

LAOS**'Land of a Million Elephants'****9 days**

Created on: 26 Mar, 2023

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

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Day 4 ***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 5 ***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 6 ***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 7 ***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 8 ***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 worshipping 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 9 ***Depart***

Departure from Viangchan

BON VOYAGE!!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast