



What About Vietnam – S4- E18 – Discover some of the best Luxury brand travel experiences in Vietnam

SPEAKERS

Kerry Newsome, Alexandra Hepworth

Kerry Newsome: 00:18

Xin Chào and welcome to “[What About Vietnam](#)”. I'm happy to say we are in our third year of the program, and that's all thanks to you. Your support and sticking with the show, even though it's been through some challenging times. We didn't know when travel was going to open up again. But here we are. It's in full flight now and Vietnam is coming back strongly. I'm thrilled to announce What About Vietnam is now recognized and recommended in the [Vietnam Lonely Planet Guide for 22-23](#). It's recommended as a reference tool for listening information about Vietnam. Wow! who would have thought that my love for this country and its people would bloom into this.

01:26

Today the show welcomes my lovely guest [Alexandra Hepworth](#) to talk about luxury travel in Vietnam. Vietnam has not always featured on the top 10 or so lists for luxury travel destinations. But steadily over the past, I think five to seven years, it is becoming an 'A Lister' for luxury experiences. With a uniqueness, I'm happy to say, my guest today describes it really well. Alexandra works for [AZA Travel](#), a Bespoke Travel agency specializing in curating high end luxury travel. While her background starts with an equine science degree, she knows Vietnam very well, as up until 2020, she lived in Vietnam for nine years and worked with some of the big brands, such as [The Fusion Group](#). She also represented the [Vietnam Tourism Board](#), that Caravelle Saigon and prior to leaving, she worked on the opening of the [Hyatt Regency](#) in Phnom Penh.

02:32

I'm talking to her now in her new home of Bogota, Colombia, and in her role with AZA Travel, Alexandra is able to give us some firsthand information about some of the best luxury hotels and brands operating in Vietnam. Together, we take you through some of the big brands you may follow as a luxury traveler, and we peel the onion back so you can hear how they perform in this country. We think you will be pleasantly surprised that Vietnam is pushing that glass ceiling with innovative decor, experiences, spa treatments, and modeling that incorporates the locality, the beauty of Vietnam culture and its people. It was an eye opener

for me with some of the properties she talks about, and I think it will be for you too. If you'd like some insights into your favorite brand and are keen to know if they perform as well or better in Vietnam. This is the show for you.

03:37

The fabulous thing about Vietnam is that each region offers its own unique history, culture, people, and landscape. So at any given point of your trip, you are potentially able to have a unique experience while still in the same country. It's an aspect of Vietnam travel that makes it exciting and rewarding, and why people find it hard to pick just one place or stay as a highlight when they get home. As each one is unique. I have to stop saying absolutely throughout the show. Please forgive me. You can go luxury all the way or you can mix up your stay with boutique homestays and luxury accommodation, to feel you're getting an authentic and well-rounded experience of Vietnam.

04:31

Alexandra has a wonderful way of describing the variables of luxury stays. That means in some cases, it's actually all about the property. You may not want to leave it for a few days and just embrace its opulence and pampering. While we wish we could have covered them all, we had to limit them to Alexandra's favorites, which I think, after listening you will agree was worth waiting for. You can find more about Alexandra from her details listed in the show notes. And of course, you can reach her through hours of travel. Please check the website for the transcript and further details. Without further ado, please welcome Alexandra Hepworth to the show. Alexandra, welcome to What About Vietnam.

Alexandra Hepworth: 05:27

Thank you very much. It's fantastic to be here.

Kerry Newsome: 05:30

Now we're going to be talking about an interesting subject. And that subject is luxury travel in Vietnam. Now, the reason why I'm referring to it as an interesting subject is that for Vietnam, it hasn't originally- or hasn't been in the luxury lane, so to speak, for very long. And it's really just starting to mature, in my opinion. So it's great to have you, and you work for AZA Luxury, which is a company, and I'll put the details in the notes for everyone. But I'm just delighted to have you on because you've also lived in Saigon for nine years. So, you know it really well. And you've seen lots of change. So we're going to be talking about some of the best locations, some of the hotels, some of the experiences, etc. So let's jump in and start with how best do we get there Alexandra, like as far as traveling to Vietnam by air or whatever. Can you speak to that, just to kick us off?

Alexandra Hepworth: 06:48

Yeah, sure. Great introduction. All of those topics that we're going to cover are super interesting, and like you said, with my time there, I saw a lot of change, which I know we will touch on later. But one thing that did change a lot during my time in Vietnam was access into the country. That improvement of direct routes coming in from Europe, more recently from the US, from Australia, which has been around for a number of years, and all of those routes with the national carrier with Vietnam Airlines. So, there are many options to get there with transfers. But it's not always so convenient for people, adding on to travel time. So, I think with that development of Vietnam Airlines air routes, but also their product over that time, as well. I remember, four or five years ago, they launched a fleet of Dreamliners that had a fantastic business class product, and also a great Premium Economy products coming from Europe, which really put them on the map as well, because as well as having great access and visibility. It was also a very nicely positioned product in terms of price point when looking at some of the other carriers in the region.

Kerry Newsome: 08:22

So they're going to come into Hanoi, or they're going to come into Ho Chi Minh City as the mains. Now, if we were to kick off as far as some of the really premium luxury experiences, where would you start? Where would you say,

"Okay, well, number one has got to be..."?

Over to you. Well, it's number one.

Alexandra Hepworth: 08:51

Yeah, it's such a big question because there really is so much there and I think it's a very different experience for first time travelers to the country versus people who are also coming back, because it is such a diverse and beautiful country and it's actually a lot bigger than people think. So, there's a lot to see and do depending on how much time you have. I have actually recently put together a very nice itinerary for a family from the US who will actually travel over the festive season. That's touching on quite a lot of my personal highlights and experiences that I think are great for couples, for honeymooners, for families alike, because it is a very welcoming country as well. So, there are experiences for every type of traveler as well. So I will call on my own experience, but also a little bit of what I've designed for that family as well through my current role.

10:02

So I think, as you said, arrival into Hanoi, or Ho Chi Minh City, either one is fantastic. You can go north to south, south to north, whichever way you want- stop in the middle, there's so much out there. From my point of view in terms of culture, learning and real history, I think that Hanoi really does offer a little bit of everything, and you can see the influence of many different nationalities that have had on the country in this city over a vast number of years. I think, luxury product wise, there are beautiful colonial style hotels, [The Sofitel Legend Metropole](#) Hanoi is one, that's always on a bucket list, just because it provides that level of- I guess that French sense that you don't expect from Vietnam and I think that's the nice thing.

11:06

I think Vietnam is so unexpected for a lot of people because they hear the name, but they don't know much about it, and you really feel it once you get there. I think for me, even luxury experiences are walking the streets and sitting on the side of the street and really embracing that local culture as well as being in a beautiful hotel. But I think also seeing the sights outside of Hanoi, driving through the countryside seeing all the rice paddy fields and going out on to Hạ Long Bay is something that is very spectacular as well and something that's very indescribable for people really. I think going out on a beautiful junk, a private boat going in between all the mountains that are in the water, that beautiful flat blue water is just an incredible experience that you can't get anywhere else, and I think differently, that is one experience up in the north.

Kerry Newsome: 12:12

I agree totally, and I think, for me when I think about the Sofitel Metropole, it's like the [Raffles](#) of Singapore, isn't it? It's got that colonial feel, and they have those beautiful afternoon teas and things like that. It's cooking lessons, it's got that just all that old world charm, just love it.

Alexandra Hepworth: 12:37

It does. That kind of the French, colonial way, and I think it's divine, and the staff as well, they're so elegant in their outfits, and you feel something very special, and being so close to the opera house as well, you walk out there, and you see that beautiful building. There, it really puts you sort of in the center and gives you a sense of the place where you are as well. So, I think that property is one that I think has put itself on the map and has remained on the map while others have grown up.

Kerry Newsome: 13:18

I think then, you know, the experience of Hạ Long Bay, being a [UNESCO](#) World Heritage Site in Vietnam, it likewise has developed and changed. I can remember I've had several experiences in Hạ Long Bay, from that real old junk, really crowded, a little bit messy to some upscale cruise ships coming in and being developed and even in Lan Ha Bay, because there's actually three bays that joined together, they develop Lan Ha and Lan Ha to me is just a little bit quieter, and some of those beautiful cruise ships and brands that have come on board, to me just takes it up a level. I don't think I've sent anyone there that hasn't come away and gone. It was nothing like I thought it was going to be. The old-world ships and their own architecture are so beautiful. The staff are beautiful, and just the serene pleasure doing Tai Chi early in the morning. I can see you and I have both been there, haven't we? It's just beautiful.

Alexandra Hepworth: 14:44

It's special. I think you're right as well. I do think you know it is nice to also touch on the people because you are going into an unpopulated area, but yeah, there is still a population of people who live there on the water. That is also their life, and those people have a very, very simple life, but people don't know that there are schools out there and there are beautiful caves and there's places to canoe and you can go and really be a part of how the local people live. I think that that is something that is very unique.

Kerry Newsome: 15:32

So now I'm going to take a big jump and take you to another area that I'd like your opinion on. Because we've done one, this came up in our conversation, and this is [The Vietage Train](#). Maybe you can talk to us a little bit about that experience, like, just what it includes, and we can touch on Quy Nhon in that as well.

Alexandra Hepworth: 15:58

Yeah, sure. So, the train is a relatively new product, I believe in the last couple of years, and it's actually linking to destinations in the center of Vietnam, Hội An, and also Quy Nhon. Hội An is definitely the most well-known of places, being a stop on most people's itineraries going into central Vietnam and, Hội An is a very special place. It's serene, it's beautiful. It's also another UNESCO listed town, an old Japanese port, and you can really feel that difference in culture and in terms of the architecture and the design of the town and the way that it's all pedestrianized and surrounded by river. So Hội An is a very different experience from what you will have seen and felt in Hanoi and Halong Bay, that's what I really love about Vietnam, in general is that everywhere you go is something very, very different.

17:10

In terms of Hội An, it is also very close to Da Nang as well, which is the entry point, which I'm sure we will touch on a little bit later. So I will stay on topic, but yeah, the train itself is linking Hội An and another area called Quy Nhon. Both places are unique in their own right. The two properties that actually link and the operator of the train is the [Anantara Hotel Group](#), linking Anantara Hội An in the Old Town, which is a beautiful colonial building set on the river and linking a much more modern property in Quy Nhon, which is a beachfront Old Villa property, [Old Pool Villas I believe- property which is very secluded, very romantic, and a fantastic addition to the hotel scene in Vietnam. And I think while Quy Nhon is not always on everybody's first time list, I do think that the destination for relaxation, for enjoying seeing something different is fantastic for people who live there. Because it's very, very short flight from Ho Chi Minh City. Obviously, there's the train journey that links the two. And it's also an up-and-coming destination, and it's nice to see it before it gets too developed as well.

18:36

The train itself is beautiful, carriages, includes food and beverage service, and again has that colonial sort of old school charm. It's very rare to travel by train in Vietnam. That's another

thing that I would say that there is no real infrastructure for trains. In the country, we definitely don't have any high-speed trains that you would expect from Japan or that you see in other places, it's very much old trains, sleeper trains that take a long time because there's only one set of tracks. So to have those beautiful luxury carriages going between those destinations is also a very, very beautiful and also unique experience that no one has had before. So I think, for those kinds of things to be developed also shows that there's a demand for new ways to travel the country for both people who live there and also for tourists. Again, like I said before, because we have so many second time is coming back to Vietnam. I think that a product like that is something that really appeals to those visitors as well.

Kerry Newsome: 19:51

We're now in central Vietnam, and we've got the choice of Hội An and like we can talk a whole show about Hội An, and I'm not telling you, I have done whole shows about Hội An, so we can't afford to give this show all to Hội An. If you are to travel to Da Nang, which we know is about a 25 minute drive. I'm gonna kind of put out there the [InterContinental](#) in Da Nang which I know it's a property, you know very well. So maybe we can talk about that property where it's located, and its proximity to Sonterra and Da Nang and maybe give some perspective of that, because it sticks out there on its own. It takes even a little bit to get there. So people would have to really know about it from its brand, but also, just where it is and where it positions people, because it isn't a an easy stroll into town or an easy stroll into Da Nang. You could speak a little bit about that property. I mean, it's even hard to get through the front door if you don't belong there. So that's my experience.

Alexandra Hepworth: 21:12

Sure. Yeah, exactly. Now I am very, very happy to talk about that one, because like you said, it is a uniquely position property, both in terms of the brand and the product, but also in terms of its location. So, it's quite an interesting one. I would say that, that the property was- in my opinion, it was quite ahead of its time when it was actually when it was actually developed in in Vietnam. And they intercontinental developed it along with local ownership as well. And along with [Bill Bensley](#), who is very well known for design, and also being a little bit quirky, and a little bit out there, which is definitely something that this property is, but it's also so unique and spectacular in its own way. Every corner you turn, there's something to take a picture of or something to do or see.

22:21

Access from Da Nang airport is around 25 minutes, but it is going the opposite way from Hội An. So, where most people would come into Da Nang and then travel towards Hội An and either stay in a property along the beach front in in Da Nang keeping themselves maybe 20 minutes or so away from home Hội An Old Town or stay in the town. The InterCon is actually the other way. So if you're wanting to go into Hội An, from there, it would then take you about 45 to 50 minutes. So, it is something to just bear in mind. Situation wise, it's actually up on a peninsula and up on a mountain. So, the drive to get there is actually quite an interesting one, it's a little bit windy and your kind of don't really know where you're going, because there's not much else around there. But the property itself is situated in its own private bay. It's actually situated on Monkey Mountain, and it's quite a steep property. I'm visualizing it. [crosstalk]

Kerry Newsome: 23:31

That's what I think they miss out.

Alexandra Hepworth: 23:32

It's like,

"I'm thinking, I'm thinking."

Yeah, but for that reason, the property is just an incredible design and incredible concept, which is something that, that I really like is the story behind the property because it's actually- when you arrive, you come into the top of the mountain and you just look out over the bay and look down onto the property which is quite an interesting way that it has been developed and to go about that. You have the beach right down at the bottom and then go up the mountain all the way through to the food and beverage outlets up at the top. The property is set into four levels. I think Heaven is at the top and Earth is at the bottom and there's a couple in the middle, that I don't remember. I think of the Sea, Earth, and one other. Those are really the kind of concepts for it. You move around the property either by buggy or on the beautiful pathways that they have. Or you can use- What's the word for the train that that goes like- the cable car that goes up the side of the mountain and I can never remember the word, but that in itself was just such a cool experience to go up and down the mountain and stop at each level.

23:39

The property also it's very black and white with these strikes of colors everywhere and the design is something that is very unique, but it also talks to its location, there's a lot of lanterns that you can see all around the property, which is very typical of Hôi An and that region. There are monkeys, real living ones that are around. But there's also many different monkey statues and characteristics and those sorts of things, again, built in within the concept because of the location of the property, that used a lot of natural wood from around the area as well, that can be seen in in all the guest rooms. It really is just something very, very special. I mean, for me, it's a property where you feel something, when you go there, it's not a generic property. And I think that having the big brand on the property, but it doesn't feel like that in the slightest is something that's very different as well. I think that people will be pleasantly surprised when going there that it has that luxury, and the infrastructure of the brand behind it, but it also has its own personality, and that's something that I really like about it.

Kerry Newsome: 26:12

It owns that space, it owns that piece of land, and it is a place in my opinion that people would go to, and pretty much want to just stay on the property. I mean, some would say it is an area which is starting to develop, as certainly, I'm sure you would have seen it come along in the last few years, just leading into COVID. Da Nang also, as a city has come on, but I think the property can stand alone because of where it is. With optimal weather, you wouldn't want to go anywhere else, it's just got everything. So, you are paying a pretty penny for it. But I think it's worth it, it's got that value. But once again, you've got that great brand, you've got that cultural depth to it, and you've got all that just uniqueness because there's just no one else to compare it to, because they own that bay, they can go up into the mountain as the langur monkeys and Monkey Forest, you've got Lady Buddha up the hill, you also can take a drive, and you can do the Hải Vân pass.

Alexandra Hepworth: 27:39

Definitely, it is definitely a place where you feel like you want to stay. Again, I think if you're a first timer, you would need to take yourself off into Hôi An and see it and be there for the day and sample the local food and all that sort of thing. Because it is very, very unique. But if you have the time to stay up there, then I definitely think it's worth it. There are obviously a multitude of properties now that have developed on the drive into Hôi An as well over the last few years. Again, luxury high end brands coming in like [Four Seasons](#), who also have a fantastic property, very, very different, but also very high end property. Properties in the town. So there really is something for everybody as well. Properties that cater to families, those that are more positioned towards honeymooners. So that area in the last 10 or 12 years has really just absolutely changed beyond recognition.

Kerry Newsome: 28:48

I think when you are thinking about these properties. In particular, like this one, to me, I don't know whether you'd agree, but I would have some time at the InterContinental and then I

would move property and stay in Hội An or stay in a property close to that to have a totally separate and different experience. I wouldn't try and stay at the InterContinental and do Hội An, because just from the travel perspective, it would be annoying when you don't want to do that. So, there's so many other places up there that I think you would have two different hotel stays if you're going to do that.

Alexandra Hepworth: 29:29

Two very different experiences, you're right. Again, it really depends how much time people have, and where they're coming from, and I guess, the objective of the trip, but you're definitely right, a stay up there, plus a stay in Hội An Old Town. I mean, that is absolutely ideal. It's just two completely different experiences and then they're very close to each other.

Kerry Newsome: 29:57

I'm going to take you back to Da Nang, we're going to jump on a flight. And we're going to go to Phú Quốc. So, talk me through your optimum experience or hotel in Phú Quốc.

Alexandra Hepworth: 30:18

Phú Quốc is one of those destinations that I think the last five or six years has really gone on zoom. There's been so much development on the island, and in a very, very short space of time. You will see now that the all the brands are pretty much there:

- There's InterContinental, again.
- We have [JW Marriott](#) there.
- We have also the [Rosewood Group](#) with a beautiful new world property.
- There's also [The Regent](#) there, that just opened earlier this year.

So, there's a lot of those very, very luxurious brands there on the island. And I think, what I would say about Phú Quốc is for me, the experiences there really are about the hotels. Me, with a hotelier background for the last seven or eight years, that's something that I really appreciate the hotel experience, because we spend a lot of time developing, so many on property experiences that sometimes people don't ever get to use them, because they're always out of the property or they go on a tour or they do something and they don't always spend the time on property.

31:39

That's very obvious more with city hotels than with resort style properties. But I think somewhere like Phú Quốc is a different proposition from Hội An and Da Nang because you are on an island, surrounded by the ocean with great weather, beautiful sunsets, all along the beach, but it's also definitely somewhere for me to go and relax, and pretty much stayed where you are. Because if I'm very honest about it, and it may have changed in the last couple of years since I last visited, but definitely at that time, there wasn't much infrastructure outside of the properties to cater for, especially for foreign tourists. I think for local travelers, and especially the local Vietnamese travelers, there's still a lot of experiences there. Because it's more local, they have the language and it's different. But for foreign tourists, I do think it's one of those a 'stay on resort and enjoy what you've paid for'. In terms of that, you are paying for luxury high end brands there. So again, why not enjoy where you've put your money and use it wisely.

33:01

One property that I do really like there, that I did mention earlier is the **JW Marriott Phú Quốc**. Just because again, I think by the end of this podcast, you'll know that I like the quirkiest places I think. But those places that have a brand behind them, so that you really feel that level of service and security that you are going to get what you pay for. But in terms of design and experience, there's always something to look at, something to do, and that JW Marriott property for me, I have to admit that when I went there, I didn't really know what to expect at

all. I didn't know the backstory of the property, I didn't know anything. And so, I was just intrigued for four days. Everywhere I turned it was just something completely different and the property is set up like a 1920 style university. And it has its own name. They created an entire story of, that it used to be a house of a family or an estate of a family and then it changed, and it was a university, and they have all this memorabilia all around the property.

34:23

Yeah, exactly. It's just fantastic, and the accommodation blocks, they're all different themed buildings as if they were the different study areas of the university. So you have like the anthropology wing and you have- I don't know the ornithology wing and the science lab which is actually the cocktail bar and all these kinds of things. So, it's very quick, like very different. There's a lot of color around. For me, it's just incredible, the way that it's been done, the staff, the uniforms, so like this cool, 1920s ladies, old baseball outfits and sports uniforms. So it's very high end, but it's relaxing, and it's quirky and it has a story. But it also has great food and beverages, a fantastic location, great service, and rooms. Most of them are pretty much ocean facing, many different swimming pools, for families, areas for couples. So, for me [crosstalk].

Kerry Newsome: 35:42

Let's take you from quirky now to probably what someone else that I did a show with, Connor Kelly, we are talking about a an archipelago of islands called the Côn Đảo islands. But in particular, there's a brand there that I think you know pretty well, [The Six Senses](#) brand. So let's talk for everyone about the Côn Đảo islands from the luxurious perspective, because Connor didn't go that route, and we didn't talk about the condo islands from that perspective. But the photos I've seen of the Six Senses resort look pretty amazing. So maybe talk to us a little bit about the Côn Đảo islands experience, be it that it's totally different again, It's an island.

Alexandra Hepworth: 36:31

Yeah, it is. Yeah, exactly. I think what you've touched on there is really accurate again. When I go back to it, Vietnam has so many experiences that you can really have a different one every day, every time you come, an entire trip, you can spend a month just exploring and not really scratched the surface, but I think somewhere like Côn Đảo is nice, because it's, it's pretty untouched. I think, there's not so many properties there, and the ones that are there are pretty in the high-end space. Definitely, the Six Senses has always been a flagship of the island and a reason that people would go there. Again, small group of islands really somewhere to go, relax, enjoy, the Six Senses brand is very, very well known for spa, which is something that we haven't really touched on yet, but something that we should, because Asia, in general is fantastic for wellness experiences, and for spa experiences.

37:44

Those experiences, they're just there, wherever you turn, but to go to a brand that is very focused on those elements, again, gives a whole other spin on a trip to Vietnam, and you can stop halfway through your trip, either access from Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City, and relax and take a wellness package or go and take a bit of a break from running around, just really go and again, have that very, very high level of service, high touch point of attention, especially on properties like that, that really do have a personal, individual guest focus because those properties and those brands really focus on the guests, as an individual, not as a couple or as a group, it's very much about what you need. I think that, again, to have a brand like that within a country like Vietnam, where it's quite unexpected that these experiences exist. Not only that they exist, but they are not so tough on your pocket as, let's say, other destinations within the region. That's something I think we can touch on a little bit more.

39:07

I would say that, to have that more of holistic experience as well, within a country like that is something that that, again, is a hook for a lot of travelers and especially now, you've probably seen quite a lot of reports about wellness travel in general and the demand for people to look

after themselves and maybe not travel around and run around so much to tick everything off the list, take the picture and leave, and they are wanting those more personalized, healthy wellness related individual experiences. I think a country like Vietnam has had those for a very long time without it really being known. So now with Vietnam in general being put on the map by the development and the investment that has gone into in the country, from hospitality brands within the last five to seven years, I think that's also something that is very, very positive for the country and for the customer experience.

Kerry Newsome: 40:11

Absolutely, I think, we're going to talk a little bit about, I guess, comparing Vietnam to its neighbors. I want to leave that to the end because I think it is worth mentioning. But so far, I've been doing a bit of a count list as we've been going. So:

- We've got Hạ Long Bay. We've got Vietage.
- We've got the InterContinental in Da Nang.
- Definitely we've done the JW Marriott at Phú Quốc.

And.. way up there!

- We've done the Côn Đảo Islands.

I've got two more that I want to run past you but one we didn't even touch prior to the show, and that's Nha Trang and Cam Ranh, maybe so I'm sure you're going to- I'm not going to preempt you, you tell me what you think is up there in the luxury in for Nha Trang.

Alexandra Hepworth: 40:57

Nha Trang is also a very interesting destination for me, it's very close to Ho Chi Minh City, and also again from Da Nang, probably 35-minute flight from each memory. So it's always been one of those destinations where you either do it or you don't. It's not always on the itinerary path, if you have 10 or 12 days, sometimes it gets missed, but if you have a little bit more time, then it's always somewhere that is added and should be. I think destination wise, again, I keep saying the same timeframe, five to seven years, but that really is because in the nine years that I was in Vietnam from 2011 until 2020. The development in the country overall was just incredible.

42:20

Especially the economy, the people really changed, the education of people that had been educated outside and coming back and also the investment in our industry of those large hospitality brands and finding those destinations that mean something to people. Nha Trang is another one that just developed pretty much out of nowhere. It used to be a strip of hotels across the road from the beach in Nha Trang city. That's probably taking me back but probably about 45 minute drive from the airport, which is called Cam Ranh. But Cam Ranh itself, which is very close to the airport, was completely isolated, not developed, and yet it has the most beautiful strip of gorgeous white, clean sand.

Kerry Newsome: 43:19

Well you ought to say it now, it's got the most stunning property now. There's a [Movenpick](#) there. Yeah, and I would think moving probably my number one for that. I've actually got an offer through What About Vietnam for that property. But you're right, it is on the same scale. But Cam Ranh years ago was like nothing, it just didn't even rate.

Alexandra Hepworth: 43:45

It was just nothing. It was just the fishing area. I think when I was working for Fusion Group, we actually opened Fusion Resort, it was called Nha Trang in the beginning, because for the sole reason.

Kerry Newsome: 44:09

Exactly, and what I still don't understand, it's part of Nha Trang.

Alexandra Hepworth: 44:13

Yeah, they don't really know but we call it Fusion Resort Nha Trang and the name has actually now been changed to [Fusion Resort Cam Ranh](#) for the very reason that, that area has been so well developed that they don't need to use Nha Trang to hook people to know where it is anymore, and the property really is not in Nha Trang. So, that is one thing that I have noticed that the development up within that area. Again, beautiful, resorts all ocean facing, and I think what that development also brings outside of the brands going in there and I would say that it's not all the international brands, that are there in Nha Trang and Cam Ranh at the moment because it hasn't had that development at the same speed as Da Nang, for example.

45:10

You don't have luxury brands there. But there is InterContinental, which is a fantastic property. In Nha Trang City, there's a Western across from the Marriott as well. Exactly. So, it is coming, and it is there. And again, that confidence in Vietnam, as a destination on the whole, and being able to give a range of experiences for every type of traveler again. I mean, I think that, that is just testament to itself, and also the acceptance of the country to allow foreign investment and to really allow that to develop the country so that it can grow at the rate that it was pre-pandemic, because it was one of the- I think the second fastest growing economy in the world, huge exports, and the country really just went boom. And I think, again, a lot of that is testament to product development within the country.

Kerry Newsome: 46:18

Let me assure you. It's definitely on the way back.

46:28

Just on the topic of wellness, now, I did take a wellness break in a beautiful property just out of Hue called Alba, **Alba Wellness resort**. Do you have a top luxury wellness resort? It doesn't matter where in Vietnam. If you were to put a pin on a map, where would you go for wellness, do you think, luxury top end?

Alexandra Hepworth: 46:56

I think for me, a wellness experience is really about the property that you're in. I think you are right, that there have been a few experiences built in the last few years, and Alba is a lovely place, again, through Fusion Group, and it's not one I've experienced myself. So, I would say that I would probably stick a little bit more and more to what I can talk to and what I know. But Fusion Group developed properties that had wellness inclusions long before wellness was a trend. Let's say that there's one property in general that has always had a big piece of my heart ever since I stepped there long before I worked with the group, it's now no longer actually part of the group, it's now called [TIA Wellness Resort](#) in Da Nang, the Fusion Maya property this is a very, very special property just from when you step through the door, the feeling that you get is just one of relaxation, one of calm, people having this sense of care without it being in your face, I don't really know how to describe it.

Kerry Newsome: 48:29

Nurturing.

Alexandra Hepworth: 48:30

It is. The property was developed long before a lot of properties were actually around it as well. So, it was one by itself. It's a collection of all pool villas. So, your accommodation is very private. They included from the outset a spa experience with every room that was booked and that wasn't something that you could say,

"Yes, I want that. Oh no, I don't. Please reduce the rate."

That was what you were buying. You were buying an entire experience, whether you decided to use that or not was another matter, but the spa inclusive experience was part of it right from the start and part of the concept. I remember, we had a 99% capture rate at the spa because even people who booked and said,

"I'm not a spa person." They left that property as a spa person

They'd been looked after and they had these amazing treatments, and they use a different scent of oil every day, depending on the energy of the day of the week and, and all that sort of things, and the rooms were tailored to different treatments.

49:44

Again, a bit ahead of their time with those kinds of experiences and then developed more- the food and beverage aspect as well to complement the spa and wellness and feeling. I think that that was so something unique for Vietnam at that time. Something that they are still doing very, very well, today, as the resort that they are in now. I know that the general manager there has been there since he was in other positions within the property and has also grown up with that property. So many of the staff have stayed there and been there because of that nurturing feeling that is not only there for the guests, but the way that the property is run, in terms of looking after their peace and wellness. Well, I think that that one for me, is a very, very nice experience that can change somebody's mindset, and something that they can potentially keep with them long after they've left the country.

Kerry Newsome: 50:50

That was similar for me to the Alba experience, as I felt like I was treated as an individual. The experience that I had and was tailored to me, it was very holistic, including massage, including meditations and purifications, the landscape and scenery there alone is just delicious, the food you're eating is very carefully orchestrated to what you want to achieve, and you set objectives around what you want to achieve in your stay. Then you've got these beautiful bungalows that are just making you feel luxurious, just by spending time in them. So you're right, there is wellness, and there's spas and I think the whole world is reevaluating just how we label and how we describe these experiences. I think, coming from Australia, Bali was it. As far as you went to Bali, where now I think, Southeast Asia has become more developed, and in particular, Vietnam is really trying to lift their game in that wellness nurturing space. They do it very easily, because their personalities per se lend themselves to that in the first instance.

52:21

I think wellness and sustainable travel and social enterprise, these are all subjects which are very hyper out there, but not very well explained. And sometimes people can get in misunderstood when they say,

"Well, that really wasn't what I expected. That should be just a spa."

We're not talking about just having a massage, and all you get is spa treatment. There's got to be lots more individualization about it, and specialties. And I think Vietnam is on the cusp of education, also in the hospitality sector, and also in wellness.

So, I got to speak to some really interesting people that are going into hotels and developing schemes and programs that the hotels are going to include that are going to offer these specialties because they bringing that talent and that talent pool to those hotels, which just wasn't there before. But certainly, no one was sitting on their hands during COVID. People were thinking ahead and planning ahead. So, Vietnam still has got a long way to go with waste

management and lots of things like that. But haven't we all? Look, I wanted to finish off with a particular place and some properties that you mentioned that I didn't know about. So, I love learning and hearing about new places.

54:06

So, you mentioned Hồ Tràm?

Alexandra Hepworth: 54:09

Yeah, so Hồ Tràm is an area with about two hours' drive out of Ho Chi Minh City, and a great beach option, in my opinion for people who maybe are a little bit short on time.

Kerry Newsome: 54:25

That's what I like about it.

Alexandra Hepworth: 54:25

People who want to play in it. It doesn't. Yeah, it doesn't. It doesn't really take too much organization. One property that I really like down there is [The Meliá](#). Meliá Hồ Tràm property. It has hotel rooms as well as beautiful villas as well where you can go with a group of friends or with families or for honeymooners or couples so it has a bit of everything and it's quite an expensive resort. So even though there's quite a number of rooms there, it still feels quite individual as well, which is always a nice thing because you don't want to feel like you're on top of many other people. I think in terms of the location, it's fantastic for something a little bit different, maybe a weekend getaway. Maybe a couple of days add on to Saigon because I mean if you can get there by 12 o'clock and leave two days later at 12 o'clock, you've had fantastic experience, great room, good food and beverage, you've been at the beach, you've done your watersports activities you've been to the spa, you've done all those things to help relax and enjoy and it's so super close to Saigon, that it really is a waste not to add it, I think. There are also a few other developments happening down. There is an InterContinental property down there as well. So, there are brands there. I do think that it offers a nice alternative to other more traditional beach destinations that have been used in the past like Mui Ne, for example, which also has its own charm, but getting there is not so easy, it takes a lot longer. Yeah, so I think it is an alternative and a nice quick beach trip, then for me, I enjoyed going there.

Kerry Newsome: 54:49

Since people jump straight into going to Cần Thơ and during the Mekong Delta. In my experience, I haven't had an alternative like this, only two hours away, easy to get to, as you say, to hire a driver and get there and get a quick getaway. That sounds terrific.

Alexandra Hepworth: 56:48

The golf down there as well. Da Nang is also another fantastic destination but close to Ho Chi Minh City, then Hồ Tràm is a great option.

Kerry Newsome: 56:59

So, just to wrap up as I'm kind of mindful of the time.

57:10

We've got to talk about value. We've talked about some big name brands, I wish they were advertising on this show, by the way, but if we are talking about that, and when we then want to compare those brands, as far as, value for money perspective, if you stay in an InterContinental in Europe, or if you stay in Vietnam, can you speak to that a little bit. I felt from you that, that was kind of worth mentioning.

Alexandra Hepworth: 57:41

Yeah, no, look, I think it's really something to note as well that your money goes a long way in Vietnam and in Southeast Asia in general, but obviously, really talking to Vietnam. Through AZA as well, I mean, we have many, many high-end clients who are loyal members with Four Seasons or with the Park Hyatt brand or with the Rosewoods and that level and they are used to paying top dollar for those experiences. When quoting the high end product that is available in Vietnam, people are very surprised by the rate that they can get a Park Hyatt there, for example, versus say, a Park Hyatt in Europe or in the US. I think that it is something very big to note because those luxury experiences are there through the brands and through local experiences as well. I mean, like I said, a couple of my favorite experiences that a luxury just because you can't get them anywhere else is sitting on the street or going for a local barbecue or something like that, that we haven't really touched on but to be in these luxurious, high end properties, but step out onto the street and be faced with real local life experiences is something that you just can't buy.

59:14

That's very obvious in Saigon, in Ho Chi Minh City and in a property such as the [Park Hyatt](#), for example, which is opulent, it's luxury. It's understated elegance, right in the heart of the action as well. That is something, like I say, that money really can't buy but also the value of that property, for the service, for the hardware, for the food and beverage experience, for the location. You really don't find those price points in many other destinations and when you're used to the prices of those brands. It's nothing except a surprise which is also a fantastic positive for Vietnam and for us in the industry when recommending locations for clients that maybe aren't on the main trail, but somewhere that's been on a bucket list and I guess rounding off what we talked about before, given now that Vietnam has much better air access and great air product.

- It has luxury experiences from top to bottom of the country.
- It has great service.
- It has amazing food.

Being able to package all of that now for people to go and experience something that seemed unachievable before, I think it's something that is very nice, and something is very close to my heart having been there for a long time and knowing how incredible the country is, now being able to share that with clients and with people from around the world.

Kerry Newsome: 1:00:55

You've just kind of summed up the reason why I do this podcast. Because I feel the same as you Alexandra. I think it is hard to explain to people to appreciate that the value is there, those brands are going to offer you that high end luxury, but not with the same price tag. So it doesn't mean that you're going to get a diminished level of product, you're going to get that and plus more, and that along with fantastic street food, the people, right up to fine dining. You've got watersports that you can enjoy, from kite surfing to all of that stuff.

I want to ask you this question. I've been dying to ask this question of you until right at the end, I'm going to add it in. So why would you go to Vietnam instead of maybe Thailand or Phuket or Koh Samui. Because I'm sure, if you're talking to people and you're wrapping up products, they're going to ask for your suggestions. So why would you go to Vietnam versus one of those?

Alexandra Hepworth: 1:02:12

I mean, I think, for me to be to be very, very open and honest, I think you get a very genuine experience in Vietnam, I think that the people are so welcoming. They really have this sense of caring for people and wanting to look after them and serving, you know, serving people and also allowing you into their homes and their lives and their culture because they are also very, very proud people. And they want to share that with more of the world than they can by

themselves, and they really embrace people coming and showing an interest in the country, and they go above and beyond for you without even realizing that they're doing that. I think that, that understated eagerness to please and that genuine courtesy of care is something that I haven't seen in many other places, if any, to the level that I felt it in Vietnam and the level that I know is possible there. So, I think for me, it's that genuine, real, authentic experience that I don't think-

Kerry Newsome: 1:03:42

In many places... I agree with you totally. I think just going that extra mile in service, whilst I live in a very developed country, when I've got to go to a hotel and I'm paying a really excessive amount, and I'm not getting it, I really struggle. I go,

"My goodness!"

I've just paid you know, \$500 a night for a room basically, with no extra service, no niceties, no nothing, not even a feeling like you want me here. Sometimes I feel like I'm an inconvenience coming into this hotel, and I'm paying that \$500 a night. So that does make it difficult after you've had the experiences like you and I have in Vietnam because you do use it as the bar like it's your marker against every other experience. Do I get into trouble with a lot of people, who say,

"Kerry, if you say, it's not as good as I'd get in Vietnam." I'll ...

I do that all the time.

Alexandra Hepworth: 1:04:52

We are very lucky that we get to experience places like that. You are exactly right. We do get spoiled also. So, it does set the bar very high for other destinations.

Kerry Newsome: 1:05:05

Look, Alexandra, just want to say a really big thank you for coming on the show, I think everyone's going to have some really good examples to have a think about, obviously I'm going to put all your details, so people can reach out to you separately and do some planning maybe with you around some of these experiences and locations and just great to get your insights and spend some time with you.

Alexandra Hepworth: 1:05:36

Oh, thank you very much for the invite. I really appreciate it.

Kerry Newsome: 1:05:48

I can't let you go just yet, I just wanted to tell you a little bit about the eBook that I released in December 22, called [Book, Pack & Stay: Travel Guide to Vietnam](#). It's available on Amazon.

It's a very different style of travel guidebook in the sense that it's not a destination guidebook, it's more about the things that you need to look for when you are booking your tour, thinking about the kind of trip that you want to design. When you're sitting down with a travel agent, or you're looking to do it yourself online, you've given some thought to the kinds of experiences that you want to have, because depending on what time of year, and those destinations that you choose, you really do need to manage your expectations a little bit. So, time wise, you've got enough time to enjoy it all. And you know, you've got the right weather in the right conditions, we talk about in the book about what to pack, the right kind of apps and bits of research that will help you in enjoying the trip and being well prepared to enjoy the trip. I don't know. So many times I've seen people with the wrong shoes or the wrong clothes, or just feeling the heat and some of these things can be managed so much better with a little bit of insight.

1:07:23

Then of course, you stay what to expect, you're going to trip over Wise, you're going to see 1000s of motorbikes, and just I hope that guide book is going to help you understand that, get it in context. And some tips and hints on just being able to make your stay so much more enjoyable. So that's the Book, Pack & Stay: Travel Guide to Vietnam. It's a nice easy price of \$4.99. So, not a huge expense. You'd have it on your phone, and you're always going to be able to interact with that with the links to various apps, videos, podcasts, and of course, Amazon is going to allow you to do that very easily. So, Book, Pack & Stay: Travel Guide to Vietnam. Get your copy as soon as you can. And please send me any feedback or suggestions as I will be updating this version later in the year, because Vietnam is just that country. It's evolving fast. I want to make sure I get you the information you need that's relevant at the time. Thank you very much.

Note – Important links for brands mentioned in the Podcast

1. [The Fusion Group](#)
2. [Caravelle Saigon](#)
3. [Hyatt Regency](#)
4. [Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi](#)
5. [The Vietage Train](#)
6. [Anantara Hotel Group](#)
7. [InterContinental](#)
8. [Four Seasons](#)
9. [JW Marriott](#)
10. [Rosewood Group](#)
11. [The Regent](#)
12. [Six Senses](#)
13. [Meliá](#)
14. [Book, Pack & Stay: Travel Guide to Vietnam](#)