



What About Vietnam - Series 3 - 9 - Street life experiences in Hanoi through the lens of a camera

[00:00:36] Kerry Newsome: *Xin chào.* Welcome to *What About Vietnam*. When I was deciding just how I would do justice to my guest on the show today, Lavonne Bosman, it was kind of hard until I looked at her photographs. Her photographs depict Hanoi street life. They are the most amazing pieces of art because they show so much detail. I hope you welcome her to the program. She comes to Vietnam obviously through the lens of her camera, inspired by friends that were already in Vietnam, who were boasting about the scenery people, and places to explore.

It's crazy how this happens. When you've been to Vietnam, it's very easy to leave with aspirations that you want to come back. You're always sharing with people and telling people just how great it is. I can understand how she was inspired by her friends.

Lavonne is a South-African-born. As a photographic artist, she offers up the most insightful, and as she calls it, photographic art depicting disappearing worlds. I think that's just a fabulous way to describe her art. She landed in Hanoi in 2019. While teaching English since her arrival, she's been expanding her portfolio with the street culture of the city. Personally, I really love street culture. In cities like Hanoi, when the old and the new co-exist, sometimes just sitting having a coffee and people watching can tell you a lot. You will hear from Lavonne how she loves to delve into some of the more interesting parts of the Old Quarter. She's got some great insights into special treats to watch out for even traveling late at night. Just her confidence as a solo traveler, I'm sure, will help people who are thinking about coming to Vietnam possibly as such. If you are interested in hearing different viewpoints of Hanoi and one from a seasoned traveler with an eye on cultural diversity, this episode will mean something to you. You will be able to view and ultimately purchase Lavonne's work as I've made sure I have included all the links to her in the episode notes. Please welcome Lavonne to the show.

[music]

Hello Lavonne. Welcome to the *What About Vietnam* podcast.

[00:03:25] Lavonne Bosman: Thank you Kerry. Nice to be here.

[00:03:29] Kerry Newsome: That's good. Now, I'm talking to you in Hanoi in the middle of COVID. Things are still a little bit tight there at the moment I understand.

[00:03:39] Lavonne Bosman: Yes, rather tight I'd say. It's been quite a strange feeling so far. [chuckles] It literally feels like we've been in lockdown for months already and with no end in sight. They give us a date. It just gets extended every time. At least we know we're still far from the situation that's in Saigon. We're still okay.

[00:04:03] Kerry Newsome: Exactly. Yes. While that's not much comfort, it is some comfort. I just want to give my listeners, I guess, a little bit of background out on you. You are a keen travel photographer. I've seen your African portraits. They are just amazing. You've done a little bit of trolling around the world, the Swiss Alps, I read. I think, from what I see, you do definitely have that fascination with developing countries and-

[00:04:41] Lavonne Bosman: Yes. [laughs]

[00:04:42] Kerry Newsome: -the diversity of street life. I'm really glad you've got that because I think street life is also fascinating. Tell us what drew you to Vietnam in the first instance. Why Vietnam?

[00:05:01] Lavonne Bosman: Yes. As a photographer, like we just said, I love the diversity of life, I love the contrast of seeing the ancient traditional kind of life that might be at risk of disappearing because of rapid development. That's probably my main attraction to Vietnam, apart from my first introduction to it as a child when I saw this American series *Tour of Duty* about the American soldiers in Vietnam. I saw a little bit of the country lifestyle, the bamboo, that kind of thing. Also, I saw pictures of Saigon that really, really fascinated me, all the traffic or the crazy chaotic traffic, all the different characters on different types of transport. You just, "Wow." It just looks amazing. Visually, I was very attracted to Vietnam. I find it very interesting. Yes. From South Africa, there's also a bit of this element of the first world and the third world that exists side by side. That kind of thing is what you see in Vietnam, especially Hanoi. I haven't been to Saigon, but in Hanoi, that exists as well.

[00:06:29] Kerry Newsome: Yes, definitely. You're right. That, I think, is an attractive feature in the sense that I like the fact that it still holds some of its traditional aspects as in the people, the food, the street food, and just the street antics, I call them. You'll be wandering down the street, and you'll go, "Oh my goodness. How am I going to explain that to the people back home?" Because we're so urbanized where we come from that-- Yes, it's a little bit hard. They go, "Are you joking? Do they do that just for the tourists?" "Ah, no. Actually, they do that every single day. That's their routine."

[00:07:15] Lavonne Bosman: Right, right. I often stumble upon a street sometimes very early in the morning unexpectedly where I feel like I just walked into an old movie set. I just went to some totally untouristy place where people are living their absolute daily lives. Wow, I love that, [chuckles] all the smoking in the air and a pig or something that is just lying over a bike on route somewhere.

[00:07:47] Kerry Newsome: Yes, exactly.

[00:07:50] Kerry Newsome: I don't know whether you've been to Train Street, which is a main street in Hanoi.

[00:07:56] Lavonne Bosman: Yes, it's one of my favorites.

[00:07:58] **Kerry Newsome:** Yes. I had a very delicate day there where I was desperate to get this video and to get this photo. Of course, you would know what that's like. I lent over. My girlfriend was with me. She was very nervous that I wouldn't get out of the way because it's very close, isn't it?

[00:08:22] **Lavonne Bosman:** That's dangerous. [laughs]

[00:08:24] **Kerry Newsome:** It's very dangerous. Now, I'm not sure they did shut it down for a while there. I don't know whether it's still shut. I hope so for safety.

[00:08:32] **Lavonne Bosman:** We'll see after COVID, what's the deal there.

[00:08:34] **Kerry Newsome:** What happens, yes. You're right. On that same street, there was a couple of chickens that were in a cage. There was a little lady. She was hunched over. She was cooking something on a little gas stove and--

[00:08:51] **Lavonne Bosman:** Right on the train tracks. [laughs]

[00:08:52] **Kerry Newsome:** It was right on the train tracks. Exactly, I know. I guess for you as a photographer, that is street life in all its naturale, isn't it?

[00:09:02] **Lavonne Bosman:** Yes. I must say the day I first went to Train Street, I really felt like I was in a different country. Even those chickens don't look like normal chickens. I think they call them dinosaur chickens. They just look so ancient.

[00:09:19] **Kerry Newsome:** Yes, I know. Everybody moves their bikes out of the road. They collapse their chairs from the side. They close their windows. I think it goes through at three o'clock in the afternoon. I think it's twice a day that it actually goes through, so you have to be there on time.

[00:09:34] **Lavonne Bosman:** Something like that. Yes. They're quick and efficient. When the train is on the way, within three minutes, everything's backed up. [laughs]

[00:09:42] **Kerry Newsome:** Absolutely, absolutely. That's just one street scene, isn't it, Hanoi? There's lots, lots more. Talk to me a little bit maybe about some favorite areas of yours because I know you're walking around, and you're trying to find some-- I don't know, just moments that you could capture because obviously they come and go so quickly. Do you have some favorite places that you seek out?

[00:10:12] **Lavonne Bosman:** Okay. Well, the Old Quarter in general is a favorite place. You can't go wrong. If you're a tourist, for example, and you don't have a lot of time, and you just spend time in the Old Quarter, you will be amused for days. [laughs] Train Street is also part of the Old Quarter, so you'll find that there. Of course, Hanoi is famous for having all these interesting streets where they sell all of the same products in one street. One of those streets is the bamboo street that is just so beautiful to me. You just see all these bamboo products, mostly some things like ladders and just long bamboo poles of different thicknesses. It just creates quite a nice decoration. Usually, the Old Quarter has quite a lot of trees. There's always this green shade atmosphere that I really love about it, and of course, so much happening. It's so bustling. Your eyes spin when you are there for the first time. Much to see, all the different traffic that goes by, people on bikes carrying the strangers loads that you just can't believe they can actually balance that. Yes, the Old Quarter is great. Of course, all the food that you can find there can also entertain you for days. Then, some other parts that I love, the plant street in Hoang Hoa Tham street. That's not far from the Old Quarter, but

it's something that I discovered quite a lot later. I somehow didn't know it was there. I thought I walked into heaven the day I started walking down that street. That was just amazing, this long, long street, so many different shops selling plants. Also, they sell fish. There are birds in little cages. It just feels a bit like a plant and a zoo streets kind of--

[00:12:17] Kerry Newsome: A menagerie, yes.

[00:12:18] Lavonne Bosman: Yes. [laughs]

[00:12:20] Kerry Newsome: I think I might have stumbled into that street. You're right. It is fascinating. They do have birds in that area.

[00:12:28] Lavonne Bosman: Yes. You could just spend hours just walking down the street and just be like, "Wow, it's just so beautiful and so abundant." One of my other favorite places would be the flower market in *Tây Hồ*, the *Quảng Bá* flower market, which I did my one little photo project late at night. It was about 3:00 AM.

[00:12:53] Kerry Newsome: Wow, that is a life project.

[00:12:54] Lavonne Bosman: Yes. If you want to experience something a bit different-- Of course, it's still overstimulation in a way, but so incredible that time of night, especially if you happen to be there before the lunar month because then it's extra bustling. It feels like you're in a really crazy action movie, just hooting and shouting and organizing. Bikes and trucks, everything's moving. Then, you just walk around there, and you just see everyone doing their job, this whole community working together. It's quite serious. I wouldn't go there in a big tourist group at all. If you are alone, that would be the best because you might get in the way and maybe get run over by something.

[laughter]

The local people might just push you out of the way to save your life a few times. [chuckles] Yes, that's been one of my favorite experiences just when I think of all the sights and sounds and even the smell of the flowers. There's this coffee smell. Everything was just so beautiful, and seeing the people working so hard all through the night. Everyone is on a mission. They have something to do. Yes, I just love that. You can see that people are serious, but there's a lot of smiles in between. Everyone's close together because it's very narrow.

[00:14:23] Kerry Newsome: You're right. It is a feast for the senses, isn't it?

[00:14:28] Lavonne Bosman: Absolutely.

[00:14:28] Kerry Newsome: You've got all of those beautiful smells and mixed in with coffee. Then, you've got tight squeezers with motorbikes, intermingling with people. All the color, I think the colors [crosstalk]--

[00:14:41] Lavonne Bosman: A lot of color.

[00:14:42] Kerry Newsome: Listen. When I think of Vietnam, and I try to describe to people why I come home so uplifted, it's because I think there's just so much color. I think it fills your senses. I guess from your point of view with a photographic eye, you look at the mixture of colors. Some of the work that I've seen and your beautiful little postcard book that you do, which by the way people, I'm going to put the link in the episode notes too because Lavonne's work is beautiful in this. You probably need the big printable version that you can put on your wall because I agree with her, there's a lot in--

Anyway, I think it's important we get the message to our listeners today about that color sense that comes into a visit and the smells. Not all smells are fabulous, but--

[00:15:43] Lavonne Bosman: No, not all of them. [laughs]

[00:15:46] Kerry Newsome: There's going to be the odd rubbish that you're going to see and all of this kind of thing. If you can lift yourself above that--

[00:15:54] Lavonne Bosman: Right, exactly. You need to just focus on the beautiful things and ignore the stinky things. [laughs]

[00:16:01] Kerry Newsome: Exactly, exactly. Just take in the ambiance. I know even from the Old Quarter, it's lovely to walk around the lake also in the afternoon. You'll see people doing t'ai chi and dancing. When do you see that in a city ??

[00:16:22] Lavonne Bosman: Right, yes. There's a park to the south of the lake. I can't remember what it's called, but it's one of the main parks. If you go in there, also, you see the groups of people doing exercise. The trees that are there are also ancient and so beautiful. It's amazing in the city.

[00:16:42] Kerry Newsome: Once again, there are certain traditions. There's certain connectivity with people, families come together, groups come together that do it regularly. They meet there. Some of the older generations will come and sit and play games together. Sit on a park bench, you'll see some old guys that sit there and maybe smoke or something like that. It's a scene. You said before, you could almost put it in a movie, couldn't you? Just as it is.

[00:17:18] Lavonne Bosman: Yes, there's a lot of it that just looks like it's a movie right there. Who scripted this?

[laughter]

[00:17:26] Kerry Newsome: Exactly, exactly.

[00:17:27] Lavonne Bosman: who did **the** costume design? did it [chuckles]

[00:17:29] Kerry Newsome: Perfectly. That beautiful lady with their little pajama set kind of thing on without having that, oh, she's just as charming. Exactly. Now, I want to talk to you about the craziness side of the traffic. A lot of people talk to me and say, "Oh, I think it'd be just too much for me." We spoke about it, didn't we, the other day? Maybe speak to my listeners about how you coped when you first time.

[00:18:05] Lavonne Bosman: Yes, I was quite nervous about that before I arrived because I watched some videos just to learn how to cross the street. [laughs] I thought, "Wow, I'm really gonna do that." I don't know. It's not that bad. I don't know if it's worse in Saigon, but in Hanoi, maybe I adapted it to that somehow quite quickly. I actually like that kind of thing where you must just realize don't go against anything, just go with the flow. If you go with the flow, don't hesitate, don't make any sudden movements. Everything really works out. [chuckles]

[00:18:46] Kerry Newsome: It does. I think going with the flow is a really great analogy. I've had Vietnamese see me when I first used to travel. They think, "Oh gosh. She's typically a tourist and is struggling." They'll just grab my arm and help me across the street. Then, I got a bit smarter. I have a beautiful girlfriend who's Vietnamese. When we go traveling together around Vietnam, she'll say, "Now, Kerry, we're going to such and such. Now, it's a very wide street. You know the drill. Grab my arm. We just go." I went, "Got you. I'm with you."

[laughter]

You pick your points, and obviously, you can find some method in the chaos. It is a bit like organized chaos. They don't want to crash into you as much as you don't want to crash into them.

[00:19:45] Lavonne Bosman: Exactly, exactly. There are some tricks that you can follow, especially if you're on a bike. Walking can be a little bit different. You just walk. When you're on a bike, and there are actually cars and trucks coming-- because sometimes it feels like the bikes watch out for each other, but you got to watch out for the cars. They just go. Something that you can do when you don't feel safe, or you don't feel confident that it's your turn, you can just keep on moving is to shelter behind someone else, maybe a bigger vehicle, or sometimes there's a little group. It always feels to me like I'm part of a motorbike gang when I'm in the traffic.

[laughter]

Okay. The group is starting to move and then you just make sure you're behind them. If someone does crash into the group, you'll be right behind, so you'll be fine. [laughs] That's a great way of getting across a scary street.

[00:20:46] Kerry Newsome: Absolutely. As you say, as you're riding the bike, you're in a different group. I know from riding with other friends, etc. they're most fearful of cars because the car is obviously faster, quicker and can really do some damage, so [crosstalk]-

[00:21:05] Lavonne Bosman: Yes, they can always--

[00:21:06] Kerry Newsome: -they're the ones that do the real damage.

[00:21:06] Lavonne Bosman: [unintelligible **00:21:06**] so much. [chuckles]

[00:21:08] Kerry Newsome: Exactly. The bikes are traditionally only going at about 40 kilometers an hour, sometimes much less. Yes, exactly.

[00:21:17] Lavonne Bosman: Most of the time I prefer going on by bicycle, which is very relaxing. [chuckles] Then, you can take the smaller roads. You don't need to stick on the big roads. Just go and explore the little roads on the side, getting to the same destination.

[00:21:35] Kerry Newsome: Absolutely. Some of those skinny areas where it is a little bit clutter-ish, a bicycle works much better, doesn't it?

[00:21:44] Lavonne Bosman: Yes. You'll see all these old people on bicycles. They don't look worried. [chuckles]

[00:21:51] Kerry Newsome: Yes, that's always a good sign. All right. I'm gonna jump into a story you told me about you've made a friend, I think, in the neighborhood. Maybe you want to share that with us.

[00:22:04] Lavonne Bosman: Yes, that's quite a special story and a special friend I guess. Yes, I met this elderly gentleman when I first moved to the neighborhood where I'm living now. He just looked really interesting to me. Photographically, I just wanted to take a photograph of him immediately, which I did. He reminded me a bit of Mr. Miyagi from the Karate Kid story.

[00:22:31] Kerry Newsome: Oh, beautiful.

[00:22:32] Lavonne Bosman: [chuckles] This great beard and this long gray hair and just a very friendly face. Yes, he said he allowed me to take his portrait. I think he even bought me a *nước mía* that day, which is one of the sugarcane juice, which is one of my favorite drinks in Vietnam. Since then, we've bumped into each other many times. Very often, I'll be cycling past or walking past, and he'll be sitting somewhere on the sidewalk, eating or having a drink. He'll always invite me over. I always join him if I have time. I think there was one morning at

about seven o'clock, I came back from cycling around the lake. He invited me for a shot of rice wine at about 7:00 AM.

[00:23:18] Kerry Newsome: Oh wow.

[00:23:19] Lavonne Bosman: [laughs] Yes. He doesn't speak any English. I'm quite embarrassed at my own level of Vietnamese. In the beginning, we were communicating a bit with Google Translate. It doesn't always work that well. We gave that up eventually. Nowadays, mostly we just hang out together, just have a drink, eat some peanuts on the little plastic chairs wherever, somewhere on the sidewalk. After a while, yes, it'll be time to go.

[00:23:54] Kerry Newsome: Oh, I think that's sweet.

[00:23:55] Lavonne Bosman: Yes, so sweet. Sometimes if I've walked, he would just point his bike. Then, he'll offer me a lift home. [laughs]

[00:24:04] Kerry Newsome: Oh, that's delightful. How gracious of him to befriend you when he really can't understand everything that you're saying.

[00:24:17] Lavonne Bosman: Right. He's always treating me to some more either *trà dào* or *nước mía* or something like that. [chuckles]

[00:24:22] Kerry Newsome: All right.

[music]

Have you tried *bia hơi* yet?

[00:24:32] Lavonne Bosman: Yes, I quite enjoy that beer. Actually, I don't go to the *bia hơi* that often. One of my favorite places where I have this kind of beer is at the flower market. They have this one food stall that seems to stay open all night, where they serve this quite famous *phở chiên*, the crispy fried noodle, which may be my favorite food in Vietnam. I like going past there because it's on the way to my home when I take the back streets from another more central area. It happens that I go past it late at night. Then, I'll have some of that and a nice cheap beer. [laughs]

[00:25:17] Kerry Newsome: It's very cheap beer.

[00:25:19] Lavonne Bosman: There's a, yes, good view of the flower market to entertain me. It's lovely. [chuckles]

[00:25:25] Kerry Newsome: When you first arrived, Lavonne, did you do any tours or anything, or did you just take up exploring on your own?

[00:25:33] Lavonne Bosman: Yes, I didn't really do any tours. I was lucky enough to have a friend here who'd been living here for a few years. He showed me around quite a lot. Yes, I was very spoiled then because I could just hop in the back of his bike. No stress from my side. Just do a bit of sightseeing. Yes, he would go and show me around the lake or show me all his favorite little places. We even did a trip during the Tet holiday, the new year for about a week where we traveled a little bit north to and the *Đà* river and a few places like that, which has been my most incredible bike trip so far. Yes. That was great to be with people who knew the area, who could also speak some Vietnamese. Yes, that was [crosstalk]--

[00:26:24] Kerry Newsome: In particular in those regions. Yes.

[music]

You're a solo traveler per se. Have you felt safe?

[00:26:37] Lavonne Bosman: Yes. When I travel, I do mostly feel safe. I think also coming from South Africa, I definitely feel safer here. I was quite nervous about traveling by bike by myself. Maybe sometimes I still am because maybe my bike isn't the best. I've got the little Honda Super Cub that's not that fast. It could perhaps break down. Usually, the people are very helpful and kind. If you would break down somewhere, someone would come along and help you sooner or later. I would advise people to be a bit street smart though because it has

happened to me when I took a bus somewhere. The drivers actually made me put my bag into their storage underneath the bus. I just had a funny feeling about it. I got out and went around. They were scratching my back, nearly stealing my passport, which stupidly, I left in my bag. [chuckles] Yes. You've got to watch out for things like that. You have got to be a bit street smart.

[00:27:43] **Kerry Newsome:** Yes, absolutely. I think mostly common sense prevails in most cases. You're right, but--

[00:27:49] **Lavonne Bosman:** Yes, like most countries.

[00:27:51] **Kerry Newsome:** Like most countries, absolutely. Would you recommend Hanoi as a good starting point into Vietnam?

[00:28:00] **Lavonne Bosman:** Yes, definitely. I think Hanoi itself-- I've been living here for two and a half years now. I still find new places that I'm so excited about, "Wow. More new discoveries." From Hanoi, there are so many places around here that are not even far that you can go to. There's, for example, Sóc Sơn is a place we often go to, a group of friends, just take our bikes and go there for the day and relax by the lake. There are other beautiful places. Well, you can go to Cat Ba Island. I haven't gone there by bike. You can take a bus. Then, you go on a ferry and spend a week in there, whatever. Places like *Ba Vì*, which is incredibly beautiful, all these. you just go up this mountain and see all this amazing plant growth and beautiful waterfalls. It's really incredible, and some other places like that that's really not too far. It's north, but it's central from a lot of places to travel to.

[00:29:09] **Kerry Newsome:** Absolutely. Now, with the freeway to Ha Long Bay, that's now reduced to only two hours away. You've got that to access or Lan Ha Bay as the two areas now. You're right. It's the leapfrog to what I would call open spaces, massive landscape, really idyllic areas for a photographer, especially on a landscape canvas. I like the idea of using Hanoi as a base. You and I talked about that before about basing yourself in Hanoi and doing some trips, a short trip to Ninh Binh first per se. You could do that not easily in a day. It's about three or four hours to get there.

[00:30:07] **Lavonne Bosman:** Yes, I would [unintelligible 00:30:08] over.

[00:30:09] **Kerry Newsome:** Yes, I would too. What I'm saying is access wise to so many different places north and south.

[00:30:21] **Lavonne Bosman:** Even taking a flight to Da Nang, going to Hoi An. It's not that far.

[00:30:26] **Kerry Newsome:** No, and cheap.

[00:30:28] **Lavonne Bosman:** Yes. Hoi An is lovely. [chuckles]

[00:30:31] **Kerry Newsome:** Yes. That's where I base myself.

[music]

If you were going to give any tips for first-time travelers, now that you're very familiar with being in Hanoi, what would you give us some tips for that for people to go?

[00:30:54] **Lavonne Bosman:** Okay. I find that a little bit of a hard question to answer just because, yes, first-time travelers, I think everything is just overwhelming in the beginning. It depends on how much time you have to spend, a lot of what you're going to do. I think if people come to Hanoi, and it's their first time, they will probably be so overwhelmed that they just stay in the Old Quarter, which is absolutely fine. I would say, yes, don't be afraid to explore some non-touristy areas where more like local neighborhoods, where you really see even more of daily life, which can be really magical and beautiful. There are so many street markets everywhere. To me, my main impression of Hanoi is the street markets. I love it. I love the idea that it looks like anyone can start a little business on the sidewalk. [chuckles] I would say yes, go, go and just walk around and get lost somewhere and find the little

unexpected road. Also, don't be afraid to use the GrabBike service. It's really convenient and-

[00:32:14] **Kerry Newsome:** Yes, it's very good.

[00:32:15] **Lavonne Bosman:** Yes, you can just absolutely relax and enjoy the view and have this little adventure of going through the traffic with someone who knows what they're doing. [chuckles]

[00:32:25] **Kerry Newsome:** Yes. Even the Grab cars are good.

[00:32:28] **Lavonne Bosman:** Yes. The Grab cars are much cheaper than you would expect.

[00:32:33] **Kerry Newsome:** Yes, yes, yes. I highly recommend them.

[00:32:36] **Lavonne Bosman:** Yes. Also, just be open to hanging out with the local people. They can be really welcoming. I remember this one day, I was walking down the street, and there was this group of construction workers having their lunch on the sidewalk. I just walked past them and smiled at them or something. They waved me over and made me join them for lunch.

[laughter]

[00:33:03] **Kerry Newsome:** Yes. That would be typical.

[00:33:05] **Lavonne Bosman:** Yes. I just ate with them. Then, they had to pack up and go and continue their work. [chuckles] Things like that happen all the time. Those to me are the most precious moments.

[00:33:15] **Kerry Newsome:** Absolutely. Lavonne, it's been great having you on the program. I really loved your stories. I'm sure people are going to love your photographs as you keep adding to your portfolio. I'm sure my listeners are going to be keen to have a look at that as it grows. Once again to everyone, the links to Lavonne's photography, everything will be in the episode notes. Stay well Lavonne. I look forward to talking with you again soon.

[00:33:48] **Lavonne Bosman:** Thanks so much, Kerry. Thanks for the opportunity. It was great talking to you.

[00:33:53] **Jingle:** Thank you for listening. Check out the episode notes for more information.

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