



What About Vietnam - S4 - E14 – Con Dao Islands – An archipelago of pristine beauty and complexity

SPEAKERS:

Conor Kelly, Kerry Newsome

Kerry Newsome: 00:18

Xin Chào and welcome to “[What About Vietnam](#)”. Today we're going to talk about a beachside location called the Côn Đảo Islands. Now, when you start Googling and researching for a beachside stay, there's a lot of options in Vietnam. You've got a coastline 3200 kilometers long to choose from. Now, but these islands are quite remote, they are a cluster of 16 islands, to be factual. They are less than hour flight out of Ho Chi Minh City. But the island or the Côn Sơn Island, which is the main one in the group, is very isolated and very raw, in the sense that there's not a lot of touristy stuff to do.

01:28

So, if you do want a very chilled out state, this is definitely the location. If you're looking for a very luxurious stay, there are some absolutely beautiful resorts there. But even if you're just looking to do some snorkeling, do some nice swimming, lay on the beach, read a good book. And you really want to get away from the hubba, hubba, hubba of the world, this would definitely be my pick for you.

Conor Kelly is my guest on the show today to talk about Côn Đảo. He went on a trip with some friends very recently, and he really enjoyed it. And I think what you're going to get from this is some insights into just what he expected or didn't expect or was a little bit surprised. There is a prison there with a museum. Regretfully there's quite a brutal past to that prison. So, when you do want to go and check out some history on the island. That will definitely come up. But as I said, quite a brutal past and something to definitely take it in with context.

02:46

I think also with Conor, because he's a podcaster himself. He's a great storyteller. He's also a teacher, and he's also a journalist. He lives in Ho Chi Minh City. So, it was very easy for him to pop over to the Côn Đảo islands to take advantage of this short break. But I think for everybody listening, I really want you to just get some insights into what to expect there. When you start planning, how much time you may want to spend there, if you do want to go at all. Let's welcome Conor to the program.

03:30

Hello, Conor Kelly, welcome to the "What About Vietnam" podcast.

Conor Kelly: 03:35

Hey, how are you?

Kerry Newsome: 03:36

We were just having a quick chat before this around the fact that we're both podcasters, and we both know what's coming next. But I'm hoping you'll allow me to go all over the place with our subject as we're going to talk about a holiday or a short break you took on the Côn Đảo islands.

Conor Kelly: 04:02

Yeah, absolutely. I'm willing to go into as much detail as I can, from my personal experience and looking forward to sharing it. Because still to this day, it's probably my favorite spot in Vietnam, and maybe ever, just due to its complexity and beauty. So, looking forward to diving into it.

Kerry Newsome: 04:20

That's a big statement saying, best place ever, because there's so many other beach resorts and beach destinations in Vietnam, for it to stand out amongst all of those. That's a big call. So firstly, tell us how did you come to the decision to go there in the first place?

Conor Kelly: 04:43

Well, it was one of those ones where you discuss with your friends where to go as, say a vacation or a short break, and I'd been to places like Da Nang, Nha Trang, Mũi Né, Phú Quốc, and the reason why Côn Đảo stands out is because, for example, all of those features, I personally think if I was to go to them and not know where I was, for example, like somebody brought me that blindfolded, I would probably get them mixed up whilst Côn Đảo was something completely different.

I think the main reason I use that is because of the amount of litter that's in the other places, the lack of I say, lack of, as if it's a bad thing. But it's good that there's no litter in Côn Đảo, the crystal-clear waters, etc. And so, I think when I was actually arranging to go, I probably can't take too much credit because I went with some female friends, and they were much, much better at organizing than I was. So, they did their research explained to me the "hidden gem" aspect and said, it's better than let's say, a standard holiday to Nha Trang or Phú Quốc, why not give it a try, to which I jumped at the opportunity. So that's really how it came about.

Kerry Newsome: 05:53

Okay, so you're right, when you say hidden gem, because it's really only come on the radar for tourists, I think really, just pre-COVID. It was starting to get some attention. It certainly comes up in beach conversations, but never as a standout. And for me personally, I always saw it as I have to have a lot of money to go there. Like that [Six Senses Resort](#) was really the standout thing about the place. And apart from that, the views from those windows and the sandy beaches and the beautiful, lush hillsides, etc. I had no other perspective. And I don't even know why I didn't look into it more thoroughly. So, I'm

curious, what was your first impression, because you've been to Nha Trang, you've been to Da Nang, and you've been to the other places. So, when you went and arrived, what was your first impression?

Conor Kelly: 07:01

I think it was probably 'shock', because the airport was probably smaller than my office, which really struck me, I thought,

"Wow, this is really quite bizarre."

Upon that, I rang the hotel that we'd booked to order a taxi. And it was just,

"No English, no English. Get another taxi."

So, I said, *"Okay, cool."*

So, then I went to the taxi and said, *"Taxi here."*

"No English." I said, *"Okay."*

So, I got on my phone and did the whole: 'Come to this location.' And then it hit me. Nobody speaks English on this island, which already gives it a different feel, to say, your Phu Quoc's because generally you will find English speaking locals there, there are normally lots of expat communities there already; as it's touristy, you think this will be something they accommodate too. But this didn't seem to have anything. It seemed very authentic Vietnamese. So, I thought, Okay, this is my first view, and then driving through the mountains, or well, not necessarily the mountains, the windy roads leading up to the town center of Côn Đảo.

08:01

So, this is something slightly different, middle of nowhere, didn't see any bikes really, only two or three. Then upon arriving just how quiet it was, it almost gave me a bit of a shock as in thinking,

"Why does nobody know about this? Is this mysterious?"

And then from exploring and my research, I was aware of the historical influence of Côn Đảo perhaps in previous times in Vietnam, so maybe it still has that connotation? Like a war Island? Who knows? But my first impression was, I don't know, it was like a mix of mystery. But also, curiosity. And also, I guess, because some of the things I was seeing in terms of just the sunset, the beaches, the mountains, the desertness of the whole place, they seem to have it in quite a positive way. So that's what my first impression was.

Kerry Newsome: 08:56

It's a good thing to bring up because I think, certainly, coming out of Ho Chi Minh City, to the quietness of that island would be a shock in itself. Like it's only a 45-minute flight, isn't it? Like it's short and sweet. I already knew about the airport not being of any grand scale. I also knew that there was very

little English spoken there. So, you're right, the island hasn't really been geared up for high level tourism. There are no buses arriving and that real over tourism feel to it at all, which is what I understood. But I'll tell you how it was put to me by someone else. They said,

"Look, it's absolutely beautiful. It's absolutely pristine, but past a couple of days, you've got to be really imaginative and innovative in what you're going to do. Otherwise, there's nothing. It's quiet, it's serene. But if you get bored with that, after a while, you've really got to start to look further afield."

And I mean, you've already mentioned the war side of it, and the prisons, and we can go into that in a bit more detail.

10:20

So, I can understand and totally relate to what you said about the 'No English', it's quiet, like,

"Does anybody really know I'm here? How am I going to function as a tourist?"

Because there's some things that I think as a tourist, we still want to have this kind of creature comforts, to know that there's an ATM if I need cash, or, like really basics. And when you get to some of these places, they're the first things you think about,

"Well, how am I going to get around? How am I going to do things in this place?"

So, from what I understand, accommodation wise, there's either on the beach itself, or it's closer to the town, Côn Sơn, is that right?

Conor Kelly: 11:11

Yeah, I believe. So, we ended up going past all of the Six Senses and resorts that were 5-stars and ended up luckily finding a place we booked in advance that was of, I guess, normal pricing, I think it was still quite expensive than what you would get in another place. But it wasn't extortion, it was reasonable.

Kerry Newsome: 11:33

So, would that be like a 4-star place or 3-star?

Conor Kelly: 11:37

If I remember correctly, it was a three star it was almost standard, like hotel room with a balcony, which was fairly nice, TV, etc. But it was a far cry, I guess, from the results that come up straightaway, like your Six Senses, etc., which are slightly further away from the main town center. I think it's still gotten places like hostels, it's just, you have to realize they don't speak English. So, it will be a bit of a tricky one. I still remember just little things like asking for a motorbike, it took 10 minutes, even with Google Translate, when in other places, it's just,

"Motorbike yeah? 120 for the day"

There you go. So little bits like that. But we ended up in like a 3-star one, I believe, in the town center. So, that suited well.

Kerry Newsome: 12:21

Alright, so you were there five days. So, I'm curious, what were some of the things you decided to do to take in the island?

Conor Kelly: 12:29

Well, we had an itinerary, which was good, because I concur with that point that after the first couple of days, once you get completely, I guess, once the novelty wears off, that you're on this beautiful, mysterious island, you could get bored. And we had a bit of a weird situation, to be honest. It's a strange one, our flights got rearranged on the way back without them telling us. So somehow, this situation, like transpired where the flight had already been, but we had to get back, and they hadn't told us. So, it was all a bit up in the air. And with that, I ended up getting stuck on the island for a bit longer, which was great. So, that's when it hit me that. Wow, yeah. Because I'm now stuck on this island, I was stuck. I mean, I could go home two days later. That means that,

"Oh, what do I actually do?"

And as I was thinking about what I will actually do, I thought, "I'm probably just going to sit on the beach, read a book, have some coffee", very basic things, which was great. Don't get me wrong, but I was thinking,

"If I was here for an extended period, that's all I could really do."

13:33

We had our itinerary, like going back to what I mentioned, which was to go snorkeling, then was to go hiking, then was to visit the museum and the prisons. And that was really about it. I'm sure there are other things we could have done but fitting it into like our period where we could also have beach time, there we go. So yeah, I would certainly agree with that. We definitely got to see little bits. And we spoke to locals who had to develop their English, I was lucky enough to interview our tour guide for my podcast, which was amazing. But after a while, you can get slightly bored. I probably wouldn't want to go solo. Because I think the beauty of the trip is experienced in this incredible place with people whilst if you're just by yourself, you can feel very isolated because as you mentioned, a great phrase,

"Nobody knows you are here".

So, it can be isolating and probably lacking in stimulation. Because there are many activities quote, unquote. There are a few bars that we managed to find, but not very expertly populated, but you wouldn't be able to interact. I think I counted five foreigners the whole time I was there, as I'm seeing it now sounds like a lot, because it didn't feel like there was even five. I was looking around, thinking there's no one. So, it's a bit of a strange one.

Kerry Newsome: 14:53

Yeah, and I've only been to a few places in Vietnam where I've looked around and I've gone- because I've got blonde hair, and I would look around and I'd go,

"I think I'm the only white person here."

I get the feeling that Côn Đảo is a little bit similar. And people say, when you see the photos and all the rest of you go,

"Well, why aren't more people going?"

I think we've actually hit the nail on the head. And that is: It's not super good for trendy bars on the beach. It doesn't have an entertainment aspect to it. Kids wise, they've got to really be into snorkeling and maybe watching the turtles and, and doing that, maybe some hiking and things like that. But there's no artificial aspects to it to add on another layer. I think, in a good way, it's still pretty raw. And I think if you're into that rawness and that untouched aspect, that is what you would enjoy. But as far as a lengthy stay, it would depend on if you really wanted a wellness aspect to your stay where you really do want really quiet and whatever, you'll definitely get it there. I was going to ask you about roosters, whether they still woke you up. But I don't think you're going to get karaoke bars and things like that.

Conor Kelly: 16:30

Yeah, exactly, none of that stuff. It was very much like the rawness was its appeal, not for anything like touristy.

Kerry Newsome: 16:38

Yes, exactly. So as far as those things to do were concerned, can I break down a couple that I'd just like to know a little bit more about? So, there is a national park. And I believe the National Park is quite beautiful and teeming with wildlife. And that is Côn Sơn. Did you decide to go and venture through that and do some hiking? Or was there any interest in that while you were there?

Conor Kelly: 17:05

I think we were trying to. We were trying to find, say, an official hike to do to go with the wildlife. But for some reason, we weren't able to. Perhaps the tour guides weren't available. I can't exactly remember. But we found someone to take us trekking. It has its similarities to a point. Then once we ended up going through the trek and getting to the top of the mountain, quote unquote, even though it wasn't an official mountain. We then went snorkeling, which was something we'd done the day before. So, it wasn't like- snorkeling was great. So, it's not like,

"Oh, here we go. We have to snorkel again."

But it was like, *"Okay! Snorkel again."*

Just because it's there. In terms of hiking and experience in the wildlife, that's not something that we did, I guess, the official way, but we did some trekking.

Kerry Newsome: 17:49

Right. So, on the snorkeling side of it, did you decide to go out? Because I think there's about 16 islands that constitute Côn Đảo islands from a plural sense. Are there any people that can take you out to some of the other islands? Can you do some snorkeling in other places? Because I do believe the coral and the sea life is quite amazing.

Conor Kelly: 18:17

Yeah, we were brought out to a few of the surrounding islands, which I wasn't too familiar with. And there's a, there's a small boat that does that for you, where you have the Vietnamese who will bring you and there'll be, say, within five to six people and then your crowd, and they take you from island to island. You do your snorkeling. And then it's rounded off by relaxing on a beach not too far away. The actual experience of that would have been amazing, except for the fact that the waves were extremely rough on that particular day, and a lot of people were getting sick. So, it was slightly mixed, where you'd be getting bumped around. Waves were crazy. People were getting sick. But except for that, if I was to dive like, for example, when the water was calmer, it was amazing. It was just on that note, it was a bit wild. But that's what happens. You can be brought around by the Vietnamese when you go there

Kerry Newsome: 19:15

I guess also for historians, and for people who want to delve back into the history of Vietnam. Certainly, the island holds a lot of some brutal history to do with the prison and definitely the way political prisoners were treated in such a brutal way in the prison. So, it's become quite famous. I understand that. Did you decide to go and have a look at the prison or the cemetery or the museum?

Conor Kelly: 19:50

Yeah, all of the above. We thought we'd have a look just to get some historical impact. That's one reason just to see what it's about. Well, the second reason is going back to what we mentioned earlier, we've done the trekking and the snorkeling. What else is that by the beach? So, let's try this. So, it was a combination of factors. But upon going there, it's a strange one, because I've been to the war museums in Ho Chi Minh and Hanoi, and I'm sure somewhere else, however, it's probably Côn Đảo. That's probably what's on my mind. So, I don't think it differed enormously from those two, to be honest with you. Maybe if I had to make a distinction, you actually went into the rooms, the chambers that were used, and there are statues and exactly what happens. So, if you go up close and personal, it can be a bit slightly brutal, slightly harrowing, especially if you try empathizing with what was happening, hundreds of years ago.

20:46

So, it's a strange one. That's definitely the distinction. In terms of the museum, it was fairly similar to the ones you get Ho Chi Minh and Hanoi. There was some slight- I guess, more historical context about the actual island and what that was used for, which was interesting. Because I wasn't previously familiar with it. It does explain the mystery of the place where if I speak to Vietnamese. Some of my Vietnamese friends about Côn Đảo, that's the first thing they say. It's not how beautiful the beaches are. It's not about the scenery. It's always

"Oh, yeah, at the war place."

So, I do think it has that spooky feel about it still, which can deter locals. But expats may not be so put off by that because of the difference of generation. So that's really what it was. They're all fairly near each other, to be honest with you, and not too expensive to go, I think within 50k to 100k. So, fairly near the beach. So, it's easy to explore and check out. That was my interpretation.

Kerry Newsome: 21:50

Yeah, it was a dark place to go for me when I went into to do some serious reading on those prisons, and just, how the French built the prisons and what they were used for, right up too, and including the American war. So, that was a dark area of discovery about the island. But certainly, as you say, I think it does have that stigma. And I think it's possibly one of the reasons that Vietnam hasn't decided to consider it or promote it to its own people.

22:40

Getting on to the other things to do. Can you talk to us about food? Like, were there any cute restaurants? Or did you move amongst hotels to get some different aspects of food? Because I'm thinking in my head also that could have been an interesting delving experience.

Conor Kelly: 23:08

This is where I feel slightly embarrassed, because usually when I will go to a new place in Vietnam, I'll do some research beforehand on certain types of food that you must get from there, for example. Upon coming to Côn Đảo, I was really just curious about what it was. It was at a point of my Vietnam journey where I hadn't been here. I think I can't remember; I think what I said, I hadn't been here that long. I've been here about a year. So that's long enough. But upon going, I remember thinking,

"Oh, what is different about Côn Đảo Vietnamese food?"

I was almost just looking at the menu and choosing what I would choose everywhere else. I had this tradition when I was younger, I say younger in my Vietnam journey, where I would look for great western spots abroad, not abroad, but in just different tourist destinations just to I guess, familiarize myself with. If I'm on holiday, I can treat myself a bit more.

24:05

So, there were some amazing western places in Côn Đảo, which surprised me. It really surprised me actually, because I thought that the whole vibe would be very Vietnamese orientated. But I think that was recommended by a friend of a friend. So that's how it all came about. But in terms of the Vietnamese food cuisine there, I'd probably say the seafood. The seafood was up there. The first meal we had, unsurprising, I suppose. But that was definitely something. I mean, it was quite expensive for what you got, but overall, the food was decent.

Kerry Newsome: 24:41

It is, being an island, you would think the seafood would have to be good. Actually, it's not going to be good there, like where is it going to be good? So, that's good to hear.

24:58

So, Conor, would you say five days was long enough or too long, or something in between?

Conor Kelly: 25:06

Probably just about enough, if not too long, I would advocate three or four days to be honest with you. I think that's enough time to be amazed by the beauty. Also see everything and not get too bored.

Kerry Newsome: 25:21

Yeah, and that's been my feeling as well, as far as when people have asked me about a side trip from Ho Chi Minh City. As we've talked, there's Nha Trang, there's Mũi Né, there's Phú Quốc, and of course, there is Côn Đảo. But as far as 'how long', I really am glad you've said that, because I'm like you. I can get just totally overwhelmed with the white beaches, the sunsets, the long cold drinks, but by day three, I'm starting to get a bit of itchy feet, and I'm going,

"Okay, so, what's next?"

So yeah, I'm glad you've narrowed that up for me.

26:12

I'm also told by my travel company that the best time to go is March to September. Would that be right for you? You mentioned the waves and I have heard out of season; those waves can get quite big, and it can be quite turbulent. So, do you still think March to September is the best time, or later, or earlier?

Conor Kelly: 26:36

Yeah, definitely. Because if it rains, I feel like Côn Đảo suddenly loses an enormous amount of its appeal, in terms of the activities you can do. And the scenery, it would lose a huge part of that. So definitely, if you are thinking I would advocate going at that time. I know a friend who went on Tết holiday, I think. I think it was Tết holiday. But for some reason, the weather was-bad.

Kerry Newsome: 27:00

February, March.

Conor Kelly: 27:02

And it was just nothing. So yeah, go around that time, I'd recommend.

Kerry Newsome: 27:11

Is there any kind of must do's or must don't dos? Is there anything to be warned, people should be aware of? You mentioned some of the aspects of not speaking in English. I think that was good to mention, that there isn't going to be that hospitality trend in Vietnam, where most people in hospitality have got some level- good of English to get around. But do you have any like, 'beware of'. I've heard maybe you need to bring repellent for sandflies. Apparently, the sandflies are pretty raucous on the beaches.

Conor Kelly: 27:53

Anything you should be aware of. A good book. Yeah, definitely bring good books. Yeah, I'd say, definitely do that. Definitely bring some good books.

Kerry Newsome: 28:03

Or bring a good podcast. There is one.

Conor Kelly: 28:05

Yeah, exactly.

Kerry Newsome: 28:06

You download a good podcast?

Conor Kelly: 28:08

Yeah. I have some recommendations, I'm sure. Yeah, make sure you're in good company, which I'm sure you will already have planned.

Kerry Newsome: 28:20

You mentioned just about the flight issue coming back. Did you book that directly with the airline? Or did you go through with your friends and through a travel agent? How did you actually go around booking it? I meant to ask.

Conor Kelly: 28:34

A good question. I think it was through Vivu Travel. I think so. I can't remember if it was their fault or the airline's fault that we weren't informed. But yeah, that's another thing I should have mentioned actually. The flights can be tricky. There's only three or four a day, both to and from, at very awkward times. I think the latest is 2pm. So, it's not one of those where you can go for a weekend where you'll go on Friday night and come back Sunday night, which I've done with Da Nang, which can't really happen. So, it's a tricky one, I'd say with flights. That makes it slightly more awkward. So, beware of that

Kerry Newsome: 29:17

In comparison to Nha Trang, Phú Quốc, Mũi Né, you would still rate it as number one beach escape?

Conor Kelly: 29:28

Number one beach escape? Yeah. And the reason is just because of how beautiful it was, as in the untouched waters, the beautiful sand, the weather, etc. In terms of I guess if you want to escape to go partying, for example, for a week or so, or have like a real western spot, then go to Phú Quốc, but I think Con Dao as a beach escape is number one.

Kerry Newsome: 29:50

Brilliant. Transcript Outline

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