TOUR CODE

LA2

ADVENTURESABROAD

LAOS & VIETNAM

22 days

Updated 06/03/2013

Day 1 *Arrival in Bangkok*

Arrive in Bangkok, Thailand.

Overnight in Bangkok (airport area). Meal plan: Dinner, if required.

Day 2 *Bangkok, Thailand - Luang Prabang, Laos*

Today we fly to Luang Prabang, Laos, a World Heritage Site.

In the 14th century, this city was established as the royal capital by Fa Ngoum, the first monarch of Lan Xang, the "Land of a Million Elephants." By this time, the city had already been the seat of local kingdoms for 600 years. According to legend, the site of the town was chosen by two resident hermits and was originally known as Xieng Thong --"Copper Tree City".

We have an orientation of this charming town, with its one main street lined with colonial era buildings housing shops and cafes. We have a chance to explore the town on foot and to climb to the top of Phu Si Hill. Looking directly downwards you can see that the former royal palace has a cruciform ground plan. We finish at Ban Phanom, a 300 year old weaving village is where shawls and sarongs are made from silk and cotton. The people in this area were originally from South China and were traditionally the King's weavers, soldiers and palace servants. The inhabitants make sarongs with dragon motifs, and shawls which are often dyed an indigo colour using a natural dye extract from a local plant. Some of the cloth woven in the village is embroidered with delicate silver and gold thread. Girls are taught from a very young age the skills which have been handed down from their forebears in Xishuangbanna District in China's Yunnan Province.

NOTE: The order of our sightseeing in Luang Prabang may vary depending on flight schedules that are subject to change.

Overnight in Luang Prabang. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 3 *Luang Prabang Area*

An early departure today takes to the Mekong River for a boat journey to visit the Pak Ou Caves. The boat is long and quite large, covered, with comfortable seat cushions, life jackets and a WC.

The Pak Ou Caves are two clefts in the side of a mountain stuffed with thousands of old Buddha images. The site has long been sacred for the Lao, even prior to Buddhism, when they worshipped spirits. The lower cave has over 4,000 images, ranging from 3 inches to 9 feet tall, stuck into nooks and crannies. The upper cave's Buddha images are placed far back into the cliff, so it's handy to have a flashlight. A real highlight of a trip to the caves is the breathtaking view of the mountains, villages, and fishermen during the 2-hour boat ride.

We return to Luang Prabang and visit the Royal Palace, a museum containing a collection of 15th-17th century Buddha statues including the significant Golden Buddha. The last member of the Lao royalty to live here was Sisavang Vong's son, Crown Prince Sisavang Vatthana. The private chapel is one of the most interesting wings of the palace. Here you will see the priceless gold Phra Bang Buddha in Abhayamudra (dispelling fear). It is made from 90% pure gold and is said to weigh 50 kg (110 lb).

We finish with a tour of the 16th-century Wat Xieng Thong with its richly decorated wooden interior. Wat Mai is another old temple of classic Luang Prabang design with gracefully curved roofs. We see many 400 year old wooden Buddha statues at Wat Wisunalat.

Overnight in Luang Prabang. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 4 *Luang Prabang - Xieng Khouang (Plain of Jars) - Phonsavan*

Today we travel by road to Xieng Khouang and the Plain of Jars.

Overnight in Phonsavan. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 5 *The Plain of Jars*

In the 18th and at the beginning of the 19th century, Xieng Khouang was the center of a kingdom of the Hmong (Meo). In 1832, it was conquered by the Vietnamese, annexing the entire region. The town of Xieng Khouang was totally destroyed during the Vietnam War. Even though it has been rebuilt in 1975, the name Xieng Khouang is now primarily used in reference to the province of the same name.

The highlight of our visit here is the "Plain of Jars." Scattered over the plain are hundreds of enormous limestone jars, each about 1 to 2.5 metres high, with a diameter of about 1 meter. There is still no explanation as to how the clay jars found their way onto the plain, nor what purpose they served. Archaeologists have come up with the wildest theories, among them a claim declaring them brewery cauldrons. More likely, the jars are enormous urns. Many jars were destroyed or damaged during the Vietnam War, when American planes bombed positions of the communist Pathet Lao.

Overnight in Phonsavan. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 6 *Phonsavan - Vang Vieng*

Today we travel by road to Vang Vieng, a small village nestled in a scenic bend in the Nam Song River and surrounded by breathtaking limestone scenery. This is rapidly becoming Laos's premier destination for eco-tourism. The outcrops have inspired many Lao legends and stories in Lao literature and are known as "Phou Suan Mon Nang Eua", meaning "Silk Tree Garden Mountains of the Princess". The area also contains an extensive network of caves some of which are outlets for underground streams.

The latter part of our drive is truly spectacular -- limestone cliffs and sheer drops. About 20 kms before Vang Vieng, we'll stop at a bridge with a lovely view of karsts. There's also an attractive immediately before the bridge.

Overnight in Vang Vieng. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 7 *Vang Vieng - Viangchan*

Today we travel by road to Viangchan (Vientiane), the capital of Laos.

Overnight in Viangchan. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 8 *Viangchan, Laos - Hanoi, Vietnam*

Today we fly from Viangchan to Hanoi.

Hanoi is a lovely city with lakes, fine boulevards and flourishing parks, as well as having a public centre that is an architectural museum piece. Hanoi is situated on the right bank of the Red River (Song Hong) which is spanned by two bridges, the old Long Bien Bridge and the new Chuong Duong bridge.

In the centre of downtown Hanoi is Hoan Kiem Lake (also called the Lake of the Restored Sword or the Small Lake.) Emperor Le Thai To (1428-1433), following a momentous victory against an army of invading Ming Chinese, was sailing on the lake when a golden turtle snapped at (and broke off) the tip of his sword, so signifying that its work was done. There is a modest tower (the Tortoise Tower) commemorating the event on an islet in the southern part of the lake. In fact, the lake does contain large turtles; one captured in 1968 was reputed to have weighed 250 kg (552 pounds). The park that surrounds the lake is used by the residents of the city every morning for jogging and tai chi (Chinese shadow boxing) and is regarded by locals as one of the city's beauty spots. When the French arrived in Hanoi at the end of the 19th century, the lake was an unhealthy lagoon surrounded by so many huts that it was impossible to see the shore.

Overnight in Hanoi. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 9 *Hanoi - Halong Bay: Huong Hai Junk Cruise*

This morning we depart for Halong Bay. The route today, via Haiphong, will be our first opportunity to see rural Vietnam. We will arrive at Halong Bay in the early afternoon. Halong Bay, located in the Gulf of Tonkin, covers an area of 1500 square km. With more than a thousand limestone peaks soaring from its crystalline emerald water this area is one of the natural wonders of Vietnam and now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The islands are dotted with innumerable white sandy beaches and grottoes created by wind and waves. The name Halong means "where the dragon descends into the sea". Legend has it that the islands of Halong Bay were created by a great dragon who lived in the mountains.

On arrival at Halong Bay we will board our Huong Hai Junk cruise and enjoy a welcome drink. The Huong Hai ('Ocean Flavours') junks are unique, 'antique' (replica) accommodations that are scrupulously clean, fully-crewed and comfortable. Our junk/s are large boats with private bath, air conditioning and fan, and plenty of deck space. An onboard chef prepares delicious, local seafood dishes (non-seafood dishes available).

After lunch on board we will cruise among the islands, stopping at a couple that have interesting cave features (some involve stairs). We enjoy sunset and then dinner on board.

Overnight Junk cruise. Meal plan: Breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Day 10 *Halong Bay - Hanoi*

Fishermen at Halong mount fan-shaped Chinese junk sails on their boats, the same sort of sails once deployed by pirates in these waters. Junks have been used for centuries by the Chinese, Japanese and Javanese for fishing and transportation, and often as living quarters; a junk commonly includes a deck, high masts, and several cotton sails.

Halong is one of the last places where junk sails are still handmade by families of sail makers. Coarse cotton panels are sewn together with silk thread -- every seam sewn by hand. To discourage rot and mildew, the completed sail is dipped in a liquid that comes from a beetroot-like member of the yam family. The sail is dipped and dried three or four times; a process that gives its dark red-tan colour.

Early this morning, after breakfast on board, we cruise to visit Hang Luon Cave by small bamboo boat. We check out at around 10 am, enjoy brunch on board before disembarking and departing for Hanoi at around noon. Upon arrival we'll visit Hanoi's Old Quarter, also known as the 'Quarter of 36 Streets', where we enjoy a leisurely walking tour.

