



What About Vietnam – 3-2 – Mu Cang Chai – A landscape of beauty and ingenuity

[00:00:36] **Kerry Newsome:** Xin chào. Welcome to What About Vietnam. What I love about what I do is I get to meet some great people, and I get to learn about some areas in Vietnam that I haven't had a chance to visit. One of those areas at the top of my list is an area called Mù Cang Chải. I have the privilege today to be talking to a guy named Jesse Pearlman, who was originally inspired to go to this region because of his love of photography. He's a great fan and has his own page on Instagram featuring some of his photographs. Now, Jesse was sitting in South Korea at the time in 2018, and as I said, motivated to go because he saw all these wonderful images of this region. Now, sometimes these images can be confused with Sa Pa as people think this is what they're going to see. You will see some of them, but certainly not to the level that you will see these kinds of visitors as you will in Mù Cang Chải. Now, to do the area justice, Jesse and I agree it would be a great idea if I introduced the program with just a couple of paragraphs from an article that was written by CNBC and published in their Global Traveler Magazine. It's entitled "Why This Remote Gem Should Top Your 2020 Travel List."

Here's just a couple of excerpts from the article, "Deep in the valleys forged by the waters of Asia's Red River, a series of colorful mountain villages are encircled by fields of towering rice terraces. The fields are agricultural feats of precision — rugged mountains blanketed with emerald stairways that, seemingly, ascend to the heavens above.

But this is not Disneyland. This isn't a destination designed to attract visitors, international attention or the Instagram set.

Centuries ago, the ancestors of Northern Vietnam's local hill tribes created this place of practicality and profound beauty for the most basic of reasons — to survive.

Rice thrives in water-logged conditions, making it ideal for the flooded Mekong Delta at the country's southern tip. To grow rice in vertical conditions, hill tribes created a terraced system to control the downward flow of water. Using ingenuity, resourcefulness and sheer grunt work, fertile fields of sustenance and breathtaking beauty were born — and still flourish today."

I thought that small snippet might give everyone some background and help you conjure up those wonderful images that you see, and we'll certainly be using to promote the program. And you're going to find on Jesse's own Instagram page if you want to look further. Please welcome Jesse to the program. I know you're going to enjoy this episode.

[music]

[00:03:53] Jesse Pearlman: Thanks a lot for having me on, Kerry. First of all, I really appreciate it. To answer your question, [chuckles] as was noted in the CNN article, I came upon Mù Cang Chải via Instagram.

[00:04:07] Kerry Newsome: There you go.

[00:04:09] Jesse Pearlman: I just saw this picture that, to me, was very fascinating of the steep terraces leading down into a river. At that time, I had been living in South Korea for about a month and didn't really know too much about culture in Vietnam or even Asian culture in general. To me, that picture that I saw jumped out at me like some sort of mural that you might see in a Chinese restaurant in America. It looks so otherworldly to me that I knew that this was the place that I needed to go before I left Korea. At the time, I had no idea I was going to be living in Vietnam for two and a half years. But to answer your question, the Internet and Instagram is how I found this place, strangely enough.

[music]

As pretty typical with me, I do a lot of research before I travel to places. It just makes me feel prepared and comfortable. That's always been I take after both my mom and dad in that way. One of the confusing things at first was differentiating Mù Cang Chải from Sa Pa. You've probably had multiple people on your podcast talk about Sa Pa, which is the most well-known rice terrace area in the world, I would say, other than perhaps an area in Bali. What happens often is Mù Cang Chải pictures will actually be taken and used for websites in Sa Pa. You'll see this all over Hanoi. There's a beautiful rice paddy made into the shape of a circle, which is famous in Mù Cang Chải. It's known as Mam Xoi Raspberry Hill. But Sapa travel agencies are constantly stealing this photo and labelling it as a suburb.

[00:06:10] Kerry Newsome:

[00:06:11] Jesse Pearlman: You'll even see postcards in Vietnam that they stopped a Vietnam War Madness. This is obviously not where it is. So I had to differentiate the two. Once I understood that the place I was interested in was not Sa Pa, I needed to look for a tour that specialized in the Mù Cang Chải area. At the time, there were only two or three, and I ended up just going with the one with the best website. I'm so lucky that I did. I found an organization called Zonitrip, which is run by a wonderful woman named Nghia Bui. Nghia was my tour guide. I sat on the back of her motorbike, the first time I'd ever been on a motorbike in my life. We drove from Yen Bai city, which was a two and a half or three-hour bus ride from Hanoi. We drove from Yen Bai city to Mù Cang Chải, which takes about four and a half hours nonstop, of course, with the many stops and my awe and fascination of the Northern Vietnam roads. It probably took closer to six hours, not to mention stopping for food.

[00:07:24] Kerry Newsome: You get to Mù Cang Chải, what happens next?

[00:07:28] Jesse Pearlman: When we arrived in Mù Cang Chải, it was raining, and I was quite downtrodden. I only had a couple of days off from my vacation. I didn't really understand the weather patterns in Mù Cang Chải. Now that I've been going there more often, it's like any mountainous area. The weather can change in a snap of a finger. We arrived at one of the most famous areas, the Circle Rice Paddy Mam Xoi, as I was talking about earlier. And we took a trekking route, which takes about 45 minutes to get to that scenic viewpoint. While we were beginning the route, it was rainy, it was muddy. I was in a horrible mood. I came all this way. I felt like I was going to cry.

Right as we entered the area itself, the clouds started parting and not only did the sun come out, but the low clouds started to hang over the rice, just floating there like a dream. I, at that point, was well aware that I had gotten everything I had bargained for and more. That was my first

interaction with the local people of Mù Cang Chải, the flower or Mông ethnic minority tribes. I had seen some pictures of them, but to be honest, I was much more focused on the landscape, going into the trip. I did not expect to meet people dressed the way they did. I thought maybe they might wear their garments for special occasions, not as an everyday occurrence. I was also really surprised to find out that they, at least the older generation, still does not speak any Vietnamese. They converse in Mông language.

[00:09:12] Kerry Newsome: Yes, and it's an interesting point you bring up about the fact that they wear the colorful clothing as everyday clothing. That's a bit like in India where the women are cleaning in beautiful, colorful Saris. It's the same amongst these people that they do their everyday work, they carry their babies around, and they're all wrapped in this brocade. They are quite colorful, aren't they? And really beautiful, interesting faces and hair and skin and beautiful eyes and big smiles and, obviously, welcoming.

[00:09:55] Jesse Pearlman: Yes, absolutely. My first impression of Mông people in Mù Cang Chải was that they're actually a little bit nervous and scared of foreigners because they don't see them that often. They might be Vietnamese people, but foreigners-- While they will see them, it's still a little bit rare. But once they get to know you, they're incredibly kind and friendly. Of course, the children are just wonderful. Yes, it's very true what you said about their skin. These are farmers. These are people that have spent their entire lives out there in the wilderness with the direct sunlight. There are some women that look like they're in their 90s, but they're only 50 years old because of the conditions that the sun has given them. Obviously, things such as hats, sunglasses, hat, maybe, sunglasses and sunscreen are unheard of.

[00:10:50] Kerry Newsome: Absolutely. You spent nearly 6 hours getting there. What were your plans then from there on? Where you're going to stay a day, a week, a fortnight? What was your plans from there?

[00:11:09] Jesse Pearlman: It was a very short trip because, like I said, I had to get back to my job in Korea. I let Miss Nghia from Zonitrip take the lead. Once we completed that area, we drove down the highway, which is one of the most beautiful stretches, Highway 32, QL32. If anyone's interested, looking it up on Google Maps. Quite possibly the most beautiful highway stretch in Vietnam, a 20-kilometre two-lane road that just goes through the heart of the Valley of Mù Cang Chải. That was the point in which I really just had to sit back and enjoy the moment. We occasionally stopped to take pictures because that, of course, was my passion and the reason why I wanted to go for photography. We ended the day hiking up a mountain that was completely uninhabited by anybody other than locals. This mountain had a great view of the sunset. We were so high up, you could see all of the rice terraces above you, below you. They truly just did seem never ending. It was an absolutely magical experience. Zonitrip, the program combines outdoor exercise, as well as cultural exchange, and then, of course, there's the motorbike component as well. We really got around and just spent two nights there. After that, it was back to Yen Bai City and then immediately took a bus back to Hanoi. But that's all it took from the **[unintelligible 00:12:46]**

[00:12:49] Kerry Newsome: Okay, and when you say that's all it took to grab your interest. When you and I were talking the other day, it grabbed your interest in a big way because you made some big changes in your life and decided to go back again. Am I right?

[00:13:06] Jesse Pearlman: Yes, I did. I finished my job in Korea about six months later. I had always planned on doing a big travel before I went back to America. My first trip was to Vietnam once I've completed my job in Korea. While I was there, I started in the bottom, like most foreigners do. I bought a motorbike, which is another pretty common backpacker trend in

the Southern mountainous region of the lot, which is pretty close to Ho Chi Minh. Maybe eight hours away in a car and drove it all the way up to the North.

[00:13:41] Kerry Newsome: Wow.

[00:13:41] Jesse Pearlman: While I was actually driving, getting close to Hanoi, I got in a nasty motorbike accident. When I had reached Hanoi, I spoke to my friend Nghia from Zonitrip, and she said to me, "If you can make it to my house, me and my husband will take care of you until you're healed." I took a week out of my trip, which was normally going to be spent exploring the mountains. I stayed with her. The city was just so quiet and peaceful and such a different experience from not only Seoul, Korea, which where I'd been living, but just the tourist hostel lifestyle that permeated Vietnam for so many young backpackers. This was such a true cultural experience. It was at that time, I had the epiphany of "I don't need to go home if I don't want to. I have this ability to teach English anywhere in the world." And a place like Yen Bai, they're probably starving for English teachers. I had a notion to come back. I left my motorbike with her, and then I continued traveling around Asia. Then, I came back to Vietnam in the late summer, early fall, because that was the time of the harvest season in Mù Cang Chải. That was really where it all started for me. I'd like to point out that a lot of areas in Vietnam will have up to three harvest seasons because of the amount of powerful sunlight and heat that they can get. Even some really beautiful places in the North will have, too, but Mù Cang Chải and Sa Pa are unique that they only have one harvest season. The planting begins in May or June, and then the cultivation and the growing will go throughout the summer. Then, the rice turns a beautiful gold and yellow color in September and October. I went up to Mù Cang Chải during that time. That's when everything changed for me because I was no longer staying in the town of Mù Cang Chải, which I would like to point out, is inhabited by a different ethnic minorities, the Thai people, not Thailand, but the Thai ethnic minority. These people are actually used to farming on places that are a little more flat. They will sometimes have terraced rice, but in general, the Mông people are the ones who are more comfortable in the mountainous region. Thai people also seem to have more experience with hospitality than Mông people. That's why they're able to flourish in the town of Mù Cang Chải, but not up in the mountains.

I had been staying there the whole time, and I happened to come upon a little homestay, in the middle of nowhere in a village called La Pán Tân, called Hello Mù Cang Chải Homestay. It was impossible to find this place, and once I did, I realized that it was on a really, really steep hill that could really get anybody out of breath, that a person in great shape still super out of breath climbing this hill just to get to the homestay. Once I arrived at the top of that mountain, my breath was just taken away. It was not only one of the best views in the whole region, but without doubt the most beautiful place I've ever stayed in my life. This is also where I met a woman named Miss My. My was the co-owner of Hello Mù Cang Chải Homestay. To that point, the first English speaker I had ever met in Mù Cang Chải. This was the beginning of a long friendship and also a really great opportunity for me to just ask questions about what's going on here? What are the people like? What do you do? How did you learn English? By the way, it turns out that she learned English in Sa Pa, which is of course a more touristic region. She went there to ask a training program. She worked at a café, saw that homestays were popping up left and right, and told her husband, "Hey, we got to do one of these Backhome." They bought the land, and they live on a mountaintop in one of the most beautiful places in the world.

[00:17:58] Kerry Newsome: A homestay that you just described, they built that from scratch?

[00:18:07] Jesse Pearlman: They did build it from scratch. It was a community effort. They went door to door in their community, and they asked people if they would be willing to help

construct this homestay. They borrowed money from the bank to get the materials. Then, the entire village came together and built a very, very small concrete road leading up to the homestay, which if you're very brave, you can take it with your motorbike. And then they built the house where the family lives, and then upstairs, like many homestays, where the guests are situated, and a kitchen as well. Now, in a commune like La Pán Tản, it's a situation where you might ask one day your friends or your neighbors or a family member to help pick your rice because it is a ticking time bomb. You need to pick the rice when it's ready to be picked or else, it will go bad.

Then, instead of asking for money or anything like that, you're just expected to owe the other person something. So two weeks later, their rice might be ready to be picked, and you need to go help them, or you need to send your son or daughter over there to help them, or maybe, they need to borrow your water buffalo to help plow the field. This is kind of the system that they used in order to build this homestay. They did it completely from hands, definitely no true equipment, which is pretty similar to the region itself. It's the only reason that I'm aware of, that does not use any real electronic equipment to cultivate rice. A lot of the other places have these kind of almost like woodchopper-typed machines where you put the rice in and the grains come out. The people of Mù Cang Chải, they hold the rice, the [unintelligible 00:20:00] rice like a baseball bat, and they bang it against the wooden box until all the rice drops into the bottom. And then they bag it up, and they either carry it on their back, which is a 50-kilogram weight, or they put it on the back of their motorbike, two or three at a time and drive it up a scary mountain at night with no lights. At the time that I discovered Hello Mù Cang Chải, I believe that the year was 2018 and the village that they were living in, La Pán Tản, the year before when I went on that tour, did not have paved roads. So the experience was just as muddy and miserable as it was climbing that scenic viewpoint on that morning. At this point, though, they did have some paved roads. It was like going to a completely new place. I could pass. That was really wonderful. Yes, you do see now, year after year, the Vietnamese government, they give them the supplies, but once again, it's on the Mông people to create the roads themselves.

[00:21:10] Kerry Newsome: Yes, and we were talking about that from a skill-set perspective, that they literally come up with those skills with a little bit of guidance from the government. But the work and the grunt is these old community based, isn't it?

[00:21:24] Kerry Newsome: Yes, it's unbelievable. You want to talk about the term "Country Strong". These people just do it all like it's nothing. I remember [chuckles] that My, the mother, she gave her beautiful 3-year-old daughter a toy. And I put toy in a quotation mark because the toy was a gardening hoe.

[00:21:47] Kerry Newsome: [laughs]

[00:21:47] Jesse Pearlman: She let her play with it, and then went on to tell me that when she's five years old, she'll go out into the fields with her mom every day.

[00:21:56] Kerry Newsome: Yes, yes, and so you decided to hang around, didn't you? You got to know the families and the people that ran the homestay. We talked a little bit about that. So talk to us now. I mean, here you are, young, good-looking guy. You're in Mù Cang Chải, Vietnam. Apart from all of that lovely community feeling, what was it that really kept you there?

[00:22:27] Jesse Pearlman: Everything that was written in that CNN article, but most importantly, the lack of tourism.

[00:22:34] Kerry Newsome: The lack of--

[00:22:35] Jesse Pearlman: Yes, I loved how quiet it was. This is something that we had discussed previously, you and I. But I think it's very important. I love the fact that there are a lot

of tourists in Mù Cang Chải. The people of Mù Cang Chải do not love that. We have opposite goals. Their goal is to get rich and having many people. They would love nothing more than it to become top-up. Of course, they do have a great deal of respect for nature and conserving nature, but they want that. Whereas me, the tourists, generally just love that there aren't that many people there. I love the quietness of it. You just really feel like you're out there. The nature-- It's one of those places that any time of year that you go, something special is going on. In February, they have the peach and cherry blossom trees, just a sea of pink and white. In March and April, you might see florescent purple flowers blooming from what would be barren rice paddy fields. And then, of course, from May to October, you have the planting of the rice itself. Right before that, they actually plant corn for themselves as well. There's always something going on. What I really love about Mù Cang Chải is you can just sit there and watch the people. They're little dots in the landscape, and they're all working. You can hear the echoes, the banging of the rice onto the board. You hear the cow bells of the buffalo. You see the children running along the road, holding hands and their beautiful clothing. Everything just feels like a National Geographic Magazine when you're there.

[00:24:30] Kerry Newsome: You couldn't have described it better. I haven't heard it described so well. Thanks, Jesse. You're doing a great job at painting the right picture of this place. But I think one of the other things I want us to just expand on because you and I are both in the same space or headspaces, I guess, in the fact that we want people to know about this area. I'm hoping if there's any good to come out of COVID that somewhere in tourism in Vietnam when it does come back on, that there is some controls or mediation. I don't want to see big buses coming to Yen Bai City, and then, there's a whole lot of trolling up those roads. Now, we're seeing no dotted people in the landscape and in the terraces. We're seeing hundreds and hundreds of tourists trolling around. It's hard, isn't it?

[00:25:35] Jesse Pearlman: Yes. A couple of thoughts on that. You do see it. Last year, I was there, and of course, there was still COVID. No foreign tourists, but lots of Vietnamese tourists. Every province in Vietnam has a different license plate number and Yen Bai is the 21. So I always used to joke to my friends when we were in Mù Cang Chải, "Oh, the 30s are here." And 30 is the Hanoi license plate. So when the 30s come out, they come out in droves, and they are all over this one main road. It has never gotten to the point where there's traffic on the highway, but I could see it happening in the future. The other thing is I totally agree with what you said about not wanting this place to be tainted by all of the extra tourism, but at the current moment, I do think that that's pretty much impossible. I have a lot of friends who are like-minded, who I just can't convince to go because it's too far for them from Hanoi, especially if you want to go on a weekend. I know people who go. They have 12 hours there, and then they go back. The driving both ways is sixteen hours, so they just don't have the infrastructure in place.

I did read an interesting article about how the government is planning to increase tourism there by 2025, including an extension off of the superhighway that runs from Hanoi to the Northern border of Lao Cai. And according to the article that I read, it will be able to get connect you to Mù Cang Chải in just four hours from Hanoi. Now, that's certainly a more manageable trip. That's Boston to New York for those Americans listening out there. But, at the moment, it's really just too far off the beaten path, I think, for it to be a really big tourist destination.

Photography enthusiasts, trekking enthusiasts, these are the people who usually make their way to Mù Cang Chải. Most people would love to go but don't have enough time. If they do go, they end up stumbling on it like, "Oh, well, we were going to drive to Sa Pa, and we realized this place was on the way. You know what? We think this place is more beautiful than Sa Pa." That's

usually what I try to tell people. I'm sure that's what you're trying to tell people on your podcast. Just go, trust me, just go. If you go, you'll love it.

[music]

[00:28:14] Thank you for listening. Check out the episode notes for more information.

What about Vietnam.

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