



What About Vietnam - Series 3 -15 - Vietnam travel Part 2 – How much time do you need?

Kerry Newsome: 00:35

Xin Chào and welcome to What About Vietnam. This is part two of the series with Miquel Angel. And today we unwrap just what you can fit in to a **14 day tour of Vietnam**. And statistically, why is it that people who visit Vietnam traditionally, it seems, only visit once. And I think you're going to be very amused to find some of the reasons why. And they're very simple, but they happen often. And I think this is a great chance for you to get some information that may help you make some wiser decisions with tours that you're choosing and things that you're really trying to fit into. That average stay widget seems to be around about the 14 days.

01:29

In this part two episode, we look at the Central and the Mekong areas. And I think that's going to give you some insights to maybe consider chunking down your holiday into regions. With the option to revisit at another time. Please welcome Miquel again to the show as my very, very special guest as he is the Head of the Human Resources and Quality Working Group inside Vietnam Tourism Advisory Board. Let's say hello to Miquel.

Miquel Angel: 02:16

Oh, good morning. Good afternoon. Good evening, from wherever you are listening to the podcast. This is Miquel Angel talking to you from Vietnam in Kerry Newsome's program. It's my pleasure just to be here. Hope you enjoyed our talk today.

Kerry Newsome: 02:29

Miquel it is absolutely wonderful to have you on the show. And just to have time with you to unpack some of the things that we've been talking about, about Vietnam and tourism to Vietnam. So welcome to the What About Vietnam podcast.

Miquel Angel: 02:47

Thank you very much. My real, real pleasure. I'm one of the regular listeners and followers. I'm learning a lot from the people who participate and come to join. So, I'm happy just to be here and share my few bits and bats after these 22 years, working and developing here tourism in Vietnam.

Kerry Newsome: 03:08

Okay, Miquel, tell us a little bit more about your role within the Vietnam Tourism Advisory Board just so we get context. What keeps you busy?

Miquel Angel: 03:22

Absolutely. Yes. Well, that I will say this is something that came naturally to me. I'm originally from near Barcelona, in Catalonia, Spain, where we develop the tourism many years ago. So being here in Vietnam, working in tourism and hospitality, after several years, right to appoint that the authorities, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism here in Vietnam, they contact me, and they say that

"Miquel, we would like you to be one of our members at the Vietnam Tourism Advisory Board", which is an entity that was created just to advise the ministry on everything related to tourism.

03:59

So, inside that board is not me only, now we have a large team of professionals that we are learning from all the different parts of the world. We have different working groups, and some related to marketing, some other related to the visa policies. You may see if you know Vietnam or you've been here, that the visa issue is starting to get better. Some countries are visa exempt. Some other they have less paperwork or less red carpet. So, we have some working on that behind the scenes even you don't see as much.

04:33

We keep working and making good things for Vietnam. And there are other people working on the marketing side. So, if you take a look, for example, at the website, we did develop with a team called *Vietnam.Travel.com*". You will see that a lot of new upgrades and with my lovely friends there, but I think you also know Kerry, we've been developing and including their hashtags and content, pictures and it is a very good, nice way of coming virtually to Vietnam where you will see there, the real things that we are doing here.

05:05

Some other chapters they are working more on paperwork, means letters that we sent to the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism and the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism. Also, to the Prime Minister, we have the sent some letters to him, because we want him to be aware what to do. And last but not least, it is the working group, I'm heading, that I'm in charge of the Human Resources, which these days is really, really huge point here, plus quality, Working Group on this quality, we include there environmental, civil, economy and everything back for Vietnam.

Kerry Newsome: 05:38

You pack a big punch as far as-- there's a lot involved. And just the little bit that I know about the board, yeah, it has evolved, it has truly evolved, and just saying what you've done with the website, what

you've done with visas, and I think we're going to unpack a little bit more about that in this show. So, one thing that came up in our chat, when we were talking about doing the show together, was, we were talking about the traveler that comes to Vietnam, unusually so, only usually comes once.

06:22

We talked about that, in comparison to other travelers who go to, say, Thailand, and they go to Phuket, Bali, maybe even Singapore, Hong Kong, and other major places in the Southeast Asian region. But they tend to be frequent visitors, they go back several times. But you inform me that that is actually not a statistic about the average tourist to Vietnam, that they come once. And they don't tend to come back again. And between you and I, we think that is an injustice to Vietnam. And they're missing out on a lot of things. Am I right?

Miquel Angel: 07:10

Yes, you're right. I was thinking a couple of years ago, that we were not treating the arrivals and the visitors so well. That's why the people were not returning back to Vietnam, because, aside from Vietnam, I've been working in Thailand and living there, in Laos, in Cambodia. And that was a question that why people repeat their trips and go to other destinations 1, 2, 3, 4 times, and here, to Vietnam, you come once in a lifetime and never return again, when the people, the scenery, the food, the resources, the attractions are huge. And you cannot finish in one trip unless you are here in Vietnam for two or three months.

07:53

So, to bring these into the scene, I will say the average traveler time that people come to visit Vietnam, either from Australia where you are, either from Europe when I'm coming from or United States, is approximately 14 days, let's say two weeks, they update down. And you have to consider that depending on where you're coming from. You have the first day or two controlling your jetlag, you're coming from Europe, you're 17 hours on a plane, you're coming from the US, either via Japan, San Francisco, either from New York coming to Europe, here you spend more than a day on a plane. So, when you arrive here, the first thing you want to find is you're not noisy hotel if possible and control a bit your jet lag. From Australia, you have a bit less hours but depending also on which part of Australia, you want to visit Vietnam.

08:50

So that said, let's say that if you're planning to have your two weeks holidays because your job, because your summer break or whatever. The first day is flying and controlling your jetlag. So, we are moving now to 13 days. And let's not make any second or last day jetlag. Let's say that during the first day, you are a good traveler, you drink lots of water you do what you have to do, and you are ready to go on the second day. Day 13 there.

09:19

So, now the tour operators and travel agents are doing and Kerry you know much better than me, is preparing, of course, beautiful programs, for these 13 days or 13 nights that you will be here in Vietnam. And I've been working preparing that programs and following the tour guides doing the programs, because I do want to see the reality of what the tour guides and the tour operator and DMCS

are doing. I say, I read I saw a brochure and I never-- no, I go, I'm chauffeured with them at 50 degrees Celsius under the Hué Citadel, and I go and cue to go to the toilet on that destination. That is crowded full of Chinese visitors. And that's my job. That's what I do. I am enjoying. I'm worried when I say, I enjoy, because I really enjoy doing that. With my beautiful little students, or professional tour guide by my side, which I love them very much. We have excellent talks, the tour guides can change the way you see Vietnam forever, a lot of attention to them.

Kerry Newsome: 10:26

Absolutely. And I think keeping it real for people is key. And it's something in this program that I want to continue doing. So, you are saying that you actually go along and follow the tour guides, you sit in the buses, [crosstalk] at the toilets, etc., that's to give a really good appreciation of what a tourist is trying to jam pack, into a day by day. So, let's just flush that out a little bit more, because in traditional tours of that type, of 14 days, they're also not seeing just one location, they're usually seeing maybe two or three locations.

11:10

As we both agreed, those hops from second, to third, to fourth place also eat up time. Because people say,

"Oh, look, it's only a 100 kilometers in a bus, that can't be too bad."

Now you and I both know that some of those roads and some of those busses are terrible and a 100 kilometers on a fantastic freeway, Sure, no problem. But if it's going into maybe some of the northern regions up into Mai Chau or Ha Giang, and they are exquisite destinations, but they probably take eight hours.

Miquel Angel: 11:54

Well, these two hours bus trip can ruin the whole of your trip, if you are not prepared, ready, or know what is going to happen. Happens to me on, but because of these bad trips, or the way Vietnamese drivers or myself drive here in Vietnam, that's the way we drive, and risking our life and just hardening and counter crossing on the street, and some market in the middle of the street near a container cargo going back to Australia or wherever. So that's the Vietnam tour. So, the point here, link to the small explanation before, if we need to prepare the 13 days trip. And you are telling me that you have 13 days to visit the whole country? Let me revert that question back to your most Australian listeners. Can I come to Australian visit the whole Australia in 13 days?

Kerry Newsome: 12:49

No way. No chance at all?

Miquel Angel: 12:52

Then that's what the people are trying to do with Vietnam.

Kerry Newsome: 12:54

Exactly. And that was what rang a bell with me. And when we started talking and is to me, the real guts of this story is, people trying to jam pack a whole country, a long skinny dragon of a country where it's just not achievable. So, people leave with an impression of Vietnam, which is like-- it must be like a snapshot. I can remember back- I think the very, very first trip I did was like back in 2007. And I'm married to someone in the army. And I did this traditional, what we're talking about a top to bottom trip. And he said to me,

"That sounds like a reconnaissance trip."

He said,

"You're going to see where you need to go back to, where you want to spend more time, where there are day trips you can do from us."

And I said, "Exactly."

14:01

But we you and me today, I think we really need to unpack that for people and explain that that's kind of logical. But you see on the internet, everywhere, everyone's selling these 14 days, top to bottom or bottom to top tours. And everybody just ends up exhausted. I was talking to a girl the other day, she was managing the sailing club, [sysco 14:30] Monet, and she said,

"Some travelers decide, they are just exhausted by the end of it. And they just go to Monet, and they just lie on the beach for five days. And then they make that day lasting memory."

And she said,

"But they come back every year. But they were smart enough to do this."

So, on this basis, today let's unpack a 14 day trip. And let's unpack it into some regions and talk about it from that context so that we can give my listeners some reality to what to expect. So, let's start with 14 days.

15:13

Where should people start? If we are not going to give them the reconnaissance trip, where should they maybe start to get a really good feel for Vietnam?

Miquel Angel: 15:27

I will say, if you are coming here to Vietnam, you either rise to Ho Chi Minh City or Hanoi from international destination. And some flights are now starting to go to Damen but doesn't really matter. It is also a good option. So, you go to Ho Chi Minh City, and visit South and Central part of Vietnam, or you go to Hanoi and visit the north and central part of Vietnam, wherever your choice is. So, let's give a short flashback on South part and another one on the North Park. And from there, we develop more, or we see what's going on there. When you arrive here to Ho Chi Minh City, the airport at the moment is

located inside the city. So, it's quite fast. Half an hour, you are in the city center, there are planning in the future to do a new airport, but it is still on the plans to do.

16:18

So here, in the south part of Vietnam, aside of Ho Chi Minh City, that you have, at least I will say two days to visit a bit, some of the museums and some of the things you haven't, you have the Mekong Delta, which is a place that is not to be missed, because the Mekong Delta, I will say is what they call the greenery of Vietnam, there are 20 million people living there producing rice, fish farms, coconut industry, which is huge, and you have two or three days just do get lost there and do your bicycle, do your boat, do your gorilla, mangrove check. And if you come there only for a day trip, you are missing the essence of that is Mekong's way of living. Either one you just wander one day, do walk in the morning, and try some coconut candy, by the Bhaskar and get into a box or a small tank either and return back to your country that's Mekong.

Kerry Newsome: 17:15

Don't forget the photo shoot, [crosstalk] selfie and all the rest of it and get that out quickly. You've got 15 minutes to do that and step on the bus.

Miquel Angel: 17:25

And that's the Mekong Delta visit that you did, fantastic, in three hours. So, that's the day that you can get lost there. Now at this point in time, some very nice hotels next to rivers, these may come area, they call it like six tons, where you can stay, cycle, get lost, get some minorities also, the Chàm people who are living in Vietnam, so that is to make on site. More attractions in the south can be Tây Ninh, for example, which is the exactly the spot where the Caodai religion is and where all the monks related to that religion. So, it is spectacular to go there and see the way they pray. The churches, the way of life they have and sit down and have a drink with them.

Kerry Newsome: 18:10

Where is this, Miquel?

Miquel Angel: 18:12

This is Tây Ninh Province, which is a bordering Cambodia province, two hours from Ho Chi Minh City, new corners. I love when you discover the corners you never been to, maybe your next visit to Vietnam, we should take a ride and go there. Absolutely amazing. I bring people there. Not many, because I cannot fit this in a 13 day problem. That's a problem. So, more things you want to see here in the south part of Vietnam is the famous Củ Chi Tunnels. And what you can observe there, how the Vietnamese guerrilla went underground with the tanks. Even if you want to shoot, they're in a very safe area, do some shots, it is nice to see that and see how the Củ Chi local guides explain to you what happened to them and their families.

Kerry Newsome: 18:58

If we stay in Saigon for a moment. I think sometimes the first impression of the city is only district one. And it took me several trips to understand, Saigon has more sides to it, a little bit like Paris has districts. Saigon also has other districts. There's the Chinese, the Tan Binh. I did an episode with a travel writer,

Samantha Kumar who came on, and she was able to pick about five districts, that somebody normally just gets off the plane, gets straight to--because as you say, they're exhausted. That first impression of Saigon is just a crazy mess. It's just a haba, haba, haba and, 3 trillion bikes but they haven't actually traversed the city itself to some of the more sedate and some of the more interesting- especially by the river, they've spent so much money on developing some of these areas, it's a shame.

20:02

The other thing I want to mention about Saigon, which also took me a few visits to get right, was to understand the shopping site. Now, I know I'm talking to a male. And there's a shopping-- probably a part of your brain switching off at this point, and probably for any male listening, but there are some unique opportunities to experience some artisans that are creating some really amazing stuff. And there's also some great social enterprises that are selling some really unique stuff. So, if you want something from Vietnam, that doesn't say it's made in China, then definitely you've got to kind of delve in a little bit deeper into that area.

20:49

I want to also draw everyone's attention to, what I call the cafe building. Now, likewise, that is a place that you'll see a lot in your Instagram photos, etc., you wouldn't probably get in the lift to go up into that building. You're nodding. Yeah, I agree. So, you have to walk up the stairs, but it is worth the trip to walk up those stairs, because around every single corner, there was something unique, something different, whether it was a coffee shop, or a boutique. Like that building just has evolved into this treasure trove of all places. There's some- where you walk past and the door is very, very small. And if you walk past it, you've missed it. So, you've got to go up those stairs.

21:49

So if you're going to the Mekong Delta, or you want to go to Cần Thơ, or you want to experience some parts of Vietnam that have been operating for like hundreds of years, then you do need to breathe, you need to slow down and you need to take it in and breathe it in, where if you've got to get back on the bus and you've done five selfies and tick, tick, tick, the operator has done his job. The tour guide is also running at 100 miles an hour. You're not really getting the best of Vietnam. So, I think we're on the same page.

21:49

And you've just got to delve a little bit deeper into the city, rather than just as you said, making sure you hit four temples in 10, markets, tick, tick, tick, tick. And I want to just make sure I get this right for the listeners as well is, because purchase this trip. And it's listed on its itinerary. The onus is on the company to make sure you do see every single one on that trip. So, it's not anyone's fault. It's just that we, you, and me, thankfully, would like you to maybe unpack the trip, so that it doesn't make it slow or boring. But it allows you to breathe, and really get-- and I think you used a great word, the essence of the place.

Miquel Angel: 23:25

Yeah, well, what happens that after, if you do this, latest sentence, you were telling, you never return back to Vietnam, because what they are doing to you, is not what you really wish. And you don't really

want to be there at that moment, you are not enjoying a trip. So, me I'm bringing some customers, even some residents here in Ho Chi Minh City, to taste the coffee of two sisters, that are doing, because one already passed away. They've been doing for 150 years, doing coffee. And they use a kind of sock that they put the coffee inside. And they have a fireplace there on the floor. And we go there to drink their coffee. So, it was packed by the old Vietnamese people.

24:08

So, I go there and just listen to the tables, talking about the war, about how we won these and won that, it is an amazing process. And I showed this corner to some Vietnamese residents that they never been there. And they say,

"Whoa, how do you know these places? I like to walk around all these things that you just mentioned there."

And aside of that, there is a very nice colleague here in Ho Chi Minh City that the public already books here on the corners and unknown corners here in Ho Chi Minh City And what that buildings were during the French, the US war era, and the Vietnamese.

24:42

So that's really, really an experience, just to go there walking, that's some walking, you do not need the tour guide, if you don't want, you can do it by yourself. And this will be available everywhere. It's not the secret. So, the point here is that in these programs, of course, the tour operators and the agents they need to fill in and make big problems with many things inside, otherwise, you will not buy a program, where you go to Ho Chi Minh City, two days, they're doing nothing.

25:08

But my question is that sometimes, if you buy one of these programs, because the price is very good, because sometimes they flip the whole plane and the whole program wherever, what you have to do is tell to your tour guide,

"Listen, I'm highly paid for this trip. In this pay, in this condition, I'm the owner of the trip. And I want to decide what to do with my money and my trip. So please get lost for three hours. And you tell your company that we visit everything in the program, you don't worry, I will not sue you or your tour operator back in Australia, or back in Europe. And give me that three hours for me to breathe. And just get into that building that you say there and enjoy a cup of tea, or a cup of coffee, and you pick up the ride after three hours."

That's the way you see the real Vietnam.

Kerry Newsome: 25:59

I sell these tours [crosstalk] to Vietnam. But I sell them under the guise that when I talk to the travel agents and say,

"Look, there's a lot packed into this tour, do you really think you want to include all of that? We can do it, sure. But is your customer, your travelers going to want to do it?"

And then I have, a bit like you just to be a mystery traveler in a group. I have joined the group. So, say, I catch up with them. And they're halfway through. So, they're in Hậu Giang, and it is 50 degrees in the shade.

Miquel Angel: 26:38

And you are still walking.

Kerry Newsome: 26:41

They're still– they're up to, I don't know, the walking tour of Hậu Giang, or something like that. And now exhausted and just gone. We just want to have a day rest. And I actually had to remind some of the travelers and say,

"If you do not want to do what the tour guy says, you can say, 'You know what, I will meet you back here at four o'clock. And you know that beautiful coffee shop you were talking about before? Go back and have a coffee there.' Just sit and people watch. Just take it in, you are not obliged to literally go and do everything."

27:17

And they said,

"Can we just do that now?"

And I said,

"Absolutely, you can."

The tour companies are trying to give you everything, if you want it, but you don't have to do it. And as you say, you're not going to sue the company and blah, blah, blah. And there were some people who don't, if they don't get everything ticked on those boxes, Miquel, they do get up in arms, and they go,

"I bought this tool package and it said, we were going to do for temples and blah, blah, blah."

I don't get that, they're unhappy, and they're not satisfied. And all the rest of it.

27:51

But I think it's a nice idea, like you said, for people to be reminded they have choice. And they have the ability, master of their own destiny to say,

"Hey, thanks for the offer. But I'm just going to chill out here and I'll come back and pick up that- Oh, yes, I'll do that show in Hậu Giang."

The AO show, say for example, that might be included in the tour. And yeah, we'll do that but, in the meantime, we're just going to go off and do our own thing. And you are totally entitled to do that. But these people were aghast, they couldn't believe it that they could make their own choice and I said,

"Go, just tell the tour guide, that that's what you're doing, so he's accounted for you, off you go!"

Miquel Angel: 28:36

I think, here in Vietnam, sometimes it is kind of strange, that the person who's paying for a trip, call it whatever amount of Australian dollars or euros or US dollars, whatever, you are paying for something, that you arrive to a destination there and looks like you have no right anymore. You're paying- not a cheap tour, we're talking about here \$100, you are paying an amount of money here, including your flight, your hotels, wherever, and sometimes you have no time to sit down one hour to have a fresh beer at 50 degrees Celsius.

29:14

So, you have the permission, like- to the tour guide to say,

"Can I please sit down here for an hour and sip these beautiful Vietnamese fresh beer, one, two, or three, or five."

I know, Australians do not drink one beer, I do.

"And come to pick me up not in three hours, in six hours. Go home and forget about my dinner. I already paid for it."

So probably the restaurant is already happy because they already received money. And you see down there to eat some chicken feet, with [inaudible 29:46]. That's lovely experience.

29:48

So, happens rarely. And I know that because I've been on that tour there, and I see the people excruciating, really hot. Don't forget, we're in a tropical country and hot means really, really hot and make your beautiful white skin really, really lobster, red color. Don't play with the sun, even in the morning, you don't go to the beach here in Vietnam, from 9am to 3pm ever. Sometimes some of us will say,

"Yes, yes, yes. I'm used to the beach, I go there in Australia, in Europe, I go to the beach."

You don't go to the beach in Vietnam, at that time, zero Vietnamese are there. We go to beach 6am-8am or 4pm-6pm, for a reason.

Kerry Newsome: 30:38

I can remember, someone asked me once, they said, "Oh you know", it was the middle of the day, and we're at the beach, etc. And they're saying,

"I don't see many locals."

And I said,

"No, they're the smart ones. They're at home under the air conditioning."

So, if we talk about the South, I really, really want to put in the episode notes, the name of the place near Cambodia. So, I'll get that off you later.

31:03

But yes, you have got access to the Mekong Delta. I mean, even a river cruise, there are some wonderful river cruises to take in that region as well. But once again, things not that you have to be rushing, rushing, because we've got to fit in the Củ Chi Tunnels, and we've got to do all this kind of stuff, all in this 14 days. Because I think, if we can get the traveler to have something left out, they will come back and they'll say,

"Gee, we only saw this part and it was full on. Next time we want to do the north or next time we want to do the central region."

OUTRO 31:42

Thank you for listening. Check out the episode notes for more information. **What about Vietnam!** Don't forget to subscribe, rate and review, and stay tuned for more fun adventures in Vietnam. **What about Vietnam!**