Overnight in Hanoi. Meal plan: Breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Day 11 *Hanoi: City Tour*

Today we have a full day of sightseeing, starting with the Hoa Lo Prison Museum, known to American prisoners of war as the Hanoi Hilton. This museum was a prison used by the French colonists in Vietnam for political prisoners and later by North Vietnam for prisoners of war during the American / Vietnam War.

We also see the Mausoleum of Ho Chi Minh, a site of pilgrimage (the building has been closed to visitors of late; probably an outside viewing only). The building was constructed from materials gathered from all over Vietnam. Modeled closely on Lenin's Mausoleum, Ho Chi Minh lies at rest in this Vietnamese version.

We continue to the house on stilts, where Ho Chi Minh lived and worked from 1958 to 1969. Its construction and decor illustrates the importance of simplicity and modesty to this Vietnamese revolutionary. The building is elegantly crafted with lacquered and polished wood, following the model of a traditional communal house on stilts.

We will also admire the elegance of the One Pillar Pagoda, originally built in 1049. The temple is lotus-shaped and is situated in the middle of a water-lily pond.

We continue to the new Ethnology Museum, one of Vietnam's finest. Dedicated to the ethnic minorities of Vietnam, this museum provides educational displays and descriptions and provides a real insight to peoples found primarily in the high country.

Next is the Temple of Literature, the site of the first national university dating back to 1076 and one of Hanoi's best-preserved ancient sites. From here we walk to the Fine Arts Museum, housed within a large colonial building, where we will see contemporary Vietnamese art and handicrafts.

Tonight we will enjoy a (+/- one hour) water puppet show. This is a fantastic art form unique to Vietnam and derives from the Red River Delta area.

Overnight in Hanoi. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 12 *Hanoi - Mai Chau - Hanoi*

Located in Hoa Binh Province, about three hours drive southwest of Hanoi, Mai Chau is home to many ethnic minority peoples. The road winds through a splendid vista of mountainous scenery until we reach a valley surrounded by a lush

landscape and stilt houses inhabited mainly by the White Thai ethnic group, distantly related to tribes in Thailand, Laos and China. Upon arrival, we walk through typical villages to discover the rustic life of these mountainous people. We also learn about the traditional craft of brocade making. We'll enjoy a traditional lunch (included) at a local restaurant in a hamlet, with a chance to taste the country's finest rice wine with a local family. Transfer back to Hanoi.

Overnight in Hanoi. Meal plan: Breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Day 13 *Hanoi - Da Nang - Hoi An*

Today we fly to Da Nang and continue by road to Hoi An.

Da Nang is situated on a peninsula at the point where the Han River flows into the South China Sea. We pass through the nearby Marble Mountains; five limestone peaks with marble outcrops known for their beauty and their caves. At the foot of Marble Mountain, an important religious site for the Chams, you can see many artisans crafting fine marble objects. Our destination is one of the most charming towns in Vietnam -- Hoi An. The ancient town of Hoi An (formerly Faifo) lies 32 km (20 miles) south of Da Nang on the banks of the Thu Bon River.

Overnight in Hoi An. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 14 *Hoi An: Walking Tour*

Today we will be able to soak in the atmosphere of this small town (a World Heritage Site) on a walking tour. The unique architecture, the temples, the market will make Hoi An one of the highlights of your trip.

The Japanese Covered Bridge was built in the 16th century, perhaps even earlier. On its north side there is a pagoda, Japanese in style, which protects sailors. Its popular name reflects a long-standing belief that is was built by the Japanese, although no documentary evidence exists to support this. At the Tran Family Temple we will see the fusion between both the Chinese and Japanese styles. This temple has survived for 15 generations.

Overnight in Hoi An. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 15 *Hoi An - My Son - Hoi An*

This morning we visit the World Heritage Site of My Son ("mee-sohn"), a large complex of religious relics that comprises more than 70 architectural works from the obscure Cham Dynasty (2nd-15th century). The Chams were "Indianised" during commercial trading relations and adopted Hinduism (which can clearly be seen in the Temple designs). My Son served as a intellectual and religious centre and is a must visit as one of Vietnam's most important Cham Sites. The forested, mountain setting and general peacefulness of this little visited site make this an excellent excursion.

Return to Hoi An with the balance of the day at leisure.

Overnight in Hoi An. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 16 *Hoi An - Da Nang - Hue*

Today we travel to Hue via Da Nang where we visit the Cham Museum* which houses the largest display of Cham art anywhere in the world. Shortly after departure from Da Nang we will pass through the Truong Son Mountains, the former border between North Vietnam and South Vietnam. Hai Van Pass, or literally "Pass of the Ocean Clouds," offers spectacular scenery.

Hue was the capital of the old Nguyen dynasty and traditionally one of Vietnam's cultural, religious and educational centers. Here there are splendid tombs of the emperors, several stunning pagodas and the citadel that houses the forbidden Purple City, situated on the banks of the Perfume River.

Overnight in Hue. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 17 *Hue: Area Tour*

We begin our day by motorised boat down the Perfume River to visit the delightful Thien Mu Pagoda, considered to be the finest pagoda in Hue. It was built in 1601 after an old woman appeared to Nguyen Hoang, the governor of Hue, and said that the site had supernatural significance.

This afternoon we tour the Citadel, a fortress surrounded by a moat that has a six-mile perimeter. At the Forbidden Purple City we can see the remains of the former home of the emperors. The Imperial City is built on the same principles as the Forbidden City in Beijing. It is enclosed by thick outer walls (Kinh Thanh) of 23-33 feet, along with moats, canals and towers. There are ten gates, which pierce the four walls of the citadel, although many are in poor condition. The city has not only been damaged by war, but also by natural disasters such as floods, which inundated the city in the mid-nineteenth century to a depth of several feet. The complex has undergone partial restoration with the aid of UNESCO.

This evening we will enjoy a special, private dinner in a beautiful, restored royal home in Hue. The home is now owned by descendants of the Hue royal family.

Overnight in Hue. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 18 *Hue - Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City)*

Today we fly from Hue to Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City), the business and tourist centre of Vietnam.

This afternoon we visit some of the city's highlights, including the Reunification Hall, formerly the site of Norodom Palace, the residence of the French governor-general of Indochina. On 30 April 1975, NVA tanks smashed down the first gates and took control of Saigon. We then proceed to Cholon, or Chinatown, an area inhabited by Vietnamese of Chinese origin. This area is one of the most vibrant in the city.

Overnight in Saigon. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 19 *Saigon - Cu Chi Tunnels - Saigon*

This morning we will visit the intriguing tunnels of Cu Chi, a complex underground system that housed 10,000 people during the height of the war and contained sleeping quarters, hospitals and schools.

From here we will continue on to the War Remnants Museum (formerly the War Crimes Museum). The visit here is a sobering experience with its countless photographs and exhibits.

Overnight in Saigon. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 20 *Saigon - Cao Dai - Mekong Delta*

On our way to the Delta, we will stop at one of the many Cao Dai temples.* This hybrid religion took root in southern Vietnam during the 1920's after Ngo Van Chieu, a civil servant, was visited by 'Cao Dai' or the 'Supreme Being'. The Cao Dai later told Ngo in a seance that he was to be symbolized by a giant eye. Being a humanist religion, it quickly gained support of a large following of dispossessed peasants. Today there is thought to be about 2,000,000 adherents and 1,000 Cao Dai temples.

A four-hour drive south takes us to the fertile delta of the meandering Mekong River, the southernmost region of Vietnam. Often referred to as the rice bowl of Vietnam, producing three crops of rice per year, the fertile Mekong Delta is also famous for its tropical fruits and flowers. The Delta area is the end of a 4500 km / 2,812 mi journey the Mekong River makes after travelling through six countries. Traditional transportation in the Delta is by boat, via a vast network of canals and channels. Boating along these canals and visiting the floating markets is a fascinating experience.

* Please pack an overnight for the trip to the Mekong Delta. Large baggage will be securely stored in Saigon.

Overnight in hotel in Cantho region (Mekong Delta). Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 21 *Mekong Delta - Saigon*

Early this morning we will have a covered boat ride on the delta where we can have a candid glimpse into the lives of the local people selling, buying, and exchanging goods from their boats.

We meet our bus (at a different point from where we left it) for our drive back to Saigon. This afternoon we may accomplished Saigon area sightseeing not accomplished earlier due to flight times. At some point during out tour we will drive past the Notre Dame Cathedral and adjacent Post Office. Both of these buildings were constructed by the French in the 1880s and display architectural characteristics typical of that time period.

Overnight in Saigon. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 22 *Departure*

Departure from Saigon.

HEN GAP LAI! Meal plan: Breakfast.