

TRANS-INDOCHINA DISCOVERY

Vietnam, Laos & Cambodia

22 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Hanoi

Arrive in Hanoi; transfer to our hotel.

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.

Overnight in Hanoi.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Hanoi: City Tour

Today we will visit several of Hanoi's greatest attractions.

In the morning we will visit the Temple of Literature, the first national university of Vietnam in the original architecture. Built in 11th century, the temple is dedicated to the worship of Confucius and the Scholars. It has since become not only the symbol of Hanoi but also the Vietnamese Culture.

We will walk around the exquisite grounds of the old Indochinese Governor's Palace (now a Presidential Palace), and visit the unique One Pillar Pagoda and the stilt house of Ho Chi Minh. Later in the day we will visit Hoa Lo Prison, also known as the "Hanoi Hilton".

This afternoon we will visit Tran Quoc Pagoda, the oldest pagoda in Hanoi and Vietnam's pagoda for defence. Today we will also discover Vietnam's unique cultures at the Museum of Ethnology. This museum boasts detailed descriptions and exhibits showcasing the fascinating lifestyles and cultures of Vietnam's 54 ethnic minority groups.

Today we will also enjoy an orientation tour in Hanoi's Old Quarter by cyclo. Discover a city of poetry and markets, a city enchantingly balanced between tradition and modernity. We will stop at the edge of Hoan Kiem Lake (Lake of the Restored Sword), and will visit the Ngoc Son Pagoda, located on the shores of the lake.

Overnight in Hanoi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 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.

We will arrive in Du Dong in time for lunch. Then, leave the vehicle for a bicycle ride of two hours across the Red River Delta scenic countryside. The Red River and its tributaries have created a picturesque and fertile landscape filled with history. Our easy cycle will take us along the dykes and rural paths of the Red River, through local villages, ancient temples and endless green fields of rice (those not wishing to ride a bike can continue through this picturesque region by bus).

We chose to start the bicycle ride at Kenh Ga, a charming floating village. As we continue along the dykes and village lanes we witness beautiful scenes of local life: century-old villages, fishermen, and locals working in the fields. We continue to the village of Van Huong, renowned for its special kind of locally produced liquor. We then continue our ride amid rice fields and limestone karst peaks until Tho Ha.

In the afternoon we will visit the impressive Buddha Cave and embark on a sampan cruise on a river, passing rice fields, reeds and limestone peaks. We disembark at Linh Coc Jetty and take a short walk to reach Tam Coc Garden, a resort surrounded by a scenic landscape of rice fields and karst mountains. This will be our home for the next two nights.

This evening we enjoy dinner in our hotel.

Overnight at Tam Coc Garden.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 4 Tam Coc: Village Visit

This morning 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. 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. Today we will enjoy lunch at the home of our host family.

After lunch we will drive to Hoa Lu, the ancient capital during the Dinh and Le dynasties. Here we will 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.

In the late afternoon we will return to Tam Coc Garden. You will have time to enjoy the stunning Tam Coc Garden setting and facilities. Some optional activities may be available such as cooking classes, various handicraft workshops, or a visit to the Thai Vi Temple.

People of the Red River delta villages are self-sufficient and they grow an abundance of vegetables and fruit for their own family's consumption. Private gardens, overflowing with a variety of crops such as tomatoes, eggplant, spinach, herbs, papaya, longan and jackfruit, were an inspiration to the owners of Tam Coc Garden who have dedicated a large area of their land to cultivate their own Tonkinese garden. This garden not only beautifies the hotel's surroundings, but also serves to provide fresh organic vegetables for the restaurant.

This evening we enjoy dinner in our hotel.

Overnight at Tam Coc Garden.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 5 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.

Tonight you can observe a cooking demonstration as the boats chef prepares some fine cuisine. 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): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 6 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 peaks 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. You will have some free time before dinner.

Overnight in Hanoi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Hanoi - Dien Bien Phu

This morning we will fly to Dien Bien Phu in northwestern Vietnam. This historic town has an infamous history as the location of a Vietnamese victory over the occupying French Forces. The town lies on a broad plain in the heart-shaped Muong Thanh Valley, surrounded by heavily forested hills. The nearby scenery is stunning! Thai, Hmong and Si La people live in the surrounding mountains.

In the afternoon we will see infamous battle sites such as the Elaine A1 Hill, the Museum and the French Command Bunker. We will also visit an ethnic Black Thai village in order to learn more about their traditions, customs and way of life. The term Tai describes the large ethnic group which includes the Thai/Siamese, Lao, Shan, Northern Thai, Thai Lu, Red Tai, White Tai etc who occupy a wide band of Asia from the Assam region of India, through southern China, Burma's Shan States, Laos, Northern Vietnam and of course Thailand itself. The Black Tai were one of the groups or clans that seem to have headed southeast rather than due south and settled initially in the Dien Bien Phu Valley

If time permits we will visit the Muong Phang commune where one finds the historical relic site of the Dien Bien Phu Campaign Headquarters. The HQ in the jungle still remains fairly intact, and nearby is Pu Ca hill, whose top is the best place to see the panorama of Dien Bien Phu city, Muong Thanh valley and former bases of the French army.

Overnight in Dien Bien Phu.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 8 Dien Bien Phu, Vietnam - Nong Khiaw, Laos

This morning we head out early and enjoy the scenic mountain roads on our way to the Vietnam/Laos border (delays here can be lengthy). After clearing immigration we will drive to Muang Khoa, situated on the banks of the Nam Ou River. Here we will make a stop for lunch before embarking upon our afternoon river adventure.

This afternoon we board our boats and head downstream along the Nam Ou, passing karst peaks and lush subtropical forests. Eventually we will reach Muang Ngoi, a picturesque hamlet only accessible by boat (no road access). We continue to cruise another hour downstream until we arrive in the sleepy town of Nong Khiaw. Upon arrival in the afternoon we will check onto our hotel. In the late afternoon we can enjoy a short walk to discover the village and its surroundings.

Nong Khiaw is a true travellers haven, and perhaps one of the most photogenic spots in all of Laos! Squeezed between some fantastic limestone mountains, the beautiful rustic little town is nestled on the bank of the Ou River. We arrive in time for diner after a full day of travel and sightseeing.

Overnight in Nong Khiaw.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 9 Nong Khiaw Discovery

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This morning we enjoy an easy walk/hike in the region surrounding Nong Khiaw. Our walk takes us alongside small streams and rice paddies, and we will visit several ethnic villages along the way. This is a scenic landscape of karst peaks and lush forests.

We will enjoy a picnic lunch today, and after a waterfall visit and chance for a swim (depending on water levels), we will eventually reach the Nam Ou River. From here it is just a short boat trip back to Nong Khiaw.

Nong Khiaw is the perfect place just to relax and enjoy the surroundings, and this afternoon you will have a few hours to do just that. Others may opt to visit a nearby temple or perhaps try their hand at fishing.

Overnight in Nong Khiaw.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 10 Nong Khiaw - Luang Prabang

This morning we enjoy a scenic drive to Luang Prabang.

Luang Prabang is a beautiful blend of French colonial buildings and Lao architecture. The town is wedged between the Mekong River and its tributary the Nam Khan River. En-route, we will take a boat trip to visit the Pak Ou Caves. These caves are among the most highly acclaimed Buddhist sites in the Luang Prabang region. Shrouded in legends and mysticism, the statues of the Buddha housed inside these cavernous shrines transport the viewer to another world.

In the afternoon we will visit the Old Quarter of Luang Prabang with its rich culture and history. We will visit some of the most beautiful temples of the city, including Wat Xieng Thong, which was built in 1560 and is the most ornate temple in the city. We will also see Wat Wham and Wat Visoun, the oldest temples in Luang Prabang.

In the late afternoon we will climb Mount Phousi to witness the entire city bathed in the golden light at sunset.

Overnight in Luang Prabang.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Luang Prabang Touring

We wake early this morning and head to the 'Old Quarter' and see the alms giving ceremony. As the sun begins to rise, orange-robed monks walk down the streets to collect offerings. This UNESCO World Heritage City is the perfect place to witness what is one of the most sacred Lao traditions, the Buddhist Alms Giving Ceremony. Despite being a highly revered ritual for locals, visitors are encouraged to be involved as long as a level of respect is maintained throughout. We then return to hotel for breakfast.

After breakfast we will visit the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre, a museum dedicated to the rich diversity of Laos' ethnic minorities. We will then drive across the Luang Prabang countryside, a scenic landscape of rice fields, hills and hamlets. Along the way we will stop at an ethnic village for an opportunity to learn about local traditions and culture, much of which have remained unchanged for centuries.

Later we will relax by the natural clear pools of the Kuang Si Waterfall. Those who wish to may walk the steep trail to the top of the falls in order to enjoy a stunning panoramic view. We will visit the nearby butterfly park as well as the bear conservation center (home to many bears which have been rescued from illegal farms).

Upon our return to Luang Prabang in the afternoon we will meet up Mr. Francis Engelmann, a former UNESCO consultant and an expert planner. Based in Laos since 1991, Mr. Engelmann is an internationally recognized expert, and his knowledge in terms of architecture, art history, botany and Buddhism makes him the perfect spokesperson for the ancient royal capital of Laos. We will enjoy a presentation about the UNESCO Heritage site, the historical and architectural background, the diversity of the Luang Prabang heritage, the nomination process, and the responsibilities of the Conservation Authority (formerly known as The Heritage House).

Overnight in Luang Prabang.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 12 Luang Prabang, Laos - Siem Reap, Cambodia

This morning we will visit the National Museum (former Royal Palace) and the UXO Laos Visitor Centre, a small permanent exhibition in the city of Luang Prabang, which explains the problem of UXO (abbreviation of unexploded ordnance) affecting Laos, the most bombed country during the Vietnam War.

This afternoon we fly to Siem Reap. Siem Reap is the true epicenter of Cambodia and the gateway for the temples of Angkor. Siem Reap was little more than a village when French explorers such as Henri Mouhot "re-discovered" Angkor in the 19th century.

Overnight in Siem Reap.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Siem Reap: Rolous Group, Chao Srei Vibol & Angkor Wat

Our morning adventure begins with a nice walk/hike taking us away from the center of Siem Reap, (tuktuks will be made available for those not wishing to walk). Our trail passes local schools and villages, and crosses rice fields before bringing us to the Roluos temple group. Roluos houses the Khmer civilization's earliest temples, also known as Hariharalaya. Here we will enjoy a walking tour of the three main temples, each dedicated to the Hindu God Shiva. We then continue to Bakong and then Preah Ko. Many people consider Bakong to be the most impressive member of the Roluos Group, sitting at the center of the first Angkorian capital, Hariharalaya.

Afternoon, hike to Chao Srei Vibol, small charming temple on top of a hill which hardly sees any visitors. Take a walking tour around the central sanctuary, a part which has not been restored and is in a ruined state. A dense forest surrounds the temple and the many trees provide us with a much needed cool shade in the heat of the day. As with some of the other Siem Reap temples further afield, the calm and peacefulness of Chau Srei Vibol and its beautiful surroundings make this a perfect spot to visit.

In the mid-afternoon we will travel by bus to the heart of the Angkor Archaeological Park. Here we will explore the famous and magnificent Angkor Wat temple at a less crowded visiting time. Starting from Ta Kou entrance (East Gate), we will walk to Angkor Wat and stroll around this massive monument, exploring the many galleries with columns, libraries, pavilions, courtyards and ponds full of water reflecting the towering temple.

Overnight in Siem Reap.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Siem Reap: Angkor Archaeological Park

Today we travel to Banteay Srei, also called the "gem" of Angkor. The so-called "Citadel of Women" was built between the 11th and 13th century and remains the best-preserved temple in Cambodia. Located away from the main monuments, Banteay Srei is a true highlight of a visit to Angkor! This temple contains the finest, most intricate carvings to be found in Angkor.

Around midday we will drive the short distance to Kirimanon, a typical village located inside the Angkor Archaeological Park. Here we will be welcomed by a local family and enjoy a lunch with local specialties. During our visit we will learn about the customs and culture of these inhabitants of Angkor, and you will have the opportunity to take part in whatever seasonal activity is happening at the time of our visit (rice planting, roof weaving, vegetable harvesting and much more).

Our last visit of the day will be a stop at Angkor Thom, when the whole complex is less crowded. Our touring of the site will include: Bayon temple, Phimeanakas temple within the Royal Palace enclosure, Baphuon temple, the Terrace of the Elephants and the Terrace of the Leper King.

Overnight in Siem Reap.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 15 Siem Reap - Phnom Penh

We will rise early this morning and travel out to the magical temple of Ta Prohm. Witness the early morning light filter through the stones of the temple and through the majestic tree roots that are now part of the temple's foundations. Ta Prohm is the undisputed capital of the kingdom of the 'Trees'. It has been left untouched by archaeologists except for the clearing of a path for visitors, as well as structural strengthening to stave off further deterioration. Because of its natural state, it is possible to experience at this temple the wonder of the early explorers when they came upon these monuments in the middle of the nineteenth century.

We later head towards the airport for our flight to Phnom Penh, the vibrant bustling capital of Cambodia. Situated at the confluence of three rivers, the mighty Mekong, the Bassac and the great Tonle Sap, what was once considered the 'Gem' of Indochina. Phnom Penh was founded in 1434 to succeed Angkor Thom as the capital of the Khmer nation but was abandoned several times before being reestablished in 1865 by King Norodom.

Depending on flight schedules, we may visit some of the main sights of Phnom Penh this afternoon; the Royal Palace, the National Museum and the Russian Market. (If not, this sightseeing will be moved to tomorrow morning)

Overnight in Phnom Penh.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Phnom Penh - Kep: Coastal Exploration

First thing this morning we drive just outside of the city center to explore one of the most important killing fields during the war, Choeung Ek. Here we learn about the Khmer Rouge era.

From here we drive towards the seaside community of Kep. Before arriving in Kep we will stop to visit a pepper plantation. Here we will learn about the traditional growing techniques and how villages produce three types of peppers: red, white and black.

Once in Kep we will enjoy an orientation tour. We will see some of the abandoned colonial villas, and travel along the coastal road to visit the famous crab shacks and a hillside temple.

You will have some free time this afternoon to explore on your own. Tuk-tuks are plentiful in the centre, and a short trip costs just a few dollars. Kep beach is a small but pleasant crescent of sand near the tip of the Kep peninsula.

Overnight in Kep.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 Kep & Koh Tonsai Island

This morning we will embark upon a short (30-minute) boat trip to the nearby scenic island of Koh Tonsai, also called "Rabbit Island". We will spend the morning here at leisure, exploring the small island and perhaps relaxing in the shade on the island's beautiful tropical beach. A lovely picnic lunch served on the island, and then you may want to perhaps pick a quiet spot to sit and read or daydream. Later, in the mid-afternoon, we will return to Kep where you can enjoy facilities of our eco-resort.

Overnight in Kep.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 18 Kep, Cambodia - Can Tho, Vietnam

This morning we depart for the seaside town of Ha Tien and the border crossing where we clear immigration and cross back into Vietnam.

From here we head to Can Tho, and en-route we stop at the charming Hang Pagoda and Thach Dong Cave before continuing. Can Tho is the epicentre of the Mekong Delta and the largest city in the region. As the political, economic, cultural and transportation centre of the Mekong Delta, it's a buzzing town with a lively waterfront lined with sculpted gardens, an appealing blend of narrow backstreets and wide boulevards. This is the perfect base for exploring nearby floating markets and the many canals and rivers leading out of town.

Overnight in Can Tho.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 19 Can Tho - Mekong Cruise

Early this morning we will travel to Cai Rang, the largest floating market in the Mekong. The market stretches for about half a kilometre along the Can Tho River. Hundreds of small boats gather here from dawn until midday, and the larger boats create meandering lanes for the smaller ones to weave through. Most of the boats here are packed with regional farm products and local specialties; vegetables, coconuts, bananas, watermelons, grapefruits, dragon fruits and so much more. Small boats that sell soft drinks, wine and food for breakfast go among the others to serve market-goers and visitors.

Around noon we will board our traditional 'bassac' boat and depart towards Cai Be from where we sail into the local waterways. These bassacs are some of the last wooden cruise boats in the Mekong Delta, and have been designed based upon the model and style of traditional rice barges of the Mekong Delta.

Lunch will be served while cruising. We will tour near the Tra On floating market before turning into Nicolai canal and heading towards the Mang Thit and Co Chien rivers. Along the journey you can simply rest on the upper deck as we pass by a landscape of rice fields and sugar cane.

In the mid-afternoon we will have the chance to disembark and take a walk along the waterways. Here we will discover the peaceful life of the Mekong countryside, with its rice fields, fruit trees and welcoming inhabitants. After our short walk we will board our boats and enjoying sunset.

Dinner will be served as we continue our cruising. We will likely set anchor on the Mang Thit River.

Overnight on board.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 20 Mekong Cruise - Saigon

This morning breakfast will be served on board as we cruise towards Cai Be. The boat will slip into the Cho Lach canal as we witness the river traffic hustle and bustle. Between markets and churches, we are presented with a unique opportunity for a glimpse of the very varied life on the banks as well as on the water.

Upon arrival in Cai Be we will check-out from our riverboat and hop about a sampan for a quiet visit through a small canal (depending on the tides). After soaking up the last of our time on the Mekong we will start the drive to Saigon. Along the way we will stop at a Cao Dai temple for some insight into this eclectic religion. We will be introduced to the temple guardian and have an open discussion about this religion.

Upon arrival in Saigon we will take an orientation walking tour in the former colonial quarter. Here we will see the Notre Dame Basilica and Gustave Eiffel's Central Post Office. We will also walk down Dong Khoi Street (former Rue Catinat). This street was reborn during Doi Moi as the centre of Saigon's commercial and shopping district. Local boutiques compete with international brands, and restaurants litter the street set in beautifully restored French colonial buildings.

Overnight in Saigon.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 21 Saigon City Touring

The attractions in this city are a vibrant mix of old and new, with well-preserved colonial structures and war relics from the devastating Vietnam War as well as sleek skyscrapers, elegant sports clubs, and expansive shopping malls against a metropolis backdrop. Great for immersing in the local culture, no two districts are the same in Ho Chi Minh City and there are plenty of ornate pagodas and Buddhist temples to visit and photograph as well.

We start our day in Cholon, Saigon's Chinatown District. Here we will wander in the markets and shops, and stop along the way at a few of the pagodas. You will see various herb stores and gain an insight into the traditional medicine of Vietnam. We will visit the Cantonese Thien Hau Pagoda and the Binh Tay Market. Ho Chi Minh City's Cholon is Vietnam's largest Chinatown with roots dating back to 1778; it's also a place of great historical and cultural importance.

From the Cholon region we will head to some of the most important sites of Saigon, including the Reunification Palace and the War Remnants Museum. The iconic Reunification Palace made its name in history when in 1975 a tank belonging to the North Vietnamese Army crashed through its main gate – thus signifying the end of the Vietnam War. This image is one of the most famous pictures depicting the Reunification Palace which has seen a rich and varied history

Overnight in Saigon.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 22 Departure from Saigon

Farewell from Saigon.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast