



## **What About Vietnam - S5-E5 - The famous Hai Van Pass experience: Insights from a seasoned traveller**

00:37 - 02:18 Kerry Newsome Xin chào and welcome to What About Vietnam. Today I'm actually sitting in rainy Hoi An, but I've got the opportunity to have some time and talk to Chris Mooney. Now Chris and I have crossed paths many times and been, you know, just trying to get the moons to align to do this interview because he's going to be talking about quite a famous area called the Hai Van Pass. Just a little bit about Chris. Chris was born in New Zealand. I believe he's still an All Blacks fan. Lived in Australia for 28 years, mainly in Newcastle. For most of his adult life, he says he's been involved in media in one capacity or another. And, you know, since about the age of 20, he's been on air hosting radio shows, doing voiceovers and working for some major brands in that field. So, you know, we've got someone on today who really knows their stuff and certainly having lived here now in Vietnam and in this region, in the An Bang and Hoi An region, having done the Hai Van Pass many times, he's got some great insights into just understanding that area and what it involves in visiting that area. So we're going to get into that in more detail. Chris, welcome to the show and why not for all our listeners just give some background to yourself and how you arrived in Hoi An and your interest in Hai Van.

02:20 - 03:36 Chris Moonie Originally, I'm from New Zealand. Spent 28 years there, then 28 years in Australia. And I first came here in May of 2013 with my middle boy,

who was 18 at the time. Loved Vietnam, thought there was something special about Hoi An. A lady that I met here, I also felt there was something special about her as well. And I went back to Australia to Newcastle and then I was back in Hoi An six weeks later and living here about 22 months after that. So I've been here now for eight plus years and living in An Bang, which is a very small, what was a fishing village up until The tourism boomed here. It's only 850 metres long, it's 350 metres wide at its widest point, but if you have a look at the area, the road from the traffic lights on the main road to the beachfront, the main road through the village, and the beachfront restaurants, there's over 130 restaurants, and that doesn't even take into account all of those great restaurants that you find down all the laneways and so on. So I love Unbung, it's quiet, but you have loads of choice and within four or five minutes walking of wherever you are.

03:37 - 04:00 Kerry Newsome And I'm glad you point that out because An Bang kind of sprung up after Cua Dai kind of got washed out and it's currently kind of sandbagged. And literally being as resilient as Vietnamese are, they kind of picked up everything that was at Cua Dai and moved it to An Bang. And that was maybe 10 years ago.

04:00 - 04:43 Chris Moonie Yeah, right about that time when I first got here, but there was very little here at that time to cater for tourists. With Cua Dai itself though, it's recovered just recently. There's some Dutch technology that's been used in building what is termed a sea dike, and then sand has been dredged up onto the beach, so the beach is the best that it's been for a long time. And I think that area will really kick off. With Hoi An, the ancient town area, there are only two main roads that go to a beach. So you've got Cua Dai Road, you're about seven kilometres out of town to get to that beach, whereas with An Bang, you're only about three, three and a half kilometres away.

04:43 - 05:00 Kerry Newsome Correct. Now, Chris, you've got a bit of a background which is going to help this podcast immensely in radio and public speaking, etc. So maybe just give us a snippet of that so everyone can appreciate where you're coming from.

05:00 - 05:23 Chris Moonie Yeah, sure. I started off with Radio New Zealand. I had 10 years there and then relocated to Australia. and had a lot of years there in radio and

also doing what is termed house voice work for Channel 9 up in Newcastle. I was told very early on that I had a great face for radio so I'm pretty much a natural I think.

05:25 - 06:00 Kerry Newsome Yeah, I'm sure they're saying that about me in the podcast. So that suits me fine. I'd rather be behind the mic and not seen than rather at the front of it. So we're together on that. Today, Chris, we're going to be talking about the Hai Van Pass. And this is something I really wanted to go into with you because your knowledge is so extensive. So maybe we kick off with talking about just how it took the attention of the BBC and the Top Gear crew back in 2008. So, I'll let you kind of lead off from there.

06:01 - 07:22 Chris Moonie Yeah, the BBC Top Gear program back in 2008 had a Vietnam feature and had the boys, they were riding motorbikes from Saigon up to Hanoi. One of them had a painting on their motorbike, one of them had a sailing ship, the other one had a ceramic vase from memory. Going back quite a few years ago, I was actually at Hai Van Pass itself and I saw a couple of guys there and one had a sailing ship and one had a painting, so they were doing the whole top gear thing over Hai Van Pass. But it's something that I did on my second trip to Vietnam in 2013, going up to Hue, and back in those days the road was pretty treacherous. It's been improved dramatically since then, but it still does have its challenges, and particularly if you're not somebody who's done a lot of riding. In the last 10 years, I've done well over 100,000 kilometres on local roads all over the country. And it's certainly very different to what you'd experience in a Western country because the Vietnamese have a different rhythm to the traffic and you don't want to be doing a bossa nova while they're doing a waltz because it gets very, very untidy.

07:23 - 08:25 Kerry Newsome And I'm glad you mentioned that because there is a rhythm and there is an element of organized chaos. And there's also an aspect of respect for one another on the roads. I see a lot of that I don't see in my own country, which is, you know, if there's a guy and he's kind of on a bike and he's got something on the back that is three times the width of him, You know, cars, other bike riders, et cetera, will just kind of veer around him, make sure he's got space and keep going on. So, you know, tourist-wise and tourists on bikes probably make me more nervous than Vietnamese on bikes. But I think it's worth mentioning and look, I could do a whole podcast just on bike riding. But today, I'm nailing you on Hai Van Pass. So, why would

you go to Hai Van Pass?

08:25 - 10:12 Chris Moonie

Hai Van Pass is just a beautiful ride. I've done it 40, 50 plus times and it's a lovely day trip. as a loop out of Hoi An, it's probably a couple of hundred kilometres or so. And you have the pass itself, then you come down to Lang Co, stop where the railway line comes over the road, go around to the west side of Lang Co Lagoon. That's an area where a lot of oysters are grown. So when you're riding along you'll see a lot of stakes in the water and the oysters are grown on tyres, motorbike tyres, scooter tyres that have been cut in half. So they're put on a line at about four or five hundred apart, and the oysters are grown, they take nine or ten months to grow. If you're travelling along that road, quite often you'll see tyres on the road, and they have been put there so that the vehicles will run over them to break off the residue and clean the tyres. So it's that sort of approach that you'd never be able to do where we come from. But, you know, there's some thinking outside the square that goes on. Also on that side of the Lang Co Lagoon, there's also the Dream Springs, which are fabulous. It's a series of cascades. It's water straight out of the hills. It's very, very fresh. But on a long, hot, dusty ride, there's absolutely nothing better than spending half an hour, 45 minutes there. It's very rustic, just bamboo huts. You have a tarpaulin to get changed behind. Typically Vietnamese with the karaoke going on, it's just great fun.

10:13 - 10:53 Kerry Newsome It sounds super. Is there like a start and finish? Like, you know, where does it go from and where does it finish? Has it got like a segment of the road or a span of road in kilometres, et cetera, that actually applies to the Hai Van Pass, because when I've done it, I've kind of tried to measure, I think this is where we're coming into it, and as you say, you're looking at that beautiful view of Lang co which is absolutely pretty as, but then I'm not quite sure when I've got out of it, or if I'm still in it, as in the pass, as in Hai Van Pass.

10:54 - 12:26 Chris Moonie Well Hai Van Pass itself, you've got the fortifications up the top and that was originally erected there by the Dai Viet or the North Vietnamese and it was a crossing point between North Vietnam and Central Vietnam. The gate up there, the brick gateway, dates back to 1341. currently that area is closed and the Hue government is rebuilding that area as it was back in the day. So I can only see it getting busier up there than what it is now to become its own tourist attraction or a tourist

attraction in its own right and I'm very happy to see that because unfortunately the locals haven't taken care of that area and the buildings have gone into a great deal of decay in the 10 or so years since I first went up there. So to see that area being recreated I think is fantastic. The road trip itself from the very bottom of the hill, and you're only about 400 metres high, up to the top of the other pass itself is about 7.5 kilometres. That's where the best view is and then down the northern side there's a lot of bush, a lot of trees, so the views are a lot more restricted and that part is about nine and a half kilometres down to the bottom of the hill as such.

12:27 - 12:41 Kerry Newsome All right, well we touched on some history there. Is there anything more behind the history of that area that is worth just kind of taking into consideration? You mentioned the Viet Cong.

12:41 - 13:11 Chris Moonie Given its height, the French used that area to install bunkers. So there's bunkers to the left and to the right. pillboxes on the right hand side next to the brick archway and there's the one that is furthest north that you can frame a really nice photo of Lanko through the gunslit. So that area there was first used for fortifications in that respect by the French and then the Americans during the American War.

13:14 - 13:22 Kerry Newsome And also, for me, probably begs the question, are you better off to do it north to south or south to north?

13:22 - 13:40 Chris Moonie North to south. So that's from Hue to Da Nang. And the reason for that is that the view is in front of you. If you're riding up the hill, you have to look over your shoulder to see the view. If you're coming the other way down towards Hoi An or Da Nang, it's right in front of you.

13:41 - 14:21 Kerry Newsome And interesting to think about time of year because I talk a lot about this on the show in the sense of it is a lot about timing of the year in Vietnam from north to south the weather differs quite incredibly. Do you have a kind of a preference for when's a good time of the year? And I just want to add to that also, you know, what time of day is a good time to go? So time of year and, you know, early morning or late evening or sunset, you know, I'm kind of steering you that way.

14:21 - 15:38 Chris Moonie As far as time of day is concerned, it really just depends on the day itself. And if you're going to have a hot day, you go earlier. As I said, if you're doing a couple of hundred kilometers, you're looking at an eight-hour day anyway. You want to stop somewhere along the way and have lunch. So if you're leaving at seven or eight out of Hoi An, What I do is I go up the coastal road. In fact, Google Maps will show you the quickest route, which is through Danang. And it may be quicker on the ground, but it's not quickest time-wise. So because of all of the traffic lights and the traffic through Danang, it really does slow you down. You can save yourself half an hour each way by going the coastal road and then turning left, going up the first of the seven bridges over the Hun River and Danung. The big suspension bridge, you come off there, you get to an area which is called Namo, or which the Americans called Red One, and that was where they disembarked back in 1965. Then you just continue on the way, and it gives you a really good scope of how big Da Nang City is. There's only 1.3 million people there, but it's a very, very large city. It sprawls a long, long way.

15:38 - 17:06 Kerry Newsome Yeah, and it's a good point to talk about access. I've done it a couple of ways. I've done it north to south and south to north. It's not going to give me the views, but I've looked at doing the trip just from Hue to Da Nang via the train, because the views from there, I imagine, are just lovely from that region. But you're not getting that height, so obviously you're going to miss out there.

We talked about transport and, you know, I get a lot of families that I look after and do trips for. So, ideally, you know, a bike is not convenient for them. Do you need to do it by bike or can you arrange another way to do it? And just my second question onto that is, Are you best to go with a guide? And I'm mentioning that because I think the first couple of times I did it, I was clueless. I just really didn't understand the spectrum of its history and just really what it meant. So, you know, I stood up there, I saw the view and I went, wow. I literally got back in the car and went back and then I've learned about it since. Do you think it would be better to go with a guide, and can we do another way of accessing it other than on a bike?

17:06 - 18:04 Chris Moonie You can. Just going back to the train, I have done it by train coming out of Dong Hoi when I went up to Phong Nha for the caves. And your views are very restricted. There's a lot of bush, and other than that, the windows are all badly scratched, so you can't take a decent photo. And that's because of the bush that you're

passing by. In addition to that, you have huge bundles of cables and they're at about eye level. So your view is greatly restricted. So you can go by bus, car, they'll go up through the tunnels normally. Train obviously is a coastal route, but not one of the better train trips that I've been on in Vietnam and I've done a lot of travel on trains here. I love it. The bike just gives you a different sense of freedom. But for a family, I mean, sure, hire a car, hire a 16-seater, they're cheap enough. You can do it that way, no problems at all. Wind the windows down.

18:04 - 18:13 Kerry Newsome And you can stop then, can't you? You can ask the driver to stop at points and take vantage points, etc. But would you get a guide as well?

18:15 - 19:18 Chris Moonie Look, either that or I can tell people where to stop. If anybody wants to contact me, I'm quite happy to share my knowledge with them. All I've done with quite a number of people is just provide drop pins on Google Maps. If you don't have local data, you can download an offline version and that works just fine. But there are specific areas that you do really need to stop to get the best out of your day. And it's the sort of thing that you learn as you go along. A lot of people come here and they come here just once. So I'm quite happy to share my knowledge to enhance people's visits here. A lot of the riding that I've done has been with the original Hoi An Easy Rider, a good mate of mine called Tong Do Van. And he is a Hoi An local, also spent a lot of time down at Dalat with the family after the war. And I've learned a substantial amount from Tom just through going on rides with him and when my friends come over.

19:21 - 20:01 Kerry Newsome Absolutely, that sounds like a great idea. I think for my guests and for my listeners, I think having a chat with me, reach out directly, happy to steer you in the right direction. You've heard from Chris, also you can get access to him directly and I'll put links in the show notes so that you can do that very easily. Let's just talk a little bit, Chris, about, you know, like, what do you need to take on a trip day or a day trip pack for this kind of adventure? And, you know, what do we need to be prepared for?

20:01 - 23:25 Chris Moonie OK, so a standard day trip via Hai Van Pass for me is to go up to the tunnels. load the bikes onto a flatbed truck because you're not allowed to go through the tunnels on the bike. Then you get into a small coach and you follow the

flatbed through to Lanco. You take the bikes off and on you go. The reason I do that is twofold. One, it saves you half an hour each way. And in addition to that, as I said before, the best view is coming north to south. And there's no reason to do Hain Van Pass twice. Not in my view anyway, because at eight hours on a bike, I'm sure you've got a back rest, but for some people it can just be too long if you're out for nine, nine and a half hours.

So once we're through the tunnels, we've got our bikes, we go up through Lang Co. On the western side, you'll go to Dream Springs, have a swim there for 45 minutes or so. come back out and depending on the time of the year you can also do a beach ride of about five, six kilometres up the top end of the beach and then you come back down and what I do is I check the tide times prior to going so we can work in that beach ride and then we'll come back down we'll have some lunch and then after lunch head off up the other pass And when you get to the top, you can stop Cafe in the Clouds, which is the last of the sites at the market on the right-hand side. has a good view of some of the switchbacks that you use, and then over the northern side you've also got a great view down over Lang co. After that, only probably about 300 metres down, there's a very sharp right-hand turn. stop there and take a view, take a photo of the view there which is incredible. You come down the southern side and about two and a half kilometres from the top you have the Big Boulder which is quite obvious and you can either take photos there or there is what I've called Hanging Rock in Australian. I've seen that. And that just gives you a fabulous view. I have a friend there, a Vietnamese friend, Minh, and her cafe is called Minh Guitar. And during COVID, she got the engineers and she's built the cafe out over the edge of the cliff, but also has built some steps down to what looks like a big whitish tongue made of rock. And it makes for a spectacular photo. It does. After that, there's a couple of viewpoints on the way down that you stop at. And as I say, the views on your left hand side in front of you. And then you're off home. I would normally stop after you come over the suspension bridge. On the right-hand side, there's the fishing fleet that anchors in there. And you've got thousands of these blue and yellow Vietnamese fishing boats moored there. Then you do a U-turn, and then you take a run back along the river, just to give you a different perspective of Da Nang, rather than using the coastal road again.

23:28 - 23:42 Kerry Newsome When I sit here and I listen to you describe it, I'm fascinated because, as I said, I have done it a couple of times and I think I missed about



60% of this.

23:42 - 24:02 Chris Moonie Because you don't have that trained eye. Having local knowledge but also a local guide is a big thing. And I know many people who have come down from Hue and they've either missed Hai Van Pass or I've talked to them about doing Hai Van and I'm listening to them and thinking, you know, you didn't do all the good stuff.

24:02 - 24:08 Kerry Newsome Yes, absolutely. And that's why I wanted to do this show with you because I'm pretty sure I've missed 90%.

24:10 - 24:40 Chris Moonie But what I put it down to is that the Vietnamese look at things in a different way, and simply because what they see is very everyday to them, and to us, it's way outside the parameters that we see in the countries that we come from. So to get the most out of you, you just need to have somebody who has that local knowledge but also comes from overseas and know what is going to have a wow factor to tourists.

24:41 - 25:09 Kerry Newsome All right, like any final tips, Chris, for people like must do things to watch out for, you know, anything that we should leave with my listeners so that, I mean, as I said, I'm going to put links to everything. They're going to be able to access yourself and be able to reach out to you directly. But just, you know, anything last minute you'd like to leave for my audience.

25:09 - 26:42 Chris Moonie As far as the ride itself is concerned, you'd need to pack a light jacket. I wear shoes when I'm riding trips like that. So light jacket because you're 400 meters up. Also take into account Hai Van is Vietnamese for sea mist or sea cloud. But having done it as many times as I have, I've only ever had one occasion where the view has just been whited out. You also need a towel, your swimmers if you're going to Dream Springs, and also a decent sized plastic bag to put everything into when you're finished. Other than that, what to watch out for apart from the scenery? Goats, cows, and petrol tankers. The petrol tankers are not allowed into the tunnel. On the right up the south side, one of the first things you'll see is the big refinery. So you see the tankers moored offshore, and there's a big refinery both sides of the road. So what you'll find is, because the petrol tankers aren't allowed in the tunnels for obvious reasons,

There's quite a few of them on the road up and down the pass. And with the big switchbacks, quite often you can be coming round a corner and you'll find that there's a tanker on your side of the road because it is that sharp of a turn. So you need to be wary, you need to be careful, you need to have your wits about you.

26:44 - 27:38 Kerry Newsome And that's working on the basis that you're going to be riding a bike. There is the option to sit on the back of a bike of an experienced rider. And personally, that would be my choice to do it that way. But as you say, you still need to be cognizant of the fact it's an eight hour day. And you know, I've done a fair bit of bike riding in my day and you know, at my stage of life, four to five hours is kind of my limit now. But for, you know, the fit, out there, the adventurous, et cetera, and if you time it with these stops, I think mentioning these stops has been crucial because, you know, if you stop for lunch or you go for a swim or, you know, you can kind of, and you're taking lots of photos, of course, I think that breaks it up and that's kind of what takes up the day. But it's still a, it's a long day, isn't it?

27:39 - 28:48 Chris Moonie It can be. And as you say, the breaks are important. So out of Hoi An, you're looking at about an hour before you get off and you load the bikes onto the shuttle. Then after that, only about a 10 minute or so ride to Dream Springs, have a decent break there. Then maybe a beach run back for lunch and have a break there. Then after that, that's the long slog that we like on the bike, where you're up and down the pass, but you've got several times that you'll stop on the southern side. So you stop at the top, you'll stop a few hundred metres down for that big sharp bend, which gives you a great view. Another two and a half kilometres down, and you're stopping at Minh's cafe near Hanging Rock. Then after that is the longest ride, where you're going down the pass and stopping once you get over the suspension bridge. And then from there, back down along the riverside to Hoi An, another 45 minutes or so. So in real terms, 45 minutes to an hour are the longest hauls before you have a break.

28:49 - 29:23 Kerry Newsome That's right up my speed then. That's perfect for me. Chris, I just want to say thank you again for being on the show. I think this episode has been extremely informative about Hai Van Pass. There's really not a lot out there about this area and let me tell you some of the images that I've seen that Chris has on Hanging Rock. I'm going to ask him if I can use and show you some of those. And obviously put the details. Just want to say thanks Chris for coming on the show.

29:23 - 29:26 Chris Moonie I hope to see you back in town again. No longer next time.

29:26 - 29:35 Kerry Newsome I wish, I wish. I'm in my 90 days so I'm really loving it this time having a little bit of extensive time. But thank you again for coming on the show.

29:37 - 29:38 Chris Moonie Safe travels. Thank you.

Fun yeah. Really appreciate the opportunity. Thanks Kerry.