



# What About Vietnam – S4- E21 – Exploring Phong Nha beyond the caves

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**Kerry Newsome:** [00:00:01]

Xin Chau And welcome to What about Vietnam? I'm happy to report Vietnam is really hitting its straps again as far as being a vibrant, healthy country to visit. I've just got back. I had a fabulous time. I could have stayed a lot longer, but there's just so much to do and trying to cram it in is always a challenge. I know I may sound a bit like a broken record, but there's just such a variety of things to do and discovery is endless. So today I wanted to focus on Phong Nha. Now, you know, Vietnam is kind of managed to get through the really hard years of COVID with a lot of hard work like most places, but also diversification in many cities and localities. And the Phong Nha locality is one such region that really pulled all their straps together to try and build on what was available with the caving to lots of other activities. And a great advocate for that is Ben Mitchell. Now I've had Ben Mitchell on the show before, along with Howard Limbert, but we really concentrated on the caves and I wanted today's story to be about some of the other cool things there are to do in addition to the caves in Phong Nha, because for you and your planning a couple of days might not cover a visit in Phong Nha you may want to extend it to a week and you'll hear from Ben as he actually says he wishes he had a dollar for every person that says, you know, we should have added in more time as there's just so much to do.

**Kerry Newsome:** [00:01:56]

Ben is really well known in the region. He's a strong advocate for tourism and really goes out of his way to. Educate to inform people about the region. And he's got some

some great links and I'll certainly include those in the notes that you'll be able to get access to. His knowledge. You know it extends to the region's history and that includes its war history. He knows a lot about bike riding and getting around through the jungles, the Phong Nha Loop. He'll talk about all of these kind of activities in the show. And you know what's great it. It's the kind of region that I think a family could really enjoy a long stay there, lots of activities for kids to do, you know, healthy stuff out in nature and exploring farms and farm life and great tasty food from farm to table and just a very nice community spirit with really good, fun, cool things for kids to do that they'll be talking about for years to come. And I think, you know, if you can build into your trip some part that does offer a long stay, it means you kind of get to unpack your bags, leave them there for a week, and then do some really cool day trips. And Fong Na, I think gives you those options and that variety. I'm really grateful for Ben coming on the show, and I just know you're going to love all his stories and and some of the stuff that he's got to share with with us today. Ben, welcome to What about Vietnam once again?

**Ben Mitchell:** [00:03:53] Hey, good morning, Kerry. Thank you.

**Kerry Newsome:** [00:03:55]

I thought what we'd get into now, Ben, was some of the things we talked about before we got on here, and that was just some of the things that you can do in Phong Nha that are kind of not for your cave lovers, not for people who are coming to Vietnam to do caves. We know that there's those people. But for those that have gone, gosh, you know, I really didn't have any real knowledge of Phong Nha, So maybe speak to Phong, Nha and a little bit of history. I'm going to make sure that I put in the notes, some of your links etcetera, to some of your historical aspects that we talked about, but maybe share with my listeners. Now just a little bit of the history of Phong Nha so that they can get a feel for it.

**Ben Mitchell:** [00:04:42] Well, Phong Nha has.... Really got a lot to offer to people that want to experience the beauty of rural Vietnam. Um, the mountains here are karst mountains. They're covered in jungle. There is an incredible road which goes from the village of Phong Nha into the mountains up to a place called Tra ang Intersection, where it where it runs into the Ho Chi Minh Trail West. That road is called Highway 20 or Victory Road. And that was the road that essentially led North Vietnam out of the North Vietnamese army, out of Phong Nha to go to fight in the South.

It's part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail network. But those roads were built and trails were built during the American war. And today they provide us with access into some really beautiful jungle mountain area national park. And that has become the loop, um, over the years with the backpacker tourism and the loop can be. Can be. Uh, utilized as a day trip by tour companies use it to go to the Dark Cave, the NUOC Moc Eco trail, and the Paradise Cave. You can rent a motorbike and go there for the very fit. You can do it by mountain bike and I mean very fit. We do have a lot of people do that but and I've done it but it's quite a quite a big ride. It's about about 60 to 70km of a couple of mountain passes in that. Um and what I highly recommend people do is go on the back of a local experienced motorbike rider. They've got their, their own scooters. They're very easy to book through your homestay. They generally charge about \$20, a little bit more than \$20 for the day trip.

**Ben Mitchell:** [00:06:57]

Basically, you've got a couple of things going on there. One is, is that those guys are. Are getting a day's salary. So, you know, for each person that goes out as a as a as a as a bit of money for the local riders. The other thing is the scenery. The scenery is just amazing off the back of a motorbike. It's an incredible way to see it. If you're on the back of a licensed rider, you can have a beer at lunchtime, one of the places around the park, you can relax and it's just an incredible day out that I've never met anyone who didn't rave about after they've done it. Um, what we've made ourselves. I actually made it with a gentleman from Da Nang. And he came up and helped me and I got with Hung from Karst Villas. Hung owns a little resort called Karst Villas. Hung and I used to run tours around the national park. We were we were actually the first people to run tours around the national park. And we had a lot of information that we've now put onto a bit of a podcast that people can listen to in chapters. That's the first chapters about Phong Nha Cave. To give people some background information about that. And then there's some other chapters about different things around the loop and about what you're actually looking at and experiencing as you go around. And that ties in really well with people who either rent a motorbike and go around or they sit on the back of a licensed rider and go around the park to give them a bit of background and give them a bit extra value for their for their trip.

**Kerry Newsome:** [00:08:34]

Okay. And I think that's good to mention because I'd like to put some links to that. Ben, if you'll allow me in the transcript and on the website so that people can get that. Because the other thing we kind of touched on at the beginning was this aspect that Phong Nha now offers the opportunity for a bit of a DIY trip, doesn't it? So you can kind of make it up as you go. Obviously there's access to people like yourselves in Phong Nha that can give some advice. I mean, you've only got to contact Ben at Phong Nha, Farmstay his links will be in the show notes. But maybe speak, Ben, if you would, talk about the kind of stuff that people can do as a family, stuff that, you know, can amuse kids. I know you know, you've got a young family as well, and I see them paddle boarding and I see them surfing and I see, you know, like I know the surf is not like Australia surf, but, you know, there are some different aspects which people wouldn't automatically think would be available from Phong Nha as a kind of a base.

**Ben Mitchell:** [00:09:42]

Yeah, well. Dong Hoi City itself is located on the East Sea and it has some beautiful big beaches. Um, there's Bo Ninh Beach and Nhat le beach and you can experience those beaches, can experience the seafood restaurants along the beaches. Um. Dong Hoi could be explained as being not. It's a place where you can really get Vietnamese modern culture. It's not, uh, not, not set up for Western tourism. It's set up for Vietnamese tourism. And in summer it's quite busy with Vietnamese tourists and quite a lot of fun for people that are looking for something very unique. You know, as opposed to going to, you know, beaches that are set up for Western tourism. Um, staying in Dong Hoi still gives easy access to the national park. There's tours you can do. You can rent scooters, You can get riders. You can stay in Dong Hoi for one night, two nights, and then still come out to Phong Nha. The whole province has got a lot of different things, a lot of diversity because of. It's a diverse place. You've got the mountains, the jungle, you've got the rural farmland, you've got the beaches, you've got these incredible sand dunes just north of Dong Hoi that have now got four wheel motorbikes that you can rent and ride around on the sand dunes. Um, so yeah, there's a lot of diversity there with the beach. I personally like to go over to a beach called Danha Beach, which is only about a 25 minute drive from Phong Nha farm stay where I live, and I like to go over there at dawn often and go surfing.

**Ben Mitchell:** [00:11:35]

The best surfing time is. The autumn and the winter when we get the storms. But we've been going over actually a couple of times recently for some little waves with the kids early in the morning. Um, as far as out here, things to do with families go. I really rate the Bungalow Valley as a great day trip. Most of the homestays around here have got bicycles included in your stay. Or you can rent better, better mountain bikes. And you can also do bicycle tours with she's another guy called. Shi has bicycle tours and he runs some incredible bicycle tours, including going up around the Bong lai Valley and other areas out in the countryside and along different parts of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and. He actually has a company here that does the bicycle tours. Mr. Shi JANG With Bong lai Valley. You can also go up there with the riders on the back of a scooter, or you can rent a scooter and go up there. It's a loop that you do in a rural valley with different stops around the loop that have just naturally evolved around backpackers and. You've got a few farm to table restaurants along the way, like Moi MOI which is one of my favorites, where they do barbecue chickens. When you order the chicken, you actually see people go off and start chasing chickens. Um, they do a really amazing dish where.

**Kerry Newsome:** [00:13:15] They're frightened when they see people come in. Oh no, they are going to have me for lunch. Oh, they.

**Ben Mitchell:** [00:13:21] Look pretty calm just cruising around doing their thing. These are really, really true free range chickens. You cannot get more free range than that.

**Ben Mitchell:** [00:13:34] They're called Ga doi, which means garden chicken. And they're, you know, they're pretty happy chickens. Um, God knows.

**Ben Mitchell:** [00:13:43] I've met.

Some people who are vegans, you know, are not vegans, vegetarians for because of food industry reasons. And they will eat the chicken up there because they see it as being, um. A garden variety.

**Ben Mitchell:** [00:13:58] Yeah. And, and, and happy chickens. Yeah. So, so, yeah, I was sort of surprised when I've seen that a couple of times.

**Kerry Newsome:** [00:14:08] I'm kind of conscious that people want to plan and plan their time. So with all of the things that you're bringing in this episode to us, how should people plan their stay? Like how long, where should they do it from? How do they manipulate it? Because we also kind of agree that there's a lot of kind of mish mash of information out there. So a lot of people come to me and say, look, it's just overwhelming. I don't know what's good, what's not good, Like, so can we give a bit of a steer for people or, you know, how they kind of put this together? Do they come to Vietnam first and then do it from Vietnam? Do they do it all their research from home? Where can we where can we send everyone?

**Ben Mitchell:** [00:14:55] Well, I think people can. If people say listen to your podcast, well, then by listening to different episodes, they will get different information about different areas from people who have a lot of experience in those areas. Um, and I think other, other sources of information at the moment, I think that tourism numbers are still very down and I think that if someone landed in Vietnam and started moving through the country, they would and they had already chosen all of their hotels and what they're going to do each day and that before they got here, 100% booked in, they would probably find that by talking to other travelers heading in the other direction at the moment, that they might have done things differently had they had they had more modern information, say, from up to date.

**Ben Mitchell:** [00:15:55] Date. So yeah, up to date information. I'm hearing from a lot of people that they're wishing that they had booked maybe less time in some of the more developed areas and more time in some of the less travelled to areas. I'm also hearing that people are noticing big changes in what they're finding when they get to destinations they've been to before. Um, a lot of businesses have shut down, a lot of businesses have been knocked about in their management systems during COVID. Um, and a lot of businesses have done a full or partial changeover to domestic tourism and the domestic tourism has much different expectations. To what Western tourism has. You might find that when you get to that resort that you've stayed at before, that it's operating very differently with a much different atmosphere. So you've got to be a little bit adaptable and you've got to be prepared to maybe change your plans or not have such set plans if you're traveling through the country. I mean, it's probably different if you're going to come out to Holland again and stay there for two weeks and just chill and hang out and soak up what that town's got to offer, That would be yeah, you know,

you're going to do that. But if you're if you're actually going to travel through Vietnam at the moment, you would probably have to make some of the decisions about what you're doing along the way by talking to people heading in the other direction that you're bumping into, because they're going to give you information that might conflict with what your expectations were.

**Kerry Newsome:** [00:17:44] And I think for my listeners, if you if you kind of consider the fact that the industry was just so hit so hard that a lot of the Vietnamese workers that worked in the travel industry have since left that industry and that has.

**Ben Mitchell:** [00:18:05] Big player.

**Kerry Newsome:** [00:18:06] A very big player and I think best to just manage people's expectations at this point and to realize that has meant that a lot of the hotels that Ben's talking about also cannot actually take 100% occupancy because they don't have the staff to man the hotels that were originally operating at that at those levels. So they have small occupancies that they can manage with people. And as Ben also alluded, there's also some takeovers that have happened. So the hotel might, you know, that you went to before or that you looked once before on the website. Actually, it's kind of changed its name. It's having some, you know, renovations done. It's got a new manager, it's got a new style. And, you know, Ben's quite right. It is targeting more the, you know, nearly 100 million local residents of Vietnam rather than us Westerners and foreigners to the country. And likewise, I think we need to appreciate that there's a kind of a what I'm hearing from my chats with people is that there's a re- training going on. So the people that have left the industry and they're hiring back new people, they've got to start from scratch. So, you know, it's kind of evolving, but it's not evolving. It's not a flick of a switch. It's not that, Oh, okay. The gates are open. We're all, you know, Jack ready to go. That's just actually not happening. What is comforting to hear is that there's enthusiasm out there and there's hope out there and there's people aspiring back to, you know, to welcome international tourism back because, you know, I think the country does have so much to offer.

**Kerry Newsome:** [00:20:02]

And what I love about talking to you, Ben, is that you do get very much involved with the tourists as they come through. And I love how you can kind of share also that

community spirit of Phong Nha . Because when I see anything about Foreigner with your name attached to it, you know, you're meeting and greeting people, you're sharing them, you know, with them what you know and experienced. Now you've been there, you know, a long time.

So getting back to that question about people planning, I agree. I think being able to be adaptable and flexible with their bookings because if you're locked in, you're locked in. So people just be careful with your cancellation policies and things like that. I think you'll find there's some manoeuvrability. There is a lot of accommodation there. And one of the things I want to emphasize with Phong Nha is there is the beautiful homestays. But if you know you want luxury in that, you can go up, you know, to your four and five star villas and things like that as well. So there's that really broad scope of, you know, the adventure traveler or, you know, maybe the chill and luxury and, and have a gin and tonic kind of traveler as well. There's that really lovely mix. So just getting back, Ben, to people planning their time. You and I have talked about this before, that you actually get some visitors that come for a couple of days but wish they'd stay for longer, maybe Talk to us a little bit about that.

**Ben Mitchell:** [00:21:33] Well, I wish I had a dollar for every one I heard say that. But I'm glad I have a dollar for every.

**Kerry Newsome:** [00:21:38] You mean Dong, don't you?

**Ben Mitchell:** [00:21:41] But I'm glad I've had. I have a dollar for every one who has stayed an extra day. But I think that the. Yeah, I mean, I'm hearing that daily as people leave that people wish they had longer in this area. They underestimated what the area had to offer. Um, and I do always look forward to them going away and telling people about the area because they enjoyed it so much. As far as things to do, I mean, the Bong lai Valley with those restaurants like Moi Moi and the pub with cold beer, with Kong's jungle experience, where he teaches people about rubber tapping and he's got a big swing up there and a full operating farm that he shows people around. Um, then there's Mr. Quyen at the duck stop, which is a somehow it's become like this world famous thing for people to go there and. Um, see be entertained by his ducks. He's performing ducks. Um, that's really popular with families. Really popular with, you know, travellers. And the food up there is quite a foodie experience for the farm to table



dishes. Like they've got bamboo stuff with pork, they've got the Bun Loc cakes, which are a peanut and mushroom, little sort of pasty pie made from cassava. Um, all these delicious delicacies and different foods that if you go up there as a group, even like you often see families and groups of backpackers together sit down and all have a big sort of order different foods and sit around, eat together in a hut up there in the in one of the farm to table restaurants.

**Ben Mitchell:** [00:23:29]

That's a good day trip. And it's cheap. I mean, you do it yourself. It's simple as that. You've got to map. The maps are online. It's all available. Um, then as I mentioned before, the national Park loop is a good thing to do. There's many things to do along that, so you can sort of choose what you want to do before you go. Um, with a little bit of research and maybe talking to, talking to your homestay or talking to, to the locals, the, the Phong Nha Cave in itself is really still it's the original tourism thing to do here in Phong Nha.

When I first came here back in 2000, early 2007, it was a tourism thing that you could do here you hop on a boat. At the at the father son ferry crossing and which is basically why the village was there. It was a village around a ferry crossing. Um, and you, you go up the river seven kilometers and then they turn the engine off on the boat. And then you go one kilometer into the cave. Now it's a great cave to visit. It's a great cave trip. Sadly, at the moment, there's still no information about what you're looking at and where you are. And there's a lot of really interesting information about that. So we're Hung and I have added that to the podcast that we made in order to try and share that information. I know at Easy Tiger Hostel, pre COVID at 9:00 in the morning every morning, people came from all the different hotels down to Easy Tiger for the 9 a.m.

**Ben Mitchell:** [00:25:09]

Talk where we would tell people about that then send them off to the cave in big groups so they could all share the boat. That is currently not happening at the moment because Easy Tiger did not survive COVID. Um, at the farm stay, we try and tell our customers, but what I'm finding is much easier for our staff and for us as a whole as we rebuild, um, at both our businesses that are still open is we refer people to the podcast just to get

that historical information. And I'd like to start sharing that more with all the other homestays too, so they can their customers can benefit from that as well.

As far as exploring the local area goes. A bicycle ride around in the countryside on either side of the river, heading away from town, either upriver or downriver is a great experience to get out into the countryside because I really fell in love with riding around all the islands in the delta behind Hoi ani 2007 through to about 2010. I found it to be like just Vietnam with no development and no nothing, nothing out there for foreign tourists. And then you could still be back at your hotel in the evening and like nice and comfortable and out for a beer or whatever you want to do. And Phong Nha was very much at that stage. At the moment, if you leave the village of Phong Nha, you sort of go out into the countryside. You can you can aim for some different things, like a ride out to the dark Cave for a day trip on a bicycles really good.

**Ben Mitchell:** [00:26:48] You can ride bicycle out to the BONG LAI Valley and then come around past where I live. In the afternoon through CU NAM village. CU NAM Village has just been designated by the government as a tourism village for they want to try and get into the tourism market. But it's it'll be very different because it's much more low key sort of tourism in a rural environment. And that's where the Farmstay has always been.

A book was recently written by an author called Sue Fleming. She was here on holiday during COVID, and she from, was from Hanoi. Um, and Sue was talking to my mother who was stuck here throughout COVID for two years. And my mother had done about eight years worth of research talking to old people in the village, using local interpreters. And Sue got hold of all Mum's research and and wove a novel around her. Her research, which we are now selling at the Farmstay with proceeds going to rebuilding the museum which was destroyed in the big floods that we have here every few years. That book's called 'Two Pillars Remain' and we're selling that here Now. There's also some great. Like there's a good documentary that's been made by Utah University and that is about, um. The war. My mother in law features in that documentary, along with a lot of us Marines that served on the DMZ and other Vietnamese combatants. And that that documentary is really good for people who want to just sort of hear about the human side of the war.

**Kerry Newsome:** [00:28:46] And funny you mentioned about Utah. I want to say hello to many of my Utah listeners and I'll tell you why. Ben, Fascinating as it may be. Um, there are a lot of people who left Vietnam as war veterans, etcetera, and took their families and resettled in Utah in the US 1975, you know, onwards. Et cetera. So yeah, it's really interesting that that documentary is coming out of Utah. I can totally understand why and really good to know.

**Ben Mitchell:** [00:29:22] Huge amount of young people coming into the tourism industry over here. A lot of them were actually studying tourism. During COVID. And they were they were frightened because they decided to go into a field that was that was. Not.

**Kerry Newsome:** [00:29:39] Looking sustainable.

**Ben Mitchell:** [00:29:41] Not looking sustainable. And so they're all quite enthusiastic and they're coming out now and looking for jobs. A lot of the best people from pre-COVID, they were the sort of people who had a lot of get up and go in them and they got up and went. When COVID hit. And I'm finding that a lot of the guys that I used to work with and around there in places like Taiwan and Penang and different parts of the world now. Yeah. Doing, doing some doing the same job and a lot doing different jobs and they won't come back now I don't think I think that they've left the industry and that's making it very difficult for some of the tour companies.

Yes, some of the tour companies are struggling to find those experienced guys that used to do that, used to carry their workload for them, and now they've got young, inexperienced people coming in. And that's adding to the stress of starting up trying to do the training that some companies really tried to do some unique measures to stay alive during the COVID. Um, that's really paying off for them now. Companies like Oxalis who kept all their tour guides busy and working and all their porters busy and working by diversifying. I hear different stories from up and down the coast of other companies that did the same. Um, that'll pay off for them. Now I know that, that I'm very grateful for a couple of the key people who run our businesses who have still got with us and, and I can see that I'm very lucky to have them still.

**Kerry Newsome:** [00:31:20] Ben, thank you for being on the show. I'd like to share with everyone the links that you mentioned. I'll make sure that they're in the notes for people to access and yeah, just great to catch up and talk everything.

**Ben Mitchell:** [00:31:32] Fun yeah. Really appreciate the opportunity. Thanks Kerry.