Tour Code
VL1

ADVENTURESABROAD

NORTHERN VIETNAM & LAOS

Trains, Trails & Temple Mornings

14 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Hanoi

Arrival in Vietnam's capital—a city where French colonial elegance meets Southeast Asian energy. Hanoi sits on the banks of the Red River, a waterway that has sustained civilizations for millennia and still flows rust-colored with iron-rich sediment from China's Yunnan highlands.

Transfer to our hotel in the heart of the Old Quarter, where narrow lanes buzz with motorbike traffic and street vendors. This evening, gather with fellow travellers for a welcome dinner of northern Vietnamese specialties.

Overnight in Hanoi.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Hanoi - French Quarter & Temple of Literature

Hanoi represents a perfect blend of old and new, Asian and European—a dynamic unification of tradition and progressive 21st-century thinking. Despite rapid recent development, the city has retained much of its traditional identity through tree-lined boulevards, serene lakes, belle époque villas, and beautiful temples.

This morning we visit the complex dedicated to Ho Chi Minh, the nation's founder affectionately known as "Uncle Ho." The imposing Mausoleum serves as his final resting place, constructed from materials gathered across Vietnam and modeled on Lenin's Mausoleum. Walking through the Presidential Palace's botanical garden, we visit Uncle Ho's humble stilt house, built in rural Vietnamese style reflecting his simple, pure lifestyle. We tour the One Pillar Pagoda, built in 1049 on a single stone pillar and designed to resemble a lotus blossom—a symbol of purity. We continue to Tran Quoc Pagoda, Hanoi's oldest pagoda, located on a small island of West Lake.

This afternoon we visit the Temple of Literature, Vietnam's first university constructed in the 11th century. This stunning temple constitutes a rare example of well-preserved traditional Vietnamese architecture and appears on the back of the 100,000 dong banknote.

We discover Hanoi's vibrant heart aboard a traditional cyclo—three-wheeled bicycle taxis that have been part of the city's cultural fabric for decades. With the gentle rhythm of the cyclo and fresh breeze, we experience an authentic journey through bustling streets. We pause at a charming railway-side café with sweeping views of the legendary Long Bien Bridge, sipping Vietnamese coffee as passing trains and the city's gentle hum create a scene both nostalgic and full of character.

We stroll around scenic Hoan Kiem Lake—the "Lake of the Returned Sword"—named after a magical sword once used by revered heroes to defeat the Chinese Ming Dynasty, then returned to the Golden Turtle God. The day ends with an enchanting water puppet show, where folklore and village life come alive on water with music and tradition.

Overnight in Hanoi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Hanoi to Lan Ha Bay Cruise

This morning we journey to Cat Ba Island (approximately 3 hours), gateway to Lan Ha Bay—the quieter neighbour to famous Halong Bay. While Halong draws hundreds of cruise boats daily, Lan Ha's 400 limestone karst islands remain relatively undiscovered, offering the same dramatic scenery with far fewer crowds.

Around midday we board our traditional junk boat at Tuan Chau Marina and cruise into waters where geology tells an ancient story. These limestone towers—some rising 100 meters above the emerald sea—began forming 500 million years ago when this entire region lay beneath a shallow tropical ocean.

Following lunch of fresh seafood, the afternoon invites exploration by traditional rowing boat through fascinating cave systems. We cruise to

our overnight anchorage, enjoying a Vietnamese cooking demonstration before dining on a special dinner in the restaurant. The evening is ours at leisure as we drop anchor in an isolated bay, the karsts silhouetted against a sky turning from gold to indigo.

Overnight on board.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 4 Lan Ha Bay to Hanoi - Overnight Train to Lao Cai

Those seeking gentle movement before breakfast can join an optional tai chi class on deck as the bay awakens. This morning we explore an impressive cave system where thousands of stalactites and stalagmites have grown over hundreds of thousands of years, each formation a testament to dripping water rich in dissolved limestone.

We cruise slowly back through the karst landscape, disembarking around 10:30-11:00. The vehicle awaits for our drive to Hanoi, arriving early afternoon.

We discover the elegant French Quarter, where colonial architecture lines wide boulevards. We visit Hoa Lo Prison, once a symbol of French oppression that later held American POWs and became known as the "Hanoi Hilton." Next we explore the Imperial Citadel of Thang Long, where an underground wartime command bunker reveals Vietnam's military leadership during the American War. If time permits, we stop at the B-52 Victory Museum, honoring Hanoians' resilience.

This evening we board the Chapa Express soft-sleeper train bound for Lao Cai. The overnight journey covers approximately 300 kilometers through the Red River Delta into the mountains forming Vietnam's border with China.The train provides private "soft-sleeper" cabins with a maximum of 2 guests per 4-berth compartment (upper berths folded away for your exclusive use). Each lockable cabin features air-conditioning, individual reading lights, clean bedding, and luggage storage space. Shared washroom facilities with Western-style toilets are located in the corridor.

Overnight on train.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Lao Cai to Sapa - Highland Villages & Rice Terraces

Dawn brings arrival in Lao Cai, the border town where the Red River crosses into China. We enjoy a simple breakfast at a local restaurant before the scenic one-hour drive to Sapa at 1600 m (5,250 ft) elevation. The road winds through Tram Ton Pass—Vietnam's highest mountain pass—passing ethnic village houses, stunning mountains, and rice and maize fields.

After a rest at our hotel, we set out on a guided village walk past rice paddy fields to Ma Tra village, with possible views of tea plantations and cardamom gardens (seasonal) along the way. The walk follows well-worn paths at a relaxed pace, with opportunities to pause for photographs and catch our breath. Ma Tra is home to the Black H'mong community, living mainly on rice cultivation in terraced fields. These terraces represent centuries of Hmong and Red Dao ingenuity—carved into impossibly steep slopes creating microclimates and irrigation systems allowing wet rice cultivation at altitudes where it shouldn't survive.

We continue on foot to quaint Ta Phin Village, home to Black H'mong and Red Dzao minorities living in harmony despite different customs and dress. Notice the distinctiveness in their way of life and costumes. The walk involveS some gradual ascents and uneven terrain typical of mountain villages, but the pace remains leisurely with time to interact with villagers and absorb the mountain scenery.

We return to Sapa by private vehicle and wander town with stops at Sapa market and Stone Church, or enjoy Vietnamese coffee at a café offering magnificent mountain views.

Overnight in Sapa.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Sapa: Mountain Markets & Ridge Walks

We depart early and travel 2.5 hours to Bac Ha Market, the region's largest and most vibrant. Highland minorities from surrounding valleys converge every Sunday morning to trade livestock, textiles, and produce. Flower H'mong, Phu La, Black Dzao, Tay, and Nung groups gather to trade goods they've manufactured—embroidered goods, rice wine, buffalo, pigs, and chickens.

Flower Hmong women arrive in riot-colored embroidered jackets; Phu La traders wear distinctive silver necklaces; Tay merchants sell medicinal herbs from mountain forests. The markets function as social hubs where marriages are arranged, friends meet over rice wine, and news is exchanged as much as goods.

After lunch at a local restaurant, we continue to Ban Pho village where H'Mong have lived for centuries. Despite modest possessions, the inhabitants' generosity in welcoming visitors is extraordinary. We return after a memorable day exploring stunning scenery and fascinating cultures.

Overnight in Sapa.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 7 Sapa - Fly to Luang Prabang, Laos

We transfer from Sapa to Noi Bai airport (approximately 5 hours driving) for our flight to Luang Prabang. The flight crosses from Vietnam into Laos, a landlocked nation that was once three kingdoms before French colonizers unified them as a single protectorate in 1893.

Luang Prabang sits at the confluence of the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers, surrounded by mountains. In the 14th century, King Fa Ngum established this as the capital of Lan Xang—the "Kingdom of a Million Elephants"—creating a realm that would endure for over 350 years.

Upon arrival we meet our guide and transfer to our hotel in town.

Overnight in Luang Prabang.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Luang Prabang - Kuang Si Falls & Temples

Nestled in lush tropical forest, Kuang Si waterfall is one of Luang Prabang's most picturesque sights—a multi-tiered cascade of pale turquoise water flowing into perfectly sculpted limestone pools.

This morning we drive one hour south, stopping at a vibrant market and hill tribe village. We follow unpaved trails gradually climbing through forest to different levels of natural blue pools, some shallow, one with a rope swing. Swimming is possible, though water is cold November-January. The remarkable color comes from high calcium carbonate content creating the travertine terraces.

We hike through the park past the Asian Bear Rescue Centre, home to over 20 Asiatic black bears rescued from dire circumstances, living in forested enclosures.

UNESCO declared Luang Prabang a World Heritage Site in 1995. Set at the confluence of the Nam Khan and Mekong, Luang Prabang reflects an intricate blend of French and Buddhist influences.

This afternoon we explore the Royal Palace featuring French beaux-arts and traditional Lao architecture, now a National Museum housing Royal artifacts. We walk through tree-lined streets to admire famous temples. Wat Xieng Thong is a masterpiece of mosaics and carved wood. Wat Vitsoun, the most ancient temple, houses Prabang Buddha statues and steles.

We climb Mount Phousi to explore the gilded stupa and admire panoramic sunset views of the Mekong and Khan rivers.

Overnight in Luang Prabang.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Luang Prabang - Pak Ou Caves & Weaving Class

We board a traditional long-tail boat for a leisure trip to Pak Ou Caves, sitting beneath dramatic karst formations 25 kilometers from downtown. Located where the Nam Ou and Mekong rivers meet, two magical caves embedded in limestone cliffs hold myriad sacred Buddhist statues and images.

The spacious covered boat provides comfortable seating—perfect for watching village life along riverbanks. We admire sleepy villages behind huge trees, wooden sampans bobbing at shore, and floating marks showing net and trap locations. We stop at a Mekong village to learn about making Lao-Lao, the beloved rice whiskey.

The Pak Ou Caves occupy two clefts stuffed with thousands of old Buddha images. The site has long been sacred, even before Buddhism when animist Lao worshipped spirits here. The lower cave houses over 4,000 images ranging from 8 centimeters to 3 meters tall, tucked into nooks and crannies.

After our visit we cruise back with stops at Ban Xang Khong and Ban Xieng Lek villages, specializing in silk weaving and Saa Paper (made from Saa Tree bark). We observe weavers and craftsmen honoring timeworn traditional crafts.

This afternoon we drive to Ock Pop Tok Living Crafts Centre, an artisan social enterprise where Lao textiles come alive. In this weaving class we gain introduction to silks and techniques before sitting at our loom. Following skilled weavers' instruction, we select colors and create a placemat-sized woven piece by traditional technique. We take our creation home as a keepsake. We end strolling the garden and enjoying drinks in the café overlooking the Mekong.

Overnight in Luang Prabang.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Luang Prabang to Vang Vieng by Rail

The alms-giving ceremony (Tak Bat) is a longstanding Lao Buddhist tradition and sacred ceremony. Every morning hundreds of monks in saffron robes leave pagodas and walk barefoot down streets, quietly collecting offerings from devout Buddhists.

To witness this timeless event, you'll wake before dawn to witness and participate in offering alms to hundreds of saffron-robed monks in early morning light. This is one way Buddhists make merit, contributing good circumstances for the future. We observe the town coming to life and visit a bustling morning market, enjoying sights and sounds of local life before returning to our hotel.

Later we board the spectacular Lao-China Railway for the journey to Vang Vieng. The train—part of the rail link connecting Kunming to Vientiane—opened in late 2021, dramatically reducing travel times. Comfortable, spacious seating includes charging sockets.

The two-hour journey showcases engineering achievement through mountainous terrain. We glide through 75 tunnels and across numerous viaducts, landscape alternating between karst peaks, river valleys, and villages where water buffalo pull ploughs through rice fields.

Vang Vieng emerges around a bend in the Nam Song River, surrounded by karst formations rising vertically from the valley floor. Once quiet, it's now a base for outdoor activities—rock climbing, kayaking, and cycling through scenery rivaling anything in Southeast Asia.

We meet our guide and transfer to our hotel. The evening brings a riverside promenade walk.

Overnight in Vang Vieng.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Vang Vieng - Karst Valley Exploration

The journey to Blue Lagoon offers perfect opportunity to experience countryside lifestyle. We drive through another world where time moves slowly and local children run out waving as we pass.

We visit amazing Tham Phou Kham Cave, considered sacred by Lao. The main entrance requires steep climbing before the cave dives through a narrow entrance into the first chamber containing a bronze reclining Buddha. We continue to Pha Ngern View Point for panoramic views of Vang Vieng town and Nam Song River (40-60 minute climb).

We head to magnificent waterfall with gorgeous turquoise water, taking refreshing dips in stream and pool. Best visiting time is October-March when water is blue and clear rather than brown and murky during rainy season.

Mid-afternoon we drive to outskirts, hiking uphill to Pha Nam Xay Point View (20 minutes) for stunning mountain and jungle views. Cameras ready to capture sunset with a motorbike on the hilltop creating dramatic background.

Overnight in Vang Vieng.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Vang Vieng to Vientiane by Rail

This morning we visit famous Tham Chang cave, owing its name to remarkable limestone formation on Nam Song River banks. The cave sheltered villagers during the Chinese Haw invasion in the 19th century and again during Laos's civil war.

We embark on a private local long-tail boat for a relaxing cruise on Nam Song River. Cameras ready to capture beautiful landscape created by rivers and mountains when sunlight fades.

We transfer to the train station for boarding the train to Vientiane (aka Viangchan). The journey takes approximately 90 minutes through mountain scenery before descending to Mekong lowlands. Vientiane sprawls along the Mekong's northern bank, directly across from Thailand—so close you can see Thai temples and towns on the opposite shore.

As Laos's capital, Vientiane holds surprising character—perhaps the most laid-back capital in Southeast Asia, where French bakeries and Buddhist temples coexist in tree-lined streets rarely seeing traffic jams.

We meet our guide and transfer to our hotel.

Overnight in Vientiane.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Vientiane: Buddha Park & COPE Centre

Vientiane is home to some of the most iconic temples and Buddhist sites in the country. Located 25km (16 mi) southeast of downtown, Buddha Park (Xieng Khuan) is a fanciful open-air sculpture garden housing over 200 giant sculptures of Buddha and Hindu deities.

One striking sculpture is a giant pumpkin with three floors representing Hell, Earth, and Heaven. We climb staircases from Hell to Heaven for panoramic views over the entire park. We stroll around observing many concrete sculptures—Buddha, Hindu demons, mythological creatures like three-headed elephants—weathered, giving them an ancient impression. We discover the outstanding 390-foot-long reclining Buddha in the park's heart. Most sculptures are bigger than life, made of reinforced concrete, carved with intricate and sometimes bizarre designs.

We continue to That Luang, a gold-covered large Buddhist stupa in Vientiane's center, generally considered the national symbol of Laos. Built in the 16th century over earlier Khmer temple ruins, its gleaming gold surface catches the afternoon sun like a beacon.

This afternoon we visit local non-profit organizations. We drive to the Cooperative Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise (COPE) supporting people with mobility-related disabilities through physical rehabilitation services. Through interactive displays, documentaries, and imagery, COPE tells the devastating war consequences, current unexploded ordnance (UXO) contamination problems, and how they help UXO survivors and disabled people move on with prosthetics and rehabilitation. Between 1964-1973, the United States dropped more bombs on Laos than on Germany and Japan combined during World War II—over two million tonnes. An estimated 30% failed to detonate; clearing

them remains a massive undertaking.

Situated on the Mekong banks, the Lao Disabled Women's Development Centre is a non-profit run by women with disabilities, offering vocational training and employment for disadvantaged, minimally educated, poor, or disabled Lao women. The center revives and supports traditional Lao crafts including sewing, embroidery, weaving, natural dyes, and paper handicrafts. We tour the center and interact with women at work, learning how they overcome difficulties. We join a workshop receiving instruction from skilled women artisans to create craft items from old newspaper or recycled banana paper.

Overnight in Vientiane.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Departure from Vientiane

Transfer to Wattay International Airport for onward connections. The journey from Vietnam's energetic cities through Laos's serene landscapes has revealed two nations bound by history yet distinctly different in character---one racing toward development, the other holding to tradition at its own measured pace.

Bon Voyage - Sok dee!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast