

Episode 4: Vietnam Travel Guide - Expert Tips and Info for First Time Visitors

Tracy Collins with guests Ros and Alan Cuthbertson of Step into Vietnam
Transcript lightly edited for readability

Tracy: Hi and welcome to the Global Travel Planning Podcast. I'm your host, Tracy Collins, who with my expert guests takes you on a journey to destinations around the globe, providing itinerary ideas, practical tips and more to help you plan your next travel adventure.

Tracy: In this week's episode of the Global Travel Planning Podcast our focus is on the Southeast Asian country of Vietnam. If you are planning or considering a visit to Vietnam, I'm sure you will have a myriad of questions and things you'd like to know before you visit. In this episode, I get the lowdown on visiting Vietnam from travel experts Ros and Alan Cuthbertson from frequenttraveller.com.au and stepintovietnam.com, who were actually in Vietnam when we recorded this episode. I started the chat with Ros and Alan by asking them to introduce themselves and share a little bit about their background, love of travel and Vietnam, before delving into essential tips and info to know for first time visitors to Vietnam.

Ros: I'm Ros.

Alan: And I'm Alan, and we're from Bundaberg, Australia.

Ros: We started travelling about 2015. We'd lost a few of our family members over a five year period and we realised that life could change in a second. And we also realised that you only have one life. So we decided we were going to go and take off to Thailand. And first off, we thought we might retire there. But then we found out about house sitting and then the whole world opened up to us. So that's the beginning of our story.

Alan: Yeah, that was in 2015 and we really loved Thailand. And we did think just before we went that we would just stay in Thailand. But as Ros said, once we started the house sitting, we decided that we would expand our travel. We ended up spending months and months first time over in the UK. We actually spent four months in the UK and only had to pay for three nights' accommodation out of the whole four months. The rest of it was all with house sitting, and that led to bigger and better things.

Ros: Better house sits, and it also changed things. We also went off in different directions in travel, and during that time we had a lot of people asking us, how do you do that? How do you do that? So we started our website, Frequent Traveller, and started documenting our travels, and that's where we've gone from there.

Alan: Yeah, it's grown, which has been very good, and we've met so many new people. Where we used to live, we had a circle of friends, but we've now expanded that to another circle of friends worldwide. And with the website you get so many opportunities to meet other companies and other people, and we go to conferences and what have you. And so that worked well until the world changed in 2020 and we came back to our home country of Australia. And from there we thought, well, we're not really ready to stop. We weren't really in a position that we could just stop because we had our place previously rented out. So we decided to start travelling around Australia. So that's where we started our second website, Road Trip Australia. And then we've been slowly building that up over the last couple of years, and now we've started a third website.

Ros: Because we love Vietnam.

Tracy: It's a bit addictive, isn't it? So we met at the TBEX travel conference in Phuket last November. But I'd already known about you guys because I've got friends of mine who live in the UK who are massive fans of your work, and they were so excited about the fact that I was going to meet you. And that's how we met. That's part of the wonder of doing what we do, isn't it? We can do what we absolutely love and we also meet amazing people as we travel as well, don't we?

Ros: We do, we certainly do.

Alan: We've made a large circle of friends now, and it's people from different backgrounds, different nationalities. It's been such an eye opener for us, and we've got out of our comfort zone of where we were just in that small circle of friends before. It's been fantastic.

Ros: It's actually changed the way we think. The world is really a small place when you think about it, and everywhere you go, most of the people are just so lovely. You might not be able to communicate with them, but you communicate through gestures. It really is like that in Vietnam as well, because we can't speak Vietnamese, but people are so ready to be helpful.

Tracy: So obviously we've talked about your three websites, and the third website that you have recently started is about Vietnam. What's really interesting is that you've talked about house sitting, and I'm actually interviewing you today sitting in a house sit in New Zealand. I'm going to have to do an episode of the podcast about house sitting, actually. And you guys are actually in Vietnam at the moment, doing more research for your website. And because I'm planning with Doug at the moment to visit Vietnam in a few months' time, we've had some great conversations about Vietnam, so I thought you would be the perfect ones to come on and talk about what first time visitors to Vietnam need to know. Doug and I don't speak Vietnamese either, we've never been to Vietnam before, and I'm sure quite a few people listening to this podcast haven't been to Vietnam and are thinking, okay, what are the things I need to know if I'm visiting Vietnam for the first time?

Ros: Well, one of the first things you need to know is that it's a very diverse country. It's got a long coastline with fabulous beaches, and it's also got mountain areas with stunning views and cooler climates. You've got Ha Long Bay, which is absolutely gorgeous. So you've got a wide range of landscapes to explore.

Tracy: So does the climate change in different months in different parts of the country? That's something I was wondering, because we're visiting in November and I don't know if that's the best time to go to certain areas of Vietnam as opposed to others.

Ros: Yes, it does change. It varies all the way down the country. In the north, visiting during December to February, or the spring months of March and April, is really good. In the central part, the dry season from March to May is best, and the worst of the rainy season there is probably September and October. And in the south they have a proper rainy season too, but the best time to visit is during the dry months of December to April.

Alan: And we have been before in the rainy season, and it's not that bad. It's like all things, it's just a general guide to what the weather can be like. It might rain for about an hour in the afternoon. It'll absolutely pour down, and then it's nothing. It's not like in our home country of Australia where it'll rain for half a day. It'll just rain for an hour or two.

Tracy: Okay, that's good to know, because when you think rainy season, you wonder, does that mean monsoon and you just have rain for days and days? But it's very different. You just have an hour or so of rain.

Alan: Yeah. And the other thing which people would probably benefit to know about when they come to a place like Vietnam is that it's still very much a cash society. Cash is king here. They will accept cards at

certain establishments like high end hotels or at certain restaurants, but 90% of the transactions are done in cash. So it's wise to bring cash with you, or bring a card which you can then use to withdraw cash. ATMs are readily available throughout the country, so you won't have any problem actually getting hold of your cash. Some ATMs will charge ATM fees, which is normal in most countries, but you can work your way around that one. We use a Wise card, which allows you to load it up with various different currencies, and you can withdraw from the ATMs without paying the ATM fee in most cases, which is really handy.

Tracy: So do you tend to take a little bit of cash with you and then withdraw more when you get there? I'm just thinking, because Doug and I are going to be travelling to a few countries before we get to Vietnam, I don't really want to be carrying too much cash around. Would you recommend taking a minimum amount?

Alan: Yeah, not very much at all. They've got ATMs at the airport. In the past, we used to bring cash years ago, but now we just go straight to the airport ATM and withdraw local currency, so it's not really necessary. There are also money exchanges at the airports. Naturally they're not as cheap as you can get elsewhere, but they are there. So it's not necessary to bring loads of cash, because you just take it out as you need it.

Ros: Try the local food. Vietnamese food is fresh, it's served with lots of herbs, and it's absolutely delicious. So get out and try the food. Even try market food, if you're going to a night market, try it there. Maybe don't try the seafood if it looks like it's been sitting out, but anything else, do go and try it, because it is delicious, and the variety changes throughout the country.

Alan: It's funny, because we've been travelling for a long time, not just in Vietnam but all throughout Southeast Asia, and we've eaten street food lots of times and we've only ever once had a little bit of a tummy upset. Ninety per cent of the time it's been fine.

Ros: And that was because I was eating a sausage at a big, really busy market, and the sausage wasn't cooked properly and I was eating it in the dark. If I'd seen it in the light, I would have been fine.

Ros: If you go to a food market, you'll see all the fresh vegetables, and I love going to fresh food markets. You will see meat and everything out, but it's been killed that day. The vegetables have been picked that day. They're probably fresher than what you're getting in the supermarket.

Alan: And talking to people that have run restaurants over here, they source the food from the exact same places that the street vendors are getting theirs from.

Tracy: So are there any favourite dishes that you'd recommend?

Ros: I like mi quang, which is a dish from Da Nang. It's got a quail egg in it, and it's got noodles, and it's just yummy. It's not spicy, but it's got a bit of a tang to it.

Alan: And the main breakfast one is pho, which is spelled P-H-O. It's a noodle soup dish, and that's traditionally eaten in the morning, for breakfast.

Ros: It's like a warm hug.

Tracy: That's what I had for dinner tonight!

Ros: Well, you won't have any trouble finding that. And banh mi, of course, everyone knows banh mi, and they're just delicious. But another one is cao lau, which comes from Hoi An, and that's got special noodles that are made in Hoi An. There's a special way of making them. And it's got big pieces of pork and pork rind and noodles. And that's delicious too. So you've got to try it.

Alan: And the other thing with Vietnam, as with a lot of other Southeast Asian countries, is that you can't drink the tap water, so you've got to drink bottled water the whole time.

Ros: Brush your teeth with it as well, to be on the safe side.

Alan: Yeah, and it's cheap. It's not expensive at all, and it's plentiful.

Ros: How much does a bottle of water cost at home in Australia?

Alan: Well, we pay sometimes about five dollars for a bottle of water, but here you pay twenty cents. It's so cheap.

Ros: And traffic, I suppose we should talk about the traffic. It's a bit daunting when you first land. Just remember that crossings aren't like crossings at home. They don't stop for you, but still use them. Just keep an eye on the traffic as you step out. The motorbikes normally go around you. You do watch the cars, though, they can't be trusted. If a car beeps, you stop, because they're not going to stop for you. But in saying that, it doesn't take very long for you to get used to it. Also be aware that they ride the bikes up onto the pavement too, so keep your eyes open.

Alan: Yes. And they drive on the right hand side of the road, but it's not uncommon to see one scooting up on the wrong side of the road. Or we've had them come right out of a shop on a motorbike. There are so many motorbikes. They reckon there's two motorbikes for every single person in the whole country.

Ros: Just keep your eyes open. But I do know that it won't take long and you'll be used to it, and you'll have eyes in the back of your head.

Alan: It's funny, because we've seen some tourists come and stop at the sidewalk to cross the road, and they'll just stay there and stay there and stay there. And they'll be there all day, because the traffic will never stop.

Ros: You've got to bite the bullet.

Alan: If you've got a Vietnamese person next to you, when they walk, walk.

Tracy: That's a good one, I have to say. When we were in Bali in March, quite often Doug would be across the other side of the road and I'd be like, I'm not going, there are just too many motorbikes and cars. And he'd be like, why, where are you? I'm like, over here! I'm just going to have to follow him closely. He's a little bit more gutsy than I am.

Alan: It's 24/7.

Ros: Yeah, it's fun. It's part of the experience.

Alan: SIM cards. If you bring your phone, you naturally need a SIM card. We tend to use eSIMs now, which we find a lot easier if you've got a modern smartphone. Otherwise you can get SIM cards at the major airports. You won't get them as easily in Vietnam at corner stores like you can in other countries. So if you don't have a SIM card and you haven't got one at the airport, it can sometimes be a little bit more difficult to get one.

Ros: So we really recommend getting an eSIM. Since we've been using them, it's just so much easier. It takes the bother out of everything.

Tracy: Yeah, I have to agree with that. I got an eSIM when I went back to the UK on my phone, and then I got another eSIM when I was in Greece, and I've got another eSIM now I'm in New Zealand. And I've actually looked at an eSIM that covers Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand, where we're going to be, for the length of time that we need as well. It's just so much easier. I've always been a little bit nervous about actually taking the SIM card out of my phone and replacing it with another one, because I am the sort of person who would lose my SIM card.

Ros: It's not like they're huge or anything. They're really easy to lose.

Tracy: Exactly. So having the eSIM and just flicking through to which eSIM I need, and on my Android phone you can have ten eSIMs. It's just perfect.

Alan: Definitely the way to go. And the other thing, of course, is load up your phone with some apps, like a virtual private network, a VPN. We highly recommend that when using public Wi-Fi.

Ros: And download Google Maps, which is good if you don't have any reception.

Alan: And the other thing we use more and more now is Google Translate. That's got much better over the last few years, and we've found it's being used quite a lot, even by the local Vietnamese, even since the last time we came. It's made things a lot easier. You can talk into it.

Tracy: Are there any other apps that you would suggest I should get on my phone before I arrive?

Alan: XE Currency Converter, definitely, for the currency. And the Grab taxi app. They don't use Uber here, they use Grab, as they do in other places in Asia. That's very good, so that's a definite. They're the main ones.

Tracy: Perfect. So have you got any other suggestions, anything else that you can think of that first time visitors need to know?

Alan: If they're taking the train in Vietnam, we would suggest booking that in advance if you want a two berth sleeper cabin, because they do fill up.

Ros: They really do. We travelled from Hanoi to Hue, and we would have liked to have had a two berth, but it was booked out months beforehand. So get in early. You can still use the four berth ones, and it was quite nice, it was lovely being in the four berth, but it would have been nice to have had the two berth.

Alan: For getting around in Vietnam, flying is very cost effective. There are quite a few airlines to choose from, and it is often cheaper than going by bus and things like that. And a lot quicker, of course.

Ros: Yeah, it can be cheaper than getting a sleeper train. And if you're in a hurry, it's just easier to fly. They're not expensive flights.

Tracy: Well, following your advice, because we had a chat about our itinerary when I was designing it, we're actually taking the train, and I did get the two berths, I'm very excited about that.

Ros: I can't wait to hear all about it.

Tracy: Yeah, well, I'll be talking about that on the podcast once we've been, and seeing how that's gone. And then we're going to be flying as well, we'll be getting a flight from Da Nang down to Saigon, Ho Chi Minh City, and we're taking a bus from Saigon to Phnom Penh. So we're going to be doing all of the different types of transport. We'll report back and see how we've found it. I'm really excited, it's going to be so good. And you guys have helped so much with giving us ideas about the places to visit and sharing the top tips and things we need to know, which is really helpful. Because I think sometimes when you start planning an itinerary, you focus a lot on where am I going to go, where am I going to stay, and what things do I want to do, which are obvious. But actually what you need to be thinking about before all of that is the practical things to keep in your head when you're planning the trip.

Tracy: So those are very useful tips. But one thing I did want to ask you about, because Doug and I are going to be first time visitors to Vietnam, and you are seasoned travellers to Southeast Asia and to Vietnam: what would be the one place or one experience that you would suggest anyone visiting Vietnam for the first time should include in their itinerary? And I know you've got two different places you want to talk about.

Ros: Okay, Hoi An. Because it's a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and it used to be an old seafaring port, and it's got all the ancient buildings. It's got a golden glow. At night time they put lanterns on the river and it's just so pretty. That's one place that you definitely need to go to. And also it's got beaches, a five minute drive down the road, and it's close to Da Nang, so you've got a good trio there when you visit. It's beautiful.

Alan: They call it the City of Lanterns. They have lanterns, and boats going down the river at night time with lanterns on. It's a beautiful place. It's a fun place to be.

Tracy: Well, I'm really looking forward to it. We've included four nights there, so I'm excited to visit.

Alan: And the other place which we'd recommend is the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Ha Long Bay, which is about a three hour drive from Hanoi. It's a must see for any first time visitor to Vietnam. It has a reputation of being beautiful, and words can't describe how beautiful it actually is. You can do various trips. They originate from Hanoi, they'll pick you up and take you to Ha Long Bay. You can do a day trip where you go there and come back the same day. You go on a boat, you have lunch, you get to go to the caves, you can do a bit of kayaking, things like that, if you've got the time.

Alan: And you can spend a night. You can do a one night overnight tour which will go further around the bay looking at different things, and they have night time activities. Over dinner you have drinks on board the boat, they do squid fishing, things like that. And then there's a two night one which takes you even deeper around the bay, because it's very, very big. There are thousands of islands, apparently. It's so huge, and each one is spectacular. It is definitely a must for anybody going to Vietnam.

Ros: We've done it twice. We've done the day trip one, which was well worth it. If you're strapped for time, the day trip will do, you'll see quite a bit. And we also did the overnight one, and waking up in the morning to Ha Long Bay was just unbelievable.

Alan: And the food is very good. And they have little boats coming up to sell you their wares as you're floating around. And you can be as adventurous or not adventurous as you want to be. If you want to go swimming and snorkelling, you can. If you want to go kayaking and explore the caves, you can. Or if you just want to sit on the boat and relax with a drink, watching the sun go down, that's fine too.

Tracy: Sounds perfect. Sounds absolutely perfect. I'm very excited about going to visit. So how much longer are you going to be in Vietnam now?

Alan: It's under two weeks now, so we're coming to the end of it, unfortunately. About a week and a half. We're in a place on the Mekong Delta, a few hours below Ho Chi Minh City.

Ros: Where we're staying, we look out over the Mekong Delta. Boats going past, little boats, big boats. It's magnificent. Beautiful.

Tracy: Well, we'll have to have you on a future episode of the podcast to talk about your itinerary and where you've been on this trip. That would be really good. But for this episode, I just want to thank you both so much for agreeing to come on and talk about Vietnam. In the show notes I'm going to link to your websites, and if you've got any photos we can put in, we'll put those in the show notes as well. So listeners, you can go and take a look at Ros and Alan's websites and social media. Pop along on Instagram and give them a follow, and I know you guys are on YouTube as well, so follow along with them and find out more about Vietnam. Thanks so much for coming on.

Ros: Thank you very much for having us, Tracy.

Alan: Thanks, Tracy. Appreciate that.

Tracy: You can find this week's show notes at tracystravelsintime.com/episode-four, which includes links to Ros and Alan's websites, frequenttraveller.com.au and Step into Vietnam. Next week we are chatting

with Tess Moone of tessomewhere.com about her recent four month trip with her husband to Japan and Europe. So until then, happy global travel planning!

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