around the village is quite a, or bicycling through the countryside to different locations like the Bong Lai Valley. You can soak up Vietnam. Everywhere you look, it's a photo opportunity of timeless Vietnam. As far as the caves and the National Park go, I wouldn't say to come here and just focus on getting to this cave and that cave, because often The best part of the whole day trip of getting out to these places is the actual trip itself. Getting around the area and looking at the scenery and learning about the history. It's got a lot more to offer than just we've got to get to this cave or that cave and then move on to the next part of Vietnam sort of thing.

**Kerry Newsome:** And, you know, that, Ben, really was my experience as well. I mean, just getting on the back of a bike. Now, there might be a lot of people that say, oh, gee, you know, I wouldn't get on a motorbike. Well, Ben and I have had a bit of a laugh about this concept and around concerns around getting on the back of a motorbike here in Vietnam. Personally, I'm going to say I feel more confident on the back of an experienced rider, a Vietnamese rider who knows the lay of the land, who's a qualified rider and is employed by an established company. So, you know, you wouldn't want to put your fears ahead of that kind of experience. Because as Ben said, getting out and about on that bike, touring through all of those streets that lead through the paddy fields and, you know, you see those beautiful karst mountains and, you know, experience funny little boats that you take the bike on that floats you over to the other side. You ride across hanging bridges and You know, these are things, and this is where I think the kids get it, because they come back

with, that was epic, because in their own countries, whether it's the US, whether it's the UK, whether it's Australia, that kind of opportunity is not going to happen in their everyday opportunity. They're not going to get that on the Gold Coast. They're not going to get that in New York City. They're not going to get that on those kinds of holidays. This is rural Vietnam and its rustic nature and its ability to facilitate these experiences for a family to do it together. And I'm talking mum, dad, grandparents, you know, right down to young children. I think collectively they all can get something out of it. So maybe Ben talked to us about, I don't know, the beginning of the duck stop, or I don't know, what's a duck stop?

**Ben Mitchell:** There's an area called the Bong Lai Valley, and up that valley there's a series of community-based tourism places. One of them is called the Duck Stop, which in recent years has become very popular. It's a very unique attraction. People love it. Kids love it. Adults love it. Adolescents love it. Grandparents love it. Everyone loves it. It's huge. But what it basically is, is a local person who's by the name of Quinn, actually, and he's trained his ducks and he employs people to Training a duck, well there you go. Yeah, it's hard to explain. And everyone that goes there tells everyone to go there. But along that valley, that valley itself is a great day trip. You can buy farm-to-table lunches at local people's houses along the valley. You can ride around it by bicycle. You can go out there by a Phong Nha rider, by one of the local motorbike taxi riders. There's a place up the top of the valley where they've got what they call the Monkey Bridge and a big swing over a cliff. The Monkey Bridge is where you're challenged to ride a bicycle across a very narrow bridge over a pond. It's a fun day out, the Bong Lai Valley, full of community-based tourism. And with the community-based tourism, too, that relates back heavily to the way that you would see the National Park. I mean, you can book a National Park tour, or you can rent a car, or you can rent a scooter yourself and ride around the National Park if you're that way inclined. But probably one of the best ways to do it, and one of the things we're proudest of, is the hopping, as Kerry just said, hopping on the back of a local rider, Going to the Paradise Cave, the Botanical Gardens, which is a jungle tracking area and swimming area, going to historical sites like the Eight Lady Cave, going to the Moc Eco-Trail where the geysers come up from a cave system, geysers of cold water where you can swim in the jungle there. The Dark Cave, the Moc Nam, these different facilities around the park, different attractions, different places, can all be visited by, you know, renting a motorbike rider for the day. The motorbike riders that we deal with are local people from local households, so each motorbike that you rent is sort of a day's income for people. And it's quite inexpensive, really, from our side, from the Westerners' visitors' side. But for the local people, it's a great income. So it's a good support to the local community. And it also helps to justify your coming here, being able to support the local community. From a safety perspective with those community-based riders, community-based tourism workers, from a safety perspective of going with them, I personally wouldn't recommend it if I didn't believe in its safety, but that's my opinion. But to date, we've not really had any issues in the decade and a half we've been working with that. We do get some problems with tourists who rent bikes and ride themselves around the park. That's a fairly regular problem. People take a bit of skin off or they break a bone or something happens. I'm not a big fan of that but I am a very big promoter of going around the park with the local licensed riders who do it daily. These people used to be hunters, they used to be timber cutters, they are used to carrying loads on their motorbikes. But nowadays, rather than working in these unsustainable industries like timber cutting and hunting, they're working in tourism. Yeah, it's a great system. We work out with our guests based on what they're interested in, what they'll see for the day.

We discuss that with the writers. We give the people a pod guide with some historical information on it. And away they go for the day. And they can visit the places that we suggested and worked out with them. And the riders take them around to all these places. And they go and wait in a hammock at most of the destinations. that the guests can take as long as they want. It's basically they're traveling at their own pace, doing their own thing. It's great for families. All the riders are well versed on and well aware that mothers like to be able to see all their kids for the whole way around. So yeah, it's a really good system.

**Kerry Newsome:** I take your point on that because I think for me, when I'm talking to people and I'm recommending people to come to Phong Nha, I don't want them to come here being ignorant or clueless around, you know, how to get the best experience here. I mean, this is a bit of a plug for you, Ben, and certainly for Phong Nha Farmstay. I want to thank you for the support over the last few years in the What About Vietnam podcast and looking after, to me, this trip and sponsoring this show. It's been fantastic. But one of the things I love about what you and what Bic have created in the Farmstay is it's not just really great accommodation set in the middle of paddy fields with if you have a check on the website for this show, you're going to see some beautiful sunset photos that I grabbed the other night. But, you know, it's rural, but it's not rough. is the best way for me to say it. Because I think sometimes people think rule is definitely having to rough it and you don't have to do it that way. But one of the things I am really dead set about is about getting good advice, getting good information. And there is two ways to experience any destination for that matter, and that's going with a fixed tour. So that means you follow a group and you start at A and you finish at B and you have a set time and you literally have to, you know, follow the yellow brick road and the person with the flag. What Ben's talking about is being able to advise you around setting up your day the way you want it so that you can start when you want to, finish when you want to, and your drivers and your guides for the day, whatever that is, whether that is going to the caves as part of it, whether it's going out and mixing it up with maybe some kayaking, stopping at the duck stop on the way back, all of that can be kind of curated to your own needs, your own wants, your own party or your own group, your own family's desires for the day. If it's too hot, you can finish early. If you feel, you know, invigorated and you want to explore a bit more and you've got time, they can add it on. So you've got flexibility in that style. And that's probably something that Phong Nha Farmstay is definitely well known for. So if you come to Phong Nha and you want, you know, quality accommodation, but you also want really good advice around putting something together just for you, then it's the ideal place to do it. We talked a little bit before about how much time to allow that. And Ben and I were just discussing before coming on the show about slow travel. Maybe, Ben, you can speak to my listeners just a bit more about, you know, trying not to cram everything in.

**Ben Mitchell:** Yeah, well, making the effort to come to Fongya, a little bit off the beaten path, I think it's worthwhile to try and give yourself at least three days. Now if you're traveling as a family and your kids are sort of eight years old and older, you can get a lot into two or three days. If you're traveling with smaller children, babies, toddlers, I think personally I'd be suggesting traveling Vietnam a bit slower, going to less destinations and spending more time at them. As far as visiting somewhere like Phong Nha with toddlers and a baby goes, I'd be aiming to do sort of one thing per day over four or five days. If you're staying with us at Phong Nha Farmstay, we've got some great common areas that are good for relaxing with the little ones. You've got The older ones can keep busy, you know, we've got bicycles, we've got village laneways and farmland all around us for exploring. Each

morning at the farmstay we run a bit of a free tour at 7am where we go for a half hour walk around the village, learning about the village. Often I'll have family staying there and the mother and one child will do it one morning. and the father might do it another morning and there might be a child who never did it. Often two parents will come out and do the morning walk with me and leave the kids in bed. And other families, the whole family will go and that can be like for one morning. Then families can do what I suggest people do on their first day of sightseeing from the farmstay, is go to Phong Nha Cave and they can either get a lift up there or they can get a bicycle and ride there. That's a great thing to do on their first day and it's a one thing, not a whole series of things. Going around the park, there's different places you can go to from Fongya Farmstay or from Fongya and you can visit just one thing each day with smaller children because to try and get too much in, as you know, they get tired and they get a bit... worn out and then everyone starts to have a bit of a miserable time. So you've got to get them back after they've done whatever they're doing for the day, have lunch somewhere different each day. There's a lot of different days you can do if you're traveling slower with smaller children. But I recommend families with children who are all sort of over eight and under 18, they can do three days in Phong Nha between the National Park, the Phong Nha Cave and the Bong Lai Valley. They would get three very full days in there.

**Kerry Newsome:** Yeah, and probably a good segue into managing a day or your stay here is also the aspect of food. You know, like I've got kids, I've got grandkids and food always features a big part of any stay. And I've had some concerns from parents who have come to me and said, oh, you know, I don't think my kids are going to eat Vietnamese. And I've said, well, that's okay, because there's all types of food that is available to them in Vietnam. Do you want to speak to that, Ben, just on the, you know, availability of food types here?

**Ben Mitchell:** Yeah, well my wife and I have got a restaurant in town and a restaurant at the farmstay and we've, over the years we've learnt to put a menu together that is very much a Vietnamese menu but also offer some Western foods. Like, you know, with a family, there's often one kid and they won't eat anything unless it's white. It's pasta, it's potato, it's chicken, it's okay. Chips. Chips. But then, you know, but, and I mean, then there's everyone in between that level and we'll eat anything. So we've got a menu, our menu is structured to sort of suit a wide range, but Around Phong Nha we've got everything from an Indian restaurant to pizza restaurants to Vietnamese restaurants to very local restaurants. Restaurants that only sell snails and duck eggs. We've got all levels.

**Kerry Newsome:** Okay, and I think for everyone, we've got chips covered.

**Ben Mitchell:** Well, one thing I would mention too, we've got a very good vegan restaurant in Phong Nha which gets incredible reviews. Good to know. The Phong NhaVegan.

**Kerry Newsome:** Ben, just talk us through, you're also a travel family man yourself and traveled overseas recently. Where would you place Phong Nha as far as cost to travel here and to enjoy a stay for a family? How would you put it?

**Ben Mitchell:** Well, looking again, two things. One, I would say value for cost. I mean, there is products here in Phong Nha that cost \$3,000 for a tour. all the way down to most accommodations will give you a free bicycle. As far as families go, a lot of businesses have got small bicycles and bicycle seats. So you've got all sorts of levels there of everything in between. We've got trekking tours, we've got national parks, seeing the national park. I mean, if you go around the park, it's going to cost you sort of \$25 per person, \$500,000 per person. to go around on a motorbike. Most of the other transport in the area is by bicycle

or, you know, there's a lot of walking things you can do. It just depends, I suppose, on how much of a hurry you're in. If you come to Phong Nha and you've only got one day here, you're going to try and cram as much as you can in and it is going to cost more. The longer that you sort of plan your trip out to stay, the cheaper it'll be. As far as accommodation goes, there's everything here from very cheap homestays to more upmarket villas with private pools. Yeah, I think as far as value and cost goes, even you'd find the most expensive accommodations in the area are less than \$200 for a private two-bedroom swimming pool villa with breakfast. So, you know, that's at the top end. It is a very cheap destination. Restaurants in the area are very, very good value for money, very cheap. It's a very competitive and new tourism destination and with high value for money, I would say.

**Kerry Newsome:** Yeah, and that's kind of the ticket that I sell it as well is, you know, the level of experiences that you're going to have, the quality of food, the accommodation level is widespread. But, you know, in my country, to find a family accommodation set up for, you know, parents and three kids, et cetera, you know, there's no way you would get that for \$200 for a night. And, you know, we're talking private pool and overlooking the paddy fields and breakfast, you know, included, like, yeah, I don't know of very many places that are offering that kind of value. But I think Ben's quite right also in saying that the activities can be as much or as little as you want. And if you've planned your time and, you know, if I'm arranging a trip, I'm going to be pushing that barrel as to, to try and allow you enough time to enjoy it at a pace that suits. Because one of the things that I do get back from travellers who get a little bit disappointed with Vietnam, and it's because time has been their enemy. They haven't allowed enough time to do things, so they're rushed and, you know, they're trying to fit everything in to make sure that they get to the airport on time to go to the next place. So for sure with Phong Nha and with your family and this sort of time that you can have together to have those experiences and you know I've got testimonials from people who have just said that just the level of confidence that their kids have got since coming to Phong Nha and having the experiences they had. has just gone through the roof, that, you know, it's opened up their thoughts and their minds to travelling more overseas to experience new cultures like nothing else has. So I really, I hope we've answered jointly, you know, any questions that you do have about this region. You can always reach out to Ben through the Phong Nga Farmstay or me directly and I can pass on. Happy to answer any questions if you come to me directly. Is there anything I didn't ask you Ben or anything we didn't cover that we should before we wrap up?

**Ben Mitchell:** I'd go a little bit deeper into getting here and getting away. I think it's good. If you're traveling as a family, as you've said, it can be economical to go by private car over the public transport. And that would allow you to then visit sites around the DMZ, like the Vin Moc Tunnel system and the Ben Hai River Bridge. Staying overnight in Hue, I think is a benefit in that there's a great day trip between Hue and Hoi An as well for families. Visiting, you know, Hai Van Pass, waterfalls, cemeteries, tombs, historical sites. beautiful scenery, coastal scenery. So, you know, heading south or coming from the south into Phong Nha is a, you can turn the actual transit into a big part of the trip as well. Getting to the north is a bit more difficult. You know, it's really a jump.

You've got to jump as far as Ninh Binh. There's nothing attracting people between Ninh Binh Hoi An, Ninh Binh, Hanoi and Phong Nha. But to the south, it's pretty action-packed all the way down as far as Hoi An over one or two days. As far as going all the way to Hoi An in one day, yeah, I think the train is an effective travel method there because You can get on the train, you can relax, walk around, enjoy it. If you get a private car straight from here to Hoi An, it is a long day in the car with the family. The kids tend to put them through hell and then they'll get you back.

**Kerry Newsome:** Yeah, I was going to say, who's gone through hell? The kids or the parents. Yeah. I'm game enough to say that, you're not Ben. But my kids are far enough away from me to do that at the moment. Okay, Ben, great to have you on the show. I'm thoroughly enjoying my time here and I think you will too, as I said. Come back to us with any questions that you have and we'll see you on the next show of What About Vietnam?

**Ben Mitchell:** Thanks very much, Kerry.