Tour Code
SE9

ADVENTURESABROAD

MYANMAR (Burma) & LAOS

21 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Yangon

Today we arrive in Yangon (Rangoon), 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. The city is an amalgamation of British, Burmese, Chinese and Indian influences, and is known for its colonial architecture, which even today remains a unique example of a 19th-century British colonial capital. Today it's a bustling, rapidly modernizing place full of energy and hope for the future.

Later today (or at some other point on our program) 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): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 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 3 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 4 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 5 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 6 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 7 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 8 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 9 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 10 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 11 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 12 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 13 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.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Yangon, Myanmar - Luang Prabang, Laos

Today we fly to Luang Prabang, a World Heritage Site (possibly via Bangkok).

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.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 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 16 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 17 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 18 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 19 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 20 Viangchan Touring

Today's sightseeing takes us to Pha That Luang, a gold-covered large Buddhist stupa in the centre of the city. Since its initial establishment, suggested to be in the 3rd century, the stupa has undergone several reconstructions as recently as the 1930s due to foreign invasions of the area. It is generally regarded as the most important national monument in Laos and a national symbol. The architecture of the building includes many references to Lao culture and identity, and so has become a symbol of Lao nationalism.

We also stop at Haw Pha Kaew, a temple now serving as a museum of religious artifacts. It was a royal family temple for worshiping the Jade Buddha and holding religious ceremonies. The magnificent temple is three storeys high with gorgeous palace hall and huge Buddha altar.

However, in 1779 A.D, the King of Siam with his army invaded the city and looted the Jade Buddha as well. Many precious collections can be seen there, such as the gold throne, the wood carving of high quality and statues of Buddha of various sizes and shapes.

We also travel to Buddha Park (aka Xieng Khuan), a famous sculpture park with more than 200 religious statues including a huge 40-metre high reclining Buddha image. It was built in 1958 by Luang Pu Bunleua Sulilat, a monk who studied both Buddhism and Hinduism. This explains why his park is full not only of Buddha images but also of Hindu gods as well as demons and animals from both beliefs. The most outstanding ones include Indra, the king of Hindu gods riding the three-headed elephant (aka Erawan and Airavata), a four-armed deity sitting on a horse and an artistic deity with 12 faces and many hands, each holding interesting objects. They are all equally impressive not only because of their enormous size but because they are full of interesting details and interesting motifs.

This evening you may wish to take a stroll along the river front and take in the giant sprawling market, with its instantly recognizable red-roofed stalls and crowds of people who come to snap up a bargain or just soak up the laidback Mekong atmosphere.

PLEASE NOTE that some or all of today's sightseeing and your departure tomorrow may be managed and guided by one of our local associates. This is due to the fact that your Tour Leader may be leaving early in the day with travellers who have chosen to extend their tour to include Vietnam.

Overnight in Viangchan.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 21 Depart

Departure

BON VOYAGE!!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast