



## What About Vietnam – S5-E8 – Empowering the Traveller in the fight against Human Trafficking in Vietnam

Kerry Newsome: Xin chào and welcome to the What About Vietnam podcast. Now, while I love telling travel stories and introducing interesting guests on the show, occasionally I get the opportunity to delve a little deeper into Vietnam and maybe bring your awareness to a more human interest story of Vietnam.

Today we're going to find out how some Vietnamese actually experience serious hardship and poverty and become more vulnerable to human trafficking. And while we are travelers, we may see things that we don't quite understand, or maybe we see them and think, oh, that doesn't look quite right, and we experience the poverty, we see it, we don't always know what to do about it. Do we give the beggar money or food? Do we report it? Who to? What impact can we really make to make a difference? My guest today is the lovely Kim Miller, and she's going to give us firsthand knowledge of Vietnam's struggle with human trafficking. I think you're going to be blown away when you hear the work that she's doing with a company called Blue Dragon, which is really out there trying to eradicate human trafficking. Plus, Kim herself needs our help to fulfill her dream. I'd like you to welcome Kim to the program as we talk some serious stuff, but some interesting stuff that I think is going to make your trip to Vietnam so much more richer, if that's the word. And I think it's going to give you a bit of a background and context to some of the things you're seeing. So let's welcome Kim to the program. Kim, welcome to What About Vietnam?

Kim Miller: Thank you so much, Kerry. I've listened to so many of your episodes and as somebody who's lived and worked in Vietnam, I still find them incredibly interesting in learning about new places that I can visit and travel to and about the people and the culture. So I'm really excited to be talking to you today.

Kerry Newsome: Oh, that's good to know. It's always nice to talk to people who listen to my podcast. That always warms my heart. Kim, look, you're an Australian girl. I know that you share your time between Australia and Vietnam. Tell us, you know, how you got interested in Vietnam in the first place. Like, what is it about Vietnam that captured your interest as a traveller?

Kim Miller: I actually came to Vietnam to work before I'd ever travelled in Vietnam, which I think is fairly rare, a little bit different to how most people end up in Vietnam. I learned about Blue Dragon Children's Foundation where I work before I'd ever travelled to Vietnam. So I'd heard about it from friends, from people who'd worked and lived in Vietnam, and I'd always been intrigued. I'd always wanted to travel to Southeast Asia. But I hadn't actually travelled very much in my life. And so when I first came to Vietnam to work for Blue Dragon, it was very new to me. I was experiencing it all for the very first time.

Kerry Newsome: That would have been quite pioneering, I would have thought. I mean, I know I first visited back in 2007. And, you know, people then thought, gosh, you know, that was brave. That was crazy, you know, going to Vietnam. Because as you and I would know, Vietnam has a kind of a history with us that we consider more in the view of the Vietnam War rather than it being a country. Would you say that's true?

Kim Miller: Yeah, and I guess my experience of Vietnam really came from the people I'd known who were working there. In some ways, I'd expected to come to a country that was far less developed than what I found it to be. I came across for the first time in 2012 and moved across full-time in 2014. And so I guess, yeah, my image of what Hanoi in particular might look like was a lot less developed than what I found when I arrived.

Kerry Newsome: Okay, so did you get a chance, and during your roles over there, did you get a chance to do some exploring in Vietnam?

Kim Miller: I have. I definitely haven't done as much as I'd like to, and there is so much more to see. I've mostly seen towards the north, a little bit in the center, and I have been down to Saigon, down to Ho Chi Minh City for work and had a little bit of a chance to explore down on the Mekong Delta. I've been up to Sa Pa and, of course, Ha Long Bay, been down to Nha Trang and Dalat, and around some of the more countryside places, the rural parts near Hanoi, like Mai Chau is one of my absolute favourite places to go to get away from the city.

Kerry Newsome: Yeah, it's a very interesting place too, isn't it? I went there with a friend who had sent me there on a trajectory to find and discover their textiles and some of the materials and things that they weave, some of their crafts and things like that. So, besides it being beautiful countryside, it was extremely interesting from that perspective.

Kim Miller: Really interesting. Yeah, it was the first time that I'd seen the weaving happening and their five-coloured sticky rice was definitely a drawcard for me. I've been back a couple of times now in particular to try the sticky rice and the lake down the bottom of my toe as well. Mammoth, isn't it? Yeah, it is. I've done quite a bit of swimming there, much to the surprise, I guess, of the people, the homestay where I was staying. They hadn't seen people swim in that lake before, but I've spent a lot of time in that lake as well. I absolutely love it down there, Macho.

Kerry Newsome: It's really come a long way too. Recently, I know that I think a fishing restaurant has been built there. It was being built at the time I was there, but it actually sits on top of a fishing farm. in the lake. Because you know the lake is huge to navigate, so they do a lot of fish farming. And this restaurant, you can't get any fresher fish. It's literally on the lake, on the farm.

Kim Miller: Straight from the lake, delicious. That sounds amazing.

Kerry Newsome: I know what I'll be trying the next time I'm there. Yeah, yeah, yeah, sure. So, you know, like good segue into talk about food in Vietnam. Do you have any favorites? Like what would you suggest to travelers listening to the program and thinking about food?

Kim Miller: Oh, look, I have so many favorites. And I'm not going to pronounce this correctly. I get in trouble for my friends and colleagues every time. Thank you. It's called Pho Chien Phong and it's kind of, it's only found in Hanoi, in one particular street in Hanoi. I kind of call it like the fast food of Vietnam. And it's basically fried squares of rice paper that bubble up like little pillows. And it's in this really interesting gravy with beef and tomato and onion. And it's quite rare in terms of the sort of food that I generally eat in Vietnam, which is so fresh and delicious. It's just like a real comfort food, especially great for in winter. So yeah, that's one of my favorites. And of course, you know, Bun Cha, Sunday morning chicken soup for Gar is, you know, to die for. And I'm very partial to a coconut coffee, a cafe soda as well.

Kerry Newsome: Gosh; You're really my best friend now. That is my first go-to when I get to Vietnam. I just adore it. Absolutely.

Kim Miller: Yeah, I made it my mission to try a few different places each time I go to try somewhere different to see if I can find a favorite, but I keep going back to one or two standards every time.

Kerry Newsome: And if I was to ask you, you know, do you have any like favorite things you love to do? You know, my listeners are always asking for local advice and advice from travelers who've maybe just discovered a bit of a gem that's not on the on the map yet or you know is not sort of drowned out with tourists and that like do you have a a favorite thing you love doing or a place that you love going to that we could share with you know a hundred thousand or so listeners just to keep it between us you know it's just to keep my secret places yeah i think

Kim Miller: Ho Dong Do, there's a little lake Ho Dong Do, it's only about 90 minutes out of Hanoi and so it's kind of my favorite place to be able to get on the motorbike, just drive out of the city and I feel myself relaxing the further away I get and you know the further into the rice paddies you get and then you arrive at this beautiful lake, that's yeah, that's kind of my favorite just a weekend escape and I think I think people who kind of live in Hanoi tend to know it's there and head there, but I don't know of any tourists who've been there. I think because it might be a little bit challenging to get to if you didn't have your own transport maybe, but it's definitely one of my favorites. And how do you spell it? So it's H-O for lake, D-O-N, and then I think it's just D-O.

Kerry Newsome: Ah, right. Okay. Good to know. Good to know. Because Hanoi is one of those places where, you know, trying to find somewhere just, you know, two or three hours away from Hanoi is a little bit challenging. I mean, you've got two hours now on the highway to Halong Bay. You're still three or four hours to Ninh Binh. I mean, I'm going to check out Yen Bai. I think it's called. It's about three and a bit hours out of Hanoi on my next trip. So, I'm always keen to find cute places or little escapes from Hanoi for people like that so that they know that, you know, that's kind of the time allotment because sometimes you can chew up a lot of time getting around Vietnam because you know, it's got some miles and not always the best roads. So, you know, finding the right transport is often challenging and you know, people are wanting to figure out, well, how many days have I got and how do I spread them about? And, you know, Hanoi is a really interesting city and very different, but, you know, maybe two or three days, four days, you're done and you want to do something, you know, sideline. So that sounds very, very interesting. I'll have to put some links, I think, to that in the show notes. Now Kim, I want to probably talk to you more now about Vietnam and the struggles that you and I have, you've certainly educated me more so recently in Vietnam. In regard to the poverty cycle and certainly where that leaves people vulnerable to human trafficking. So maybe for everyone, just to give us some context, maybe throw us some numbers. Can you give us some rough idea? I mean, the population of Vietnam is coming up to around about 100 million. They're saying now. And I've, you know, just in researching to do this show with you, you know, I'm, I'm hearing that there's over, over a million, uh, that are considered below the poverty line. I I'm, I'm thinking that's fairly short of the real number, but maybe give us some numbers around just, you know, what, how big the problem is, I guess.

Kim Miller: I think, it's kind of telling that, so Blue Dragon has rescued just under 1,500 victims of human trafficking, people who've been tricked, lied to, and trafficked. And that, you know, is absolutely the tip of the iceberg. We've rescued people from every single province in Vietnam. And so I think it kind of shows just how widespread that problem is. We're not even just rescuing people from remote or rural areas, we are rescuing people from the cities and trying to protect people from the cities as well. And so I think whenever people ask for numbers about the number of people who are trafficked globally or in Vietnam and Really, the only number we can give you with absolute certainty is the number of people that we have rescued because there are so many people who are yet to be rescued or who we may never learn about or who may never return home safely. And so, yeah, I think those most telling numbers is just the number of people that we've rescued and the fact that it's from every single province around Vietnam.

Kerry Newsome: And it's interesting that you mention about every province and city because I was to understand the little bit I do know that there was some concentration up in the north and certainly in the ethnic minority areas and where we find Vietnam's borders very close to China. Is that fair to say?

Kim Miller: So that absolutely would have been the case before COVID. That was definitely true. Since COVID though, we've seen a very different scene when it comes to human trafficking. And people being tricked and trafficked from all over Vietnam. And they're being trafficked into different places as well. So at the moment, some of our most common rescues and our most challenging rescues are actually people who are being trafficked into,

it was firstly Cambodia, and now also Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, and they're being trafficked into forced scam compounds where they're being tricked into thinking perhaps they're going for a job, they're applying for a job where they'll be working in an office. Perhaps they think they're just going on a date with a boy that they've met. Maybe they think they're going for a job in a restaurant or a telephone shop, a phone shop in one of the cities. But they're being tricked and trafficked into these other countries where they're being forced to work as slaves. And so that where they're coming from now isn't just in those northern border regions. Although when we first started doing this work, we definitely did find that there were many locations along northern Vietnam where human trafficking was more prevalent than in other areas.

Kerry Newsome: It's such a silent, killer and so hard to detect. I know I got involved with another charity called the Children's Education Foundation, and that's around sponsorship of girls' education. And getting close to these girls that I sponsored over the years and working with an interpreter, I was able to kind of get a feel for just how they connect and, you know, they connect like us. They use, you know, social media and things like that. And just how scarily easy it was for these girls to be impressed with connections and reach out from people offering them jobs. And I would try to explain to them that they know nothing about those people. Those people have got no credentials. They need to research and be very cautious. But in their kind of their beautiful naivety and ability to believe everybody's kind of good and would do the right thing by them, they can so easily be misguided or caught up in situations that are just not what they appear to be. Has that been your experience too?

Kim Miller: Absolutely, yeah. People who are looking for a better life, they're looking for a way to be able to care for their family. You know, we had one young mum who is living in Hazang. She has four children. And she was already living in absolute poverty when her husband had passed away. And so she was left with four young children too who were, you know, a baby and a toddler. And she had been talking to somebody on Zalo, a social communication app in Vietnam that's very popular. And that person had been talking to her about a job that she could go to if she could leave her children in the village with other people to care for them. She could go for this job where she would earn good money. She could send money back to her children and she would be able to earn enough money to come back to her family. And she was really lucky. We were running part of our anti-trafficking strategies that we're developing anti-trafficking boards, which is groups of people who become experts in communities to run workshops to help people understand the tricks that the traffickers use. And just like what you were saying, ways that they can keep themselves safe, red flags that they can look out for. And in this workshop that she just happened to go to, she realized that the messages that she'd been getting were basically word for word what the traffickers had been using to trick people into going to Cambodia to work in these scam centers. And so it was just she was looking for a way to feed her children, you know, to be able to help those kids survive. And we have no doubt, had she gone, you know, she would never have seen those children again. But because she went, the really great thing, because she went to that workshop, we now know she exists. And so we were able to support her. Not only is she now safe from human trafficking because she understood the dangers of it and that, you know, that what was being offered to her as being too good to be true actually was too good to be true. But we were able to buy her a

very pregnant cow, you know, healthy with veterinary teeth, Very valuable. Yeah, help her learn how to care for the cow. And then to have that income, to be able to have an ongoing income without needing to leave her children and leave her community. We're also helping to pay school fees for her children, as well as helping her with that emergency money to begin with. So it's being able to help people who are looking for a way to have a better life, who might take a risk. because they can't see a way of their life improving without taking that risk. It's really important to be able to help them stay in their community and not to have to leave and not to have to take those risks.

Kerry Newsome: Yeah, and it's an interesting analysis to look at the traffickers as well as those trafficked. And I'm a follower of your founder, Michael, And just some of the blogs that he's written and the stories he's told about just how desperate the traffickers are, as well as the trafficked. You know, the hype in movies and things like that about it being, you know, all big business and flamboyant and, you know, like, it's not always the story. And as you say, some of these people that are suggesting that, you know, there's work to be obtained in Myanmar or there's work to be obtained in China. You know, it's better in Cambodia. These people are actually often known to these people that get trafficked. So, you know, it's scary that, you know, you can be that close to these people and the traffickers are thinking that they're going to make some extra dollars in a much easier fashion, without any concept of the slavery or the danger that they are actually putting these people through. I mean, some are, but some are fairly innocent, from what I've heard, that they don't actually know what concept they're selling, and when it turns out to go bad, it must be dreadful.

Kim Miller: Absolutely, yeah, and that was one of the things like when we started, you know, we knew at Blue Dragon that we needed, doing the rescues is fine. We have social workers, psychologists, lawyers, we have a team of people that can really care for survivors when they come home and help them to be able to rebuild their lives. But we can't change what's happened to them. And so we needed to find a way to be able to end human trafficking and to be able to keep people safe in the first place. And that was one of the things that we realized is that we knew a lot about the victims of human trafficking, but we needed to know who the traffickers were. And we did. We found that the profile of a human trafficker in Vietnam is very similar to the profile of a victim. living in absolute poverty, low education levels, people from ethnic minority communities are often overrepresented. And again, it's finding ways, it's where these anti-trafficking workshops and the anti-trafficking boards that have been set up, their goal also is to be able to stop people from being vulnerable to poverty, because then we're going to have less people also not only taking a risk that ends up with them being trafficked, but it also stops people from becoming traffickers, from doing something that maybe they might not ordinarily do, but to be able to improve their own lives as well. It's such an important thing. It's such an important thing that we're looking at both sides of it.

Kerry Newsome: I mean, education is just so invaluable in this situation, isn't it? For these people to get access to it, to acknowledge that this kind of deception is out there and to be mindful, not to have that open heart, which many of the Vietnamese have, to new things and opening up their homes to people. As travelers in particular, you find yourself at the generosity of many people that have very little and they give so much. And to then discover

that they're being exploited in this way, to me, it just kills me. You've told us that you do share your time between here and Vietnam. So tell us what you yourself do in Vietnam and then we'll lead into that great swim that you've got coming up.

Kim Miller: Yeah, look, I'm in a really unique role at Blue Dragon. I often say I think I've got the best job in the organisation. My role is that I started in Vietnam at Blue Dragon as the school's coordinator. So effectively, I work with schools and students and teachers and supporters of Blue Dragon all around the world, and I help them understand the issues, the cycle of poverty, the ongoing cycle, human trafficking, modern slavery, child slavery, and helping them understand the ways that people become vulnerable and the things that we can do to help them lift out of that poverty and be less at risk of human trafficking. I also work with our supporters and our business supporters and our friends in Australia. And so my role is kind of that dual role of working with people all around the world of school age and students, but also working with our donors and supporters here in Australia.

Kerry Newsome: In getting back to where I started in the program in talking about travelers, and I'm one of them, so when I'm traveling to Vietnam, I do come across situations where I think, oh, I don't know, that just doesn't look right, or I just get, you know, my antennas go up and I just feel like that person is being forced to do something against their will, or I don't know. It's very hard to gauge, as we've just said, that deception-wise, there's some amazing tricks in their trade on how they can represent themselves. But if you are a traveler, we talked about before we recorded this show about an opportunity for how travelers can make a difference? What are some of the things that we can do to help this process or aid this process other than, you know, straight donations? And we get to that and we're certainly going to get to where we can help you. But just as we're out and about, you know, is there anything that we can do or we should take a note of?

Kim Miller: Yeah, absolutely. There was one day I was coming back from a school that I'd been speaking at in Hanoi and it was in between the two, there were two main lockdowns in COVID in Vietnam. And it was in between those two lockdowns. Kids had been able to go back to school for a little while. And I was riding back to the Blue Dragon Center. It was about 11 o'clock in the morning, a super hot day. And sitting out from the curb, about a meter and a half from the edge of the road, was a little girl sitting, holding a basket, as you often see people living in poverty do in Hanoi to earn money. And in that basket, she was selling things like toothpicks and chewing gum and tissues. And she positioned herself kind of in the middle of the road so that hundreds and hundreds of motorbikes had to ride around her. And as people walked past or as they rode past, they were often dropping some money, generally only one or two thousand dong, five thousand dong in her basket. And I stopped, she was a little girl who I had seen before, and we were very close to the Blue Dragon Center at the time. I could actually see the Blue Dragon Center from where we were. And I stopped to sort of find out what she was doing. And she very proudly pulled out a wad of money from her pocket. And, you know, in real terms, it might've been \$5. It might've been enough money to buy her lunch and to buy her a drink that day. Um, and I sort of, I said, okay, all right, come on, let's, let's go to blue dragon. It was nearly lunchtime. So I said, let's, let's go to blue dragon and we'll have some lunch. And she said she couldn't go because she had had problems with her teeth. And she'd been told that day by her mom that she wasn't allowed to go to blue dragon and she wasn't allowed to go to school

because she really needed to go to the hospital to get her teeth fixed. I kind of realized that she wasn't going to go with me at that time, so I went and bought us both a bottle of water and I sat down on the side of the road with her, which meant that people stopped giving her money. And in doing that, she realized, okay, I may as well go with Kim to Blue Dragon because nobody's going to give me money now anyway. And of course, when we got to Blue Dragon, I was able to talk to the social workers who were able to go to her mom, find her mom, take her to the hospital, you know, get her mouth fixed to be able to pay for her education, to make sure that they had somewhere safe to live. And it just really, you know, it really brought home to me in a really visceral way that all of those people who gave her that little bit of money on their way past, it was very generous and kind of them, but what it did was maybe help her survive with a bottle of water and some food for that day, but it didn't help improve her life. It didn't help her go to school to be able to get out of the cycle of poverty or to have somewhere safe to sleep that night.

**And one of the things that we can do as travelers that I wish more people knew about, and we can do this anywhere in the world, is take a pin, pop a pin, open up your phone, go to Google Maps, put out a pin, and remember where you are. Make a few little notes for yourself about what the child's wearing, where they are, if you can find a street sign that's even better, and then go to Google and find out who is a charity or an organization, a children's charity, that's working with children and homeless children in this area. Simply, if anybody had gone straight to Google on that day and they'd messaged homeless child Hanoi, Blue Dragon would have been the first thing that came up. By sending a message to us just through our social media, which again would have come up very easily, would have been one of the first things that come up. We could have had a social worker out to see her within five or ten minutes of her being there.** We have a team of, we call them outreach workers. They're basically social workers who are out on the streets every day and through the night. to look for street kids, to look for vulnerable children, and to be able to help them, not just in that moment, but over the long term. And it's something that I know that we can do anywhere in the world, is just, you know, open up your phone, do a Google search, send a pin to show, you know, people, the social workers or the organization where the child is, and you'll be able to find somebody who'll be able to help them, not just for the moment, but for the long term.

Kerry Newsome: And you know, I think that information is invaluable. I mean, I don't know how many times I would have loved to have had that initiative to do something like that. I think for me, getting my head around just the fact that organisations like yours, like Blue Dragon, exists and has the capacity to offer this kind of assistance is just truly amazing and inspiring. And I think for travellers, I think in their hearts, from people that I talk to, I think, you know, they would like to know what they can do if those circumstances you know, coming to their experience of the country. Because basically, you know, no one wants to see that happen, but they're not really sure where to get the support. I mean, even back onto the human trafficking, just I think in earlier years, because I was involved with Vietnam in, you know, kind of the early 2000s, I don't think I thought that Vietnam had strong enough penalties against people that did these kinds of things. But, you know, that's changed dramatically and those penalties have become quite severe now. So, you know, you can get 20 years plus imprisonment for that. So all of that has kind of spurred on, I guess, a greater want and desire for people to become more active and play a more active role. in



supporting charities like Blue Dragon in doing what they're doing, because this kind of work is just so important. Let's talk, Kim, now about what your dream is. And I mean, you've already done some great fundraising work for the charity, but you might like to tell everyone about what you've got planned for July.

Kim Miller: Yeah, it's a little bit crazy. The thing that I love most about what I'm doing is that anybody can do this in their own form. I'm taking something that I love and that I'm passionate about and I'm using it to do something great, to do something positive in the world. And so I am a swimmer, an ocean swimmer. I've only been able to say that since about December 2020. But yeah, I love ocean swimming and over the last couple of years I've started swimming further and further and I have the opportunity in July this year to attempt to swim across the English Channel from England to France to raise money for Blue Dragons. So I'm raising money for Blue Dragons. anti-trafficking programs. When I talked about those anti-trafficking boards and the sustainable income initiatives, paying for education, we know that to set all of that up in a community costs around \$20,000. So I've set a kind of audacious goal of raising \$200,000 from my English Channel Swim so that I can help 10 communities have these anti-trafficking programs initiated and keep thousands more people safe from human trafficking?

Kerry Newsome: My hat goes off to you. I think it's a fabulous thing that you're doing. And for everyone listening, I'm going to be putting the link in the show notes. So it's like you're one click away, literally, for having the opportunity to be able to support this charity, to support Kim in what she's doing. And, you know, remember her tips about when you are visiting Vietnam and, you know, that pin in the Google map, easy peasy for us to do that kind of thing. We already know of the organization that we can pass that information on to. But certainly if we can get behind Kim to support her in this swim, audacious as that 200,000 is, I'm hoping that my generous listeners will definitely help you in this way and we can do more for Blue Dragon and just to break that poverty cycle and eradicate human trafficking in Vietnam.

Kim Miller: I'm just so grateful, you know, to have this opportunity and to be able to talk about Blue Dragon's work. I think whenever I travel somewhere new, I want to know not just about the amazing things I can see as a tourist, but how I can help and what those social issues are underneath the bits that maybe I can't see for myself. And, you know, to have the opportunity for other travelers coming to Vietnam to do that as well. It's such a beautiful country with incredible people. I work with a team of incredible Vietnamese superheroes. And I'm so proud to be able to talk about their work and to let other people coming to Vietnam know what they can do to help keep even more people safe and create that change. So thank you so much for the opportunity.

Kerry Newsome: Kim, it's been my pleasure. And as I said, everyone, look out for the link in the show notes, whether you listen to my podcast on your favorite channel, your Spotify, your iTunes, your Google podcast, your Amazons, your whatever. What About Vietnam is there. You can come to the website also at [whataboutvietnam.com](http://whataboutvietnam.com). You'll also see the summary notes there, which will also have the links. So let's get behind Kim and see what we can do to play our part in eradicating human trafficking in Vietnam. Thanks, Kim.