Tour Code
**LA3**

ADVENTURESABROAD

# TREASURES OF INDOCHINE

## Laos, Vietnam & Cambodia in One Journey

**27 days**

Created on: 8 Nov, 2026

### 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

### 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

### 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, Laos - Fly to Hanoi, Vietnam

Today we fly from Vientiane to Hanoi, Vietnam's capital. Flight schedules permitting, we may have time to see more of Vientiane before our departure — your Tour Leader will advise based on flight times.

Hanoi sits on the right bank of the Red River (Song Hong), spanned by two bridges: the historic Long Bien Bridge, built during French colonial rule, and the modern Chuong Duong Bridge. The city blends lakes, tree-lined boulevards, and parks with colonial architecture and contemporary development. Unlike the commercial dynamism of Ho Chi Minh City in the south, Hanoi retains a more measured pace, with governmental and cultural institutions anchoring city life.

At the heart of downtown lies Hoan Kiem Lake, also called the Lake of the Restored Sword. Legend tells that Emperor Le Thai To (reigned 1428-1433), following his victory against Ming Chinese invaders, was sailing on the lake when a golden turtle rose from the water and snapped the tip from his sword — signifying that the weapon's purpose was fulfilled. The Tortoise Tower on a southern islet commemorates this event. The lake does indeed contain large softshell turtles; one captured in 1968 reportedly weighed 250 kilograms (552 pounds).

The park surrounding Hoan Kiem Lake serves as Hanoi's communal gathering space. Each morning, residents use the paths for jogging and tai chi, transforming the area into an open-air exercise ground. When the French arrived in the late 19th century, they found the lake surrounded by dense housing that obscured the shore — the colonial administration cleared the area and created the park we see today.

Overnight in Hanoi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 9 Hanoi: City Exploration

Today we explore Hanoi's historic highlights, witnessing a capital city where tree-lined boulevards, lakes, parks, belle époque villas, and Buddhist temples create a distinctive urban landscape.

We begin at the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, the final resting place of Vietnam's most iconic leader. The building, constructed from materials gathered from across Vietnam, closely follows the design of Lenin's Mausoleum in Moscow. Ho Chi Minh's preserved body lies in a glass case, and the site serves as a place of pilgrimage for Vietnamese visitors. The mausoleum periodically closes for maintenance, in which case we view it from the exterior only.

We continue to Ho Chi Minh's Stilt House behind the Presidential Palace. Despite his position as President of North Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh chose to live in this modest two-room house built in traditional style, elevated on wooden pillars. The building, constructed from polished and lacquered wood, demonstrates his commitment to simplicity — a stark contrast to the grandiose Presidential Palace nearby, which he never occupied.

The One Pillar Pagoda, originally built in 1049, represents one of Vietnam's most distinctive temples. The lotus-shaped structure rises from a square pool on a single stone pillar, rebuilt after French forces destroyed the original in 1954. The design symbolizes a lotus blossom emerging from muddy water, representing purity rising from an impure world.

At the Ethnology Museum, one of Vietnam's finest museums, we gain insight into the country's 54 ethnic minority groups. The indoor galleries display traditional clothing, tools, and cultural artifacts, while the outdoor section features full-scale reconstructions of minority housing styles. The museum provides essential context for understanding Vietnam's cultural diversity beyond the dominant Kinh (Vietnamese) majority.

We visit the Temple of Literature, established in 1076 as Vietnam's first national university. For nearly 700 years, this Confucian institution educated the sons of mandarins and, later, commoners who passed rigorous examinations. Stone stelae mounted on turtle pedestals record the names of successful examination candidates from 1442 to 1779, creating a remarkable historical archive. The temple's five courtyards progress from public spaces to increasingly sacred areas, culminating in the sanctuary dedicated to Confucius.

We conclude at Hoa Lo Prison Museum, known to American prisoners of war as the "Hanoi Hilton." French colonists built this prison in the late 19th century to house Vietnamese political prisoners and revolutionaries. During the Vietnam War, North Vietnam held captured American pilots here. The museum presents both periods of the prison's history, though exhibits reflect an official Vietnamese perspective on the conflicts.

Overnight in Hanoi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 10 Hanoi - Red River Delta & Tam Coc

This morning we drive to Ninh Binh Province through the Red River Delta, northern Vietnam's agricultural heartland. The Red River (Song Hong) rises in China's Yunnan Province and flows 1,175 kilometres (730 miles) through deep gorges before entering Vietnam and discharging into the Gulf of Tonkin through a vast delta. The silt it carries is rich in iron oxide, giving the water its distinctive red colour and its name. The delta's fertile soil has supported intensive rice cultivation for millennia.

After lunch we drive to Yen Mac village, where we meet a local family to learn about daily life in the delta. Families here practice diverse agriculture, growing rice in paddies while maintaining gardens abundant with vegetables and fruit — tomatoes, aubergines, spinach, herbs, papaya, longan, and jackfruit grow in remarkable profusion. We walk along narrow village lanes to see the local pagoda and communal house, the traditional centre of village governance and ceremonies. The relaxed atmosphere encourages interaction with residents going about their daily routines.

We continue to Hoa Lu, which served as Vietnam's capital during the Dinh Dynasty (968-980) and early Le Dynasty (980-1009). We visit temples dedicated to these dynasties' rulers, set among karst limestone peaks that provided natural fortifications. After Hoa Lu, we drive across the Trang An eco-tourism complex to reach Hang Mua Cave. A climb of 450 steps brings us to the summit, where panoramic views

reveal the region's remarkable landscape — often called "Halong Bay on land" — with limestone peaks rising from rice fields and waterways.

This region's combination of karst scenery, historical sites, and agricultural landscapes earned it UNESCO World Heritage designation in 2014 under the name Trang An Landscape Complex.

Overnight in Tam Coc.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

## Day 11 Tam Coc - Lan Ha Bay Overnight Cruise

This morning we journey to Lan Ha Bay, absorbing views of the Red River Delta and its rice fields throughout the drive. Lan Ha Bay, lying south and east of Cat Ba Town, comprises approximately 300 karst islands and limestone outcrops. Being farther from Halong City than the more famous Halong Bay, Lan Ha receives fewer tourist boats, creating a more secluded atmosphere.

We arrive at Dinh Vu port around midday and board our overnight boat. Lunch is served as we cruise toward Lan Ha Bay, entering a seascape of limestone karst peaks rising dramatically from emerald waters. These formations began as coral reefs millions of years ago; tectonic uplift and erosion created the landscape we see today.

During the afternoon we explore hidden lagoons and floating villages, observing how communities have adapted to life on the water. We have opportunities to swim or kayak at the base of the limestone cliffs, paddling through channels barely wide enough for the kayak to pass. The scale of the karst formations becomes particularly apparent at water level.

As evening approaches, we drop anchor in an isolated area. Under clear skies, the upper deck offers excellent stargazing away from city lights, while the bay's calm waters reflect the sunset's changing colours.

Overnight on board.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

## Day 12 Lan Ha Bay - Hanoi

Those interested may participate in a tai chi class on deck before breakfast, practicing gentle movements as the sun rises over the karst landscape. This morning we explore a cave system featuring thousands of stalactites and stalagmites formed over millions of years by water slowly depositing calcium carbonate.

We slowly cruise back through the karst peaks, returning to Dinh Vu port by late morning. Around noon we disembark and drive back to Hanoi, arriving in mid-afternoon.

Later this afternoon we enjoy a walking tour of Hanoi's Old Quarter, also known as the "Quarter of 36 Streets." This ancient commercial district developed between the 11th and 18th centuries, with streets organized by trade guilds — Hang Bac (Silver Street), Hang Ma (Paper Street), and so on. Many streets still specialize in particular goods, though modern shops have diversified the offerings. The narrow shophouses, typically just 3-5 metres (10-16 feet) wide but extending deep into the block, represent traditional Vietnamese urban architecture. The Old Quarter's congested streets, filled with motorcycles, vendors, and shoppers, create Hanoi's most vibrant atmosphere.

This evening we attend a water puppet show, an art form unique to Vietnam that originated in the Red River Delta. Puppeteers stand waist-deep in water behind a screen, manipulating wooden puppets that appear to move across the water's surface. The performance, accompanied by traditional instruments, depicts rural life, legends, and historical tales.

Overnight in Hanoi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 13 Hanoi - Da Nang - Hoi An

Today we fly to Da Nang and continue by road to Hoi An. Da Nang sits on a peninsula where the Han River flows into the South China Sea. Our route takes us past the Marble Mountains, a cluster of five limestone peaks with marble outcrops. These mountains hold religious significance for both Buddhists and followers of traditional Vietnamese beliefs, with caves housing shrines and statues. At the mountains' base, artisans craft marble objects — the stone quarrying has continued for centuries, though authorities now restrict extraction to protect the site.

We continue to Hoi An, one of Vietnam's most atmospheric towns. This ancient trading port flourished from the 15th to 19th centuries as a major Southeast Asian commercial hub, attracting Japanese, Chinese, Dutch, Portuguese, and French merchants. The town centre preserves over 1,000 timber-frame buildings, their architecture reflecting diverse influences. Hoi An's designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999 recognized it as an exceptionally well-preserved example of a Southeast Asian trading port.

On arrival, flight times permitting, we'll have an informal orientation tour, walking through the compact old town where canals once allowed boats to deliver goods directly to merchants' houses. The town's location on the Thu Bon River, several kilometres from the coast, protected it from coastal storms that frequently damaged other ports. However, by the late 19th century, the river's silting made it inaccessible to larger ships, and trade shifted to Da Nang. This decline ironically preserved Hoi An — without economic pressure to modernize, the old buildings survived largely intact.

Overnight in Hoi An.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 14 Hoi An: Walking Tour & Boat Trip

Today we explore Hoi An's old town on foot, discovering architecture that blends Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, and French influences. The town's wealth came from trade in ceramics, silk, pepper, and cinnamon, and successful merchants built elaborate houses that still line the streets.

Hoi An's Japanese Covered Bridge, dating to the 18th century, represents one of Vietnam's most iconic structures. The bridge connects what were historically the Japanese and Chinese quarters of town. On its northern side, a small temple serves as protection for sailors — the bridge was funded by the Japanese community but has been maintained by Chinese and Vietnamese residents over the centuries, symbolizing the town's multicultural heritage.

The Tran Family Temple has remained in the same family for 15 generations. Built in 1802 in a style combining Chinese and Japanese influences, the temple serves both as an ancestral shrine and a family home. The architecture features distinctive details — carved wooden panels, curved tile roofs, and a layout following traditional Vietnamese feng shui principles.

We visit a Chinese Assembly Hall, built by merchants from specific Chinese provinces as meeting places and temples. Hoi An has several such halls, each serving immigrants from different regions of China — Fujian, Cantonese, Hainanese, and others. The halls' ornate decorations honour Chinese deities and historical figures, with incense smoke perpetually filling the interior spaces.

At the Central Market, vendors sell fresh produce, spices, and prepared foods. The market operates daily, supplying both residents and the town's many restaurants. Hoi An's culinary reputation draws visitors specifically for dishes like cao lau (noodles unique to Hoi An), white rose dumplings, and banh mi sandwiches that Vietnamese immigrants have made famous worldwide.

We take a boat trip on the Thu Bon River, which remains essential to the region's economy and transportation more than 500 years after merchants first navigated it. The river supports fishing, agriculture, and increasingly tourism, with traditional wooden boats now carrying visitors rather than porcelain and spices.

Overnight in Hoi An.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 15 From Hoi An: My Son Cham Dynasty Complex

This morning we visit My Son (pronounced "mee-sohn"), a UNESCO World Heritage Site comprising over 70 architectural works from the Cham Dynasty. The Chams controlled much of central Vietnam from the 2nd to 15th centuries, establishing a Hindu kingdom influenced by Indian culture through maritime trade. My Son served as the dynasty's spiritual centre and burial ground for Cham royalty.

Construction at My Son began in the 4th century and continued for nearly 1,000 years, creating a complex of brick towers and sanctuaries dedicated primarily to Shiva. The Cham builders developed sophisticated techniques for creating bricks that bonded so tightly that researchers still debate the construction methods. Unlike the stone temples of Angkor, Cham structures used brick almost exclusively, with stone reserved for decorative elements.

The site's remote location in a mountain-ringed valley protected it for centuries after the Cham kingdom's decline. However, the Vietnam War brought devastating damage — American forces bombed My Son in 1969, mistakenly believing it harboured Vietnamese soldiers. Many structures were destroyed, though enough survived to demonstrate the Chams' architectural achievements. The remaining towers, carved sandstone lintels, and lingam shrines reveal clear influences from Indian Hindu temple design, adapted to local materials and aesthetics.

My Son's forested setting and general peacefulness create a contemplative atmosphere. The site receives far fewer visitors than Angkor, allowing time to examine details and imagine the complex during its centuries as a living religious centre.

We return to Hoi An in time for a late lunch. The remainder of the day is free to explore at leisure. The Hoi An riverside, lined with cafés, galleries, and tailor shops, bustles with activity day and night. The town is particularly known for its tailors, who can create custom clothing in as little as 24 hours — though allowing more time produces better results.

Overnight in Hoi An.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 16 Hoi An - Da Nang - Hue

Today we travel to Hue, stopping first in Da Nang to visit the Museum of Cham Sculpture. This museum houses the world's largest collection of Cham art, with over 250 sandstone and terracotta sculptures dating from the 7th to 15th centuries. Many pieces rank as masterworks — the dancing apsara figures, altar pedestals carved with mythological scenes, and lingams adorned with faces display technical skill and artistic vision that place Cham sculpture among Southeast Asia's finest artistic achievements. The museum's collection comes primarily from My Son and other Cham sites throughout central Vietnam.

Shortly after leaving Da Nang, we begin climbing through the Truong Son Mountains, which historically formed the border between North and South Vietnam. Hai Van Pass, literally "Pass of the Ocean Clouds," winds through these mountains at elevations reaching 496 metres (1,627 feet). The pass offers remarkable views — mountains rising to the west, the coastline and East Sea (South China Sea) to the east. Clouds frequently obscure the summit, giving the pass its name. The pass served as a significant barrier throughout Vietnamese history, marking boundaries between kingdoms and later between the divided nation. A tunnel now allows most traffic to bypass the pass, but we take the older scenic route for its views.

Hue served as Vietnam's capital from 1802 to 1945 under the Nguyen Dynasty, the country's last royal family. The city straddles the Perfume River (Song Huong), so named for the fragrant flowers that fall into the water from trees along its banks. As the imperial capital, Hue became Vietnam's cultural, religious, and educational centre, a status it partially retains despite losing political primacy to Hanoi.

Upon arrival in Hue, we take a cyclo ride through the old city and market. Cyclos — three-wheeled bicycle taxis with passengers seated in front — appeared in Vietnam during French colonial times. They remain common in Hue despite being largely replaced by motorcycles in other Vietnamese cities. The ride provides a leisurely way to observe street life and the city's mix of colonial and Vietnamese architecture.

Overnight in Hue.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 17 Hue: Area Tour/Citadel Visit

This morning we take a motorized boat along the Perfume River to Thien Mu Pagoda, considered Hue's finest. Built in 1601 after a local woman (the "Thien Mu" or Heavenly Lady) appeared to Governor Nguyen Hoang and identified the site as sacred, the pagoda has been rebuilt and expanded several times. Its seven-tiered tower, added in 1844, rises 21 metres (69 feet) and has become Hue's most recognizable landmark. The pagoda gained additional significance in 1963 when one of its monks, Thich Quang Duc, drove to Saigon and self-immolated to protest government persecution of Buddhists — the car he drove is preserved at the pagoda.

This afternoon we tour the Imperial City, built between 1804 and 1833 following the principles of Chinese imperial architecture. The complex sits within a walled citadel surrounded by a moat, with a perimeter of nearly 10 kilometres (6 miles). Ten gates pierce the four walls, though many suffered severe damage during the 1968 Tet Offensive, when Hue became one of the war's major battlegrounds.

The Imperial City follows the same layout as Beijing's Forbidden City — successive courtyards and gates leading to increasingly private and sacred spaces. At the complex's heart lies the Forbidden Purple City, once home to the emperor and his family. Where Beijing's Forbidden City remains largely intact, Hue's suffered devastating damage from both the Vietnam War and earlier conflicts, natural disasters, and neglect. UNESCO has supported restoration work since the site gained World Heritage status in 1993, but much remains to be done. The surviving structures, particularly the Thai Hoa Palace (Hall of Supreme Harmony) where the emperor received officials and foreign delegations, display the refinement of Vietnamese court culture through their carved wooden pillars, lacquered panels, and ceramic tile work.

This evening we enjoy dinner in a beautifully restored royal home, now owned by descendants of the Hue royal family. The setting provides an intimate glimpse into how wealthy Hue families lived, with traditional architecture adapted for tropical comfort.

Overnight in Hue.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 18 Hue - Ho Chi Minh City

Today we fly from Hue to Ho Chi Minh City (widely still known as Saigon), Vietnam's largest city and economic engine. Where Hanoi retains a governmental and cultural focus, Ho Chi Minh City pulses with commercial energy. The city's location near the Mekong Delta on the Saigon River has made it a trading hub for centuries. French colonial rule (1859-1954) left a legacy of grand architecture, tree-lined boulevards, and café culture. Since economic reforms began in the 1980s, the city has transformed into a modern metropolis while retaining its French colonial quarter and Chinese district.

This afternoon we visit several city highlights, beginning with the Reunification Palace. This modernist building, completed in 1966, served as the residence and office of South Vietnam's president. On April 30, 1975, North Vietnamese tanks crashed through its gates, marking the end of the Vietnam War and the reunification of North and South. The building has been preserved exactly as it was that day, providing a fascinating glimpse into both the war's conclusion and the architectural tastes of the period. The palace's design incorporated bunkers, war rooms, and telecommunications facilities alongside public reception halls.

We continue to Cholon, the city's Chinatown. Ethnic Chinese have lived in this district since the 18th century, when many fled political upheaval in China. Cholon developed into a separate city before merging with Saigon in 1931. Today it remains one of the city's most vibrant areas, with Chinese temples, medicine shops, and wholesale markets doing brisk business. The architecture blends southern Chinese and Vietnamese styles, while signage appears in both Chinese characters and Vietnamese script.

Overnight in Ho Chi Minh City.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 19 Ho Chi Minh City: Cu Chi Tunnels & War Remnants Museum

This morning we travel outside Saigon to the Cu Chi Tunnels, one of the Vietnam War's most recognizable symbols. The tunnels began during French colonial rule in the 1940s, when Viet Minh fighters dug hiding places to store weapons and evade capture. During the Vietnam War in the 1960s, the network expanded dramatically as Viet Cong forces created an underground city beneath Cu Chi district.

The tunnel system eventually stretched over 250 kilometres (155 miles), with living quarters, kitchens, storage areas, hospitals, and command centres all located underground. Despite intensive American bombing campaigns that turned the district into one of the most bombed areas in history, Cu Chi residents continued their lives beneath the soil — sleeping, eating, planning operations, treating the wounded, and educating children in underground classrooms.

Today, sections of the tunnels have been widened slightly to accommodate visitors — the original passages measured only 60-80 centimetres (24-31 inches) wide, forcing people to crawl. Those comfortable with confined spaces can experience what movement through the tunnels entailed, though claustrophobic visitors may prefer to observe from above ground, where camouflaged trapdoors and ventilation systems demonstrate the network's ingenious design.

We return to the city and visit the War Remnants Museum, Vietnam's most comprehensive wartime documentation centre. The museum presents the conflicts from a Vietnamese perspective, with exhibits covering French colonial rule and the subsequent American war. Some displays contain graphic images of war's effects on civilians and soldiers. The outdoor courtyard displays captured American military equipment, including aircraft, tanks, and artillery. While the museum's narrative reflects official Vietnamese viewpoints and includes anti-American propaganda, it does document the war's human costs and the long-term effects of defoliants like Agent Orange.

Overnight in Ho Chi Minh City.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 20 Ho Chi Minh City - Cao Dai Temple - Mekong Delta

Our destination today is the Mekong Delta, where Southeast Asia's most important river approaches the sea through a network of tributaries and channels. En route we stop at a Cao Dai temple to observe this uniquely Vietnamese religion. Cao Dai emerged in southern Vietnam during the 1920s after Ngo Van Chieu, a civil servant, experienced visions of the "Cao Dai" or "Supreme Being," who instructed him to establish a new faith.

Cao Dai attempts to synthesize major world religions — Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity, and Islam — into a single practice. The religion's symbol, a giant eye representing the Supreme Being, appears prominently in temples and on the religion's flag. The faith gained rapid support among dispossessed peasants and today claims approximately two million adherents and 1,000 temples across Vietnam. The main temple we visit displays remarkable eclecticism, with dragons winding up columns, Christian saints depicted alongside Buddha and Confucius, and French poet Victor Hugo honoured as a saint. If we time our visit correctly, we may observe a ceremony where priests in colourful robes — yellow for Buddhism, red for Confucianism, blue for Taoism — conduct services.

We continue south to the Mekong Delta, the southernmost region of Vietnam. The Mekong River travels 4,350 kilometres (2,703 miles) from the Tibetan Plateau through six countries before reaching Vietnam. Here it fragments into a web of channels and distributaries that the Vietnamese call "Cuu Long," the Nine Dragons. The river deposits massive amounts of sediment, creating exceptionally fertile soil that supports three rice crops annually — earning the delta its nickname as Vietnam's rice bowl. The delta also produces tropical fruits, coconuts, sugarcane, and vast quantities of fish and prawns from its waterways.

Traditional transportation throughout the delta relies on boats navigating the network of canals and channels. Tomorrow morning we'll experience these waterways firsthand at one of the region's floating markets.

NOTE: Please pack an overnight bag for the Mekong Delta trip. Large baggage will be securely stored in Ho Chi Minh City.

Overnight in hotel in Cantho region (Mekong Delta).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 21 Mekong Delta - Ho Chi Minh City / Colonial Quarter

Early this morning we take a covered boat ride on the delta to visit a floating market, where traders conduct business from their boats rather than from fixed locations. Vendors specialize in particular products — one boat might sell only pineapples, another only coconuts — and advertise their wares by hanging samples from tall poles. Larger boats serve as wholesalers, while smaller vessels function as retailers or restaurants, creating a complete marketplace on water. The floating markets represent centuries-old trading traditions, though they're gradually declining as roads improve and land-based commerce grows more convenient.

Due to the delta's flat terrain and limited forested areas, nearly two-thirds of the land supports agriculture. The Mekong Delta produces more than half of Vietnam's rice output and serves as the country's most important fishing region, with both river and coastal waters providing abundant catches.

After our morning exploration, we drive back to Ho Chi Minh City, arriving early afternoon. We complete any city sightseeing not accomplished earlier in our visit, including the Colonial Quarter. Here we find the Notre Dame Cathedral and adjacent Central Post Office, both constructed by the French in the 1880s. The cathedral, situated in what the French called Paris Square (now Công trng Công xã Paris), ranks among Vietnam's largest Catholic churches. Built entirely from materials imported from France, including red bricks from Marseille, it displays the neo-Romanesque style popular in late 19th-century Europe. The twin bell towers rise 58 metres (190 feet) and once held bells cast in France.

The Central Post Office, designed by Gustave Eiffel's architectural firm, features a vast interior hall with arched windows, decorative tilework, and an enormous map of southern Vietnam and Cambodia from the French colonial period. The building remains a functioning post office, though it now serves primarily as a tourist attraction. Both structures exemplify French colonial architecture adapted for tropical conditions, with high ceilings and large windows designed to provide natural cooling.

Overnight in Ho Chi Minh City.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 22 Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam - Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Today we fly from Ho Chi Minh City to Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital and largest city. Phnom Penh sits at the confluence of the Mekong, Tonle Sap, and Bassac rivers — a strategic location that has made it Cambodia's most important city for centuries. The city served as the Khmer royal capital intermittently from the 15th century, becoming the permanent capital in 1866.

French colonists, who controlled Cambodia from 1863 to 1953, transformed Phnom Penh into what they considered the "Pearl of Asia," building grand boulevards, colonial villas, and public buildings. The city's tree-lined streets and French architecture survived relatively intact until the Khmer Rouge period (1975-1979), when the regime forcibly evacuated the entire urban population to rural work camps. When Vietnamese forces drove out the Khmer Rouge in 1979, they found an abandoned city. Phnom Penh has since recovered, though many colonial-era buildings remain in states of disrepair.

The city takes its name from Wat Phnom ("Temple on a Hill"), a Buddhist temple on a small artificial hill that local legend credits to a woman named Penh who found Buddha statues washed ashore and had the hill built to house them properly.

Depending on our arrival time, we may accomplish some sightseeing as described for tomorrow.

Overnight in Phnom Penh.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 23 Phnom Penh: Tuol Sleng Prison & City Tour

Today we confront Cambodia's traumatic recent history, beginning with a visit to Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. This former high school was converted by the Khmer Rouge into Security Prison 21 (S-21), the regime's largest torture and interrogation centre. Between 1975 and 1979, approximately 20,000 people passed through Tuol Sleng — political prisoners, intellectuals, suspected dissidents, ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese, and eventually Khmer Rouge members accused of treachery. Prisoners were photographed upon arrival, interrogated under torture to produce false confessions, and then transported to execution sites. Only seven prisoners survived.

The buildings remain largely as they were found in January 1979 when Vietnamese forces liberated Phnom Penh. Classrooms became tiny cells or torture chambers, their transformation documented by photographs that line the walls — thousands of black and white images of prisoners, their faces showing fear, defiance, or resignation. The museum serves as both a memorial and a historical record, ensuring that the Khmer Rouge's crimes are not forgotten.

We continue to Choeung Ek, one of nearly 400 "Killing Fields" scattered across Cambodia where the Khmer Rouge executed prisoners. Located 17 kilometres (11 miles) from the city, Choeung Ek served as the primary execution ground for Tuol Sleng prisoners. Approximately 17,000 people were killed here. A tall stupa now houses over 5,000 skulls exhumed from mass graves. Walking paths lead past excavated pits and beneath trees that were used to execute children — the site's brutality is difficult to comprehend. An audio guide provides survivor testimony and explains the site's history.

Returning to Phnom Penh, we visit the National Museum, which houses one of the world's largest collections of Khmer art. The museum's collection includes over 14,000 objects spanning prehistoric times through the Angkorian period and beyond. Stone sculptures from Angkor and pre-Angkorian sites form the centrepiece — standing Buddhas, dancing apsaras, lingams, and architectural elements demonstrate the evolution of Khmer artistic styles over more than 1,000 years. The museum building itself, constructed between 1917 and 1924, takes design inspiration from Khmer temple architecture, with a central courtyard and terracotta-coloured walls.

We walk to the nearby Royal Palace, the official residence of Cambodia's king since the 1860s (though the current king resides elsewhere). While parts remain off-limits, we visit the Throne Hall and Silver Pagoda. The Silver Pagoda, named for its floor of 5,000 silver tiles, houses Cambodia's most sacred Buddha images, including an emerald Buddha and a life-sized gold Buddha encrusted with diamonds. The pagoda's walls display frescoes depicting the Reamker, the Cambodian version of the Hindu Ramayana epic.

We conclude at Wat Phnom, the temple-topped hill that gives the city its name. Built in 1372 and rebuilt several times since, the temple remains an active place of worship. From the hilltop, views extend across Phnom Penh's distinctive mix of colonial buildings, modern construction, and traditional wooden houses.

Overnight in Phnom Penh.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 24 Phnom Penh - Siem Reap & Angkor Wat

This morning we fly to Siem Reap, gateway to the ancient temples of Angkor. The town sits on the edge of Southeast Asia's most important archaeological site — the remains of the Khmer Empire, which dominated the region from the 9th to 15th centuries. At its height, Angkor was one of the world's largest pre-industrial cities, home to over a million people.

This afternoon we visit Angkor Wat, the best-preserved temple in the complex and the world's largest religious monument. Built in the early 12th century by King Suryavarman II, it was originally dedicated to the Hindu god Vishnu before becoming a Buddhist temple in the 14th century. The temple's five towers represent Mount Meru, the mythical home of the gods in Hindu cosmology, while its extensive bas-reliefs depict scenes from Hindu epics and Khmer history.

We continue to Angkor Thom, the fortified capital city built by King Jayavarman VII in the late 12th century. We enter through the South Gate, where giant stone faces gaze out in four directions. At the city's centre stands Bayon Temple, famous for its 54 towers bearing serene stone faces — likely representing the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara or perhaps the king himself. The Baphuon, a massive temple-mountain, represents another architectural achievement of the period.

We also visit the Elephant Terrace, used for royal ceremonies and public audiences, and the Terrace of the Leper King, adorned with intricate carvings. Both terraces showcase the engineering and artistic sophistication of Angkor's builders.

NOTE: The order of Siem Reap sightseeing may vary at the discretion of your Tour Leader.

Overnight in Siem Reap.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 25 Siem Reap: Angkor Thom

Today we explore the Petit and Grand Circuits, two routes established by early archaeologists to organize visits to Angkor's sprawling temple complex. These circuits connect dozens of temples beyond Angkor Wat, each revealing different aspects of Khmer architectural and artistic development.

We begin at Ta Prohm, deliberately left in its overgrown state to show how the jungle reclaimed Angkor after the city's decline. Massive silk-cotton and strangler fig trees grow from the temple's walls and courtyards, their roots prying apart the ancient stones. Built in the late 12th century as a Buddhist monastery and university, Ta Prohm once housed over 12,000 people, including 18 high priests and 615 dancers.

We continue to Ta Keo, notable as the first Angkorian temple built entirely from sandstone rather than brick. Its unfinished state — the temple was never decorated with bas-reliefs — provides insight into Khmer construction techniques. Nearby, Sras Srang (Pool of Ablutions) served as a royal bathing pool, its laterite steps leading down to water that still fills the reservoir during rainy season.

At Preah Khan, a massive monastic complex built by King Jayavarman VII, we explore the labyrinthine galleries and courtyards that once formed a Buddhist university. The temple's name means "Sacred Sword," and it served both religious and administrative functions during Angkor's golden age. Pre Rup, with its brick sanctuaries glowing red in certain light, represents an earlier architectural style from the 10th century.

The scale of Angkor becomes clear as we move between these sites. The complex covered several square kilometres, with sophisticated hydraulic systems — canals and reservoirs called barays — that controlled flood waters and provided irrigation during droughts. This engineering allowed Angkor to support what may have been the world's largest city in the 12th century, with populations estimated at one million inhabitants.

Overnight in Siem Reap.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 26 Siem Reap: Banteay Srei

Today we venture beyond the main Angkor complex to visit temples farther afield, traveling through the Cambodian countryside where rice paddies and rural villages provide glimpses of daily life that has changed little over centuries. The journey itself offers a different perspective on the region, showing how the great temples existed within a much larger agricultural landscape.

Our primary destination is Banteay Srei, considered by many to be the jewel of Khmer art. Built in AD 967, this temple stands apart from Angkor's other monuments in several ways. Unlike the massive royal projects we've been exploring, Banteay Srei was commissioned by Yajnavaraha, a Brahman priest and spiritual advisor to King Jayavarman V. Originally called Tribhuvana Mahesvara, it stood in the town of Isvarapura, about 25 kilometres (15 miles) northeast of the main Angkor group.

The temple's current name, Banteay Srei, means "Citadel of Women" or "Citadel of Beauty" — a reference to the delicate artistry of its carvings rather than any historical association with women. Built on a smaller scale than Angkor's royal temples and constructed from fine-grained pink sandstone, Banteay Srei allowed artisans to create extraordinarily detailed relief work. The lintels, pediments, and standing figures display a level of craftsmanship unmatched elsewhere in the Angkor complex, with scenes from Hindu epics rendered in miniature precision.

Banteay Srei was one of the first temples restored by French archaeologists using the anastylosis technique — carefully dismantling and rebuilding structures using as many original stones as possible. This restoration, begun in 1931, served as a model for later conservation work throughout Angkor.

Overnight in Siem Reap.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 27 Departure

Departure from Siem Reap.

BON VOYAGE! Aw khun chran (Thank you in Khmer)!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast