TOUR CODE

VRSE

ADVENTURESABROAD

VIETNAM, LAOS & MYANMAR (Burma)

with Victor Romagnoli

24 days

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Day 1 *Arrival in Saigon*

Welcome to Vietnam! Today we arrive in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City), the country's main business and trading centre.

Overnight in Saigon. Meal plan: Dinner, if required.

Day 2 *Saigon: Cu Chi Tunnels*

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 3 *Saigon: Mekong Delta Area*

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.

Our 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. Today we will have a 3-hour 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.

Return to Saigon.

Overnight in Saigon. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 4 *Saigon - Hanoi*

Today we fly to Hanoi, a lovely city with lakes, fine boulevards and flourishing parks, as well as 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.

Upon arrival we'll enjoy a scenic cyclo ride through the narrow streets of old Hanoi and then 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 5 *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.

Overnight in Hanoi. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 6 *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 and dinner.

Day 7 *Halong Bay - Hanoi, Vietnam - Luang Prabang, Laos*

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.

We return to Hanoi in time to fly to Luang Prabang, Laos.

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

Day 8 *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 9 *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 10 *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 11 *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 12 *Vang Vieng - Viangchan*

This morning we spend time in the idyllic Vang Vieng. You may choose to relax at our resort or join your tour leader on an excursion to Phou Kham Cave, 6km west of Vang Vieng. We will use local transport to make our way to the cave where a reclining bronze Buddha resides. A flashlight is recommended!

Later, after lunch, we travel by road to Viangchan (Vientiane), the capital and largest city of Laos, situated in the Mekong River. Vientiane became the capital in 1563 due to fears of a Burmese invasion. During French rule, Vientiane was the administrative capital and due to economic growth in recent times, it has become the economic centre of Laos.

Overnight in Viangchan. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 13 *Viangchan: City Tour*

Today we will visit the morning market and allow time here for shopping and absorbing the local colour. We will then drive to Pha That Luang, the most important Stupa in the city/country. Legend dates its founding from 3rd century BC Asokan missionaries who erected a shrine here to enclose a breastbone of the Buddha. The earliest physical remains of a religious structure on this site, however, seem to date from a Khmer monastery around the 12th century.

We also stop at Haw Pha Kaew, a temple now serving as a museum of religious artifacts.

Balance of the day at leisure to enjoy Viangchan's charming laid-back atmosphere.

Overnight in Viangchan. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 14 *Viangchan, Laos - Yangon, Myanmar*

Today we fly to Yangon (Rangoon), likely via Bangkok. Yangon is Myanmar's former capital and main port. Founded in 1755 by King Alaungpaya, it grew into a trading port after the British annexed lower Burma in 1826 and became the capital after the whole of Burma fell to the British in 1890.

Later we visit the Shwedagon Pagoda. This golden stupa dominates Yangon, and it is the spiritual rallying point for much of the population. Somerset Maugham said it was "like a sudden hope in the dark night of the soul". The Pagoda is said to date back 2,500 years, and was built to house eight sacred hairs of the Buddha. Its bell-shaped structure is covered in almost 60 metric tonnes of gold-leaf, and on top of the Pagoda there are gold and silver bells studded with rubies, sapphires and topaz. The diamond orb is encrusted with 4,350 diamonds and crowned with a 76 carat diamond. Legend has it that two Burmese merchants travelled to India and met the Buddha under the sacred bodhi tree.

Overnight in Yangon. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 15 *Yangon - Bagan: Site Tour*

Today we fly north to Bagan, where across 40 sq km stand thousands of pagodas and temples. Bagan was once the largest and most splendid city ever built in Burma and it was a rival to Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Its pure Hinayana Buddhism had no rituals, no sacrifices and no priests; only monks, vowed to poverty and meditation.

Upon arrival we'll begin our sightseeing program,* which will include several temples that are unique or important in some way. Many of the monuments are undergoing restoration, and may be either closed or obscured on a rotating basis, but there are plenty to choose from! Our program usually includes Sulamani Temple, restored after the 1975 earthquake, utilising brick and stone, with frescoes in the interior; and Ananda, as important as it is huge. Considered to be the best surviving masterpiece of Mon architecture, Ananda is the finest, largest, best-preserved and most revered of the Bagan temples. We'll aim to be at Shwesandaw Paya at the end of our day -- an excellent place from which to view the sunset.

* The exact order and content of our Bagan area sightseeing will likely vary depending on restorations, weather, group interest, and Tour Leader preference.

Overnight in Bagan. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 16 *Bagan Area*

From the 9th to 13th centuries, this was the capital of the Kingdom of Pagan, the first kingdom to unify the regions that

would later constitute modern Myanmar. During the kingdom's height between the 11th and 13th centuries, over 10,000 Buddhist temples, pagodas and monasteries were constructed in the Bagan plains alone, of which the remains of over 2200 temples and pagodas still survive to the present day.

We have another full day to enjoy the wonders of this important and expansive site, with visits to Payathonzu, with its outstanding wall paintings. Sula Mani is enormous and impressive. We finish at Ananda, as important as it is huge. Considered to be one of the most surviving masterpiece of the Mon architecture, Ananda is the finest, largest, best-preserved and most revered of the Bagan temples. At some point, we will likley be able to stop at a viewpoint overlooking the Irrawaddy River.

Note: This morning is the ideal time to participate in an optional excursion that has grown VERY popular amongst the arriving foreign tourists -- ballooning over the temples of Bagan at sunrise. The excursion begins very early in the morning and is run by Balloons Over Bagan, a British-owned outfit that has been operating the company in Bagan for years. For those who wish to participate in the balloon ride, please note that due to its popularity, you MUST book months in advance. The cost of the balloon ride is $320 USD (payable in cash) based on 2012 pricing. Please contact the Adventures Abroad staff if you wish to make the booking so that we can contact Balloons Over Bagan far in advance. If there is no room for this morning's flight, we can try for the next morning in Bagan.

Overnight in Bagan. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 17 *Bagan - Mt Popa*

Today we travel by bus to visit the monastery at the summit of Mt Popa. On the way, we stop at one of the roadside mills where you may watch docile buffalo slowly circumnavigating the central stone, grinding palm seed into oil. This is a good opportunity to taste some 'jaggery', the local candy made from palm sugar.

Mt Popa is an incongruous extinct volcano that dominates the area. However, Popa's attraction today lies not so much in its geological aspect, but more in its religious and mystical attributes that are still prevalent. Popa is popularly recognized as an abode of many "Nats" (spirits of ancient ancestors) who dwell in various parts of the mountain. In the days of old, it also used to be referred to as the "Mountain of Spirits". The evidence of these beliefs is abundant in the form of Nat shrines, ceremonial offerings, annual representative festivals, and a never-ending stream of pilgrims. We will have time to ascend the hill on foot before continuing to our nearby hotel (Mt Popa Resort) featuring spectacular views.

Overnight near Mt Popa. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 18 *Mt Popa - Mandalay*

This morning we travel by bus to Mandalay, the "Golden City", founded in 1857 by King Mindon after a legend that told of the Lord Buddha's visit 2,400 years previously when he prophesied the founding of a holy city. It lies on the east bank of the Irrawaddy, about 805 km (500 miles) north of Yangon. It was Burma's last capital before it came under British rule. The magnificent Mandalay Palace was burned down during the Second World War and only a scale model remains in the palace grounds, which are surrounded by a moat. However, many pagodas and monasteries still stand.

Time permitting today (or tomorrow), we will stop at the U Bein Wooden Bridge (named after the former town mayor), constructed out of materials salvaged from the forsaken Ava Palace. The bridge, the longest made from teak in the world, is about three-quarters of a mile in length.

This evening we can travel to the summit of Mandalay Hill for sunset and city views.

Overnight in Mandalay. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 19 *Mandalay: Amarapura & Mingun*

We have an early start for our drive to the ancient capital of Amarapura, the "city of immortality," described in its heyday as a microcosm of Burmese civilization. As a capital it was founded by King Bodawpaya in 1783, the year after he came to the throne. Bodawpaya died in 1819 and his grandson Bagyidaw shifted the capital back again to Ava in 1823. That was not the end of Amarapura though, for in 1841, during the reign of Tharrawaddy (the brother of Bagyidaw), it became the capital once more. Sixteen years later, with King Mindon in power, Amarapura was finally displaced by Mandalay.

Back in Mandalay we visit Shwenadaw Monastery before travelling to Mingun and the Myatheindan Pagoda. The seven wavy terraces around the pagoda represent the seven mountain ranges around Mt Meru, while the five kinds of mythical monsters can be found in niches on each terrace level. Mingun has two remarkable objects which we see on our tour, both the brain-child of King Bodawpaya -- the Mingun Bell and the Pagoda, a bizarre and incongruous sight.

We return to Mandalay.

Overnight in Mandalay. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 20 *Mandalay - Heho - Inle Lake*

Today we fly from Mandalay to Heho from where we continue by road to Inle Lake.

Inle Lake actually has two meanings: "little lake" and "four lake" (because there are four big villages on the lake, though 200 in all). People began migrating to the lake area as early as the 14th Century, completing their resettlement during the 18th Century. To survive, they became fishermen and developed their unique style of leg-rowing and catching fish in conical traps. Since the land fronting the lake belonged to the Shans, they were forced to build their homes and villages on the water itself.

Depending on the timing of today's flight, we may be able to accomplish some of our sightseeing program today upon arrival.

Overnight at Inle Lake. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 21 *Inle Lake Area*

This monring we have a boat excursion to Indein Village, located at the western side of the lake. Passing Nyaung Ohak Monastery and following a stair path lined with many hundreds of wooden columns, we reach the impressive Shwe Indein Pagoda complex. From the hillside we have great view over the lake area. On the way back to the boat, we walk through a romantic bamboo forest at the riverside.

We then return to Inle and have afternoon visist to Nga Phe Kyaung Monastery, a silver and goldsmith, observe cheroot making, as well as the blacksmith, cotton and silk weaving industries.

Overnight at Inle Lake. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 22 *Inle Lake & Kakku*

Today's day trip from Inle takes us deep into the Shan hills to the hidden 'forest of temples' at Kakku. Travelling from the flatlands around the lake, we drive higher and higher into the hills, criss-crossing the railway line and passing through small villages inhabited to the Pa-Oh people. At Kakku, we are rewarded with a spectacle: more than 5,000 stupas from the 11th century rising high above the plain. We are able to wander amid these mysterious stupas in an area closed to visitors for many years.

In addition to visiting the temples, our local will introduce you to the customs and lives of the people as we pass thgrough nearby villages.

Return to Inle Lake.

Overnight at Inle Lake. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 23 *Inle Lake - Yangon*

Today we fly back to Yangon.

On arrival we'll accomplish any Yangon sightseeing missed during our first visit, such as the National Museum and other sites, such as the Sule Pagoda and / or Reclining Buddha.

Overnight in Yangon. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 24 *Departure*

Departure from Yangon.

BON VOYAGE! Meal plan: Breakfast.