



What About Vietnam - S3-22 – Phong Nha Cave tours – in depth

Kerry Newsome: 00:23

Xin Chào and welcome to “[What About Vietnam!](#)” Today, we're going to explore **Phong Nha** caves. And I'm delighted to have my guest, Howard Limbert on the program, as he is going to take us through the **Phong Nha** caves in such a way that we can really get to understand what's truly achievable to experience in the caves. And just what kind of skill levels we need to do that, if in fact, we need any.

01:07

A little bit about Howard, & how he's been exploring caves, believe it or not, all over the world, and for 32 years. He is now the technical advisor for the [Oxalis](#) company. And in that role, he is all about putting together adventure tours for the company, and about making sure the safety level is there. And at the absolute best to ensure great experiences for all travelers. He negated to tell me until a little bit into the program, that in fact, he was a leader of the British team that explored the caves that actually discovered **Son Doong** back in 2009.

01:53

So needless to say, he's got a lot of information, and a lot to teach us about these caves. So, when you see all those fabulous photos of the cave systems, which definitely are out there on all your Instagram and your Facebook pages, showing off the system in Vietnam, you're going to learn in this program, just what sort of time you need to set aside, as in two days to do it, three days to do it, or four days, and then what you'll get to see in those time spans. So, I'm not going to waste any more time. I want to jump straight in. And let's welcome Howard Limbert to talk to us about **Phong Nha**.

Howard Limbert: 02:48

Phong Nha is the name of the village where everything is situated. It's named after the cave, **Phong Nha** cave. And that was all that was known for many, many years, because they used that particular cave, in the war. Many of the boats, further from the military used to live in the cave. And they were also a hospital in the cave. So that was what was known for many years about **Phong Nha**, the village, there was this wonderful cave. And we came along in 1990 and explored **Phong Nha** cave, 10 kilometers long, one of the most amazing river caves in the world. But we realized this was just the lower parts of the cave system where the river comes out.

03:29

So, over the last 30 years, we've explored many, many caves, deep in the jungle upstream, like **Phong Nha** cave, and what people will know about, is **Son Doong** cave, the one that we were lucky enough to discover and explore in 2009, the world's largest cave. But this is just one of many cases that are in that area. It's tremendous, beautiful area. And we now employ many, many people, local people in the area as porters, as guides, even cleaning ladies,

everybody. We employ nearly 550 people now. So, it's a major concern, and many people are starting to visit **Phong Nha**.

04:13

It is the fastest growing tourist destination in Vietnam. And it's the third most popular, certainly for foreigners coming into Vietnam, because foreigners are into sustainable tourism. They're into beautiful nature and peaceful and quiet. It's not like certain parts of Vietnam. It's very busy and you'll see hundreds of people going trekking or visiting the site. **Phong Nha**, we try to make it purely sustainable, and that, all the adventure tours that we certainly run, is very limited number of people. So, we usually have group sizes maximum of 10. So, when you go into the caves, when you go into the jungle with your team, your group, you will only see those people in general. So that's a great feeling for people to feel like they're going somewhere special, rather than hordes of tourists. And we'd like this to continue for the future, it seems to be doing well, this type of tourism.

Kerry Newsome: 05:14

Absolutely. And I can remember, I did a Vietnam National Administration Tourism Board Roadshow with their team from Vietnam, over here in Australia. And one of the first slides that they put up was, the **Son Doong** cave. So, this is like back in 2017. And whilst I've been traveling back and forth to Vietnam since 2007, this was the first I'd seen of the cave of-- and just that imagery and the whole audience, their jaws just absolutely dropped, it just how amazing it was. Maybe tell us a little bit, Howard, you know, the kind of numbers that you know, across each of the tours, and we're going to get into the individual tours. But tell me, how many people are visiting **Phong Nha** caves in a year these days?

Howard Limbert: 06:12

Well, in **Phong Nha**, and the caves, we've got two- what we class as mass tourism caves, one being **Phong Nha** cave, and the other being Paradise cave. And they attract many, many people, but they're tourists' caves. They are lit up. One of the caves, you go in, in a boat, and there they walk through and it's a beautiful, superb tourist cave. And then we'll take maybe half a million people a year into those caves. We're not in that type of tourism. Were into sustainable, limited adventure tourism. So, people want to see nature. It's not lit up. There are no artificial paths. It's purely adventure. So, it's real caving. And we're taking over 20,000 people a year into all these different adventure caves. In fact, more people go caving, proper caving like multi days in **Phong Nha**, than anywhere in the world. Not just adventure tours. This is anybody going caving, so more people go caving in **Phong Nha**, in Vietnam than anywhere else at the moment.

07:24

We really look at, that these caves are perfect conditions. It's not like caves in Australia, caves in the UK, where I'm from, where it's quite cold in the caves and quite small and it can be miserable on times, some super caves. But here, they are generally very big, and the water temperature is usually around 24 to 26 degrees. And the air temperature in the cave is always, winter/summer 23 degrees, which is wonderful, perfect temperatures. It's like America, it's like California all the time. So, it might be 40 degrees out in the jungle, sweaty and hot. But once you get in the care, it's like having air conditioning. It's just perfect. So, we're really lucky in this part of Vietnam, which was perfect for caving, but people don't really want to reflect too much. Because we tend, we do a high standard of adventure. We look after people and the quality of the equipment, and the food is really high class and people appreciate that.

Kerry Newsome: 08:26

Yeah. Well, actually, I think you told me a bit of a funny story before we started to record where you said, "One of the things that we have to impress upon people is to not eat too much because the food's too good."

Howard Limbert: 08:38

It is. I mean, it is too good. And people are many, many people come at **Son Doong**, rarely come here as well. But "I'm looking forward to losing some weight." And I said, well, "You know, you had your chance. You really have to be strict to lose weight on this tour." Because you'll have like a choice of 10 dishes on an evening. I mean, it's serious good food. And there's a lot of it. You don't have to eat it all. But when you've had a tough day, [crosstalk] people tend to eat. You get a little bit hungry.

Kerry Newsome: 09:10

Yeah.

Howard Limbert: 09:11

So, it's so- we always have two chefs on each tour. And they've been doing it a while now and they know what people want. And they know what I want. Like, when I came to **Phong Nha**, it was very, very basic, like incredibly basic. And I'm one of the few people, who don't like rice. So, I had to teach them to cook chips. That was the first thing I had to do.

Kerry Newsome: 09:35

[crosstalk] Don't tell me you're going to bring out the chip [inaudible 09:39] or something like that.

Howard Limbert: 09:40

Very British. I am very British. So, I said, "We got to do chips, customers like chips and I love them."

Kerry Newsome: 09:47

There's plenty of carbs in that. So that's probably helpful.

Howard Limbert: 09:51

The other thing we noticed is lots of certainly foreign customers, don't do noodles. Certainly, many Americans can't do noodles for breakfast. We obviously supply various noodles bowls, and things like that. But after a few days, if you're on a four-day tour, for instance, they get a little bit fed up. So, I had to teach our chefs how to do pancakes. And how to do French toast, or eggy bread, as they call it. Just for foreign customers. So, it's very nice for breakfast. Now we have a great variety, but we try to do a variety for vegan, vegetarian, meat eaters, as there is no problem in this--

10:30

Oh, yeah, we get a lot more of the gluten free. The only difficulty that we do have with gluten free is like sweet teas and snack products in Vietnam, obtaining gluten free snack products, so that's the only thing we ask, if there are genuinely gluten free. We have a lot of people that like to be gluten free, but not 100% genuinely, Celiac and other problems. So, we asked them to bring their own snacks, although we do find that the meals are so plentiful that you don't really need to bring snacks, very rarely people do.

Kerry Newsome: 10:30

Gluten-free...

Kerry Newsome: 11:08

And we had to get them to just stay shy of that rice wine because, whoa! that [crosstalk].

Howard Limbert: 11:17

We do bring a little bit of rice wine, but we limit it as, like just one on an evening, just to show people what it is because--

Kerry Newsome: 11:25

That would be enough--

Howard Limbert: 11:25

It's really dangerous.

Kerry Newsome: 11:27

It is dangerous stuff.

Howard Limbert: 11:29

My tip for rice wine is, if you get to like it, you've gone too far. You're in a real mess, if you like it.

Kerry Newsome: 11:37

Because it doesn't taste nice.

Howard Limbert: 11:39

It tastes awful.

Kerry Newsome: 11:40

--nothing. Now, Howard, I'm going to get you if I may, we're going to kind of unpack some tours for people. Because something that I need to share with you is some of the queries and the questions that I've got over time is:

- How much time should we allow?
- If we've got an extra two days, what would we get to see in two days –
- Or if we've got three days? S

So, you and I kind of agreed that we would unpack a stay. And you could give them some guidance around periods of stay. So, time that they've got a lot. And one thing I loved about your website, and for everyone listening, I am going to put the links to the **Oxalis** website, because I've never seen a website that's got every Frequently Asked Question, that you could possibly come up with. That website has got it.

12:37

So, if you, after this episode, want to know even more, and we didn't cover it here, we'll definitely go there, the answer will be there. But having Howard with me, I want to talk about: If you do have extra days, or you can pack in some time, I definitely recommend you coming along to **Phong Nha**, and doing a cave discovery tour. Now, I want to preface this by saying, that, one of the things I learned from the website, is about managing expectations in the sense that, if you're flying in from the UK, it's probably not a good idea, if you land in the morning. And then you're getting yourself to **Đồng Hới** and then you're jumping straight into a tour, that's probably not a good idea, you would probably settle yourself in **Phong Nha**, have a good night's rest and then begin the tour the next day.

13:37

So, 99% of people have common sense and would apply that, but some think, "Oh, that'll be fine", and whatever. We would really recommend that you allow that day before and that day at the end. So, when you finish the tour, stay a night and as my friend Ben Mitchell says, come to one of the places in **Phong Nha**, have a Gin and Tonic, come and say hello to some locals and chill out and then take your journey home. So, starting with the one-day. Would you put that in, what you call the tourist cave? So, that's really what you're going to see in one-day or is there other options Howard?

14:22

We're going to come back to Howard, just as he explains that the **Oxalis** tours are not really what they classify as 'Tourist Tours'. If I may just explain that difference. There are very short,

rounded tours of the **Phong Nha** caves, but they are very much for very short trips, maybe only half a day or a few hours at a time. These are not the tours that we're going to be talking about on this show. I just thought I'd jump in there to give some explanation and how it's going to go into a little bit more detail with that, just coming up right now.

Howard Limbert: 15:16

No, these are not tourists' caves, all tours, relatively remote areas in beautiful scenery in the jungle, you will not see 1000s of people. We run three types of one-day tours. The first one a simple one, is our family tours. We run family with children and parents into very easy caves, short walking, no swimming in the cave. But we love swimming in rivers and fun activities in the rivers. We keep young children from our main adventure tours. We don't want children involved in those, but we have some caves that we specially set up for children, shock proof caves, which they'll find very, very exciting and the parents will like, but it's not a great danger. And that can be well looked after. And so, we have that family tour. So, family tours are basically into **Tu Lan** area. And we look after the main specific caves, and they are really, really popular family groups.

Kerry Newsome: 16:22

Okay.

Howard Limbert: 16:22

Well, people over 16 years of age, we have two types of tour:

We have a relatively easy one-day tour, which includes:

- Swimming in a cave.
- Jungle trekking in a dry cave.

Lovely, lovely tour. It's like an introduction to our tours. We also have a more difficult one-day tour, which involves a lot more difficult trekking and you've got to be relatively fit to do this. You've got to have done some trekking and walking before and it's a full long tour. It is two caves, called **Hang Tien**, very spectacular, massive cave. And there are three one-day tours:

1. Family. Tú Làn
2. One-Day.
3. **Hang Tien** One-Day.

There are currently [inaudible 17:06]. And that's a good introduction to **Phong Nha**. So, if you've got really limited time, do these tours, you'll enjoy them, people love them. However, I would recommend going longer, you get much, much more value. And not only that, but you also see the place and interact with the local people and get more out of it.

Kerry Newsome: 17:06

Absolutely. Okay, so let's talk about a two-day tour. So, this is an overnight in a cave, yes?

Howard Limbert: 17:36

So two-day tours, that we run, are all really special and very different. The first one is called **Hang En**, which has got a massive wow factor. This in fact is the first day of the **Son Doong** tour. So, this is where the **Son Doong** tour goes on the first day, because the only way to **Son Doong** cave is to actually go through **Hang En** cave. So massive cave, huge cave, in parts of its 200 meters wide, 140 meters tall, then you camp inside the cave. And it's got a spectacular large pool, where you come and there's daylight coming in. Like I say it's the third largest cave in the world. And this involves around 22 kilometers of trekking, in and out, relatively easy, the only class, that has a moderate sort of difficulty. The trekking is easy, incredibly beautiful. The swimming at the campsite inside the cave. And we have this open from December until the early September. So, during the rainy season of mid-September onwards to October and early

November, we cannot go in this cave, because there's a very large river. Hence why **Son Doong** is the largest cave in the world.

17:36

Yeah. These are overnight, not in a cave, somewhere in caves, somewhere camping next to caves, next to waterfalls, and jungle. And we have four different two-day tours. They're all very, very popular. In fact, these were probably our most popular tours, pre-COVID. We now find post-COVID people wanting to do longer tours, everybody wants to do three and four-day tours. And a lot of people now we're doing two-day tours and doing two, two-day tours together, do a two-day tour, come back to a lovely hotel, rest and then do another two-day tour, which is [crosstalk] for variety. And it's really, really popular.

Kerry Newsome: 19:12

Absolutely correct.

Howard Limbert: 19:30

So that's one of our most popular today's tours. Because when I say, a wow factor, I mean a wow factor. Photography is outrageous in this cave. Very easy. We did Peter Pan film there. Neverland is part of that cave. What I'd like to say is, this goes out to the world, so, the location is brilliant, but the film is terrible. The film didn't do justice, [laughter] for the location is fantastic. [laughter].

Kerry Newsome: 20:21

Mom's the word.

Howard Limbert: 20:23

That's what we'd say about **Hang En**, very, very popular cave. Where the walking is relatively easy. There's nothing too technically difficult about that cave. And the walking, there is jungle and a lot of river crossings, you will get wet. 30 river crossings to get to--

Kerry Newsome: 20:41

As long as I get wet. And I don't get leeches on. I'm okay, but--

Howard Limbert: 20:45

No, there's not only not many leeches on that particular tour, but you can also never guarantee it sometimes on the way out. If you've had some rain. The leeches at least- no worries really, leeches are no problem. **Tu Lan** two-day. This was our first multi-day trip we ever invented. This involves five caves. Some are dry, some are very wet, because you have to swim through some of the curves. You swim from one entrance, go through and come out in the jungle, brilliant campsite, next to a lake and waterfalls. It's a tremendous fun tour, is **Tu Lan** two-day, very, very popular. And again, this is open from mid-November till mid-September. And it's only a moderate choice, not too difficult. And it's a great introduction to-- and it's a fun tour, a really fun tour, people like it.

21:44

My personal favorite is the next one is called **Hang Va**, that's V, A. It's a two day-tour again. And it really is a real cave, as caves, you do two caves. And one is huge, massive, fantastic cave, beautiful. But the other cave is-- it's you actually touch the sides in places. A lot of Vietnamese caves are so big, you can't even see the sides and the roof. But this cave, you're actually physically-- it's not tight or claustrophobic, but you'll actually touch the walls, and there's quite a lot of water in places, it is quite exciting. And people love it. And there's also some technical sections in this, where you wear [inaudible 22:30] and He clipped to ropes. So, it's very, very good for that.

22:35

I really, really would advise doing this, because it's got some of the most amazing formations, in caves in the world. We've got stalagmites that grow underwater, that are formed underwater, and there's nowhere else like it in the world to this particular cave. These are unique formations to this cave. And there's 1000s of them. And it's a really, really beautiful cave. Not too difficult of a walk. It's technical, scrambling up and down routes, but it's not a long, great distance. So, it's not too physically challenging. And again, we have lots of safety assistance, looking after people on any of the technical sections. Safety is our priority. **Oxalis**, we look after people. And you've only got to read the reports, they are well looked after.

Kerry Newsome: 23:27

In a group of 10. That's [crosstalk] yeah. And it was great to hear that you've got support staff, like seven to 10 people, and then you've got people carrying your luggage and food and things like that, which is awesome. But out of that 10 people, give me an age break up, like immediately think of young people, taking the biggest chunk. But you alluded to me the other day, that it's more than 30 to 55. Is that correct?

Howard Limbert: 24:02

That's correct. It's generally that sort of age. We've had everybody from 16 up to 80, doing our tours, including [crosstalk].

Kerry Newsome: 24:09

Yeah, but at that end, what's the biggest chunk of people?

Howard Limbert: 24:13

Probably 30 to 55, I would say, that's our big chunk of people. We are finding now in COVID time, we get a lot of ladies, more ladies than men. We're about 60 to 70% ladies, this is for **Son Doong** as well. Young ladies from Ho Chi Minh, many, many, many now are coming up to do these and they love it. They just love doing that. Vietnamese are becoming very active. And they're really into this sort of adventure and it's great to see, rather than sticking on a computer that they're getting out-- And now they're finding that they realized they've got something really special. They did not realize that Vietnam has these incredible places. It's only that-- it started to go out to the world, that they realized that these are unique places, that are nowhere else in the world. And it's in their own country.

Kerry Newsome: 25:07

It's a funny realization too, that for me sometimes the Vietnamese and, I mean this with the deepest respect, when they see the European or the Westerner, I think that the place is great, then they decided to look at it with new eyes.

Howard Limbert: 25:24

The thing that Vietnamese really like, is the quality. Because let's be perfectly honest, some of the tools that are available in Vietnam and some parts of Asia are not the highest standard for safety. And they're really concerned about that. And Vietnamese love **Oxalis**, because they realize it's a very high standard of safety. And that's why they keep coming back and telling their friends and they keep coming back. Because of that standard. Because it is- we like to keep that quality of tools, you might pay a few dollars more, but you get better quality food and better-quality service, better quality equipment, and they understand that, that's why they keep coming back.

26:09

So, all our equipment is imported. All our caving ropes, all our harnesses, every safety equipment is imported from France, from the UK, Switzerland, because I've used it and know it's well. I know it will work, rather than buying something that might have been imported as a copy from China. So, we don't do that, ours is imported from Europe, we pay a bit more, you generally get better quality. Yeah, we've got **Hang Tien**. two-day, this involves three really big

caves, some of the biggest caves, that we do outside of **Son Doong**. There's no swimming in this particular tour in the cave. So, this appeals to some people, that are not the strongest swimmers, but we do have rivers and pools by the campsite. So, it's very nice in hot weather to go in there.

26:59

But actually, in the cave, some people a little bit worried about swimming in caves. Other people love the idea of swimming in caves. So, this is a term that's very popular in people, a little bit apprehensive. We also have a, if the river is high inside the cave, we have a flying fox, which is quite exciting, you put harnesses on and you are 15 meters above this roaring river. And you clip into two big stainless-steel wires, and you zip across the river, because you get across the river in high water. So, we look after the safety there.

27:31

That's very, very popular. It's quite a tough tour. It's not the easy tour, involves quite a difficult walk out. But people like this sort of thing. They like a challenge. They don't like just a stroll in the park, they like to feel, they are doing something [crosstalk] these fantastic places, rather than drive into them and just seeing them, snap! snap! We're looking for people who like nature, we're not after people who just want to take a single picture and walk out, we are after people who enjoy the whole experience, mixing with the different cultures, the porters and seeing people and enjoying after you've had a meal, having a bit of a chat and fun with a pause. And this is why it's so appealing to many, many people throughout the world.

Kerry Newsome: 28:16

Three days, Howard. So, we've got a little bit more time.

Howard Limbert: 28:19

Well, three-days are now becoming our most popular tour. People realize, you see so much more. The longer you've got, the better. And we do find now, people are coming to this part of Vietnam, central Vietnam, realize, it's the best part of Vietnam or nature. So, they book their tours. Most importantly, they book them beforehand. And then they-- the other activities are around this. So, our three and four-day tours are our most popular tours. So, you got to book in advance really for these tours, you can't just turn up and go on a tour. And people decide to do these tours. And then they'll book their -- Hội An, Hạ Long Bay, etc., around this. And so many people are so disappointed when they go to the other places, and say, "I wish, we would have stayed longer, we should have done another tour." Because it's what they think Vietnam is, it's peaceful, beautiful people very clean, very tidy. And when they get to the other places, they tend to be a lot more touristic and a lot more people around.

29:27

They are beautiful, there is no doubt about it, it's beautiful, but if you're into nature, and wanting to see genuine Vietnam, try and spend a bit of time and book in advance. So, our three-day tours, which again are very, very popular, can give you more time to see the places and a little bit more relaxed. And the first one is the **Tu Lan** three-day. So, this involves around seven caves, all completely different, some are dry, with fantastic formations, great for opportunities. Now, I must mention this now. In all our caves, our guides, every guide, you'll always have an English-speaking guide on every tour, fluent English-speaking guide. They're absolutely top class at doing photography. So many people now come along with a cell phone, we can get wonderful shots for everybody, because we bring special lighting into the caves. And we've done a lot of teaching of our guides, how to do photography, and our guides have become particularly good at getting excellent photographs in caves, not just selfies. We're talking wonderful shots of the cave.

Kerry Newsome: 30:36

So, these seven caves, is this dry and wet--

Howard Limbert: 30:40

Dry and wet, are absolutely dry with fantastic stalagmites, stalactites, everything, and some are wet, where you'll be swimming through the caves, going all the way through in rivers. And it's great having this variety. This is what's popular about it. And the camp size in this particular thing is deep in the jungle, always next to a river, pool and waterfalls. So, on an evening after you've done your caving, dive in the rivers, swimming, have a bit of fun, we often have paddle boards and things around, so people can enjoy themselves. Because as you know, Vietnam is quite warm. Certainly, after March, you want to be in the water. It's really nice. You don't worry about getting cold in Vietnam.

Kerry Newsome: 31:31

I have been called in Vietnam, but in the north.

Howard Limbert: 31:34

Yeah, in the north, and certainly around January, it can get a bit chilly. It's definitely glamping. They're super, super tense, big four mattresses really thick. It's like on a bed, you have a pillow, a lovely-- I mean, it's all made up, ready, clean every time, new every time that you go in. Beautiful.

Kerry Newsome: 31:54

I hope you're enjoying the show with Howard, as we explore the caves. We are now going to start to talk about three-days and four-days in a tour program with **Oxalis**. And in this area, we start to maybe expand a little bit into the jungle, experience the caves themselves, some of the experiences that you can expect to have around campsite, etc. How it's going to give us plenty of detail. And of course, the pièce de résistance, the **Son Doong** cave itself. Please stay tuned, lots more to come.

32:41

So, Howard, we're up to the second tour that you run for three-days.

Howard Limbert: 32:48

The second tour is very different from the first tour. It involves quite a lot of jungle trekking. It's for people who want to see more jungle and perhaps less caves. We see four caves on this tour, and they are really big, impressive caves. But what's very popular is the jungle trekking and the campsite. Spectacular remote campsites, again next to rivers in gorgeous, gorgeous areas. Very, very popular for people, who especially don't want to do a lot of swimming in the caves. There's a small number of people who are a little bit worried about swimming in a cave. I don't know why, because they are well looked after, everybody who swims, but some people are a little bit wary about the field is not for them. So, this is a track, quite a difficult track. And so, you've got to be relatively fit to do this particular tour because the jungle trekking is a little bit demanding, climbing quite a lot of hills. And it's in a jungle. So, it's still a bit rocky and slippery in places. So, it's very, very popular. It's become incredibly popular this tour.

Kerry Newsome: 33:58

I would think, it would be popular with the European market in particular.

Howard Limbert: 34:02

Absolutely. It has been. But we're-- Yeah, we're finding a lot of people, who like to do this tour. The caves are spectacular, but that's only one section of it. They love the campsites, the remote, beautiful campsites.

Kerry Newsome: 34:15

And what's the name of that tour? What's that one?

Howard Limbert: 34:18

Hang Tien, three-day tour.

Kerry Newsome: 34:23

Okay. Alright, so now we come up, we've got four-days. Now, I just want to preface, before you begin this again to people, when we're saying four-days, that's four days of the tour. You need to allow then your day before and your day after. So really, you're looking at six days and you need to consider that for all of the other ones that Howard's talking about as well. Because you'd be doing yourself a real disfavor by not and let's face it, it might not be a place that you might get back to again very soon. Although Howard is shooting me in the foot with that and saying, he's getting a lot of repeat visitors, but certainly too-

35:07

So, to do it in a way that you can really enjoy it, that you're not pushed for time, you don't feel like the buzzers on you. And you've got to rush back. So, **Phong Nha** is really opening up, and I think that you would do yourself and the people that you're traveling with, because everyone kind of deals with exhaustion, and chewing up some energy doing these things, it can be quite tiring, I'm thinking, most people be lights out by seven o'clock or eight o'clock at night, because they're pretty exhausted after the day. And you are taking in all that beautiful oxygen and fresh air and just all that beautiful natural wildlife, so that can actually wear you out. So definitely give yourself those days either side. All right now, Howard, take us on the four-day expedition.

Howard Limbert: 36:06

Before I do that, I would like to say that all our tours, even the one-day to start quite early in the morning. So, to get to your point, it is useful to come the day before because most of our tours will start at 7:30, we'll leave 7:30, drive to the drop off by so it's quite an early start, then you might not get back until five, six o'clock in the evening. And like you said, you may be a little bit weary. So, you don't want to be getting on a bus, train, plane that time and now you will maybe-- so we do strongly advise coming before and afterwards. And all our four-day tours, which leads on to, we supply a hotel resort before and afterwards, it is part of the tour.

Kerry Newsome: 36:53

So that's included in it.

Howard Limbert: 36:54

It's all included, including pickup from Đồng Hới, the airport, the train station, wherever, pickup and drop-off, everything's included from, once you land, everything's included all the way to--

Kerry Newsome: 37:08

This is your five-star tour, isn't it?

Howard Limbert: 37:10

Yeah, these are the top tours, the four-day tours, because the four days, you really must be there the day before, in you really don't want to be leaving that evening. Because you've had a full four days and all four-day tours- well, we have a party afterwards on all the four-day tours. And then, we would have like a- as Vietnamese call it, a gala dinner. So, we have a meal and the guides and some of the porters will come along and have a bit of a celebration.

Kerry Newsome: 37:36

I'm sure, there's lots of experiences to share.

Howard Limbert: 37:40

Things I can tell you about that. Yeah.

Kerry Newsome: 37:42

What's that- "What goes on tours, stays on tours." That kind of thing. [crosstalk] absolutely.

Howard Limbert: 37:49

With **Son Doong** tour, that's slightly different, and that you must have a briefing the night before the tour, we have to go to make sure people understand what they are going into. So, we have a full briefing which lasts about 45 minutes-an hours, then we have a meal with all the customers, before we go. It gives them an introduction what they are going into, because you never know, people that always read. I can't believe that people don't read the website, and the frequently asked questions. Because the paying a lot of money. I would ask questions. I would look at the website. People come along and have no idea.

Kerry Newsome: 38:27

Why do you think I'm doing a podcast, Howard? Yeah.

Howard Limbert: 38:30

[crosstalk] Just don't do it.

Kerry Newsome: 38:31

Yeah, I'm hoping the podcast is an easy way for people to consume the information in a way that's entertaining without too dry and too boring, etc. But they get the important points across and then they can go and delve deeper. There's enough Google out there for everybody to go digging away and getting all the nitty gritty. And that's not what my podcast is about. It's about talking to real people with real experiences. And that's why I'm loving what you're putting down. So, talk us through those four days. What options?

Howard Limbert: 39:08

Okay, we have three four-day tours. These are very popular. And I'll do the first one, which is **Son Doong**. This, I don't really have to say anything about it. Because so much is out there in the world now. But this is the ultimate tour that we arrange.

Kerry Newsome: 39:30

It's essential.

Howard Limbert: 39:31

Yeah, this is what pulls everybody to **Phong Nha**. And this is where our idea- We use **Son Doong** as a promotion. So, everybody reads about **Son Doong**, they see all the pictures, go, "I want to see that." But they can't afford it. So, they come along and do the other tours. It's like Nepal, Mount Everest, people come to Nepal, because it's got the biggest mountain, but they'll go see other things very, very similar things. We tried to set up the to promote tourism in the area, and it seems to have done very well. And it is the ultimate tour. It's in the world's largest cave. But this is not what people will leave and talk about and tick: "I have done the world's largest cave." Because it is absolutely unique. There's nowhere else like in the world. In the cave, you get situations that you will not see anywhere else. You'd see jungle and animals inside the cave. Big jungle inside the cave. Now that normally doesn't happen in caves, because these huge skylights come in. Incredibly spectacular.

Kerry Newsome: 40:37

And what animals do you see?

Howard Limbert: 40:40

We see everything from-- we have our own species in there. We found seven new species in the cave. That's only in **Son Doong**, nowhere else in the world. Such as certain white fish, white spiders, white centipedes, white crayfish, white- what else-- They are all white, basically white things, they are seven things. They are generally small, obviously, because they've got to evolve. There are not many creatures, very clean **Son Doong**, amazing. There's no bugs, any nasty things. It's because of the two big holes in the cave. And that involved-- that allows wind to come through. So, it's always pristine. So, you expect when you go in jungle and caves,

it'll be horrible, nasty creatures. No, there's very, very few in all our caves, they are spectacular, like that. Everybody's really worried about, [sysco 41:32] when will it be musky? No, you don't get any! Perfect! Perfect! for camping is really, really good.

Kerry Newsome: 41:39

That's exciting for me.

Howard Limbert: 41:41

I mean, I've been in a lot of caves.

Kerry Newsome: 41:44

[crosstalk] carry me away.

Howard Limbert: 41:46

Yeah, the horror. No, it's really nice. I mean, it's really special. **Son Doong** is the number one. I do believe, it's the number one adventure tour in the world. I have taken six people, who have climbed Mount Everest, to the top of Mount Everest, through **Son Doong**. And each and every one of them said, "**Son Doong** is a better experience than climbing Mount Everest." Because of the situation you get. They're all blown away. I can say all this now, because I know every single person who has ever been in **Son Doong**, will say, it's the best thing they've ever done. There's nothing like it. It's so unique. So, it's a wonderful thing. This is what I do most of the time, I look after customers and look after the safety in **Son Doong**. And on every tour, there's one of the original explorers goes along with the team. So, myself, my wife, and some of the original team, that first explored **Son Doong** will go as a safety expert. So, we can tell stories about how it was explored. As well as looking after the people.

Kerry Newsome: 42:55

I'm just so excited when I realized that you were part of that English group of explorers that actually discovered the cave, that is kind of far out real unreal as it is, because I've been reading about this stuff for years now and talking about it at promotional events and things like that. And to think that you were one of them, that was just a little bit of fine detail, Howard, that you could have just expanded on from the very beginning, when we started talking. That is just incredible. Who discovers caves these days? I mean, there's a lot of the world, that they think there isn't anything else to discover. And here you were in 2009. And as I heard, 'stumbled across' or 'stumbled into' and found this amazing cave. I mean, I've heard descriptions as in that you could fit Big Ben inside. Is it true?

Howard Limbert: 43:55

Easily. Yeah, it's huge. One place, it's 440 meters tall. That's quite big.

Kerry Newsome: 44:02

How many storeys building is that?

Howard Limbert: 44:04

I have no idea. People are asking. I have no idea. But I just know it's huge.

Kerry Newsome: 44:08

440 meters. I'll ask my husband. He'll know that.

Howard Limbert: 44:12

That's the height from the river to the top. That's the height.

Kerry Newsome: 44:15

And from beginning to end. How long is it?

Howard Limbert: 44:21

The whole cave is just over nine kilometers long. And we take customers around seven kilometers of that cave. We don't do all the little side passages. We do the main huge, impressive part of the cave. There's a lot of variety. It's not just a- it's not a walk in the park in **Son Doong**. Because it is [crosstalk].

Kerry Newsome: 44:40

No, so what's that level of difficulty?

Howard Limbert: 44:43

That's our highest level of difficulty. The highest we do, because these technical sections, there's a descent of 80 meters, that's quite steep. And then there's an ascent of 95 meters. So, using technical equipment, you are totally safe, you're on lifelines, I'll stay all the time. But you've got to put a bit of effort in yourself. It's nice if customer does a little bit effort, and we don't have to pull them all the way up these climbs, and people like it as a challenge, so we do help them. But we like them to [crosstalk].

Kerry Newsome: 45:17

I bet; they find a few muscles they didn't know they had.

Howard Limbert: 45:20

Yeah, yeah, they ache a little bit afterwards in places, they use different muscles in caving. And it's not all big and walking. Some of it is smaller, where you have to go through a little climb, and you do a lot of up and down. It's not flat. There's a lot of up and down and rocky terrain. And it helps if you've got a little bit of sense of balance. If you got [crosstalk] it's good.

Kerry Newsome: 45:44

Yes, yeah, actually, balance was one of the key things that Ben Mitchell mentioned to me, he says, his mother has done it.

Howard Limbert: 45:52

She did. Yeah.

Kerry Newsome: 45:53

Yeah, and he said that, she struggled a little bit, but he said, for the most part, her feedback to him was, "You've got to have good balance." Like if you get- Yeah, so, no middle ear problems or anything on the day?

Howard Limbert: 46:09

No, no, it helps, not to have that. I mean, what we find is, small people do better than tall people, because they've got a lower center of gravity. So Vietnamese, well, they are remarkably good at balance.

Kerry Newsome: 46:22

I'd fit in with Vietnamese really well, I'm only 5ft 1.

Howard Limbert: 46:25

It's really easy. If you're small. I mean, I'm sorry, it does help. It does help being smaller.

Kerry Newsome: 46:30

I can understand the revelation that you would get, like the adrenaline, and all of that, and experience like this would give you. So, I hope I'm transferring that through this podcast, because I think that would be- that would last for ages after you finished it that, you would just be so high from it.

Howard Limbert: 46:53

Well, all the caves in **Phong Nha** are all big. There are no small caves. They're all large, large cave. So, there's no claustrophobic problems and things like that. It's in a different scale, the place has got the largest caves in the world. It's the number one caving area in the world.

Kerry Newsome: 47:11

A few final facts from Howard, as we wrap up the show and finishing off with the **Son Doong** cave itself, a little bit of insight, also into just how tourism is working in the area in a very positive way, just the impact that **Oxalis**, as the main tour company to be running these tours. In fact, you cannot do **Son Doong** with any other company other than **Oxalis**. So, while you may think that this show is actually an **Oxalis** advertisement, it's not. But I feel very lucky, very privileged to have Howard on as part of the expedition team that did discover **Son Doong**. And give us the insights into the tours that **Oxalis** run. Let's get back to Howard, now as he concludes our episode on the **Phong Nha** caves.

Howard Limbert: 48:12

Son Doong is the most important part of it, it's very limited the number of people, it's a rule, a requirement. We're only allowed maximum, a 1000 people in a year. And the group size is maximum of 10. That goes into, that's only 100 tours in a year. And you've got to book ahead, it's not something that you will be able to come along at the last minute.

Kerry Newsome: 48:38

How far in advance? I heard at one point; you have to book a year in advance.

Howard Limbert: 48:43

Sometimes up to a year in advance, like I know next year will be sold out up until at least June. So, we'll have a few places, a few maybe 100 places left June, July and August. But a lot of people then will book the following year. Because this is something that they'll sort the holiday around. It's so special, so unique. They will book in advance this particular tour, and then they'll sort the rest of the holiday around it. Most of our four-day tour people do that. And you've got to do it in **Son Doong**, because very limited people are allowed to go in, it's for conservation and protection of the caves.

Kerry Newsome: 49:23

For sure. Okay, so in the four-day package, we've got one other tour, that you offer.

Howard Limbert: 49:29

Well, we have at the moment, but I'm going to tell you about a new tour as well. But the other four-day tour that we run, maybe two or three times a week, is what we call the **Tu Lan** four-day tour. This covers all the caves in **Tu Lan** and all **Hang Tien** caves together. It's a physically tough tour and people must have a good degree of fitness. This does involve abseiling if they wish into a river, swimming in caves, dry caves. In fact, everything is involved in this tour. It's a really, really great tour is this, and we run it from January to the end of August. It's again- it's popular because it's a four-day tour, we find in post-COVID, most people want to spend a long time, rather than just the odd day, if the traveling all this distance, they want to spend a long time in the area,

50:28

It's a great choice, **Tu Lan** and obviously, it's a lot cheaper than **Son Doong**, you see numerous caves, I think, it'd be the region of 10, 12 caves are completely different, magic campsites. But it is tough. It's not for everybody. It is a little bit tough. And it's probably more popular with a slightly younger people, because of the lack a little bit of a challenge. So maybe it's slightly younger, we still get people up to 60 doing it, but it is a little bit of a tough toll. And I would expect people to have some degree of fitness, you've got to have done something you've got to done quite a bit of trekking before you go on this particular tour. And the last of our tours is not up and running at the moment. But it will be end of February, March. And this is a--

51:21

22, yeah, I lost track of tours and years with COVID. Yeah, this is going to be called **Hang Ba**. Now this tour is going to involve six caves, that nobody has been in. But the original explorers, who I was in 1994. I was fortunate to discover these caves, and they were really remote in 1994. Nowadays, it's possible to get into this area with a four- or five-hour jungle walk. Now this may be not for you. Because there will be leeches on the way, leeches++. But leeches don't cause any problems. But it's quite difficult walk-in and walk-out. But the caves are outrageously spectacular. They're massive. They're so unique and nobody's ever visited these caves. Photography will be tremendous. We'll get sunbeam in certain gifts, which is very, very nice to stand in a sunbeam in a certain cave.

Kerry Newsome: 51:22

22.

Howard Limbert: 52:34

Again, lots of swimming, swimming in the beautiful valleys, campsite, specky, really specky campsites, next to beaches. And again, we do have paddleboard, so people can use paddle boards at the campsite and in certain parts of the caves. You cannot do nothing before you do, you should be able to do a few treks, we advise people to have done some trekking, hopefully multi-day trekking. So, if you've done that, you'll be fine. I think this was the most popular tour after **Son Doong**. I think it's fabulous city position. I know this area quite well. And it is really unique, there will be a lot of wildlife because it's deep into the jungle. So, there's good chance to scene monkeys and things like that in this area. We see them also at **Son Doong**, but I think also in this area, we'll see monkeys because it is quite remote. So, I've got a great hope for this tour. And I'll be amazed if-- when people go on the tour, they don't come out and are blown away by it. Really blown away.

Kerry Newsome: 53:43

So, this is going to be brand new. So, this is for February, March 22.

Howard Limbert: 53:49

Yeah, I've got to get back to Vietnam and get in the jungle and set it all up. We've got a good idea. We've done a bit of work last year. But it's a rainy season at the moment. So, we cannot get into the jungle. But soon as a rainy season is over. By the end of November, we will go in, set the camp, set up the area and work out a proper four-day tour for people, which I guarantee will be spectacular. And people are already asking about. Because many people now, even though we've got lots and lots of tours, especially Vietnamese have done all our tour. And they've done them twice. And now they said, "Can you give us another tour?" And they always want to come back to **Oxalis**, because it's quite good, they look after people, and they really like it.

54:36

So, this is our new tour, that we're hoping to-- Well, we've got permission from the parks and the authorities to start a new tour. We just need to actually set it up and sort out the finer points of exactly where the campsites are going to be, and the exact route through the jungle. People talk about tourism, and they always feel that it's detrimental. But what we've seen with the tours that we run, because of tourism, there is a lot more wildlife. So, tourism has helped conservation. Now that's really unusual. And the reason is that we employ, the people are used to the illegal activities, simple as that. So, we employ the best jungle man.

55:27

The people who used to go out, into the jungle collecting animals, collecting the rare wood, they're all employed by **Oxalis** now, because we decided, we wanted the best people. And these are the best people in the jungle for carrying and looking after people. And it's made a

huge difference. Anybody who comes on tour, are really helping the local community. We employ over 98% local people in **Oxalis**- are 500 people, we have to have one or two from Ho Chi Minh, and Ha Noi, we- special qualifications that we need for certain posts, but the vast majority of people who are from that area, and so they enjoy working and it's a very young company, a lot of young people work, so great company to work for. And it's great fun work in that. And it's helping all the money comes back into the local community.

56:08

And I'm not bullying **Oxalis**, but the Vietnamese people are lovely helping other people. We give a lot of money to help the local people, be it toilets, floating houses, children, helping people out. I think we give something like underneath \$80,000, last year to heritage. And this is purely from tourists, buying T shirts, buying pants, things like that, all- every single penny of the money goes back into foundations that we have, which I really like to see. That's why, I'm still working in **Oxalis**, rather than retiring and living a nice life. I enjoy being over there, because it's doing good things for the community and helping people, which I think is very important.

Kerry Newsome: 57:08

Very important. And I'm really glad to hear that. And I've heard that from other people in **Phong Nha** as well. So, I'm just really glad to have you on the show, Howard, for your time for your insights, that everything I've learned a lot as well. I'll let you go and enjoy the rest of your day. I know you're off to Iceland, you lucky duck. But thank you again for being on the show and I hope to talk with you again soon.

Howard Limbert: 57:35

Thank you, Kerry. It's been a pleasure.