

SOUTHEAST ASIA EXPLORER

Thailand, Cambodia & Vietnam

20 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Bangkok

Today we arrive in Bangkok and transfer to our hotel.

Known as the 'City of Angels,' Bangkok is a vibrant metropolis that seamlessly blends traditional culture and modern excitement, with ornate temples, bustling markets, and spicy street food waiting to be discovered.

Overnight in Bangkok.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Bangkok: City Exploration

Our Bangkok city touring begins with a visit of 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 Kaeo, 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 3 Bangkok - Fly to Chiang Rai

Today we fly to Chiang Rai, 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, exuding a laid-back charm and cultural richness that's uniquely its own. Evidence of the town's historic importance can be seen in monuments such as Wat Phra Kaeo, where intricate architecture and revered Buddha artifacts whisper tales of the past, even as modern development is becoming increasingly prominent, adding a touch of contemporary flair to this captivating corner of Thailand."

Depending on our flight time, we may be able to begin our sightseeing program on arrival.

Overnight in Chiang Rai.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Chiang Rai Touring

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Our day starts with a visit of 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 5 Chiang Rai - Chiang Mai

Today we travel by road to Chiang Mai, nestled in the heart of northern Thailand's misty mountains. This cultural and spiritual hub is alive with the scent of incense, the chime of temple bells, and the warm smiles of locals, as ancient traditions and vibrant markets blend seamlessly with the stunning natural scenery. We'll explore the city's iconic temples, bustling markets, and perhaps catch a glimpse of the surrounding mountains, where the rhythms of rural life unfold at a gentler pace.

After settling in, we'll learn how to cook an authentic Thai meal with a half-day cooking class, diving into the bold and aromatic world of Thai cuisine. Thai food is known for its harmonious balance of sweet, sour, salty, and spicy flavours, with dishes often featuring fresh herbs like lemongrass, galangal, and Thai basil. A typical cooking class features shopping for ingredients at a local market, where we'll discover the vibrant colours and enticing aromas of Thai produce, spices, and condiments. Then, rolling up our sleeves, we'll create a meal of classic Thai dishes, guided by an expert cooking instructor who'll walk us through each step. From preparing fragrant curry pastes to balancing the flavours of a spicy stir-fry, we'll learn the techniques and secrets behind Thailand's beloved cuisine. And the best part? We'll get to enjoy the meal we've prepared at the end of the lesson, savouring the flavours and aromas of our hard work!

Overnight in Chiang Mai.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Chiang Mai Area Touring

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

Chiang Mai, a city steeped in history and spirituality, boasts over 300 temples, each one a testament to the region's rich cultural heritage. As we explore the old quarter, nestled within its ancient moat, we'll discover a treasure trove of traditional wooden houses, their intricate carvings and ornate details a reflection of the region's unique Lanna style. At the heart of this historic district lies the magnificent Wat Phra Singh, one of the city's most revered temples. The main sanctuary is home to a stunning tower constructed in 1345 to house the ashes of King Kam Fu, while the beautiful Viharn Lai Kam is a masterpiece of Lanna architecture, its wooden structure adorned with intricate carvings and ornate details. Inside the temple, we'll find one of Thailand's three sacred Phra Singh images, its setting enhanced by a vibrant and action-packed mural depicting everyday life in bygone eras - from piggyback fights and merchants haggling over goods to fishermen hauling in their catch and children playing in the streets.

Later, we'll visit the Arts and Cultural Centre, where we can delve deeper into Chiang Mai's rich cultural heritage and learn more about the region's unique history, art, and traditions.

Overnight in Chiang Mai.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Chiang Mai Area Touring

This morning we visit a stunning orchid farm, nestled in the picturesque Mae Sa Valley, where the river's gentle flow and scenic cascades create a serene backdrop. As we drive through the valley, we'll pass by lush landscapes dotted with orchid farms and resorts, their gardens bursting with vibrant colors and exotic blooms. The area's natural beauty, combined with its proximity to Chiang Mai, has made it a haven for horticulture and relaxation, offering a tranquil escape from the city's bustle.

As we explore the region, we'll encounter one of Thailand's most revered and majestic creatures: the elephant. With its revered status as the national animal, the elephant holds a special place in Thai lore and history. Once roaming freely in the vast forests of Northern Thailand, these magnificent beasts played a multitude of roles, from battle tanks to off-road vehicles, and even symbols of kingship. The white elephant, in particular, was a symbol of royal power and prosperity, yet ironically, many ordinary elephants have become a burden to their mahouts, who can no longer find work for them in the logging industry. This has led to a heartbreaking situation where abandoned elephants are forced to roam in search of food, often encroaching on farmland and facing the threat of being hunted. To combat this issue, we'll visit a conservation centre dedicated to protecting these gentle giants and preserving the traditional bond between elephants and their mahouts. Here, we'll learn about the rich history and cultural significance of elephants in Thailand, and discover the important work being done to safeguard their future.

Overnight in Chiang Mai.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Chiang Mai, Thailand - Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Today we fly to Phnom Penh (likely with a connection in Bangkok), the capital and largest city in Cambodia.

Phnom Penh, the vibrant capital of Cambodia, boasts a fascinating history that reflects its French colonial past. Once a showcase of elegance, the city's tree-lined streets and grand colonial mansions were engineered by the French to evoke a sense of Parisian chic. Although many of these beautiful buildings still stand, they now bear the scars of time and neglect, their intricate facades and ornate details slowly being reclaimed by the jungle. As we arrive in this captivating city, we'll embark on a journey to uncover its hidden gems and rediscover the charm of its bygone era. Depending on our arrival time, we may even get a head start on exploring the city's rich history and culture, fitting in some sightseeing today that will set the tone for our adventures ahead.

Flight time-permitting, we may begin our sightseeing program on arrival.

Overnight in Phnom Penh.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Phnom Penh: Tuol Sleng Prison & City Tour

Today's sightseeing begins 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 10 Phnom Penh - Fly to Siem Reap

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.

* 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 11 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 Chao 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 12 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. 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 13 Siem Reap, Cambodia - Fly to Da Nang, Vietnam - Hoi An

Today we fly to Da Nang and continue by road to Hoi An.

As we journey to Hoi An, our route winds through the breathtaking Marble Mountains, a stunning cluster of five limestone peaks adorned with gleaming marble outcrops and intricate caves. At the mountains' base, we'll discover a sacred site revered by the Cham people, alongside skilled artisans crafting exquisite marble creations.

Our destination, Hoi An, is a captivating town that embodies the essence of Vietnam's rich history. This ancient trading port, perfectly preserved and dating back to the 15th to 19th centuries, is a treasure trove of Southeast Asian culture. With its compact town centre, we'll explore the charming streets on foot, taking in the unique blend of architecture, vibrant markets, and warm hospitality. Upon arrival, we'll embark on an informal orientation tour, allowing us to soak up the town's enchanting atmosphere and get a glimpse of the adventures that await us.

Overnight in Hoi An.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 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.

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.

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.

Overnight in Hoi An.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 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 with the balance of the day 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.

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Hoi An - Da Nang - Fly to Hanoi - Ninh Binh

Today we fly to Hanoi and continue by road to Ninh Binh.

Ninh Binh, affectionately known as "Ha Long Bay on land," boasts breathtaking natural beauty and majestic karst limestone mountains that evoke the drama of a mythical realm. This captivating region is steeped in cultural heritage, offering a wealth of historical treasures to uncover. After lunch at a local restaurant, we'll journey to Hoa Lu, the ancient capital that once thrived under the Dinh and Le dynasties. As we explore the local temples, we'll glimpse the region's storied past.

Next, we'll drive through the stunning Trang An Eco-tourism complex, where lush landscapes and ancient rock formations await. Our adventure culminates at the Hang Mua Cave, where a challenging 450-step ascent rewards us with a breathtaking panoramic view of the surrounding countryside, a true masterpiece of nature.

Overnight in Tam Coc.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 17 Ninh Binh - La Ha Bay Overnight Cruise

This morning we embark on a journey to Lan Ha Bay (an extension of Ha Long Bay), all the while absorbing the incredible beauty of The Red River Delta and colourful rice fields throughout the journey. Lying south and east of Cat Ba Town, Lan Ha Bay is made up of approximately 300 or so karst islands and limestone outcrops. Due to being a fair distance from Halong City, fewer tourist boats venture here, meaning Lan Ha Bay has a more isolated appeal.

We will receive a warm welcome as we arrive at the Dinh Vu port around noon. Here we will board our overnight boat. A mouth-watering lunch will be served as we cruise to Lan Ha Bay.

During our afternoon cruising we will witness the phenomenal and awe-inspiring scenery around Lan Ha Bay. We will explore hidden lagoons and floating villages, and you will have the chance to swim or kayak at the foot of the verdant giant stones. We later drop anchor in an isolated area for the evening and enjoy the peaceful ambience of the bay. Under clear skies, the upper deck offers a great vista from which you can admire the beauty of the Lan Ha sunset.

Note: Due to the weather and operation conditions, the cruise's itinerary is subject to change without prior notice.

Overnight on board.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 18 Lan Ha Bay - Hanoi

Before breakfast, those who wish to can participate in a Tai Chi class on deck under the rise of the Southeast Asian sun.

Later this morning, we'll venture into a breathtaking cave, its vast interior shimmering with thousands of stalactites and stalagmites that sparkle like nature's own cathedral. As we explore this underground wonder, the majestic formations will leave us in awe. Afterwards, we'll leisurely cruise back through the serene waters, surrounded by the towering karst peaks that pierce the sky like giants, their rugged beauty a perfect complement to the cave's hidden treasures.

Around noon we will disembark at Tuan Chau Marina 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'. 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.

Overnight in Hanoi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 19 Hanoi City Touring

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.

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).

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 illustrate 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.

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.

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.

We'll 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.

Overnight in Hanoi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 20 Departure

Departure from Hanoi.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast