Tour Code
LA1

ADVENTURESABROAD

THE HEART OF LAOS

A Journey Through Nature, Culture & History

9 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Luang Prabang

Arrival in Luang Prabang, the spiritual heart of Laos and a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1995. Nestled at the confluence of the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers, this former royal capital has preserved its architectural heritage better than perhaps any other city in Southeast Asia. French colonial villas, Buddhist temples, and traditional Lao houses line streets that have changed remarkably little over the past century.

This evening we meet our Tour Leader and fellow travellers for a welcome dinner.

Overnight in Luang Prabang.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Luang Prabang: Town Touring

In the mid-14th century, King Fa Ngum united a patchwork of principalities to found Lan Xang, the "Kingdom of a Million Elephants," and made this bend in the Mekong his capital, the start of six centuries during which Luang Prabang would remain Laos's spiritual heart, even after the political capital later moved to Vientiane. Legend places the town's founding earlier still, chosen by two hermits and known then as Xieng Thong, the "Copper Tree City."

We spend the morning tracing the peninsula on foot, along the single main street where French colonial shophouses now hold galleries, cafés, and workshops rather than the merchants and monks who once filled them. The mix of gilded temple roofs and shuttered colonial façades is part of why UNESCO listed the entire town as a World Heritage Site in 1995, one of the best-preserved fusions of traditional and colonial architecture anywhere in Southeast Asia.

The walk climbs Phu Si Hill, a steep 100-metre/328-foot mound at the peninsula's centre crowned by the gilded stupa of Wat Chom Si. From the summit, the former Royal Palace reveals its cruciform ground plan directly below, while the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers trace the shape of the town Fa Ngum chose six centuries ago.

Optional: return to Phu Si Hill toward sunset, when the town's monks and monasteries are visible from above as the light turns gold over the two rivers.

As evening falls, the main street fills with the stalls of Luang Prabang's night market, a good option for dinner on your own before an early start tomorrow.

Overnight in Luang Prabang.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Luang Prabang Area

An early departure takes us onto the Mekong for a two-hour boat ride to Pak Ou Caves, travelling upriver in a long, covered boat with cushioned seats and life jackets for the crossing. The caves, two clefts cut into a limestone cliff at the point where the Nam Ou River meets the Mekong, have drawn pilgrims since long before Buddhism reached Laos, when local spirits were worshipped here instead. Thousands of Buddha images fill the lower cave alone, ranging from palm-sized figures to statues nearly 3 metres/10 feet tall, wedged into every ledge and crevice; a flashlight helps pick out the images set deep into the upper cave. The river views along the way — forested hills, fishing villages, longtail boats — are reason enough for the journey.

Back in town, we tour the Royal Palace, now a museum holding 15th- to 17th-century Buddha statues from the old royal collection. Its private chapel houses the Phra Bang, the gold Buddha image that gave Luang Prabang its name: cast from 90% pure gold and weighing 50 kilograms/110 pounds, it stands in Abhayamudra, the gesture of dispelling fear.

We finish with three of the town's finest temples: Wat Xieng Thong, built in 1560 and celebrated for its sweeping roofline and gilded mosaic interior; Wat Mai, its façade carved with scenes from the Buddha's life; and Wat Wisunalat, home to Luang Prabang's oldest surviving stupa and rows of 400-year-old wooden Buddha images.

Overnight in Luang Prabang

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Luang Prabang: Chomphet Heritage Walk & Kuang Si Waterfall

A short ferry crossing over the Mekong takes us to Chomphet, a district that feels a world apart from Luang Prabang's boutique hotels and gilded temples just five minutes downstream. Traditional wooden houses line dirt paths that wind between rice paddies and hillside monasteries, the pace unhurried compared to the town we've left behind.

We stop first at Wat Long Khoun, an 18th-century temple where Lao princes once retreated to meditate before taking the throne, part of a monastic compound that faced the old royal capital across the water long before the Royal Palace stood on the opposite bank. Village guides lead us along paths connecting smaller shrines, with a stop for a private blessing ceremony conducted by resident monks and a short walking meditation through the temple grounds.

By late morning we recross the river and drive an hour south to Kuang Si, Luang Prabang's celebrated waterfall. A cascade of turquoise limestone pools drops roughly 50 metres/164 feet through the forest, the lowest pool wide enough for swimming, though the water runs cold from November to January. A boardwalk trail climbs past the falls to the Tat Kuang Si Bear Rescue Centre, where Asiatic black bears saved from the bile trade and illegal wildlife markets since 2003 roam forested enclosures built for climbing, foraging, and simply being bears again.

Overnight in Luang Prabang

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Luang Prabang - Fly to Pakse - Si Phan Don - Don Khong

An early flight carries us south from Luang Prabang to Pakse, a market town the French established as a colonial outpost in 1905 and today the gateway to Champasak province. The landscape feels immediately different here: flatter, hotter, shaped by the Mekong's widening delta rather than mountain gorges. We stop first at Pakse's market, stocked with produce, coffee, and river fish from the surrounding lowlands.

From Pakse we drive an hour to Vat Phou, a pre-Angkorian temple complex built between the late 10th and early 11th centuries, when this valley was already the capital of the Chenla kingdom. Stone causeways climb toward a sanctuary set beneath Phou Kao, a mountain whose linga-shaped peak marked it as sacred to Shiva long before the Khmer carved sanctuaries into its base. Boundary markers along the pilgrim causeway, some still bearing Sanskrit inscriptions, trace a route worshippers have walked for a thousand years. UNESCO recognised Vat Phou in 2001 for this fusion of temple and landscape, and standing here it's clear why: one of Southeast Asia's great religious sites, seen with almost none of Angkor's crowds.

We continue south for three hours to Si Phan Don, the "Four Thousand Islands," where the Mekong we've followed since Luang Prabang splinters into its widest, most complex stretch: over a dozen kilometres across at points, a maze of channels, sandbars, and river villages found nowhere else along its course.

Overnight in Don Khong

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Don Khong - Si Phan Don - Phapheng Waterfalls - Pakse

Today we embark on a boat excursion through the islands of Si Phan Don, beginning with a visit to Khone Island. During the French colonial period (1893-1945), France attempted to establish a trade route along the entire Mekong River. The Khone Falls blocked river traffic, so the French built Laos's only railway — a 7-kilometre (4-mile) line with a pier, station, hospital, and maritime office. We visit these remnants, now

slowly being reclaimed by vegetation, which offer insight into colonial ambitions and the challenges the Mekong presented to navigation.

We continue to Li Phi Waterfall, known locally as Taat Somhamit. The Lao nickname translates as "Corridor of the Devil" or "Spirit Trap" — local belief held that the turbulent waters captured malevolent spirits, preventing them from traveling further downstream. The falls create a dramatic display where the Mekong drops through a series of rocky channels.

In the afternoon we travel by road to Khone Phapheng Falls, the widest waterfall in Southeast Asia. During peak flow, the falls measure 11 kilometres (6.7 miles) wide, with water dropping 21 metres (69 feet) in a series of cascades. The volume and power of the Mekong here explain why this barrier prevented French colonial dreams of continuous river navigation from China to the sea.

We return to Pakse, concluding our exploration of southern Laos's river landscapes.

Overnight in Pakse.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Pakse - Bolaven Plateau - Fly to Vientiane

We leave Pakse for the Bolaven Plateau, a volcanic highland rising to 1350 metres/4,429 feet, the red laterite soil and cooler air changing noticeably within an hour's drive. French colonists recognised the potential a century ago and planted Laos's first coffee estates here; arabica and robusta from these slopes remain some of the country's finest.

The morning's first stop is Tad Fane, where twin streams plunge 120 metres/394 feet into a forested gorge inside Dong Hua Sao National Park, followed by Tad Yeung, a smaller 42-metre/138-foot fall ringed by coffee fields and wooden picnic huts. Along the trail we pass a village of the Alak or Katu people, ethnic minorities who have farmed this plateau for generations using tools and techniques largely unchanged since long before the French arrived, offering a rare window into upland life that few visitors to Laos ever see. A stop at a family-run plantation shows how the cherries are hand-picked, sun-dried, and roasted, with a chance to sample the results over fresh-brewed cups.

Optional: the tour leader can arrange a longer cupping session at a plateau guesthouse for anyone keen to taste through the different varietals.

A short flight in the late afternoon returns us to Vientiane on the Mekong's northern bank, Laos's capital and our final stop on this journey.

Overnight in Vientiane

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Vientiane Touring

Vientiane sits on the same river that carried us from Luang Prabang's temples to Si Phan Don's islands. After a week following its course through Laos, we find the Mekong here at its most citified: wide and unhurried along a waterfront of parks and night markets.

Our morning begins at Wat Sisaket, built in 1818 by King Anouvong and the only Vientiane temple to survive Siam's sacking of the city in 1827–1828, spared because its Siamese-style architecture made it indistinguishable from Bangkok's own temples. Its cloistered galleries hold more than 10,000 Buddha images, in contrast to the Lao architecture seen elsewhere on this trip. Next door, Haw Phra Kaew, the former royal temple built to house the Emerald Buddha, now serves as a museum of religious art; the Buddha itself was carried off to Bangkok in 1779 and never returned, a loss still felt in Lao national memory.

We continue to Pha That Luang, the gold-covered stupa that stands as Laos's most important national monument, its stepped platforms said to enshrine a relic of the Buddha brought here more than seven centuries ago. The afternoon closes at Buddha Park, an eccentric riverside sculpture garden built in 1958 by a monk who blended Buddhist and Hindu imagery into more than 200 concrete statues, including a 40-metre/131-foot reclining Buddha.

Optional: an evening stroll along the Mekong riverfront, where red-roofed stalls and a night market set up after sunset.

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 today with travellers who have chosen to extend their tour to include

Vietnam.

Overnight in Vientiane.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Departure

Departure from Vientiane.

BON VOYAGE!!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast