



What About Vietnam - Series 2 - 5

Explore Mau Chau and its threaded history in textiles

Kerry Newsome: Welcome to what about Vietnam today I am talking to the lovely Cynthia Mann, and I'm going to be talking to her about a recent trip that she did to a place called Mai Chau.

Now Mai Chau is one of those places a little off the grid about three hours out of Hanoi, but it is absolutely wonderful experience if you are looking for a place in Vietnam that can take you back in time in some ways as its features the minority groups; the Hmong people and the Thai people.

Cynthia has a lot to do with these ethnic communities as she operates a business called Future Traditions and has a showroom in Hanoi which I strongly recommend that you pop into. Using the traditional weaving and textiles of all the Hmong people and the Thai people she's been able to create the most amazing contemporary designs in homewares and fashion. She is definitely a person in the know and with lots of years of experience in the area. She was able to join us today from Hanoi and tell us a little about her trip.

Please welcome her to the showwelcome Cynthia to the program.

Cynthia Mann: Thank you, nice to be here.

Kerry Newsome: Great to have you on the show. Look today I am going to be picking your brains about a trip that you did recently to one of my favorite places call Mai Chau. Tell us a little more about where Mai Chau is, where it's actually located and how you get there just so we can appreciate where it is on the map.

Cynthia Mann: One of the nice things about Mai Chau is that it's actually like a drive from Hanoi, so it doesn't require flights itself, it's maybe three hours. Its also quite a good road to get there, so you can leave in the morning and be there for lunch. It's in the mountains with beautiful valleys, it's home to some minority villages in the area. The Mai Chau town itself is quite small it's got a really nice kind of "old world" feeling and community there: there are some beautiful waterfalls and scenery. It's just a really fantastic place to get away from it all, and I don't really know one person there.

I mean you can jump on a bicycle and ride around the villages very easily, and it's a lot less physically demanding than Sapa, but yes absolutely not as touristy, which is part of its appeal.

Kerry Newsome: Exactly and I think you made a good point about referring it to Sapa. I mean Sapa kind of sits very high on the tourist map but Mai Chau traditionally hasn't, and I'm not sure why. Because like you, I found it fascinating.

I went there about three years ago, and I had to ask my travel agent to create this tour for me because you know they said not many people know about Mai Chau. I went well, I'm going, I want to experience it. So where did you stay, and why did you choose the place you stayed?

Cynthia Mann: Traditionally I started going to Mai Chau in about 2008 and there really was only one or two Homestays and a hotel called an Echo Lodge. And now there are two Echo Lodges, one on the road, and then there is just a beautiful big one.

Yes, and now there's quite a lot of different places to stay but this is where I stay at Mai Chau is a place called "Hide Away", and it's actually about fifteen to twenty kms out of Mai Chau town, on the edge of this huge hydroelectric reservoir. So very beautiful, one of the biggest in Southeast Asia, so you've got all the options as in kinds of water activities like kayaking and things like that.

And we really went after lockdown, as we just wanted to have a bit of a getaway and feel like we were human again.

Kerry Newsome: Escape the world.

Cynthia Mann: Escape the world. To put it in context, in a sense you know that during the lock down I was locked in the house by myself, so I was really a bit desperate to talk to people and that was partly why it was fantastic. To be there with friends and enjoy their company and wide open spaces.

Kerry Newsome: Now you mentioned that the Mai Chau place you stayed at was a Homestay.

Cynthia Mann: No, the place we used to stay would be the only option, but now this was kind of a four-star kind of hotel

Kerry Newsome: A four-star, okay and what would the average night stay there be just roughly for our guests to understand price-wise.

Cynthia Mann: That's a good question can't remember because we got a special deal and I think it was maybe it was about a \$100USD for the 2 nights.

Kerry Newsome: A hundred U.S.

Cynthia Mann: Around that much I think we'll have to check on that one and so.

Kerry Newsome: And as a list of things to do around Mai Chau what would be like your top three things to do, if you base yourself at the Hideaway what would you do?

Cynthia Mann: If you've never been to Mai Chau town, going to Mai Chau town is essential and spend some time in their kind of tourist villages there, because it's where their ethnic type villages do some weaving. They have a lot of textiles which is my first love as you know.

Kerry Newsome: Absolutely.

Cynthia Mann: I would go on one of the little boat cruises. Actually sounds a bit glamorous, it's not, it's kind of one of those you know, pop ups! Very basic. You know the ones.

Kerry Newsome: That's a good point.

Cynthia Mann: It was March and it was very pretty particularly just before sunset. So you go down the reservoir, and then we had dinner at this amazing dinner at this fish farm. So we cruise as the light shadows us which is gorgeous. It's a bit like it is at Ha Long Bay, you know you've got these amazing kinds of rocks coming out of the water. And then on the west side we cruise while heading into the sunset which is absolutely stunning. It was really beautiful and the dinner was incredible. We were the only guests. Their job was cooking all this amazing array of fish dishes, all sorts of different ones, barbecued with various flavourings, and it was just delicious.

Kerry Newsome: Can you explain a little about that fish restaurant because if I got it right it's a fish farm that sits in the middle of the lake.

Cynthia Mann: Yeah.

Kerry Newsome: And now they built a restaurant around it is that right?

Cynthia Mann: In the middle yeah; it's basically a series of farms that supply to the area and I think they also send it up to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh. It's very locally driven. You would most probably not hear about it, but you get some table you can sit at, and they just bring out the food

Kerry Newsome: So glad that's happened because when I was there, they were building it and I actually walked away with a piece of the bamboo that they were using to build the structure with.

I planted things in it back at home when I got home. God knows how I got it through customs. I knew all the plans that they had to create this restaurant so it's great to hear that they've done that.

I'm sure tourists coming into the region are going to love it.

Now I want to get back to something that I know you're going to be able to speak to everyone a lot about. And that's about the ethnic communities and about those textiles that we talk about that you offer in your boutique- Future Traditions, through your handcrafts; tell us a bit about that.

Cynthia Mann: Sure. Sure, when I was down there, I actually also did a bit of business I have some textile producers down there. So because I met with them while I was there it is predominantly ethnic and minority communities down there. Hmong and Thai. They do all the famous embroidery, the Thai weaving is famous and it's incredibly affordable to buy.

Kerry Newsome: Do they still hang the bedspreads on the lawn?

Cynthia Mann: Yeah, they do.

Kerry Newsome: I bought one.

Cynthia Mann: They actually made those from recycled Hmong skirts and not actually Thai at all. I love the beautiful Hmong gathered skirts that are made from a number of different pieces featuring appliqué and embroidery, and they construct those, and then make them into this kind of blankets sheets and bedspreads whatever you want to call them.

And that's one of the interests I have. But it is no longer hand made because it's cheaper for them to buy in from China and then just to sew the skirt, because for Hmong traditional woman's clothing can take forever, and they could be doing other things. Like rice harvesting. Roasting food and other things. It can take a year for them to make a new piece of clothing, which they usually do, so everybody in the family will get a new set of clothing for the new year. For TET.

They now have a quicker and cheaper way to do it. Which on one hand is great, right? Because it's cheaper, and it's quicker and everybody will get more time to do other things and perhaps potentially earn more money?

But it also means that those integral cultural traditional skills are being diminished. So one thing I do to bring back to the boutique is to take work to a couple of ladies in one of the villages outside on the Province border, who I know still do the hand stitching, applique & ribbon of which is a traditional form of the skirts. They add the red black and white, then do a bit of a floral through it, and then the black and white little squares are added on, because now you can find a similar layer of it, from China, that's machine-made. But it's just not quite the same.

The traditional way is one of the things that I first fell in love with, the first time I went to the Hmong villages.

Over time I've worked with some of the ladies that make it, and I've given them fabric in different color schemes so that they then produce a version for me that fits in with some color scheme that I'm working on for the next collection

Kerry Newsome: That's really great to know.

Cynthia Mann: During that time I use some of those bedspreads or recycled old skirts and infuse some into my signature jackets with antique fabric which is all right and I try to make it work. As often as I can, I go to Paco village and purchase fabrics in combinations I can incorporate into my designs.

Kerry Newsome: So, just too to recap on where that situated the Paco village that that you referred to is actually kind of at the back door of where I was staying last time. So that Eco log that set up on the hills you can actually go down the back and through to the smaller villages.

Cynthia Mann: Through the back of little villages that are set up between, that's different.

Kerry Newsome: It was pretty basic. Not much is there but good to see.

Cynthia Mann: Yeah, Paco village itself is actually on the canal. A village, which has a local market there on a Sunday morning.

Kerry Newsome: Yeah, I didn't get to.

Cynthia Mann: It's kind of like a triangle between the town, where the Paco village is.

Kerry Newsome: How long would you suggest a person should plan a stay there, is that a day trip? Or is it an overnight trip, two or three days, what would you recommend?

Cynthia Mann: Definitely an overnight if you want to go to the Paco market which is lovely really lovely it's a very small market.

Kerry Newsome: Yes, I have heard. But only open on a Sunday.

Cynthia Mann: You need to go there early, be there by seven thirty, eight o'clock as it's over by ten.

And I would stay, ideally stay two nights. If you start like at the Eco Lodge in the valleys behind much of a Mai Chau Town. Then you can hire a bicycle and just cycle around and into different villages and you know talk to the locals, and it's a really lovely valley to explore and it's really easy to do

Kerry Newsome: Just to clarify on the timing you went in, we think around about June.

Cynthia Mann: Yeah.

Kerry Newsome: Because you and I just love the heat. I like recommending for people the best time to visit. I went in March and it was actually quite cool.

Cynthia Mann: Yes.

Kerry Newsome: So, I was wrapped up. It was quite chilly but you went in June. When would you think are the good months to go from a timing perspective?

Cynthia Mann: Autumn in the north is probably best. Anywhere in the north is probably the best season - starting September October November.

Kerry Newsome: September, October, November.

Cynthia Mann: And once you get it in December January it can be quite cold, and for February can be quite cold. Tends not to be as humid there which is nice and especially for tourists who are not used to it.

When we were there and were chatting with some friends online and they were saying better you're enjoying the cool weather down there. And I looked away and it was actually the same temperature, and it was thirty-nine degrees. But in Hanoi, it was no different in temp, it's not as high, or as cool as Sapa, but it tends not to be as humid, so for a lot of people that's a big relief.

Kerry Newsome: I think any time in the middle of the year anywhere in Vietnam is pretty warm let's face it.

Cynthia Mann: And once you enter towards the end of July, we're just starting the rainy seasons. It will be more overcast, and then you will have rain. On the other hand the rain cools everything down. On Sunday we had this huge downpour and an old friend of mine and I just whistled around on bikes in the cool, it was like.... WOW... I haven't felt this for a long time, it was just fabulous.

Kerry Newsome: Delicious especially after lockdown.
Cynthia, it was great to chat.

Cynthia Mann: Absolutely.

Kerry Newsome: I just wanted to say thanks again and we will be chatting soon.

Cynthia Mann: Excellent. Be safe everybody and look after yourselves and looking forward to seeing you in Hanoi, Vietnam at some stage in the not too distant future.