



What About Vietnam– S5- E23 – Pushing Limits, Finding Magic – Caving and Trekking in Phong Nha’s Tu Lan Cave System

Kerry Newsome: Xin chào and welcome to the What About Vietnam podcast. I thought I'd just jump in with a little bit of an intro here to this recording. It was done with my husband in Hanoi and it is a podcast that's just going to focus on one particular experience and that is the experience of the Tu Lan cave system in Phong Nha through the OXALIS tour group. And this experience was one had by my husband, so rarely will you get him to come on and do something like this, but I was thrilled that he did and I think you're going to get a lot out of it. I hope you will see it as some kind of insight to help you make a decision as to whether or not you would like to do caving or trekking or hiking, as Andrew goes into quite a bit of detail about what you can expect, what kind of fitness that you would need or don't need to do it, and just how well-organized Oxalis is in delivering that program for you. As I said, this is actually recorded in Hanoi. There is a little bit of background noise, so I hope you'll be forgiving of that, but you can't get any more authentic than this, I can tell you. So sit back, enjoy, and please welcome Andrew Newsome to the program. Now, people, this could not be any more authentic if it tried. I'm sitting here on the balcony of our hotel in Hanoi, just having come back from Phong Nha, and I'm sitting here with my husband, and this is... a happening interview, which I

never thought would ever happen, as in I would ever get the chance to interview my husband on this show. But it's only because, and he's only agreed to do it because he has had such an amazing experience in Fongya doing the Tu Lan (4) four-day expedition with the Oxalis Adventure Group Company. And I didn't want to let time lapse before I interviewed him because he's been on such a high and he can remember everything and it's kind of vivid. I just wanted to do it now. I'm just hoping that there's not too much street noise, and if there is some background that you do pick up, people, please forgive me, it's just authentic Vietnam in its truest, most realistic self. Please, will you welcome Andrew Newsome to the program. Hello, Andrew.

Andrew Newsome: Hi, Kerry. It's great to be here.

Kerry Newsome: Okay, I'm going to treat you gently, but I'm going to definitely pick your brains about this day because I have to say that this is all about the expedition. It's all about those four days doing this caving trip, and I'm sure you're going to get a lot out of it from Andrew. So, Andrew, Maybe can we start with your motivation to do it in the first place? When we were sitting back in Australia and making up some plans for Vietnam, it was always on the map, but why this one? What was the kind of the reason behind you wanting to do this two-land, four-day expedition? Why this one?

Andrew Newsome: So I didn't even know that there were caves in Vietnam until I heard your interview with Howard Limbert, who helped set up Exalis and discovered quite a few of these caves. And then from that, I had a look at their websites and I just thought it would be a fantastic thing to do. The Son Doong Cave, which is in the same area, is like the largest cave in the world and there's a whole bunch of other cave systems. I have done some caving before when I was in like Boy Scouts as a kid and a little bit in the army as part of adventure training, so I knew I really enjoyed that. I quite enjoy hiking and jungles and wildlife and all that sort of stuff. So when I had a look at the Oxalis website, they had a range of available guided tours ranging from like a half day trip that's suitable for the whole family all the way up to four and five day adventure treks through the jungle and the caves. The Son Dung cave is kind of the, you know, like the flagship trip and you basically spend the entire four days traversing through and sleeping overnight in Son Doong cave but that only has very limited spots available. And by the time I got round to booking, that one wasn't available. But when I had a look at all the other tours, the two-land, four-day expedition looked like a really good combination of trekking through the jungle and going through a range of different types of caves. So I thought that was probably the best one for me.

Kerry Newsome: So, for everyone out there who's, you know, considering doing the same thing, it is an exciting thing to do, but there's a lot of talk about levels of fitness, you know, what trip and what activity would suit you best. Maybe, Andrew, you know, kind of speak to people about level of fitness to do this. Now, I want to preface this because The occasion that we did this trip and had time in Phong Nha, would you believe it, it was a heatwave. So, we're talking like 40 to 43 degrees at the time and it is April 2024. So, that was kind of not expected, not planned for and neither hoped for. So, that added a level of difficulty to it. But, Andrew, speak to us a little bit about just what level of fitness you need to do something like this two-land one. And on the day, on just talking generally about the people that joined you on it, what their level of fitness was as you witnessed it going about?

Andrew Newsome: I've only obviously done one Oxalis tour, but it's obvious from the website that they have a range of tours that suit different levels of fitness. The Tu Lan, four-day expedition, the Hang Ba deep jungle expedition and the Son Doong expedition. sound like they're the three most difficult ones.

Kerry Newsome: Level six, does that mean anything?

Andrew Newsome: Yeah, Oxalis have like a six level system and they filter all their trips across those different levels and you can see that on the website. But for the hardest ones, I think you would definitely not only need fitness, but you probably want experience as well, so that you have the confidence. So, you would need experience. Trekking. Overnight trekking experience, climbing up and down steep terrain, rocky terrain, scrambling over rocks and boulders. For this one, there's swimming through the caves, so you need to be a reasonably confident swimmer. You don't need to be a strong swimmer. There's no strong currents. You've got a life jacket on, but you need to be comfortable in the water so that you can get in the water and swim through the caves and enjoy it rather than worrying about the environment.

Kerry Newsome: And just that swimming bit, that's like fully clothed with your trekking boots on and everything, isn't it? Like, we're not saying strip down to your swimmers and take a nice dive and walk through. We're talking about from one side to the other with your backpack on your back, fully clothed, sort of getting out the other end, am I right?

Andrew Newsome: Yes, but I certainly didn't find that too difficult or too unusual. And because of the heat, it was fantastic to get into the caves, which are much cooler than the outdoors. And the water in the caves and in the river systems is much cooler. So being able to cool down in the water and then continue on with wet clothes was actually

a benefit. If you came in the cooler part of the year, around December, January, I believe it gets quite cool. So then, you know, doing that swimming and then getting out with wet clothes would be more challenging.

Kerry Newsome: Alright, so let's start with our itinerary so we can take people through it so they can, you know, know right from the get-go what they're looking at. So first night, what are we looking at?

Andrew Newsome: So the first and the last night are in, you know, in some ways not part of the expedition itself. The first night was at local farmstay, which was just some bungalow accommodation by the river that Oxalis use. I think you can stay there separately, but it's mostly used by Oxalis so that they can get everyone for all of their tours together in one place and make sure that they can start on time. on the first day. So I stayed there overnight and then got picked up by a minibus with all the other people from my tour and driven to Tulane Lodge, which is in close vicinity of the Tulane cave system. And that's where we got all our equipment and got ready to go from there.

Kerry Newsome: What I'm hearing and what I've heard from other people too is you got a really good feeling really from the get-go about just the level of planning, organisation and training that you were going to get to use equipment and the people involved. So, maybe speak to us a little bit about that. Because for me that would be a big thing if I kind of from day one got that confidence that, you know, the people really knew their stuff, that would help me be confident to keep going.

Andrew Newsome: First thing in the morning at the local farmstay, there was like four or five different groups and, you know, the staff were running around trying to sort us into the right groups so that we all got on the right bus and went to the right start point. And that was a little bit interesting. But once we got through that, it was fine. We got to the Lodge, got like a series of little sort of outdoor briefing rooms, and there's a PowerPoint, and they take you through all the stuff you need to know, all the safety, what equipment they're going to give you, what stuff you need to bring yourself, the system that they have where you carry the minimum amount of stuff. They have porters who carry other stuff. You can get rid of dirty and wet clothes each morning and it gets brought back to the lodge and you pick it up at the end and through all those different systems so that you understand how it's all going to work.

Kerry Newsome: And it sounds, when we were talking about it just between you and I, it was just good to get a feel for the group that you were in was kind of mixed and maybe speak to that so people can feel like not everybody in the group is these you know, high-end or high-octane adventurers, you know. I think for me when I first

envisaged it, I envisaged very young people, very active people, you know, everybody be there in the super-duper gear and all that sort of stuff, where that actually wasn't the case, was it? It was kind of your, more your average type person,

Andrew Newsome: It was very much, it was a bit of a mixed bag. So the trip that I did was over the reunification day, long weekend. So Oxalis were very busy. And the number of domestic tourists from Vietnam that are doing these tours has only increased in the last couple of years. And because it was a long weekend here in Vietnam, there were even more. So, from my group of seven, there were five Vietnamese, myself and a French guy who's been living in Australia for the last 10 years. And from the various other groups that I saw or that we passed on the trail, I would say maybe two thirds to three quarters of the participants were Vietnamese and the other, you know, 30% or so were various different types of Westerners.

Kerry Newsome: But all mixed levels of capability, I guess, in this kind of experience. Because what I found outstanding about this, and we didn't really know, or I didn't really know until later, was that the Tu Lan expedition is actually **touted as more difficult than the Son Doong** for strenuous activities and involving kind of endurance factors that you don't need as much in the Son Doong Cave. So, because this has got trekking and it's got jungle and it's got caving, those three levels combined makes this kind of the most difficult. But you found that there was varying levels of skills amongst your group. They weren't really, you know, the high level achievers.

Andrew Newsome: I'm pretty sure everyone in our group had previous experience doing tracking. So, they may not have all have done something as difficult as this, but I'm pretty sure they've all done similar stuff or, you know, maybe not quite as hot or not quite as long. But I think they definitely all had some experience. So everyone in our group completed all the activity. The two safety staff who came with us in addition to the lead guide were obviously very experienced. They recognised which people were less confident than others and they sort of provided a level of assistance to them. So like when they're scrambling up over rocks, they're like, you know, put your foot here, grab my hand and I'll pull you up a little bit. helping them with their balance over the uneven terrain and that sort of stuff.

Kerry Newsome: Okay, so let's talk about some of the activities then individually. Talk to us a little bit about the hiking element.

Andrew Newsome: So, it was almost all through the jungle. There are a few patches where you're going through a valley where it's a bit more open, but most of it was through the jungle, and a lot of it was quite steep uphill or downhill, and quite a bit of it

was over very uneven and rocky terrain. So often you were kind of scrambling over boulders and rocks. you know, the slopes were often around about 45 degrees, which is quite steep. Fortunately, considering the heat, when you're in the jungle, you're pretty much always in the shade, which made it a little bit cooler. And then it just opened out a few times around the valleys and around some of the rivers.

Kerry Newsome: And then the swimming element. We talked a little bit about that before, but maybe give us a bit of a deep dive into that.

Andrew Newsome: So there were quite a few rivers that we had to get across. Some of them we just sort of walked across because they were like knee deep. There was a couple that we had to swim across and a few of the caves were wet caves, which basically means, you know, the cave's half full of water and you need to swim all the way through it. Anytime we were actually swimming, there were life jackets provided and we all had to wear them. I'm a reasonably strong swimmer and I'm confident I could have done any of the swimming without a life jacket, but I had no issues wearing it. You're there to experience the cave, so just being able to float along and look around rather than having to concentrate on swimming was great and definitely, I think, added to it overall.

Kerry Newsome: And I imagine just from the pictures I've seen that just that lovely coolness of being in the water, just being able to look up 360 degrees must have been awesome. You mentioned also about rafting. So, talk to us a little bit about, I mean, I know you said there was no rapids or rough water, but there was definitely crossing rivers inside the cave, believe it or not, and you were rafting. So, talk about that.

Andrew Newsome: I think to mix it up as much as anything, there was like a river crossing that we could have swum across, but they had like a big inflatable raft positioned there and we used that to get across. And then in one of the caves later on, where we were abseiling down off a cliff into the water, Instead of, obviously it takes a little bit of time for each person to individually abseil down, so instead of having people sitting in the water, waiting for everyone else to abseil down, you abseil down onto a raft, and then sat there on the raft until everyone else had come down, and then you could either stay on the raft and paddle out, or you could get into the water at that point and swim out of the cave.

Kerry Newsome: Okay. And you mentioned also something about ladder climbing. What's that?

Andrew Newsome: Yeah, so there was just one part where we needed to go up an almost vertical section and it wasn't really suitable for climbing or scrambling up. So

there's a permanent ladder there that went up about probably 15 metres. And just as a safety thing while climbing that ladder, you put your harness back on and you're clipped onto a line so that if you slipped off the ladder you wouldn't fall.

Kerry Newsome: Okay, so one of the things that I was really impressed about when we were talking about it afterwards was your impression of the organisation. Like, you just couldn't speak highly enough about the planning, the safety briefings, the descriptions. And considering you're coming to a country, you know, that English is the second language. You know, you don't have that kind of familiarity to give you some sense of confidence. You really raved about it. Can you speak to us just a little bit more about that? Because I think that for people who are making the journey to come to Vietnam in the first place, coming to Phong Nha and then doing something like this, I just think, let's answer that. Let's really put to bed that so people can feel really good about it.

Andrew Newsome: Yeah, I thought from go to woe, the whole thing was very well organised. Obviously, they've spent a lot of time refining their processes and their itineraries and putting everything in place in the background so that everyone who comes on the trip can focus on having a really good time and all the logistics and all the stuff behind the scenes is taken care of.

Kerry Newsome: Yeah. And, you know, I presume that kind of went also for your guides and the staff and, you know, you spoke of your guide, Annetta, and, you know, how great she was in leading everyone. So, porters and I heard even the food's good.

Andrew Newsome: Yeah, yeah. So, Annetta, the lead guide, was fantastic. She spoke very good English and she explained everything that we needed to know twice, obviously once in Vietnamese and then once in English. She did a really good job of making sure all of us were having a good time, if we had any issues or anything that she or any of the other crew could fix, they were all over it. The itinerary was very well paced, so we never felt like we were in a rush or that we couldn't take the time to enjoy everything, but at the same time, it didn't really feel like we were ever wasting time. When we were hiking, because of the heat, we took quite regular breaks. You could cool down and drink and catch your breath if you needed to, and then we'd keep going. But we still got everywhere we needed to go, did everything we needed to do. It was really good.

Kerry Newsome: And you haven't yet talked about the food. You raved about the food. Come on, like, let's get on to the food.

Andrew Newsome: So the food was really good. Obviously, you're eating out in the jungle, but like it might be at the mouth of a cave and they throw down a tarp. And I

don't know where all the food came from. The guys just kept opening their backpacks and pulling out more stuff. I guess you'd call it simple but traditional Vietnamese food. So there was a lot of pork, a lot of chicken. The first lunch we were making rice paper rolls and eating them at the entrance to a cave. Soups, fruit, all sorts of tasty things. There was a vegetarian in the group and there was extra stuff for her. And there was always plenty of food.

Kerry Newsome: And, you know, it was something that I was worried about in the heat and, you know, thinking about how were they going to keep that food fresh, you know, along the duration of that time period, especially in the heat. But you said it just kind of seemed to come from nowhere and, you know, it was fresh as and you really enjoyed it. So, that was a good thing.

Andrew Newsome: Yes, so the porters weren't walking with us, like we saw them at night, but during the day, as we were making our way through doing all the caves, they were obviously walking backwards and forwards to various pickup points that could be accessed by road or scooter or whatever. And they were picking up the food for that day or dropping off everyone's dirty clothes that we could get them at the end or whatever was needed to make it all happen.

Kerry Newsome: So, if you were to provide everyone thinking about this, what tips would you have for them?

Andrew Newsome: I think you definitely, to get the most out of it, you need to pick a tour that is suitable for your level of ability. Yeah.

Kerry Newsome: And we knew that it wasn't for me, right? We knew that definitely.
Andrew Newsome: Yes.

Kerry Newsome: So, I think you've got to call it, haven't you?

Andrew Newsome: Yeah, you know, you're probably going to be planning it in advance. So you might look at the tours and what's required and say, well, you know, maybe I can only do level two or level three. But if you're six or 12 months out and you spent that time doing a bunch of hiking and some overnight stuff, you could probably get to a higher level of fitness by the time you set out to do it. So I think Be realistic, but also don't sell yourself short, because I think I can't comment for any of the other tours on the website, because I've only done one of them. But I suspect if you push yourself just a little bit, you'll get the most out of it.

Kerry Newsome: And as you say, it's just a matter of confidence and if you've done a few bits of trekking and a little bit of that kind of exercise to feel that way, you're going to be able to relax into it rather than treating it as a bit of a stretch or a challenge. I think to

enjoy those kinds of things, If you go there relaxed and confident, then you enjoy it and you don't treat it like an arduous challenge that you've got to kind of competing with yourself to enjoy it. Before you go, I just, look, I know this is gonna be a challenge for you, but was there any, like, aha moment? Like, did you come to a point, because I thought your aha moment was actually right at the end when you rang me and said, you know, it was through, it was just absolute amazing, but was there any aha moment while you were doing it that you went, God, I'm just glad I'm here and I'm doing this. Was there anything in that?

Andrew Newsome: Look, we've talked about a lot of stuff, but we haven't really talked about the caves. And I mean, obviously, the caves are mostly what it's about.

Kerry Newsome: Knock yourself out, Andrew. Talk about the caves.

Andrew Newsome: And just the caves themselves were amazing. The scale of them. the pristine nature. I'm not sure exactly what the system is, but access to these caves is government controlled. Exalis have got some sort of permit where they can only let so many people per year through them. Obviously, Oxalis are very invested in looking after the caves, so there's some areas you can't go into. You know, there's no rubbish. If anyone sees the tiniest scrap of rubbish, they pick it up and take it out with them.

Kerry Newsome: That's great to hear.

Andrew Newsome: Yeah, they're just beautiful caves. Some of them are massive. There's all different types of formations. As we were going through, Annette had a lot of information about how different types of formations formed and the calcium carbonate and the silicon dioxide and various other things that I can't remember now.

Kerry Newsome: But would you have said prior to doing this, you were really into caves? Because I've been married to you for 20 years and I can't really think that you were into caves before. You'd go, yeah, you know, like we're going to go and visit caves. So, for you to go, oh, we haven't talked about the caves and how amazing they were.

Andrew Newsome: I don't have a good answer to that. But seeing the photos of the caves in Vietnam and realising that they were something above and beyond what I've ever seen before in Australia, it just really looked like something that I knew I would enjoy. But even expecting that, I was just blown away by the variety, the scale, the unspoilt nature of the caves. It's fantastic.

Kerry Newsome: Yeah, and I think they're really strong on keeping that unspoiled nature of the caves that, you know, that footprint of the tourist is very well monitored and they're under very strict conditions to do so. So that is good. But I think you also

mentioned that there was some beautiful natural light coming through from various aspects of the caves, which they try and capture on film, but you got to be there really, don't you?

Andrew Newsome: maybe one part of a tour that I was less into. was they have, at different points in different caves, they have some opportunity for some staged photographs. They know the best way to do it. They know the best settings to put on your camera or your iPhone to capture it. And you can do poses or whatever you want and get some really fantastic photos of you to put on your Instagram or whatever the kids do these days.

Kerry Newsome: In just wrapping up, Andrew, is there anything I didn't ask you, anything else you just want to mention? Because this is your story, and I want to make sure that for you and for everyone listening, they just get everything they can from you on this tour.

Andrew Newsome: I think we've covered it, Kerry. I can't recommend it enough. It definitely exceeded my expectations. If you're interested in caving, jungle, nature, trekking, a unique experience that it's difficult to get anywhere else, and you're in Vietnam, then I would absolutely recommend one of these trips.

Kerry Newsome: Thanks a lot. I really appreciate you doing this because I know how much you love doing this kind of thing. I think everyone, you want to feel really honored to get this because this is really heartfelt and I think it's just fabulous that it turned out to be as good as we hoped.

Andrew Newsome: Anything for you, my darling.