

SOUTHEAST ASIA CIRCUIT

Laos, Vietnam & Cambodia

16 days

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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 Laos'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: Kuang Si Waterfall

Today we have an excursion to Kuang Si Waterfall, a beautiful multi-tiered falls located 30 km from Luang Prabang. There is a flight of steps

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which one has to climb to reach a pool half way to the top. From there, you can look down to the pool below. Many local people come to Kuang Si for picnicking. Our journey to / from the falls is scenic and interesting, passing through small villages and rice fields.

We return to Luang Prabang and have an afternoon at leisure.

Overnight in Luang Prabang.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Luang Prabang, Laos - Hanoi, Vietnam

Today we fly to Hanoi.

Hanoi is an attractive 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.

Flight schedules permitting, we may accomplish some Hanoi sightseeing upon arrival.

Overnight in Hanoi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 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.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Hanoi - Halong Bay Cruise

Early this morning we travel to Halong Bay. Upon arrival we have a 4-hour cruise on Halong Bay. We'll stop along the way to visit one of the limestone caves in the area. As we cruise our boat staff will serve you a sumptuous local seafood lunch on boat. On our leisurely cruise back to Halong, we stop to visit the floating fishing village and learn about the fishermen's daily life and legends about the bay.

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.

Overnight in Halong City.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 8 Halong City - Hanoi - Da Nang - Hoi An

Today we transfer back to Hanoi airport from where we fly to Da Nang. We 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.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 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 10 Hoi An - Hue

Today we travel by road to Hue. En route we visit the Cham Museum in Da Nang.

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

This afternoon we tour the Citadel, a fortress surrounded by a moat that has a 10 km (6 mile) perimeter. At the Forbidden Purple City we can see the remains of the former home of the emperors. The city is built on the same principles as the Forbidden Palace in Peking (Beijing). It is enclosed by 7-10 m (23-33 foot) 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 and incessant conflict but also by natural disasters such as floods which in the mid 19th century, inundated the city to a depth of several metres. The complex has undergone partial restoration with the aid of UNESCO.

Overnight in Hue.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Hue: Perfume River & Imperial Tomb - Saigon

We begin our day by motorised sampan 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. Later we visit one of the nearby Imperial tombs.

Later we transfer to Hue airport for our flight to Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City).

Overnight in Saigon.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Saigon: Cu Chi Tunnels & War Remnants Museum

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 to the War Remnants Museum (formerly the War Crimes Museum). The visit here is a sobering experience with its countless photographs and exhibits. We also see the Independence Palace (formerly 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.

Overnight in Saigon.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Saigon, Vietnam - Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Today we fly to Phnom Penh and have a tour of this city on arrival.

This is the capital and largest city in Cambodia. Engineered by the French, the city 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.

We visit 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."

Overnight in Phnom Penh.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Phnom Penh - Siem Reap & Angkor Wat

Today we fly to Siem Reap, gateway for Angkor Wat/Angkor Thom. On arrival we have a tour of the South Gate of Angkor Tom, Bayon Temple, Ba Poon, the Elephant Terrace and the Leper Temple.

Overnight in Siem Reap.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Angkor Wat & 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. We also visit Ta Prohm, in its natural overgrown setting.

This afternoon we visit the magnificent grounds of the splendidly preserved 12th century temple of Angkor Wat. Considered the best example of ancient Khmer architectural, it is the largest and most impressive of all Cambodian monuments and generally regarded as one of the finest religious structures in the world. The construction mirrors the concept of the ancient universe and its bas relief carvings and intricate murals tell a fascinating story of life over 800 years ago. The "Apsaras", or Heavenly Dancers, have lost none of their grace and beauty as they dance frozen in time on the walls.

PLEASE NOTE: Due to weather, flight times and other scheduling considerations, the order in which Siem Reap area sightseeing is accomplished may change at the discretion of your Tour Leader.

Overnight in Siem Reap.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Departure

Departure from Siem Reap.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast