



What About Vietnam - S2-24 – Explore the Bac Ha Markets – Rich in colour and tradition

Kerry Newsome: [00:00:32] Now, today, I'm going to be talking to you about the Bac Ha markets. Now, this is a region that has fascinated me for a long time, and the reason being that it has so much color to it. I know a little bit about the color aspect being in the flower Hmong people, which the market is really all about. So just to rewind the clock back a little bit to give some context, tell us, Mike, how you first came to visit the Bac Ha markets and like, what attracted you to go there in the first place?

Mike Pollock: [00:01:14] Well, the story really begins with Sa Pa. I went to Sa Pa for three days, I knew nothing about Sa Pa. I did zero research on it. I just got on a bus and went up there and I loved it. I was absolutely fascinated by the people. Their wonderful way of life is fascinating. And of course, the landscape and the scenery are just spectacular. So after my three-day trip, after three days, I left Sa Pa for about three weeks. I rearranged my entire life and I ended up spending a great deal of time there. I learned more and more about the region. I made friends with people who are happy to be in the travel business, their tour guides, tour organizers. So that's all you have to go to. You have to go to Bac Ha. So on the first trip to Bac Ha, I was in love with Bac Ha, too. And again, it's a combination of the people, their way of life, and the stunning season.

Kerry Newsome: [00:02:28] And as you say, the stunning scenery, the people, because of their beautiful costumes, just the whole landscape, everything there is has got to be for a photographer like yourself, like, oh, wow, I could spend a lot of time here, right?

Mike Pollock: [00:02:50] Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

Kerry Newsome: [00:02:53] Because you see the photos everywhere when anyone is selling Vietnam when you look at a brochure or whatever. I don't know. But you'd swear to God the flower Hmong people were everywhere in Vietnam, not just in the north. Sure. Yeah.

Mike Pollock: [00:03:08] And the same thing with photographs of the iconic rice terraces, too. You see the same pictures of the same rice fields all over the Internet.

Kerry Newsome: [00:03:18] Exactly. And like when people arrive in Vietnam and they're in Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh and there are 300 million motorbikes, they're not quite the same as the rice field picture, I think.

Mike Pollock: [00:03:31] Well, that's another thing, too. I mean, far northern Vietnam is radically different from other urban centers. It's so much different. You know.

Kerry Newsome: [00:03:44] It is. Let's dive a little bit deeper now into how do we get to Bac Ha, because it's a trip, isn't it? There's a trip involved. And it's not just getting to Sapa, it's beyond Sapa. Now, you've written a great article on your website, which I'm going to put the link on the episode notes, too. But can you talk to my listeners just about the mode of transport, the best mode of transport and just timings? Do you know how we had a joke before about how long things take? If you could just speak to that, that'd be great. I think everyone would benefit.

Mike Pollock: [00:04:23] Well, you hear of a few different options. And, of course, that combines very easily with Sa Pa.. And if you think, of course, both these are districts and provinces, Lao City is the transportation hub of the province. So if you're going to go to Sa Pa. Or you're going to go to Bac Ha, chances are you're going to at least drive through Lao Chi Lao City. So to answer your question, now that I've gone through all that, you have several options. You can take the train up to Lao City, which I believe you know all about. And then from the train station in Lao City, it's very easy to get either a van or a minibus , which is roughly two hours from Lao City Center. You also have the bus option, you can take a bus to the city from Hanoi. And there are a few direct buses running between Hanoi and Bac Ha. There was a night bus for sure, some of us don't really care for nine buses and there's also a daytime bus that runs all the way up to a similar high. So you have a couple of options there. And then, of course, if you're going to combine back and Sa Pa, that's very easy to do with a combination of either public bus and local bus. And there's also a shuttle that runs directly from Sa Pa to Bac Ha every afternoon and Sa Pa to Bac Ha is roughly a three-hour journey.

Kerry Newsome: [00:06:12] Ok, and I wanted to bring this up earlier with people because I wanted to set some realities for people in the journey side of things, because if you've done the overnight train and you kind of get out of that train in the morning, and I remember I was pretty shattered. And then the thought of then another two to three hours onto that, that was kind of a bit for me to take on. And I've heard some of the other people that have traveled into this area, they've kind of said, oh, gee, I wish that I sort of got off and been able to chill out for a while, maybe in Sapore itself and maybe have a rest day and then do it the next day or try and add some more time into the day and the whole adventure of the region because I think if you go into these places and you're tired. Your weariness inhibits you from enjoying it to the full max because you just weary and you kind of need to take a breather. No one will tell you the real time in Vietnam is to drive me crazy because I'd say I'd get in a car or a van or know how long it is going to take. And they don't want to tell you that the road is got, you know, twenty-five switchbacks and it's going to take..

Mike Pollock: [00:07:45] You three hours. Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Travel overland, travel in and around Vietnam and all of Southeast Asia can be extremely slow. And it is difficult to say exactly how long the journey is going to take, you know, so you have to have some patience

there. But the thing about these markets, I should mention this is they start very early in the morning. People are setting up their stalls before sunrise. And the market by the Bac Ha market, in particular, will be very busy by about 10:00 a.m. And then by about noon, people are going home. So the best way to tackle this is to get there the night before. And you sleep there the night before, if you sleep in Bac Ha on Saturday night and they have what they call a night market cultural show, and it's really not so much of a night market, but they do have a stage in the town center run by the little temple downtown, uptown Bac Ha. And every Saturday night there's a performance of not just Hmong people, but also to forget all the ethnic groups that get on the stage and their full costume. And they do a dance show. And I don't think this is really a tourist-orientated thing. They just they're really the people that are really into the culture. We've talked about this before.

Mike Pollock: [00:09:16] They're very into the traditional costume, traditional music, traditional instruments, a traditional dance. So anyway, so you get to Bac Ha the night before you get up early, get to the market early before it gets too crowded, particularly if you're a photographer. This is key. You want to get to the market before it gets crowded and before the sun gets too high in the sky so that you can get some nice clean images, and have some nice light. And then depending on your interest, a couple of hours in the market might be enough, and then what you can do is head to the north of Bac Ha anywhere and back our head up north towards the border of China. And the scenery is just absolutely beautiful. And that's easy to do. You can rent a motorcycle if you're qualified to do so. You can hire someone to drive you around on a motorcycle you could hire or car. You can even do some of it. If you're a little bit adventurous by public transportation or buses that run north of the city, that'll get you to a foreign city. If you're into trekking, you can hire a local guide to take your truck in or you can go trek around by yourself. But the district is absolutely beautiful. It's a typical rural Vietnam.

Kerry Newsome: [00:10:37] So, you know, good lead in to just talking about Hmong people, because everything I've read is that this Sunday's a big day for them, isn't it? They come from far and wide and the women in particular dress up, if that's the word, in the traditional costumes. So talk to us a little bit about what they sell, what they try. You know how the gig actually, guys, what can I expect to say?

Mike Pollock: [00:11:08] Ok, well, if you read any Vietnamese travel articles or travel blogs about these markets, what it translates into English, it always translates into fair. People say there's a Sunday fair in Bac Ha and that's kind of what it is. And you're exactly right. That Hill people not just from Bac Ha but they'll come from neighboring Hoang Su Phi, Ha Giang Province. They'll come from a long area to go to this market exactly, and they will trade many traditional things. livestock where they trade buffalo, horses, goats, pigs, chickens, ducks, that sort of thing. But they also sell handmade farming equipment. I mean, these people are farmers. They might have a side job of some sort, but somewhere during the day, they're going to do some farming. And the Hmong people are famous for making steel implements that range anything from a knife to a machete. They are the working part of a wooden plow, the steel pulled behind a buffalo. So there's a lot of traditional handmade tools in addition to the clothing that we've talked about, the cloth of the dye, the thread necessary to make these products all kinds of local potions,

Kerry Newsome: [00:12:34] Happy water,

Mike Pollock: [00:12:35] Happy water. Yeah, we can talk about a lot of water and people come and people come to the market and they make a day out of it themselves. The food stalls are always full, chock full of locals eating fall or whatever it is. And it is a big day out for them too. You'll see the little children running around getting ice cream and dads having a little hot water while mothers sell corn or whatever it is. It's a big day for the people. You know, it's not even the tourists who go to these things. It's not really directed at the tourists. It's a local thing.

Kerry Newsome: [00:13:18] And that kind of for me, begs the question on how to best experience that from a language perspective, because sometimes when I go to these places, especially because I try and get there early before the typical busload arrives and like we don't know in the future with covid, et cetera, maybe they won't be big busloads like they used to be. It kind of crosses our fingers on that one. But like, when you do get there, I almost feel like a bit of an invader because like I say, I've got blond hair, so I stand out like the proverbial and but when I get in there, I do feel a little bit noticeably. A tourist, and then I feel like I'm kind of invading in this space. Do you recommend going with a guide to get a better experience or language-wise? It's a little bit tricky.

Mike Pollock: [00:14:21] I, I will hire guides to go to markets on occasion. And the main reason is just the language barrier because I really do want to have a chat with people. I really want to find out exactly what that funny-looking herb is that they're selling on the table. You know, you see the potions in the powders. I should have put your picture, but you know that you have these strange exotic herbs and tree bark and mushrooms and powders and more happy water. And I want to know exactly what this is. So it is useful to have a guide,

Kerry Newsome: [00:15:03] In the soup. I always ask that question because, you know, let's just let's identify what I'm talking about. And I'm not a big fan of blood, bone, blood, anything that starts with blood. That's when I have a steak. It's well done so I can have it all.

Mike Pollock: [00:15:28] But the thing is that any of these markers that you go to, you don't need to go into that section. You don't need to go to the butcher shop. You can stay in the vegetable market or it's nice.

Kerry Newsome: [00:15:39] But if you want a snack and you want to have some soup and it kind of smells OK, but then. You know,

Mike Pollock: [00:15:50] I think you don't fight, they give you order chicken soup when we say guy, you're getting chicken soup, it's time to bring this to the big mystery,

Kerry Newsome: [00:16:03] All right. So suggestion wise is that. Yes, definitely get it. God, I mean, I. I always get a guide for language reasons. And because I think that they can just give you some insights that you wouldn't pick up on otherwise, you know, you're going to look at it with very Western eyes, but they're going to say, oh, well, that means that. And, you know, they can give some reference points, I think, that is most helpful.

Mike Pollock: [00:16:31] Yeah, I agree with you for sure.

Kerry Newsome: [00:16:34] All right. So when we're talking about, you know, things to buy for a Westerner, OK, we're not going to take any shovels or picks home with us. I'm certainly not riding any buffaloes or, you know, they're not doing trick or treat like that. So what am I going to be looking to buy as a souvenir. To take home.

Mike Pollock: [00:17:02] Well, there are a number of stalls in these markets that cater specifically to tourists, tourist trinkets, many of which you will have already seen in Hanoi. But there are a lot of traditional handcrafts produced there that are traditional and handmade. And what you need to do is just look at the product before you buy it. Obviously, if it looks like it was made in a factory, it probably was. If it looks like grandmother made it at home, you know, it's very soft. It's got a little layer of dust on it. You know, that's a product that's handmade, handmade cloth, hand-done embroidery. I think you can figure it out. And if you dig through these stalls, you'll find a tremendous amount of traditional pieces. You just have to kind of scan around to look around a little bit. But I know since you mentioned that I don't have the proper name for it, but the Hmong flutes, you've probably seen pictures of the musical instruments you can buy. Those are so nice. That's a nice souvenir among musical instruments.

Kerry Newsome: [00:18:15] Yeah, I have bought bedspreads. They are spectacular color-wise. You know, they buy and hang them up and you can go through and you choose the ones you want. And I kind of have a laugh with people like the ones where the threads are hanging out and there's probably a good chance that when you wash it the first time it'll fall apart. The authentic ones. If you wanted to stay together, you're probably better over that stall where it's probably made in a giant factory. You know, there are pluses and minuses, but I still have it because I love it, because when I touch it and I smell whatever, I feel like I was really bad. So, it does have some beautiful memories, but I wash it very, very carefully. Very delicately. All right. Let's just talk about times of the year, because another fascinating fact about Vietnam, which I think always seems to faze people, is that everyone thinks that Vietnam is hot all year round and they kind of just, what, Vietnam over and say, oh, you know, it's that hot. Yet I think you're going to agree with me in the north. It gets bloody cold all over.

Mike Pollock: [00:19:50] They had a brutal winter last year.

Kerry Newsome: [00:19:54] Certainly in this particular area in Sapa, it can get to freezing. It can get to snow.

Mike Pollock: [00:20:03] Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Basically in December, well into March, it is winter and it can be very cold, windy, and it can also be extremely foggy. Yes. What we call black fog or you or you can see 50 meters in front of you and that's about it. And the fog will get so thick and it basically starts to drizzle and everything is covered and covered in a mist. So the wintertime can be challenging. Yeah.

Kerry Newsome: [00:20:38] And I think that missing all that fog that you talk about was something I didn't count on, and I think for a photographer that might strike you a bit crazy with the fog because you can't see 50 feet in front of you.

Mike Pollock: [00:20:54] Well, yeah, the weather, in general, is very challenging there. But that's also sort of the magic of the place as well. You know, you wake up and it's your blanket in fog and mist and maybe a little bit of drizzle. And by noon, the sun is out and shining and it's extremely hot. And then the cycle repeats itself in the afternoon. Yes, the weather makes travel there interesting and it can make it a bit challenging. So like I said, winter times are tough and you need to bring warm clothes. You need to dress in layers and wear some kind of outer waterproof shell, carry an umbrella.

Kerry Newsome: [00:21:34] Yeah, but if we're talking around that kind of march through til, what would we say, June, July, that's pretty pleasant, isn't it?

Mike Pollock: [00:21:47] Yeah, I would say April is kind of the threshold. March can be, as I said, very challenging. But once you're in April, things are looking good. But then you have to remember that by June you're in the rainy season and it can be very, very wet there and during the rainy season.

Kerry Newsome: [00:22:07] So peak times to visit, we should say, April.

Mike Pollock: [00:22:12] And April, May and October, November,

Kerry Newsome: [00:22:18] October,

Mike Pollock: [00:22:19] November. Yeah, I like it. Well, September, you have all the rice. The rice is maturing and you have the beautiful rice fields, so I love September, but there's a good chance you're going to get a little wet now and again. Did you notice all the ladies in all carry an umbrella? Everybody carries an umbrella. I do, too, because when it's not raining, the sun comes up, the sun cooks the back of your neck, you break out your umbrella.

Kerry Newsome: [00:22:48] It is genius. And I'm all for it. And you don't look, in some countries, they would kind of think you're a bit of a bit of a nut case. But in Vietnam, not a problem. I do it in a lot of places because you're right, it's handy for the wet when it just does a downpour for 20 minutes and then it's gone and the same when the sun comes out and with my skin. I gotcha on that one. Look for some areas a little bit around back that I did a little bit of research on. You mentioned the temple and and the and the Saturday night features, but there's a few little places around back. How did you venture further into those areas?

Mike Pollock: [00:23:38] You see a significant portion of the district. As we mentioned earlier, there's many certainly America's most famous. And then there's a Saturday market about 19 kilometers to the north and Can Cau. But there's markets there, small markets every day. There's interesting markets. So I think six days a week. So you can if you missed the Sunday market, there's a Tuesday market in Coc Ly For example,

Kerry Newsome: [00:24:08] I was going to mention Coc Ly.

Mike Pollock: [00:24:09] Coc Ly's setting. It's absolutely beautiful. It's off the main road. It's absolutely stunning season scenery. And you can combine that with hiring a car and driver, for example, take it from Sa pa to Coc Ly and then to Bac Har and make a road trip out of it. And there's another market on Wednesday, a market up by Si Ma Cai which is very worth doing as well. They have a nice buffalo market anyway. But as I mentioned before, these markets start early in the morning. So you get going early in the morning. You do a couple hours of the market and then you continue on and you can do some more sightseeing or trekking and explore the district.

Kerry Newsome: [00:24:57] At your leisure,

Mike Pollock: [00:24:58] At your leisure, exactly.

Kerry Newsome: [00:25:01] So would you allow it properly, would you allow two nights, three nights?

Mike Pollock: [00:25:07] Oh, easily. I could do that easily. And the other interesting thing about that is that for the weekend, markets are very well known. They're very popular. The town is quite busy. But Monday through Friday, the town itself is very, very quiet. If you want to escape the hustle and bustle, that's the place to do it. It's a very relaxing, quaint little town.

Kerry Newsome: [00:25:32] So would you say this is the kind of thing that a family could do, like, you know, like a young family, you know, like, I think it's definitely a family thing to do and kids and anyone would just find it fascinating or do you?

Mike Pollock: [00:25:49] Absolutely. I come across many, many families. And Bac Ha, you know, a lot of a lot of people do organize tours or I do have a car and driver, and it's very common to see families traveling that way.

Kerry Newsome: [00:26:06] I would, however, suggest for people with, you know, like any difficulties as far as walking or, you know, they're not they're not good with the kind of endurance in heat if if if they're going at that time of year, maybe they take a Good car and I can drop them around a few places.

Mike Pollock: [00:26:29] Well, the market in town is not an issue. It's in the infrastructure that surrounds the town. So there's no problem walking around there whatsoever. As far as the heat goes, as I already mentioned, you really want to get there early because the markets are done by and by high noon when the sun is cooking and Bac Ha can be very hot. We talk about holding it in the winter. In the summertime, it's pretty hot. So you want to get out early before it gets too hot. So some of the other markets could be a little bit challenging if you have some mobility issues. Yeah, not necessarily a deal breaker, but you have to maybe choose accordingly.

Kerry Newsome: [00:27:19] Yeah, for sure. For sure. Let's talk just a little bit as we kind of finish off the episode, just about accommodation in the area. You and I had a bit of a laugh about home and just how liberally that that term gets shared around. So talk to us about it. Stay there.

It's not, it doesn't have to be expensive. But just so people can manage their expectations about home status and accommodation, can you talk to us a little bit about your experiences there?

Mike Pollock: [00:27:52] Yeah, well, there's the issue with the homestays that it's used to describe a big variety of accommodations. It's used literally: a homestay could be living in a traditional house the size of the mountain or you're sleeping on the floor with the chickens. Or it could be more like a guest house or whatever the United States we would call a motel. So, yeah, it varies widely. Generally speaking, I sleep in the hotels in the back of town. There's there's quite a few of them. They're very typical Asian Vietnamese style budget accommodations. They're very inexpensive, but they're very simple. And it makes it easy. Roll out of bed. You're at the market. If you go to the market, you need a little break. Very easy to find a place to have a coffee or a bowl of soup, as we mentioned earlier, run back to the hotel to get fresh batteries for my care or something like that. But surrounding the town itself, yes, there's many, many home stays and they really do range. There's a big range of homestays, I guess you have to choose your home state wisely, do some research on it.

Kerry Newsome: [00:29:08] I know because I work with a tour company out of Hanoi and we have people who say to us, oh, no, we want to have the real authentic experience. We want to. And we tried to say, well, yes, we can do, but please understand that. And it's really hard to get a visual or give people a visual of just how humble some of these are, because you're talking about people's homes, how they live is how they kind of invite you into their typical home. So I always try to emphasize to people to get a real understanding of what that authenticity is. Can look and feel like when really you want a hot shower and a comfortable bed after a day out exploring, so I don't know whether you've actually invited friends, if your soul or shared home, stay home, stay indoors with people. But you're right, it's from one level of the needle to the other as far as, you know, what you can experience with home stays in that region in particular.

Mike Pollock: [00:30:26] Yeah, a true home state. I said the traditional home state is just a couple steps above camping.

Kerry Newsome: [00:30:34] Yeah, not even as good.

Mike Pollock: [00:30:37] Know you are you're still you're sleeping on a bamboo mat, which is local style bamboo mat,

Kerry Newsome: [00:30:44] Perhaps no chickens on my camping trip.

Mike Pollock: [00:30:47] Ha ha ha ha ha.

Kerry Newsome: [00:30:49] Right now, I leave them at home.

Mike Pollock: [00:30:52] I will say one thing about the hot water, though. Anybody in North Vietnam who's serious about doing any sort of homestay has built a structure. Separate from the main house that contains a shower with hot water and a western toilet and a proper sink, pretty much every home stay in that area is going to have those basic amenities because the locals like hot water too.

Kerry Newsome: [00:31:21] Yeah, and I think it's good to mention Western toilets because, you know, South East Asia is not always famous for Western toilets. So I like to hear that there's more and more Western toilets in that region. So that's good to know. Mike, just to finish off, I've been asking my guests recently to give me a word to describe travel and what it means to you. I mean, we're sitting in a very different world at the moment. You're sitting in Bac Ha. I'm sitting in Australia. And neither of us can go anywhere, but we're still both lap travel. So if I was to ask you what your word is, what would your word be? And then I'll tell you what mine is. Describe putting you on the spot. Yeah. What it means to you, what it means to you. What does travel mean to you? In a word.

Mike Pollock: [00:32:20] In what word? In one word or one.....Discovery.

Kerry Newsome: [00:32:28] Discovery. I like it. Why discovery?

Mike Pollock: [00:32:33] Well, that's what you're doing, aren't you, even if you go to a place that's been well traveled, many, many people have been there before you, you're just going to new to you. You're discovering all this for yourself for the first time.

Kerry Newsome: [00:32:49] Great work. Love it, and I think what I miss most about travel is discovery and certainly at times nicely with my word, which is revived. One of the reasons I'm doing this podcast is I want to revive people's spirit in the form of discovering new places, new cultures, new food. And so revive is my word. And I'm trying to revive and keep that spirit alive in people. So with the help of people like you who came discoverers, I'm hoping to do that for Vietnam might. Lovely to have you on the program. Really great to get some some insights into the Bac Ha markets. I've learnt a lot and I'm sure my listeners have as well. So thanks for being on the show.

Mike Pollock: [00:33:45] Thank you very much. Have a great day.