



What About Vietnam - S4-23 -How to capture Beautiful Photos - in Vietnam or anywhere! - Part 1

[00:00:39] **Kerry Newsome:** Xin chao and welcome to, What About Vietnam today I'm talking with Thomas Levine, photographer.

He lives in Vietnam and he has done a lot of photography in the country.

[00:00:53] **Kerry Newsome-1:** A little bit about Thomas. He currently lives in Hoi An. And he's lived in a lot of places. Omaha, Phoenix, San Francisco, and Tampa. He has a bachelor degree in sociology minors in business and psychology. He's actually, well, he describes himself as a self-trained photographer, but he also trained under, Master photographers and developed some skills, obviously in portraiture. Architecture, national Geographic Photography and working for a New York advertising agency. He does a lot of commercial work, so that obviously gives him some I guess, status in the kind of quality of work that he produces. And he has an amazing portfolio of fantastic photography that you can plug into after the show. He's got extensive experience photographing people and that that's a skill in itself. But he also does other things, you know, for annual reports and advertising Stills, live, cars, food, jewelry, furniture, you. He enjoys photography for many reasons, both personal and professionally, and he's just a lovely guy that can, I think, help us.

Will certainly help me in understanding some of the elements of photography when we are traveling because we, we want to get the best shots, don't we? We want to capture the moment. We may come back at another time, another date, another year or whatever, but you're never going to get that moment back again.

And so I really impress upon you to, you know, have a good listen to this. Two part series that we've got together and I just want you to get a lot out of it for yourself in your trip planning for Vietnam. But for any trip that you do that you want to be able to produce photography, you know that you're going to be able to put on a wall or sit on a shelf or put in an album that you're really proud of and you can share with others.

Let's face it, you don't want to get home or get back to your hotel, or you finish the tour and it's all over and you look at your photos and you go, I really wish I'd taken more time and a little bit more care and with a bit of insight and knowledge, I thought having someone on the program to actually talk through the use of colour and lines and focus when you've got beautiful scenery and people and activities, et cetera.

To photograph that we try and get it right from the get-go, and Thomas has done a great job in this show and is such a learned person in this area. I thought this is what we need as part of the show's. I guess features, and I think you can come back to this any time for a bit of a refresher, OR for any trip you do.

So please take the time to, to listen to him.

He's got, a website and everything that I'm going to be able to share with you so you can go and get some pointers and maybe do some lessons with him or get some advice so you'll be able to reach out to him directly and. Yeah, I just think you're really going to enjoy this show.

It's broken into two parts because we went through it and we went, oh my gosh, there's a lot in this.

So I've put it into a part ONE and part TWO series, and I'll release these very close together so you can combine them. There is. Obviously transcription notes, so you're going to be able to refer to them and yeah, I just hope you really get out a lot out of it.

You don't have to be a professional to use some of his skills and his advice.

You can use it with your, mobile phone or you can use it with an actual camera as a dSLR and make those apertures shutter speed s that you need to get things right. Let's welcome Thomas to the program.

[00:05:22] **Kerry Newsome-1:** Thomas, welcome to the What About Vietnam Podcast?

[00:05:27] **Thomas Levine:** Thank you very much for inviting me to be on. Kerry what can I tell you? You're going to be telling me a lot about a subject I only know a very small bit about, and that's photography, but I'm going to do it in a way, hopefully with your permission, that we hone in on how we can improve our photography skills relative to Vietnam.

[00:05:59] **Kerry Newsome:** Okay. So it's going to be okay, sort of Vietnam specific, if that's okay?

[00:06:04] **Thomas Levine:** Yeah. I mean, some of it's general because it applies to just a camera operation and the rest of it, I'll try to make it for Vietnam.

[00:06:12] **Kerry Newsome:** Sure. Okay. Alright. Firstly, my first question to you would be, tell us a little bit about why Vietnam has captured you through the lens of your camera.

[00:06:29] **Thomas Levine:** Because it's beautiful and, it's, it's a different culture. When I travel I've been quite a few places in Southeast Asia and they're all different, every country's different.

You'd think it's, oh, it's not the same, but it's the cultures are very different. The terrain's different and Vietnam is just absolutely gorgeous. And some of the places I've gone to, I mean, I need to go to more places in the north, because that's supposed to be where it's actually really gorgeous.

But it's interesting everywhere you go and people are very kind here, the Vietnamese and the tourists too. The tourists are having fun here. But it's the terrain. It's there's, I'm a nature photographer. That's how I start it. And the nature here is incredible.

Everything is green. You get a lot of rain, which is another issue too, but it's not a really an issue because. You know when you come here, you're traveling and you have to take pictures, period. You don't have to, but a lot of people do. And if it's raining, you can still take pictures and they come out different.

And that's good because the rain makes saturation. You get a lot of colored saturation. It just looks different than other people's pictures, and that's what you want in the first. Absolutely. Sure. Now I'm going to ping you in the sense

of, I'm going to start with technique because I think for all of us, Getting our technique right.

And as you say, you can take this technique wherever you go around the world, but if we start with technique as a basic, I think that's going to help us from the get-go. So you and I have had a few conversations and just those alone have given me a better sense of where to start. But maybe you could help us with it.

Talking just a little bit about some basics I don't know how to hold a camera, how to hold a phone to take, the best image, the best pic.

[00:08:40] **Thomas Levine:** The thing is that a lot of people they get home and they look at their pictures, or you look at your pictures on your phone.

Sometimes it's hard to really see into it, but when you get home and you put them on your computer, You. It's not sharp. I guess I didn't do a good job of focusing it, but it's not always focus. It's a lot. That's when it comes down to technique, because when you're taking that picture, your camera needs to be stable and sometimes they have stabilizers in it, but they only works so much.

So basically your technique of holding the camera should be the same every time and it takes a little practice. And once you get used to it, then you know your pictures will come out a lot better if that's the problem you're having. Because sometimes it's hard to tell whether it's a focus problem or it's a camera shake problem.

But if you see everything in it that's not sharp, that's probably camera shake. If you see parts of it that are sharp, then it's probably focus. But the thing is, when you're holding a camera, what you really need to do is use your elbows and your arms, and you need to have, make it a tripod with your arms.

You put your elbows into your stomach and squeeze, and you're holding the camera up. And that's, and then you're actually creating, cradling the camera. It's actually in your palm of your hands. And that's, and that. And then you bring it to your face and basically you're like a tripod. And you, when you press that shutter, this is critical.

When you press, you have to be still. And what I do is I hold my breath. I practice it first too, but I hold my breath when I press the. And if you're hiking along and you're taking a picture after picture and you're starting to hold your breath, sometimes you need to take a break because you can't catch your breath.

[00:10:34] **Kerry Newsome:** So I love it. So yeah, you, because you could be out of breath, but for the wrong reasons. Yeah. So you probably need every breath. Yeah. But I like that because when you breathe, you. You move. Yeah. Your chest and your abdomen, et cetera moves as you breathe. So if you hold your breath, that makes a lot of sense in being absolutely. Still. And I agree with you in the little bit of photography skills and lessons I've had, that was one of the first things that they highlighted, whether it was your phone. Or whether it's a camera is finding a way to. Become really still, and as you say, creating yourself as a tripod.

[00:11:19] **Thomas Levine:** Right. And I, I'm, I it's putting it in your palm of your hands is the trick too, because you want it cushioned in your hand.

And it's hard to, it's hard to tell you without showing you.

[00:11:32] **Kerry Newsome:** Yes, I know this is where audio is a little bit tricky for people, right? In the sense you can't put your hand up and actually do a demonstration. But we will have some pics on the website with some examples of holding the camera.

So we'll definitely put those in. Okay. Alright, so if we've, The camera now cradled in the palm of our hand, or if we've got the phone right. Cradled in a safe, secure, still position holding our breath or otherwise, what, should we be doing or looking for next?

[00:12:12] **Thomas Levine:** First of all when you're pressing that shutter, you could squeeze, because if you hit it too hard, then you're going to vibrate everything. So whether it's a phone or the camera's going to have a shutter. You're going to have a kind of a fake button on the smartphone, and you just have to understand and try it out and see how much of a touch it takes for that shutter to release because you just don't want to touch it too much, because as soon as you start pressing in, you're going to vibrate the whole thing.

So you just be able to touch it, but touch it firm enough that it'll take the picture.

[00:12:47] **Kerry Newsome:** I like that. I like that. I think that's something we need to be more conscious of.

[00:12:51] **Thomas Levine:** Yeah. And you just practice it. If you practice it when you're starting the trip you're like, and then you'll go somewhere else and then it's you'll take the picture wrong and then you'll kick yourself and it's okay, I did this wrong. Then you start doing it more and it gets to be a habit. Because

that's really what you want. You want know how to hold your camera and pressing the shutter should be something that you don't even have to think about. Eventually, you just do it right? Okay, so it's just practice. But that's the whole thing.

The other thing about sharp pictures is you have you have to be able to focus it, right? So if it's a camera, then a lot of times it's automatic focus, so there's a one. That you want to focus at, and that point is going to be the sharpest in your frame. Okay. But the thing is, you have something called depth of field and sometimes you can't tell the difference between the focal point and the depth of field, especially on a phone.

And they have a one third, two third rule. And I really don't go by rules too much, but use this one when I. Sometimes I want to make sure I take the picture. So, I will do the focal point, take the picture, whatever the subject is, focal point on the subject. I'll take the picture and then I will do something with the depth of field.

So if belongs in, in its part of the aperture the aperture is the, it's the round it closes and opens depending on the setting. And it's like your eye. If you look at something and if you close your eye and squint, you can see the front and the back is even more in focus than just as it was before.

Squinting is what that aperture's doing. So when it closes down, which is a higher number, then you have more depth. So you can have a, the one third, two third rule if you have enough of your aperture closed enough, and then you don't always need to close it all the way, but if you close it, then you could set it so that the one third you focused like one third into the frame.

So if you're like a landscape and one-third, that's where you focus. And then after that, the two-thirds all the way to infinity should be in, in depth of. Doesn't mean it's going to be as sharp as a focal point because that there's only one focal point, but you want enough aperture closed down so you get the whole thing in focus.

[00:15:37] **Kerry Newsome:** Okay. And I think for lay people like myself who are listening to try and get their heads around that it, it is really about making. Whatever you want to focus on, whether it's a person or a particular flower or some item or whatever the subject. It is the focal point. Exactly. But the rest is quite blurred behind it exactly as you describe about squinting, et cetera.

[00:16:09] **Thomas Levine:** And they, so maybe you don't want, and you can achieve this on your phone as well, can't you? Yeah. And actually there's an app I think that you can actually. Select your shutter speed and your aperture.

It depends on the phone, but there, there are several apps that do that. Another thing too that people don't realize is light. If you have a strong light coming it's going to be it'll make your picture sharper because it raises the contrast as long as that light's not getting into your lens directly.

So if you have a foggy day, you know it's not going to be sharp. Or if you have a day with a, like a lot of atmosphere where there's just a lot of moisture in the air, which happens in Vietnam, then if you take in an overall landscape, it's going to come out soft. It won't be as sharp. But that's not having anything to do with camera shake or your focal point or depth of field. It's just the atmosphere. So there's not a whole lot you can do other than photograph closer and that show as much area. Okay. But you get certain days, that's just, it's just like that here.

And other days everything's sharp because there's good light. So light has a lot to do with it.

[00:17:27] **Kerry Newsome:** I hate to add this point about lighting, but in my experience, and correct me if I'm wrong, with lighting, there's a little bit of an education. To take into consideration about lighting in the sense that doesn't mean in the middle of the day necessarily, because in my opinion it's not a kind light to people.

No. And so you can be absolutely drop dead gorgeous, but in the wrong light. You can look a hundred years old. I think, can you speak a little bit more to just that lighting perspective?

[00:18:11] **Thomas Levine:** Of course when you travel, a lot of times you don't have a choice on lighting. Okay. Because you're traveling all day.

So the morning and the late afternoon are the best lights because it's coming from the side. If it's overhead, then you might have some problems because you're really lighting, like you're taking a picture of a person, you're lighting the top of the head. But most of the time it's not right overhead. And I found that if you don't have a choice and the person's facing the light, I prefer somebody wearing sunglasses for that particular picture.

Because you're probably going to have other pictures whether or not they don't have to wear sunglasses. I used to take pictures. Of these people for commercial reasons, and they would be staring at the light. And they wouldn't they were not allowed to wear sunglasses for the ad I was making.

So people are like, they would close their eyes and then I would go, 1, 2, 3 on three, open your eyes. And then they would open their eyes, because otherwise, if you stare at the sun, you're just going to squint. Okay. And it's not that much fun to be a subject. Where that sun's straight in your eye. So I prefer if it's possible, and it's possible when you're traveling, wear sunglasses for those kind of pictures.

The other thing you can be under a tree or under an umbrella and take the picture and it's a lot more pleasing. Okay. Or if it's if it's two o'clock and the light is off to the side a little bit, but not as much as you'd like, then a lot of times you can turn that.

So that the light's coming off of their side, off the side of their head and their side of their face. And there's another thing you could do with a lot of cameras is it's called fill light. It's fill flash. So if you're taking a picture of somebody and they're they're in the shadow, their face is in the shadow, but everything else is lit, you can turn your flash on and set it for fill and you can do this on your iphone.

Or whatever phone you're using, and then it'll fill it in and you, and it's actually very pleasing light for your face. So I don't know if you're familiar with that.

[00:20:24] **Kerry Newsome:** No, definitely not. And I have made the error of sometimes I'll stand in the shade and take a picture of them in the sun. And that doesn't work out. And then I swap places and then I'm in the sun and they're in the shade. And either way it doesn't come out well. Or a person has got shade on half of their face, and sun on the other. You can see how much trouble I have in getting it right. It takes me a few goes

[00:20:58] **Thomas Levine:** Well, I, Kerry, I it's something that most people aren't going to carry.

I carry, a disc that opens up and it's white. Okay. And it's on a kind of a spring thing, but I've also done it this way. If somebody is, too bright on one side and it's too dark on the other, and I see somebody wearing a white shirt sometimes if they're not going to be in the picture, if I could get them close enough that white, the sun will bounce off that person's white shirt and fill the other part of

your face in. So you have them on the dark side of their face, or if you find something white. Sometimes I've even used a, menu. From a restaurant, just to fill in that, because I use that with food too. Because you really it it's too much of a distraction if you're really bright on one side and it's too dark on the other, it just doesn't look right.

No, and if you want to print that, then that's not going to print right either. But you want that. Sometimes you want that. It's a, I think they call it Rembrandt. Where you have one side of the face that's lit and the other side's dark. And actually what that does is it makes your face thinner.

It makes you look thinner because that's cause part "I'm all for that" yeah. So that's just the way it works okay.

[00:22:21] **Kerry Newsome:** So is this kind of the part where we are talking about lines and curves kind of the psychology aspect of it?

Or still in just general technique?

[00:22:37] **Thomas Levine:** I'll talk about leading lines and, line is, is one of the elements in art. There's a leading line that, like a sidewalk and you want to take a picture of a mountain in the background and to get there, you're going down a trail or a sidewalk.

[00:22:53] **Kerry Newsome:** That line will take somebody's eye all the way up into the mountain. So that's what you want. You want to lead the viewer to where you want them to see. Okay. So that's the leading line. And if you have a curve and it curves around this way and it curves around that way, it makes it more interesting.

It's not as boring. And if you think about curves are nice because if you think about it, it's a design, like Apple design a lot of curves and earphones, that kind of stuff. It's a design, but also it's a lazy kind of thing.

When you see a curve you just emits some sort of feeling and that's what you want to do. When you take a picture. You want to get some sort of emotion. So that's how you can use line and. Line will just if, even if it goes into a curve, your eye will follow that and it'll take you right into the picture, maybe right to the subject if possible.

Okay. Because you really need to find out or figure out what is your subject, because that's where you're going to focus, that's where you want the line to lead. That kind of thing, if that makes it clear. I don't know.

Yeah. In a way Vietnam is renowned for having lots of places, and we're going to talk a little bit about some of those places later.

But where you've got steps up to a peak, you've got trails, you've got ravines through, limestone caves and things like that. I've found myself in inside caves or coming into caves, or I've found. Walking a path and thinking, gosh how could I kind.

Get this path visually in a pic to be able to express to people just the length of it, the relativity to its background. I'm thinking about all these kinds of things so that it, I can display the picture in such a way that it gives. A really good representation and perspective so people can go, oh, wow.

Kind of like I'm going Oh, wow. In the moment. Can you speak a little bit about how to line that up? I guess sometimes I get quite low on the ground and try and take it so that it's shooting up and I get a longer view. But I'm open to ideas. That's why we're talking to you, Thomas.

[00:25:30] **Thomas Levine:** A lot of it depends on the lens you use too. If you use a really wide lens, then everything's smaller except in the foreground or on the sides. But basically everything's smaller. And so if you have leading line that you want to take people up, it doesn't always work it's so small that you could hardly see that line farther down the picture.

And another thing too is if you have a foreground that's really boring, it's like open area, it's kind of flat. Then if you get up higher, that area is actually going to be larger in the picture. If you get low then it flattens that part out and you notice more in the background, which is what you want.

Yes. So you have to, yes. Experiment, but people don't talk about that for some reason. At least I haven't seen it. But it really depends. That's what happens when you get lower or higher. And sometimes you want it boring in the beginning. It just depends on what you want. But you should be aware of what it does so that way you can make a choice. If I want to get low, I want to get high. And also when you get low, you are showing more detail in the foreground. And maybe that's what you want because if there's a lot of I've taken pictures of rice fields and I get low a lot of times because I wanna show

the rice coming up out of the ground and then you can see on the top of the rice the land, the rest of the landscape.

And if it's a sunset or just a mountain or whatever vegetation. So it really depends. But that's how I handle that. It's just being aware of your choices. Okay. And again, you're traveling. Some people wanna take a picture and not worry about it. But if you think about it for a second, you can usually improve that picture.

And another thing is when you're taking pictures of people, the easiest thing to do is put that person right smack in the middle of the frame. But that's not always the best thing. So correct if and I like a lot of times the person will go on the front of the. And you take a picture and then you go somewhere else to do the same thing over and over, and it gets boring.

So I always like to have the model like you were talking about, where sometimes they turn and they you see their back and you're taking a picture over their shoulder. And what that does is it gives you more depth because we're missing that the camera is one eye. And we have two, but we're missing depth when you only have two dimensions.

So if you put something farther in, in your foreground, and then you're taking a picture of a landscape of something farther away your subject is not the person. It's whatever is in that frame farther down. But that person gives you that feeling of depth. And you also get that with lighting because if it's coming from the sun, the side, you have a lighting that it will give you more contrast and you'll have a dark area and a light area, and that gives you depth as well.

So that helps compensate for only having one eye, because that's all the cameras got.

[00:28:52] **Kerry Newsome:** I have this theory about travel photography. In the sense that you never are going to go back to that place and have that moment again.

So as far as getting it right or getting the best possible picture that you can it's quite a meaningful thing, don't you think? It is. But believe it or not, some people do go back. So it's but you're never going to go back. That could be the same, get that exact time. No, because you are not going to be the same.

No. The environment's not going be the same. That moment is the moment. To go back a year later or whatever. And I've done the same and sometimes I've

gone back because I didn't get it right the first time. So I want to go back and spend more time to, to really. Do it justice, I think is the purpose, my main purpose anyway, because I feel like I've walked away and then I've looked at the photos back on my computer and gone, damn I really should have taken different angles, right?

Different lighting, et cetera, et cetera. But most people now are traveling with their phones. And I think probably we need to kind of balance that out in this conversation

As everybody's being very clever with their phones and they're, and the phone has definitely come up, definitely in its skill level. And now people are saying if you do a photography tour in Vietnam, that you can do it with your mobile phone device. So maybe if we can include both because I know if you've got real camera, you can work with aperture and all that kind of stuff. A lot easier than trying to switch that theory onto a phone.

[00:30:41] **Thomas Levine:** And, but when you get that control, you can also make mistakes too, unless you're used to using that part of your phone.

[00:30:48] **Kerry Newsome:** Yeah. And that's why they have auto on them.

Take it from me.

[00:30:52] **Thomas Levine:** I don't know how many times I've taken my phone and I'll just. And it automatically focuses on something. You can pick what it's going to, when it's you touch it and that's where it's supposed to focus. But if you don't do that, it chooses itself.

And some people just do that. They just point the phone and click, they take the picture. And I don't know if this is true or not, but I think there's probably more people with phones traveling than they are with cameras. Correct. That's my guess. Absolutely. That's why I said it's about an eight out of 10 people, are traveling and taking photography with their phones. Two out of 10 are taking. Good cameras with good lenses and taking a very artful approach to it. A good segue into talking about the art element of photography. . Can you talk to us a little bit about that? And I know it's something close to your heart, so talk to us a little bit about the artfulness and the emotion and the psychology side of taking photos.

When I learned photography originally, which was years and years ago, nobody explained any of this art stuff to me. I just started taking pictures and they were

I get a good one every once in a while. But then I just learned by looking and critiquing and having other people look at why do you have this in there?

Why do you have that in there? And you learn that way. But learning the art, sure, learning later on, I learned the art side of it. And it makes it where you understand a lot more and a lot of it's psychology. Like especially with colours. Colours have meaning. Okay? And they also work together or they work against each other.

And if you find red a lot. I use the red a lot, but I don't use it in the way of everything's red or most of it's red or anything like that. Like I have a picture of someone in Dalat. In Dalat they have farms and I went into this guy's farm and they had they were growing flowers and they were all yellow, I guess daisies, I'm not sure they were all yellow, but inside there, there was somebody working there and they had a red top on.

With one of the conical hats. So she had a conical hat, which is a great thing to have in a lot of your pictures because that immediately shows you're in Southeast Asia and they really use that. I'm getting off track here, but they usually, a lot of people wear that more in Vietnam than I've seen them in a lot of other southeast Asian countries.

But anyways, this lady was wearing red and she was surrounded by yellow. Your eye immediately went to her because it's even though it wasn't much red, it really popped out and the yellow was in competition only. There was so much yellow and just that little red, you had no choice but to look at the red.

So that's you get an emotion outta that. Red. Red means a lot of things, but There's, like I said, there's a psychology behind it. Sometimes a color would offend somebody. Okay. And they, might get moody, they might not like it. They might feel bad. Who knows? Maybe they were in a car accident years ago and that person that hit them was in a red car subconsciously red is negative to them, that kind of thing.

[00:34:20] **Kerry Newsome:** Thomas we're going to take a short break here and, we are going to keep going, but we're going to do that in a second segment

as we've still got a lot of great stuff to cover. And I wanted to just give people a chance to digest everything we've gone through and, we'll continue in part two of this, show coming up.

So stay tuned everyone, because there's more really great photography skills with Thomas to come. Thank you.

You can contact Thomas Levine here:-

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