



## What About Vietnam - S3-5

### The Ha Giang Loop - Vietnams' final frontier

**[00:00:36] Kerry Newsome:** *Xin chào.* Welcome to *What About Vietnam*.

Today, I'm taking you to the last frontier of Vietnam, a place called Ha Giang. That's spelled "Ha Giang." Ha Giang actually gets connected to what they call the "Loop". The loop is actually 350 kilometers in total. It's a spectacular region. Amazing views. You're going to see lots and lots of photos on the internet of this region, and lots of people talking about motorbike riding around the loop.

I'm talking today with Tom Stone. Tom has been running tours in this area on bikes for the last 10 to 12 years. He's decided to take up roots in the area and building a boutique hotel. That's pretty exciting. He's going to give you some great insights into what to expect there from a real "living there" perspective.

You're going to get, the things that you can't get anywhere else because it's coming from someone who's really living the life and offering those tours to locals and to foreigners. Come on board today for a fabulous episode, we're going to learn lots about just what to expect in accommodation, how much time as investment that you need to put in to get the best out of the region. We're going to learn a little bit about what minority groups are located in the region. I think it's going to give you some great advice on whether or not it's the right thing for you to include in your next trip. Please welcome Tom to the program.

[music]

Hello Tom, welcome to *What About Vietnam*?

**[00:02:35] Tom Stone:** Hi, Kerry. Thanks for having me.

**[00:02:37] Kerry Newsome:** Just to start with, to give people an understanding of where it is, can you talk to us about its location and proximity to the Chinese border?

**[00:02:48] Tom Stone:** Yes, sure. It's Vietnam's most Northern province. It's situated approximately-- it's around three hundred kilometers from Hanoi. It's also it's about 250 kilometers, approximately, from Sapa, which a lot of people know about in the North. The province border is surrounded mainly from the East and the West from the Chinese border and the far North.

**[00:03:19] Kerry Newsome:** When I see the photos and I see that beautiful gorge, it is such-- I think we actually talked about it before and you said it's the last frontier. Is that how you feel about the region? You've been there a long time. How do you feel about the region?

**[00:03:39] Tom Stone:** Yes, as you say, I've been coming up here for a long time, recently moved up here, but I spent a lot of my time in Vietnam up in this area. It never fails to blow me away, just how astounding the scenery is. It's a little bit like going back in time even for Vietnam. It's a lot less developed, especially in the way of tourism, than anywhere else in the country. In my opinion, the scenery is unmatched. The gorge that you speak of up in the *Mèo*

*Vạc - Đồng Văn* area is absolutely incredible. Whenever I've had people go through there, I've never, never failed for them to be, "This is one of the most amazing places I've ever been to." Saying, it's very, very popular for photographers like-- Yes.

[00:04:35] **Kerry Newsome:** I would think some of those photos would be drone photos, wouldn't they? Because they're taken at very high levels, some of them, I say. Is that right?

[00:04:43] **Tom Stone:** Absolutely, but the funny thing is some of the best photos are just off your basic phone. You're so high up. The scenery is literally below your feet and well above your head as well. There's so much of view, which makes it such a popular thing to see by motorbike or scooter because the scenery is so huge.

[00:05:10] **Kerry Newsome:** Talk to us a little bit about the loop because mostly Ha Giang seems to get connected to the loop. They talk about the loop. The image, and how I see it sitting in my head, is I'd say lots of switchbacks, I'd say very, very narrow trails where people are turning their bikes in awkward fashion to try and get around some of those switchbacks. I've been on the back of a bike. I know that feeling. Talk to us about the loop, talk about the what's involved with the tour and doing a loop.

[00:05:50] **Tom Stone:** The loop, as it's known, the Ha Giang loop, has become, I think, mainly popular in the last two years. Before that, it wasn't really known about by many people. In my early days here in Vietnam when we used to go up there, and I would lead tours and things up there, they were very specialized. People would have never really heard about it and wouldn't really remember the name. They would just say, "Oh my God. The tour was amazing. The scenery was outstanding. You've got to go to North Vietnam. That was as far as it went." When Ha Giang became more popular was when there was more accessible by transport up to Ha Giang City and bike rental and bike tours from Ha Giang City. People would then do the super loop as you call it. I've seen people do it. I've done it myself in two days, but it's really not enough to get around that size of a loop.

There's obviously different ways you can go and things to see the the Ma Pi Leng canyon and get right up to *Đồng Văn* and even *Lũng Cú*, which has the northernmost point, **the flag tower** on the border of China up there. Back to Ha Giang, I think an absolute minimum of three days to see it all. Even when I get people contacting me, I'd say, "Well, if you can do five days, even better."

All these tiny little pathways and little trails that you can take to get up to some of the summits of some of these little mountain peaks and things like that, yes, can be dangerous to some serious drop offs off the side of them and stuff, but what they've also been doing is widening a lot of the popular areas

There is a small trail that runs above the Ma Pi Leng canyon. You can go out there. There's some really popular-- I'm sure if you get on Google, you'll see some of the photos of people posing on the side of rock cliff faces and things like that, which are very dangerous, but the roads getting up to them. They've actually widened them since COVID, since I've been up there and exploring a bit more. They've widened them to even almost get a car up there. It's a little less dangerous now

[00:08:20] **Kerry Newsome:** Talk to us about the minority groups and the people of the region.

[00:08:25] **Tom Stone:** The main one seems to be in Ha Giang is the Hmong people? Then, the other ones I think the *Dao*, the *Thái*, the *Nùng*, and even, now, the *Kinh* people, which is the main Vietnamese one, but a lot of interaction to be had in this area. It's very much here got a variety of villages, different towns and things like that. Every place seems to have its own set of quirks, but very much the local people are happy to interact and engage with foreign tourists coming through. A very happy place here, for sure.

[00:09:12] **Kerry Newsome:** When you're talking about spending three to five days in the region, let's call it the last frontier, we talked about the loop and doing bike riding. You also said there's the opportunity to **do jeep or private car**, but, let's say bike riding would be the optimal experience. You mentioned caves and trekking. Broaden our view of some of the other things that you can do in the region.

[00:09:47] **Tom Stone:** Well, because of this influx, obviously, a lot of it stopped when COVID started.

[00:09:55] **Kerry Newsome:** Like everywhere?

[00:09:56] **Tom Stone:** Yes, but with the influx in the last couple of years with tourism, which is a huge thing for Ha Giang, especially Ha Giang being one of the poorest provinces in the country, this little influx of tourism is a massive thing. A lot of people got on board. A lot of people that weren't necessarily directly on the **loop**, but people are traveling on either, but people have popped up and started saying, "Look, I'm learning a lot about it now when I go and try and visit new areas here and things." They're saying, "Oh, we can trek up this mountain. We're offering this in our backyard and things like this."

There's a lot of spots that are now coming up. **Trekking** even just outside of Ha Giang City, up on the *Tây Côn Lĩnh* mountain ranges is **exceptional**, really, really beautiful, a lot of untouched jungle and great scenery up there, not even far from the city yet. Then, the other thing that they're finding a lot of-- I'm hearing that they will be opening a few in the next few months to tourism, **the caves and things**. Probably caves are not really in size comparison to what they have down in *Phong Nha*, **but I think equally incredible. It's another thing that you can visit along the way if it's something that you're into.**

[music]

[00:11:30] **Kerry Newsome:** Now people have starting to get a brand or a location label. That's helping them zero down a little bit more on these areas. As you say, some of the caves are only just being discovered in the last five to 10 years. I know in *Phong Nha*.

[00:11:48] **Tom Stone:** That's right.

[00:11:50] **Kerry Newsome:** Even in *Ba Bể* Lake when I was there, there were massive caves. Really, the Vietnamese locals didn't have any idea how spectacular they were, but if I take them back and compare them to, say, Jenolan Caves in Australia, they were of similar ilk, they were just as spectacular. There was like 10 people there. That's what's mostly fascinating to me about Vietnam. Is it a world discovery tour every time you go because they've discovered something else themselves?

[00:12:25] **Tom Stone:** That's absolutely right. I think you hit the nail there when you said that they've chopped it down into different areas to see. Now, instead of just saying something broad like, "I'll go and visit North Vietnam." I think when it was like that, it was mainly made for motor tourists that were here just to discover the country on motorbikes. That's what they would do. They would discover the whole of the North Vietnam, but in reality, the main people that come and visit here, the main tourists that come and see the place, they don't have time to see all of North Vietnam and see if the way that people do that a travelling like that on motorcycles.

Now, I think that the way that they've done that is a great idea because it's now promoting a lot of repeat tourism as well because you don't just come here and see Ha Long Bay and then Sapa and then maybe one other place like you say *Lake Ba Bể* or something like that. In the North, you've got all these other options that are like, "Oh, wow, look at the photos here. I've got to go and see the **Ma Pi Leng canyon** up in **Ha Giang** or the markets in *Mèo Vạc* or something

like that. Yes, it really has opened up, I think, places like Ha Giang as a place that you would specifically come back to Vietnam to visit-

[00:13:45] **Kerry Newsome:** Visit. Yes.

[00:13:46] **Tom Stone:** -because you need the time to see it properly you need to have the time.

[00:13:50] **Kerry Newsome:** Time, yes, to those summits, to those peaks and to do it so that you're not exhausted because if you are exhausted, and you've had all that adrenaline pumping through you going around through all these areas, [chuckles] sticking your neck out into places that you probably are a little bit out of your comfort zone. That's exhausting. It's tiring.

[00:14:11] **Tom Stone:** It really is.

[00:14:12] **Kerry Newsome:** It is. Everybody's crashing at early hours of the night because you're just exhausted from the day, but you do need to schedule in time. People say-- they look at the map and they say to me, "Oh, look, it's only there. Today, it's only 200 kilometers." Well, it is, but on that road, as you and I both know, that can take a day.

[00:14:39] **Tom Stone:** Absolutely. That's a huge misconception, especially for-- depending on which country you're from. I know that in Australia and New Zealand, 200 kilometers is like, "Oh, we just go. We'll be there by lunch." Here, we're talking about, for instance, the road from Hanoi up to Ha Giang is only 300 kilometers, but you need at least five and a half hours to get up here even by the fastest transport, which would be private car or motorbike. The buses are similar. You do need to plan around it, plan your time. That's why I say to people, "Look, if you're going to come up here, give it five days or so." It's like nothing you'll ever experience anywhere else, even in Vietnam. It's absolutely incredible. It's absolutely worth it.

[00:15:41] **Kerry Newsome:** I agree. Let's talk about this time of the year because you and me, when we got together earlier in the week, we discussed that it's a big factor to consider when to go because if it's raining, and some of those roads are wet, and you're trying to battle conditions like that, that can make it more dangerous. Talk to us about the best times of the year to come to Ha Giang.

[00:16:12] **Kerry Newsome:** It's a popular place for local tourism. The thing that the local people like to see is the flowers blooming. This happens. A lot of the buckwheat fields bloom at that time. It's really pretty. It is really pretty. In my opinion, the most pretty of the area is the scenery itself. That's not particularly just the flowers. They're a nice thing to have there, but they happen at around **spring and autumn time**. Over here--

[00:16:43] **Kerry Newsome:** What month is that?

[00:16:44] **Tom Stone:** normally **around April and October sort of time**. That's the time that has been very broadcast on the internet as the best times to visit Ha Giang. Now, I've been running tours up here for a long time, particularly in the last six or seven years. We came up with our true north tour. It became so popular that **we were running it two times a week throughout the year. The fairer question I would say is when not to visit Ha Giang.**

[00:17:22] **Kerry Newsome:** Oh, okay. That's good to know.

[00:17:25] **Tom Stone:** Absolutely. It is, absolutely. I think whatever time you come, you will be blown away. We had to cancel, I think, two tours in that time due to extreme weather. One was in the middle of winter, when, I think, it was about mid-January. We got ice. That was cold. We had ice on the roads. Everything was frozen up there. You're above 1,000 meters predominantly of the most of the loop and zero visibility at that time. We canceled it. I think the other time that we canceled was extreme heavy rain. That was, I think, in July at one point. That was because it was danger of landslides. Sort of been raining continuously for four days or something, very, very torrential. It was a danger of landslides. That's a danger that happens up here, but if you're watching the weather, and you've planned a trip, and you're already here, I wouldn't recommend canceling that until the last minute, until what's going on, or you've got

someone that you're speaking to that's based in the region. You can plan accordingly, but just going off what you see on the internet and saying, "Oh, we can't go **on** this trip because it's not April or it's not October. Then, we can't go and see it." I don't think you have to do that.

As I say, we've had very happy people going up there throughout the year, even in midsummer. It gets very hot, but we can use sunscreen. We can put extra layers on and cover up from the sun. That's okay. The other thing is you start to get the rain like we are now at this time of year, but I'm still out and about every day, getting out on the bikes and doing things. You get a downpour. You pull over and have a coffee somewhere or interact with the locals somewhere along the road. It's always an adventure. Then, you get back on the bike because it seems to stop as abruptly as it starts.

[00:19:42] **Kerry Newsome:** It's a good point that you brought up just about the variances in weather because not everybody thinks it gets cold in Vietnam. [chuckles]

[00:19:52] **Tom Stone:** Yes. That's true. That's true. I've had people get off the aeroplane in Hanoi wearing their bordies!

[00:19:58] **Kerry Newsome:** Crazy.

[00:19:58] **Tom Stone:** Yes. They go, "I thought I was in Southeast Asia.

[00:20:02] **Kerry Newsome:** [laughs]

[music]

Just talk to us a little bit about the accommodation, Tom. Now, I know you've been running the Flipside Hostels. I know you're also in the mode of building a boutique resort. That's pretty exciting, but when you talk about this area, the last frontier, immediately go to fairly primitive homestays in my mind. Talk to us about the accommodation that a person could experience, or what's on offer for a three to five night stay up in that region.

[00:20:51] **Tom Stone:** Yes. I think you're absolutely right there. Again, being a fairly underdeveloped area, the accommodation that was always here has been, yes, those fairly primitive stood-house-style homestays, which can be a really cool experience for all types of people, a little bit hard on the back when you're sleeping on some hard mattresses on the floor in these stood houses, but a lot of them are really nice, really clean, really good food. The families are just wonderful to drink a bit of the local rice wine with them and things like that, but predominantly that's what you got. That, I think, is what has tagged the area as, possibly, some of the more hard-adventure-type tourism.

[00:21:43] **Kerry Newsome:** Traveler.

[00:21:43] **Kerry Newsome:** Yes, traveler. Yes. As you say, when we think of Ha Giang it was very, very popular. It was predominantly backpackers, **young backpackers** that didn't-- They don't mind. They wanted that sort of thing.

What we're focusing on now because there seems to be a bit of a gap in the market here, that is for the other type of traveler that **want a little bit more of comfort** and a break from the--how do you say the rawness of Ha Giang? Every now and then, to have some good food, nice comfort and decent **beds**, and places to stay and things like that. What we are doing here in Ha Giang City is trying to do something like that.

Throughout the loop, what's available now? As it's become more popular, a lot of hotels and things like that are popping up throughout the area, but a lot of them are still fairly basic. I think that if people are looking to do it themselves and get up here to Ha Giang and rent a bike or something like that, it's a little bit more difficult to find. You look online and get a barrage of different accommodations that are available. **It's really hard to know which ones are legitimate and which ones are actually good.** A lot of them share the same photos. I'm sure, I just looked at that one, but it's another place in another town. There is more becoming

available for different travelers now as well, which is a good thing, especially in the main towns.

**[00:23:37] Kerry Newsome:** Good to know. I think for everyone listening, it's important to just explain the homestay variable in the sense that if you're staying in a homestay in Hoi An, it's like a mini boutique hotel. It's got all the comforts that a westerner would be used to. The beds might be a little bit hard. You're still looking at quite a modern set-up where the more traditional homestay is as it was deemed to be, was a homestay. It was the home of the local family. They were opening it up to visitors to come, stay in their home, experience their home life with their family, they would cook for them, etc. Things like the bathroom and the bed situation probably would be of that raw, camp-type feel to it. As you say, it's not for everyone, but it's just good to get the measure out there for people so they understand the difference because I've had people come and say, "Oh, homestays fine. We stayed at a fabulous place in Hoi An." I go, "Whoa." That's not what you're going to get in Mu Cang Chai or—Ha Giang?

**[00:25:04] Tom Stone:** You're absolutely right. It's actually a very good point to make. We get asked a lot here. I've always considered a homestay to be the leisure of what you just explained. It's a very local thing. We stay, actually, with the family. You eat dinner with the family. The bathrooms are typically shared. If there's a private room in their homestays, it's typically occurrence that's put across. T

But it's an interesting and eye-opening experience for a lot of people. Yes, it's, as you say, very different to what I would call a homestay in Hoi An or Hanoi or something like that. It seems to even up here now that has started to deviate into nicer places being called homestays, which is typically what we are not calling our place because I think it is. There's a big difference between that raw, real homestay thing and somewhere that is the creature comforts for Western tourists. It's a very big difference. I think you would have seen yourself staying in places like Mu Cang Chai and *Ba Bể*, where it's all they had. I'm pretty sure what will they still have is that homestay-type accommodation.

**[00:26:26] Kerry Newsome:** But as you say, it's morphing into a more Westerner version of the same thing. Look, to me, it's just about managing people's expectations.

**[00:26:39] Tom Stone:** Absolutely.

**[00:26:40] Kerry Newsome:** For some people, they get quite annoyed that they're not getting an authentic experience if they get the two modern experience. It's just about managing what people have in their vision as to what they want to experience in that region. I think there's something for everybody, but not everything is for everyone. Just what would be some tips for people coming into the area. We talked about the variance of type of person. It's not just a backpacker anymore. Certainly it's opening up to a much wider audience, but if you were to throw some tips to my listeners as what they need to consider or things to bring or mindsets to have, What would you share for my listeners if they're going to come to Ha Giang?

**[00:27:38] Tom Stone:** First thing I would say is have an open mind to what you're going to experience because as we discussed, **the region is so raw. That is, as we call it, the final frontier of Vietnam. Even the locals call it the final frontier**, not just because it's the most Northern frontier on the China border, but because it is the last place that hasn't really been overrun by development and tourism.

When you enter the place, you have to understand that. The other thing that I would say, as well as, is try to preplan as much as you can because this tourism thing is new. A lot of people jumped on board. **There's a lot of misinformation** if you will, especially, looking on the

internet and things as most people do these days to find info. There's a lot of conflicting stuff as to where things actually are. Again, having your expectations managed correctly is an important thing. Look at contacting someone local that has been around for a while and things like that. Make sure you have a bit of a plan you've researched where you're going to go, if you're planning on doing it yourself, the type of transport you're going to be using, because safety is a huge thing up here. As we've discussed, 300 kilometers away from Hanoi. It's not that far, but it takes a long time to get there. When bad things happen up here, it's a long way to get to somewhere that can help. Anywhere on a motorcycle can be dangerous. It's important to research where you can as much as you can before you get up here, but absolutely, I'd invite people to come and see it. It's an incredible thing and well worth visiting.

**[00:29:30] Kerry Newsome:** Yes, I agree with you totally. Just thanks again for being on the show.

**[00:29:34] Tom Stone:** Not a problem. Thank you very much for having me.

[music]

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