



What About Vietnam - S4 - E16 – Ninh Binh – The mystical rival to Halong Bay

Kerry Newsome: [00:00:36] Xin Chau and welcome to What about Vietnam? Well, believe it or not, this is going to be the last episode for 2022, as I'm going to take a short break. As to be really honest, I really need a short break as we've got a big year planned for 23. So, you can expect to see us back early in the new year. I wanted to take the opportunity to thank you for your support. You've been absolutely fantastic. I hope you're getting a lot from the program. We've, been going now two and a half years. We've got over 70 episodes. So to my guests, to you, my listeners, just my deep gratitude and thanks for your support.

[00:01:28] Just a couple of other things that I thought I'd mention before we start this show. Firstly, is just wanted to say that you can reach out to me directly through the website. [What about Vietnam .com](http://WhataboutVietnam.com)

I'd love to get your reviews, get your feedback. I absolutely love getting mail from you, so please do that. And you can also follow the program on social pages. So your Instagrams, your Facebook, etc., we're there. I also have a YouTube channel. So if you're not sure which show that you might want to watch, if you go to the what about Vietnam YouTube channel, you'll be able to look at some trailers there and just get a feel for an episode before jumping in if you wish to. So that's just something I thought I'd add, that you might not know about. The last thing I wanted to mention was my book. I finally got to complete my book called [Book Pack and Stay - a Travel Guide to Vietnam](#).

Kerry Newsome: [00:02:40] To give you some context to the book, It's actually been inspired by my little book of notes that I've carried with me over the years back and forth to Vietnam, where I write little bits and pieces down from experiences. And these are not only my experiences but experiences from travellers. Some of the things that they've said that I've taken note of that, you know, had they known or had they had got that information, then they may not have found issue with that. So it's quite an interactive book in the sense that there's lots of links to podcasts, to YouTube channels, to apps, to how to get a visa to all sorts of things. So I'm hoping you're going to be able to read it fairly quickly, but keep it as a bit of a go to when you want to start your planning. And while it may sound on the surface like a total do it yourself guide, it is in a sense. But it I'm hoping also it's going to give you the the questions to ask a travel agent so or to mention that you know these aspects are important to you so you want them included in your trip. So it's kind of like your soft skills guide to to getting it right. I mean, holidays are special. We don't always have that much

time on our hand, so I'm hoping it's going to be your companion guide to your research. When you look at planning a trip to Vietnam. And just before we jump in the show, I want to wish everyone a merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. Please make it as special as possible.

Kerry Newsome: [00:04:32] I think one of the things that we've all learnt from the pandemic is about time and about time with those we love. So, it's up to us to make it as sweet as possible. And I just want everyone to know I'm sending you my best wishes for this time of year.

[00:04:51] Now, I wanted to make the last show a bit special in the sense of featuring a special location that I certainly have an affinity with, and that's Ninh Binh. Now, Ninh Binh doesn't come up that much in dispatches I guess, or social media, but it definitely should, as its probably biggest rival would be Halong Bay.

[00:05:19] But as my guest and I agree, Ninh Binh is probably even more special. That's a big statement. I know, I know, but I'd like you to meet Jack Taylor. Jack Taylor produces some. Absolutely outstanding cinematography through a YouTube channel he started a few years ago called 'I Go Cool Places'.

[00:05:45] The link will be in the notes. Of course. Jack is actually an English teacher by trade. He's travelled quite extensively, lived overseas most of his adult life. So, you know, four years in China and three years in Spain. And so he's really got some good life experience to use as a comparison when he's traveled in Vietnam. And I'm happy to say that he's fallen in love with Vietnam as a country to visit in Southeast Asia. I hope you'll enjoy the episode, please. As I said, stay tuned for what about Vietnam as it comes back on in 23, thanking you again. And please welcome Jack Taylor to the program. Jack, welcome to What about Vietnam?

Jack Taylor: [00:06:47] Thank you. Thank you again for having me.

Kerry Newsome: [00:06:49] It's great to have you back on. I really I couldn't let you go without talking about Ninh Binh because you've done this fab YouTube video. And I just yeah, I fell in love with Ninh Binh all over again due to your fabulous filming. So congrats on that. , let's talk. Let's talk Ninh Binh

Jack Taylor: [00:07:12] Yeah. Ninh Binh was towards the end of my northern Vietnam trip after visiting Hanoi and Sapa and I mean it's really hard to choose a favourite place that I've been in Vietnam, but Ninh Binh is definitely up there. I think it's got some of the most beautiful scenery in all of Vietnam. They call it the Halong Bay on land and you can see why these tall, pointy karst mountains that are unlike most places I've ever been before.

Kerry Newsome: [00:07:42] And that's my problem with it. I find it really hard to describe to people, you know, and they say, like, what's so fantastic about it? I don't know. It's the limestone peaks, you know, the the caves that you go on, the boats are managed by those rowers that row with their feet. You know, I don't know if somebody said to you tomorrow, okay Jack, describe Ninh Binh for me, What would you say?

Jack Taylor: [00:08:14] Yeah, I would say it's almost like it's a semi mystical place to me as to how I described it in my video, because you've got these mountains that don't really look like mountains that you've ever seen before. Also nestled in amongst them are temples, and then you've got this, this kind of river system. And I think I found that out most when I took my drone there to make the video. And you've obviously seen my video. It's got these structures that you've never seen anywhere else before. So if you're a drone enthusiast, this is probably the best place I've ever been to fly my drone because you've got some of the best shots, some of the most interesting things you could see.

Kerry Newsome: [00:08:51] And you know why I love the drone photography a lot is because in some ways you get to see things that your own eyes at street level can't see. So you're not always going to be able to get to vantage points to get high enough to be able to look down and so the drone gives you that that absolute 360 degrees view, which is just spectacular. Absolutely spectacular. So talk about your stay there, Jack. Like, how long did you decide to invest in your stay there? Because timing, as we said before, is always a challenge in Vietnam, trying to fit as much in as you can. So how long did you have for this trip?

Jack Taylor: [00:09:45] So I spent two nights and three days there. When we arrived, this was towards the end of my trip and I'd had like I'm sure many people in Vietnam when they backpacking round. We'll have a very hectic trip. And the first day that we arrived, maybe early afternoon, it was, we just relaxed and I think Ninh Binh is a good place. If you have a day to spare where you just want to chill out and Ninh Binh is probably the place to do it in northern Vietnam. The reason being Hanoi obviously as you know, is hectic wherever you go. I don't know how relaxed in a city is Sapa, as we talked about the last time I was on, can be a little hectic as well. But Ninh Binh we arrived, we made a point to stay in a hotel which kind of took advantage of the nature. I see a lot of stuff online recommending that you stay in the town. I assume there's more bars, more restaurants there. But actually I found the best thing was, and I don't usually do this staying in the hotel, we could stay in the hotel. There was a pool and you can see the mountains from the pool. You open the curtains, you can see the mountains. Our hotel was like built into one of these mountains as well. So it was a really beautiful place. And the first day we just relaxed, took it easy, maybe rode our bikes a little bit, and that was all we did the first day. The second day we did more of the traditional touristy stuff.

Kerry Newsome: [00:11:19] Okay, So let's talk about some of that touristy stuff because I remember it back. My visit there was very much touristy. There was nothing in the town like you were. You were barely lucky to find a restaurant to eat at. So it was, it was very laid back. And a lot of this development has happened in the last maybe four or five years. It's kind of really stepped up in that commercialisation and development side of things. So talk to us about the most touristy things to do.

Jack Taylor: [00:11:54] Yeah, there's two must do things and they are the Hang Mua viewpoint and the Tam Coc or Trang An and Boats. And let's start with the viewpoint. The viewpoint. It's like, like it says in the name, it's a viewpoint you've got to hike up. I think it's 500 and something stairs. It takes you to the top of this mountain and from the top there you get one, a view of the town. You get a view of some of the rice paddy fields nearby, and you also get a good vantage point to see the mountains from above. It's pretty high

up, so you get to see the tops and the peaks of the mountains and it's probably the best, the best view in all of all of Nimbin.

Kerry Newsome: [00:12:39] Is there a pagoda? There's a pagoda at the top.

Jack Taylor: [00:12:43] Yeah, there's there's two actually, there's two peaks that you can climb up to. One of them has one of them has a pagoda and one of them has this long Chinese dragon statue built in the top of it.

Kerry Newsome: [00:12:55] Yeah, that's, that's what I was thinking. Yeah. And I think one of them dates back to the 15th century. It's that that old. So Yeah. So if you can do the 500 stairs once again, that's not, not for everybody. But if you can do it, that view is outstanding and you don't need a drone to get some of those views. Like if you buy a trip in Hanoi to do Ninh Binh a day trip. That's probably mostly the two things that you'll do. You'll do the boat trip and then the stairs get back on the bus and come home.

Jack Taylor: [00:13:37] The boat trip, I think is probably the best thing you can do. I think it trumps even the viewpoint. And that's because, like I said before, I've never seen structures like this. I've been in places where it's similar with the coastal mountains. So Gullin in China, they had it also. But what it didn't have was quite it didn't quite have the river system that was kind of running all around these mountains. So you just get an amazing view of these mountains. But it's also they've went and built temples into there. This is where I get this mist. That's why I say it's mystical. It's got a mystical feeling to it because you're pulling up on the small boat, someone's rowing, you're along, they've got the traditional Vietnamese. .

Kerry Newsome: [00:14:22] The conical hat. Yeah.

Jack Taylor: [00:14:24] Yeah. And you're pulling up on boat to these mountain, to these temples built into the mountainside. There's monks there praying. And that's why, that's why I say it's like a mystical feeling or a mythical feel, because it feels like you've gone back 1000 years in time.

Kerry Newsome: [00:14:43] And maybe talk a little bit about the rowing technique.

Jack Taylor: [00:14:47] Well, my rowing technique was let my driver do it.

Kerry Newsome: [00:14:52] But you do it. Technique is going to be definitely different to yours, I bet.

Jack Taylor: [00:14:58] Yeah. Yeah. So when you do it, someone you have someone who's glad to row your boat and they're well trained. So at one point ours, it was a woman, she was doing it with her feet at one point because they are so skilled.

Kerry Newsome: [00:15:15] That's mostly.

Jack Taylor: [00:15:16] What they take it nice. Yeah. They take it nice and easy. Nice and slow. So you get, you get full experience. I was surprised how long it was. It was two, maybe even 3 hours, two and a half, 3 hours I think it was. And the point where it must be the most difficult to navigate is they go through these cave systems so the rivers are not only going around the mountains, you're going through the mountains and out the other side as well. And it gets it gets pretty dicey at some point. There's low hanging stock, right? So you'll see the driver of the person row in the boat. They'll lean back and they'll just do it with their

feet and they'll navigate through. I did bang my head at one point, so you've got to be careful. But yeah, these these cave systems, they're beautiful. I was surprised how long they went. One of them, the longest one, is a kilometer long through the mountain. It's really special.

Kerry Newsome: [00:16:08] You know, I don't know whether it crossed your mind when you were there, but for me, it was like, Gosh, why haven't I known about this place before? Like, these are so unique, so, rich in just not being discovered or talked about or known about.

Jack Taylor: [00:16:28] I mean, yeah, I mean, when you think about they call it the Halong Bay on land, but you could easily call Halong Bay, the Ninh Binh, the Ninh Binh on water. You know, it's, it's not necessarily less, it's not necessarily less than Halong Bay. Yeah. I was surprised that it's not it's not more famous, to be honest with you. I wouldn't be surprised. I think it's becoming more and more famous. So if you can get there sooner rather than later, I'm sure tourism will only continue to grow in the area.

Kerry Newsome: [00:16:58] Yeah, and as I said, you know, from a commercial development side of things, it's really come on in the last five or six years, it used to be typically SAPA like that was the number one spot to to venture out from Hanoi. But now you've got more openness around Mu Cang Chai and Mai Chau and you know, all of those places are starting to get very big with your Instagramers and and all the rest of it.

Jack Taylor: [00:17:34] Yeah. I mean, I think it's one of the most beautiful places I've ever been. There's still plenty of places in Vietnam that I need to explore. But I think I think Ninh Binh has got to compete with even the most beautiful places in the country.

Kerry Newsome: [00:17:46] I think if you love Ninh Binh Jack, I don't know whether you've been to the Phong Na Caves yet.

Jack Taylor: [00:17:53] No, But it's my next trip. My next trip to Vietnam will probably be Ha Giang and then, and then the caves.

Kerry Newsome: [00:18:00] Yeah, I definitely would highly rate the Phong Na caves for sure. Did you have any great food or.

Jack Taylor: [00:18:15] Well, the most interesting food is goat is the local speciality. And I believe it's wild Mountain goat. From what? From what I read about it, you'll see once you go up the viewpoint, the staircase, you'll see some some goats hanging around there. And I believe they just catch them from around there. It wasn't my favorite dish I've ever eaten. I think it's worth trying. I told you my last time we did a podcast that I like to do the stuff that's a bit more out there, and it was a bit chewy for my liking. But it was interesting. I never had goat before.

Kerry Newsome: [00:18:52] Did you have that corn dish that they do where they fry the corn and they kind of scrape the bottom off it and then they put like pork and stuff on it. Did you try that?

Jack Taylor: [00:19:03] I did, yeah. Yeah, it was delicious. I came up with the name of the dish. Yeah, but. Yeah, yeah, it's.

Kerry Newsome: [00:19:08] I can't say it right now. Yeah. Com cha.

Jack Taylor: [00:19:12] Yeah, It was delicious. Yeah, that was one thing. As I was doing my research going into it, I was surprised how much culture is actually in the city. So we just talked about two speciality dishes that are unique to the area. Also on top of that, Nimbin is the former capital of Vietnam and there is an ancient city there that marks a monument. But yeah, before the capital moved to Hanoi, the ancient capital was here in Ninh Binh

Kerry Newsome: [00:19:40] And I've also heard I didn't experience it, but I've heard there's a lot of snail restaurants too. Did you see much of that about.

Jack Taylor: [00:19:49] I did see a little bit about that. I've had snails before so I didn't feel the need to try it again, to be honest with you. But yeah, they also had some snail restaurants.

Kerry Newsome: [00:19:57] Okay. What do you think's a good amount of time to spend there? And when's a good time to go?

Jack Taylor: [00:20:10] So here's the mistake I think a few people make when it comes to Ninh Binh, and this is how I decided to stay that a little bit longer is I met people who'd done the tours, the day tours, and they pretty much all said they wish they had more time. I usually avoid the the tour groups if possible, so me and my wife, we decided to do it ourselves and we found that spending that extra day and just kind of taking in the environment really kind of improve the experience for us. We did a much more leisurely pace. The two big tourist points that I said before, the Ha Mau viewpoint and the Dragon boats. But we were able to do that our own pace. And the key to that was we just rent the bikes and we were able to cycle around. It's not particularly far in between those two, maybe like a 20 minute cycle. And as you make your way around, you can one stop and take photos. For me, I like to fly my drone, but it's you're kind of riding through the mountains anyway. So even though it's not necessarily a tourist experience, it's not something you certainly paying a ticket for. That really added to our experience too. And like I said before, being able to just spend time in the hotel and sit up and look at these mountains really improve the experience for me too.

Kerry Newsome: [00:21:27] And like with the accommodation, I've got to ask you like, you know, was it modern? Would you class it as a four star boutique? Is it more like a homestay? Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Jack Taylor: [00:21:40] They call themselves a homestay, but it was more like a small boutique hotel to me. It had a pool. It had nice big rooms, really comfortable beds. It didn't have hot water. At one point we had to get that fixed. But the hotel owner was very kind and she got that fixed, made sure it got fixed. We also left our passports there and this hotel owner made sure that we got our passports sent up to Hanoi and to our hotel. So a big thank you to the hotel owner.

Kerry Newsome: [00:22:11] How wonderful.

Jack Taylor: [00:22:12] I think it was her fault mind. I think she I think she kept the passports on.

Kerry Newsome: [00:22:17] When.

Jack Taylor: [00:22:17] When you never got them back. Stay out in the countryside. Stay in the stay in nature.

Kerry Newsome: [00:22:23] So two nights. Is a good stay. Two or three nights.

Jack Taylor: [00:22:28] I would say two. Two nights is you probably good, but you can spend more time there like we spoke about in the last podcast. Most people are a little bit pressed for time and the trips to Vietnam two nights is enough. I'm sure you could spend a week there. There was there was other things on the list which I didn't do. We went to go into the ancient city. However, we were a little bit pushed for time. We kind of got to cycle around the outside of it, but there's some other temples in the area. I think they have the biggest temple in Southeast Asia, nearby Ninh Binh and also nature reserves just an hour away. So if you wanted to go spend a week there, I'm sure you'd have plenty to do as well. And this was towards the beginning of October.

Kerry Newsome: [00:23:20] October, beginning...

Jack Taylor: [00:23:21] October, on the first day, which was the day we were spending the most time relaxed anyway. It was a little bit gloomy, but therefore not too hot. It was quite comfortable temperature on the days we were riding bike, it was still a little bit overcast and it wasn't too hot. As soon as we got back to Hanoi, the sun came out. So I'm sure that may have it would have been a little bit more tricky riding about on bikes in that kind of heat, but it was still comfortable. I feel quite comfortable.

Kerry Newsome: [00:23:55] Yeah, I. October is a tricky month in the centre and the south of Vietnam, but in the north I've found I can get away with it. You know, you might get a little bit of rain or mist or a little bit of gloom and then you get, you know, big, big kind of chunks of sunshine and not too pressing heat.

Jack Taylor: [00:24:19] And that kind of adds to the experience as well. Like in my video, I call it the Misty Mountains, because it you've got these tall, pointy mountains and then with this kind of fog over them, which makes it even more beautiful, in my opinion.

Kerry Newsome: [00:24:31] Absolutely. Certainly more magical. Absolutely. Look, great to have you on the show again, Jack, and thanks for sharing. I'll make sure that I put the links in for everyone so that they can check you out and get inspired to to visit.

Jack Taylor: [00:24:46] Thank you very much.

Speaker1: [00:24:48] Thank you for listening. Check out the episode notes for more information. What about Vietnam? Don't forget to subscribe, write and review, and stay tuned for more fun adventures in Vietnam.

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