



What About Vietnam – S4 -9 - A Foodie's Paradise – Part One

SPEAKERS:

Kerry Newsome, Corrin Carlson

Kerry Newsome: 00:18

Xin Chào and welcome to “[What About Vietnam](#)”. Sometimes when you travel light with an open mind, and you're not tied down with any commitments that can't be changed, the world can truly open up as your oyster. Let me begin today's program with some background to my guest. It started with a working holiday, I'm told, starting in New Zealand, moved on to Asia, then to Hanoi for a month, then that led to three months and ultimately would you believe to three years. As you will soon find out, this is only the tip of the iceberg for my delightful foodie guest on today's show, Corrin Carlson, who found her heart and passion for food in Hanoi.

01:26

Corrin is a delightful American girl, who is using her acting and education to share her travel journey throughout Asia with her next stop being Europe in September 22, one to definitely watch out for. You may have seen Corrin on her very popular "The Fat Passport" [TikTok](#) and [Instagram](#) pages. As she shares her "Plates of Hanoi" with her followers. Her personality and knowledge really shine through in her posts. And I think she does the same in this show. You tell me.

While Corrin was visiting her friends and family in the US just recently, I was able to hook up with her to record the show. Being such a wealth of information about the food localities in Hanoi, and some really great experiences, I just knew one episode wasn't going to cut it. So, I've expanded it into a two-part series. That way you get the full picture of some of her great finds, and she's certainly got some super-duper tips for a stay in Hanoi. Without further adieu, let's welcome Corrin to the program.

02:47

Corrin Hello, and great to have you on the show.

Corrin Carlson: 02:50

Thank you so much for having me.

Kerry Newsome: 02:52

Let's just jump right in. Hey, I'm really keen to talk about Hanoi with you. And I know you're going to take us through the city and talk about it from a tourist as you were, when you first arrived, and then originally to someone living there for three years. So maybe share with us just some of those things about the city as a whole, just to kick things off for everyone.

Corrin Carlson: 03:20

Well, Hanoi is without a doubt one of my favorite cities in the world. And like you said, I first came to Hanoi as a tourist. And I loved it so much that I kept extending my stay until so finally I realized I was living there. And then I did live there for three years because it really just draws you in. I used to live in New York. So, I love Big City energy. And for me Hanoi is one of those cities that just totally encapsulates that. There's so much going on, so much history, so much vibrant life happening pretty much around the clock. And it's just an absolutely stunning place to get lost in and also to live in.

Kerry Newsome: 03:59

The times that I've visited, I've probably acted more as the tourist because I am a tourist, let's face it, I didn't get to live there, and I don't get to live there. But there's certainly some areas which I felt more drawn to because of their architecture, as you say, that vibe in the area, just the atmosphere and the friendliness, a great one. Can you speak to that yourself?

Corrin Carlson: 04:27

Oh, yeah, absolutely. I think Hanoi is a city that's one of a kind in the way, like the best cities in the world are. I know so many people love Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City). It's very cosmopolitan. But to me, Saigon is like a cut and copy of a lot of other large cities that you find. But Hanoi because of its history is entirely its own. So, it's a large city. It's a city of about 5 million people, but because it has so much rich history and it is a city of lots of skyscrapers. It's a lot flatter in comparison to other large cities. So, the old architecture from the French, from before the French and from immediately after, really, is the main focus of what the city looks like. And also, you'll find that people sometimes, especially southerners, say that,

"Oh, in the north, the Hanoians, they're so stuck up there."

Kerry Newsome: 05:26

[laughter] I've heard that, too.

Corrin Carlson: 05:28

Yeah, exactly. And especially as a foreigner, who didn't speak Vietnamese, when I first arrived, when you hear the dialect of the north, and you see the mannerisms of people that they have, it seems very brisk, very blunt. So, it doesn't seem right away that people are very happy to see you, or even very happy going about their own lives. But once you just get used to the culture, and you start even to learn a little bit of the language, you realize that people are saying very nice things to you, even if they don't have a smile on their face all the time. It's just kind of the emotional state of the north. So, I think people are kind of turned off by that sometimes as a tourist or as a foreigner. But if you walk in, and you're just kind and polite, you can trust that even if you don't understand people, they're being kind and polite back to you.

Kerry Newsome: 06:17

It's a good point to mention, because I think you're right. I think I've noticed that there is a serious note to the people in Hanoi, they are very serious facially. But every time I've dealt with anyone in Hanoi, and I actually do some work in Hanoi with a tourist company, everyone is just so lovely. And I find even the youth of Vietnam, they are even more exuberant to talk to foreigners, because they want to practice their English and they want to do things, they want to get to know a little bit about you and what we know about Vietnam back to them. So, there's a really nice view, but I do say, again, that I do get drawn to the lake areas or around the lakes, but maybe you talk to us about your experiences of the best kind of places for a tourist to head towards. Where would you suggest that they start their journey or their trip in Hanoi?

Corrin Carlson: 07:29

Yeah, absolutely. You're so right. The lakes are such a total hub to both the living and the tourism, culture parts of Hanoi. So, in the very center of Hoàn Kiếm, we have Hoàn Kiếm Lake, which is an ancient lake, and there's a lot of story and history behind it, a lot of old temples in it, that surround it. And so, what I would say, if you are coming to Hanoi as a tourist, you only have one, two, maybe even three days, I would say that staying near Hoàn Kiếm Lake in that central district is the best place for you to be. There's so much going on everywhere in the city. But most of the tourist places, most of the temples that you want to go and visit, most of the souvenir shopping is going to be right in that area. So, that's a great place to be.

08:20

If you have a couple more days, say you're there four, five, seven days, I definitely do recommend staying over by Hồ Tây, which is the big, big lake that takes up a large portion of the center of Hanoi. And there's a neighborhood there, where actually a lot of foreigners live called, Hồ Tây, means West Lake. So, this is the western area where a lot of people live. And there's a lot of like great nightlife, great restaurants, a lot more people speaking English in that area too, if you're interested in having conversations with Vietnamese people or with foreigners who live there, and just hearing about their lives. So, both areas have a lot of history, a lot of great food and a lot of great views to them. It just depends on what your timeframe is.

Kerry Newsome: 09:06

Yeah, and that's a good point to mention the timeframe because I know when I first went, I literally did the 'hop in, quick surveillance of the city', did the major points and got out, so I really didn't get a good feel for the city. It was just too short. But of course, subsequent visits, I've delved in a little bit deeper and spread my wings a little bit further and got to know people and things like that. And the lake that you mentioned, as in West Lake, that's the lake that you don't hear that much about. And it's a shame because, as you say, it's got a little bit of a different vibe to it than Hoàn Kiếm Lake. Maybe share a little bit more about West Lake if you wouldn't mind, because I think it deserves a bit more attention.

Corrin Carlson: 09:59

Yes, certainly. So, there's about three or four different districts, different distinct neighborhoods that surround West Lake because it is such a large lake. And each of those neighborhoods has their own feel. But it's really common for people who live in those neighborhoods to spend a morning, biking around the lake or walking around the lake with friends, it's a couple of kilometers long. So that's a really nice activity. And then when you are doing that, when you're going along the lake, you're going to see lots of shops and restaurants. But more than anything, what you're going to see is so many coffee shops.

10:35

You're talking about the youth of Vietnam before and they have so much energy, they like to be seen, they like to dress up, they like to take photos with their friends. And so going to the coffee shops on the lake is a really popular activity with young Vietnamese people. But with people of all ages, the coffee culture is so huge there. And so if you get a chance to go over to Hồ Tây, and then take a taxi there, which is really affordable and doesn't take much time, no matter where you're coming from, you can cafe hop around different parts of the lake and enjoy the views and also enjoy just getting to be around people who live in those neighborhoods.

Kerry Newsome: 11:14

And you're right, they do have an energy, especially the younger people, which I love, because they make every event and even the event of just eating food, something to celebrate. They're always taking photos of the food, the taking photos of the people that they're with, the place they're in. So, they really celebrate it. And at first, I found that,

"Oh, gosh, do they have to take a photo of everything?"

But it was explained to me that it is part of their fun. It's part of their enjoyment of the occasion. And it's quite lovely in the end, you get swept into it a little bit. In the end, I was taking photos of everything that I could get my hands on. [laughter]

Corrin Carlson: 11:57

Yeah, of course.

Kerry Newsome: 11:59

So, I'm going to ask you to dig a little bit deeper, because I know something that you found, it was your thing. Because I've seen you so often and followed you on your TikTok and on your Instagram page. So, let's dig deep into the food, which I think you thought or found was 'Top of the Pops'.

Corrin Carlson: 12:28

Yeah, absolutely. I'd be happy to. Should we start with some more casual dining, some street food?

Kerry Newsome: 12:33

Yes. Let's start there. Yes.

Corrin Carlson: 12:36

Awesome. So, you're right, I started an Instagram page called "Plates of Hanoi", shortly after moving to Hanoi, because I love street food, and I love Vietnamese food. And in the north in Hanoi, there's phenomenal food. But what I was finding was that there wasn't a lot of influencers who spoke English that were writing about it. So, I was going out and trying all these foods, and I thought,

"Oh, I think other people who speak English would be interested in learning what these foods are, too."

So, I just started documenting it. And then that page really took off. So, in Hanoi, there's a lot of competition, again, between the north and the south and that people think that Saigon food is better, but I have to disagree. The North just has incredible richness and flavor. Because the North actually has four seasons, four very distinct seasons. So instead of things being light and sweet like they are in the south, you'll find a lot heartier dishes and a lot heartier flavors. Even the Phở in the north is much heartier than you'll find in Saigon in the south.

Kerry Newsome: 13:43

Yes, it's true.

Corrin Carlson: 13:44

Yeah. And Phở actually comes from the north, that originated from either Hanoi or the very northern regions of the country. It's kind of disputed. So, northerners are very specific about the way that they make Phở. So, in the south, and often when you're in other countries, for example, in the US, and you try. I had tried for here; it was southern style. So, it came with lots of herbs, and lots of lime and bean sprouts, things that you add into the broth, but in the north, the dish comes out as is and you can put in some garlic, you can put in some chili sauce, but that's it. Because the broth is so much richer and it's so much heartier. It's more to just be celebrated on its own. And even though it gets super-hot in the summer, just like it does in Saigon. People eat Phở every single day. It is an absolute staple.

14:37

Some other dishes that are distinct to Hanoi, the most famous dish in Hanoi is Bún Chả and this is- maybe many people who are listening, who have seen the episode with Anthony Bourdain, and he takes Obama to a Bún Chả spot in Hanoi and they have a great

conversation. But the reason why that dish was picked was because it just totally encapsulates the food, the street food scene in Hanoi. So you have little grilled pork patties that are grilled over an open flame, and often made with lemongrass and there will be cut up pork belly as well, it's all going to come in a broth, usually a fish sauce base with sugar in it, it will come with herbs on the side and Bún which is like vermicelli noodles.

15:25

With Vietnamese dishes, it's very common that pieces will come a little bit here, a little bit there. And then you're supposed to take a bite of this, and a bite of this and a bite of this and put it all together in your mouth. So, it's DIY, in terms of flavor, and what you want to add. So Bún Chả is something that you absolutely need to try when you're in Hanoi. You can still go to the restaurant, or Anthony Bourdain and Obama ate, it's now called Bún Chả Obama. And it has the table where they ate, encased in glass and set up as if they were there. Personally, I don't think it's the best Bún Chả in Hanoi, I would prefer someplace in Hoàn Kiếm, like, Bún Chả 34, Bún Chả. But it's a good example.

Kerry Newsome: 15:25

And I've been there. It's not actually a fancy place, is it?

Corrin Carlson: 16:09

No.

Kerry Newsome: 16:09

It's got little red chairs, It's just really, really a street food type place. Because when I first went there, I expected, because Obama had been there. That they would have taken him somewhere a little bit special, but it wasn't. It was just a really average everyday street food place. So, when you go there, don't think you're in the wrong place. You're probably in the right place.

Corrin Carlson: 16:38

You're so right. And that season, that Anthony Bourdain was filming, it was all about street food places. So, it was the perfect option for them to take care, though I did hear that, all the other people that are in the restaurant at that time are actually background actors, so.

Kerry Newsome: 16:53

Yes, I know that [laughter] Well, you've got to give it your best shot, haven't you?

Corrin Carlson: 16:58

Yes, exactly. One other great thing that I will recommend about Hanoi because a lot of the food has meats, or it has some kind of protein in it. So, people are a little bit cautious if they're vegetarian, or perhaps if they're vegan before they traveled to Vietnam. But a really lovely thing that I enjoyed learning about and especially enjoyed eating when I was in Hanoi, were at the vegan buffets. So, it's a part of Vietnamese culture to eat vegan food, one to two times a month, depending on the lunar calendar, if you practice Buddhism. Some of the younger generations follow it, sometimes they don't. But even still Vegan Buffets have come out of this.

17:40

So, you can find some 'hole in the wall' places, and some places that are just absolutely built up and beautiful. And you spend about one to \$3 and it's all buffet style vegan food. And I don't know about you, Kerry, but I never used to like vegan food, [laughter] I suck up my nose about it. And I was like,

"Tofu? Why would I eat that?"

And then I went to Vietnam, and I completely changed my mind about vegan food. They do it so well. And they just have amazing simple ingredients, but awesome flavors. One place that

I really like that's in Hoàn Kiếm, it's also in Tây Hồ, they have a couple locations around the city. It's called Veggie Castle. It's in big three-story houses, and all of their locations as grand buffet. And it's just like a cool place to hang out too, you'll find lots of young Vietnamese people there.

Kerry Newsome: 18:35

I'm really glad that you starting to mention some places because I want to be able to direct people, because sometimes I think when you arrive in Vietnam, and I hear it from people all the time, it's a little bit overwhelming. It is so buzzy, there's the motorbike thing, there's a lot going on.. So, trying to point people to a particular area or particular place helps, because then they can find, and if you're a vegan or you're a vegetarian, and that's really what you want to do. Well, I'm going to make sure that I put the link and mention this properly in the show notes. So, if you are vegan, you're not lost, you're going to find places very easily in Hanoi, which offer vegetarian or vegan food. And it's the same for people that are gluten intolerant. People say,

"Oh, you can't go to Vietnam because your gluten intolerant."

And I go,

"Whoa, that's not quite right because there's the beautiful broths."

As you say, you don't need to actually add the noodles and you can still get those beautiful flavors with the herbs and the chicken or the beef whatever you choose.

Corrin Carlson: 19:54

Exactly. I have to add too, that often the noodles or rice noodles, so Phở noodles, Bún. If you like Bánh like a Bánh it's rice flour, rice noodles. So, if you're super, like Coeliac intolerant, yeah, there might be some gluten somewhere in the process, which is something to watch out for. But if it's just something you choose not to eat, you're going to be totally fine. All you really can't eat is Banh Mi. But that's it. Everything else is rice flour based.

Kerry Newsome: 20:23

Yeah. And that's a shame because I'm a big fan of Banh Mi.. [laughter] I mean, totally, that is my go-to, when my girlfriend picks me up from the airport when I arrive, the first place she takes me is to a place to get by Banh Mi., doesn't matter what time I arrive. That's the first go-to.

Corrin Carlson: 20:41

Absolutely, you can find it any time of day too.

Kerry Newsome: 20:44

You can. Yeah, absolutely. And it's just not the same. Like they sell, these places here in Australia that sell it. And it's just not the same. I hate to say it, but it's just not.

Corrin Carlson: 20:54

I agree. It's almost too fancy. The places you go to here in the States, they're like to put together and like,

"No, I needed to slap that sandwich around a bit, and then it's going to taste right."

Kerry Newsome: 21:03

[laughter] Yes, exactly. All right. So, street food, anything more you want to add for people so that they can really get a good sense of street food in Hanoi?

Corrin Carlson: 21:15

Yeah, absolutely, I would love to talk about a few more. Another dish that I would say, is a standout in Hanoi is called: Phở Cuốn. Instead of the Phở noodles that we know that they're skinny and long, it's the same noodle, just not cut up. So, it's going to look like a sheet of noodle, the same thickness. It's laid out flat. And then inside is posed, usually roasted beef, lettuce, and coriander and then it's rolled up. So, it creates this nice little roll. And it's served with dipping sauce. So that dish also originates in Hanoi. There's a great little island, or tiny little neighborhood on Hồ Tây called Trúc Bạch. And this is the birthplace of this dish, Phở Cuốn. So, when you're driving around Hanoi, you'll find often that you'll be on a street, and you'll look at the street, and you'll realize that all of the restaurants on the street, or all of the shops on the street are selling the exact same thing.

22:20

That's just how the Vietnamese view competition. It's like, 'Well, if my competitor has clients that are coming here to buy Phở Cuốn, then if I'm here with Phở Cuốn, some of them will come to me, rather than being spread out.' So, for example, when you go to Trúc Bạch, all you have to do is cross the bridge onto Trúc Bạch islands, and entire street that you drive down is packed with Phở Cuốn restaurants all the way down, probably 10 on each side. And you can really walk into any of them, there'll be slightly different and have a few different things on the menu or cooking that's a little bit different. But more or less, it's the same food, the same ingredients. And so, it's fun to be in those places and look around and be surrounded by the same things.

Kerry Newsome: 23:06

And I think if you use the advice, I had from someone recently, I spoke to about food in Hawaii, he said,

"A good way to pick a restaurant is to pick it by their menu."

So, if they have a very big menu, like an extremely extensive menu, then he said,

"You can figure yourself that they're not going to be able to cook all of that fresh or super fresh."

So, it's more looking for the restaurants or street vendors, that have got a very small menu, because it's what they focus on. And it's certainly going to be the freshest and made that day. And just something else I thought mentioning, some places- correct me if I'm wrong here Corrin, is that sometimes it's all gone by like 10 o'clock in the morning, that day. Because, if I'm sort of getting up from having a lazy day, and I want to mooch and have something later. I go to some places, and they've sold out. Because the Vietnamese are very early morning people and breakfast and getting up early to meditate or go for a walk or that sort of thing. They then are having their breakfast quite early. So sometimes the Phở is all gone early. So, it's not necessarily a dish that you have in evening or whatever. It's earlier in the day, would you say?

Corrin Carlson: 24:40

Yeah, definitely. And it's interesting. I would say that each Phở restaurants, it's unless one of the really well-known popular ones. Usually, it'll serve through one meal. So, like you said, they wake up at 4am, they'll prepare their Phở and then it'll be done by 9am, or there'll be a lunch spot or there'll be a late at night spot, for like people who are getting off work late at night. And that's very common for a lot of different dishes and street food that you'll find in Hanoi as well.

Kerry Newsome: 25:13

Yes. When you were mooching around and picking places, how did you pick places that you decided to try and then ultimately record on your Instagram or TikTok page?

Corrin Carlson: 25:27

Yeah, I asked a lot of friends, both foreigners and Vietnamese for their recommendations. And I stalked Instagram so hard, and I would save posts from other people that I followed, who were Vietnamese foodies, and places that I wanted to try, or dishes that I wanted to try, and I could try elsewhere. Even just searching through hashtags like #HanoiEats or #FoodieHanoi, #HanoiFoods, those gave me a lot of ideas about what to eat. And honestly, I am a very adventurous person, which was why I decided doing the "Plates of Hanoi" and photographing these things was a good thing for me to do, because I'll eat anything. But I know some people want to learn about it first.

26:14

What I can definitely say to you in Hanoi is, there's a lot of these staple dishes. They're very neighborhood based when it comes to the street food. So, there'll be a great Phở spot on the street. And on the next street, there'll be another great Phở spot, and there'll be a little bit different. But neither of them is bad. What I would say, as a tourist in Vietnam, especially, is, learn some of the names of these dishes, do just a little bit of research about what they look like and what they are. And then as you're walking around the city, and you see a Phở restaurant, or you see a Bún Chả restaurant, you're like,

"Hey, I know what that is. It's not the place that I was planning to go based off a recommendation, but it looks good, it looks busy, I'm going to go in."

And you're guaranteed to have a great meal, even if it's not the original location that you wanted to visit.

Kerry Newsome: 27:07

I agree, and I think if you see a lot of Vietnamese at a restaurant, that's always a good tip.

Corrin Carlson: 27:19

One thing that is so much fun, and I think maybe not a lot of tourists do it. There is a street in Hanoi, which is called Chicken Street. And you can look it up on Google Maps. And it won't say Chicken Street, it will point you to the actual Vietnamese name, but it is a street that is just like the Phở Cuốn street where every restaurant on that street selling one thing, this street is all selling Barbecue Chicken and Barbecue ribs, pork ribs, pretty much. Each restaurant will have a slightly different variation, but pretty much all the same things. And it's only a nighttime activity, mostly people will go as couples or they'll go with groups of friends, they order beer, they order, grilled chicken, and grilled ribs and grilled **Bánh Miến**, it's just like a super fun night out. Each restaurant will have their own hot sauce recipe that they're well known for. That's right Hoàn Kiếm. And it is always a great meal. Just like you said before, go to the ones that have some people but it kind of depends on the night. Sometimes my favorite is pretty quiet, even though, it is a very popular place. But I've never been disappointed on that street. I definitely recommend it to anyone who eats meat.

Kerry Newsome: 28:39

I mean, I know we're talking about all the good things about food in Hanoi. Are there any things that you would warn people out about like, maybe stay clear this and that. Because sometimes, in the media, it plays up a lot of negative things like dog and pigeon, and things like that. So maybe we need to talk a little bit about that, just to give people perspective.

Corrin Carlson: 29:05

So, right Kerry, I get asked about dog all the time when I'm not in Vietnam by people who are wondering about the cuisine there. And it's something I'm super happy to just put to rest and lay out for people as well because I know it's something that foreigners and tourists worry about. So typically, and traditionally in Vietnamese cuisine, dog meat was actually something that was very expensive, and was only eaten on special occasions or on special group outings

with friends. So, it's never a meat that you are going to accidentally end up with in any of your dishes, ever.

Kerry Newsome: 29:41

Correct.

Corrin Carlson: 29:42

Unless you're maybe out with a big group of Vietnamese people. It's a very special occasion. I've heard, one or two people out of hundreds- It's just not common. But one or two people say to me, I went out, I ate this meat. I thought it was very good. And then the next day I found it was dog, but that was just because they were out maybe with their business partners or something like that. So the only times that you would come across this meat- sometimes you will see places in Hanoi selling dog meat, but it's actually becoming very unpopular now, because the younger generation have really grabbed on to the idea of dogs as pets, which the older generations used dogs more as guard dogs and less so much as pets. So that mentality is changing in the big cities. If you go to a smaller city, you might see a little bit more of it. But again, it's expensive, and it's very well marked. So, it's not something that you're ever going to accidentally consume.

Kerry Newsome: 30:38

Yeah, and I'm really glad you've put it that way. Because I think that's the fear and the uneducated- that don't know about it. And it's not commonly spoken about on any social media, but it's important, I think to address that it's just not going to land on your plate accidentally.

30:55

This is where we're going to finish part one of Hanoi, A Foodie's Paradise. Join me for part two of my interview with Corrin Carlson in the next episode, where we talk more about what to look for in Hanoi for food, and taste sensations. And let's check out where those fabulous tips are from Corrin. Stay tuned to What About Vietnam and follow us on our [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [Pinterest](#) pages.

31:27

Before we let you go, I thought I would introduce you to a new [Cooking Class and Market Tour](#) that's now featuring on the [WhatAboutVietnam.com](#) website. It's based in Hanoi. So, after we've been chatting about Hanoi and some of the great foodie experiences, I thought this was a great one to remind you about. What's wonderful about this is, the class is with Chef Duyen. I've done the class with her she's absolutely fabulous, great personality, what she doesn't know about cooking our food, the markets will just blow you away. What's exceptional about this tour and the opportunity to learn from her is that she brings her class now into her own home. So, you get to meet her family. You get to just hear about how food is a big part of Vietnamese culture, their family life and social upbringing. You should try all kinds of cooking classes in Vietnam, but I hope you're going to enjoy this one in Hanoi with the Chef Duyen. Please check it out in [WhatAboutVietnam.com](#), on the Offers [page](#). Until next time, I wish you happy travels in Vietnam.

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Stay tuned for more in Part 2.