



## What About Vietnam - Series 2 - 9

# Discover Phong Nha and the largest cave on the planet

**Kerry Newsome:** So to kick it off. Maybe we just tell everyone. Where is Phong Nha, You know, Where is it located?

**Ben Mitchell:** Okay, Phong Nha is located 300 kilometers north of Danang. Ah, 200 kilometers north of Hue.

Um, if you were to get an overnight train from Hanoi or from Phong Nha to Hanoi, Hanoi down, you could have a break here on your way from Hanoi to get to Hoi An..

Um, There's flights to Dong Hoi City, which is 50 kilometers from Phong Nha from both Saigon and Hanoi On board, most people come usually on their way to or from Hoi An between Hue and Hanoi.

Kerry Newsome: Right, Okay, because I probably wouldn't have thought about it that way. I probably would have thought I'd fly to Hanoi, do my Halong Bay stay and do my Hanoi stuff. And then I would pick up a flight to Dong Hoi.

Ben Mitchell: Yeah, you could do that., But to get to Hoi An on from here, you really have to go overland because we don't have flights into Phong Nha, so that would be a good way to do it. You could fly down from Hanoi to Don Hoi and then go from from us, overland.

One of the best sort of cross sections I believe that you could do in Vietnam would be to go from Phong Nha, down the HCM Trail as a day trip; stay overnight, and then go from bike on over to Vin Moc tunnels and around the DM zone, the older militarized zone from during the war, and then stay overnight in a way and then do another one day transit trip, if you like stopping a different places between Hue and Hoi An. It would be sort of three days from Hoi An to Phong Nha. Seeing a great cross section of both culture, historical jungle, minority people, beaches, different types of architecture. The whole cross section over three days, Central Vietnam.

**Kerry Newsome:** Now we're going to get into a little bit more about things that people should look out for when planning this kind of trip.

Uh, maybe give us some background a little bit. How you found yourself in in Phong Nha as a foreigner, like you've you've established a life there. So you know how did Phong Nha now come up on your radar?

**Ben Mitchell:** Well, I met my wife, BEC, when I first came out working in Vietnam, and she brought me up to Phong Nha nearly 15 years ago. To meet the family and Phong Nha was very, very undeveloped back then. Um, there wasn't really any tourism to speak off. They got some busy domestic tourism on the long weekends in summer coming out from Dong Hai on day trips.

Um, but it was very, very low key. And the national park wasn't open to tourism at that time. It was only the Phong Nha cave on the edge of the National Park, which was a boat trip.

The ferry crossing in Sun Track Village, which is now sort of all purpose, is called Phong Nha. Um and I came here then and fell in love with the area. Um, a few years later, my wife and I decided to have a try at opening a tourism business for foreigners to come to the area to try and encourage foreigners to come to the area. And that is what is called Phong Nha Farmstay.

We opened that in 2010 after having people sort of staying at a house for the year or two before that, at a parent's house in hammocks. After that we decided we opened up our farm stay. And that did encourage foreign tourists to come to Phong Nha very quickly and from our farm stay and then it hit the ground running throughout 2011. Um, yeah, and sort of it's growing quickly since then.

Kerry Newsome: It has kind of been an evolution, hasn't it?

Because I remember when I started coming to Vietnam, you know, like, this is only about 14 years ago, but, uh, it really wasn't hitting any headlines. It wasn't hitting any tourist list. But then all of a sudden, as you say, six or seven years ago, it started to get meaty media attention. And just a little I had to do with Vietnam tourism, the VNAT.

All of a sudden, there was this cave system, and very quickly people were setting up businesses like yourself and others to meet that demand, which was fantastic. And I think there's also been some further discoveries of caves in recent times, that has broadened that openness and an eagerness of people to say, "Hey, we need to include this on our map".

Traditionally, Vietnam had featured the hot spots of you know, Hanoi, HCMC. and Hoi An, Hue.

Where Now Vietnam is opening up to these outer regions because, as you said, there's just so much more to greet you in these places, including minority groups, including culture, crafts and, local cuisine, etc

So, uh, just when we're talking about the caves themselves, I mean, you've been there and seen a lot.

They've been opening up and developing, tell us about the caves that you'd suggest would be kind of meeting the average person's ability to explore, to spend time in and and really enjoy their stay there. What caves would you suggest?

#### ABOUT THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF CAVES

**Ben Mitchell:** Well, the caves could sort of be divided into three categories. If you like. One would be the show caves, the Paradise cave, the dark cave, the Fungal cave, the TSien Cave, um. These caves are set up to accept mass tourism. So busses can pull up in car parks and they are set up with infrastructure that can move people either by boat or zip line or up and down staircases and walkways, um, into and out of the caves. That would be one category. Another category would be the more Adventure Caves that are for doing day trips to and maybe overnight trips to. And they would be what I would consider great for tourists to go and have a really adventurous experience of trekking in the jungle and visiting a cave. Maybe, as I say, maybe for a day trip and then coming back and having a swim in the pool and a gin and tonic watching the sunset from there, Or, from a bar somewhere around Phong Nha. Or maybe they do an overnight trip where they camp in the cave and they have the right cook dinner by the local jungle man. And yeah, thats fun.

So the third category that I would suggest would be the, uh, multi night caves so they could go into the two lung system for many, many nights of camping and trekking and adventure of course this includes the Son Doong cave, which is Ah, a four day trip usually.

The moment you are in Son Doong you're actually tracking to a different location every night.

In either solely the Han Son Doong cave or in some of caves and do the other trips. You could be going to different caves and different campsites every day. And they would be the more\, adventurous ones. That would be, I would consider, would be not probably for everyone, but definitely for people who want to do something that's going to be outside the box.

**Kerry Newsome:** And I think they are the ones, that multi night cave trips that are featured in those,trekking tour brochures. They're the ones that always seemed to sit on all the websites and feature all the amazing pictures. Because I know when I did a VNAT tour a couple of years ago and I went... God, these caves are amazing. But then when I drilled down to it, I found out that, you know, it was a 7 kilometer cave and, you know, you could spend four or five nights and maybe not get through, plus when you've got a book; Sometimes two years in advance.

I mean, we're sitting here in the middle of September and the middle of Covid 2020 so I'm not sure how that's affecting future plans. But prior it was about a two year in advance kind of booking, set up, that you would have to make to even get on one of those as an experienced trekker. And secondly, they were quite expensive. Those multi night ones, Um, all right,

#### **CAVING SEASON FEBRUARY - SEPTEMBER**

**Ben Mitchell:** Yeah, its September, and currently looking like the caving season for, say, Hang Son Dong,( which they refer to as its full name) the world's biggest tour finished here about a week ago now, due to the chance off Typhoon or Big Storm coming in from the Pacific at this time of year. Uh, Oxalis, the company that runs the tours, stops tours between now and the end of January to the world's biggest cave.

**Kerry Newsome:** And that's nothing to do with Covid, is it? That's just seasonal.

#### **HOW THE CAVES ARE RUNNING DURING COVID**

**Ben Mitchell:** Well, it was quite funny. Strange things happen like when when Covid came. Obviously, a lot of people canceled the holidays with Oxalis and a lot of people postponed till next year, Um, or to even the year after,

We were lucky enough, as a lot of Vietnamese people and expats who live in Vietnam, then took the tour. So the tour has been running as busy as it normally would do, right throughout Covid, with domestic and expatriate tourism.

Uh, yeah, so looking at next year at the moment, they're running 15 tours per month, so it runs on a 15 out of 30 days and looking at numbers at the moment, they've got some openings.

#### **WHAT IS 2021 LOOKING LIKE?**

The caves will be opened up on around the 27th of, January.

They've still got some places open on the 29th. February is quite busy. They do have a few places left, March is booked out. But April is, um, April still open. Like if you want to go next year, there's still a lot of places open for that. So it's not like when they say, booking a year out? Well, yeah, there's There's 15 trips per month and 10 people can go per trip.

So you're looking at about 150 people a month going through from January till September, excluding TET holiday, which they'll be closed down for for a little while over TeT in February.

**Kerry Newsome:** I really appreciate you breaking up the caves in categories, as in that, you know, one category being the show caves, as in they're the ones where I see all the as you say, bulk tourists, um, you know, cramming themselves into busses and other kinds of vehicles, etc and flooding those caves.

And then you've got the "adventurers" caves. Then you're going to get people that are going to spend, you know, two or three days, um, exploring.

And then you've got the really experienced, uh, trekker Who's going to take on that quite strenuous caving through Son Doong, because, you know, that's not just for your average bear. Let's face it like I don't know about you, but I certainly know about me, and Im not sure I would be up for it.

WHAT FITNESS LEVEL DO YOU NEED TO TREK SON DOONG?

**Ben Mitchell:** It is mainly is for walking, like if you can walk a few kilometers a day, you'd be right to do the world's biggest cave. It's not, for people that can't walk and balance is helpful. Yeah!

**Kerry Newsome:** Balance.!!! And, you know, having the right gear, the right footwear HELPS. You know, not being worried about squeezing your body through, small crevices. Yeah. Darkness. Yeah. Actually, I read something that the stalagmites in size can be related to the Big Ben in London. Is that kind of a little bit of an overstep in creative license description? I mean, is that true, that they are that big?

Ben Mitchell: Makes a big day. Yeah. Yeah, that's how big they are. Yeah. So

Kerry Newsome: When you walk....

Ben Mitchell: through it, it feels like you're in Notre Dame Cathedral. But you're a Lego man. Hahahah!

Yes. Wow. God. My mother's done it. Um, my, I've done it. Um, I have a lot of different people come from, and so long as you can, you keep yourself physically moving for a few days. You can do it.

There's a little bit of rope work in that, but where people don't have the experience to do it. The company Oxalis has it. Their staff are very experienced, and they're not just experienced in what they do. But they're also experienced in getting people who are not experienced in what they do through the cave. So, you know, they've got some good runs on the board at this point after being doing it since 2013.

### **CAVES ONLY OPEN SINCE 2013**

**Kerry Newsome:** Yeah, and you know we're still talking about It's only 2013. We are only sitting in 2020. So less than 10 years. Quite a revelation. These caves. That's why you know, having you on to talk about it rather than just me read about it in a Vietnam Tour guide or, you know, Lonely Planet guide. You've done it. You know your mother's done it. You live there. It kind of makes it a little bit more real to me.

Ben Mitchell: It's a very interesting part of the world. Like when I first came here, I was asking my then girlfriend, now wife Bec and her family and other people in the area. Like what? What about these mountains? What's in these mountains? And no one would answer me. No one would tell me anything, and it was just fascinating.

And then I found out about a group of British cavers who'd been coming here since 1990 um, every year or two or three whenever they could come and exploring the area. Now

those guys, some of those guys now work here permanently for the Oxalis company, working around safety.

And, uh, you know, they are the caretakers off the cave, and other caves that Oxalis are involved in. They also tend to help other companies that want to set up on that a bit on the side just to try and keep everything, um, safe and environmentally sound as well.

Like sort of advisers, consultants, they become the safety monitors on the bigger tours as well, but they have explored the area, and still do every year.

They do expeditions where they go and explore new caves. it's just amazing that there's all these caves. I mean Paradise Cave, for instance, which sells a lot of tickets on a weekend public holiday. Um, and during the summer, it's very busy with people from all over the world.

#### CAVES DISCOVERY

The first humans completely went through the whole passage in 2005.

It went open to tourism in 2010. Like it's just hard to imagine, and I do often have a lot of guests, who say...they must have known about it. Someone would have known about it. Somebody would have used it during the war or something. And it's like, No, they just didn't.

There are some of the caves have got very interesting histories. Like Phong Nha. Our cave was used by the champ, the Champ Monks. They broke down stalagmites and stalactites and made altars in there, and they wrote graffiti all over the walls. Um, that cave also was used by the NVA, the North Vietnamese army as a major, sort of, uh, logistical part of the logistics for the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Um, other caves, like Von Cave, had a whole town underground during the war, Um, in order to avoid the bombing. But most of the caves, to be honest, just weren't used by people. The people didn't have lights up until a less than 10 years ago. They had torches and things here in this area. Um, they just didn't go into the caves. They went in as far as they needed to get out of the rain.,Even the world's biggest cave, wasn't discovered till 2009.

When the first people went and explored it. The local bushman who took the British explorers to the entrance to show them where, the entrance to what he believed would be a big cave. He found that in 1990, during a thunderstorm, when he was only about 16 years old, and, uh and he took them back there in 2009, and they went in and to explore it. And they were very excited from from the moment they found it because they knew they'd found something remarkable on. Then they opened it up with Oxalis, with the owner of Oxalis, in 2013 for the first tour group that went there. And then, really, they opened in 2014 fully.

**Kerry Newsome:** Yeah, you mentioned you know, the safety aspect. And maybe let's just touch on that a little bit more because, you know, there is sometimes, um, a concept about some of the things in Vietnam, you know? Are they safe? You know, Do they have the, you know, the kind of same levels or quality of safety that you know, are experienced in other countries, etcetera.

I mean, talk to us a little bit about that. I mean, I've been up to Ba Na Hills and seen, you know, the extravagance of workmanship that went into that five kilometer cable car that takes you to the top of that hill. I mean, my heart still races every time I do it, but I I say to myself, geepez,

it's an amazing piece off of ingenuity. So just talk to us a little bit. So we can. We can cover that off for people, so people know it sounds like it's well, it's well managed. It's safe, etc.

#### SAFETY OF THE CAVES

**Ben Mitchell:** Yes, okay, I've been to the cave with the Oxalis tour company to the world's biggest cave and yeah, the safety, it was above, and beyond.

Everyone's inducted; How to use the harnesses in the parts where they need to use the harness. Everything's bolted. Um, yeah, I mean, it was 100% kosher, fully safe. Yeah, it's that's good. And as far as, the Phong Nha cave goes and some of the other tourism, that mass tourism, involves water. Um, there's life jackets and everything provided I mean at the springs. You're not allowed to swim without a life jacket there. Even if you can swim because they do have a lot of them, I guess that they can't swim properly. So they just make everyone wear a life jacket anyway. And when

Kerry Newsome: You have to wear a swimming costume for that, don't you?

Ben Mitchell: Yeah. Yeah. When you're caving through like the Two Lung cave system, you would really want to wear a life jacket. Like I'm a strong swimmer. And I always wear a life jacket when I go through those river caves simply because it's so nice to lay on your back with a life jacket on. Just to relax.

### **WHAT DOES A STAY IN PHONG NHA LOOK LIKE?**

**Kerry Newsome:** And not have to do all the work. Yeah, for sure. All right, now I want to talk about just what a stay in Phong Nha could look like?. So you've seen a lot of changes and developments in accommodation and, you know, just the township I would expect has evolved with tourism to support it. So talk to us a little bit about the types of accommodation that you can experience now and a bit about the town itself.

**Ben Mitchell:** Well, where we are at the moment here in Phong Nha, we've got a lot of local people have opened homestays. A lot of those homestays HERE NOW. Sort of borderline between a small guest house and a "bed and breakfast". You get a room and you get maybe a nice view of the river or nice view of the rice paddies.

Ah, lot of them have got swimming pools. Um, and they supply breakfast. And there's other restaurants around the town that you could go out to for your evening meal. Most of your lunchtime meals would typically come from most people traveling through Phong Nha and be out in the park or part of the tour. It would be pre planned.

Um, you know, Phong Nha to date hasn't sort of been the destination where a lot of people are sitting around during the day. They sort of come in quickly, see the caves doing a full day of activities or two full days of activities, and then leave.

Um what, like it's just in that stage of development where people are putting it short, as you so put it, between Hanoi and Halong Bay.

Um, I think most people, when they do come through Phong Nha, although wish they hadn't done that, but it's just not well known enough. They've heard about it, so they come to see the caves and move on. But once they get here, they sort of realized, Oh, well, we could have. You know, maybe this was actually better than Halong Bay.

Because it's sort of got the feeling up to now of being a little bit rough and ready. Still, um, there's a few of us here that have started to build some nice accommodation that people can come and actually have a holiday and relax for a few days or a week.

Um, pool villas, poolside villas, bungalows by the lake at the Lake house. Different, uh, They're starting to become a little bit of, ah, body of nice accommodation out here in Phong Nha. But there is a lot of budget accommodation and a lot of that budget accommodation is cheap, and you get good value as well.

It's very competitive. Because there's so much at that base level, as far as villa and bungalow accommodation goes, You've got Victory Road Villas. You've got Elements Villas,

JungleO, villas, the Phong Nhal Farm Stay the Lake House Resort. The pepper house home stay is really nice around a pool. Uh, in that mid range, there's a few places like it around the valley. Ah, lot of like in the town is a main strip that you would find in most tourist towns, with all the neon lights and a few karaoke bars and hostels and cheap cheap bars and restaurants. Um, in Son Trac Village near the boat station, which was the old ferry crossing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, where you get the boats to Phong Nha cave.

There's a big, long strip of that style tourism there, but depending on what you're after, that's where the bus stops. So most home stays and other places air measured on their occupancy, from how far they are from the bus stop due to the backpacker style accommodation that was here prior to Covid.

Um, Vietnamese tourism has always typically stayed in Dong Hoi. But we have seen a trend has changed where they are now looking to come out and stay in Phong Nha in more unique style accommodations than the cheap hotels that they were attracted to in Dong Hoi in the past, especially as the domestic tourism is now,

Oh, many Vietnamese now buying cars to go, like they're traveling in cars as family groups rather than traveling in large groups on buses, as the way they always typically did before. We're now seeing smaller groups of people in cars

**Kerry Newsome:** A lot more wealthy Vietnamese.

**Ben Mitchell:** Vietnamese have got a lot more expendable income now. And, you know, my friends up and down the coast have been talking lately. Since Covid hit, we've seen this massive amount of domestic tourists driving around the country, checking out their own country in their cars.

**Kerry Newsome:** Yeah, fabulous. Yeah, on doing the D Y. I thing....do it yourself angle.

#### **HOW LONG SHOULD YOU STAY IN PHONG NHA**

Um, if we talk about the length of stay for someone planning a trip. You know, what would you say is a good amount of time? I mean, we've got now a better idea of the types of caves and access. And then, you know, who could do any of these? The show, the adventure or the multi the multi night caves. But on average, what would be a like, a good a couple of, you know, nights to stay two or three?

**Ben Mitchell:** Yeah, Minimum of three. (3) Full days in the area are memorable days. Yeah. And, uh, one thing that we've noticed as well since Covid in March. We've noticed that they Well, we've had a lot of expats come and stay from Saigon and from down from Hanoi, and they typically stay for between five days and two weeks. And that's been a big change to the whole way we operate because they tend to go out and do something every day and then come back and relax. Whereas before we were full of people staying two nights, wishing they had four and trying to fit everything in everything in one or two days.

**Kerry Newsome:** And, you know, we've talked a lot about the caves and the caves, obviously, you know, get the headline, but there's quite a bit to do just around the park. Is that right?

#### **IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT THE CAVES**

**Ben Mitchell:** Yeah. I mean, one thing I've noticed with all the expats coming through, they tend to rent a motorbike or go with one of our Phong Nha riders who used to be timber cutters or hunters. They take people. Yeah, they take people around the back of their motor bike all day. What we are typically finding now is that people are going up into the park and maybe they're going to eight Lady Cave and the Botanical Gardens one day. Then they're going to Paradise Cave another day, and then they're going to the dark cave and nuke Marquis Gautreaux Another day. That...

**Kerry Newsome:** Sounds like a great idea..

### **TWO DAYS NOT ENOUGH - ALLOW 3-5 DAYS**

**Ben Mitchell:** Yeah, and they sort of just keep going up into the park and doing things each day because there's so much waiting. There's way too much to do now, for just two days, and so they're sort of If people come for longer, will they get to do more? And that way, they actually get to enjoy it, rather than and then on to the next thing, and then we'll have half an hour here and then onto the next thing. And then we have an hour here, and then we're onto the next thing.

Um and then that's things you can do yourself.

But then outside the park, you've also got, like, all this countryside to explore and do what you want, like bicycles or mopeds, and you could just explore. And we're very close to the coast here too. So ....

**Kerry Newsome:** you said you went surfing this morning. So we don't think about surfing in Vietnam as the water mostly calm, but...

**Ben Mitchell:** ...from September through to November. We get waves. Yeah, so we try to make the most of it. It's only a short short window of waves. So I'm going, Yeah, so? So there's there's a lot like: You've got the ocean; You've got the fishing villages; You've got the sand dunes; Then you've got all the rice paddy farmland; Then you've got the agricultural land between the rice paddy land in the jungle; Then you've got the jungle in the mountains. Then you've got the caves and you know it...a great cross section off Central Vietnam. Just within a 40 kilometer, 50 kilometer width area of the country.

This is the narrowest part of the country here, like JUST SOUTH OF PHONG NHA , the country's only 40 kilometers wide. So it's the narrowest part of the country. And as a lot of experts have been telling, me over the last few months, they're like, .....Wow, we just never knew, You know, "we're here for like, two weeks, and we're you know, we're coming back". They love it. They say "We'll be back again in a few months, you know?"

**Kerry Newsome:** Yeah, it's on my list now. Well, it's been on my list for quite a while, but it's matching up the best time of the year. Let's just talk about when you would suggest is the best time of the year to come.

### **WHATS THE BEST TIME TO VISIT?**

**Ben Mitchell:** Let's say the best time of the year to come would be March April. Um, it's

**Kerry Newsome:** THATS all of Vietnam.

**Ben Mitchell:** Yeah, best is April, It's spring here. So we have, if you look at it from down South, they only have two seasons, wet season or dry season.

If you look at sort of north of us. They have four seasons. They have summer, autumn, winter and spring. Well, here in Phong Nha, we have six seasons and the crossover of those two climates. So we, uh, we have plants and animals that are endemic to both the North and the south of Vietnam. We also have plants and animals that are found only here. It's a very high biodiversity in the jungle here, but having said that March and April is spring here everything's blooming. Everything's coming to life. It's just not too hot yet.

It's going to be hot in Hoi An in, May and June. Yeah, but it's cold here in January and February. If you are going to come here and do some hard core tracking and camping, I would highly recommend coming between January between December and February because yeah, then much in April's sort of the prime and then again September, October November. It's a really beautiful time of year, ....

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