



What About Vietnam— S5- E20 – Saigon Unseen: The Sights You Didn't Know You Were Missing

Kerry Newsome: Xin chào and welcome to the What About Vietnam podcast. Well, people, here we are six weeks away from Christmas. I don't know about you, but I'm wondering where did the year go? It's been a terrific year. It's been a big year. It's been a busy year. I hope you've enjoyed the programs that we've been able to put on. I really want to extend a big thank you to everyone that follows the show. that sends me your feedback. I hope you gain some information to help you in your trip planning. As you know, I also offer the services of trip planning and I really do love putting those trips together for people and please reach out at whataboutvietnam.com for those services. Today we've got a really great program. I did something really different in this program. I took the risk of recording in an outside location, which is a restaurant in Saigon called The Refinery. While 90% of the recording was good, there is a little bit of background noise. And just as a bit of a heads up, I wanted to just ask for your forgiveness for a couple of spots towards the end of the show that aren't so great. I've done my best to edit those out, but if you'll just forgive those tiny little pieces there that aren't at my normal 100% perfect level that I would normally want to give. However, it hasn't taken anything away from the show.

Just on the show schedule now for 24, we have this one and then one more before we wrap up for the end of the year. I will be taking an extensive break. The first show back for 25 will be at the end of January. So, you know, this show to go, one more, which is another great show to finish up the year, so hang in there. We've still got lots to tell you about Vietnam before we wrap

up for 24. Now, launching into today's show, it was a really great opportunity, as I said, to try something different, to record outside. I got to meet this person who I've been following for quite a long time, and I'd like to tell you about my guest, Matt Cowan.

Matt is the founder of [The Bureau Asia](#), a media channel based in Saigon that he's been creating travel F&B and lifestyle content since 2018. You can find his content all over the web on YouTube, social media, podcast platforms and his website [thebureauasia.com](#). Prior to becoming a media mogul, he was, I'm sure, a comedian in his past life. Matt was the managing editor of Saigon-based English language magazine Word Vietnam for a couple of years after he threw in his career as an educator at RMIT Vietnam, an Australian university with a campus in Saigon. He's also moonlighted for a number of magazines over the years, including Travel Plus Leisure Asia, Silver Chris, and that's your Singapore Airlines in-flight magazine, and others. And he still remains a pen for hire. If you wanted to reach out to him for his insights, his knowledge in the travel sector, F&B and lifestyle content, he would be your go-to guy. He's originally from Australia, from the Murray Valley region, which is just on the border of New South Wales and Victoria for Australians. So, you can imagine, and these are his words, he can be bought off very easily with a good cheese. Matt's been living in Saigon since 2010. and in that time has witnessed and reported on Vietnam's dynamic growth over the past 15 years. I got to meet him and his wife and it was very easy to tell that they really love Vietnam. In talking about his Vietnamese language skills, he's as bad as I am, it's an ongoing process. He says his knowledge of Vietnamese history and culture is getting better, however, not great at remembering names, dates and significant events. I told him that's okay. That's what Google's for. Matt loves Vietnam. He loves its people. And I think you're going to get a lot out of this show. We kind of really clicked. I loved my time with him. He's got some great insights to some parts of the city, which, you know, don't normally fit on your traditional visit map. So, you know, don't worry about trying to keep up with the show. There's lots of links to take you to this information. So, you're going to be able to access it easily when it comes to your visit and I just think you're just going to love the show.

Let's welcome him to What About Vietnam. So here we are at the refinery in downtown Saigon and I'm very, very lucky this afternoon because I'm sitting here with a gentleman by the name of Matt Cowan.

Matt Cowan: Matt, say hello. Yeah, hi. Hi, Kerry. Thanks for having me. It's an honor to be on your very special podcast that I've been listening to for a long time, by the way. I do tune in, as you say.

Kerry Newsome: Well, like that in itself is an amazing feat.

Matt Cowan: Yeah. I just hope I don't bore your listeners today. That's all.

Kerry Newsome: No, we decided before this, you were the funny one. Remember, I was the serious one. You were very kind. No, you just have to be funny. Yeah, well, you're putting the pressure on.

Matt Cowan: Yeah, yeah.

Kerry Newsome: Hey guys, I just want you to, I don't know, get a better feel for Saigon in the sense that you have to dig a bit deeper to kind of get to the nitty gritty interesting kind of places. And interestingly enough, Mr Funny here tends to do that. scratch the surface. I said scratch decor.

Matt Cowan: You've got to be careful though when you scratch here in this country. I've learnt that over the years. It may end up a trip to the doctor if you scratch a little too hard.

Kerry Newsome: Yes, yes. Now be careful. So we're sitting in this beautiful, it's actually a French restaurant called [The Refinery](#). And I've been here several times. It was Matt's decision to come here so I said yes to that very quickly.

Matt Cowan: A little bit of history.

Kerry Newsome: a little bit of history and I'm going to let Matt talk kind of about the bit of the history stuff because he's far cleverer than me.

Matt Cowan: I'm actually not a historian. No. And I'm not actually very good with details.

Kerry Newsome: No, but you're interesting. See, so that's okay.

Matt Cowan: You can stay. That's two points already. I don't care. You can come back.

Kerry Newsome: It's my show. You're on my show. Remember? Now over to you to talk a bit about this area.

Matt Cowan: Thanks for dropping that on me. We're in the refinery as you said and just to give a little bit of background to the refinery. The refinery these days, if you say to people who live here, if you say, oh we're going to go to the refinery. It's a restaurant and bar. It's like a French brasserie, I think you would call it. It's like a French bistro kind of place. And I believe it's been open since about 2006. So, it's coming up on the 20 years. Nearly as long as I've been here, I think. No, 15. I've been here 15 years. And it's still here. Amazing. Yeah. And this was this precinct. was really where all the expats at that time would hang out. This building here that we're sitting in, I think it was actually part of the actual, well it's called the refinery because it was an opium refinery back in the day. So I believe in the late 1800s it was where the French government began refining opium and did whatever they did to it for consumption. So I think they imported most of it from India at the time. I think there was a little bit of opium grown here, and hence that's why the name refinery. And just for your listeners, if they do decide, if you guys do decide to come and eat here in this little precinct, There's a gate at the front on Hai Ba Trung Street. It's 74 Hai Ba Trung opposite the park higher. And if you look up at the top of the gate, there's still the opium motif that that was made out of, I don't know what, cast iron back in the day, I guess. And that's been there ever since this place has been open. So, what are we talking? How's your maths, Kerry? Oh, what are you talking about? 120, 160 years or something like that. So, yeah, and this... Because it's off the street.

Kerry Newsome: That's what people need to understand. Yeah, there's a gate. There's an archway.

Matt Cowan: Yeah.

Kerry Newsome: And you have to walk down this little alley.

Matt Cowan: That's right. Yeah.

Kerry Newsome: And there's quite a collection of restaurants here.

Matt Cowan: Yeah, yeah.

Kerry Newsome: And it's kind of the first on your left.

Matt Cowan: It's a very typical sort of gate of that period. So, if you can imagine back in the day when everything was horse and cart and that sort of thing. So, you know, they had to bring the horses and carts in here to pick up stuff. And when you're walking around town in the older parts of town, you still see a lot of gates like this. But this one in particular is quite unique because it was part of the opium refinery. And as I said, the cast iron motif at the top still has the opium poppies, which is quite intricate and quite beautiful. And I think that you can see it there, Kerry, but I'm just pointing out to Kerry here, there's a, what do you call those, a blind and the logo for the refinery is actually an opium poppy.

Kerry Newsome: If, these walls could talk.

Matt Cowan: Oh yeah. A little bit further down, there's another restaurant, a Vietnamese restaurant there that your listeners might want to check out one day and it's called Hoa Thuc, which basically means flowers.

Kerry Newsome: And there's a nice little bahn mi stand just next door. It's kind of like, it looks like a little caravan that they kind of lift up the doors and make bahn mi from. I love the decor here too.

Matt Cowan: Oh, it's a great little spot. It's really cute. I actually came here for lunch a few months ago because with We'll probably get to it eventually, you know, the development of Vietnam and Saigon over the last decade or so has meant that I haven't come to these places so much and now that I've been here a long time, I'm sort of looking to get a little bit more nostalgic, so I came back here for lunch and I walked in and I just went, wow, this is sort of a step back in time, you know, you get a little bit of that French feel. Just before we move on, I was going to mention that back in the day, Mel and I, my wife's here, you know, taking photos of us and that, upstairs was a nightclub. So we used to go up there. It was called Vasco's nightclub. And that was the place where all the expats used to get together on whatever night of the week it was. And yeah, and there weren't too many places to go.

Kerry Newsome: Typically back in those days, possibly the place to go would have been above the Caravelle, the rooftop bar there. That was pretty the hot spot to go for a nightlife and a lot of expats, etc. But yeah, keep going.

Matt Cowan: Yeah, definitely anywhere that's a five-star hotel back in the day, you know, like when I first came here. So yeah, 2010, the beginning of 2010, there wasn't a hell of a lot of things to do even then, you know, we're talking 2010, you know, a weekend sort of staycation was all you could really do and it was go to say the Park Hyatt or the Sheraton or the Caravelle, have their buffet lunch and then hang by the pool for the rest of the day. There wasn't too much to do but there's a lot of things that have changed, lots of things to do now.

Kerry Newsome: And I think maybe there was a preconception that you know, you fly into Saigon, and really it was the stepping point to other places in Vietnam. It was just too city-fied, people were overwhelmed with its busyness, et cetera, and there really wasn't enough info out there. As you said, 2010, it wasn't as civilized and as cosmopolitan, would you say it is now?

Matt Cowan: Yep, for sure. Something happened around 2014, I think it was, I think, the Vietnamese government became signatories to a number of international trade agreements. So that sort of opened things up a bit. And then we saw the craft beer boom sort of around then. 2014 was when Pasteur Street first came onto the scene. Some of your listeners might be some of your listeners who are beer drinkers. I'm sure there's a few. They're probably familiar with Pasta Street and also the restaurants and that that came as well and it just built and built and built until the pandemic but we won't talk too much about that.

Kerry Newsome: Well we'll have to at some point but I think the evolution of Saigon has been an interesting one as when even now when I'm talking to people and I'm building it into an itinerary and I'm suggesting to stay extra days, there is a little bit of pushback by everyone saying, oh, do we really need to stay there? And I go, just give it a chance. But as you say, it's not on the surface. I mean, you're going to get a list of the, you know, what are the top five things to do that are going to be in you know, the Unification Palace and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But there's a lot more to that. And pretty much, that's why you're here, Matt, because I've been following you and how you've been, as you say, scratching below the surface to uncover the really cute, natty places. And that's what I want my listeners to get about this place. So knock yourself out with those places.

Matt Cowan: Well, I think you hit the nail on the head. To a large extent, Ho Chi Minh City is still seen as that city where you either fly into or fly out of. I get that. And as a long-term resident here, I totally understand, you know. There's motorbikes everywhere. The footpaths are overtaken by motorbikes and street sellers. And if you happen to survive that, you'll roll your ankle. You know, the air quality is not so great. Take your mask off, Kerry. No, she hasn't got a

mask on at the moment. But this time of year moves into, even though it's the best time of the year weather-wise, moving into December, it's also the build-up to Tet, the Tet holiday, and sometimes the air quality gets pretty bad, so January sort of into February it can, because the factories really the manufacturing places nearby really whip into gear before Tet. So that can be an issue and I get that, but having said all that, I still believe Saigon, Ho Chi Minh City, is the best city in Vietnam. Wow, big statement. I'm a little bit biased, but I've had an opportunity to scratch beneath the surface and find out a little bit more. I was thinking about this on the way in, and it may be nothing new, but it's all about the people. Saigon is about the people. If you can in some way connect with the people, your stay is just going to be so much better. How do you do that? Well, I suppose come with an open mind and try things.

Kerry Newsome: And I think what I like most about what you've been doing with your YouTube and with your podcast is talking to people about the history of this place, but in finding it in places like cafes and architecture and kind of the ambiance.

Matt Cowan: The sort of the Indochina kind of thing.

Kerry Newsome: Lost in translation kind of guy thing.

Matt Cowan: Well, I mean that, how do I say this? Vietnam was colonized by the French. And so these days to sort of glorify the colonial days is perhaps not the thing to do. You know, it wouldn't be happening in Australia probably or in other sort of Western countries around the world. But we've got a, we're up to Generation Z now, I think it is, or Generation whatever they are.

Kerry Newsome: I get lost in the alphabet.

Matt Cowan: And that, you know, that was a million years ago for those guys and so what we, a little bit of a trend we're seeing at the moment is new cafes and bars opening up, cocktail, there's a lot of cocktail bars here by the way, if you love cocktails, I mean, you've come to the right town.

Kerry Newsome: Yeah, I've just spent two weeks here so I think I can vouch for that.

Matt Cowan: Oh, that's why you've got the bloodshot eyes.

Kerry Newsome: Thanks, Matt. Now you know why I stick to audio and I don't do visual. So tell your wife to turn that camera off.

Matt Cowan: But yeah, a lot of, you know, when you come here, you'll discover a lot of cafes and bars that are fairly new and they're harking back to that Indochina vibe, which to me, I love. To be honest, yeah. Dark places, all that lovely, you know, the interior, the French vibes, you know. So, there's a whole lot to discover here in that sense and despite what you hear probably on social media and in the media that, you know, so many of the French buildings are getting torn down and all that sort of stuff. There are actually still a lot of the big apartment blocks that

were French built. They're looking a bit tired and weary and stuff like that and a bit smelly. But if you take the time to go in off the street, don't mind, remember we were in Chinatown the other day and you said, oh, I feel like I'm prying into their personal life.

Kerry Newsome: Into a neighborhood, into a collective.

Matt Cowan: Yeah, don't worry about that. Head in. head in and get up the stairs and have a look around because what you'll find is you know sort of three to four level apartment blocks that essentially hold communities and I'm talking hundreds of people maybe even thousands and where young people have come in the latest generation has come in and they've either traveled or they're better educated. They've come back to their hometown. They're like, okay, I'm going to open up a coffee shop or I'm going to open up a cocktail bar. And they do it.

Kerry Newsome: Yeah. And one of the most typical ones, which, uh, you know, is like Instagram fave is the cafe building. Right now, if that, you saw that building in the U S or Australia or whatever, it would be demolished. Right. even to get into it and go up the stairs.

Matt Cowan: There were rumors that they were going to pull that down back in the day. Guess what? They haven't. And you know why?

Kerry Newsome: It's because it's turned into a major tourist attraction. But what I think I want to stress with just something that Matt's talking about some of these places, they are kind of down dingy alleys. I don't know where you hang out, Kerry. Yes, you actually do because you and I nodded to a lot of the places that we knew in the last few days.

Matt Cowan: I know nothing.

Kerry Newsome: So, don't give me that. Anyway, but apart from that also, you're not going to see a tourist bus with 40 people pile out in front of it.

Matt Cowan: Yeah, that's right. Yeah, good point.

Kerry Newsome: It's for the people who really hang around and spend some time to delve in that. Now, you can still be in that group with the bus and people and the 25 people and whatever, and you'll see the stock standard, tick, tick, tick, tick, the boxes, et cetera. But that's only a poof dink of what there is. And I think that's what Matt's trying to say in that.

Matt Cowan: I'm just on that apartment, apartment 42, isn't it? On Winway Street. Interesting that you raised that because About two years ago, I did a video with a local architect. He's a little bit older than me, not too much older than me, but lived here all his life, actually lived in District 1 in this neighborhood. And we did a video together about the Continental Hotel, which is quite famous and a lot of your listeners will be aware of. [The Quiet American](#), the novel, and of course the movies, and Graham Greene, who was the author of that, and he famously stayed in room 214, which Mal and I, Mel, my wife, we stayed in that room a couple of years ago, and I did a video in there. did a bit of a walk around, but I also invited my friend who's the architect to come

and talk about the building and talk about the area. Anyway, we've just been in touch and we're going to have lunch next week because we're going to do a video on that very building you're talking about, apartment 42. He's got a lot of knowledge about that and history about that particular building.

Kerry Newsome: And it's a funky building in the sense that, you know, you keep climbing the stairs and, you know, you don't know what you're going to do.

Matt Cowan: You can pay for the lift for anyone who needs a lift. Have you seen that lift, Matt, recently? It's one of those old French style. It's a cage, isn't it? It's a glorified cage.

Kerry Newsome: And then if it got stuck, I'd just, you know, I'd do the stairs. I'll tell you another building is the CatNet building, right next to the new playground. Right. Have you, have you been in there? It's got a Kong cafe right on the corner and it's another mysterious, wild, up, up round stairs.

Matt Cowan: I don't know. I get this wrong all the time. The old CIA building. I don't think it was the CIA building. It was the residences for CIA staff, I believe. Someone will correct us in the comments. But it's the spot where the famous photo where the chopper landed on the day. No, that's not the building.

Kerry Newsome: I know you're showing off. Like, sit down.

Matt Cowan: It's not too far from here actually. We probably should have got a chopper to lift us in. Of course, that's just what we need. Drop us in and we could have done this podcast there.

Kerry Newsome: A little bit of chopper noise in the background just to add more authenticity to us.

Matt Cowan: I don't know if anyone would have heard anyway.

Kerry Newsome: Anyway, the Catinat building, for everyone else who wants a simplified where is it, it's opposite H&M. You cross over the road and you go through this art dealers kind of thing and then you walk up the stairs.

Matt Cowan: Yeah, that's the one where the Comme Café is on the bottom, on the corner, or the Catinat Building is on the corner and there used to be a Cong Café. Cong Café in the building. Yeah. For anyone who's into war history and, you know, the very famous photo that was taken April 29, I think it was, the day before the fall of Saigon. Rooftop is still there. I've been up there. There was a time when you could get up there and you could also pay the security guy to get you up there. Of course you could, Matt.

Kerry Newsome: Yeah. Okay, so moving right along, can we talk a little bit about some of the history that comes through in places like the Opera House and some of the shows they put on there? Because I don't think we talk about that enough. I'll start with the one I know, which is the AO.

Matt Cowan: Oh, I haven't done that one. I haven't been to that in all these years.

Kerry Newsome: But the one you have done is the Tadar. Yeah, Tadar show. So maybe talk to my listeners about the Tadar.

Matt Cowan: It was a little while ago, but an amazing show. Yeah, very Cirque du Soleil. And it's done by a troupe of dance, I suppose you call them a troupe, a troupe of dancers from the Central Highlands, somewhere around near Ducklack, I think, or something like that. And it's just a very acrobatic, How else can I? Systematic, no, acrobatic. The choreography's amazing. The choreography's amazing. And all the props are made out of bamboo, so they're manoeuvring these massive... I don't know, artefacts and yeah, boats and big circular things and whatever else made out of bamboo. And it's super daring. It's eye opening. If you get a chance, make sure you go and see it.

Kerry Newsome: Yeah, I think it's a definite thing to do, which doesn't get mentioned that much.

Matt Cowan: Yeah, funny that.

Kerry Newsome: I mean, there's a massive opera house there that the show is featured on. For everyone listening, just be careful on the dates because it doesn't play every day of the year.

Matt Cowan: It moves around. Sometimes they go on tour. They go overseas.

Kerry Newsome: Yeah, and Hanoi. Yeah, yeah, yeah. But they are part of the same troop which is the A.O. show. I personally think the A.O. show is just a step up. And it's been going a lot longer. But it definitely does move around. And I think the company that runs it is called Lune. I'll put a link in the show notes for people to just check your calendars if you're here. You know, I think the whole family would get something out of it. It's really quite special.

Matt Cowan: Really great chance to see the Opera House as well. And inside a tip, the comfiest seats in town. Oh, that's handy to know. Because there's not many comfy seats around in this city. There's none. So try and get yourself into the Opera House. Just outside the hop-on hop-off bus. I've seen it. I haven't done it. There's a little ticket booth just outside the front of the Opera House.

Kerry Newsome: So you can just wander up there and the buses pull up across the street. I never do on-off buses. I know I should, but I don't. I want to make it hard for myself, obviously. But people say it's a really good summarising opportunity to them to see it. And they don't have to walk in the sweaty day or whatever. They can sit on the top deck and get a suntan.

Matt Cowan: You've got to pick your time of day, otherwise you'd fry. You've got to sit inside. I think I've done it a couple of times now and I think we chose around about, well, depending on the season. So we're moving into the best season for tourists at the moment. Christmas in Saigon is the best time weather-wise and also a little bit of a festive atmosphere as well. The Vietnamese

don't sort of, yeah, they don't celebrated in a religious sense so much and so great time for the double-decker bus and to sit up on top.

Kerry Newsome: And you kind of got to fit it in people because you don't want to miss out on happy hours. You've really got maybe somewhere about three to four maybe do you think? It's about an hour trip, is that right?

Matt Cowan: Yeah, it's about, well actually they've extended it as well. You can go into Chinatown now as well. So I haven't done that yet. But Mel and I have done it, the original one, and I think we went about four o'clock. Again, depending on the time of year. So, we're in Vietnam, we're moving into winter. So, you know, shorter daylight hours. It's usually dark at 6 p.m. anyway, isn't it? Usually around here. Yeah.

Kerry Newsome: And you want it to be dark at 6 p.m.

Matt Cowan: Yeah. So, it's not a bad idea to get the bus at about 4.30 if you can, if there's one going at that stage. So, then it moves into the twilight and then the lights come on.

Kerry Newsome: I think Saigon is a night city. Oh. I think the city... Well, it's a lot easier on the eye. We're in a taxi. In some places, it's a lot, lot easier on the eye because some people kind of come out of the woodwork.

Matt Cowan: Yeah.

Kerry Newsome: Do you know... Yeah, there's some characters that come out.

Matt Cowan: Oh, you know about that. You've just... Oh, they don't get around. Like, seriously. You've just taken one off my list.

Kerry Newsome: I did that the other night with a friend of ours and it turned out to be, yeah. And I'd never done Bowie Vinn either. So it was a big night. So we did Bui Vinh I was like, from the start to the finish, I was, I'd done that in 15 minutes. But I got in early, I got in early, out early.

Matt Cowan: But then we, when then we did the Japan... You might have to go to that hospital you keep telling me about to get some new ears.

Kerry Newsome: Look, I save that for special occasions, that hospital, to get special work done. We can definitely talk about Japan Street, but talk about Chinatown. I loved what we did the other day.

Matt Cowan: Well, this might be where I get to put a little bit of a plug in, because actually I took you on a small section of a walk that I've created. And so, you know, obviously you'll leave a link to that. But people can access that. That's a self-guided walk that you can do. So you don't need anybody. You just access it through one of my websites or whatever, which is easy, and just follow the prompts along. And there's a few little photos and stuff like that, and a few little explanations. And there's a map. Your time's finite, and same with your money and stuff like

that. And so it's like, I don't really want to miss anything. We're calling it Japantown because there's a lot of Japanese sort of small restaurants. If you've been to Japan, you'll know izakayas, so they're sort of little snack bars there. There are, well, you're staring at me earlier, Carrie. Little sort of massage places and little bars where you can, what would you, how would you? No, I don't know how you'd say it, Matt. You would get a companion to sit with you. Buy a companion a drink, not buy a companion. Let's get that straight.

Kerry Newsome: I think you'd buy them for more than just a drink.

Matt Cowan: Well, I don't know. I don't know. I can't comment any further than that. This is a G-rated show. If you want the X-rated version, go to Patreon. No, my website isn't like that. Yes, so a lot of the Japanese expats will live there. So Vietnam has a lot of Japanese workers who come who are in construction. They do the engineering on skyscrapers. They build roads and bridges and stuff like that. So they've been responsible for a lot of the infrastructure development in Vietnam over the last couple of decades. And of course, when you've got groups of people, you want to generally speaking, kind of hang out with your own to a certain extent and get the food and the drink that you're used to and the massages, I suppose, that you're used to from back home. And a little bit of care and attention. And over the years, it's developed into a bit of a Japan town. But before that, We actually used to call it the ghetto because expats new to town would wind up there. That was where there was accommodation. The landlords were used to having foreigners live with them and they sorted out their, you know, their residence stuff there. rental agreements and leases and all that sort of stuff. But over time, over the last decade or so, it's evolved into this sort of almost like a red light entertainment.

Kerry Newsome: Yeah, I was wondering whether those words were going to come out red and light together.

Matt Cowan: Or if you're Japanese listening to this, pink.

Kerry Newsome: It's like a maze, isn't it? It's a rabbit warren of little alleys. We were actually looking for, I think, a famous bar or some guy who was involved in a bar called The Power.

Matt Cowan: Oh, OK.

Kerry Newsome: I saw him on a YouTube channel the other day. And it was nothing like I expected.

Matt Cowan: It looks a bit like a gentleman's bar. Let's put it that way.

Kerry Newsome: Well, there wasn't even any gentleman there.

Matt Cowan: Right.

Kerry Newsome: It was dead as a doornail.

Matt Cowan: What time was that?

Kerry Newsome: Oh, probably about nine.

Matt Cowan: Yeah, a little bit early. Probably a little bit early. Yeah. Yeah. And you're not really the demographic. No, thankfully. But then you moved on to Bui Vien Street, which is the backpacker area, Pham Nhu Lao area.

Kerry Newsome: And that was just, as Matt's saying, you know, that's about ticking a box for me. I literally, from the archway that it begins to the archway, I reckon I hightailed that. I did that in about 15 minutes, 20 minutes. And as you say, demographically, that's not for me either. I stood out like the proverbial.

Matt Cowan: It's worth having a look though, isn't it?

Kerry Newsome: Look, the food here is so diverse. I get challenged with my clients in trying to describe the cuisine and the choices available in Saigon. Like, people say, oh, what happens if I don't like Vietnamese? That won't be a problem because there's Japanese, there's Greek, there's Italian, Like, you name it, it is here in Saigon and good quality and well-priced.

Matt Cowan: Yeah.

Kerry Newsome: There's plenty. So, yeah. So, I think and the cakes are like, I've got a girlfriend who recently had some surgery and as I said, we'll talk about that. But all she could eat was something very Ah, soluble and soft. So, she went for the cake. So, I have got some beautiful places to list out for you to explore as far as cake shops.

Buttery - <https://www.facebook.com/butterycakecafe/>

Ivoire - <https://www.facebook.com/ivoirepastry/>

Matt Cowan: And that's the French history still hanging around, you know. It's a beautiful thing. And other things that are sort of French that you'll find, and especially deep into the outer districts as well, are flans.

Kerry Newsome: Oh, okay.

Matt Cowan: Yeah, there's a long tradition of flan here. So, the little, they're like the little custard tarts and stuff like that. Yes. You get the caramel flan or whatever. So, you'll be driving, you don't really see them so much in District 1, District 3, but if you go over the canal to District 4, there's a street there, all the other districts really. But eventually you'll come across someone who's got a little stand on wheels and they'll be selling flan and little sort of custard tartlets, little pastry on the outside and then the egg tart in the middle. And you just whack one of those back and get going. What advice am I going to give people? And probably, as I said at the beginning of the episode, was about the people. The people make this country. They make this city, you know? So, OK, you need your guard up. As a traveller, you need to take care of your things, take care of your bag, take care of everything else. Make sure you don't get run over crossing the street or whatever. But other than that, Be open to people approaching you and having a chat. The Vietnamese, I lived in Japan for three years, 25 years ago. And the Japanese really are not

into speaking English. They're not great at it, generally speaking. It's very rare to be able to walk up the street and say, hey, can you help me in English? And someone will answer. Whereas here, it might be a lady on the street pushing a trolley. up a sort of a hill in the midday sun and you stop her and say, hey, can you show me where this cafe is or whatever and they'll have a go at it.

Kerry Newsome: I'm a bit like you. I really do try to encourage my travelers to engage where they can. And people say, you know, well, how do I do that? And you can start with your reception staff at your hotel. They are your first point of contact. You'll probably find that they have a little bit more English at their disposal. I have had the most amazing relationships formed by getting to know the reception staff at various hotels. The other thing I'd encourage you to do is to do something that they will need to speak to you about, like a cooking class. And sometimes you'll, you know, engage with, I mean, I've got a very, very dear friend that started, she ran that cooking class. We just formed a relationship. The next thing she was sending me a text message at the end of the afternoon said, you know, what are you doing this afternoon? Would you like to meet up for a coffee? Would you like to go for a glass of wine, because I'd obviously shared with her I like a glass of wine. And, you know, we went from there. And I was then able to, you know, spend time with her and see Vietnam through her eyes. And that was just invaluable.

Matt Cowan: Yeah. And you've just reminded me, one way to feel a part of the city and if you're brave enough, get on the back of a motorbike. Absolutely. It's one way that you can really feel like you're part of the crowd and while we're on it, there's just a couple of motorbike tours Can I mention them? Sure.

That I'd recommend. One is [Vesper Adventures](#). Definitely, I've done it and it's a great tour. It's really cool.

Kerry Newsome: And then Vesper's a bike, an interesting bike in itself and it's probably only going to go about 40 k's an hour.

Matt Cowan: They also do a craft beer pub crawl as well so you can book one of those if you want to do that, if you're into that. Another one, a young guy, he has one called Yes Ride. as well. So, they're young kids who get around, you know, early 20s or something like that, locals. So, that's really cool. Have we got time to just quickly, I've got a little list here of a couple of things. Go for the list. I kind of forgot about it. Okay. So, one other thing, if you're into history, in Saigon. One of the things on my list that I did, you know, the 25 things to do is eat in locations that are historic, just so you can sort of soak it in. And obviously the refinery is one of those. Another one is the Continental Hotel, which we mentioned, the Graham Green Hotel. So if you're a bit of a bookworm and, you know, nostalgic and stuff like that, you can sit there. And actually on Sundays, I think it is. Often on Sundays, the vintage cars will come out and they'll just park there. And the guys who have got these really old vintage cars, they'll want to show off

their cars to people and they just park them there and people come along, take photos and you can have some sex on the beach or a blue lagoon or, you know, those old school cocktails back in the 70s. I mean, I wasn't around then, but you might remember. Another one, I just mentioned Tan Din before, where the pink church is. Not too far up the road there's a pho place, pho noodle soup place called Pho Bin. And it was a Viet Cong safe house during the war. And that's where they orchestrated the attack on the US embassy in 1968 for the Tet Offensive. And so what you can do is you can go there and have a bowl of fur. And then for a small fee, you can go upstairs and they've still got the room set up basically how it was back in 1968. And so it was a cover for all the, you know, the top brass to go up there and have meetings and stuff like that. And there's photos around of the father of the sons who still own the place. The sons are, you know, probably in their 70s now or something like that. And there's old photos there. So you can sort of soak it in a bit. And not too far away is a place called Cafe Dolfo. And it was also a similar sort of place. And Kerry, I think, I'll send you a, I'll give you a link and map location, stuff like that. And it's a quite a cool little spot to go because it was another one of those places that was sort of, you know, during the war, under everybody's noses, you know, the spies were coming in and out. And then allegedly across the street, there was a Korean army, you know, soldiers barracks and the soldiers, the Korean soldiers used to go in there and have breakfast. Little did they know that it was actually a VC safe house, sending messages and listening in to their conversations. And that's still there. And it's a national relic. So and it's free. to check out. So, yeah, but there's a whole lot of other things and if I think of them all, I'll let you know.

Kerry Newsome: The great thing about talking with you, Matt, is that you've got a library of links, YouTube videos, bits and bobs.

Matt Cowan: I'm glad because my memory's going.

Kerry Newsome: I was actually thinking of coming to talk to you. How's he going to remember all that? And then I thought, no, it doesn't matter because, you know, there's that thing called the World Wide Web and it means that I can send links to you. But don't worry listeners if you think oh God I need to keep up with this or I need to read this very, very long transcript which it's turning out to be. I'm going to put some links in. You're going to be able to go straight to Matt's pages and his YouTube videos.

Matt Cowan: On the other occasion I do a podcast as well as a podcast, the Bureau Asia podcast. That's how I found you Matt if you remember.

Kerry Newsome: So, anything to wrap up with that we want to leave people with as far as Saigon?

Matt Cowan: I just think if you're coming to Saigon, try not to think of it as a, you know. Leapfrog. Yeah. Spend a bit more time. Spend a few nights here. I think three nights might At

least do it. Come with an open mind. Do everything in the morning or in the evening. Leave the middle of the day for you back at the hotel and have your nana nap or whatever. I'm big on that because the heat creeps up on you and then next thing you're ready to pass out.

Kerry Newsome: And pick a time of year.

Matt Cowan: Yeah, that's right, yeah. And typically I tell people around about Christmas, the end of the year is good for Saigon. Not too sure what it's like in Hanoi, pretty chilly that time of year, isn't it?

Kerry Newsome: Getting December, January, it's starting to cool off dramatically, yeah, it drops because, you know, you're up near the China border and, you know, it's a totally different... But all the storms are pretty much done by then.

Matt Cowan: Yes, it's just cold. You know, this time of year, Nha Trang tends to cop it a little bit. We get a bit of rain here this time of year, but...

Kerry Newsome: No, Saigon is good. Okay Matt, thanks for being on the show. It's been great to have you. I really appreciated Matt coming on the program. As promised, you'll find a lot of the links to Matt's website and his social media platforms, including his podcast. We mentioned a few different places to visit in Saigon. I'll also include those links. So please go to the website whataboutvietnam.com to find those or check your podcast channel for information and the transcript. Thank you and I look forward to sharing more Vietnam travel stories next episode.

Please enjoy some of the topics we managed to cover during the show.

00:07:03 - Exploring Saigon's Hidden Gems

00:08:16 - History of The Refinery

00:10:33 - French Colonial Architecture in Saigon

00:12:47 - Nightlife and Expat Hangouts

00:14:06 - Saigon's Evolution and Modernization

00:17:07 - Connecting with Saigon's People

00:18:10 - French Colonial Influence in Modern Cafes and Bars

00:20:05 - Exploring Historic Apartment Buildings

00:23:21 - Famous Historical Sites and Buildings

00:25:28 - Cultural Shows at the Opera House

00:27:47 - Hop-On Hop-Off Bus Tours

00:30:01 - Saigon as a Night City

00:31:04 - Exploring Japantown and Chinatown

00:40:04 - Motorbike Tours in Saigon

00:41:08 - Historic Dining Locations

00:45:06 - Best Time to Visit Saigon

Links as mentioned for you to explore further:-

Continental Hotel video with architect Hoanh Tran (The Bureau Asia YouTube Channel)

<https://youtu.be/YBqwIGvOuXw?si=IYVTgbhtjT5kRTR>

Cho Lon Self-Guided Walk (The Bureau Asia Substack Mailing List)

<https://thebureauasia.substack.com/p/cho-lon-self-guided-morning-walk>

The best places to EAT, PLAY, LOVE in HCMC in 2024 (links out to the 25 Things to Do in HCMC video)

<https://thebureauasia.com/2024/03/30/the-best-places-to-eat-play-love-in-ho-chi-minh-city-in-2024/>

Then & Now - Saigon 20 Years On (The Bureau Asia Podcast)

<https://podcasts.apple.com/vn/podcast/then-now-saigon-20-years-on/id1478396971?i=1000656875461>

The Bureau Asia Facebook Group

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/thebureauasiagroup>

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