Tour Code
**SE8**

ADVENTURESABROAD

# LAOS, VIETNAM, CAMBODIA & MYANMAR

**40 days**

Created on: 29 Mar, 2024

## Day 1 Arrival in Luang Prabang

Arrive in Luang Prabang - Welcome to Laos!

Overnight in Luang Prabang.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

## Day 2 Luang Prabang: Town Touring

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" (a charming and evocative nickname from times gone by. Latest figures indicate that Loas's population of wild elephants is in the range of 781- 1,202). 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.

Overnight in Luang Prabang.

Included Meal(s): 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.

Included Meal(s): 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.

Included Meal(s): 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.

Included Meal(s): 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 wat immediately before the bridge.

Overnight in Vang Vieng.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 7 Vang Vieng - Viangchan

Today we travel by road to Viangchan (Vientiane), the capital of Laos. Time-permitting we may be able to see a bit of Viangchan today upon arrival.

Overnight in Viangchan.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 8 Viangchan, Laos - Hanoi, Vietnam

Today we fly from Viangchan to Hanoi. Flight time-permitting, we may have some time to see more of Viangchan before our flight.

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.

## Day 9 Hanoi: City Exploration

Today we enjoy a full day of sightseeing in Hanoi, and as we visit the historic highlights you will witness a capital city packed with tree-lined boulevards, lakes and parks, belle époque villas and beautiful temples.

We will start at the Mausoleum of Ho Chi Minh, a site of pilgrimage and the final resting place of the most iconic and popular leader of Vietnam. The building was constructed from materials gathered from all over Vietnam and is modelled closely on Lenin's Mausoleum. (*From time to time the building is closed to visitors; possibly an outside viewing only).

We continue on to the Ho Chi Minh stilt house. For most of his tenure as President of North Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh lived in this modest stilt house behind the grandiose Presidential Palace. 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, one of Vietnam's most iconic temples. Originally built in 1049, the temple is lotus-shaped and is situated in the middle of a water-lily pond.

Our visit to the Ethnology Museum (one of Vietnam's finest) provides us with an insight to the lives of the peoples found primarily in the high country. Dedicated to the 54 ethnic minorities of Vietnam the museum is packed full of information detailing traditional Vietnamese ways of life. 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.

Today we finish 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.

Overnight in Hanoi.

## Day 10 Hanoi - Red River Delta & Tam Coc

This morning we will drive to Ninh Binh Province through the rural Red River Delta region. This part of Vietnam is often referred to as "Halong Bay on Land". Song Hong, the Red River, is northern Vietnam's largest river. The river rises in China's Yunnan province and flows 1175 km southeast through deep, narrow gorges to enter Vietnam and discharge into the Gulf of Tonkin via a great delta. The silt it carries is rich in iron oxide, making its water red and giving it its name.

After lunch we will enjoy a short drive to Yen Mac. Here we will meet with a local family and learn about the local village activities such as gardening, rice cultivation and production, and local handicraft work. People of the Red River Delta villages are self-sufficient and they grow an abundance of vegetables and fruit in private gardens, overflowing with a variety of crops such as tomatoes, eggplant, spinach, herbs, papaya, longan and jackfruit. We will walk along the narrow village streets to see the local pagoda and the communal house; the relaxed atmosphere here lends well to interaction with local villagers.

We then drive to Hoa Lu, the ancient capital during the Dinh and Le dynasties. We'll visit the local temples and then drive across the Trang An Eco-tourism complex in order to reach the Hang Mua Cave. Here we can climb up the 450 steps to reach the summit for a panoramic view of

the surrounding area.

Overnight in Tam Coc.

Included Meal(s): Lunch

## Day 11 Tam Coc - Lan Ha Bay Overnight Cruise

In the morning embark on a journey to Lan Ha Bay (an extension of Ha Long Bay); all the while absorbing the incredible beauty of The Red River Delta and colourful rice fields throughout the journey. Lying south and east of Cat Ba Town, Lan Ha Bay is made up of approximately 300 or so karst islands and limestone outcrops. Due to being a fair distance from Halong City, fewer tourist boats venture here, meaning Lan Ha Bay has a more isolated appeal.

We will receive a warm welcome as we arrive at the Dinh Vu port around noon. Here we will board our overnight boat. A mouth-watering lunch will be served as we cruise to Lan Ha Bay.

During our afternoon cruising we will witness the phenomenal and awe-inspiring scenery around Lan Ha Bay. We will explore hidden lagoons and floating villages, and you will have the chance to swim or kayak at the foot of the verdant giant stones. We later drop anchor in an isolated area for the evening and enjoy the peaceful ambience of the bay. Under clear skies, the upper deck offers a great vista from which you can admire the beauty of the Lan Ha sunset.

Overnight on board.

Included Meal(s): Lunch

## Day 12 Lan Ha Bay - Hanoi

Before enjoying breakfast, those who wish to can participate in a Tai Chi class on deck under the rise of the Southeast Asian sun. This morning we will explore an impressive cave engulfed with thousands of stalactites and stalagmites. We slowly cruise back through the majestic karst peeks heading back to the pier.

Around noon we will disembark at Dinh Vu port and drive back to Hanoi. We will arrive in the mid-afternoon and will transfer to our hotel. Later this afternoon we will enjoy a walking tour of Hanoi's Old Quarter, also known as the 'Quarter of 36 Streets'.

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

Overnight in Hanoi.

Included Meal(s): 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. Our route takes us through the nearby Marble Mountains; a cluster of five limestone peaks with marble outcrops known for their beauty and their caves. At the foot of Marble Mountain one finds an important religious site for the Chams as well as many artisans crafting fine marble objects.

Our destination today is perhaps one of the most charming and atmospheric towns in Vietnam - Hoi An. The ancient town of Hoi An is an exceptionally well-preserved example of a South-East Asian trading port dating from the 15th to the 19th century. The town centre here is small enough to get around easily on foot. On arrival, flight times permitting, we'll have an informal orientation tour of this charming town.

Overnight in Hoi An.

## Day 14 Hoi An: Walking Tour & Boat Trip

Today we will venture out on foot and discover many of the highlights of this UNESCO protected town – including the old-town architecture, Buddhist shrines, French colonial houses, art galleries and old canals. This was once a prominent Vietnamese trading port for porcelain, pepper, silk and cinnamon, and the city offers a true mix of Vietnamese, Japanese, Chinese, and French architectural feats.

The oldest parts of town are teeming with beautifully-restored houses, shops, and temples, offering sightseeing opportunities you won't find in other cities in Vietnam. One of Vietnam's most iconic attractions, Hoi An's Japanese covered bridge dates back to the 18th century and is a beautiful historical piece of Japanese architecture. On its north side there is a pagoda, Japanese in style, which serves as protection for sailors. The Tran Family Temple has survived for 15 generations, and here we will see the fusion between both the Chinese and Japanese styles.

During our time here today we will visit the Chinese Assembly Hall, the Central Market and we will enjoy a boat trip on the Thu Bon River. This river is still essential to the region more than 500 years after it was first navigated, and it remains essential to local food production and transport.

Overnight in Hoi An.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 15 From Hoi An: My Son Cham Dynasty Complex

This morning we will visit the UNESCO 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 an intellectual and religious centre and is a 'must visit' as one of Vietnam's most extensive and most important Cham Sites. The forested and lush setting, and general peacefulness of this little visited site make this an excellent excursion.

We later return to Hoi An in time for a late lunch and the balance of the day is free for you to explore at leisure. The Hoi An riverside was a prominent stop amongst foreign traders between the 16th and 18th centuries due to its location on the banks of Thu Bon River, and today this part of the old town is still the most popular gathering spot day and night.

Overnight in Hoi An.

## Day 16 Hoi An - Da Nang - Hue

Today we travel to Hue. Our route to Hue takes us via Da Nang where we visit the Cham Museum - housing the largest display of Cham art anywhere in the world. Many of the exhibits are considered masterpieces of their field, and at present the museum houses over 250 stone and terracotta sculptural works.

Shortly after our 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 as it weaves through breathtaking mountains overlooking a stunning coastline.

The riverfront town of 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.

During our time in Hue we will enjoy a "cyclo" ride through the old city and market. These three-wheel bicycle taxis first appeared in Vietnam during the French colonial period.

Overnight in Hue.

## Day 17 Hue: Area Tour/Citadel Visit

There is no better way to start the day than with a motorized boat journey 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 part of Vietnam has a long and illustrious history as it used to be one of the main royal capitals of the country. This afternoon we tour the Hue 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), 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.

## Day 18 Hue - Ho Chi Minh City

Today we fly from Hue to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), the captivating city of culture and commerce. This cosmopolitan metropolis vibrates with energy and innovation. The old blends with the new in Ho Chi Minh City, defining it as one of the most diverse locations on the winding course of the great Mekong River.

This afternoon we visit some of the city's highlights, including the Reunification Palace, formerly the site of Norodom Palace, the residence of the French governor-general of Indochina. A visit here provides a fascinating glimpse into the turbulent times of the Vietnam War as well as a look at the architectural influences which inspired some of Vietnam's revered architecture – from French and English, to Japanese and Chinese.

We then proceed to Cholon, or Chinatown, an area inhabited by Vietnamese of Chinese origin and one of the most vibrant parts of the city today.

Overnight in Ho Chi Minh City.

## Day 19 Ho Chi Minh City: Cu Chi Tunnels & War Remnants Museum

This morning we travel outside of Saigon to the Cu Chi Tunnels - easily one of the most recognizable symbols of the Vietnam War. The tunnels were dug with simple tools and bare hands during the French occupation in the 1940s, and further expanded during the Vietnam War in the 1960s to provide refuge and a defensive advantage over the American soldiers. Despite all the bombings in their town, the Cu Chi people were able to continue their lives beneath the soil, where they slept, ate, planned attacks, healed their sick, and taught their young. The site has over 120km of underground tunnels, with trapdoors, living areas, kitchens, storage facilities, armoury, hospitals, and command centres. Today there are sections of the tunnels which visitors can crawl through (not recommended for the claustrophobic).

From here we will continue back to the city and head to the War Remnants Museum - the most comprehensive wartime documentation centre in Vietnam. The exhibits and descriptions here may be one-sided, with many exhibits containing a heavy dose of anti-American propaganda, but they do graphically portray the horrors of the war.

Overnight in Ho Chi Minh City.

## Day 20 Ho Chi Minh City - Cao Dai Temple - Mekong Delta

Our destination today is the Mekong Delta, where the Mekong River approaches and empties into the sea through a network of tributaries.*

On our way to the Mekong 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 Ho Chi Minh City.

Overnight in hotel in Cantho region (Mekong Delta).

## Day 21 Mekong Delta - Ho Chi Minh City / Colonial Quarter

Early this morning we will have a covered boat ride on the Delta - an ideal way to explore the attractions of the magic waterways of the Mekong region. Here we can have a candid glimpse into the lives of the local people selling, buying, and exchanging goods from their boats. Due to its mostly flat terrain and few forested areas, almost two-thirds of the region's land can be used for agriculture. The Mekong Delta is also Vietnam's most important fishing region.

After our morning exploration we connect again with our bus for our drive back to Ho Chi Minh City. This afternoon we will complete any city sightseeing that was not accomplished earlier. At some point during out tour we will visit the city's charming Colonial Quarter. Here we find 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. The Cathedral, situated in the aptly-named Paris Square, is among the largest Catholic vestiges in Vietnam, and is still frequented by many locals despite much of the country now practising the Buddhist faith.

Overnight in Ho Chi Minh City.

## Day 22 Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam - Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Today we fly from HCM City to Phnom Penh, the capital and largest city in Cambodia.

Engineered by the French, Phnom Penh was once filled with beautiful tree-lined streets and colonial mansions. Today many of the old buildings exist, although they are in a severe state of disrepair.

Depending on the time of our arrival, we may accomplish some of the sightseeing as described tomorrow, today upon arrival.

