



What About Vietnam– S5- E15 – Yen Bai

Discover luxury in the heart of nature

Kerry Newsome: Xin chào and welcome to the What About Vietnam podcast. Okay, so this is going to be a little bit of a curly one for everyone because I'm going to start to talk about in this episode a place in Vietnam that looks a lot like the hills of SaPa, but it doesn't have all that development going on. Now, if I can take your mind and your imagination to those beautiful cascading mountains, paddy fields, that very, very rural feeling, that totally unspoiled beauty. Let me introduce you to Yen Bai and the general manager of a property called Le Champ, Hylton Lipkin. Hello Hylton

Hylton Lipkin: Xin chao, Kerry great to be here and great to see you again Yeah, it's it it's an amazing place to be and I think everything that you just explained I'm like wow I'd like to go there and I actually do live there. So yeah, you you're not far off in your in your description.

Kerry Newsome: So I guess I want to preface it because why am I doing this show and you know what is it about Yen Bai that's kind of caught my attention? Well really for some of the reasons I first said, I have actually been to Sapa So I know quite a bit about the location. But this is an area which has kind of been quietly humming away and attracting the pretty well researched, you know, bike riders, local Vietnamese. And those looking for those spectacular views that we talked about, but they're not wanting particularly, you know, the draw cards like Fanispan and, you know, the cable cars and the hubba hubba that kind of goes with all that. So I want to ask Hylton a little bit more about this actual location so we get a feel for the locals that that live here and you know just a little bit about what's so special about Yen Bai and in particular Tu Le.

Hylton Lipkin: So do we have two, three hours?

Kerry Newsome: Yeah, sometimes we do.

Hylton Lipkin: So maybe to be very honest, the way you brought that in and the way you explained it to everybody and the listeners here, it just made me think about when I initially arrived in this area. Like I explained to you earlier, I had absolutely no idea where I was going. Yes, I love the mountains. Yes, it's beautiful and I've lived in Vietnam a long time, but Actually, we landed up in this paradisiac, very open nature, in the mountains type of place. I had no idea what it was about. I came here and I remember my family and all we could say was, are we in Nepal? Are we in Nepal? Where's Everest Base Camp? So it really has that beautiful, natural, undeveloped, like you mentioned, type of feeling. Yes, I'll be 100% honest, we are off the beaten track. We're not in one of these major hub cities with, like you mentioned, all the fancy glimmer and glitz of some of the cities in Vietnam, but that is what attracts people to this place. That is the attraction, should I say, rather. It's a lot about nature. It's a lot about a beautiful place to be and a place to, you know, if we look from a wellness or a well-being perspective, find yourself, detox yourself, enjoy the fresh air, eat fresh food, and get away from the city. So, it didn't take me three hours, but kind of... Oh, we've got a bit to go, so hang in there.

Kerry Newsome: We're going to dig a little bit deeper.

Hylton Lipkin: Okay, all right. Moving on then.

Kerry Newsome: Moving on. All right. So, I've just arrived and I've done a quick scout. We've been talking. The breathtaking views just getting here from Hanoi by road took roughly four and a half, five hours to get here. And that was done very easy-peasy, done with a driver that is actually belonging to this resort. So it picked me up from my hotel and I had a very, very comfortable ride here. Thank you very much for that.

Hylton Lipkin: No problem.

Kerry Newsome: Now, so that gives you a position of where it is, but maybe, Hylton, you can tell us a little bit about some other close vicinities, so people could possibly wrap up two locations in the one trip, and I'm talking about bringing in Mu Cang Chai.

Hylton Lipkin: So maybe I can just explain. Normally when leaving Hanoi and moving in this direction in the north of Vietnam, the destination is generally Sapa. Going out, traveling on the highway, getting to Lao Cai and then going up to Sapa, which is very famous. In the middle, somewhere along the way, you turn left and you come along these beautiful winding mountains, mountain roads, which takes you up to where we are now, which is Tu Le.

Tu Le is a very beautiful, simple village town in the mountains. It's actually very, very famous for its rice. They have this green sticky rice that most of the Vietnamese people actually know about and it's quite famous. People buy it and import it around the country. So that is a major attraction to Tu Le, where we are today. There's also Mau Cang Chai, which is just over the mountain, which is very well known in Vietnam for the beautiful terraced grass fields that go on forever from the top of the mountains to the bottom of the mountains throughout the year.

You have the different seasons, you have the mirror season where they're full of water, then you have the green season when they're growing, and then you have the yellow season, or golden season as they call it, when they're harvesting it. So those are some of the major natural attractions that we have in this area, besides everything else that we've mentioned, just the beauty and the serenity of the area.

Kerry Newsome: Yeah, I actually I had a bit of a joke with Hylton earlier. I said, look, I really want to come here and write my memoir, because it's just got that eerily like, beauty. And I can see that. I'm actually looking forward to tomorrow morning just to see how the morning breaks with the fog and just it coming up over the mountains because it is truly spectacular and you'll see some photos of my view from my hotel room and what my first view was when I stepped into reception. I just took that shot, that first shot because it was just so staggeringly beauty. And remarkably so to me is the untouched aspect of it because let's face it people like there's not many places that aren't fully developed. Everybody's heading in the let's develop all this beauty and let's you know kind of do that. So to find a hotel with such beautiful rooms and aspects to it is remarkable and to find it in such an isolated place. But I want to talk and Hylton's going to be the best person to talk about this. is to talk about the different kinds of rooms available at the hotel, because I'm only staying in one of them.

Hylton Lipkin: Before I go on to explain the hotels, what the listeners need to understand is that Kerry is just staring out of the window. We're actually sitting in the main restaurant on the property, but we have this panoramic view of as far as we can see, green valley mountains and trees covered. And as we speak, I'm staring at her, but she's staring out of the window. So a lot of this inspiration comes from actually the natural beauty that's surrounding us. So she's not just saying that to sell the product. It is a beautiful place. And one other thing before I mention the different room types and what we have on properties, you also didn't mention the cultural history within this area. you know we are quite far away from Vietnam and from Hanoi City and throughout Vietnam there's actually a very rich culture of ancestral people who have very strong traditions and the government really doesn't get involved at all they actually respect it and even you know help them in certain circumstances and out here in Thule we have the Hmong people the Thai people and the Kien people and actually you know they don't speak the same language they don't speak Vietnamese they speak another language and they have their own dress and attire and you know it's almost as if when you're walking around in the street you think there's a school here that's wearing a very colored uniform but actually that's just how they dress so it's fantastic to see they're not wearing you know sports shirts I won't give out brands because then we should get money if we give out the Yes, we should. Or you know, or jeans or something like that.

So it's actually beautiful to see. So it really just blends into the nature of the place and the simplicity of the area.

With regards to our property, Le Champ, we have a hundred rooms. And they are diversified. We have an entry category, which is almost like a #glamping with a thatched roof. We will show that to you. Yes, I've got a picture of it. They're a bit small. I mean, everything's available on our web page. They're a bit small, but they really, everything has a beautiful view of the vista beyond, the green vista and the clouds and things like that. So we have different room categories, #bungalows, we have, that's called the Glenwood or the Glamour. Then we have the room that you are in and we have the president's bungalow or the VIP bungalows So we have a range of different accommodation, but very luxurious and again for this area. There's nothing else we are off the beaten track as I mentioned earlier and when you're driving through the mountains and coming here and you're suddenly and come bang, you know, face-to-face with Le Chum, it's like, where am I? Because up to now it's just been many homestays and very simple villages, and here we have this beautiful property that, you know, boasts a certain level of luxury. I think I'll be safe to say that. Absolutely. So, you know, it's really something special in a very quiet, hidden, like we could say it's a hidden gem, basically.

Kerry Newsome: Yeah, and like, you know, I guess as a traveler, you know, I go to places and I automatically think it's going to have this and this and this and this. So when I arrived here, my expectations were of, oh, this is, you know, this is a four and a half star property. I knew a little bit about Hylton, so I knew it was going to be luxurious. But then what I didn't expect and what came from it, and he's right, I'm sitting here, I'm kind of blinded by the light to be honest, I'm blinded by these mountains and this beautiful quietness, where the hotel is offering something really quite unique and a bit standalone, like there's no other hotel in this region of this standard. Sure, you're going to find your homestays and you know, that's another map, that's another story, that's another podcast. But for this one, this is about coming in and getting that lovely luxury but without all the glamour glitz and all the rest of it that sometimes comes with properties of this standard. I want to talk maybe Hylton about you know, the kind of people that you attract to the hotel. We started just before coming on talking about, you

know, who loves this place? Who comes, who are they? You know, where are they coming from? Talk to us a little bit about that.

Hylton Lipkin: We need to be honest that we are predominantly a Vietnamese property. The property's been running for about four and a half years, run by the owners, local owners, so most of the marketing and most of the efforts have been placed on Hanoi. Like you mentioned earlier, we're pretty close to Hanoi, five hour drive, so for many Hanoians to come out and enjoy this, they do, as a weekend getaway, a public holiday getaway. So I would say that 85% of our clientele are from Hanoi, or the north of Vietnam. In that group of people we definitely have families, a lot of families. On the weekends we have lots of young children running around with their parents. We do have different activities here for children, so they tend to enjoy that as well. But it's also a very romantic type of isolated place that you mentioned. So, you know, we get the honeymooners, we get the romantic couples, we get the families. We do get elderly people, but you very rightly mentioned that There is a bit of walking to be done around.

We are in the mountains and it is quite steep in certain areas. Myself being a fitness fanatic, I'm very happy with that. But yes, sure, when your knee is sore or you're getting older or you just can't do it, that definitely is a hindrance. But we do have that group of demographics of people. But over and above that now, that we've changed our marketing strategy and we've been looking in different places to market. We're starting to see Western guests, non-Vietnamese guests. Of course, there's the expat community within Vietnam that we also do attract, but it's outside of Vietnam. We have a lot of tour groups coming through. And like I mentioned to you this week, we had French guests and German guests. We had a gentleman from Saudi Arabia, the first in the year and a half that I've been here. So that was great to see him. So 80% Vietnamese or 85% Vietnamese and maybe 10% Western European, American, Canadian guests, and then maybe some Asian other guests that come in through there. So that's pretty much the mix or the demographics of what we have.

Kerry Newsome: And I am going to support the, you know, I don't think it would, I'd put it in the class of elderly friendly. I mean, you know, I'm elderly. And, you know, I'm thinking of how many times am I going to do those steps in the next couple of days. So

my knees aren't what they used to be. But, you know, I've seen other levels here as well. So I'm sure if you had some issues, and you mentioned that, So, I think great for the family, you know, they've got this amazing infinity pool that they would absolutely go nuts over. If you're an Instagram fanatic, oh man, you're going to get some amazing pics. And I'm pretty sure we talked also, Hylton, about some actual photography groups that come to photograph because there are certain times of year that these paddy fields actually come alive with green and yellow colors that are just, you know, they queue up literally side by side to get the best shot.

Hylton Lipkin: But actually, like you mentioned earlier, sunset and sunrise are pretty spectacular. With or without the clouds, it's absolutely beautiful, you know. coming up behind the mountains, going down behind the mountains. Some days we have pink-red skies, other days we have grey-blue skies with the clouds. So it is actually very, very picturesque. Yeah, no doubt about that.

Kerry Newsome: And I think it's funny, I've just finished doing a VTV4 show. I think it's called Culture and Connection. And they were asking me to talk about how I feel when I'm in Vietnam or what does Vietnam make me feel. And I said, beautiful. But I've got a good explanation for the word beautiful in the sense that when I am surrounded by beauty, I can't help but feel beautiful. It has that real rub-on effect that nature in its raw and its pure sense, it really does. And then even the air, you know, I've just come from Hanoi and just breathing, I feel like I'm taking extra gulps just every hour just to really get a full sense of it. So, you know, I'm not crazy coming out to Yen Bai and people are looking at it on the show list and saying, oh, Kerry's done a show on Yen Bai. God, what's that? You know, what could that be about? Because you're not going to see it on the classic tourist map. It's not there. And it's the reason I'm here, because it's not there.

Hylton Lipkin: It is a new and upcoming destination, but I think I'm very safe to say that it's not going to become as busy as Hanoi. I can definitely say it's not going to become as busy as Hanoi. Thank God for that. That is one of the attractions to the area, the fact of the simplicity, the beauty, and the fact that there is no traffic. My biggest traffic problem are the buffalo on the pass going over the mountain. And the chickens. Yeah, I

mean, a bad traffic run for me in the morning is children in the road, buffaloes, goats and sometimes baby pigs. So, I mean... It's a tough life. Different priorities. And, you know, you were mentioning as well, people are looking for healthier destinations, more open destinations, places where they can breathe and, you know, get away and detox and enjoy themselves. Yes, my forte is definitely in well-being and wellness and Even though directly this is not as intense as the last property where we were together in central Vietnam the elements of Relaxation and and fresh air and the hot springs that we have as well and the mountain food and fresh food is definitely there So whether you're a wellness fundi or not, you still automatically get that that infusion of being away being in a natural relaxing healthy environment whether you like it or not. That's a given once you get off the highway.

Kerry Newsome: And I think certainly I can understand why the Vietnamese love it and it's a five-hour escape from Hanoi. So, you know, it fits perfectly in that long weekend or short break opportunity for Hanoians to come and enjoy. And, you know, that's kind of where I came from to visit here. I want to jump into food because there was a fascinating conversation I had about a particular specialty to the area. Over to you Hylton to talk about it.

Hylton Lipkin: What's famous in terms of food in this area and for me very naturally just jumped out and went black chicken for me. We talk about all the time. She just did it again. Big eyes and a strange face. Actually, it's true. I'd never heard of it before and maybe we become very adapted to the areas and the things that are around us. But here in the mountains they have this black chicken. It's literally black bones, black meat, black skin. And it actually tastes exactly like any other chicken. But it's a speciality of this area. And I was also explaining to Kerry that we have different levels. So you have like the light black chicken, which is not really the black bones. It has normal bones like the chicken we know. Don't tell me there's a brown chicken. No, no, no. But then you get the ones that actually have black bones. There's no preservatives. There's no coloring. It's just a black chicken.

Kerry Newsome: Am I going to see one here?

Hylton Lipkin: Yeah, definitely. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Going over the mountain, you'll probably see it. So for the locals, it's also an element which I didn't mention to you, Kerry. It's an element of wealth. Because the bigger they are and the more black they

are and the further into the mountains you go, they're actually worth more money. So at a hotel level, we kind of get commercial black chicken. But you can go deep into the

mountains with the Hmong people and they actually grow their own Black chickens that are a little bit more expensive a bit like, you know, like a more refined beef or something to that effect So that's one one element that apparently a well-fed black chicken on organic food That's what we want is a well.

Kerry Newsome: I'm gonna I'm gonna go in search in the next few days for sure

Hylton Lipkin: We're going to send her on a trip to find one and then prepare it herself.

Kerry Newsome: I've got to get a photo for sure.

Hylton Lipkin: The other element as well is the fish. So because we're up in the mountains and we have many fresh water rivers and fountains, they make these trout farms or salmon farms or sturgeon farms. So sturgeon is apparently an endangered species in some countries but definitely up here in the mountains it's in abundance. So not only are the fish healthy because they're living off natural food and natural mountain water with no pollution. But they actually are very popular here and not excessively expensive. So salmon, sturgeon and black chicken and then obviously like I think I mentioned before the rice in Thule is very famous. It's like a sticky rice. They harvest it and then they crush it on the side of the road. Actually guests can do it as an attraction and it becomes almost gooey. And then when they cook it, you have to try some. It's sticky. It's very similar to Thai sticky rice and it's everywhere. Every time you have a meal, you get this two-layer rice. So those are the main attraction towards food. There are many others. There's also bugs. Okay, let's not go into the bugs.

Kerry Newsome: That could sway things the other way. Hylton, I want to talk a little bit just to make people feel comfortable and not feel like it's out of their reach. We talked roughly about cost-wise, when people think resorts are a way in. districts like this that's going to cost me the earth to do that. We kind of went on a range somewhere between \$80 starting through to about \$250 US per night. But what I want to mention more so is that you're a bit of a two-for-one man in the sense that you control two properties So not only by reaching out to the Yen Bai property of Lesham, you can also combine that with the Garriard property in Mukhang Chai. Now I'm going to make sure I put the links in the

show notes so that you can do that. I guess what I'm asking you to do is to not think of it just as one place because one from the other is only an hour away.

Yeah, an hour by car. So you could get in Mu Cang Chai as well as Tu Le in the same trip is what I'm saying.

Hylton Lipkin: Many people who come out this way actually... Combine. Correct. So they would come to Tu Le, stay with us, go over to Mu Cang Chai for the day, visit and then come back and stay here and then ultimately head back to Hanoi or wherever it was. Mu Cang Chai is the big attraction area and it's really close and beautiful to get there. So, yes, I am actually the area general manager of two properties. Le Champ, the one that we've spoken a lot about, is open and been running for about five years now.

Over in Mu Cang Chai, we are opening a new property called Garrya. And that will be opening in the next 60 days. Something very exciting under the Banyan Group. And a beautiful high-end luxury hotel. The prices are a little bit higher than over here. Or in Lechon. But very, very beautiful. So the idea is that people could then ultimately come to Thule, stay one night in Thule, move over to Mu Cang Chai stay one night in Mu Cang Chai Discover both areas and then head on back instead of staying in the shop for two nights and doing one day in Mu Cang Chai So we kind of combine them together Kerry Newsome: Hylton, if you were to do that kind of combination, could you kind of wrap it up with the car to take you to one place and then kind of get you back to Hanoi? Because that's really, I don't want that to be a barrier for people to get here.

Hylton Lipkin: Correct. So we do have our bus for each property and we link them together. So as you did today, we can pick you up at the airport or we can pick you up in Hanoi itself. and then bring you out either to Tu Le or take you over to Garrya and Mu Cang Chai or vice versa between the two of them. So yes, there is transport between the two of them. Yes, we're in an area where there's not Ubers or Go or... No, there's nobody here, there's no Grab. I get it. There are local buses that continuously travel between all the cities here. But as it develops and as the new property comes online, we will definitely have more transport options for our guests. Because one thing as well is that here in Tu Le, we have natural hot springs. But in Mu Cang Chai and Garrya, we don't have that. So we could still offer that to our guests from Garrya in Mu Cang Chai.

They could come over and use the hot springs for the day and then go back. Like you said, it's only one hour or one and a half hours by car. If you wanted, you could run it. It's only 40 kilometers. Yeah, I'll get my husband on that for sure. 20 up and 20 down. He'll be into that. Or you could cycle it. I've seen a couple of people actually mountain biking over the pass. So there are some adventurous people around here. So those are other options as well.

Kerry Newsome: Thanks so much for coming on the show. I couldn't have done this area justice without you.

Hylton Lipkin: It's my pleasure and you know it's always great to see you and thank you for everything you're doing for promoting Vietnam and you know especially for us here in Yen Bai or Tu Le and Mu Cang Chai. It's great for people to discover us and get to come out and enjoy this beautiful area, this beautiful region which is not really that popular but well worth the visit.

Kerry Newsome: Absolutely, I concur.