



What About Vietnam - S4-22 –

A wide lense view of trekking in Sapa

[00:00:00] **Kerry Newsome:** Xin chào and welcome to What About Vietnam. Today we're going to be talking about a really interesting area called Sapa. Now if you don't know anything about Sapa, Sapa is located in the north western region of Vietnam. It is an overnight train trip from Hanoi or overnight by bus. And it's just the first point of contact I would think for people coming to Vietnam that want to have a look into the mountainous regions, the very scenic rice terraced fields of Vietnam. Sapa is definitely your first go to place.

Today I'm joined with Jack Taylor and Jack's going to take us through this region, the Hoang Lien Son Mountains. And we're going to talk about trekking in this region. He's done some serious trekking and as you're going to see with his cinematography, which is the focus of his trip, you're going to get some really great handy information and tips if you are thinking of going trekking in the Sapa region. The other aspect is he talks about his interaction with the various hill tribes such as the Hmong, the Tay and the Dao. And I will include the link to his YouTube channel which is where you're going to actually see the fruits of his labour I guess.

Jack's had an interesting career living abroad. He's lived in Spain for three years, China for four and Thailand for four. Now residing in Vietnam and doing some teaching. He says he decided to start a travel YouTube channel. One of the main reasons he says for doing this was he felt that a lot of the videos out there on travel are definitely featuring the travel destination but they're a lot about the person who's taking the videos rather than the area and he wants to

focus on the people, the places, the food and the culture that he visits. And that's what really kind of attracted me to bring him on this show because I love his approach and I love his respect and his mutual love of Vietnam and the people.

So I think for those trekkers out there this is definitely the show for you. Let's welcome Jack to the program. Thank you very much for having me. Look we're going to be talking about a couple of places in Vietnam that I've really wanted to get a little bit deeper into and that's a place called Sapa and another place called Ninh Binh. But before I jump into that, Jack tell us how you found yourself in Vietnam. Why Vietnam?

[00:00:00] **Kerry Newsome:** Welcome to the what about Vietnam podcast? Great to have you on the show.

[00:00:08] **Jack Taylor:** Thank you very much for having me.

[00:00:10] **Kerry Newsome:** Look, we're gonna be talking about a couple of places in Vietnam that I've really wanted to get a little bit deeper into, and that's a place called Sapa and another place called Ninh Binh. But before I jump into that, Jack, tell us how you found yourself in Vietnam. Why Vietnam?

[00:00:32] **Jack Taylor:** Why not Vietnam? I've been there twice now. This is my second trip. I think it's one of the best places to visit anywhere in the world that I've been. And one of the most interesting places in Asia. So I I've lived in Asia now for the last seven years. Three years in China and four years, so four years in China, and now four years in Thailand.

This most recent trip we had a long holiday, the world's opening up again. So I finally managed to get out of Thailand. And this is my first, this is my first trip outside of home that I've been to and outside of Thailand for four years now. So Vietnam was the first place where I went to.

[00:01:09] **Kerry Newsome:** It's an easy place to fall in love with I totally get that. And I think what I appreciate most about how you see Vietnam is definitely through the eyes of your camera and your cinematography. And for everyone listening, you're going to be able to see some of the work that Jacks. Created because it inspired me to talk to him.

And I'm really grateful that he's here on the show to actually talk about that filming and those experiences. Because when you do see the video, you go, oh gosh, that place is just so wow. It's just got so much. Wow. So let's start with Sapa and Yeah. Like talk, talk us through. Your journey, your setup, like how

did you get prepared for Sapa and what was your kind of first experience of Sapa?

[00:02:04] **Jack Taylor:** So I went to Sapa after a couple of days in Hanoi. And anyone who's been in Hanoi knows it's a hectic crazy wild city. Almost anywhere is a complete change from that. So you take the "love bus", I take the love bus, a small bus with a compartment with my wife. It was a late an hour, eight hour drive up there.

And When you first get there, it's actually a bit intense. The one thing that I didn't like about Sapa that much was that I stepped off the bus and people were hassling me for tours already, hiking, tours. Now this was something I'd already sought out before. Hate to start with the negatives, but that was the first thing that happens as soon as you get off there.

Once I found out way to a hotel and you get a look around the place you realize that it's a really beautiful mountain town. You can see the mountains in the distance and some of the architecture of the town's really nice as well. And I suppose in terms of my setup, my camera setup I didn't know what to expect there.

In Hanoi when I made a video there, I was able to do a bit more research. I feel like there's a lots of videos and lots of pictures from Hanoi Sapa, less, slightly less so I was just walking around taking pictures, taking videos of the town center and some of the people in it.

[00:03:13] **Kerry Newsome:** And, I'm glad you brought to everyone's attention just a little bit of that different presence of. Of Hagglers or sellers because they don't actually represent the vast majority of the population there. They're actually a very small group of people that, obviously they need to sell things to, to make money, to feed their families and all the rest of it.

But I had a similar. Experience, and I found it quite aggressive. And I was quite shocked because even in places like Hanoi, you can go around the old quarter and you can go around places there, but you never get haggled or I never did to that extent. So I was, that was a bit in my face. I'm thinking, God, aren't I out here in rice fields and the hills are alive kind of thing.

But yet I'm getting haggled.

[00:04:05] **Jack Taylor:** Yeah I, like I say, I had a similar experience you'll notice as well with a lot of people. It's strange because I had the town

experience before I then did the trekking experience, which we'll talk about in a minute. And my first thought when these people were trying to sell me trekking to is that they're dressed in the traditional outfits.

What I now know is a Red black Hmong and at first I thought it was a bit gimmicky, but actually it's not. It is the traditional outfits that you'll see once you go out in the countryside and there's no tourists there. It's the same outfits they wear. So it's, I can imagine some people who never get out of the town maybe are overwhelmed by it or think it's a little bit gimmicky, but actually there is, that is part of the culture.

So my idea changed after a while.

[00:04:43] **Kerry Newsome:** It is authentic and you can't get over the intricacy of the costumes that they wear. Sometimes they take up to a year to actually make some of those costumes. But I did a program with a guest, oh, over a year ago now, and we talked about, trying to make sure that you get the right kind of trekking guide and one that does.

Or is authentic and you know is gonna give you the best experience, but it's very hard to pick them. When you are the naive tourist and you're arriving there, how do you know which one is the. The good one or the bad one when they're all looking the same. And then when you ultimately go out and they're similarly dressed, but not quite the same attitude.

So it's a tough one, but I don't wanna, I don't wanna go too much on it, but I just think it's worth mentioning and doing your homework and getting some guidance before you arrive is definitely. The way to go. So let's separate Sapa out into the town itself because you took us through on your video, a little bit more of the town than I actually spent time on.

So maybe share with us a little bit of the town itself.

[00:05:59] **Jack Taylor:** Yeah, it's quite a lively little town. Like I said to you earlier on. I expect it to be a really quiet, mountainous town. It's not, it's got quite a lot going on. Lots of restaurants, lots of bars, lots of coffee shops. They've got a large town square. There's, there seem to be lots of shows going on there.

They're stage set up. A lot of the tourism in the area is based around the trekking or the, like the ethnic minority villages. But they have a large population within the town as well. And yeah, I thought it was it was very different here to Hanoi

in the level of hecticness, but it's also, it maintains that a little bit in the town, but it's a nice contrast at least compared to Hanoi.

You can look out even though. It's got, it's, the streets are pretty crazy. You can look out on these beautiful mountains and enjoy that too.

[00:06:43] **Kerry Newsome:** Yeah, and I have two experiences which are. A little bit. The first one's a bit funny in the sense that when my husband and I went there, we kept going down wrong way streets on a bike that we hired. So we kept getting fined by the police who were asking for these amounts of money, which, once again, you know, that kind of went.

Kerry, I should know better than this. It was in my very early days of traveling to Vietnam, so I was, yeah, one of the very naive ones. But we learned very quickly that there was a bit of a system going on there. And then in the township, I was desperate to get my hair washed. And this, I went to this hairdresser, and this is before like you're talking about bars and a real happening.

The town, like we're talking. 2010 probably that we went. I haven't been back since and the township was really small and not much happening at all. And if you weren't into trekking then, there wasn't a lot to do. So yeah, so I went to this hairdresser and she washed my hair and truly I came out and I looked like.

Phyllis Diller If you ever remember the American popular star. My hair was like in went straw. I don't know what she washed it with, but it was like gasoline or something like that. So it was a bit scary. So getting into the trekking side of it. There is a little bit of small trekking to be done, just very close to the town, which a lot of the tourists do when they just do a very one night stay because they don't have time.

So they just do this little meander around and it's quite pretty and it's not too pressing, but what I'm keen to talk. To you about is the trekking that you've done quite out of Sapa and the advantages of going out and what to experience there.

[00:08:41] **Jack Taylor:** Trekking is something that I do on a lot of my trips, I think it's probably my favorite to do thing to do when I go to a new country. And I think there's numerous reasons for that. One. You get to see the landscapes, which personally that's something that I'm really interested in seeing especially in Asia.

Once you get out of the cities, there's some great mountainous. And really u unique, interesting places to visit. You also get to see and meet the real people. I think people who live in cities all around the world, there's some similarities. Okay. Hanoi is different to London. In many ways, but it's still a city.

It's still people who have city life. Once you get out into the countryside, that's a completely different culture. You could argue the real people of a country. So you get to kinda see what life is like in, in a more rural setting. In this case, I went to Trekking for three days with the Red Dao tribe.

A woman from the Red Dao Tribe and yeah, she taught us first of all, I was impressed by her level of English cuz she taught us a lot about the surrounding area, how they live and their history. And it was a really fascinating experience.

[00:09:47] **Kerry Newsome:** And I think having the local minority groups. There to give you some advice, give you, and if you've got someone that can give it to you in English, whilst, you can always put a lot into hand gestures and pointing and, but having English speaking. Guides is a really big plus I think in these places, just so that you can get a little bit more information to give context to the region because the minority groups are so interesting when you get into their history and.

The role that they've played in all of the wars that have gone on in Vietnam and all sorts of things, and their crafts, their markets, all of that sort of thing. So talk to us a little bit about the level of hiking that is required to get the best experience. Do you have to be, a really good hiker or trekker or, can you just be a hobby one like me?

[00:10:49] **Jack Taylor:** I think there's something for everyone. Maybe I'm a bit of a weirdo, but I would say, I said, give us the hardest one. Give us the hardest track you've got. And once she said, once she's, we got AZ at you on the first day. Do you wanna do the easy way, the hard way? We went probably the hard way. What is it?

Is it better? She's it's more beautiful. We said, give us the hard way. Like I said, I've done some treks or like I told you before I've done some treks around the world now I've done some treks in China for multiple day ones, some in Thailand usa. So I've got a bit of experience.

However, I think it can still be enjoyed as a hobbyist, like if you just wanna do a half day tour. The first towns we walked to were actually within an hour or two of Sapa town center. They weren't the best towns. But it was still beautiful

countryside. You could still really enjoy it. I think there's also options to do day trips to, to the villages and then go on tour walking tours around the villages as well.

So if anyone listening who is maybe a bit intimidated by doing a three day trek then you, there are still options for you too.

[00:11:51] **Kerry Newsome:** And. Like I, I'm wanting to drill down a little bit on this because I've spoken to other trekkers and never said, oh, it's only about, 25 Ks or 30 Ks in the total track. And some people might go, what the 20, 25, 30 Ks? I don't walk that in a year. So it's. It's trying to put some reality to it because you've got also weather conditions to consider it.

It can get quite warm or conversely it can be quite cold. So talk to us a little bit just about, what sort of fitness level do you think and, have you gotta be an avid walker and go, be able to handle. My experience, you've gotta be able to handle hills, you've gotta have good footwear and you've gotta be able to handle that that just, that change in temperatures, et cetera.

[00:12:42] **Jack Taylor:** Yeah, so on the track I did, I think the first day was 17 kilometers. The second day was 25 and then the final day was 13. So it was pretty intense track, especially that second day. Cuz the second day there was this huge valley. And in the video I'm currently making now I'm doing a more focus video on the trekking, which you haven't seen yet.

But there's one day we climb up this giant hill. And then we're already pretty tired. And then we go where we at? Hiking to today. She points through the valley and it

[00:13:12] **Kerry Newsome:** Oh no.

[00:13:13] **Jack Taylor:** and we're like, oh, we're going over there. So that was she didn't tell us that until we got to the top of the hill.

It was already too late at that point. But I would say on the trek I did, you gotta be a bit fit. The thing I found that was the most difficult like I say, I bring my cameras everywhere with me, so I've got a whole bag

[00:13:31] **Kerry Newsome:** A lot of gear.

[00:13:32] **Jack Taylor:** My wife will carry that one and I carry both of our clothes, so her clothes and my clothes.

So I had this too big of a bag really. And over three days hiking that much, it really dug into my shoulders. So it was my shoulders more than anything that I had trouble with. Don't do it in flip flops is my first piece of advice. Bring at least a pair of trainers. I'd known this is one of the reasons I came to Vietnam and to Sapa, was to do the hiking.

So I brought a nice big pair of hiking boots. So if you're gonna do the more extreme end, I'd be prepared. Bring plenty of water that kind of thing. And yeah, I'd probably done a, I've probably would try and get some experience beforehand if you're gonna do the three day one. But like I say, there's options for one day.

There's options for two day, that kind of thing.

[00:14:16] **Kerry Newsome:** Yeah. And like I think that's really great advice on the shoe wear, because I've seen some amazing. Options of people that have got off those buses and they're gonna do a two day hike. And when I look at their footwear, I just go, oh, are you kidding me? There is nowhere, there's no traction on them.

They've got no concept of the slippery slidy places that they're going to be going and, yeah, crazy isn't it?

[00:14:46] **Jack Taylor:** Yeah. The, it reminds me the first trek I ever did was actually probably the longest one, and I was probably in the worst shape. I was in Columbia, in Latin, in South America, and I did it. I was like, yeah, whatever. I'll do it in these. Plimp soul shoes and I came back, it was five days, I think. I couldn't walk for a week afterwards.

Everyone that did the trek, they went on to the next place. I was like, I need to stay in this hostel for a couple of days and just relax. It's the same, it's the same in Vietnam.

[00:15:11] **Kerry Newsome:** Yeah, absolutely. And like I've even done, small climbs, et cetera, when you do Marble Mountain near Danang and places like that, that if you don't, some people try and do it in thongs and I go, Like marble, when it's wet, it's slippery. Like you can just so easily do an ankle or, do some damage that then wrecks your whole holiday.

So a really good point.

[00:15:39] **Jack Taylor:** and if you're doing it, if you're doing it out there in the Sapa countryside, if you twist an ankle that you've got a hike, either way, you know you're gonna have to get yourself back to a main road somehow, somewhere. And that wouldn't be fun.

[00:15:52] **Kerry Newsome:** No, and depending on who you've hired as your Trekking guide or the company that you are dealing with, likewise them having someone to, come and get you back where you know they've gotta take on the rest of the group. All these little kind of things can go wrong if you don't put a little bit of thought into it.

And some people are just so casual about it. It amazes me that they just take. Thought about it so lightly and not think, gee, I better wear, and even the size of their bags I think, you, you're not gonna take that wheely bag. Like they'll be wheeling a small carry on bag. And I'm thinking are you kidding me?

Yeah. So

[00:16:38] **Jack Taylor:** Hundred, a hundred percent. You couldn't have done that on this track. Yeah. It would ditch that bag. That bag would've gone.

[00:16:43] **Kerry Newsome:** Yeah, for sure. Talk to us a little bit about your accommodation during the trekking. You've obviously stayed overnight in some home stays.

[00:16:53] **Jack Taylor:** Yeah. I was surprised by the quality of them actually. The houses were really quite nice. The village it's very rural. So don't get me wrong, it's not a modern place, but like the quality of the houses, they were well built. We had a bed. I wasn't expecting a bed actually.

Like I say, I've done some treks in other places, even northern Thailand. And usually when you stay with the hill tribes there it's a wooden house, which it was here as well, but it. Very much like on stilts. Like it very much looks like it's made in the middle of the jungle and you're sleeping on a mat on the floor.

So that's what I'd expected. And then we got there and it was a fairly comfortable bed. It was a bit hard and but that, I can't complain. The quality of the house was nice. The food they cooked was absolutely delicious. So that was probably the highlight. They cooked food, all of it made from local ingredients, cuz they're agricultural people.

They, it's, everything was grown locally. I remember they had spring rolls, some stir fried beef lots of vegetables. That was absolutely delicious. And probably the most unique thing about the Red Dao is they do this herbal bath. I dunno if you've heard about the herbal baths.

[00:18:00] **Kerry Newsome:** Oh yeah.

[00:18:01] **Jack Taylor:** And it was again, This was a lot nicer than I was expected.

So we got the accommodation and then you offered it costs a little bit more. I can't remember exactly how much it was but it wasn't too expensive and it was definitely worth doing. And they run this herbal bath. I'm not entirely sure what was in the herbal bath, but it's in like a barrel.

It's not a bath, it's in a barrel. So me and my wife, we had two separate barrels. It was filled with hot water and it was one of the best things you can do after a long day's hike. When you got all that sweat and all that grime on you, you're in. I wouldn't want it to, I wouldn't want think about how dirty the water would get once out once we'd been in there.

But it was one of the best things to do and relax after the hike.

[00:18:40] **Kerry Newsome:** Yeah. Now I've had a guest on the show who traveled around Vietnam with social enterprise headset looking for experiences. Where social enterprise played a role and she found herself in Sapa and in a Red Dao village. And she took that bath and she described it equally as pleasurable and as relieving for those sore muscles.

After doing that trek it's interesting just about the accommodation. I get very mixed views about. Home stays an accommodation in those remote areas. Some people say they're really great and very obviously homely, but comfortable enough. And then there's some people who just can't see themselves staying that it's just beyond their comfort zone.

So it's interesting. Do I dare

[00:19:34] **Jack Taylor:** that.

[00:19:34] **Kerry Newsome:** ask about toilets? Can you tell, are they western toilets?

[00:19:39] **Jack Taylor:** It did have a Western toilet. Again, I was surprised about that it had western toilet. It did have a shower room, so if you don't wanna do the herbal bath, it had a whole shower room. Yeah I was surprised of the quality and, but I'm the kind of person. Who is quite comfortable with bare bones.

Like I say, one of the things I like doing about the hiking is you get to go experience local cultures. The, my only question is if you'd stayed in the non-home stay house, would it have had all that? My guess is probably not. My guess is this was made up for tourists for their comfort zone. **So this is Tain Village and I can find you the link for the Homestay**

I stayed so you can attach it at the bottom, but this one was very nice. This one was very nice. But I also think there's kind of two types of people when it comes to backpacking around Vietnam or other places in Asia. It's some people who. To go there because they can probably afford to places that are more comfortable and maybe more luxurious than what they're used to.

It's obviously cheaper than backpacking around Europe, right? If you're backpack around Europe, you're probably staying in cheaper hotels, basic stuff. But if you go to Vietnam you can pay the same price and have. Like really luxurious places. I think there's that kind of person and there's the kind of person more like me who likes the wild side of it, who likes to see the things that you wouldn't be able to see in Europe or other places around the world.

And that's what you'll get when you're staying in the villages. Like it is. It is very rural. I don't I can imagine some people, I imagine my family. If they visited, they'd be out their comfort zone. So it is something to make sure you would be comfortable with beforehand. But to me personally, it's one of the most fascinating things you can do.

[00:21:20] **Kerry Newsome:** Yeah, and I think you're right, and I've got both in my audience, so I've got some people who, yeah, they can handle a little bit of raw a little bit of, discomfort to experience that. Authenticity within a region. And then there's some that just say, no that's not me.

And, horses for courses like that's fair enough. But what I wanna do in the show, in, in what I do with people is I try and give them the reality side of it, not the fluff and bubble I want to talk about. So you go there with expectations that can be met, so you don't go there with Unrealistic expectations and then get disappointed or the other way around.

Talk to us a little bit about how long you think is a good stay there? If people are planning to do this, what would you recommend as far as how long they should give themselves to, to have a really good experience?

[00:22:16] **Jack Taylor:** I would say possibly even a night in Sapa town is enough and a homestay. So I would say minimum two nights, minimum. Two nights. If you are gonna do the trekking part, like I say, mine was three days, two nights. So I think I was there four nights total. Like everywhere in Vietnam, I wish I had more time.

I would've loved to have stayed in other home stays and there was some things in the town that I didn't check out. Mount Fansipan is one of the, one of the highlights there that I didn't actually have time for. So you could stay longer. I would say minimum two. Before moving on to either Ha Giang or maybe back to Hanoi.

[00:22:55] **Kerry Newsome:** And did you? Did you choose a particular time of year that you wanted to go to Sapa? I'm thinking about your cinematography side of it. Did you say, no, I want to go, when it's this time of year because of

[00:23:10] **Jack Taylor:** My job as an English teacher, so I'm an English teacher in Thailand, so it was when I got the holiday is when I decided it. However one thing to note I went after the harvest and the good thing about that, about trekking in that time was it was quite nice, whether it wasn't too hot.

On one of the days it was cloudy, which was quite nice. It was nice and cool. The other days it was a bit sunny, which was also nice. It wasn't too hot though. If you come earlier in the year though, you can see the rice paddies actually growing. So it's nice and green and as the people working in the fields, so especially what I've seen from a lot of photographers and from some other people who've been there making videos if you go at that time of year, you get to see for people work in the fields in the traditional outfits, and that's must be a beautiful site to see.

I didn't get to see that. However, I think the trekking part of it was just that little bit better. Because it was mostly dry, but even I stepped into a couple of puddles and then I had my up to my ankle in covered in dirt. If you've gone closer to the rainy season, I think you're gonna get a lot grimmer.

It's, the trekking probably gonna be that bit more difficult and I've heard that there can be leeches. So you have to be careful. The leeches

[00:24:25] **Kerry Newsome:** Yeah. So what month did you go?

[00:24:28] **Jack Taylor:** I was beginning of October is when I went.

[00:24:31] **Kerry Newsome:** Beginning of

[00:24:32] **Jack Taylor:** And there was no leeches.

[00:24:33] **Kerry Newsome:** bonus.

[00:24:35] **Jack Taylor:** Yeah.

[00:24:36] **Kerry Newsome:** So is there anything else you'd like to add for everyone listening just about trekking, Sapa would like, to make sure that we get everything out there in, in our chat. So is there anything I haven't mentioned or should have mentioned?

[00:24:51] **Jack Taylor:** Yeah. One thing that I think might be interesting that we haven't mentioned is some of the wildlife that you'll see out when you're hiking. So the main one is the water buffalo. I'd never seen water buffalo that up close before. I've lived in Southeast Asia for four years now, but there we, there's so many water buffalo they live.

They live and they work in the fields. And I was a little nervous at first because I remember the first time I came to Vietnam I was doing a bike tour in Hoi An and we, as we were passing the water buffalo, the guide I think he was taking the mick outta me, he told me that the water buffalo, they don't like the white people cuz we smell like milk. We smell like milk. And they don't like milk. They only like Vietnamese smells. I think he said they smell a foot. So he said, you gotta be careful around the water buffalo. Now our guide

[00:25:39] **Kerry Newsome:** no, that's terrible. Oh,

[00:25:42] **Jack Taylor:** cuz I was walking past the, we had to walk pretty closely by them and they get scared, right? So they begin to run away.

So I was like, this guy told me that they don't like the smell of us. And she said, no, that's not true. He's pulling your leg.

[00:25:53] **Kerry Newsome:** Oh, that's

[00:25:53] **Jack Taylor:** on top of that,

[00:25:54] **Kerry Newsome:** I'm gonna share that one. That's excellent.

[00:25:57] **Jack Taylor:** On top of that our guide may wander. She got worried at one point. There was a big snake. We just missed it. It s slivered down the hill. But she said it was about this big. I'm, I know about 10 centimeter thick. She didn't really say how long, but it was in the grass and that's s slivered off, so you gotta be a little bit careful.

She said some of them are poisonous, but most part they're okay.

[00:26:19] **Kerry Newsome:** I wish you wouldn't have told me about the snake bit. Now I might have to cut that out because like I'm terrified of reptile. So I yeah that's good to know for everyone listening. And especially good for me to know in case I wanna do that trek. In the future. Beware of reptiles. Good to know.

Jack, that's really wonderful. Thank you for sharing with us. I'm going to make sure that I put all the links to your fabulous footage that you've done. I really love your work, so we'll make sure that everyone can see that. And yeah. Just want thank you for being on the show

[00:26:56] **Jack Taylor:** Thank you.