

## SOUTHEAST ASIA EXPLORER

## Vietnam, Cambodia &amp; Thailand

22 days

Created on: 18 May, 2024

## Day 1 Arrival in Hanoi

Arrive in Hanoi; transfer to our hotel.

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Hanoi, located on the banks of the Red River (Song Hong), is an attractive city with lakes, fine boulevards, flourishing parks, and a public centre that is an architectural museum piece. Rich in history, this is one of the most ancient capitals in the world. Hanoi is like a living museum; a fascinating glimpse into a city of old, yet oozing with the energy and pace of a modern metropolis.

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Overnight in Hanoi

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

## Day 2 Hanoi: City Exploration

Today we enjoy a full day of sightseeing in Hanoi, and as we visit the historic highlights you will witness a capital city packed with tree-lined boulevards, lakes and parks, belle époque villas and beautiful temples.

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We will start at the Mausoleum of Ho Chi Minh, a site of pilgrimage and the final resting place of the most iconic and popular leader of Vietnam. The building was constructed from materials gathered from all over Vietnam and is modelled closely on Lenin's Mausoleum. (\*From time to time the building is closed to visitors; possibly an outside viewing only).

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We continue on to the Ho Chi Minh stilt house. For most of his tenure as President of North Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh lived in this modest stilt house behind the grandiose Presidential Palace. Its construction and decor illustrates the importance of simplicity and modesty to this Vietnamese revolutionary. The building is elegantly crafted with lacquered and polished wood, following the model of a traditional communal house on stilts.

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We will also admire the elegance of the One Pillar Pagoda, one of Vietnam's most iconic temples. Originally built in 1049, the temple is lotus-shaped and is situated in the middle of a water-lily pond.

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Our visit to the Ethnology Museum (one of Vietnam's finest) provides us with an insight to the lives of the peoples found primarily in the high country. Dedicated to the 54 ethnic minorities of Vietnam the museum is packed full of information detailing traditional Vietnamese ways of life. Next is the Temple of Literature, the site of the first national university dating back to 1076 and one of Hanoi's best-preserved ancient sites.

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Today we finish with the Hoa Lo Prison Museum, known to American prisoners of war as the Hanoi Hilton. This museum was a prison used by the French colonists in Vietnam for political prisoners and later by North Vietnam for prisoners of war during the American/Vietnam War.

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Overnight in Hanoi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 3 Hanoi - Red River Delta &amp; 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.

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After lunch 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. People of the Red River Delta villages are self-sufficient and they grow an abundance of vegetables and fruit in private gardens, overflowing with a variety of crops such as tomatoes, eggplant, spinach, herbs,

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1-800-665-3998

Email  
sales@adventures-abroad.com

papaya, longan and jackfruit. 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.

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We then drive to Hoa Lu, the ancient capital during the Dinh and Le dynasties. We'll 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.

Overnight in Tam Coc.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 4 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.

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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.

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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. Under clear skies, the upper deck offers a great vista from which you can admire the beauty of the Lan Ha sunset.

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Overnight on board.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

#### Day 5 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.

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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. Later this afternoon we will enjoy a walking tour of Hanoi's Old Quarter, also known as the 'Quarter of 36 Streets'.

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This evening we will enjoy a (+/- one hour) water puppet show. This fantastic art form is unique to Vietnam and originates in the Red River Delta area.

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Overnight in Hanoi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 6 Hanoi - Fly to Da Nang - Hoi An

Today we fly to Da Nang and continue by road to Hoi An. Da Nang is situated on a peninsula at the point where the Han River flows into the South China Sea. Our route takes us through the nearby Marble Mountains; a cluster of five limestone peaks with marble outcrops known for their beauty and their caves. At the foot of Marble Mountain one finds an important religious site for the Chams as well as many artisans crafting fine marble objects.

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Our destination today is perhaps one of the most charming and atmospheric towns in Vietnam - Hoi An. The ancient town of Hoi An is an

exceptionally well-preserved example of a South-East Asian trading port dating from the 15th to the 19th century. The town centre here is small enough to get around easily on foot. On arrival, flight times permitting, we'll have an informal orientation tour of this charming town.

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Overnight in Hoi An

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 7 Hoi An: Walking Tour & Boat Trip

Today we will venture out on foot and discover many of the highlights of this UNESCO protected town – including the old-town architecture, Buddhist shrines, French colonial houses, art galleries and old canals. This was once a prominent Vietnamese trading port for porcelain, pepper, silk and cinnamon, and the city offers a true mix of Vietnamese, Japanese, Chinese, and French architectural feats.

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The oldest parts of town are teeming with beautifully-restored houses, shops, and temples, offering sightseeing opportunities you won't find in other cities in Vietnam. One of Vietnam's most iconic attractions, Hoi An's Japanese covered bridge dates back to the 18th century and is a beautiful historical piece of Japanese architecture. On its north side there is a pagoda, Japanese in style, which serves as protection for sailors. The Tran Family Temple has survived for 15 generations, and here we will see the fusion between both the Chinese and Japanese styles.

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During our time here today we will visit the Chinese Assembly Hall, the Central Market and we will enjoy a boat trip on the Thu Bon River. This river is still essential to the region more than 500 years after it was first navigated, and it remains essential to local food production and transport.

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Overnight in Hoi An.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 8 From Hoi An: My Son Cham Dynasty Complex

This morning we will visit the UNESCO World Heritage Site of My Son ("mee-sohn"), a large complex of religious relics that comprises more than 70 architectural works from the obscure Cham Dynasty (2nd-15th century). The Chams were "Indianised" during commercial trading relations and adopted Hinduism (which can clearly be seen in the Temple designs). My Son served as an intellectual and religious centre and is a 'must visit' as one of Vietnam's most extensive and most important Cham Sites. The forested and lush setting, and general peacefulness of this little visited site make this an excellent excursion.

We later return to Hoi An in time for a late lunch and the balance of the day is free for you to explore at leisure. The Hoi An riverside was a prominent stop amongst foreign traders between the 16th and 18th centuries due to its location on the banks of Thu Bon River, and today this part of the old town is still the most popular gathering spot day and night.

Overnight in Hoi An.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 9 Hoi An - Da Nang, Vietnam - Fly to Siem Reap, Cambodia

Today we fly to Siem Reap, the true epicentre 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. Depending on our flight time we may begin our sightseeing program on arrival – TBD.

\* 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 10 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.

This afternoon we 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 11 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 and Dinner

### Day 12 Siem Reap → Fly to Phnom Penh

Today we fly to Phnom Penh, the capital and largest city in Cambodia.

Engineered by the French, Phnom Penh was once filled with beautiful tree-lined streets and colonial mansions. Today many of the old buildings exist, although they are in a severe state of disrepair. Depending on the time of our arrival, we may accomplish some of the sightseeing as described tomorrow, today upon arrival.

Overnight in Phnom Penh.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 13 Phnom Penh: Tuol Sleng Prison & City Tour

We begin with a visit to the infamous Tuol Sleng Prison, now a museum illustrating the atrocities committed by Pol Pot during the 1970s, and the nearby Choeung Ek, aka the "Killing Fields." The buildings at Tuol Sleng are preserved as they were left when the Khmer Rouge were driven out in 1979. The regime kept extensive records, including thousands of photographs. Several rooms of the museum are now lined, floor to ceiling, with black and white photographs of some of the estimated 20,000 prisoners who passed through the prison.

Back in town, we visit the National Museum, which houses one of the world's largest collections of Khmer art, including sculpture, ceramics, bronzes, and ethnographic objects. The museum's collection includes over 14,000 items, from prehistoric times to periods before, during, and after the Khmer Empire, which at its height stretched from Thailand, across present-day Cambodia, to southern Vietnam. The Museum buildings, inspired by Khmer temple architecture, were constructed between 1917 and 1924.

We then walk the short distance to the Royal Palace and Silver Pagoda. We also stop in at Wat Phnom, a magnificent temple overlooking the town, said to be the spot whereupon the city was originally founded.

Overnight in Phnom Penh.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 14 Phnom Penh, Cambodia - Fly to Bangkok, Thailand

Today we fly to Bangkok. Flight time-permitting we may include some of our city sightseeing program upon arrival – TBD.

Overnight in Bangkok.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 15 Bangkok: City Tour

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

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

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

Overnight in Bangkok.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 16 Bangkok - Fly to Chiang Mai

Today we fly to Chiang Mai, located in the north of Thailand.

Cosmopolitan Chiang Mai, Thailand's second city, is regarded by many as its rightful, historic capital. It's a fascinating and successful mix of old and new, where 1,000-year-old temples and quiet pagoda gardens exist side by side with glittering new hotels and shopping malls.

After settling in, we'll learn how to cook an authentic Thai meal with a half-day cooking class. A typical cooking class features shopping for ingredients at a local market, then rolling up our sleeves to create a meal of classic Thai dishes. An expert cooking instructor will walk us through each step, and you'll get to enjoy the meal you've prepared at the end of the lesson.

Overnight in Chiang Mai.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 17 Chiang Mai: City Tour

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

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

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

Overnight in Chiang Mai.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 18 Chiang Mai & Mae Sa Valley

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

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

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

Overnight in Chiang Mai

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 19 Chiang Mai - Chiang Rai: Hill Tribe Village

known as the "Gateway to the Golden Triangle." With its varied ethnic groups and beautiful surrounding scenery, Chiang Rai, the capital of Thailand's northernmost province, feels far removed from Bangkok or even Chiang Mai. Evidence of the town's historic importance can be seen in monuments such as Wat Phra Kaeo even though modern development is becoming increasingly prominent.

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

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

Overnight in Chiang Rai.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 20 Chiang Rai & Golden Triangle

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

Later we return to Chiang Rai.

Overnight in Chiang Rai.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 21 Fly Chiang Rai - Fly to Bangkok

Today we fly back to Bangkok.

Overnight in Bangkok.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 22 Departure

Departure from Bangkok.

BON VOYAGE!!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast