



What About Vietnam - 2-12

Health and Wellness Retreats - What to look for, Part 1

Kerry Newsome: Hi, and welcome to What About Vietnam. Look, with so much going on in the world right now, challenging us on so many levels, I thought it was perfect timing to release a series of episodes, focusing on the opportunities in Vietnam for healing, relaxation, wellbeing, and health.

Now, I know travel remains for most of us something that we're restricted to our own countries and our local areas. But I think for the future, I wanted to let people know that when the doors open, Vietnam has a lot to offer in this area, like not only is there the beautiful scenery, but there are some very special retreats specifically designed to help us, you know, reboot our energy levels, heal our minds, and connect with like-minded people. Okay, so, let's welcome Emma Sothern Sothern, a yoga and mindfulness instructor and local to Hoi An, who offers yoga and mindfulness retreats. As a traveler herself, Emma talks to us about what to expect from a retreat in Vietnam.

I mean, specializing in the area of yoga and mindfulness, she's got some great advice on what to look for when researching the best retreat for you and the best retreat that's going to serve your expectations. You know, like what do you want to get out of a retreat? Emma Sothern herself arrived in Vietnam from Ireland about two to three years ago. And she was immediately smitten by the people and the locality of Hoi An.

After traveling extensively through Southeast Asia and Vietnam, she decided to come back and finally settled down with her partner in Vietnam and offer retreats for people wanting the experience of rejuvenation. As she knows it's possible. When you decide to say to yourself, I deserve this. It's not a self-indulgence, it's something that's good for me. And it is going to offer me the healing and general escape or reboot that I need.

Emma has been driven in her studies of yoga and teaching due to her own stresses as a young girl, coping with a condition called Alopecia, which is an auto-immune condition she's had most of her life, you can access more information about the great work she does in this area to support people, as I will put a link in the episode notes.

As a delightful Irish girl now living and very happy in Hoi An. She's got some smart advice for all of us when we think about choosing to do something for ourselves, especially when that opportunity comes in another country and possibly a country that is foreign to you. So, learning a little bit about Vietnam, let's get straight into it as I ask Emma Sothern with my

vision board for what to expect from a retreat in Vietnam matches what can be achieved, let's say hello to Emma.

Talk to us a little bit about what someone can expect from a retreat in Vietnam. Just make sure that my vision is matching out my expectations kind of thing.

Emma Sothern: Sure, well it's a really exciting time I think, to come on a retreat in Vietnam because it hasn't quite reached, maybe saturation point like some other countries like say Bali as it is wonderful for yoga; but there's just so much. It can be a little overwhelming. Vietnam for me anyway, it still feels like retreats here are very genuine and very authentic. So, they're not just kind of only focused on marketing, maybe they're here to give you just a beautiful setting. People who are really, really passionate about yoga and they practice what they preach as well, plus... it's affordable, which is really important.

And you have all the other aspects of Vietnam, like just amazing food, really healthy foods, your beautiful settings. So, in Hoi An, we're lucky to have the beach; the rice fields and then the river running through. So, you have all these bamboo trees and yeah, it's your ideal setting. I suppose, if what you envisage is just somewhere, you can just totally relax in a lovely setting with really good teachers and really good food, then it does live up to that.

Kerry Newsome: Oh, brilliant. Okay, fantastic. Now I decided when we began chatting that I would actually devote a couple of episodes, actually I think I'm doing three or four different episodes about retreats, health retreats in Vietnam. And obviously I'm delighted to talk to you about yoga and meditation, but also mindfulness in this session. So, tell us a little bit, like how do you separate out one from the other, as in what's the difference between a mindfulness retreat and a yoga retreat or do they sometimes get combined?

Emma Sothern: Yeah, so they're often combined. But I suppose before you maybe book your retreat, it's important to maybe see what you want to get out of it. So, if you're looking for something that you really want to get exercise, or you want to find out more about yoga and you want to know about the kind of different varieties available and more of, I suppose, the theoretical side of yoga than a purely yoga retreat is really good. Especially that's what I did before in Bali and other retreats, but it was mainly focused on the physical exercise and I did have things like breath work and some meditation in it, but it was quite a physical experience, like it's more like a workshop and extended workshops. So, we were doing three classes a day, quite intense, quite tiring.

Kerry Newsome: Yeah, that can be rigorous.

Emma Sothern: And you usually, your schedule can be quite busy, so you might not actually have that much relaxation time that can be maybe a big class in the morning, you have breakfast and it's all kind of planned out for you.

But I suppose on some yoga retreats, we'll have aspects of more the spiritual chanting and some other activities like that. So, you can really kind of get back to the roots of yoga I suppose. I'm finding back to connection with the ancient practice of yoga, whereas mindful retreats. Some mindful retreats won't even have yoga in them like you might be just doing different activities, like mindful writing or mindful eating. You could be doing different forms of meditation, so you're doing shisha meditations, walking meditations, even things like tea ceremonies and there's so many different aspects.

And I suppose I see mindfulness as this kind of toolkit that you can bring with you for everyday life. So, for me, it's really about coping with things like stress and just to enjoy life

more and it's like a mental training course. So, that doesn't always involve exercise, but I do think it's an important part of it to help mindful movement as well. And yoga just fits in really well with it because it's focused on the breath. So, if you can practice yoga in a mindful way, that's really getting all the benefits out of it. So, I suppose my ideal retreat that I'd like to go on and the ones I hope to teach are ones that involve both. So, they'll have maybe two yoga classes, but they'll have like a morning more active one and then a very relaxed evening one.

So, you're not pushing yourself too much and throughout the day they'll have those mindful activities like meditation and doing things that are accessible for everyone. So, it's not overwhelming for people who've never practiced yoga before they can still get a lot out of it without feeling stressed. Because you had lots of anticipation, I can't pronounce that word, that's the opposite of what you want for the yoga retreat is to come out feeling stressed or, you know overwhelmed. So, yeah, mindfulness retreats I suppose are just about feeling good and coming out of a feeling better than when you went in, hopefully.

Kerry Newsome: Yes, and I think sometimes you know, some of the retreats that I've been on. They've kind of been a little bit rigorous in the sense that the routines are quite strict and have to do this, and you have to do that. So, maybe I didn't make the right choices. So, it's good to learn about different types of retreats so, that people, when they're listening to programs like this, that they can make a wise choice because you're often spending a reasonable amount of money and sometimes, I think people don't get everything they want out of it because the one they've chosen didn't kind of match up or fit their expectations.

Emma Sothern: Yeah, so, I really agree with that because and that's where I go back to, like when you're researching a retreat, just write down what you need at that point in your life, what are you looking for and not what other people think you should be doing maybe and going on a really challenging thing.

If what you need is to relax and if you're feeling exhausted, then these retreats that involve getting up at four in the morning or three in the morning for like a two-hour meditation might not be what you need. So, it's just important to kind of reflect on what you're looking for and not base it all around price as well, because you know, often the cheapest as well will be these very, no-frills saying that you might just feel exhausted after, and you might want to leave after two days.

And sometimes like I've been on these sorts of retreats and I love them. I've got a lot out of them, but you just have to maybe assess where you are in your life and what might make you feel better at that point.

Kerry Newsome: Yes, so if we were talking about a retreat in Vietnam and let's talk about typically ones that that you facilitate as in maybe a slight combination of mindfulness and yoga. So, what's a good amount of time to consider a retreat two days like what's a good amount of time to do one?

Emma Sothern: I would say, so it's interesting because I actually did before our lockdown here. So, one night retreat the purpose of that was to kind of cater for people living here, maybe who had families and mightn't be able to take longer time away and to try to make it affordable. And some of the feedback from the participants was that they couldn't believe how much they could maybe change in 24 hours or how much they could get out of 24 hours. If you can offer them those tools, they can take with them afterwards. But they did say, you

know, I would have loved an extra night because it does take a little bit of a while to switch off from whatever's going on. So, I would say minimum two nights, really. Especially if you've been traveling, you might even feel jet lagged when you come to a place still, and it takes you a little bit of time just to get used to it.

You're bound to feel nervous maybe by meeting new people, especially if you've never been on a yoga retreat before, it can all feel a bit overwhelming. And like you say, if there's a routine, it takes some time to get used to that, maybe a different time of eating or getting up. And not only it might take you 24 hours, you can get used to that and then you don't want to be leaving straightaway and stressing about what you have to do next. So, I'd say very minimum, two days, even better if it's in your budget, maybe four days, if you can, to get really into it.

Kerry Newsome: Now, I mean, where in the midst of COVID and we're all about social distancing and we're all about zoom and we're all about doing everything online. And I think it's great that you do offer classes and a guided meditation online. So, I'm going to put that link in the episode notes, but what I'm keen to talk to you about is, you know, coming through COVID, we're going to have retreats where people are coming together again. So, be it that there'll be the distancing, etc. and everyone will follow that rule. But talk to us a little bit about the coming together aspect; what is gained from being together as a group in a retreat rather than doing a zoom thing online or something like that? Talk to us about that togetherness.

Emma Sothern: Sure, so a couple of aspects, I think first of all, I think there's something just really special about meditation together as a group. Like that's the one aspect of a yoga retreat that I just think you can't really mirror like meditation by yourself can be really difficult and really challenging. And it's a hard one to explain if you're not into things like energy and stuff. It's a very special energy that can happen when you're in a group just being silent together, not even feeling the need to talk, it can be quite transformative. And I know I find in my own retreats that even though we have amazing chats over the meals together, or swimming in the pool and you connect with people in a new way. Kind of the most powerful moments are when we're sitting together; just meditating in silence.

Or when we had a silent breakfast one day and just that feeling of, okay, you can be around people and supporting each other, but you don't need to speak. It's something we're never used to in our usual lives. We're used to like filling in with small talk. So, there's something special about being quiet in a group setting together.

And also, I suppose in the wake of COVID when we've been so isolated, I know we can connect online. It's just a really nice feeling to be able to come together in person and learning something like this, but especially if you're like an introvert like me, I suppose when you get released from lockdown, it can be a bit scary to go into the outside world straight away and suddenly be surrounded by people and noise, that's why going on a retreat and meeting people who are maybe equally a little bit shy by that sort of thing and making real connections with them can be very powerful.

Like any retreats I've ever been on, even if it is one day and if it was five or six years ago across the world, I still connect with those people and we could still message each other. It's quite a special bond you can form very quickly. Which I think it's unlike any other bond I've ever made with someone, that just from, I suppose it's the stuff a form of healing, the transformative aspect. People are very open when they go on yoga retreats. They're very

mindful of each other's kind of feelings and emotions and it's that special kind of environment.

Kerry Newsome: It is, and I think you're right. I think that energy exchange between people in that open space, in that allowing space, in that space that is free, it's non-judgmental and I think just in a beautiful environment kind of takes all that armor off. I think everyone kind of relaxes a little bit more and is a bit more willing and open to share or, or not share as you say, in a silent environment. Talk to us a little bit about the kinds of people that are coming to Vietnam and enjoying these kinds of retreats.

Emma Sothern: Yeah, so they'd be all different types. Like on my last retreat, I had a few people already living here.

Kerry Newsome: They are ex-pats.

Emma Sothern: Yeah, and there was one person who was a mom with three kids and traveling around. And I think she, so my post about the day before it started or something like that, she'd never been on a retreat before and decided it was perfect timing that she thought. She was stressed traveling with her kids and family, and she thought, oh, it's only one night I can give myself that gift. So, it was really lovely to see people who'd kind of practice yoga a little bit, who were used to maybe just doing drop-in classes and hadn't done a retreat before. So, that's the expats and then this lady who'd never done any sort of retreats, they decide they could kind of benefit from it. So, I suppose in retreats normally you might not get young backpacker types maybe because maybe it's not in the budget depending on the retreat. It's often people who have families who are just very busy, they feel they need this couple of days just to themselves to be able to recess and to offer more to their families or to their communities when they leave. But really all sorts of people are welcome and good retreats will foster all levels whether you're very experienced or whether you're totally new.

Kerry Newsome: Because you know, coming from the commercial world. I often talk to people about a holiday obviously in Vietnam and when there's so much to do and see and experience in Vietnam, that can be quite tiring, you know. It can be kind of jumping on and off planes and getting around, etc. So, I've often suggested to people that they may consider a retreat, on the last couple of days, just to wind themselves down, get them geared to come home, you know, come home with some skills and some tools to use back in their work life and try and I guess help them manage stress moving forward and long-term. Because you don't want to kind of do all that, and then not come home with something, a gift, I guess from a retreat to you. You want to be able to use it in your day-to-day life,

Emma Sothern: Yeah, that's such a good point and actually that's probably the people you'd see most and these retreats they maybe solo travelers. Because I know that's what I did myself the first time I went traveling myself, I knew I'd feel quite overwhelmed maybe coming to a new country and not knowing what was going on. So, I started it with a retreat just to ease into “to shake off the kind of tiredness of traveling and to mentally prepare myself”. And I went back to that same retreat, like three months later, right before I went home just to, again, set myself up to feel calm and grounded going home. So, it's really good for people who maybe aren't used to traveling so much or feeling a bit nervous, or like you say, people who have a jam-packed schedule and they don't need to be going home still exhausted after all the activities, even if it's for those two nights, just to unwind a little bit before they go home.

Kerry Newsome: And you know, it's a good point, you raise about the solo traveler too, because sometimes it's an opportunity to form friendships. I mean, you've talked about that yourself, that the bonds that you can make on those retreats are quite deep bonds I think, and I know myself I've done similar things. So, I think that's a really good point that for a solo traveler, if they want to look at a retreat to also meet people and to share with people, you know, a common passion in yoga and mindfulness. I want to talk to you a little bit more about Vietnam as the destination for these retreats. Tell us how important is the location or venue of a retreat.

Emma Sothern: I would say very, very important because you could have an incredible teacher and all you hear is honking horns and it's I don't know a room that's totally sweltering. It's very hard to relax like, they can make it possible that the teacher is very good, but usually a bit of beautiful surroundings will go a long way. So, Vietnam has a lovely kind of luxurious aspect. I know it has a lot of beeping scooters as well.

Kerry Newsome: Certainly, in the main cities.

Emma Sothern: We have an awful lot of them, which is why many of these retreats are kind of built specifically that they are a little bit away from that, there'll be in kind of a right scene site or by a river by the beach, or I know there's a beautiful one of site in Hoi An and the Cham islands.

And even for people living here that can feel like another universe because it's just this lovely little Island setting. So, I would say yeah, really important because you want to feel like you're going on holidays anyway, seeing somewhere you wouldn't be used to in your home life. Just making it easier for you to switch off. And because the good retreats we'll have a little bit of maybe a lot of relaxation, as well as the kind of activities you want it to be somewhere that you can really just relax enough, just going to bed. Maybe somewhere you can sit out and look at nature and do some writing and just give yourself some time you wouldn't have normally.

Kerry Newsome: Yes, and you're right. Like you do need to be in some kind of idyllic location to do that, I think after a meal or after you finished a meditation, etc. Just to take it down and chill and all of that sort of stuff, you know.

Emma Sothern: If you are getting up at three in the morning, you know, it helps to have a nice sunrise after your meditation.

Kerry Newsome: You're absolutely right. Okay, so any words of advice or guidance you'd like to share with the listeners today just on selecting the right retreat and that kind of thing?

Emma Sothern: Sure, I'd say like I said before, like focus on your reasons for doing it, what you need in the moment. And I know a lot of people might think maybe going on a retreat or booking a retreat for themselves might be maybe an overindulgence or a self-indulgence, whereas it's really one of the best ways you can spend your money rather than ticking off boxes of all the different sites you want to go see, you know, this is something that could really benefit your physical and mental health not just on your holiday but going home. So, it might seem like a bit of an investment, but you're doing just so much good for yourself just by taking this time away. And the fact that it's guided as well, so you could take yourself to a lovely Island yourself, or, you know, spend some time writing in your book and drinking

cocktails, and that's lovely as well. But to have this kind of retreat escape where you don't have to think about anything, the activities are there for you to take or leave, and you have this ready community of people who are like-minded as well to support you through it. It's really, really a special thing to do for yourself. So, my main piece of advice I suppose is just go for it, don't think you don't deserve it because you really do, especially after this stressful time.

Kerry Newsome: I'm going to finish on that. That's perfect advice, thanks again, Emma Sothern. Thank you, Emma Sothern, for being part of this series with me on what about Vietnam? I'm sure this is going to help a lot of us navigate the world of wellness and yoga retreats in Vietnam as there are certainly a lot of them.

And I totally agree with you, we should just do it as we deserve some self-nurturing after the year it's been. Please check out the episode notes, but links to Emma Sothern's pages, where she announces her retreats and she also offers online yoga sessions, and you can join in those, no matter where you are. Stay tuned over the next few episodes as I bring you more in keeping with wellness and retreats in general in Vietnam. Please if you are on Apple, iTunes person, please rate and review the show as it really helps me reach more people. And of course, you can reach me through my Facebook page and website What about Vietnam. Please share, stay safe till next time.