



What About Vietnam S5-E22 – 10 Things travellers may not know about Vietnam

Kerry Newsome: Xin chào and welcome to What About Vietnam. Now today I'm really thrilled and I have to say I'm a little bit nervous. I've got Ian Payton to the show. Ian is the co-founder of We Create Content, a content marketing agency, so a real professional in this field. He's been helping global brands like Bundesliga and Netflix really connect with the Vietnamese audiences through social media. Ian's been living in Vietnam on and off for the past 14 years, though as he admits, no matter how many times he's tried to leave, his love for the country keeps pulling him back. He first landed in Vietnam in 2008 and instantly fell for Hanoi and the breathtaking northern mountains. We can totally relate to that, Ian. He puts it in his own words, from the moment I touched down in the old quarter, I knew this was a place I had to live. Starting out as a journalist, travel writer and magazine editor, Ian eventually launched his own company in 2013. But here's something fun, and it is really fun. He's also a bit of a music sensation. I watched the video, cracked up, thought it was wonderful. He wrote and performed in a viral music video called *Ồi Giời Ơi*, and I've probably pronounced that poorly, but everyone in Vietnam back in 2012 was absolutely singing along. He followed it up with *The Charming Beast*, a rap song that humorously captures his rollercoaster love affair with Hanoi. I'll put the link in the show notes. I first got to know Ian through his own podcast called *You Don't Know Vietnam*. You can imagine with a title like that, I was immediately drawn to him. So armed with Ian's history and knowledge of Vietnam, I'm delighted to have him on the show. So Ian, welcome to What About Vietnam. It's great to have you on the show.

Ian Paynton: Thanks, Kerry. It's very, very nice to be here. What an honor. Thanks for having me.

Kerry Newsome: Look, we got together and kind of mapped out what we thought new travelers were wondering about Vietnam, maybe couldn't get the absolute latest and greatest on some things. There's a lot of content out there, as we've both discussed. But we kind of narrowed it down, I think, to about 10 top things that we think Vietnam travelers, or

especially people new to Vietnam, may not know about the country. It's a movable feast, I give you. But do you want to kick us off with what you think maybe the first one is?

Ian Paynton: Yeah, well, I think something I always say is that Vietnam is a really, really surprising place. I think a lot of people have the wrong idea about Vietnam. You know, you could say what's the first word that comes to your mind when you think about Vietnam to a lot of the global population, and they're going to say probably a three-letter word. Absolutely. And it's just not that anymore. And also, it's not what you saw in the Top Gear episode in 2008.

Kerry Newsome: Absolutely.

Ian Paynton: When Jeremy Clarkson quite arrogantly and clumsily travelled from north to south. So I think there's lots to be surprised about when it comes to Vietnam. But I think one of the things that takes most people by surprise, and let's call it our, not number one thing, but the first on our list, it's just that Vietnam is way more than rice paddies, buffaloes, and conical hats. I know that the tourism brand pushes that angle, and they also push the urban dynamism of Vietnam too. But mostly when you think of travel in Vietnam, you think of lush green rice paddies, and buffaloes, and waterfalls, and conical hats poking out from the rice fields.

Kerry Newsome: Everywhere you go.

Ian Paynton: Everywhere you go.

Kerry Newsome: I can totally relate. It's a bit like Australia when they think, you know, you're going to find kangaroos, you know, jumping down the street on the way to the shopping mall. You know, they're just not going to be there.

Ian Paynton: Does that not happen? No! Isn't that a...

Kerry Newsome: Look, I've killed it for you now. Oh, that's terrible. No, but you're right. We are talking about Vietnam much more than conical hats and rice fields.

Ian Paynton: Yeah, and I admit, right, like, I like getting out to the countryside. And also, when I first came to Vietnam, I touched down as you mentioned, in Hanoi. But before that, on the journey from Nội Bài Airport to the Old Quarter, I looked into the mountains of Tam Dao and I could see the rice paddies before it and the conical hats poking out. And I was just like, this is unbelievably beautiful as a place. And so I get it. I get why visitors want to go to the countryside and experience that. But I guess what I'm sort of saying is that travelers shouldn't necessarily be surprised by how energetic and exciting and how much there is to explore in the cities and they shouldn't necessarily rush it either just to get out to the countryside.

Kerry Newsome: Absolutely. I think one of the challenges when I'm putting trip plans together for travelers is their eagerness to want to go into these country areas. I think that's because it's such a contrast to living in a developed world. When a Westerner is leaving their home in San Francisco or London and wanting to escape that urbanism, to come to a country, in some places it does feel like time has forgotten it. It is existing as it has done for hundreds of years. So, I'm with you. It's probably where social media has played a role in amping that up. But I agree too, that the cities definitely are worth exploring. But once again, they are fairly layered. And you've got to kind of dig a little bit further below the surface of the stop one, stop two, stop three on the tourist map to really get a feel for those. So, you know, in particular places like Hanoi.

Ian Paynton: Oh, yeah. And the cities are hard to work as well, you know. they're chaotic, they're loud, it's an assault on the senses. And you're completely right. Why do I want to go to a bunch of coffee shops or cocktail bars or nice restaurants or museums when I can do

that in my home country, London, Singapore, Melbourne, wherever. But those trips in Hanoi or Saigon are going to be a different experience for you. They're going to be different coffee shops. They're going to be different restaurants. You know, obviously Vietnamese food's amazing, which we'll talk about in a moment and different museums. I particularly like just walking around the old quarter and getting lost.

Kerry Newsome:Yes. And it happens to me a lot.

Ian Paynton:Yeah, I mean, even after living here for so long, there's still alleyways I've not been down. And I love walking through Hanoi's, mainly the old quarter, but anywhere really, and looking at its walls. I'm so attracted to Hanoi and Vietnam's walls. They tell so many stories. I've actually got an Instagram account called Walls of Hanoi, and it's where I take photographs of walls, which sounds a bit bonkers, right?

Kerry Newsome:Oh, I totally get it.

Ian Paynton:They're so textured and charming and soulful and they tell so many stories. And then you've got the typographies and the posters. And so, yeah, I just like walking around, getting lost, taking in everything there is to take in about, let's say, the old quarter. And I think I should add as well that I've spent all my time in the north of Vietnam. So I'm only really talking about northern Vietnam.

Kerry Newsome:But like, you know, the same goes, I mean, I travel all over and I've done a lot of travel. I've been to places that Vietnamese say, gosh, I can't believe you went there. I've never been there, never heard of that place. So, it's been a whirlwind discovery for me over the last, you know, 12,14 years. If those walls could talk, you know, what stories would they have to tell about, you know, the history of that place, of that, you know, that dish that they cook, that they are known for, the coffee, you know, the family that run it, you know, all of that kind of gets involved in that. But I think with travelers, always time is not always their friend. So, they are keen on you know, knocking over the major things in the first instance. But I do try wherever I can to encourage people to, you know, build in some time to just muse. Just, you know, walk the old towns, you know, walk the old cities and just keep an open mind. You know, leading into our next point that we came up about probably Vietnam's most well-known dish. So talk to us about that one.

Ian Paynton:It's a playful one, really. I hear a lot of foreigners go, oh, can I have a bowl of faux beau, please? Yeah. And I just want to say to them, nobody knows what you're saying. you might as well have gone up to someone and said, can I have a bowl of blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. You know, they're just not going to get what you're saying. Yeah. Such is the nuance of the Vietnamese language and the need to get it right. So, you know, I always say that it's not pronounced that way. Um, and I'm not saying that I'm going to get this right either, but I think I'm a bit closer in saying, you know, foe is not foe. It's more like fur. So I think of like fur of an animal. Yes. I do too. yeah and then you like because it's got a question mark above it you hook it round with the tone so it's fur. Often I think people think fur is the noodle soup dish and actually I'm here to say something you might not know is it's actually the rice noodle and can be eaten in many different ways.

Kerry Newsome:So talk to us about how many other ways we can eat this and where?

Ian Paynton:Well, I mean, fur actually comes in a big square and it's a rice noodle, but before it's been chopped up into noodles, it's just a big square. And this can be used to cut into larger, smaller squares. and roll around beef. So that'd be called phở quán. So phở, but rolled. Yeah. And that's eaten in pretty much one place in Hanoi called Trúc Bạch Island, which is a really cool neighborhood, by the way. I'd recommend anyone coming to Vietnam to check out Trúc Bạch neighborhood. It's An up-and-coming neighborhood. It's got lots of

cool restaurants, craft beer joints, and also cocktail bars. But importantly, it's just outside the old quarter. So you still get a vibe of being in the city, but not with the chaos of the old quarter. Have you tried Furquan?

Kerry Newsome:No. But it's on my list when I'm back in April. Yeah. For sure.

Ian Paynton:Yeah. Well, I'll take you to my favorite Furquan place, if you like.

Kerry Newsome:I'm in. I'm in. Count me in.

Ian Paynton:There are rumours that that's actually quite a new dish and it was by a foreign chef that invented it.

Kerry Newsome:So all he's done is taken the noodle and is it deep fried or is it steamed or?

Ian Paynton:No, it's completely fresh. Yeah. So it's fresh phở. Yeah. And inside you've got beef, some of the herbs, the coriander, it's rolled and it comes rolled. There's about 10 of them on a plate and you, dip it into the fish sauce dip. Yeah.

Kerry Newsome:So that means the noodle must be quite, is it still quite thick? Because that noodle, it's not like a rice paper roll where the rice paper is quite thin and can, you know, be deep fried or fresh. But in this case, it would be quite a thick noodle, wouldn't it? Yeah.

Ian Paynton:Exactly. Yeah. It's thick. It's chewy. It's filling. It's great. I can nail, I can nail about like 20 of those rolls.

Kerry Newsome:Oh my god. Okay, so that's one kind. Have you got any more?

Ian Paynton:Yeah, so the other way is before it's cut into noodles, is they cut it into tiny little squares, into little pillows, and then they deep fry it. And that's called phở chien phởng, which basically means phở, fried, pillows.

Kerry Newsome:Wow.

Ian Paynton:Or rooms, I think. And they're little squares, little puffs of fur. And they're so tasty. And they come with beef, vegetables. And again, you dip it in the fish sauce broth. And you usually get that at the same place as you get fur kwan.

Kerry Newsome:Right. But inside the pillow, is there anything in it? Or it's just the pillow?

Ian Paynton:Just air.

Kerry Newsome:Air. Right. So it is all down to fur being the basis of the whole meal. Essentially.

Ian Paynton:Yeah. Wow. Yeah. And what you do is you take the beef, you take the veggies and the beef comes in this really tasty gravy and you stuff it into the pillow. You grab it with your chopsticks and you dip it in the fish sauce broth, couple of chilies in there and then put it all in your mouth and it's just amazing.

Kerry Newsome:God, I'm truly in. I'm truly there. I am totally there. That sounds awesome. Why haven't I had that? My God.

Ian Paynton:I don't know.

Kerry Newsome:To all my Hanoi listeners and to all those I've ever connected with in Hanoi, this is very remiss of you to not tell me about this. This is crazy. Like, food is just one of those things in Vietnam, isn't it? It is an eternal discovery tour from- well, I mean, because I've been from South to North, I mean, the changes infer alone in taste, like, you know, even between the South and the North. The South is much sweeter. And that's because, you know, access to more herbs and sugar cane and things like that. I think that's kind of the basis if my research and knowledge is anything to go on. But, you know, a little bit different to the North in the sense it's a more plainer variety, more clearer variety, I think, would you say?

Ian Paynton:Yeah, I think so. There's definitely difference, isn't there? Yeah, the broth.

Between the North and the South. And the middle. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Oh, the broth is just

amazing. And you're so right. It's a never-ending sort of journey of discovery with Vietnamese food. You know, there's still so many dishes that I've never even heard of, let alone tried. In terms of broth, I just wanted to add a few more on the phở options because you've got the phở a bo, which is phở noodles with beef in a broth, and then you've got phở gà, which is the same but with chicken. My understanding is that actually before the French arrived, it was mainly phở gà, and then the French brought with them cows as a source of protein. My most underrated version of phở is phở chon, which means phở without any broth. And it's a little bit like a pad thai from Thailand.

Kerry Newsome:Right. Yes. I have seen that. Yes.

Ian Paynton:Yeah, oh, it's just amazing.

Kerry Newsome:It is, it is. And because it all gets down to the production and how they make those, that noodle. It's all in the noodle. And I'll ask you about the timing of eating fur. Because I'm of the understanding that mostly the best fur, and Vietnamese normally have fur for breakfast. rather than lunch or dinner as a Westerner kind of thinks it is more you know, relative to have. And I don't know, are you thinking that? Because sometimes in some places, all the fur's gone by 9 a.m.

Ian Paynton:Yeah, no, you're right. I think one thing that surprised me when I first got to Vietnam, I think you mentioned in the intro about me landing in the old quarter and being like, I need to live here. I just need to live here. One of the things that surprised me in that very same hour was how it was six or seven in the morning and there were these steaming bowls of beef noodle soup being eaten in the morning. And I was like, for breakfast?

Kerry Newsome:Yeah.

Ian Paynton:So yes, definitely for breakfast, but also definitely for lunch, definitely for dinner, and definitely at any time of the night after a few beers, perhaps. And I think the different stalls or restaurants open at different times. So one of my favorite places in Hanoi, it's a real experience. So it's in a grandmother's living room. And you go down an alley, and you go up some steps and you go into her living room. And she serves this beef noodle soup and she opens at 4pm. And she serves this beef noodle soup with a clear broth. And it tastes like a beef roast dinner.

Kerry Newsome:Wow, that that's big coming from you. Wow. A beef roast dinner, Vietnamese style. Love it. Love it. That should sell well into the UK market. Thank you for that.

Ian Paynton:It should indeed. Yeah. Yeah. So to answer your question, all times of day, yes, definitely for breakfast, all times of day. And I think the different restaurants will open at different times. I don't think you usually find one that stays open 24 hours.

Kerry Newsome:Correct. And I think, as you say, some of them, depending on, because the broth itself takes such a long time to make, like it spends hours to make. So, I think some are known for getting up very early and then they bring and like make a batch of it and then it's kind of gone by nine o'clock or whatever. And so, for those ones, you probably need to only appeal to the early birds, and then, you know, look around for other places. So, travelers, keep your eye out, ear out, and I'll definitely put some links to the ones that Ian has mentioned, if he's happy to do so. He probably doesn't want 300 million people. turning up at his favourite restaurant. So, moving right along, but staying in the food, culture and weather kind of thinking cap. Let's talk about expectations and managing those in Vietnam.

Ian Paynton:Yeah, I think the third thing that I think is surprising for visitors to Vietnam is that it changes drastically as you go from north to south, south to north, to the middle, you know, to the coast, etc. And often I think people might land in Ho Chi Minh City and then

have a great time, and then get to Hanoi and be like, oh, this isn't, this is not the same as Ho Chi Minh City. It's not what I enjoyed and get a little bit disappointed that maybe it's not quite as good or the food's not quite as whatever, you know, it might be, although people are a bit different. And I just sort of say, expect the unexpected. Every time you jump on a train or a bus to land somewhere else, expect it to be different. and embrace the change, you know, embrace the variety, because otherwise you're just going to kind of be moaning all the time that it's not quite like the last place. And that's the same with food, people's attitudes, people's accents, the weather, you know, everything changes. So the topography, You've got the mountains in the north, you've got the castles in the north central, you've got caves in the central, beaches, sand dunes, jungle, river deltas. So just expect the unexpected and expect it to change as you go either up or down Vietnam.

Kerry Newsome:I could not agree more. I think I use the word stay fluid and really try and move with the changes, not try and do direct comparisons on each stop because they won't marry up. Some people in the lesser-known districts and areas don't speak English at all, while they have just come from a city like Saigon where the hospitality industry is well-known for, you know, speaking English fairly commonly. and the urbanization of Saigon versus going to Munay or you're going to Vung Tau or, you know, these kinds of places. Total different, eco different, food different, people, as you say, attitudinally different. And If you're not willing to adapt with that and try and move with that, you know, sure, you can go from one five-star hotel to another five-star hotel and have that five-star experience and that's all wonderful. But if you want some realism to your experience in Vietnam, why not mix it up a little bit And, you know, of course, everybody wants their luxuries and want to come back to a nice bed and a nice room. It's clean and, and all that sort of thing. But I say, you know, do you want to just a five-star hotel? You may as well stay home. You know, don't, don't come to Vietnam if you, if you say you really want to see Vietnam, if you're not prepared to just go with the flow a little bit. And, and I think, whilst people say they want that, when they get it, as you say, they compare and sometimes they get disappointed. So it is really important to, I think, manage people's expectations about Vietnam right from the get-go.

Ian Paynton:Yeah, I agree and I think you articulated that much better than I did. But the fourth point that I wanted to mention, I think is closely linked to that. And I think that is things are done differently in Vietnam and get used to it or have a bad time is what I say. Like I've learned that you can't always force your own ideals or expectations onto the way things are done in Vietnam. So the next place might be The customer service might be slightly different in the next place. You got promised something and it turns out to be a bit different. It's not as it looks in the brochure. The bus is two hours late or whatever it might be.

Kerry Newsome:But the Vietnamese are happy it turned up at all.

Ian Paynton: Yes.Yeah, yeah. And you mentioned about being more fluid. I think that was a really good way of describing it. Even time, I think, is more fluid in Vietnam.

Kerry Newsome:Oh, absolutely. Time is something that they're really not good at. They can say, I'll be there about nine. Well, that could be nine, 9.15, 9.30, whatever. And because we come from westernized worlds where time is like, you've got to be there or you miss out, You don't necessarily miss out in this situation. They'll wait also for you.

Ian Paynton:Yeah, yeah, yeah. And it's kind of okay to turn up half an hour late to a meeting or for that bus to be 45 minutes late. And, you know, Vietnam's unpredictable. And I think whether it's down on the streets and the traffic to in the business meetings, Vietnam is

completely unpredictable. So we look for predictability and structure. We don't want to feel anxious. So we look for predictability and structure. And we want things to be done in a certain way and on time. If we let everything that we feel disappointed about in Vietnam get on top of us and build up that means we're going to end up losing our heads in the middle of the street or we're going to end up going away from Vietnam going that was a completely crap experience I'd never go back and I'd never recommend it to 10 friends so I would much rather, and I found that I've had a better experience in doing it this way, is people let go of their expectations. They go with the flow a little bit more. And don't take the baggage of all the little experiences that you've had on your trip. Don't take that baggage into every interaction or every experience or every part of your tour because you will end up blowing up. and feeling like you've had a bad time. It's hard to do, and there's a bit of an art to letting go in Vietnam and going with the flow, but I think it's essential. I can't stress that enough, really.

Kerry Newsome: And I guess the value that I feel like I bring to you know, my show and obviously the trip planning that I do is that I really try to manage that right from the beginning when I'm putting a plan together to say, okay, if you want to go to Huế in the middle of June, let me assure you, you'd be able to fry an egg on the steps of the Huế Citadel. It'll be that hot. Your children will be sweating themselves to death and just want to be back at the pool at the hotel. You're going to have to manage that situation. Otherwise, you're going to go and hate it because I'm sending you to six and seven pagodas and places, et cetera, where you might just want to have the day free and then late afternoon go and I can arrange a guide to do that when it suits you. Guess what? They'll wait. They'll sit in that car, it's an air-conditioned car, and they will wait for you. And people are staggered that, you know, Vietnamese do it. So, as much as there's some challenges out there to deal with in traveling Vietnam. sometimes pays back in other ways. It mightn't be directly in that circumstance where you're really feeling challenged where, you know, you've gone somewhere and they said they were going to be serving, la, la, la, la, la, and they didn't. They only had this. So, you know, you've got to be thankful for that or whatever. Then they'll say, well, we'll add on a visit to you know, a market stall around the corner. You know, some Westerners think, well, no, I didn't want to see that, I wanted to see this. Well, sorry, on this day, the mother of the place who runs it, blah, blah, blah, she's not well, so she's not opening, so we now have to move to such and such. And that is the kind of go with the flow circumstance or typical of when I think people get annoyed and get disappointed and it kind of didn't match up. And, you know, Bana Hills is probably a classic, you know, that Instagram being totally jam-packed. And we're going to talk a bit more about the role that social media and, you know, the TikTok and, you know, ism of Vietnam has kind of taken over. You know, some people think the Golden Hand is somewhere in Da Nang. And when I tell them, no, it's actually in a theme park at the top of the hill, and you know, it's a five kilometer cable ride, and they go, what the? Are you kidding me? Yeah. And it's about an hour out of Da Nang. So, you know, I feel social media has done a lot for Vietnam, but in some ways it's kind of created this very surreal aspect of Vietnam that isn't true, isn't really, really true. Some of the, you know, the rice paddy fields are not that yellow. they're yellow, but they're not that yellow all the time and every month. You know, those photographers that go and take those absolutely magical photos have to wait for the exact, you know, couple of weeks where it's as crisp and yellow as that to get that in Sabah. So, You know, it's a challenge, but I'd like to hear, because you're a content creator, I really want to hear your

thoughts on this, because we're going to talk about some places that never were on the map before until social media, I think.

Ian Paynton: Yeah, I think you made a great point. It'd be really easy to turn up to one of these magical rice paddies that you've seen on Instagram, gold and yellow, and you get there and it's just mud.

Kerry Newsome: Yeah.

Ian Paynton: And how do you get the shot? How do you get the selfie? You don't. You don't. It's mud. Yeah. Because you've gone at the wrong time. Sorry. So no one's fault. Yeah. It's just the way it is. Yeah. With regards to social media, I mean, it really has changed the way that some attractions are seen in Vietnam. And it's made attractions as well. Some of these things weren't attractions before Instagram and TikTok, like train street, for example.

Classic. I've lived in Hanoi on and off for 14 years. And when I first got here, that was just a railway line running through a bunch of houses. Yeah, it was cool, but it wasn't flooded with people doing selfies and TikTok stuff. You know, it was, it was just part of makeup of Hanoi.

Kerry Newsome: Vietnamese didn't even know it should be an attraction at that time. I asked people to take me there and they went, I don't know what you're talking about. A train goes through the, there's some bunch of houses. It's not an attraction. It's not. And I went, well, I've got to tell you differently.

Ian Paynton: Yeah. Interestingly, when I did that music video that you referenced in the intro, there is a shot of me on trains, but that was because I thought it looked Aesthetically interesting, you know, for the video. You wouldn't be able to do that now because there'd be people all over it, sort of dancing or just taking selfies or whatever it is they do. So I've never actually been to Train Street when a train's going through. Just on Train Street, I think it is a great example of the adaptability and resilience of the Vietnamese people. So to be living in this spot where you've got this train roaring straight past your house and moving all of your things, taking them in every time the train goes by, then once it's gone, moving everything back, you know, not to mention the noise, the pollution of it, the danger perhaps of it as well, but also to, lean into the business aspect of it shows the entrepreneurial spirit of the Vietnamese as well. You know, when when it did become a trend on social media, they were like, All right, we're going to make the most of this. We're going to lean into it. And they did. And they've done a really good job at that. Yeah. So, I can see why it's gone big on social. It's pretty mental seeing this train move inches away from your face.

Kerry Newsome: I literally stuck my head out to get this video shot and I was with my girlfriend at the time and she's Vietnamese and she pulled me back and I've got a video of her screaming, And, you know, I'd obviously stuck my neck out. So, I'd hate to think about, and you'd probably never hear about any accidents that have happened. So, I have been there several times. And over the years, and we're probably going back to about maybe 2000, 10 maybe, around that kind of era, where it was just starting to get some notoriety about its unusualness, if there's a word, that a train travelling so close to you know, people's homes. No barriers, no guards, no, you know, protectiveness for anyone around it while it goes through. The main one, I think, is at about three o'clock. Most people head for that one. And, you know, just that that is still happening in today's world when, you know, even your home swimming pool is guarded better than this train track, as far as, you know, gates and, you know, ability. It's purely open. And they, you know, they just moved the bikes out of the road, the tables and chairs get moved inside and blah, blah, blah, blah. So, you're right. The Vietnamese have leant into it. They've built businesses around it. And it really has gone big. Is it good? Is it bad? Is it worth it? I don't know.

Ian Paynton: Yeah, I mean, it's, quite frankly, it probably wouldn't be allowed to exist in most countries. And it would take an accident to just close the whole thing down. And I vaguely remember there being an accident. They did close it for a while. Yeah, there was a lot more regulation and rules about what you could and couldn't do. But it's still going, it's still buzzing and, you know, people seem to enjoy it. The other tourist attraction that became big on social media was Hà Giang Province. Now, we never used to call that the Hà Giang Loop. It was just Hà Giang Province. And I remember When I first went in 2010, and I'm not meaning to be that guy here, by the way. I know I sound like that guy. Some guy goes to me, do you want to come on a motorbike trip this weekend? I said, where are we going? He was like, oh, a place called Hezang. And I was like, what's there? And he was like, I can't really put it into words. Photographs, you know, don't really do it justice and there aren't many, but you've just got to trust that it's worth the nine hour bus and the three, four day bike ride. Okay, let's do it. And we go up to Hà Giang and just- Flew you away. Absolutely, absolutely mind blown. You don't see another foreigner the whole time. And it kind of feels like that scene in the beach where Leonardo DiCaprio gets given a map. and you're letting on this secret, like maybe Vietnam or Southeast Asia's best kept secret. And you're going around these mountains, and these mountains change every 45, 50 minutes to an hour. They just change, you know, the way they look. The landscape changes. One minute you're in a pine forest, then you're in this like moon-like, rocky kind of terrain, like up in Dong Van, and then you're back down in a valley, and then there's rice fields and corn fields, and the Hmong people are kind of looking at you as if to say, what are you even doing here? Yeah, yeah, you lost. And it just felt so exhilarating. Ha Zhang became really, really big in maybe 2016, 2017. And it kind of got called the Ha Zhang loop. And there's t shirts saying I survived the hazang loom. And it's called a loop because it's about three or 400 k where you start in one place, you go around and finish in the other in exactly the same place. It's a long trip. It's a long trip. I've actually been there. I think my friends take the mickey out of me for continuing to say this, but I've been there 17 times. And it gets more magical every single time.

Kerry Newsome: Wow. When was the last time you went, Ian?

Ian Paynton: About a year and a half ago.

Kerry Newsome: Wow. And how would you describe it now, like a year ago, to back your first time? Because I've heard there's even traffic jams now as you go around. It's so busy at busy times.

Ian Paynton: Yeah.

Kerry Newsome: So, tell me a bit about that because I really would like to cover that off.

Ian Paynton: So one thing that I did was I saw this big tour group of motorbikes going. There's like 25, 30 motorbikes. And when we used to go, we always used to go in a smaller group as possible. So we could not stick out like a sore thumb. We wanted to be a little bit inconspicuous with it. Anyway, these tour groups are in groups of 15, 20, 25 bikes. And they're going, oh, you need to come with me because there's a police checkpoint and you'll get fined. And I kind of said, you go that way, I'll go that way. And I didn't want to go through this checkpoint with 15 other bikes because I was sure that a few of them would get picked off and fined. So I always go anti-clockwise rather than clockwise. Yeah, so I'm not really ever kind of in a pack, but I might see packs go past me. And looking past things like There's this waterfall that we used to go to and there'd be no one there. And last time I went, there was probably about 50 backpackers there all with a beer in hand and some dance music being played by some DJs. It was just, it was just such a surprise to me and a bit

disappointing. But getting past all of that, Hà Giang is still absolutely beautiful and it still blew my mind and it's still worth going. I didn't experience any traffic jams and definitely there's a lot more foreigners around but it doesn't change how magical the place is.

Kerry Newsome: That's good to hear.

Ian Paynton: I'm not sure how long that will remain the case, because if there is traffic jams and you're having an experience where it just feels like an overcrowded sort of honeypot, then maybe it would change a little bit. But we're not quite there yet, but I don't think it's got long before. And I have kind of said, I don't think I'll go back that many more times.

Kerry Newsome: And I think it has changed up. There's been some new accommodations built in the region. So, it's definitely accommodating more people and a diverse range of people. I think it was definitely appealing to a younger audience to begin with, but then more Bike riders of different levels have come in. But as you say, when you've got those big packs and you've got those big groups, and then you're trying to traverse that same area, you're getting stuck kind of behind them. And yeah, so it is changing a little bit, I think, but I hope it doesn't lose its magic.

Ian Paynton: Yeah, me too. And just the other thing is that because of the, increased amounts of tourism, they are redoing all the roads. So sometimes if you're on a big motorbike, you can be driving for two or three hours in just like rocky gravel or mud. And that's not ideal. Other people choose to go up in vans or cars, which is probably a bit safer. Hà Giang is all about feeling it and breathing it in, you know. doing it from inside a car isn't going to be the same. So the key thing there is how is it going to get developed and managed in a way that's responsible and sustainable? And I think that takes us on to point six.

Kerry Newsome: Tourism attractions, yeah.

Ian Paynton: Yeah, and the sixth thing that I think people don't know about Vietnam is that it's actually sitting on the planet's next big tourism attraction in Sun Dung Cave. This is essentially like discovering the Grand Canyon. I think about 16 years ago, Vietnamese farmer in Phởng Nga stumbled on this hole in the wall, went inside and found the world's largest cave. Then a bunch of British explorers came and sort of examined the cave.

Kerry Newsome: I actually interviewed one of the guys in that group. Howard Limbert.

Ian Paynton: Oh really?

Kerry Newsome: Yeah, lovely, lovely guy. And he was one of the nine that discovered the cave and still currently manages the safety and tells all sorts of stories. Great episode with him. Just during, I did during COVID. talking about Son Doong, and it is, as you say, it is like discovering the Grand Canyon, and that size and magnitude takes, you know, four full days to cover it. It's higher than Big Ben, it's It's one of the most interesting episodes I did because he just had all this knowledge to pour out about the cave and how people had kind of compared it to, you know, climbing Mount Everest and other, you know, really tandem out major experiences and said this one just outclassed all of those. They just, yeah. My husband actually, just in April last year, did the Tulen Cave, which is a four-day trip inside and outside in the jungle, etc. So, I've had a fair bit to do with that region and Phong Nha to know about that. But you're right, it is It's gonna have some challenges, and I'm happy for you to talk about those regarding sustainability, but Oxalis, who manage it, and who have got the contract to do so, as I understand, are meticulous about how they are trying to manage that gem, that jewel that Vietnam is holding there, to ensure that it does have that eco-sustainability.

Ian Paynton: Yeah, you're right. Exalus are doing a fantastic job.

Kerry Newsome:And they have to. They're employed to do so.

Ian Paynton:There were talks a while back about putting a cable car through the cave, you know, and there was this Save Sơn Đoòng campaign. And it seems like the authorities actually listened and said, OK, we're going to put this on ice. But from what I understand from watching a documentary called Crack in the Wall, which I really recommend to watch if you can get your hands on it, is that discussions are opening up again in 2030 about how they're going to let as many people experience this cave while being responsible and hopefully sustainable with it. How do we make money out of it as a country, as a tourism board, as a local population, while not just absolutely destroying it? So watch this space there. Let's see how it goes. But yeah, just to have this cave in Vietnam, I think is just such a blessing. And it's something that I think would surprise a lot of people that there's this, the world's biggest cave is in Vietnam.

Kerry Newsome:To me, it's is another one of those gems, a little bit off the beaten track, that now is becoming on the track. So, a little bit like Hà Giang, you know, was nobody ever heard of, it kind of bloomed. And then, you know, places like Fong Na, are now rising as well because of Sơn Đoòng. And they ploughed a lot of money into pushing it. Like if you go to any tourism event that talks about Vietnam, it is all about Sơn Đoòng. Sơn Đoòng features in those videos.

Ian Paynton:Last time I was down in that region, one of the guides was saying that there's a very, very good chance that there's another crack in the wall somewhere with maybe even a bigger cave.

Kerry Newsome:Wow. Oh, God. Really?

Ian Paynton:Yeah, yeah. It's quite exciting.

Kerry Newsome:I think your Instagram page for walls could get even... take us into something that never gets talked about in my space on this program. Music.

Ian Paynton:Yeah, so it's more like music festivals, I think, is something that's surprising about Vietnam. Music generally has been kicking off, you know, there's loads of new young pop artists, rap artists, Vietnamese raps really been having a moment for the last seven or eight years. So the local music scene is vibrant and worth checking out. I'm actually putting a playlist together which I could share with your audiences of Vietnamese music. Fantastic, please do. mainly urban music. But the music festival scene is growing as well, which I think is quite interesting. So talking about caves, there's actually a cave rave once a year by the nightclub here called Savage. They have a festival called Equation and they hold it inside a cave in Mai Chau.

Kerry Newsome:Wow.

Ian Paynton:I've never been, but for anyone that's listening that would like a bit of an all-night adventure listening to techno music inside a cave, then... Wow. Yeah, it's pretty interesting. Again, I'm not... There are questions to be asked around, should we be doing this inside a cave, I guess, but I've not been.

Kerry Newsome:Do you know when it's on?

Ian Paynton:Do they hold it? It was on towards the end of last year, so... I want to say in autumn each year.

Kerry Newsome:So around about November.

Ian Paynton:And then there's Studio Adventure, which is another festival that's also dance music, but it's a little bit more bass heavy. This happens once or twice a year, and it always happens on New Year's Eve, usually in Fuquok. and so studio adventures worth looking out for. There's this thing called the Rektor, which is a collective that travels up and down

Vietnam, usually in a minibus, touring different venues throughout the country. Yeah, it's really good. And it's a whole mixture of genres, but mostly live musicians, artists and performers rather than electronic DJs. And there's also reggae festivals in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam Music Week, and lots of EDM parties as well, which could be checked out. And that's, I think, something a little bit more what the young Vietnamese would be attending. These big festivals of thousands and thousands of people, EDM parties. I've not been to those either.

Kerry Newsome:No, I probably wouldn't go.

Ian Paynton:They're definitely happening.

Kerry Newsome:Where do we go to find music festivals, Ian?

Ian Paynton:Yeah, you're right. It's not very well documented. And it's one of those things where you kind of have to be on the ground and in the know to know that it's going on, but that doesn't help visitors.

Kerry Newsome:Correct. So, you know, what do I tell people? I mean, I happen to, you know, know a lot of people now as locals and and expats, etc. So, they are my people on the ground. So, they'll say, oh, look, you know, this bar's got so-and-so playing, you know, go here, blah, blah, blah. And that's the only way I find places, literally through word of mouth. So, yeah, I wish we could head somewhere. Maybe that's something for, you know, we create content agency to work on in the future.

Ian Paynton:yeah there are these things do get covered in like regional publications like what's on publications um you know whether it's resident advisor or or you know things like this but but yeah there's not one single publication or space in vietnam where you can find out where all this is happening i would get on the ground and ask around um groups on Facebook, the communities on Facebook, join them, put a post saying, look, I'm coming to Vietnam during this time. Does anyone know of any music festivals that are going on? And then all the people in that group who usually live in Vietnam and are in the know will share links and things like that. I think that's the best bet. I agree.

Kerry Newsome:So if we move on to other forms of connection, do you want to cover number eight? I'm leaving this one all to you.

Ian Paynton:yeah I mean the eighth thing that you might be surprised about in Vietnam is that Tinder might get you into trouble here so if you're here you're you're a single, it's usually the guys I think that fall victim to this. If you're a single guy and you're swiping left and right in the city, you might match with someone and they will say, oh, I'm in the old quarter, meet me at this bar. And usually what they'll do is they'll invite you to a bar and actually they'll be working for the bar and they'll kind of entertain you and talk to you and But really, they'll be selling you drinks and making sure that you drink and probably get in the commission. There's no date there. And there's certainly not going to be any love, I should imagine.

Kerry Newsome:Not without a bill.

Ian Paynton:Not without a bill. And this hasn't happened to me. I mean, I've been I've engaged and, and with, you know, my fiance for 10 years. So this isn't something I've experienced firsthand, but it's something that I hear a lot of people talking about right now is if there's no flexibility in the venue to meet and it happens to be in the old quarter, it's probably a scam.

Kerry Newsome:Right. Good one to know. And you know, you're right when, you know, you are coming to a new country and you want to use that platform to meet up with people. Totally understandable. But, you know, how would you know to pick that kind of thing up,

you know, firsthand? So, good point. Let's like get into, I love this one, number nine. I love number nine, pronouns in Vietnam. Let's go.

Ian Paynton: Well, from what I understand is there aren't really any.

Kerry Newsome:Correct.

Ian Paynton:There's no I and you. No. What it means is that every time you address someone in Vietnamese, it's this hierarchical dance. I have to know how old you are in relation to me in order to address you correctly. So are you a younger person? Are you a friend on the same level? Are you an older sister, an older brother, auntie, uncle, grandmother, grandfather, or a super respected person? And based on all of those things, I will respond to you in a different way with different words in Vietnamese. So it's really complicated and you can really get yourself in hot water.

Kerry Newsome:I only have one savior in this one for when you want to summon a waiter. So, because I'm old, most waiters are younger than me. So, I can, I've been told, correct me if I'm wrong, but I've been told I can most commonly say emoy to call out to the waitress as in a sort of short for excuse me. So, I can say emoy and the waiter will come to me. But that's only on the basis that that person is younger. than me, that I can kind of get away with that. So because I'm old, there's some advantages. It's got some power there. Yeah.

Ian Paynton:So I do get what you're saying, but... A slight complicating factor as well is that if it's in a service environment, if someone is serving you, then usually you would call them M, like younger person, even if they look the same age. I really struggled to do that. I struggled to M someone just because they're working as a waiter and I'm a guest.

Kerry Newsome:I can't do that either. Yes, exactly.

Ian Paynton:Only if they were clearly younger than me can I call them M. Otherwise, I tend to go with Ban, which is friend, or I will play it safe and go older brother or older sister. However, if let's say you say older sister to a Vietnamese woman who is younger than you, she's not going to like it. And if you say M, i.e. younger person to a Vietnamese woman who's older than you, she's probably not going to like that, although she might be somewhat flattered. You think she's younger.

Kerry Newsome:Yes. Yeah. But I, I haven't learned those nuances well enough to do that differentiation on the spot and quick enough when I just want to order food or drink or whatever. So I went with the excuse me option, which was I hope still respectful to that service person. I don't get any frowns. They seem happy to come to me when I do it. But then, as you say, if you know a little bit of Vietnamese, they may suspect that you know a lot more. And clearly I don't, so I can get into bother with then they wanting to have a chat with me. And my only out is like, tròi ơi! And I'm trying to say to them, oh my God, no, I don't know anything else. That's it, you know? But yeah.

Ian Paynton:One thing I would say is that, Yeah. If you nail hello or the pronouns in inverted commas correctly, people are going to think that you speak Vietnamese really well and have a full conversation with you. And I remember speaking to this one guy called Phuc Ma, who is a foreigner who speaks Vietnamese really, really well on my podcast. And he was saying that, like, he could gauge how well he was doing in Vietnamese by how long he could have a conversation for in a taxi. So when he first got here, it would last a few seconds. You'd get answered the same old questions, give the same old answers. And then as he learned more and more, he could do the whole journey speaking to the taxi driver.

Kerry Newsome:That is definitely an achievement. Definitely.

Ian Paynton:Yeah.

Kerry Newsome: Now, because you are definitely a lover of the Northern region, probably good for our number 10, and to finish on number 10, maybe you might want to speak to one of the aspects of the people of the North that reside in the Northern regions, which I'm a big fan of too.

Ian Paynton: Yeah, I think my 10th thing that people might not know about Vietnam is that there are actually 54 ethnic groups here. 85% of the population is made up of Kinh people, who are usually found in urban areas, coastal plains, river deltas. But up in the north, but up in the northern mountains, you also have the Hamang, the Zao people and the Thais. And I think it's just like, a really great experience to drive through the mountains and meet these different people and see how they live. And they all live quite differently from each other. So the Hamang people live highest up. You'll find the Hamang people in Hà Giang province, for example. But in the north, yeah, Mườngchải. But you'll find them in the highest altitudes, which often means that their ability to farm is limited because the land space is lower. So they might just have little small plantations of corn instead of rice. And their houses look different to, let's say, the Zhao or the Teis who live next to the river and in valleys, who will have their houses on stilts. So they dress different, they speak with unique languages, their houses and architecture is different. It's just so amazing to travel through the mountains and meet these different people and see how they live. Ethnic groups, the diverse ethnic groups aren't only in the North, they're also in the Central Highlands and in the Mekong Delta in the South as well. Khmer Krom people in the Mekong Delta, who I think originated more from Cambodia, for example, and the Jirai and Banar people in the Central Highlands, and they've got this beautiful communal house with a huge, huge thatched roof, which is really worth a visit in the areas like Kontum and Plaiku. So it's just this really diverse tapestry of life and so exciting to explore it on your journey up and down Vietnam. And I think if we were to come back to our first point about the cities, if you land in Hanoi, for example, And we talk about not rushing it before going out into the mountains. I would really, really recommend visiting what I think is Vietnam's best museum, and that's the Museum of Ethnology. That's where you can learn about Vietnam's ethnic groups, their architecture, their dress, their customs and behaviors. And it's a beautiful museum. So do that in the city and then go out to the countryside. And then you'll know exactly.

Kerry Newsome: Yeah, I think people need to get context around the minority groups. They really need to understand how they fit into the world of Vietnam, the role that they have played over the centuries. And I think what is intrinsically magical about these people is that they, are allowed to live on their own lands, mostly, and farm as they wish and live as they wish in these areas. And, you know, I might say to people to just be careful when you're going to these places that you go with you know, the appropriate guide or the person because you're kind of trampling into their world as they have preserved their world and their families and the way they bring them up and school them and all. And I realize progress, you can't stop progress. But, you know, I'm just forever trying to instill in people the respect angle. when you are going to these places. I met a guy named, a French photographer named Rohan. You might have heard of him. He has the museum in Hanoi, in Hôi An. And what he's done in that museum, I don't know whether you've had a chance to visit it, but it is amazing because he has photographed the 54, and because he was able to do it in such a respectful way, they have donated to him some of their traditional dress. So, on live models, as gifts to him in this museum, which is free to visit I might add, you can actually physically see the models dressed in full traditional dress of those 54. minority groups. So once again, it's an education factor that if you can just get a glimpse into this part

of Vietnam, it is worth, otherwise you kind of go out there and you're just sort of driving and you've got a guide, maybe who's telling you some of this stuff, but you don't really get it. You haven't really kind of understood the relevance of these people and just how interesting they are and their crafts and things like that. I'm fascinated by that area, those areas.

Ian Paynton: Oh, me too. I completely agree. And actually, I, I, whenever I go to Hà Giang, I buy one of the Hamang baskets, um, which carry all the wood and you've got baby ones, kid ones, and then adult ones. And I've actually, I like making lights out of them for our living room. But I've noticed as I've gone up there to Hà Giang in recent years, they've switched out the wicker baskets for plastic tubs. So I guess they're more resilient. These bright blue and green plastic tubs. So I can see things changing and I get it. you know, you can't, like you said, you can't stop progress. But I hope that their crafts and their cultures aren't lost forever.

Kerry Newsome: Me too, me too. I could literally keep on going for ages with you, seriously. But do you want to, is there something you'd like to finish on? Is there something that you think we should add or a question I should have asked or, you know, we have got really 10 great things I think travelers would really benefit from knowing about, but anything you'd like to add before we wrap up?

Ian Paynton: I don't think so, Kerry. I think the only thing I would say to sum everything up is, you know, I've been here quite a long time and I still don't know Vietnam, you know. Visitors should just expect the unexpected, expect to be surprised, take it in their stride, be open, fluid, and go away and recommend it to others because we want people coming back. We want people coming through Vietnam to explore the amazing people, food, topography, and different attractions. a bloody good time and recommend it to your friends.

Kerry Newsome: I think that's a really good thing. Or maybe can I add, talk to me at WhatAboutVietnam and let me put your trip together from A to Z in all walks, in all areas, happy to do so. I think maybe one thing I would like to, and it just occurred to me as you're finishing up, I think we didn't talk much about the value for money that you get in Vietnam. I think, you know, as a country, as experiences from hotels to food to, you know, a grab car to get anywhere to whatever, you know, it is starting to cost more and, you know, we had to expect that, but I still think it offers great value for money. Would you agree?

Ian Paynton: Oh yeah, absolutely. What I love is that you can still have a \$1.50 noodle dish on the street or you can have, you know, a \$150 French meal at night. And the same is true with hotels and homestays and tours. So yeah, there's a whole spectrum even at the higher end, you know, if you're paying for a higher end experience, it's still going to be great value compared to, let's say, neighboring countries. Absolutely.

Kerry Newsome: Thanks so much for coming on and I really, really enjoyed the show and I look forward to staying in touch.

Ian Paynton: Me too, Kerry. Thanks for having me and catch up soon.