



What About Vietnam - S2-25 – Vietnam River Cruising – A truly immersive experience

Kerry Newsome: [00:00:35] Thank you and welcome to what about Vietnam,

Our subject today is river cruising in Vietnam. So before you jump into “cruising” and maybe reference it to ocean cruising, we're definitely not going to be talking about anything that resembles ocean cruising.

We're talking about river cruising and river cruising up the mighty Mekong or down the mighty Mekong, as in the case with my guest, Charlotte Pinder, as she's going to reference her trip from Cambodia down the Mekong to Ho Chi Minh City.

She's done several cruises with Pandaw Cruises and raves about them. She's done them also in other countries. So I think you're going to get some insights into river cruising that you just can't get anywhere else.

She is a seasoned traveler. She's worked abroad; Germany, Japan, China, Hong Kong, U.K. She's got a professional background in marketing, working for companies such as Procter &, Gamble and Pepsi Cola. Her focus has been in Latin America and East Asia, and she's traveled quite extensively through Vietnam, apart from cruising. She has a great interest in the Cham civilization and that was what spurred on from her visit to Angkor Wat in Cambodia.

If you're considering Vietnam and you've been looking at cruises and you're not sure whether it's your thing, this is the episode for you because you're going to get all the nuts and bolts of it. You're going to get a better understanding of what to expect, the value that you're going to get, and certainly the kind of service that you can expect with the Pandaw Cruise ships in particular. And I think the plan is to give you everything you need to make a really well-informed decision, as I think cruising is a great experience.

Charlotte, welcome to what about Vietnam?

Charlotte Pinder: [00:02:53] Thank you, Kerry.

Kerry Newsome: [00:02:55] Look, Charlotte, we're going to be talking about cruising in Vietnam. And I know when we got together originally, we decided, oh, is that the right term, calling it cruising? Because some people kind of think about cruising as just generally ocean

cruising. But I think we've kind of agreed that it is river cruising. So tell us, how did you come to do a river cruise in Vietnam in the very first place?

Charlotte Pinder: [00:03:27] I had friends whom I met in India who said, if you ever want to travel in Asia in a different way from the run of the mill trips, package trips and so on, if you ever want to do something really unusual, then there is this company, Pandaw, which you should give a try. It runs small cruising ships. They're not really cruises, in the sense of massive ocean-going liners, as you said, but they are small bespoke boats, almost like a special little experience. Sorry, that didn't come out very well, did it?

Kerry Newsome: [00:04:12] No, it came out perfectly, because when I get asked to describe the cruise ship, so to speak, it's quite an older ornate style. You can swear that you're sort of on a boat that's kind of like a mini Raffles. It has that kind of old-world feel to it, but with all the mod cons, doesn't it.

Charlotte Pinder: [00:04:42] It's more like a boutique hotel experience is what I describe it as. It's smaller than the norm and it's more elegant than the norm. It is, in a way, a little bit like walking back into a, say, an Agatha Christie movie. And it looks like a period boat. It's not ultra-modern. It is charming, beautifully decorated. The cabins are absolutely luscious, decked out as if they were marine craft themselves with wooden panels and blue bed covers. It has a real nautical feel to it.

Kerry Newsome: [00:05:23] Yes. And I think, you know, in changing people's headsets about the actual ship, it's important to get that description down pat because the experience is an old world experience, in my opinion. And I think, you know, you and I got on the same page as that. And I think the fact that the boat will only hold I think I checked around about 35, 40 people, Max, which is a vast difference to a major ocean liner. So you get that kind of very, would you say personal experience on the boat?

Charlotte Pinder: [00:06:09] It's much more an individual experience. This isn't about jumping off the back of a boat and doing snorkeling trips in the deep ocean. This is about slowly meandering down quiet little waterways. Very often the boat is almost completely silent as people just sit and stare out over the riverbanks. Looking at the little villages that were passing by. I think it's unlikely that you would encounter thirty-five people on one of the trips because of the people who go on. These trips are single and therefore you will find normally somewhere between, I don't know, twenty and thirty-five. It's a very small, intimate experience as a result of that.

Kerry Newsome: [00:07:01] Absolutely. So one of the trips I know you and I talked about was the trip from HCMC City up to Angkor Wat in Cambodia. And it's quite a famous trip that the Pandaw cruise line does and very, very popular. So can you talk to us about that experience from the get-go, from the absolute start? So I'm arriving in Ho Chi Minh City. How does that all roll from there?

Charlotte Pinder: [00:07:32] Well, one of my lifelong loves is Cambodia and Cambodian Art. I've often found myself in transit to see Angkor Wat with no other destination in mind. But on one particular trip, I decided to add on I think it was a week then or maybe 10 days traveling from Siem Reap down the river to Ho Chi Minh City. And really my interest was seeing what lay

on the Cambodian side of the border rather than necessarily where I was going to end up. But actually, it was such a charming trip.

It was my very first trip with Pandaw, and it's one that's fueled my desire to go on as many trips as I possibly can with that company because the countryside is so wonderful from a boat. I've always travelled by road and in Vietnam and in Cambodia beforehand. But the view from a boat is quite, quite different. It's much more rural, much more focused on the people and the lifestyle in the villages, the ones passing. And it's rather it sometimes feels a little unplanned. It feels as if something interesting is happening on the bank, the captain will just stop and we're able to get off and have a look. So it takes you through some very different kinds of the countryside that you wouldn't necessarily get to see on a land trip. The things that stood out for me on that trip were whether there are many of them, actually, but I remember stopping in little village and going to a very, very small temple with people bringing flowers and chatting to one another, a very different experience from going into a big city and doing the same kind of sightseeing.

Charlotte Pinder: [00:09:41] We then floated down the river to various towns where we were able to get off and go into markets. For some people, that's the highlight of their journey, going to see these exotic fruits and vegetables that are being hawked and blended, then with vendors in little conical hats on the river bank selling their wares. That's a great experience.

I particularly enjoyed going to the village where Marguerite, the French writer who was famous for her book, *The Lover*, where she had spent some time, and I was quite surprised to find that that was directly on the riverbank. The other thing, which I remember very distinctly, was stopping at a fish farm. I've never really been off the boat in a fish farm area and I had no idea what to expect, but fascinating to experience the lives of people who basically live on water their entire lifetime and feel much more at home on a wooden plank in the middle of a fast flowing river than they do on land when they go to sell their wares. For anybody even remotely interested in rivers and oceans, going to see a fish farm is a very novel and interesting experience.

Kerry Newsome: [00:11:16] Yes, I'm nodding my small experience on fish farming was actually in Mai Chau. There is a massive reservoir there and they have a fish farm. And I've since heard that they've built a seafood restaurant attached to it now. So you can imagine how fresh that fish is when it comes to your table.

But, yes, it is a wonderful experience. And I think the ship to shore excursions are a big part of your journey. I mean, the mighty Mekong is a teeming place of activity, isn't it?

Like there are all different kinds of freight being transported up this river and down this river. And I think the chance that you've just described to be able to have the captain decide to pull in some way when something is interesting, that's magical. That's really amazing. I haven't had that experience. So that's really special.

I love the children, too, don't you? When you get off the boat, when you meet them, they're all waiting there, all very excited to see you.

Charlotte Pinder: [00:12:29] They particularly like the tourists. They like to meet people from other cultures. And I've seen some very fine experiences along the way. Little kids who just literally want to try two or three words of English, it's really charming.

I don't think on this particular trip, but very often Pandaw will make a special effort to visit, say, a primary school. I've done that a number of times with Pandaw and other trips, which is, again,

quite a remarkable experience, and one from which both sides benefit both the visitors and the children themselves.

Kerry Newsome: [00:13:09] Yes, exactly. And another part that I enjoyed was actually seeing some of the craft making; mats being woven and things like that, and candy being made and things like that. Did you have any experiences like that?

Charlotte Pinder: [00:13:30] I have also done the Red River experience in the north of Vietnam. In fact, that was much more recently than the Mekong trip. And on that trip, which takes visitors out of Hanoi and towards the coast, I remember quite distinctly we stopped at a conical hat making factory. If I say factory, it really means three ladies sitting around weaving baskets. Basically, I had no idea the amount of work that goes into a conical hat. And I still have one in my living room here, which I brought all the way back from Vietnam because I was in such awe of the remarkable skill that is required to produce one of those. We would also stop. We did also stop on that trip in workshops where they were producing things like clay figurines, decorated pots, lacquerware, and a lot of different activities going on in these little villages.

Kerry Newsome: [00:14:47] Yeah, and it's a rich experience, isn't it? Because, you know, most tourists would end up seeing some of this stuff in local markets, and walk right past them and dismiss them quite easily as something that is made in China or something like that. But when you actually see the real McCoy that's made in a factory, in a local environment and you see the work that those women put into it, it does really blow you away, doesn't it? That those crafts are still happening, that they're still operating to the level they are?

Charlotte Pinder: [00:15:27] I remember the level of astonishment amongst our group when we stopped on the way between Hanoi and the coast to watch somebody making noodles. Oh, nobody had ever considered how noodles are produced. And then we saw them hanging in great loops over what looked like a laundry washing line hanging out to dry. And we were fortunate enough to see the whole experience. It's a little difficult to describe for this podcast, but suffice to say that one man with very deft hands can produce hundreds of kilos of noodles from just some raw pastry or paste. To the astonishment of everybody who watches such an experience, I'll never, ever forget that. And I'm sure nobody else would have seen it now.

Kerry Newsome: [00:16:24] And noodles. It actually is an interesting subject, because it comes up quite a bit when I talk to any Vietnamese chefs or I talk to people about cooking classes and things like that, because, you know, "noodles" aren't noodles, like, we think of them from a very Italian perspective.

In Vietnam, they're very light. And I've since learnt that they are largely made from rice flour rather than wheat. So from a gastrointestinal point of view, they are possibly lighter for us and easier for us to digest. So, you know, there's a good bit of trivia to add in on the trip.

Tell us, Charlotte, a little bit more. You know, back on the boat. You know, something that I thought when I first did the trip was that; seven to ten days on a boat or a river cruise. You know, that might be a long time in a confined space. Can you talk to us a little bit about just how the boat runs, like, you know, in a day what would be a normal day on the boat? And it doesn't matter if it's the Red River one or the other one that you did up to Angkor Wat?

Charlotte Pinder: [00:17:46] Well, the day runs around either the excursion programs or mealtimes, all of which are very enjoyable, of course.

But on some days there are lengthy stretches between the meals and between the riverside excursions. And on those days, you will find that there is a program not compulsory by any means, which might cover such things as Vietnamese food or how to wear a local form of dress or some kind of art form, which may not have been known before to the people on the trip. I've particularly enjoyed the cookery classes. Again, not compulsory and the history classes. If you're going on a trip like this, it really brings things to life to learn a bit more about the background of the country and its history. So there are small mini lectures, if you like, maybe an hour long or two hours in some cases to fill in the day. If you wish to join them. And if you don't, then there are beautiful lounge chairs and you can put your feet up with a nice book and a cocktail and just watch the world go by.

Kerry Newsome: [00:19:14] Yes, and that's the nice thing about the cabins. The cabins all have nice balconies so that you can either, as you say, you can choose to sit alone and look at the changing scenery. Because I found that the scenery as you went into different parts changed quite dramatically, you know, it was remarkable at different times of the day, how different it was.

Charlotte Pinder: [00:19:57] Definitely. I mean, the morning times are very hustle and bustle because people are on their way to the market or in some cases on the way to school or on the way to work. But there's a lot of activity that slows down towards the end of the day. You're absolutely right.

Kerry Newsome: [00:20:23] And back on the boat, talk to us a little bit about the food, because I think that's an important factor to consider, because I was really impressed.

Charlotte Pinder: [00:20:45] Well, what to actually get in terms of food will depend on which chef you happen to have on board. And each chef has his own specialty. But I have to say that the trip that I did from Siem Reap to HCMC was a real culinary highlight for me.

I discovered a dish I wasn't familiar with to which I have since become addicted, which was hot and sour soup. The taste is exactly what the name says. It's hot in terms of spicy and sour at the same time to taste, which are really typical of food of that region. But somehow the chef had melded different aromas and flavours together to create a real masterpiece.

Before I left the boat, I went down to the kitchen and begged to have a copy of the recipe. And there are no recipes. The chef doesn't have a recipe book. He knows how to make this. And he tried in vain to impart the same skills to me as he has. I would say that was an absolute highlight. There are, of course, some people who come on the boats and don't want to try local food. It's not obligatory and the chef will always produce something in a more Western style, if that's what you wish to eat. But I have to say, eating the local food is part of the experience and something which I really look forward to and have enjoyed tremendously on these trips.

Kerry Newsome: [00:22:25] And I think that was another factor for me was the food, because I didn't feel I was in that mass production kind of situation where it's, you know, the massively produced buffet. I felt like every dish was well thought out. I thought there was a really good variety. And as you say, if you didn't want to eat anything that wasn't Western, you could ask and they simply would bend over backwards to accommodate whatever dietary problems or issues that you had to make sure that you had something tasty at each meal.

Charlotte Pinder: [00:23:16] You've hit the nail on the head there, because one of the things which makes Pandaw really exceptional is that they truly want every customer, every visitor to come away. Very happy indeed with every part of the experience. And if there is anything they can do; if there's any special request you have, they will try their best to fulfill that. And if that is in the form of a particular kind of food or a particular meal, someone will try their best to accommodate you in that regard.

With regard to buffets, that's not really what the experience is. At meal times. The lunch times tend to be stunning salads and admittedly laid out buffet style, but not huge numbers of them. In fact, a very small experience. It's a small countertop with the most delicious salads you could possibly imagine. Some things cooked hot in some of the country trips I've been on. It involves crispy noodles or crispy tempura style vegetables and butter which come straight from the kitchen. I mean, these are sizzling hot. This is not a buffet that's been sitting around for a long time, not by any means.

The salads are, as if they've just been tossed and then you can serve yourself. Whatever is hot from the buffet that day in the evenings is a much more formal dining experience where a plated dish is brought to you at your table, and that's a really fine a la carte experience. But again, intimate because you can eat what you want, not what's forced upon you. If you don't like what's being offered, there's always the flexibility to go and ask for what you do wish to have. I was on a trip with some Americans who only want to eat spaghetti bolognese and burgers, and that was accommodated with not a flinch or blink of an eye about it, if that's what people wanted, that's what they received. But I have to say, if you don't try the local food, you're really missing out because it is superb.

Kerry Newsome: [00:25:37] I agree. And even if you only just try it, you know, just to see what you think. Because Vietnam sits in Southeast Asia. Sometimes it gets bandied with all Asian food. And it's not like Thai or Malaya. Not at all. It's very unique in its flavors and it's very delicate in its flavours. And I think, you know, you owe it to yourself if you're going to a country like Vietnam to at least sample some of the food, you might be surprised.

Charlotte Pinder: [00:26:19] One of the delights of Vietnamese food is, of course, that it's heavily influenced by the French colonization of Southeast Asia. And so you will find to your surprise that the croissants and the baguettes are some of the best in the entire world. There's even a kind of a stuffed baguette called a Banh Mi. I think the Vietnamese have taken something French and given it a twist, which makes it irresistible

Kerry Newsome: [00:27:03] Because it has pâté in it. And, you know, you can get it almost anywhere. It's one of the first things that I die for when I get to Vietnam. Its those baguettes, are just just simply fantastic. I never feel like I'm full when I eat one. But then the actual Banh Mi itself is so loaded with such beautiful tantalizing flavors with the pate, the pork and the fresh coriander and things like that. It's just, yeah, it's to die for.

Charlotte Pinder: [00:27:39] One of the other specialties of Vietnamese cuisine is spring rolls, but not spring rolls, as your listeners probably know them. Not deep fried Chinese style spring rolls, but Vietnamese spring rolls “fresh of the freshest” vegetables, shredded vegetables and

maybe prawns or whatever else you want to put into them, because very often you can make your own wrapped up into a flexible rice paper.

It's a sheet of rice paper, really, in a circle, in a circle which you can roll and make into an absolutely stunning piece of hand-held food, delicious in its own right. But the interesting thing was the day after we learned to assemble and were taken to, again, what they call a factory; but it's nothing of the sort, it's just some ladies making these rice paper circles on a local fire by their homes on the riverside and then hanging them up on bamboo, a sort of bamboo contraption to dry them off. This gives them their distinctive patterning. It's an experience in itself to see the food, make the food, eat the food and watch someone else making the ingredients. Fabulous.

Kerry Newsome: [00:29:03] Yeah. And when they make those circles, with the batter, and make them into perfectly shaped round wrappers; you think, oh gosh, you know, that looks pretty easy. I should be able to do that. Not so easily,

Charlotte Pinder: [00:29:20] But it's all part of the experience and it's just fascinating that it's always like that, which makes these trips so special.

Kerry Newsome: [00:29:29] I think so. So talk to us a little bit, Charlotte, about who are the typical travelers on the cruises that you've been.

Charlotte Pinder: [00:29:39] I've done seven trips with Pandaw in various different countries, and I cannot tell you honestly that there is a typical traveler. On the latest trip I did in the Delta, the Irrawaddy Delta, just south of the south of Myanmar, south of Yangon. There were four youngsters in their late 20s, maybe, but that there can also be people in their 80s. I can remember quite distinctly a very sprightly pair of ladies in their late 80s. Fit & jolly having a wonderful time. There is really no specific profile to travellers apart from one thing, which is that families tend to choose the family trip option. There are at certain times of the year cruises which are labeled as good for people with children. I would say that there were no children on any of the trips which I undertook, to be frank. I think children would find this a very tame experience if they were used to big cities. As for the adults, any age group, any nationality, I've met them all on these trips.

Kerry Newsome: [00:31:09] And you mentioned that a lot of single people on the boat. I've traveled alone on these trips and I know you have. I mean, as far as I'm concerned, I felt totally safe and happy to do that, and would do the same again.

Charlotte Pinder: [00:31:28] I do all my traveling on my own. I find I don't get so close to the local culture and history and the people themselves if I'm with someone else. So every single Pandaw trip that I've done has been on my own. It's an amazing experience to have a cabin to yourself and to be able to meet other people on board. You would never be lonely. There is always someone to talk to. And for the most part, everybody I've met on these trips has been someone with a particular fascination or interest, which makes them a good dinner companion and a good travelling companion.

As for security, there's no issue whatsoever, but security is totally safe. I would say that most, if not all, Southeast Asia is perfectly safe for single travelers and for single females. I've never had any difficulty whatsoever during 40 years of traveling through Southeast Asia.

Kerry Newsome: [00:32:29] Well, you can't get any better recommendation than that. I mean, I've only been traveling in this particular region for the last 14 years, but most of the time on my own and funnily enough, traveling on your own, sometimes I think you meet more people if you travel on your own. I think if you travel with a partner or whatever or your own group, you tend to stick within your own group where if you're on your own, not that people take pity on you, but, you know, people will be more open to say hello, when you're more open to reach out. What do you think?

Charlotte Pinder: [00:33:13] I think on the rare occasions, and I do mean it's not very often that people come in a group, but on the rare occasions when people have arrived in a group, they've had a less interesting experience than those who are happy to be seated anywhere at a dinner table or on a bus or wherever or in rickshaws with someone else, because they tend to speak about things they already know. They already know each other and they reinforce their own lifestyle.

Whereas going onto a boat as a single person, the dining tends to be communal. That is tables of six, eight, 10, 12, whatever. And you just join whichever table you wish to join. And I tried really hard to sit at a different table every evening so that I meet as many people as possible. I've never had someone feel sorry for me travelling on my own. And in fact, many people on some of the trips which I've travelled on have been travelling on their own. It is much more likely that you will see and experience something fabulous. If you're with people who are doing the trip with you for the first time and don't know each other. In fact, if you are a single traveller, occasionally Pandaw will run trips which have a special rate for a single traveller occupying a double cabin for themselves. So that's something to look out for. It makes it an affordable way to travel. Pandaw is very flexible in that way and provides many opportunities for the single traveler to have a fabulous trip in the same way as a couple or a group would.

Kerry Newsome: [00:35:04] So this is a good segway into the pricing of river cruising in Vietnam. I mean, how would you describe it? You've done a lot of travel and lots of different kinds of experience. How would you say that the cost to benefit ratio kind of thing? Do you think it's good value?

Charlotte Pinder: [00:35:26] I think it's exceptional value, not just good value. The quality of the experience is exceptionally high. And yet the price is, to my mind, pretty reasonable for a very intimate and exclusive experience. The cabins are lovely. The food is exceptional. On every trip I've been on, the quality of the excursions is better than anything I've experienced in the past. Very carefully planned. The way in which you travel in a leisurely fashion down the river, that's irreplaceable. I think the prices are actually very reasonable. Reflect that, and if, as I say, as a single person, if you go on one of the weeks when single travelers are priced slightly differently from the norm, it's again, a really good deal.

Kerry Newsome: [00:36:23] Yeah, that was my thoughts. Exactly. And I think when you do weigh up the experience in its entirety, the actual miles that you are covering, as in distance wise, I mean, getting around Vietnam has all forms of transport, but going by river is a unique, totally unique experience. So you can't mimic it by land or bus or any other way. It is truly unique and I think that has to be taken into consideration.

Charlotte, I want to just finish up our episode. It's been really good to talk about cruising in this way and give everyone that's listening a really good sense of what it is like to travel this way and experience the country. Because as you've done seven trips with Pandaw, I think that makes it fairly evident you like travelling this way and with this cruise company.

Charlotte Pinder: [00:37:22] 7 different itineraries, yes.

Kerry Newsome: [00:37:25] So just to finish up, I'm doing this thing on my series where I'm asking people for a word that describes travel and what it means to them now and in the future. I mean, you know, you're sitting in Portugal, I'm sitting in Australia. Both of us can't go anywhere, but we both love to travel. I have a word and I'm going to tell you my word, but if I may, can I ask for a word? It can be two words if you have if you have to. But just a word to describe what travel means to you.

Charlotte Pinder: [00:38:11] Oh, 'immersion'.

Kerry Newsome: [00:38:16] Immersion. What a great word.

Charlotte Pinder: [00:38:19] Immersion into culture, the history, the lifestyle of these countries in a way that you possibly can't do in a house. In a vehicle, on land.

Kerry Newsome: [00:38:33] Gosh, I didn't think I'd be stuck for words, but that is such a great word, I'm really impressed and I think it speaks to the type of travel we've spent the last 30 minutes talking about.

And I think maybe even sits nicely next to my word. My word is "revive; And my word is driving me in what I'm doing with the podcast in the sense that I want to revive people's travel inspiration.

I want to revive their love of discovery and "immersion" and the chance to experience new cultures, as you say; try new food, meet new people and travel the world in different ways. And we've just spent today talking about river cruising. So, you know, reviving the interest in cruising is important because I think cruising as a word has kind of got tarnished due to the covid pandemic. And a lot of media coverage about it. And I think it just doesn't relate to river cruising and what we've been talking about. So important to have you on to talk about it in such a positive way and share your positive experiences.

Charlotte Pinder: [00:40:02] And again, the word cruising really doesn't capture the experience of one of these boats. This is laid back slowly meandering down river ways, etc. It's an experience and a lifestyle that would be otherwise unattainable, that of the daily routine of little villages, little towns. Cruising gives entirely the wrong impression. I think we've said this all the way through the podcast. It's not a true reflection of the lovely way in which you are able to travel on one of these ships. And then when I said "immersion", I meant being able to get off a boat, suddenly find yourself in a rice paddy field where local people are performing a dance. Or in one case, we went to a water puppet show in a village which would have been totally inaccessible from a major city. I'm not even sure you could get there by road. A water puppet experience far better than I've ever seen in a theater in Hanoi, let's say, out in the open air with a lot of people who are desperately interested in getting to know this culture. That's something that you can't always buy kind of experience. I really believe that. And cruising makes it sound rather ordinary. I promise you, there's nothing ordinary about these trips.

Kerry Newsome: [00:41:38] Really lovely to speak to you. And thank you for sharing your experiences with us today.

Charlotte Pinder: [00:41:48] Thank you. Kerry, your inspiration for this series that I understand you're doing is superb. It will help people to plan their trips in a way they couldn't otherwise, I believe. Thank you.

Kerry Newsome: [00:42:02] Thank you very much.

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