



What About Vietnam - Series 3 -17 - Mui Ne - Beach bliss, kitesurfing and sand dunes

Kerry Newsome: 00:01

Xin Chào and welcome to What about Vietnam!

00:04

Ho! Ho! Ho!

00:06

Guess what? We are nearly there once again. I wanted to take this opportunity as we wrap up for 2021, to wish you all a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, I'm truly grateful to everyone that subscribes to the program, writes reviews, that pops in and send me messages that is really supportive of the program as it's a labor of love, I love doing it, and I get to meet some wonderful people as a result.

00:44

I am hoping that I'm going to see you in Vietnam in 2022. Things are looking very positive for that to happen, at least in the second quarter as a tourist with all the freedoms that we were accustomed to prior to the pandemic.

01:03

We're going to wrap up this year with a destination episode.

01:09

Our destination for today is "**Mui Ne**".

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If you Google "**Mui Ne**", you'll see all these pictures of crazy sand dunes, dune buggies, kite surfing and beautiful beaches. It's just a little place of contrasts but more known for its beautiful beaches and an opportunity to really chill out and relax.

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I'm joined today by the lovely Nikki Cornish.

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Nikki Cornish was the General Manager of Sailing Club in Mui Ne. I caught up with her as she was taking up a new role with the Sailing Club Leisure Group in Halong Bay, but she was great to come on the program to talk about Mui Ne. She originally came there in 2018. She had an extensive background in the hospitality industry and was thrilled to take up that role as General Manager of Mui Ne. So, she's been there since then. She comes with two sets of eyes, one as a tourist and one as a local and an expat. She shares with us some great insights about the location, which I think you'll all find really handy to know about because it is a destination that's 4 hours out of Ho Chi Minh City, but very popular with long haul travelers who are looking for just a bit of respite before that long journey home.

02:44

I hope you will have a fantastic 2022. Please continue to follow the program as I do really appreciate it and I've got some great guests lined up for next year to talk about some really cool stuff to do, and some great places to talk about. Vietnam is just one of those places that just keeps opening up to so many different things you wouldn't even believe and that makes it exciting and revealing all at the same time.

03:21

So, Nikki, welcome to What about Vietnam!

Nikki Cornish: 03:25

Great. Morning, Kerry. Thank you! And thank you very much for having me.

Kerry Newsome: 03:28

Tell us a little bit about Mui Ne and what we're seeing there? And is it all true?

Nikki Cornish: 03:35

Absolutely! Mui Ne is a beautiful little beach resort town, on the southeast coast of Vietnam. It's about two hundred kilometers from Ho Chi Minh City and it's idyllic. We can get away for guests that are coming from Ho Chi Minh or from around the southern areas or wherever else they may be coming through from in Vietnam. It is also a beautiful beach destination for international travelers as well.

04:05

The pictures that you see of the beaches on the sand dunes, it's all there and it's just so beautiful beach destination, somewhere you can really just get away from everything. Very simple life, but beautiful surroundings, especially if you like the outdoors or being on the coast, then Mui Ne is a perfect destination.

Kerry Newsome: 04:34

What challenged me was when I first saw pictures was, "*How does a beach resort sit alongside sand dunes?*"

It looks like the deserts of Arabia in some of those images. So maybe explain to us a little bit about how one part of that location relates to the other?

Nikki Cornish: 05:00

Mui Ne is known as actually **one of the sandiest areas** in Vietnam or urban area with the prolific amount of sand. Mui Ne is mainly made up of a strip of resorts and restaurants that sort of tourists section. Then you do have the sand dunes, but they are short drive away. So as an example, the white sand dunes are about forty kilometers away from our resort and the red dunes are about twenty kilometers, but you will see them even as you drive down the coastal roads and driving in and around Mui Ne, you can see just off the coast a lot of sand, a lot of the sand dunes. It's almost like a little mini desert set up, but you don't really feel that because you're obviously on the coast and then it's very tropical as well.

Kerry Newsome: 05:52

I think you and I spoke about the fact that you can go and visit these sand dunes. So, what would be a typical kind of outing to visit the sand dunes?

Nikki Cornish: 06:03

The sand dunes, the red and white sand dunes are one of the most popular tours and attractions to go and see in Mui Ne. There's also the fishing village which is very popular because Mui Ne is based on local fishermen, that's how majority of the locals actually make their livelihood, support, and feed their families. So, you have the fishing village and then there's another small and tourist attraction called the **"Fairy Stream"**.

The Fairy Stream is basically a beautiful little stream, ankle deep water that you walk through and as you're walking through it, you go through like a mini canyon and you can see the different red and white sands on the walls of the canyon. You keep walking through and eventually at the end you do get to a little waterfall.

06:55

So, we have them at Sailing Club, we offer a really great tour, it's about four hours, we take you out with one of our trusted tour guides who is obviously fluent in English and in Vietnamese. And you go off to the sand dunes in the morning either for sunrise or sunset, you go and visit the fishing village and obviously the fishing villages is best to go first thing in the morning. So, you can actually watch the fishermen come off the water, see their catch. We take you through to the red dunes after that and then around to the Fairy Stream to end off. So, it's a great morning or afternoon tour where you can actually experience all those attractions within one fall. The sand dunes there, they always recommend doing either a sunrise or sunset tour because of scene, it always makes things a lot more picturesque and a lot more beautiful. And the tour is open to go to any time of the day.

07:53

When you get to the white sand dunes, you have an option to either go up on a four-wheeler or an open-air jeep. So, they drive you up on the dunes, you can see all the views from there. And obviously from there because of all the different sands and the different colors, it makes it really beautiful to see,

as I said, it's like the colors of Mui Ne. Then if you want to do some sort of sand sledging down the dunes, you can, once you've had your photo opportunity moments you've taken in the view that then take it down on the four-wheelers, you do a little bit of a Dune Buggy experience. There is a beautiful little dam at the bottom, you stop off there, and then they take you back and then we continue with the tour to the Fairy Stream and to the red dunes from there.

Kerry Newsome: 08:48

As you said it is a sand location, how does that affect the weather in the region? Like is it particularly mostly dry or how does it effect?

Nikki Cornish: 08:59

We have such an ideal climates in Mui Ne, it's a microclimate and we're very protected from sort of all the weather elements as well. So pretty much throughout the year, you're going to sit on an average temperature of about 27 degrees Celsius, we do experience a summer and a winter season but the only thing that really changes with that is rain and humidity, in saying that Mui Ne is probably one of the driest regions in Vietnam and when I say dry, for those who know Vietnam, when it rains, there's a lot of rain in Vietnam [inaudible 09:40] to be very wet but the rainfall is very moderate. we don't get a huge amount of rainfall where it affects your stay or affects your travel too much. So, the weather's is beautiful, it's consistent and constant throughout the year and just very pleasant.

Kerry Newsome: 10:06

So, in other words, where normally we might recommend different months of the year for other regions of Vietnam, just to adjust, I guess for certain people's likes and dislikes as far it is, in the middle of the year, typically it's extremely hot. So, you're saying that really any time of the year would be a good time to go to?

Nikki Cornish: 10:30

It would be and depending on what are your preferences. So, our high season typically runs from end of October to end of April and a few reasons for that.

10:42

One is the weather, it becomes our winter season, which again, you're sitting on sort of 27 degrees so it's not cold at all but during those months, there's no rain, the humidity completely drops or almost completely dissipates and then that is also the season that we get very good wind and I bring that in as a factor because Mui Ne is known as **one of the top kite surfing destinations** in Southeast Asia. So, it makes it a high season as well because of people who want to come for the kite thing, for windsurfing and other sort of water or wind sports.

11:22

If you had to come from low season, which is now going to be May till mid to end October, you will experience rain and there will be days where the rain will sit in for a day. Usually, after the storm, it all clears, you're back to beautiful blue skies, you will feel the humidity and I would say again, for people

that are coming from a weather point of view, then most ideal would be the October to April the high season time and obviously if you are kite surfer, that is definitely the best time to come through.

11:58

For people who don't enjoy such big crowds and actually prefer traveling on offseason then July/August is also ideal. We sort of go through some of the rains or some of the heavy rains which come around sort of May/June, we get very heavy rain and then in September very heavy rain. But that July/August period, which fits in with Australian summer holidays, British summer holidays and the Germans also have them, a long summer break over there. So that has also become quite a popular time offseason to travel to Mui Ne.

Kerry Newsome: 12:32

Okay, so I don't know which question to ask you first, should I ask you a bit more about the kite surfing, I'm intrigued because I have a few friends who are into that and they've never kind of really thought about Vietnam as a destination for this and I said,

"Well, hang about, I'm going to be talking to this lady who is right I believe in a location that it is a very top priority spot there".

Nikki Cornish: 12:59

Correct! and things you don't ever see pre COVID, in high season if you look out onto the sea, there's just hundreds of kite surfers out and enjoying the wind, it's very big at Mui Ne and it has a lot of different kite schools. We have our own kite school at Sailing Club as well as "**Sailing Club Kite School**", so we offer kite surfing lessons that is from complete beginners to professionals. At any level we have our guides and instructors there to be able to teach you we've got all the equipment. We also offer other watersports, surfing lessons, paddleboarding, kayaking, but it's definitely all about the wind. So, a lot of people will travel to Mui Ne for that six-month period and pertaining to the kite surfing in the windy season. And they will either be coming through as foreign kite surfing instructors, or people that are able to [inaudible 14:03]. It's their passion and they'll come for a whole high season, and they come just to kite surf. There's also been a couple of big kite brands, that come up when they developed their new range and they're ready to launch for the next year, they come through and they do all their photography, and they do their launch in Mui Ne.

Kerry Newsome: 14:30

Okay, that's interesting! But traditionally, we said that it's the kind of destination to come to for ultimate relaxation. Like we talked a little bit, about the fact that it's not a place with a heap of attractions. It's ideally a place to relax and chill out. Maybe talk to us about who are your most common visitors?

Nikki Cornish: 15:03

I think everyone can agree obviously things have changed quite significantly during the pandemic.

15:10

So, we've got two major sectors,

1. Pre COVID
2. During COVID.

So speaking on behalf of our resort and Sailing Club Mui Ne, during and pre COVID, we were very lucky that we had such a broad demographic of guests and visitors come through, a lot of Southeast Asian trade, a lot of European from all over the world we had people come through, and a lot for us, and in our resort were holidaymakers who had a bit of a busy tour or busy trip, and they did just want a couple of days or a week to just relax by the beach, sip on some cocktails, and enjoy really good food by the pool, be looked after pampered, that would be our main stream of guests.

16:04

Now, obviously, during COVID, the domestic market is what we've had to rely on, and we've been very fortunate enough that we have got a very strong and loyal following from people in Vietnam, and particularly in Ho Chi Minh City. So, we have a lot of our regular guests that come through regular return guests that come every sort of two, three weeks, they stay with us for sometimes 2-3-4 weeks, and again, varying very much on people that just want to get away from the city and come and relax. And those who want to kite surf. So, it is a little bit of a mix and it's very dependent on what you do, if you enjoy your kite surfing and those activities, it's all there for you. If you're wanting to just get away, switch off, turn off all your media, your phones, and then sit with a book by the pool and just rejuvenate and recharge.

Kerry Newsome: 17:10

Yeah, and I really like that idea of finishing off a trip before you go home, in a place like that because sometimes it can be all rush and you're trying to cover a lot of places. People by the time they end up at the airport to depart for their long-haul flight back to Europe or US or Australia. They're absolutely exhausted, it's probably a good idea to finish off in a place like that because it kind of leaves you with that nice, beautiful feeling rather than that, "*Gosh! I wish we'd had more time*" kind of feeling.

Nikki Cornish: 17:52

Absolutely! We had we had a lot of our guests, especially European and British guests that were booked through certain travel agents in the UK or Europe or wherever they were coming through, their tour was pretty much tailored that they would start up in the north and they would work their way down. Vietnam is such a such a diverse country, for anyone that is or has been to Vietnam, there is so much to see, there's so much to do and as you say literally from when you touch down, it's just go! go! go! because you want to see and absorb as much of what this beautiful country can offer you. As I just mentioned, a lot of our clients in the trip of five day or seven day stay, they're just relaxing. And I said, it was absolutely the best way that they could have done Vietnam because although they enjoyed seeing everything in Vietnam, they did say it was quite intense and I think a lot of people experience that when you come in from another country and you're not familiar with Vietnam, it can come across as a bit of intense and bit busy. And I said, for them it was absolutely the most ideal way of how to structure their holiday and should they return to Vietnam, it's definitely how they would do it again.

Kerry Newsome: 19:12

In fact, it's going to be the title of an episode I'm doing in a couple of weeks' time just about trying to fit everything in a 12 or 14, what we call "**a top to bottom tour**" versus maybe chunking it down into smaller regions because there is just so much to do, you're up at eight and you're on the bus or you've

got a car waiting for you when it is go! go! And I think people do underestimate that movement factor, the heat. Taking that into consideration and you just wanting to be able to really enjoy the place rather than just go there, see it, get back on the bus. so, time becomes a luxury, if you can afford it and we were going to do an episode just on that, and I have a really great guest to do that.

Nikki Cornish: 20:12

Brilliant! looking forward to tuning in and listening to that one.

Kerry Newsome: 20:19

That also came about when we were talking about the amount of time to give to a stay like this, like, we talked about having a few days, but it sounds like you could easily stay there a week, or that just to take in the environment and to relax and I think you mentioned that you do have some guests that actually stay longer than that.

Nikki Cornish: 20:45

Absolutely! We obviously have short stay guests come in sort of one to three nights, those are people that are on a little bit of a tight schedule, they're trying to see as much of Vietnam as they can, and they stay a week or two.

20:59

We have guests that will spend sort of a week with us, and we've had guests that will stay sometimes up to a month with us. So, it's such a great thing for us as well because we obviously get to meet people and travelers from all over the world. People who have different likes and dislikes and so it's always quite fascinating to meet people who come from such different backgrounds and want and needs. You do have the people that just could sit there for a month and just relax, and you have other people that do get a little, but they are the more active peoples they do tend to get a little bit antsy at times that,

"What else can we do? And we want to go and see this."

So, it is all a matter of preference and I think the easiest way to put it is that for those who want to travel to Mui Ne, they don't come with the expectation that it is going to be a full-on busy holiday or trip for you. There are some beautiful sights and attractions to see but it's not going to be as busy as a lot of other destinations that you will visit in Vietnam.

Kerry Newsome: 22:14

Correct me if I'm wrong, I think the major things that I take away from this is, yes, there are some wonderful photo opportunities, for avid travel photographer, that would be a great destination, as you were saying with the sand dunes. Lots of lovely sunsets and sunrises to take etc. So, all those beautiful pictures, that's how they come about. So, I think for the travel photographer, that's very keen.

22:41

I think, in especially post COVID, I think people are going to really think very carefully about this stay, and what they want to get out of it and so if they are looking for slow travel, or they are looking for

maybe just one or two destinations in Vietnam, to take in a trip so that they can have that slow travel and really soak it up and enjoy it. I think also for maybe the more mature traveler, or the solo traveler or people just might want to go away for a bit of a sabbatical away from, as you say, the media, the phones, the whole kind of thing.

23:24

Then you've got your kind of your budget traveler, you've got your sporting traveler, so that if they want to do some water sports or they want an environment to learn some of those watersports. So that's got to be appealing, I guess, as well for maybe young adult families, you've got teenagers, they're always wanting things to do but if they could learn something like a water sport that you suggested, kite surfing, surfing, all of that kind of stuff. It sounds like a great environment for them as well.

23:59

So, maybe just talk to us a little bit about the kind of budget that is good to allow for a stay, maybe a three- or four-night stay from where you are to kind of the other end.

Nikki Cornish: 24:15

One of the beauties of Mui Ne is it actually caters to anyone on all budgets, you can find accommodation options in Mui Ne, anyway from sort of \$20 a night up to \$300/\$400/\$500 a night. What going into the sort of meeting four- and five-star resorts. Same goes for your sort of food and beverage costs. Vietnam in general, if compared to first of all countries and to the rest of the world, it's is generally very affordable. So especially for people coming from Europe and that when they compare the prices to what they pay in Europe, it is extremely cheap compared to what they're paying over there.

25:07

Again, for the food and beverage, whatever your budget whether you want to enjoy there's a lot of local seafood restaurants and those become very popular and not just because of a price factor but just because it is very much something that is prevalent in Mui Ne with it being a fishing village that has grown into this tourist town, there is actually a section on the strip of Mui Ne, that has all, they're called "**Bo Ke Restaurants**", and it's all the seafood restaurants. So, you walk along the strip, and it's just seafood restaurant after seafood restaurant, all the fish and the life tanks, and you go through and you pick and choose what you want, obviously very local, so a lot of the Vietnamese flavors than all the local way. Prices are pretty crazy for beautiful fresh seafood as well as an ultimate local dining experience that you wouldn't be able to experience in many other places of the world. So that is definitely something I would recommend when you're on Mui Ne, definitely go and give one of those seafood restaurants a try.

26:26

For those who do prefer sort of more fine dining, there are some beautiful restaurants, in some of the resorts. Our sandals restaurant, which is the restaurant within our resort is very well known, not just in Mui Ne, but actually in Vietnam, we've got a very good reputation for great food, and beautiful location, great wine list. The only thing I would say that maybe there in terms of pricing, it might be a little bit sort of off kilter when you compare pricing within the rest of Vietnam is maybe sort on your alcoholic drinks,

your wines, and cocktails, that's just because they are all alcohols and that are obviously imported into the country. So, you would probably expect to pay maybe not the same as what you would in Europe, but it would be a little bit less, but it's definitely not as cheap as sort of the food side.

27:19

In terms of activities and getting around its very affordable. So, you can tailor make your holiday in Mui Ne to whatever budget you have, I would suggest work with what or decide on what your budget is and then you can work back and find the right accommodation option, the right tool option for you.

Kerry Newsome: 27:43

Yeah, I agree. And as you say, I think managing the budget from an alcohol perspective, I'm sure not that I'm a big drinker but it is always the most expensive part of a restaurant bill because the seafood is just so cheap and that they will cook it any way you want it and you're eating that in a restaurant, in a very local environment and it's a very local field. So, you're not paying for white tablecloths and things like that. So, if you do ask for a wine or you do ask, I mean beer is usually pretty cheap. It's more in the wines and things like that.

Nikki Cornish: 28:31

Absolutely! so all these sort of local seafood places you will only get beer and is cheap, beer is very cheap. And again, with these restaurants it's a very rustic setting.

Kerry Newsome: 28:38

There's nothing flash.

Nikki Cornish: 28:47

There's nothing flash about it you are just there for seafood and for the beers. if you're there and you're a beer drinker, it will be very affordable but yes, if you do enjoy your good wines and your sort of high-quality spirits for cocktails then you will expect to pay a little bit more at the resorts and the restaurants that do offer that.

Kerry Newsome: 29:07

So, Nikki, before we close up any final tips that you'd like to share with us about the region just so that we come fully prepared?

Nikki Cornish: 29:20

I would say, something to definitely take note of is that there is no international airport in Mui Ne at the moment. So, the most popular airport to fly into would be Ho Chi Minh City. And the next closest airport would be Cam Ranh which is just out of Nha Trang. From both airports, it's about three and a half hours, three and a half hours from Cam Ranh and about a four-hour drive from Ho Chi Minh City. So, I think that is just definitely something to take into account is the travel time and there's no direct route in there, unless you have come through from another city.

30:05

There is talks that possibly at a later stage an airport might be built, and they are talking about extending this raceway, which will make the travel time from Ho Chi Minh City into Mui Ne a little bit quicker. There is also the train option, the train option is a four-hour train ride from Ho Chi Minh City. A lot of people actually recommend it. They said, it's very comfortable, especially if you hire yourself a private sort of forbid compartment or cabin, especially if you're traveling with children. I know people like to do that because the kids can entertained and have a rest.

Kerry Newsome: 30:45

And you can move around.

Nikki Cornish: 30:47

Absolutely! So definitely factor in the travel time.

Kerry Newsome: 30:52

Yeah, and I've had, a lot of people say they prefer the train because they can get up and move around and they can have some snacks and a cold drink and they don't have to stop the car, the car or a private car definitely is the other way, I think. And the train is much cheaper to get there.

31:15

Look, it's been great to have you on the program and for sharing with us. Your knowledge and your insights, etc. just before I finish, how long has Mui Ne, like being this popular, I've been going back and forth for about 14 years, and it really didn't come up on my radar until about the last four or five years maybe.

Nikki Cornish: 31:41

Correct! So, I can't give you a date of sort of when that was and so our resort Sailing Club Mui Ne was built in 2002 and we were the third resort on that strip. So, there was not a lot going on there obviously wasn't a better tourism. And in speaking with the principal of Sailing Club Leisure Group, he said when he first got there, there wasn't even tarred roads, it was very much a dirt road slip with a lot of palm trees and basically Sailing Club was the third resort. And I would say it would have been some sort of probably about mid 2000s that I think, I stand to be corrected on this, but I would say from about the mid-2000s, things sort of started picking up and a lot more development and talks now is that there's going to be huge developments in that area they are talking about building a lot of other big hotels, we are starting to see some of the construction and some of the areas sort of in and around the area. So, I do expect that sort of post COVID There's going to be a lot more hotel options, a lot more resorts and that it is going to expand and grow.

Kerry Newsome: 33:04

Do you see any significant changes due to COVID?

Nikki Cornish: 33:12

In a positive way like moving forward or negative?

Kerry Newsome: 33:16

Positive or negative, do you think they're going to actually change anything specific?

Nikki Cornish: 33:23

So, definitely. Obviously from negative side we have seen that Mui Ne which once was such a bustling tourist start, any time of day there would be people walking on the streets and people on bicycles and all the shops and stands on the side of the road and just always so much going on lots of people everywhere. And just a great little resort town bustle going on. Obviously with COVID as a lot of people would have seen an experience that things have obviously got a lot quieter unfortunately, some of the shops and the businesses have had to close temporarily, I do believe that once international travel and that starts coming back, those businesses will be revived.

34:15

I think from a positive notes, I think for the companies or business owners that have a vision for hospitality and for building large scale resorts. This has been a fantastic time for them to be able to come in and to be able to achieve that and prepare ready for when international travel recovers and it's also for those who have wanted to do renovations and get things back on track. It has provided a little bit of downtime to be able to do the necessary, TLC jobs, maintenance, and renovations that people have possibly been planning.

Kerry Newsome: 34:59

Yes, and I've heard that for quite a few people, it's been a chance to revive, regenerate and some of the forests and that have had a chance to breathe. We were getting to a stage of over tourism in some areas in Vietnam, just pre COVID. So, maybe tourism, when it does come back on, it's going to come back on a little bit more responsibly and thoughtfully for the environment moving forward. So, that is a positive. I do feel for a lot of the small business owners that have suffered out of this but hopefully they can regenerate also with tourism coming back on.

35:37

Anyway, Nikki, thank you very much for being on the show. It's been great to chat, and I've certainly learned a lot more about it. And I hope everyone listening has as well.

Nikki Cornish: 35:47

Brilliant! Thank you, Kerry, thank you for your time and it's been lovely getting to know you through this, and I hope that you have a great rest of your day.

Kerry Newsome: 35:56

Thanks very much. Take care.

Nikki Cornish: 35:58

Thanks.