



What About Vietnam S5 – E24 - Ha Giang: Insider Tips for an Unforgettable Adventure

Kerry Newsome :Now, Ha Giang is characterized by towering limestone casts, winding mountain passes, terrace rice fields, and changing colors with the seasons. You know, words like breathtaking, unbelievable are often referred to about this area. The last show I did on Ha Giang was with Tom Stone back in series 3, Episode 5. And that would be another reference point for you. And I'll put the link in the show notes if you want to go and explore there. Now, In some way, it's kind of an area that is steeped kind of back in time. Visitors can immerse themselves in the culture of various ethnic groups in the area, each with unique traditions and festivals. Let's welcome Ying to the show. Ying, it's a pleasure to have you with us. How are you? Hello. How are you? I'm very good, thanks Ying. It's really great to have you on the show. I am very excited to chat with you.

Ying Hang : It's really nice to meet you here too. Looking forward to that.

Kerry Newsome : Okay, Ying. Now, I'm going to ask you lots and lots of questions, as I'm sure when you have your travellers and you go around Tarzan, they do the same thing. But firstly, can I ask you a little bit about your personal background and growing up in Tarvan village in Sapa? Tell me a little bit about that.

Ying Hang : So I'm from Ta Van originally. I grew up in the farm, like normal farming. And even today, my family still farm. So then when I was a kid, I had a dream that I don't want to farmer. Then I had to find some way to leave the farm and do what I, because when at that time, it was like the year of 2000. And I was only nine. So I see some tourists come to my village. And I thought, yeah, maybe this is a good job for the future. And then I had a dream that I want to be independent. So then I start to learn English. So I start to sell the handy crafts to the tourists come to my village. Then I start to learn English. I think it's about two years later that I moved to Sapa town. It's very small and small town at that time. We have like 30,000 in the whole area. Then I start to learn more English and I make more friends and that's how I become a tour guide after all.

Kerry Newsome : Wow. So, you actually got to, you got your dream. Mm-hmm. I got my dream because I want to be a tour guide. That is fantastic. I love that you had that vision for yourself. Was there something else in your family or were there people in your family that kind of encouraged you to do this?

Ying Hang : Inspired you to do this? No, I don't have any family members were doing the tour like selling handicraft, but My cousin, she was, she speak English and she was already gay at that time. So I think, I say to myself, I want to be like her. And this is my dream job. And I would, I have to get there.

Kerry Newsome : And so this is part of Dragon Mountain family group. Yeah, that that is you and your cousin, right?

Ying Hang : Yeah, me and my sister and my cousin. Oh, fantastic.

Kerry Newsome : Okay. Yeah. All right. Now, for my listeners that, you know, look at Instagram and, you know, TikTok and all the social media, there's lots and lots of photos and videos and everybody's an expert and everybody's doing it differently. So, let's start at the very beginning by talking about Ha Giang as in where is it? Where is it located in connection to Hanoi?

Ying Hang : Hanoi is, Hanoi is north, north centre of Vietnam. So, you go directly from Hanoi to Hanoi. Because now where my hometown is northwest and Hanoi is north, north.

Kerry Newsome : So, from Hanoi, it's about 300 kilometres, I think, roughly?

Ying Hang : Yes, that's correct. 320 kilometres away from Hanoi. Okay. And it's about six or seven hours by car? It's about six hours by car or even like a bus is about six hours as well.

Kerry Newsome : Okay. I think with motorbike maybe a little bit longer.

Ying Hang : Yeah, not normally if the people do the motorbike, they would have to travel by province by province, not straight from Hanoi, it's too far. Okay.

Kerry Newsome : So, essentially, Ha Giang is located kind of so far north of Vietnam, it almost borders China, correct?

Ying Hang : Yeah, it's near the border about from Hainan City to China is 20 kilometers. Okay.

Kerry Newsome : And if we were to describe this area, tell me if you think this description is a good one. So, it's kind of known to be rugged and very remote, and it features a lot of dramatic landscapes. And sometimes it's so deep and the valleys are rich in a like a colourful array of vegetation. And sometimes when it rains, some of those hills, they collapse onto the road. And sometimes when it's in the right time of the year, it is golden yellow in flourishing rice fields.

Ying Hang : Yeah. Yeah. So, Ha Giang is A little bit warmer than in my hometown. They are the same weather in Hanoi. So they can do two harvests per year in the valley, but in the mountain, like, let's say, 20, no, 10 km away from the Ha Giang city, there is much colder, higher up. It's about 2,000 m from Ha Giang. so we do have a very green valley and have like a rainforest and national park map and lots of rice fields and the red zone people and the Hmong they are living in that area so during the beautiful season of visiting if you like green that is in July It is raining time, but if you like the weather, you like sunny and hot, then I recommend October is the best. Then you see all the yellow valley, because that time everybody will go to harvesting. Some people harvest, some is not yet, but most likely it's ready for harvest.

Kerry Newsome : As far as Ha Giang town is concerned, talk to us a little bit about the town itself before we actually start on the loop.

Ying Hang : Okay. So, Ha Giang city is right at the valley with a lot of mountains on the side and there is a river. So the name of the river is Lo and they are crossing in the middle. So both sides is the Hazan city. And they are 7000 square meters around there. and we have 750,000 people live there and this day is quite remote but 10 years ago was much better and also now for tourists to go to Hazan it's a lot easier because there is many hotel many hostel and also a lot of easy rider they start from there as well so Hazan city is good for the first night you are arriving you spend the night and the next day you're ready for the tour right so

Kerry Newsome : For people planning, you're going to arrange transport from Hanoi. It's going to take you about six or seven hours and you're going to have your first night in Ha Giang City, correct? Yes. Okay. So that's one day, because I'm going to get to the part about how much time you need to allow. Because sometimes people say, Oh, you know, I just, you know, going to go up and come back in two days. And you go, actually, no, that's not possible, because it takes you a day to get there. So it's important for people to appreciate the timing. My next question is around Like, while it's possible, I believe, and correct me if I'm wrong, to explore the area by yourself, tell us a little bit about, you know, do you need a guide to do this well, or can you do it by yourself?

Ying Hang : You can choose because a lot of people, they also do by themselves too. But one thing that you don't learn much about the area. You will go and you'll see the beautiful part, but then you don't learn any culture or you don't know what they're doing there.

Kerry Newsome : From my perspective, this is what I think. Firstly, I think people would struggle with the navigation, just knowing where to go, how to go around things. So I think, you know, it's challenging. It's got winding mountain passes and unpredictable weather. The second thing I think, as you say, is sometimes when, you know, us mere travellers get there and we're looking at things, we don't really know what we're seeing. We don't really understand it. So, unless you have a guide like yourself or someone to tell us about this, it doesn't have quite the same impact on us, I think. That's another reason I think having a guide is good. The second last thing is I think about safety. you know, I hear some stories of some tragic things that happen. And, you know, even things like getting pulled up by the police and, you know, getting fines and things like that. So, there's a range of things that could happen on your trip up there that you wouldn't know how to handle. Yet if you have a guide with you, they can explain it. They've obviously got the language and things like that. And then there's just the convenience. I find a lot of comfort in being with someone who knows that area. Like I've done a lot of traveling. I've got a very close Vietnamese friend. And her and I go traveling a lot to places. And just the advantage of having her with me to A, speak in Vietnamese, but B, also to explain something to me, tell me to avoid something, you know, all that kind of stuff just helps me get it right. So, I think navigation is important, getting an understanding of the culture, So, you know what you're saying, safety and I think convenience, having someone by your side to explain things. So, they're the things that I think having a guide is all about. Tell me some of the things that when you're taking people around, what are they saying to you? What are they asking you? What are the things that come up for them instantly? This is a good question.

Ying Hang : So, they will say, how did the tourists find this place? Because a lot of time, if they were in their country, they could not find Hazan. I think it's because we spelled it

different, and if they want to look online, they spelled it different. So, that's why it's harder for them to find.

Kerry Newsome : Can't find it, that's right, because it's G-I-A-N-G, but it sounds like Zang. Ha Giang. Yeah. I can, that's good, I haven't heard that said before. So what else do they say when they arrive in Ha Giang and they have lots of questions? What are some of the questions they ask?

Ying Hang : I think I pretty much I tell them everything and they don't ask me too much.

Kerry Newsome : I can imagine that. I can imagine that happening. Absolutely.

Ying Hang : They will ask me, like, how many people live in here and what do they do for a living and how do they survive in this rocky mountain? But I also explain, like, from the beginning, this is how they live and they have, like, they don't have rice in that mountain. They cannot plant rice. They have to plant corn. and it's only one crop per year. And we have to start from March to June, July, they collect the corn. And during that time, when they collect the corn, they have to sell it to buy the rice, or they make a rice wine and sell it to make the income.

Kerry Newsome : So they sell the rice wine, the happy wine.

Ying Hang : They sell the corn wine.

Kerry Newsome : The corn wine. Yes.

Ying Hang : Yeah.

Kerry Newsome : Okay. That is strong stuff. I've tried a little bit of that and my head nearly blew off. So, yeah. It is quite strong. It is quite strong. Absolutely. And not really easy tasting either. I don't like the tasting. No, it's not so smooth. It's very whiskey taste. Yes, absolutely. If you were to paint a picture for a person about Haozhang, what would you put in that picture? What are the key things that you would put in that picture?

Ying Hang : I think I would paint Lolo people or Hmong in between those two. What people are they? Explain. Lolo. Lolo. Lolo people. Yeah. Have you heard much about them? No. More about Hmong. They are very... Thai and Dao. Yeah. because why I want to put them in there because they're very colorful. The dress are very flower and very pretty. In Vietnam, we don't have many of them. We have like over 4,000 people and they're living in Hà Giang and basically Mèo Vắt, Đông Văn in Bảo Lạng district. They're very Chinese look. They are also farmers?

Kerry Newsome : Everyone is. Everyone is farmer in that region. Unless they get a dream like you and work hard to become guide. If we're talking about getting back to our timing aspect, a day to get there and a day to come back, how many days do you suggest people allow to go around the loop?

Ying Hang : So I suggest three nights, four days, but you can take the night bus from Hanoi. By the night time, you arrive in Ha Giang about midnight, and then you stay at the hotel. The morning, you pack. Then you, a guy and a driver pick you up. So you have three nights in the mountain, and then back. So basically, four days and six nights, or five and a half nights, something like that. Four to five days, yeah.

Kerry Newsome : minimum. Yeah. Okay. This gives you time for a bit more of a pacing, because as I understand, you are traveling long distances each day. So, let's talk about also the way to explore the region. So, If we're talking about the loop, talk to us about how many miles you do per day and which is the best way to do it by car, by bike, by passenger on a bike, etc.

Ying Hang : because everybody have a different experience and everyone wants to try different right so mostly the younger one like 18 to 30 most of them want to go in the easy

rider because they want to experience how like the 1d road but also it's very dangerous if you don't know how to drive you must have an easy rider and beside that you need to have an international driving license for the police checking. We have like four or five different police station checking for the license. And if you don't know this, then you get fined. Every stop, they stop you. You have to pay like \$100 per time. Okay, I want to stop you there.

Kerry Newsome : So that means you have to have a license, a bike riding license in your own country. Yes, that in Vietnam is recognized. Yes, and that's only come up in the last couple of months. The laws on, you just can't have a car license, you've got to have a bike license and you have to be considered an experienced rider. So like I had someone contact me this week and they want to do the Ha-Zang loop, and they wanted to know about this license. And they have been writing for 15 years in their own country, in New Zealand, and, you know, so they're going to be coming with the right qualifications. But as you say, it's not the place to come to, to just jump on a bike, hire it straight away from Ha Giang and then go around. That would be considered very dangerous. Now, back to you. So, if you don't want to do that way, you can be a passenger on an easy rider. That's what easy rider is about, right? And that's the kind of younger people and we understand that. If you don't want to do that, what's the option?

Ying Hang : If you don't want to do that, then you can take a car like a tour guide and a car. So it's much safer. You definitely will see more and learn more because your guide is with you. And then you can do some more walking, hiking into the villages. And they will show you like much more than you go by Easy Rider or you drive yourself. Because we will measure the time when we're doing the day. Every day we have a schedule. So we have full day to do the activity and we know what exactly to do.

Kerry Newsome : If I come to you and we leave Ha Giang on a day, how much of that day would be on the road?

Ying Hang : So for the first day, We drive about 150 kilometers away from Hazan. But on that way, we stop many places. So then we have a fully scheduled life. First place, Heaven's Gate. Second is the twin. And then the third is where the lady who's weaving the fabric and making the clothing. And then the fourth, we stop in one of the town called In Ming. That's for lunch. And then we go to the King Palace in Laos and then Dong Van for the night. That's just day one?

Kerry Newsome : Yeah. Right. And where do you stay in the evening?

Ying Hang : We stay at the hotel in Dong Van. You can choose like a hotel or homestay.

Kerry Newsome : Right. Can you explain the difference about a homestay versus the hotel and the standard?

Ying Hang : yeah so hotel it's in the mountain there is very basic it's like two-star or one-star hotel it's nothing fancy because it's open for tourism not long ago and to develop it's not very okay because it's a unit school so you can't build too many fancy but the homestay you can stay with the family and spend the night with them and have dinner and see their life, learn about their life and culture. In the evening you get to share with them. Okay.

Kerry Newsome : Now, I know this is going to sound very basic, but like things like a shower, private bathroom, toilet, things like that. I know some people don't care at all about it, but For me, I'm an older lady, and those things are important to know. If I know what to expect. They have everything. So the hotel, would you have a private toilet? Or would it be shared?

Ying Hang : You own bed. No, the bathroom is in the room. So you have everything private. But sometimes homestay have to sharing. Right. Depends what you order. Because they

have like a little private room that you have everything in the room. If you want to share in the dorm, you can have a dorm. If you want a private room, they give you a private room.

Kerry Newsome : Okay. Good to know. All right. So, that's day one. What would be day two?

Ying Hang : So, day two, we have more options to choose. So, we can choose to have breakfast at 7.30 normally that's what I do basically because it's a long day yeah so breakfast 7.30 then we drive to Lung Ku flat where the Lolo people living that is where the border China about three kilometers away and with a beautiful view landscape with the Lolo, Hmong, Thai and where else? Nung people living in that valley Then after the view, visit, learn a little bit about the culture and the history about that mountain. Then we come back to Dong Van. Then we drive to Ma Pi Lan mountain. That is the most beautiful place the whole trip. Then we can do, we will do some hiking. Okay.

Kerry Newsome : The evening, after a long drive, everyone tired. Because it's been a busy day. Yeah. So, they stay in another homestay, another... Another homestay. Another homestay. Because I would think... Every night we stay different. Right. Second night. Because not many hotels out there. More homestay.

Ying Hang : No. We stay different, yeah, different homestay every night.

Kerry Newsome : Right. Okay. So then on day three, are we nearly on the loop coming back to Ha Giang or still a long way from Ha Giang?

Ying Hang : We go further to Yiming and Suzhou. so that it's beautiful and discovered not long ago and it's quite popular for tourists who want to swim and there's a waterfall so everybody want to go there and visit but Zouza village is very beautiful it's in the valley of the big Yeah.

Kerry Newsome : And when you go to these places, is there a lot of other tourists there? Like, is it super busy and lots of... It is super busy, but you choose where you want to be quiet.

Ying Hang : Ah.

Kerry Newsome : It's less touristy. And this is where you come in very handy to explain and take people to areas that they couldn't find by themselves, right? Yeah, yes, that's correct. Okay, so now we've been three days around the loop. What do we do on day four?

Ying Hang : So on the day four, breakfast, same, same, every day morning, every morning, same hour for breakfast, then we drive back to Quang Ba with a Thursday. We have to travel different direction to the first day then we were going back to Ha Giang in the afternoon and some people can take the bus like four o'clock or they can take the sleeping bus to Hanoi or they decided to go to Sa Pa by that direction okay so yeah so day four basically return all right so you check me and tell me if i understand correctly okay day one i travel from Hanoi to Ha Giang city yes

Kerry Newsome : Day two, three, four, I am traveling around the loop. Day five is the last day and I come back into Ha Giang, but a different way. And I can, but if I got back late, wouldn't I want to stay the night and then go back to Hanoi the next day?

Ying Hang : Yeah, you can also do that or you can catch the late night bus at 10 o'clock.

Kerry Newsome : At 10 o'clock. Wow.

Ying Hang : At 10pm. So, you can, you can leave late in the night time. Right.

Kerry Newsome : And you are arriving at about 3am. So, now I'm going to ask a very tricky question, as in, who are the type of people who this is best for? Like, I'm not the most... No, I'll say this another way. I am... I'm not the best outdoor person. That's the best way to

describe it. I am very circumspect about where I travel in Vietnam and if I'm capable of doing the level of trekking involved so that I don't injure myself for the rest of the stay. So, like, is there, like, for you, do you try and guide people that are mostly younger people or older people or, like, I need some kind of

Ying Hang : understanding of level of fitness yeah yeah so there I mostly guide the my customer around your age they're not always young you're kidding Really? No. Yeah. They are around 50 plus. Yeah. Mostly. That's me. And family. So yeah. So for the options of trekking you can choose. If you cannot do this trekking and I can always find you another direction that it's easy for you. So there is always option because it's like I know the area well. I don't have to just take only one trail the whole time. I can always change it. When I normally do tour, I always say, how far can you go and how is your health condition? So then I can decide on that day what schedule we're taking.

Kerry Newsome : That's very comforting to hear. But like your experience now, you've been doing this for quite a long time. what would be the, I'm trying to understand the general population of people that would come to you. Are they mostly 50 or, because firstly they have to find you and I just want to let everyone know that's listening. I'm going to put Ying's link in the show notes so you don't have to remember everything she says. You're going to be able to communicate with her directly through her website. I also advise a lot of people on putting trips together. So, I plan the trip. So, someone arrives into Hanoi and maybe they do Ninh Binh and maybe they do Sa Pa and then I can arrange to come to you and I plan everything. What do they need to know before they come? Like what is like about clothing, about health and fitness, about everything like that? What would you say?

Ying Hang : So for the, because different season, I would, I will tell you what to bring. So in summer, usually in the nighttime temperature drop in the mountains, so you always have to bring one long sleeve, but mostly long, Long pants or long trousers is always good because we have mosquitos when you do the hiking around the villages. And in summer, it's quite hot so you always have to bring a lot of sun cream. In case if it's raining, you need to have a jacket like a rain jacket or umbrella, whatever. Sun cream, mosquito sprays, insect sprays. And clothing, in summer, it don't really have problem but winter, Winter for us sometimes is not as cold as in Europe or in Australia. But to us we are cold. Like 5 or 10 degrees is quite cold for us.

Kerry Newsome : I have been to Sapa and it's been freezing. I have had a big puffed jacket on and I go straight to my hotel, I get under the duna and I am freezing. Like January is freezing. So, September to November is the best weather for golden, right? March to May is pleasant and blooming flowers. Yeah? This is just what I write to myself. December to February is cold, very cold. But it is, it's kind of misty, isn't it? It kind of gets a little bit... Yeah, now it's very misty. But you're sitting there with a big puffer jacket, a North Face puffer jacket. So, and it is March. So, yeah. And then June to August is green, very green. Green, very green. Yeah. Okay. So, Everyone, please go back and check those months of the year and plan and pack accordingly. I cannot stress it enough. I ran around Hanoi desperately trying to find a puffer jacket because I was only going to Sa Pa and Mai Chau and I froze. I was really cold in February, beginning of February. So, I learnt my lesson. So, I try to tell people, wise up. It's really important. And if you're on a bike or an easy rider or whatever, even colder. Oh man, is it cold. If you were to tell people anything else that they need to know, what would that be?

Ying Hang : Whatever you plan, you have to know what you want to do. Like if you go by car, you don't need to plan like carry Too many things, but motorbike, you definitely want to

have good shoes because when your shoes get wet, you're cold if you're easy rider and you need to have a good rain jacket. When you get wet, everything is not feeling good and cold. Correct.

Kerry Newsome : Yeah.

Ying Hang : Yeah.

Kerry Newsome : I'm terrible at packing, really bad. So, I have suggested to people in the past that they arrange with their hotel in Hanoi when they come back to stay in that same hotel and leave the bulk of their luggage in the hotel and the hotel will look after it. Because you don't really want to be lugging around 23 kg luggage and a backpack and another carry-on and whatever, because you've been shopping or whatever.

Ying Hang : Bring just enough for you, if you want more you can always buy. Fair achievement.

Kerry Newsome : Ying, I wonder if you could tell us just maybe one story about some travellers that you took around, like a story about their experience and explain what you did and what was the highlight.

Ying Hang : the local authentic and basically local and the market. The market, it's very beautiful. I highly recommend. It's Mil Van and Dong Van market. They are the most beautiful and colorful and it's still very traditional. They don't have like too many tourists go in that market. Only the people who stay overnight in the area, they go. Okay.

Kerry Newsome : If there was one story that you could tell about something that happened along the way around the Ha Giang Loop, what would that story be?

Ying Hang : Beautiful story. It's the market in the Kanya. It's very beautiful. So a lot of people want to go to the boat riding below the Mapilin Mountain. that's beside the China border and Vietnam so wherever you go and you will experience beautiful and basically lots and lots of people go there because they're so pretty the one thing we only have like 40 minutes on the boat so you can take a swim in there And you can have lunch there. And then you come back on the boat, off the boat after you finish.

Kerry Newsome : Oh, okay. And what day would you do that on? Day three? We'll be on the day two. On day two. Okay. All right. And the other thing I didn't ask you about was the food. Tell us a little bit about some of the unique food in the area.

Ying Hang : Okay, so the local food up in Hazan, it's a little bit more like Chinese. The way they cook, normally we're sharing the food together. We order like pork, one plate pork, chicken, or duck, or veggie. We have lots of greens, so we will order like few different dish and we're sharing with the group. In the night time, we have a steam bowl, like a hot pot. So that is very Chinese and a lot of time everybody like it. Mostly I always have that for dinner because it's a little bit colder in the night time. So we have that for dinner. Then you can go to see the in Dong Van there is a night market. on the Saturday night and on the Friday night, they do a little bit dancing. You can also join them too.

Kerry Newsome : That brings up another point then, like should people come on the Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, those days rather than during the week?

Ying Hang : Yeah, that's, I also recommend that too. In the week it's a little bit more quiet if you don't want to see too many people, because on Saturday and Sunday it's a lot of Vietnamese travellers, they go to that area. It's going to be busy, but it's beautiful too.

Kerry Newsome : As far as the language is concerned, not many people speak English up there, do they?

Ying Hang : Yeah, Hazan don't have too many people speak English. It's now start some younger boy, they want to learn and they want to do the Easy Rider, but to be a tour guide, there is no.

Kerry Newsome : What would you say about, is it safe for a woman solo traveler to come on their own to this area? It's safe.

Ying Hang : Yeah, it is very safe. Okay. But what you plan, you have to be careful with the company, that's all.

Kerry Newsome : Yes.

Ying Hang : Yeah, because when you book, they don't refund you.

Kerry Newsome : They don't refund you. Yeah. You know, like I know some very adventurous women who travel from the US and Europe, because they do lots of trekking in their own countries, etc. So I want to make sure when I say, you know, you can feel safe to come, I would get them to get in touch with you so that you can set them up. Because to me, part of the safety factor is in about who you deal with. So, like I always make sure that I deal with reputable companies that I know and trust, that I've dealt with, and I'm confident then in sending them up that way.

Ying Hang : Yeah, definitely. Understandable.

Kerry Newsome : Yeah, definitely. Now, I mean, there's lots of talk about the future of Ha Giang tourism. What would you say the future is for Ha Giang?

Ying Hang : The future is going to be touristy and very, very remotely. I mean, lots of things are coming up now. Building homestay, On the roadside, it's a little bit not so pretty anymore. Day by day, I'm traveling there every week. So I see change very much.

Kerry Newsome : And is that change not so good? Do you think it will spoil it?

Ying Hang : Yes. Well, too many buildings and they are not traditional. So it's not pretty. But there is a place you can go just a little bit further. You just have to find it out.

Kerry Newsome : I really do want to encourage my listeners to explore, do your research about this area. I'll definitely put Ying's details in the notes, as I said. I just want to say thank you, Ying, for coming on the show and for giving us this information because it's truly valuable.

Ying Hang : I am very happy that you invite me to. I really appreciate it.

Links –

What About Vietnam S3-E5 - <https://www.whataboutvietnam.com/series-3/episode-5/the-ha-giang-loop---vietnams-final-frontier>

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Note: Please forgive any background sounds and any words misspelt in the Transcript.