Overnight in Phnom Penh.

## Day 23 Phnom Penh: Tuol Sleng Prison & City Tour

Today we tour Phnom Penh and its surroundings.

We begin with a visit to the infamous Tuol Sleng Prison, now a museum illustrating the atrocities committed by Pol Pot during the 1970s, and the nearby Choeung Ek, aka the "Killing Fields." The buildings at Tuol Sleng are preserved as they were left when the Khmer Rouge were driven out in 1979. The regime kept extensive records, including thousands of photographs. Several rooms of the museum are now lined, floor to ceiling, with black and white photographs of some of the estimated 20,000 prisoners who passed through the prison.

Back in town, we visit the National Museum, which houses one of the world's largest collections of Khmer art, including sculpture, ceramics, bronzes, and ethnographic objects. The museum's collection includes over 14,000 items, from prehistoric times to periods before, during, and after the Khmer Empire, which at its height stretched from Thailand, across present-day Cambodia, to southern Vietnam. The Museum buildings, inspired by Khmer temple architecture, were constructed between 1917 and 1924.

We then walk the short distance to the Royal Palace and Silver Pagoda. We also stop in at Wat Phnom, a magnificent temple overlooking the town, said to be the spot whereupon the city was originally founded.

Overnight in Phnom Penh.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 24 Phnom Penh - Siem Reap & Angkor Wat

Today we fly to Siem Reap, gateway for Angkor Wat/Angkor Thom.

Later we wander the magnificent grounds of the splendidly preserved 12th Century temple of Angkor Wat.* Considered the best example of ancient Khmer architecture, it is the largest and most impressive of all Cambodian monuments and generally regarded as one of the finest religious structures in the world. We will also be visiting the South Gate of Angkor Thom, Bayon Temple, Baphuon, the Elephant Terrace and the Terrace of the Leper King.

* NOTE: The order of Siem Reap sightseeing may vary at the discretion of your Tour Leader.

Ovgernight in Siem Reap.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 25 Siem Reap: Angkor Thom

Today is dedicated to seeing the remaining highlights of the Petit Circuit -- Angkor Thom (Bayon), with its haunting images of the God-like Avalokitesvara and its magnificent murals, and Sras Srang (Pool of Ablutions), Ta Keo (the first Khmer temple built entirely of sandstone), and Ta Prohm, in its natural overgrown setting.

We will also see much of the Grand Circuit, including the great temple of Preah Khan and the brick sanctuaries of Pre Rup. It is not hard to imagine how this vast complex, covering several square kilometers, with carefully engineered canals and reservoirs to control flood waters and survive droughts, was once (by some estimates), the largest city in the world, housing as many as one million inhabitants.

Overnight in Siem Reap.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 26 Siem Reap: Banteay Srei

Today we visit some temples a little farther afield, including the exquisitely carved Banteay Srei.

Banteay Srei is something of an anomaly. It wasn't built by a king, but rather a spiritual teacher, Yajnavaraha, the Brahman of King Jayavarman V, in AD 967. At that time it was called Tribhuvana Mahesvara, and stood in a town called Isvarapura. The name Banteay Srei

means the "Citadel of Women", and is one of the first temples to be restored by the French.

Overnight in Siem Reap.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 27 Siem Reap, Cambodia - Yangon, Myanmar (Burma)

Today we fly to Yangon (Rangoon), possibly 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.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 28 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.

* Recently this flight has occurred very early in the morning. Please bear this in mind when booking / approving your flights into Yangon. If you arrive in Yangon at 01:00 am, for example, it is possible that we'll be waking you up to fly to Bagan at 4 am! If this is the case, you may wish to arrive a day early and rest up.

** 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.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 29 Bagan Area Tour

Today we have a full day in the Bagan area, visiting some of the more important and picturesque monuments therein.

We will visit the Manuka temple, with its reclining Buddha image, which records a captive king's impression of life in prison; the fine stone carvings of Nanpaya Temple; Thatbyinnyu Temple, the tallest in Bagan; and Bupaya Pagoda (to name a few). We may also have time to travel to a viewpoint overlooking the Irrawaddy River.

Note: This morning is the best 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 operator that has been operating in Bagan for years. Please note that due to its popularity, you MUST book in advance. For more information and to book, visit www.balloonsoverbagan.com. Please double check the date - today's date will appear on the version of this itienrary sent with your final documents.

Overnight in Bagan.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 30 Bagan - Mt Popa

Today we travel by bus to 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," or 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), which features spectacular views.

Overnight near Mt Popa.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 31 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.

Overnight in Mandalay.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 32 Mandalay: Amarapura

This morning we 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. We also visit Bagaya Monastery with its myriad Buddha images and vast collection of various antiques.

On the way back to Mandalay we will stop at one of the top three of important sites for Burmese Buddhists (after Shwedagon and The Golden Rock) called Mahamuni. During our time in Mandalay, we will also visit Shwenadaw Monastery, Mandalay Palace, and see how gold leaf is produced.

Overnight in Mandalay.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 33 Mandalay: Mingun, Sagaing & Inwa

Today we travel up the Irrawaddy River 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.

In 1838 an earthquake struck and part of the building collapsed; today you can still see a huge fissure in the giant slab. Guarded by a pair of dilapidated brick chinthes, the Mingun Pagoda is truly a bizarre and incongruous sight. This may not have been the largest pagoda in the world, but it does have the world's largest uncracked bell, 14 times the size of that of St Paul's. It is possible to crawl inside, and pray that none of the entourage of giggling kids rings it while you're underneath! Not surprisingly, the bell fell off during the earthquake of 1838 and it lay on the ground until 1896 when it was re-mounted. It is now covered by a shelter open on all sides.

We also include Sagaing and Inwa -- the "Bagan of the North" -- where we can see the countless pagodas that bejewel the landscape of this former capital city.

Overnight in Mandalay.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 34 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.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 35 Inle Lake Area

This morning 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.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 36 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.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 37 Inle Lake - Yangon

Today we fly back to Yangon.

Depending on flight schedules, we may accomplish any Yangon sightseeing missed during our first visit. Time-permitting we'll visit the National Museum and other sites, such as the Sule Pagoda and/or Reclining Buddha.

Overnight in Yangon.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 38 Yangon - Mount Kyaiktiyo (Golden Rock)

Today we travel by road to Mount Kyaiktiyo, the third most important Buddhist pilgrimage site in Burma after the Shwedagon Pagoda and the Mahamuni Pagoda. A glimpse of the "gravity defying" Golden Rock is believed to be enough of an inspiration for any person to turn to Buddhism. Balancing on the cliff top at its peak, this huge boulder, covered in gold, is without doubt one of the most magical destinations in Myanmar.

The legend associated with the pagoda is that the Buddha, on one of his many visits, gave a strand of his hair to Taik Tha, a hermit. The Hermit, who had tucked it in the tuft of his hair safely, in turn gave the strand to the King, with the wish that the hair be enshrined in a boulder shaped like the hermit's head. Kyaiktiyo Pagoda has become a popular pilgrimage and attraction. At the peak of the pilgrimage season (November to March), an atmosphere of devotion is witnessed at Kyaikhtiyo pagoda.

The latter part of our journey involves a winding 11km ride (45-60 min) in an open truck with no top (be prepared for rain or sun!). Due to limited space, it is best to bring an overnight bag for this one night and leave large bags in Yangon. Once settled, we will be able to walk the short distance (10 min) from our hotel to the Golden Rock for our visit.

Overnight in the vicinity of Mount Kyaiktiyo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 39 Mount Kyaiktiyo - Bago - Yangon

Early this morning we can visit Golden Rock again -- it is nice to see in different lights at different times of day.

We then transit back to our bus and head back to Yangon. En route we stop at Bago to see the Shwethalyaung Buddha reclining Buddha. After a break for lunch, we continue to Yangon where we visit the National Museum (if not already accomplished earlier on our trip). We expect to arrrive at our hotel late afternoon.

Overnight in Yangon.

## Day 40 Departure

Departure from Yangon.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast