



## What About Vietnam - Series 3 - 8

### A fun foodie adventure in Hanoi that will blow your mind

**[00:00:36] Kerry Newsome:** *Xin chào.* Welcome to *What About Vietnam*. Today, we're going to take a real fun adventure in Hanoi. We're going to be experiencing something with a lady named Fleur Sharpe. It's a foodie episode believe it or not. It's a crazy, crazy fun story. I couldn't let it go. I couldn't let Fleur go without telling this story because I think what it did for me originally was just open up my mind, and I'm hoping yours, too, just about the things that you will do on a holiday that is a little bit left-field, a little bit adventurous, risky, a little bit dangerous because it just all adds to the momentum of your trip, your storytelling. You're walking away, going, "Wow. That was crazy, but it was fun. It was just heaps of fun. Fleur is no stranger to food. She runs her own online programs, where she specializes in courses in recipes and learning how to use the Thermomix. If you would like to know more about those, you can reach out to her on the episode notes links as I'll have everything there for you to access her directly and book those courses. Today's episode, as I said, is a crazy adventure with a very fun lady as she shares with us just what happened one lunchtime in Hanoi with her husband when they took on a very, very adventurous food journey. Please welcome Fleur to the program.

[music]

Fleur, welcome to the *What About Vietnam* podcast. Great to have you on.

**[00:02:34] Fleur Sharpe:** Oh, thank you for having me. I'm excited to tell you about my adventure.

**[00:02:38] Kerry Newsome:** [chuckles] Well, it's funny. Adventures can come in all forms. I have to say the adventure that you spoke about when we last chatted just blew me away. I'm going to let you tell my listeners what your adventure entailed. Maybe that's not the right word I should be using. In Hanoi, you decided to take up quite a gastronomic adventure I would call it. Let's hear all about it.

**[00:03:14] Fleur Sharpe:** Oh, well, it was an adventure. That was for sure. I was even a bit nervous as a pretty hardcore foodie, and I pretty much say yes to everything. When my husband first floated this idea of going to this snake restaurant just a little way out of Hanoi, I

was a bit like, "Oh." It's one of those things that sounds great in theory, but when you're actually confronted with doing it, it took me back. I was like, "When am I ever, when am I ever in my life going to be back here and be able to go to a snake restaurant." I just went, "Look. Let's just do it." I steal myself with a bottle of French champagne. I got it on the way. I just was like, "Let this crazy thing roll." It wasn't planned as part of our trip. In fact, the whole trip wasn't particularly well planned. It was a bit of a last-minute thing. We're in Hanoi.

**[00:04:05] Kerry Newsome:** When was it?

**[00:04:08] Fleur Sharpe:** It was actually three years ago this week. Not the best time to be there. It was hellishly hot like, "Oh my God." Coming from Queensland, I'm used to the heat, but this is a whole other level of heat and humidity. You just suck the life out of you. What do we do? We're wandering around. I don't know. What's that lake in the middle of Hanoi in the old-- in the center there?

**[00:04:31] Kerry Newsome:** The Hoan Kiem Lake.

**[00:04:33] Fleur Sharpe:** Yes, we're having, That's it. Well, we're having one of those beautiful egg coffees. Then, David said, "I've just been doing some research and found this restaurant that I think Anthony Bourdain had mentioned in one of his adventures too. I think it was the same trip that he met up with Barack Obama in Hanoi, and they had that famous dinner." Anyway, so he recommended it. I went, "Oh, okay. I'm sold. Let's go." Off we go, it's about 5 km. It's called The Hung Snake Restaurant. It's about 5 km outside of the Old Quarter. Off we trot, I don't think we had a booking at all. I think we just knocked on the door. It was about midday.

**[00:05:19] Kerry Newsome:** You went midday?

**[00:05:21] Fleur Sharpe:** Midday, yes.

**[00:05:22] Kerry Newsome:** With the champagne?

**[00:05:24] Fleur Sharpe:** Yes, with a bottle of champagne under my arm. They obviously weren't expecting us or anybody to be honest because we had to wake them up. They were all lying on the floor because it was so hot under the fence.

[laughter]

We had to wake them up. It was so funny. Then, in a heartbeat, they were like, "Come in. Welcome." Basically, the premise is that you choose your snake. You choose a snake, and you pay for the whole snake. I think you can pay by the kilo, but we were in for a penny, in for a pound. Let's buy the whole snake. We chose a cobra for no other reason than I think it was the most expensive and the fattest. [chuckles]

**[00:06:06] Kerry Newsome:** Isn't there some story that goes with the cobra? I heard that it had extra ??? value] or something about it. It's like the king kong of snakes.

**[00:06:17] Fleur Sharpe:** Oh yes. The cobra comes with its own marketing message, 100%. I'll tell you more about that. We choose our poor cobra, who has been caught in the wild. These people that have been doing it, they're fourth-generation snake catchers in the wild. The owner who was actually the son of the owner was the fourth generation. His name was Dragon. Not sure whether that was his stage name or his actual name, but it was Dragon. He talked us through it. We chose our cobra and then obviously the cobra had to meet its maker.

To distract us while that happened, they did a bit of a snake show. I know you're not a fan of snakes.

**[00:07:00] Kerry Newsome:** No, definitely not.

**[00:07:00] Fleur Sharpe:** This would have completely freaked you out. They get the snake out, and they do this snake magic kind of thing. It was fun and terrifying at the same time.

**[00:07:12] Kerry Newsome:** I hope by now you're having the champagne.

**[00:07:15] Fleur Sharpe:** Oh yes.

[laughter]

**[00:07:20] Kerry Newsome:** I was going to say you have to have a few champagnes by the stage just to take that show in!

**[00:07:27] Fleur Sharpe:** Then, they sit us down, and the show begins. Dragon presents every course to us. It was basically a 12-course degustation of cobra. Now, I love food. I'm a pretty adventurous bit of a foodie, studying gastronomy. I've had some really great meals in my life around the world. I think there's a reason why cobra hasn't taken off as a gastronomic thing because

[laughter]

I read the reviews on TripAdvisor. Everyone's going, "Oh. This is a great restaurant. This is fantastic." I'm like, "I don't remember a single flavor with the exception of two." [chuckles] A lot of it was deep-fried, but you've got to go. Don't let me put you off. You have got to go. They come out the first thing they do is that they give you-- Well because I was with my husband, they gave it to him. It was the still-beating heart of the cobra in a shot of vodka. He had to down it. The thing was if you drink it while it's still beating, it gives you longevity.

**[00:08:31] Kerry Newsome:** Long life and-- Yes.

**[00:08:32] Fleur Sharpe:** You're bulletproof. Yes. Then, there's another shot of vodka with this bright-green-like, nuclear green liquid in it, which is the bile, which was for me. [laughs] I've got a slick.

**[00:08:47] Kerry Newsome:** Did you hold your nose or—

**[00:08:49] Fleur Sharpe:** I didn't. I was just like, "Oh, anyway." I was just like, "Okay, it's a shot of vodka. Down it goes." it was like **[00:08:56]** mild. It was pretty bitter. It wasn't pleasant, but that was my fit. It was pretty much all downhill after that. Oh, with the exception of one thing my husband got because there was only one. He got to eat the penis. There was this whole story.

**[00:09:09] Kerry Newsome:** Oh, lucky him!

**[00:09:12] Fleur Sharpe:** There was this whole story around what eating a cobra's penis will do for a man. Hung, the owner, was totally into it, totally believed his own PR. We bought into it, too, to be honest. We ate that. Then, it proceeded with dish after dish after dish of different parts of this poor cobra, which we had no hope of eating in its entirety. In fact, I think Hung's family ate very well for the next week of the leftovers.

[laughter]

**[00:09:45] Kerry Newsome:** But do you add salt and pepper or has it got herbs and spices?

**[00:09:50] Fleur Sharpe:** Yes, there was one that was very much like Kentucky fried cobra. It was off the bone. It was the backbone and was all kind of spicy, crunchy, and all that stuff. Then, there was one that was like spring rolls and one that was in a salad. Yes. Then, it was a blur, to be honest. [laughs]

**[00:10:08] Kerry Newsome:** Oh God.

**[00:10:11] Fleur Sharpe:** It was pretty funny. Then, the champagne ran out. They bought out a bottle of Vietnamese vodka. There's a reason why **[00:10:20]** it's 4.50 a bottle. It's pretty rough.

**[00:10:22] Kerry Newsome:** Pretty rough.

**[00:10:24] Fleur Sharpe:** After what we'd been through it, it was like-- whatever. It was certainly an experience. Then, they took us down to where they keep all the snakes, the snake boxes, which would have completely freaked you out. We went down. We got down this-- how they do in Vietnam, those tiny, rickety wooden staircases that go around and around and around. It was like going into the bowels of hell. Then, we went down. We went out to the garden, where there were all these boxes, wooden boxes full of snakes. They explained to us that when they go out into the long grasses, that to find snakes that's where they bring them back to. That was when Dragon's father arrived. I think his name was actually Hung, the hung.

**[00:11:13] Kerry Newsome:** [laughs]

**[00:11:14] Fleur Sharpe:** He was the original Hung.

**[00:11:16] Kerry Newsome:** Do you reckon he ate a lot of penises to be called Hung or....

**[00:11:22] Fleur Sharpe:** Oh my God.

**[00:11:23] Kerry Newsome:** Is there any correlation?

**[00:11:24] Fleur Sharpe:** How did I miss that? Of course.

**[00:11:28] Kerry Newsome:** I don't know where I went to with that, but I just thought "Hung" and "penis" were like-- Oh my God.

**[00:11:31] Fleur Sharpe:** It's so funny. Well, I think Hung has been doing it for so long. He only had three and a half fingers left. He literally had virtually no fingers left, this old man. Well, he looked like an old man. I said to David, "Look. He's probably 45, but he looked 85."

**[00:11:52] Kerry Newsome:** Did he have 25 children or something because of all these meals??

**[00:11:54] Fleur Sharpe:** Nearly. Yes, huge families. Yes.

**[00:11:59] Kerry Newsome:** He's worn out obviously.

**[00:12:00] Fleur Sharpe:** Clearly. Yes, clearly.

**[00:12:05] Kerry Newsome:** Did they speak at all about the poisonous side of things or Did that ever come up?

**[00:12:10] Fleur Sharpe:** Well, no. They said that they were removed. The way that they kill it means that that doesn't go through any of the flesh, so it's done pretty well. From what I understand, no one's died yet.

**[00:12:31] Kerry Newsome:** Talk to us a little bit, Fleur, about-- you went at lunchtime so was this like 12, 1 o'clock? Then, how long did you actually spend out there?

**[00:12:43] Fleur Sharpe:** We went about midday from memory. Two of the courses take some time. We were still there. Come late afternoon, early evening, and a lovely American couple came from Texas. We pulled up a chair with them. They didn't do the full 12 courses, so we ended up meeting some really lovely tourists. We shared a cab back into Hanoi with them, which was lots of fun. We shared the bottle of vodka with them. We were there pretty much the whole afternoon. It was the most incredible experience I remember telling you about. I still glow about it. Even though it wasn't a real foodie, foodie experience, it was a fantastic all-round adventure.

**[00:13:31] Kerry Newsome:** You're right in saying that. First, I would put it down to maybe a dare that as a backpacker or something and a whole heap of guys and girls, etc. might go and do. When I spoke to you and because you're a sophisticated lady, you're well educated in food and all this type of thing, that's why I was fascinated. I was thinking, "My God. She was game enough to do it." I definitely couldn't go there just because I can't stand reptiles. I certainly can't stand snakes. The fact that it is an experience you can have in Vietnam, I really wanted to have you on the show to share that with people to say, "Look. You can go as wild as you like. You can be as adventurous as you like. I've got proof. I'm talking to this lady. It's 2021. She survived it. [laughs] She's here to tell the tale, and she had a fun time." You've walked away with saying it was a great experience. Was it expensive?

**[00:14:35] Fleur Sharpe:** Well, the way we did it, which is buying the whole thing.

**[00:14:37] Kerry Newsome:** Well, you started with the French champagne. It kicked off with a good start.

**[00:14:40] Fleur Sharpe:** [laughs] Yes, that was. It's the cobra was about-- I think you pay by the kilo. I think we paid about 250 USD for it.

**[00:14:52] Kerry Newsome:** Wow.

**[00:14:52] Fleur Sharpe:** But that could have easily fed six to eight people with that. We didn't need to do it that way. The other couple that came in were just ordering a few dishes. You weren't killing a whole snake just to feed them. You don't have to do it that way. I'd say if you're adventurous, and you want a good story to tell and good pictures to take home and add to your photo book, it's certainly a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Yes, I'd highly, highly recommend it.

**[00:15:22] Kerry Newsome:** You'd highly recommend it. Well, that's good to know. I think because we talk about going to Vietnam, some people get a little bit concerned about some of the species of animals

[laughter]

that can get dished up. Would you agree with me? You've got to go with an open mind, haven't you?

**[00:15:44] Fleur Sharpe:** Everywhere you go over the world. I don't think you've got any business traveling if you're not up for experiencing and saying yes to things. Not taking stupid risks, but come on, don't go to Paris and order a burger. Don't go to Vietnam and expect to eat hotel food all the time. Get out there and try something new. Push your boundaries. That's a whole point of travel for me I think.

**[00:16:14] Kerry Newsome:** Certainly, a cobra at 250 USD. That's a fairly big swag of money for a Vietnamese, yes, in Vietnamese terms. As you say, he is lucky that his virility could afford his wallet because [laughs] if he's got all those kids and that big family, he would need 250 USD, I guess, to spend it. What was the ambiance of the place? Talk to us a little bit. Was it terrible?

**[00:16:46] Fleur Sharpe:** Terrible.

**[00:16:47] Kerry Newsome:** Ow. It was really basic, was it?

**[00:16:49] Fleur Sharpe:** Yes, it was like plastic chairs, but that's like how it is there, everywhere.

**[00:16:52] Kerry Newsome:** That's perfect.

**[00:16:53] Fleur Sharpe:** All I really cared about is it was air-conditioned because, stupidly, we went in July. It was air-conditioned.

**[00:17:00] Kerry Newsome:** And it was the middle of the day.

**[00:17:01] Fleur Sharpe:** Yes. There was an enormous stuffed snake, that was the decorator, that hung over us. I don't know what sort of snake it was, but it was ginormous. It was stuffed, and it was there. That was kind of a backdrop of it. You were immersed in a snake nirvana. [laughs]

**[00:17:22] Kerry Newsome:** Yes, nirvana. Did you have any concerns about health and hygiene because this is another aspect that people come to me about? How did you feel about that?

**[00:17:36] Fleur Sharpe:** I get that from a food point of view like food safety and all that, that's what I really find fascinating. Having worked in food safety here in Australia and the enormously precautious approach you have to take to food safety here. Yet over there, there is literally meat out on the street in the middle of the day in the heat. Food poisoning is actually pretty rare. I think you've got to be pretty smart about it. At the same time, it wasn't really something that I thought about too much because there are other ways of making sure that foods are properly prepared and stuff. That's probably why they deep fry a lot. They also use a lot of salt for preserving. That all helps.

I think I wouldn't go, and I guess this is the point of why we're doing this today is giving a recommendation. If we hadn't read the reviews, and we hadn't seen that it had been a good experience for people, then we may not have gone. Do your research, but I think this experience, in particular, is not really for people that are overly cautious. At some point, you've just got to be all in and take a risk in order to have a great experience. I think that is also true of Vietnam [laughs] as a country. It's not a place for somebody that wants everything in its little box, yes, everything is predictable and planned out. It's probably not the country for you. Do you need that?

**[00:19:12] Kerry Newsome:** No. I'm really glad you mentioned that because I think you do have to be realistic. People have come to me concerned about the health and hygiene of food because as you say, you'll go to the markets and there'll be fresh meat and fish and that out on tables. Once you dig in a little bit deeper and actually did another podcast with a chef in Vietnam, and she was saying, "But they do two kills a day." That meat that's out there early in the morning is actually all sold in about two hours, three hours tops.

It's as fresh as you can get. Sure it's not refrigerated, but it's not there for very long before the restaurant, all the locals, etc. picked it up. I think the way they cook it and because of the deep frying and the high temperatures, you have got that, as you say, as a safety precaution. You're right, if you've got a stomach that is a little bit delicate or some smells or as you say, rickety chairs and cobras stuffed on walls, and all of that's going to upset you, yes, don't go to a snake restaurant. I'm glad you mentioned the TripAdvisor and all the rest of it because I've used the podcast or what I'm doing with the podcast as almost your live trip advisor. People come on to share their experiences. We're in the middle of COVID. Hopefully, we're just coming out of COVID. Cross fingers.

I'm really loving talking to people about their experiences of Vietnam. When people do a trip plan, if they want to do something adventurous, they can find you and this episode and go, "Hey, she came out of it with a smile on her face. She sounded like she had a great time." I think that's the whole gist of it for me.

**[00:21:16] Fleur Sharpe:** Yes, I think so. I think that there comes a point. If you continue to keep looking, you can over research something. If it sounds like a good idea, and there are people out there that have corroborated that idea and go, "Yes, it's a good idea," then go with it. I think some people can have depth by research, and they talk themselves out of it at some point just go, "Yes. Let's give this a go."

**[00:21:42] Kerry Newsome:** Look. It's been great to have you on the show, Fleur. There's no way I would be sharing this experience with anybody. I won't be taking the recommendation, but more because I can't stand snakes, period, let alone eating them. I just want to make sure your husband and you are well and everybody at home is—well!

**[00:22:08] Fleur Sharpe:** Yes, he's still alive. To give you some context, he ran a marathon. He ran 42 kilometers a couple of weeks ago. Maybe it was the snake. Maybe it was the penis. Who knew?

But he's very, very well.

**[00:22:23] Kerry Newsome:** Ow, that's fantastic. Fleur, just again, thanks for being on the show.

**[00:22:27] Fleur Sharpe:** Pleasure.

**[00:22:29] Jingle:** Thank you for listening. Check out the episode notes for more information.

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