



What About Vietnam - Series 2 – 17

[What about a holiday that ended up being a life changing experience?](#)

Xin Chao and welcome to what about Vietnam? I hope you've been enjoying the series I have recorded talking to local health and wellness practitioners in Vietnam. It's an evolving area of travel experience in Vietnam and while in many ways Vietnam uniquely can offer wellness and the opportunity to build a healthier and stronger body and mind just by luring you to its shores. Because of its natural landscapes, fresh food and warm culture..... It still has a way to go to meeting the demands and expectations of the western travelers, especially those that are well-versed in true wellness and therapeutic wellness systems. But it's people like my guest today, I think who will be at the forefront of this kind of development in Vietnam. I'm really delighted to be talking with Michell Ford from luminarylifecom.com, the business designing life-changing experiences.

Talking with Michell, you will get a sense of her devotion to this area in Vietnam, her and her team. Originally from Cape Town, she tells me she came to Vietnam for one year and has stayed for 15. Michell comes with a very in-depth resume on the wellness project development space. Having brought on ambitious wellness concepts and bringing on six hotels with a very high-quality bespoke spas and treatment centers. It is the collective knowledge of how and where this industry is heading in Vietnam. But I'm hoping it will help you better understand how to navigate and how to choose what's right for you, be it the right location, type of treatment and practitioner.

When you see a promotion for wellness, health benefits, therapeutic centers, things like that,..... I hope after this episode, you are going to be a little bit more the wiser.

Vietnam is destined to be a hot destination in the future for wellness, as we transition through COVID and begin to heal collectively as a community and as individuals. Because I know Vietnam in my heart has so much to offer. I wanted to get Michell's take on how to go about finding the right place for you, what to look for. So please welcome Michelle to the program.

Michell Ford: Actually, when I arrived in Vietnam, there was no wellness at all. So, I kind of grew into it with Vietnam and so I think it was an interesting part of my own growth process and a way, at the same time, to see how it's growing in Vietnam. And because it was such an exciting new field for this area, I was really interested in taking that further. That's really how I started to explore it with Vietnam, I would say.

Kerry Newsome: And from looking at your experience Michelle, you kind of, if I could use the term, cut your teeth, in hotels and trying to bring that experience into hotels, which haven't traditionally been very good at that.

Michell Ford: So, yes working in hotels, very often the hotels are looking at wellness from a different frame, or from a different perspective. When a client's looking for wellness, they're really looking for what problem you're solving. They are not looking for what accommodation and inclusions are in the package. And so hotels are traditionally creating from the experience level to say, this is the experience I'm creating for you. So that is what we saw to be quite a challenge. And in addition, you need so much more expertise in wellness to build a frame like that and to bring the right people together, to be able to solve that problem for the clients. So that's really where we, through experience in the hotel side, I could really see how we needed to bridge the gap because this was not existing in Vietnam as such.

Kerry Newsome: And I think if I draw my own experience in earlier years, I think Vietnam sort of thought, ah look we can just put on a gorgeous hotel with all luxury experiences within the hotel, as in, you know, by the pool and all that ambiance that goes with that. Provide massage treatments and kind of that's it!!

Michell Ford: Right.

Kerry Newsome: And I think, what I've seen, and what's good to talk to you about is the evolution of wellness and retreats, and retreats that are becoming more focused and more specialized. Would you agree?

Michell Ford: Definitely. I think traditionally it was easy to add on just that one thing or the other. But I think going forward, Vietnam risked “wellness washing” if we keep doing that.

I think it's time to stop that and that's why we really feel we need to spend a lot of time in-depth to develop those programs. In addition, there's a lot more expertise in Vietnam. In the beginning, yoga was pretty new here and that is how it started. But Vietnamese themselves and the experts that are here, the expertise is much broader. You're able to develop stronger wellness programs than what we could in the past too.

Kerry Newsome: You've decided to put roots down in Vietnam and obviously extend your skills in this area to hotels and your own center. What happened next?

Michell Ford: What happens next? So basically, we have two parts at the moment. We're doing one, which is a wellness consulting and management, where we offered this exact support to hotels. We can help them build their full wellness program and we can help them integrate it into the hotel if we manage it as well. We really develop targeted programs specific for their destination and their skills and make sure that all the parts are aligned in the resort to offer that. And in the other branch that we're following, due to seeing that there will be this growth of wellness retreats in Vietnam, we've built an online retreat platform, kind of booking.com for wellness.

Kerry Newsome: Okay.

Michell Ford: And what we have done is, we're busy curating, we're supporting the hotels to develop the programs that they sell on there. We provide that advisory and we're categorizing it really in detail so that clients can find what they need.

And thirdly we actually are setting up a call center with wellness coaches so that clients really can see, okay, I'm coming to Vietnam, this is what I want to do, how can I find what I want to do? What places would you recommend to me if I want you to do this, or I don't want to do that. So that we can really give them that level of support they need.

Kerry Newsome: Well, that's sort of speaks to where I was heading with this. This time with you in this interview, which is really trying to help travellers navigate this space. As you said, Vietnam is not really known for being well-managed, if that's the best word. And just finding a hotel and thinking that that's going to be the be end and all end is not the solution.

So, if I'm a traveller and I'm sitting in some part of the world right now, and I'm thinking, I'd love to go to Vietnam to experience a wellness retreat. I've been in lockdown, I need to reboot, to re-energize. How would you advise someone in planning a trip to Vietnam on that basis?

Michell Ford: At the moment, the resources are still a bit limited for them. Of course, they would be looking at some retreat platforms on Google, and they would start to explore what specific niche that they want to focus on. If they want to do yoga or they want to do transformational healing it might be two completely separate things. In Vietnam, it's not always consolidated under one umbrella. For example, you could stay in **Hoi An**, very comfortably, and then you could work with all the practitioners and healers in the area and join the classes. Or there are some niche retreats, but they're also generally not always available. It seems a little bit by calendar basis. So, it's a little bit harder to navigate as you say.

Kerry Newsome: Yes and...

Michell Ford: Sorry, from our perspective, with our platform that we're developing, we're really helping guests with that by creating a wellness spectrum.

We say on the beginning of the spectrum is this “recreational level” where you want to trek, or you want to go cycling. You just want to relax and enjoy your time with a little bit of these wellness activities, the spa, a bit of yoga.

Then we look more at an “experiential level”, where the wellness starts to go deeper, where there is a bit of a formalized program around it and so on.

Michell Ford: Then there's this “transformational level” where you really want to be on a specific program for a specific outcome. For example, the detox program. And then we have an immersion program where you really want to get, let's say 30 days really deep into meditation, or really deep into yoga where you're really going on that full educational and immersive program. I think if you know where you want to be on that already, it's easier as a starting point.

Kerry Newsome: And what do you think Vietnam brings to the table? Tell us what makes a retreat in Vietnam more attractive than anywhere else? Let's say.

Michell Ford: I think Vietnam has some natural resources for that. I think the nature and the diversity throughout the country and the options that you could choose.

Because nature is obviously a big part of how you immerse yourself and wellness, so beautiful destinations for that. The people are just that genuine and offer a nurturing care that you just don't get in many places. So just feeling loved and nurtured and cared for in everything. And certainly, obviously the food is almost naturally healthy. You're already naturally eating, let's say a semi plant-based meal plan while you're here as well. So that's kind of the easy entries which laid a solid foundation for a wellness program.

Kerry Newsome: Exactly. Now, something that you talk a lot about in your services and certainly your expertise extends into this area. And I'm going to bring up the subject wellness ecosystem. Can you talk to us a little bit about that because I think sometimes people get a little bit miffed by a lot of the language?

Michell Ford: Right.

Kerry Newsome: And it becomes very academic around simple things. And there are some trendy words that are being bantered around and they might say it on the brochure, but they don't actually deliver it if you know what I mean.

Michell Ford: Yeah.

Kerry Newsome: Talk to us a little bit about, and explain for everyone listening, just what's in a wellness ecosystem, both for yourself personally, and in the bigger picture.

Michell Ford: So, we implement that on all levels of our business. We can say there's a wellness ecosystem globally, but there's also a wellness ecosystem in our business and there's a wellness ecosystem within us.

It's in principle that theory that what we do micro is the macro, it is the seed to the macro. From our business perspective, in the wellness ecosystem, we really want a good balance of what the client needs how the practitioners fit into that and who they are and how they're supported in their work and also what the hotel brings. What are the hotel facilities available? What can the staff provide? And we really build the program as an ecosystem around that.

Kerry Newsome: Can you tell me Michell, a time you have attended a wellness retreat in Vietnam. And tell us about that experience.

Michell Ford: In Vietnam, to be honest, because I've been here for most of it, I tended to go out for my wellness retreats at that time. It's always the opposite of what you have. Yes, so let's see in Vietnam, I haven't specifically done wellness retreats, but really much more wellness. I'm very specific on picking specialists. I really enjoy working with wellness specialists, so I might not have picked a retreat in Vietnam at that time, but I would travel to a location and search out the best wellness specialists in that area and work with them.

Kerry Newsome: And that's a good point to raise in the sense that some people think there's only one choice, which is, if I want wellness, I have to kind of go away and lock myself down to a hotel or resort or a center for two or three days. Where, what you're saying is the

traveler's got the option to find specialists and we've talked about **Hoi An and Danang** and kind of the central region, **Hue**. I know also has some, nice venues for that. But being able to find and recruit or get the services of specialists in particular modalities and whether that's yoga, whether that's reiki, whether that's hypnosis or whatever. Talk to us a little bit about the options with that, because that's not something that people would normally think about Vietnam in that sense.

Michell Ford: Right. You know, even if you pick up a private yoga teacher here, you could do your daily beach classes. You can go onto the beach and have morning yoga every day by yourself. Having a private teacher like that, you can really go a little bit more into the depths of why are you doing the sunrise salutation, and what does it mean for you. It can work on your posture during that. So very practical that you learn through the process.

But it really depends on what you're looking for because if you're doing that, you almost need to be able to already know a little bit of what you want and what you need. I would say, if you're really more coming into wellness or you really have a serious issue that you want to work on, whether it's medical or mental or whatever it might be, I would say it's really good to go on a structured program where people can guide you and advise you. But if you've already been through some of those and you enjoy it and you kind of know which areas you want to work on, you can do this more freestyle, if I can put it that way.

Kerry Newsome: Yes. And I think, as you say with Vietnam growing into this space, I mean, I try to think about Vietnam as having so many places to offer it. But would you think that central Vietnam would be the best region to focus on? I mean, or is it also available in the North and the South as well?

Michell Ford: I would say definitely this region is really strong for it. It's got all the tools available, both in Hoi An and Da Nang. There are a lot of really good practitioners in the area. A lot of venues you can join, a variety of classes and different studios, a lot of plant food restaurants or vegan cafes so it is definitely easy here.

There is definitely also a part of it more towards like Sapa area, if you want to get more into the trekking side. There are some of that too, but maybe a little bit less specialists, but more immersion into nature and that experience.

Kerry Newsome: Michell to put aside an amount of time to devote to a retreat or whatever, what would you recommend is a good amount of time to invest in that? Just how much should you allocate? Because people get, I think a bit thinking they're self-indulgent or they're going on a holiday and they're going off into a retreat and they get a bit guilty about that.

Michell Ford: Yes. That's something we come across often, there are people that say I'm a little bit guilty to do that. But it's really by you being able to do that you can give the best of yourself to everyone around you. You really have to see it as being of service to everyone around you, as opposed to feeling guilty that this is only for you because it's not only for you. You're impacting everyone around you when you come back. For the time period, there isn't a fixed time because it really depends on what you want. If you're super-stressed and really just want to come down from that, or if you really have serious medical issues and need to cleanse your body, it might take 21 days compared to a three-day relaxation.

I think, it really comes down to what you want out of it and then build back how much time you need as opposed to the other way around.

Kerry Newsome: And I think these came up in the other parts of the series that I put together with some other practitioners. The first question kind of has to be to yourself, as in what you want to get out of it.

Michell Ford: And think in terms of what do you want to change in your life, because sometimes you don't even know what you need to get out of that to change. You can be quite practical to say what you want to change or shift in your life and then how can I do that? Where can I go? How long do I need?

Kerry Newsome: I can't talk about this subject without bringing COVID into it because obviously COVID has affected us all. So, talking to that, how has COVID changed your business and your attitude in this space? Talk to us about that.

Michell Ford: To be honest, the wellness business is in the right place at the right time.

Kerry Newsome: I was going to say.

Michell Ford: I think there's not someone that has come out of COVID without more awareness around wellness and what that means to them. And that would maybe be physical because of the immune system and the fear of what's coming there, but it may also be totally a mental around anxiety and stress. And it may be wellness around relationships because we were stuck together in a small apartment, 24/7. It kind of highlighted whatever wellness needs we have right now and brought that to the front to say, okay I really need to work on this. So this is what I want the change in my life to be. I think it's really supported people to find this path for them and which one is the priority as well.

Kerry Newsome: And one question that comes up for me with people who follow me and talk to me, is just about how Vietnam faired through COVID and what assurances can they get that Vietnam is safe to travel and to travel in this wellness space?

Michell Ford: Vietnamese has been really amazing at handling this, so we had basically zero deaths if I'm not mistaken. We have no transmissions anymore for four months already.

They've been so proactive and I think the other part of it is Vietnam is a really community driven society. We see that people do things for the greater good of others. It wasn't just, I don't want to wear my mask, so I won't. It was knowing that if we wear our masks, we support other people as well. If we take care, if we self-isolate, it's really much more a community focused society in general. Vietnam was very strict, if they found a case, they traced four levels of contact and they were very specific to say what those levels were and they published the person's itinerary for the period before they travelled.

When they published that you could also see, oh goodness I was in that area, so I need to self-isolate. They were very transparent with that, so it was very easy to see. And they themselves were tracing where it went and would basically follow to quarantine people to disinfect areas that were involved.

After the second rise up in Da Nang they basically quarantined everybody and they tested every single person. So proactive to really jump on there and get it going. The big thing that we felt here, we always felt it was under control, it was in good hands. Decisions were being made, if they were tough, that was fine we understood that. And at the same time, we felt safe. We didn't have that same collective fear going on here and because of that we can pretty much live our lives here already which we're so fortunate for. So really, as a destination for traveling, I would say Vietnam should be on the forefront of anyone's radar as the first place to travel because of its safety.

Kerry Newsome: And that's kind of a little bit how I feel as well. I mean, I was there in March, and I got out just in time to get back to Australia before they shut the doors kind of thing. And I was in a bit of a state of denial I have to say at the beginning.

Michell Ford: I know, I think we all were a little bit, we didn't realize just how big this would become and what global impact, it would have.

Kerry Newsome: Exactly. But I think where the future of travel is heading is definitely where countries have managed it well, and I think Vietnam has shown the world just how jumping on it quickly and quite strictly. And, I think the part is, as you said when they were publishing people's itineraries.

Coming from a country where privacy is such an issue and things like that, that was kind of all blown out the door, you know? Lists everywhere of where people were, so as you say, they could say, yes, I was in that coffee shop or, I was attending that tour or things like that. So, whilst we might've not agreed in all their approaches.

Michell Ford: Right.

Kerry Newsome: I think as a community, as you say, everyone did support it and get behind it and it's achieved the success, it has.

Michell Ford: Yes, yes.

Kerry Newsome: Michelle just lastly, I just want to maybe steer the conversation to the time of year in Vietnam and you've been belted with some terrible typhoons of late. I mean, we're sitting here in November. Would you suggest there's a better time of the year to come? To do something like this in the area of self-healing and wellness.

Michell Ford: Let's say specifically in the central region, it's really lovely all the way from April to let's say September.

Kerry Newsome: Hot.

Michell Ford: Very hot when you start to get to July and August, but you are guaranteed sunshine.

Kerry Newsome: Absolutely.

Michell Ford: It really depends on what you like, but of course in rainy season, with wellness it's not as important because if you're coming on in something for transformation

and you've got your program, it's not really as important as the weather as well. But for sure, much nicer in the spring, summer months.

Kerry Newsome: And do you have some recommendations for places that people might consider to come to do a wellness retreat?

Michell Ford: We have a few practitioners in Hoi An that are running wellness retreat programs, shorter programs, for example, Victoria Wellness, she's running some. Vietnam Detox is running some and we have two projects coming up next year that will run in this region full programs as well.

Kerry Newsome: Okay. And any actual hotels that you've been involved with that you can speak to from personal experience that you worked on, that you would advocate.

Michell Ford: In the area at the moment, most of the wellness is still more experiential relaxation-based. I would say at the moment, there's not one that has really moved forward to more of the transformative space. But of course, the one we're working on now, we're hoping to launch in February or March. We would have to share that with everyone soon.

Kerry Newsome: Okay. Great. Well, I can put those links in the episode notes for sure. Michell, thanks for being on the program. And I look forward to seeing you in Vietnam hopefully soon.

Michell Ford: Yes, please. I think Hoi An needs it as well, everyone's businesses and livelihoods somehow depend on it too.

Kerry Newsome: Absolutely. Thanks, Michell.

OUTRO: Thank you for listening. Check out the episode notes for more information. What about Vietnam? Don't forget to subscribe, rate, and review and stay tuned for more fun adventures in Vietnam.