

THAILAND

'The Land of Smiles'

9 days

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Day 1 Arrival

Arrive in Bangkok, Thailand.

Overnight in Bangkok.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Bangkok: City Tour

This morning we will visit the Grand Palace situated on the Chao Phraya River. Started in 1782, the complex is a collection of buildings covering over 1.5 sq km (0.9 sq mile). Within the grounds we visit Wat Phra Kaeo, known for the venerated Emerald Buddha. Sitting on a golden altar, it is carved from green jade and is only 75 cm (30 inches) high! Since its discovery in the 15th Century, the Emerald Buddha has known many homes, including Lampang, Chiang Rai and two locations in Laos, Luang Prabang and Vientiane.

We will start our afternoon with a visit to Wat Pho also known as the Temple of the Reclining Buddha. The temple is the largest in Bangkok and it is 200 years old. On its grounds, we will see the tremendous 46m (150 foot) long, 15 m (49 foot) high gold-plated reclining Buddha. The sole of his feet have detailed work of mother-of-pearl. Wat Pho also has more than 1,000 bronze images from Ayutthaya and Sukhothai rescued by Rama I's brother.

We will continue our day by crossing the "khlong" (river) by boat in order to visit Wat Arun, or the Temple of the Dawn. It was built in the early 19th Century and its tower is the highest in Thailand measuring 81m (265 feet). The tower, or "prang," is covered with pieces of Chinese porcelain and its beauty is appreciated from a distance. The temple gained its name from the Indian god of dawn, Aruna. Here there are superb statues of the Buddha at the most important stages of his life: at birth (north), in meditation (east), preaching his first sermon (south) and entering Nirvana (west).

Overnight in Bangkok.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Bangkok - Pitsanolk - Sukhothai - Chiang Mai

Today we fly to Pitsanolk, the birthplace of King Naresuan the Great of Ayutthaya (reign: AD 1590-1605), and his brother Prince Ekathosarot. Phitsanulok has long been an important center for political and strategic reasons, and a major center of recruitment when Ayutthaya waged war with Burma. It was the capital of Thailand for 25 years during the 1448-1488 reign of Ayutthayaos King Boromtrailokanat.

On arrival, we are met by our bus and begin our sightseeing, including the monastery of Wat Phra Si Rattana Mahathat, commonly called by the inhabitants as "Wat Yai." This is the most important monastery of Pitsanulok, located at the foot of Naresuan Bridge on the city side of the river. The monastery was built in the reign of Phra Maha Thamma Racha I (Phraya Lithai) In AD 1357. It houses the Phra Buddha Chinnarat regarded as the most beautiful Buddha image in Thailand.

We continue to Sukhothai where we visit the Ramkhamhueng National Museum, an excellent introduction to the historic city, including much in the Sukhothai style. From here we proceed to Wat Mahatat, dominated by a 14th Century lotus-bud tower and encircled by a moat. Some of the best architectural ornamentation is found in the main tower. We also visit the remains of the Royal Palace.

We continue to Chiang Mai, arriving late afternoon.

Overnight in Chiang Mai.

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Chiang Mai: City Tour

Today we have a tour of Chiang Mai and the surrounding area.

Chiang Mai has over 300 temples, and its old quarter set within a 2 sq km moat, has retained many of its traditional wooden houses. At the main sanctuary of the Buddhist temple is a tower constructed in 1345 to house the ashes of King Kam Fu and the beautiful Viharn Lai Kam. This wooden structure is a marvelous example of Lanna architecture. Inside the temple there sits one of Thailand's three Phra Singh (or Sihing images). The setting of the image is enhanced by a colourful mural that is action-packed with scenes showing piggyback fights, merchants, fishermen and children playing.

While in Chiang Mai we'll visit the Arts and Cultural Centre.

Overnight in Chiang Mai.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Chiang Mai - Mae Sa Valley - Chiang Mai

We have a morning visit to the orchid farm. The road we travel today passes through the narrow valley of the Mae Sa River that tumbles down numerous cascades. The natural beauty of the area and closeness to the city has attracted orchid farms, elephants camps and resorts with impressive gardens.

As the national animal of Thailand, the elephant has a special place in Thai lore. Elephants were once numerous, ranging over extensive forest habitats that covered much of Northern Thailand till the middle of this century. In former times, the animals were the equivalent of a battle tank, an off-road vehicle and a ten-wheel truck. The symbol of kingship since ancient times, a white elephant required such elaborate care that a gift of one from a king was enough to bring ruin to an over-ambitious courtier; hence the English expression a "white elephant".

Ironically, ordinary elephants have become "white elephants" to poor mahouts who are no longer able to find work for their animals logging in the hills and have to abandon them. The abandoned beasts are unable to find sufficient open land and have been destroying crops. As a result they are hunted and shot. The conservation centre was set up to redress the situation; we will see a demonstration whereby mahouts have the animals show their skills and learn about some of the many traditional roles the elephant has played in Thailand since the days of old Siam.

Overnight in Chiang Mai.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Chiang Mai - Chiang Rai: Hill Tribe Village

This morning we travel from Chiang Mai to Chiang Rai, founded in 1262 by King Mengrai. He decided that the site, in a basin between mountains, would be ideal for the new capital of the Lanna Kingdom. However, the capital was transferred to Chiang Mai only 34 years later and Chiang Rai declined in importance. Today it is known as the "Gateway to the Golden Triangle." With its varied ethnic groups and beautiful surrounding scenery, Chiang Rai, the capital of Thailand's northernmost province, feels far removed from Bangkok or even Chiang Mai. Evidence of the town's historic importance can be seen in monuments such as Wat Phra Kaeo even though modern development is becoming increasingly prominent.

We visit Wat Phra Kaeo, the city's most revered temple. According to legend, lightning struck and cracked the chedi in 1436, revealing a plaster cast statue encasing the Emerald Buddha (actually made of jadeite). Today, Thailand's most holy Buddha image is housed in Bangkok; a replica, presented in 1991, is now kept here. The wat dates from the 13th century and is also notable for its fine bot, decorated with elaborate woodcarving, and the Phra Chao Lang Thong, one of the largest surviving bronze statues from the early Lanna period.

This afternoon we will take a boat trip on the Maekok River and visit a local Hill Tribe village. The rugged, forested limestone hills of northern Thailand are home to a melange of some of the most interesting indigenous peoples in the world. The Lao, Karen, Hmong (or Meo), Mien, Lahu, Akha and Lisu minorities are a fascinating example of a vibrant pre-industrial way of life. They originated in Tibet and south China and live on the migration route that the Thai people themselves traveled 1,000 years ago. At some point during our visit to Chiang Rai, we will pay a visit to the Hill Tribe Education Center where we can see typical clothing worn by each tribe. We will also be able to see different folk implements and other anthropological exhibits.

Overnight in Chiang Rai.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Chiang Rai - Golden Triangle - Chiang Rai

We have a full day trip to the famous Golden Triangle where the borders of Laos, Burma, and Thailand come together. We travel to Mae Sai, Thailand's northernmost town near the Burma border; you can watch Thai and Burmese locals walking across the bridge separating the two countries. There are excellent opportunities to buy Burmese handicrafts at reasonable prices. From Mae Sai we drive to the heart of the Golden Triangle where the Ruak and Mekong rivers meet. You can stand on a hilltop and enjoy views over Burma, Laos, Thailand and the mighty Mekong. We visit Chiang Saen where evidence of the original 13th century city can still be seen on the banks of the river, a tranquil spot with charming old temples and finely carved figures.

Later we return to Chiang Rai.

Overnight in Chiang Rai.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Chiang Rai - Bangkok

Today we fly from Chiang Rai to Bangkok.

Overnight in Bangkok.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Depart

Departure

BON VOYAGE!!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast