

**SEA****Laos, Vietnam & Cambodia****15 days**

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**Day 1      *Arrive in Vientiane (Viangchan)***

Today we arrive in Vientiane, the capital of Laos.

Vientiane still feels like a sleepy little city with relaxed charm, tree-lined boulevards, interesting wats and colorful markets. Starting tomorrow morning we will tour the different highlights of the city, including Pha That Luang, a gleaming golden stupa which is perhaps the most important national monument in Laos; Ho Pha Keo, the formal royal temple, now a museum with beautiful examples of Buddhist sculpture; Wat Si Saket; and Patuxai, a monumental arch inspired by the Arc de Triomphe, but executed with Lao motifs.

Overnight in Vientiane.

**Day 2      *Vientiane - Luang Prabang***

Today we fly to Luang Prabang.

Set between the Nam Khan and Mekong rivers, Luang Prabang is an enchanting town filled with historic temples and colonial style buildings. The entire town was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995. We will begin our tour with a visit to Wat Visoun (Wat Wisunalat). The oldest living temple in Luang Prabang, Wat Visoun dates back to 1513 and contains a collection of antique wooden Buddhas. We will also visit the nearby Wat Aham before continuing to Wat Xieng Thong, the crowning jewel of all the monasteries and temples in the city. Its many ornate buildings feature exquisite mosaic and gold-stenciled murals. From there we will stroll down the main street (Wat Street) of Luang Prabang.

Today we will also climb the hillside stairs to the small temples atop Phou Si, the 100m high hill that sits in the middle of the town, offering beautiful views over the temples and river.

Overnight in Luang Prabang.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

**Day 3      *Luang Prabang: Tham Pak Ou Caves & National Museum***

In the morning we will visit a local market to see the hustle and bustle of activity that takes place in the early morning. We then continue to the National Museum (Royal Palace), a modest but graceful building that combines traditional Lao and French beaux-arts motifs. This turn-of-the-century royal residence has been preserved as it was when the royal family last lived here and provides unique insights into the history of Laos. A visit to Wat Mai is also part of this morning's sightseeing.

Later today we will travel by boat down the Mekong River to the steep limestone cliffs overlooking the Mekong and Nam Ou rivers. These cliffs are home to the Tham Pak Ou Caves. These extraordinary caves are filled with Buddha images of every style and material imaginable. On the return journey we will stop at Ban Xang Hai Village, a local area famous for the production of lao lao, the local rice wine whisky.

Afterwards we will visit Ban Xang Khong, a village near Luang Prabang well known for its traditional hand-woven cotton and silk, as well as production of the local sa (mulberry) paper.

Overnight in Luang Prabang.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

#### **Day 4      *Luang Prabang: Kuang Si Waterfall***

Today we will travel by vehicle to the Kuang Si Waterfall. Located in a perfect natural setting near Luang Prabang, this multi-tiered waterfall tumbles over limestone formations into a series of turquoise pools. We will have time to enjoy swimming in the clear water, or you may choose to just relax in the natural environment. We will visit the local village of Ban Muang Khai and continue to Ban Tha Pene, a nearby Khmu village. Later in the day we will return back to Luang Prabang.

You will have some free time this afternoon to explore Luang Prabang on your own.

Overnight in Luang Prabang.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

#### **Day 5      *Luang Prabang, Laos - Hanoi, Vietnam - Halong Bay***

Today we will board our flight to Hanoi, Vietnam, and then travel by road to Halong Bay in the northeast. Upon arrival in Halong Bay we will check into our hotel and you will have the rest of the day at leisure.

Located in the Gulf of Tonkin, Halong Bay includes some 1,600 islands and islets, forming a spectacular seascape of limestone pillars. Because of their precipitous nature, most of the islands are uninhabited and unaffected by a human presence. The regions outstanding scenic beauty is complemented by its great biological interest.

Overnight in Halong Bay.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

#### **Day 6      *Halong Bay Cruise - Hanoi***

This morning we will board our traditional wooden boat to cruise amongst the emerald waters and craggy limestone cliffs of Halong Bay, stopping to explore one of the many caves in this area. We will sail past picturesque islands, floating villages and fishermen casting their nets ... as we observe the rhythms of daily life on the bay. Some of the islands support floating villages of fishermen, who ply the shallow waters for 200 species of fish and 450 different kinds of mollusks.

We will enjoy a seafood lunch on board our boat before we return to Halong Bay pier and drive back to Hanoi.

Overnight in Hanoi.

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Lunch

#### **Day 7      *Hanoi: City Tour - Da Nang - Hoi An***

Although it is the modern-day capital of Vietnam, Hanoi still retains the mystery and charm of past centuries. Narrow lanes and traditional shophouses invite exploration by cyclo, while its many beautiful public spaces lakes, parks, tree-lined boulevards and monuments give the city an air of elegance and harmony with nature unique among Asian capitals.

We will begin our day by visiting the Temple of Literature, a peaceful series of walled courtyards and graceful gateways, and one of

the best surviving examples of traditional Vietnamese architecture. Founded in 1070 and dedicated to Confucius, this was also the site of Vietnam's first university.

We continue to the miniature One Pillar Pagoda. Also dating from the 11th century, this monument was rebuilt after being destroyed by the French in 1954. Today it stands near the vast Ho Chi Minh Memorial Complex, a lovely park setting which is home to Ho Chi Minh's final resting place, as well as a museum and other memorials.

Finally, a highlight of our day will be our discovery of the Old Quarter of Hanoi by cyclo. This fascinating network of narrow alleys and shop houses is also known as 'The 36 Streets', each street being named after the merchandise traditionally sold there, ranging from fabrics and crafts to medicines and tombstones. This is a handicraft-lover's paradise and an endlessly interesting place to explore local life.

Afterwards we will drive to the airport for our flight to Da Nang, followed by a drive from Da Nang to Hoi An.

Overnight in Hoi An.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

### **Day 8**      ***Hoi An: Walking Tour***

The exquisitely preserved merchant town of Hoi An was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999. Its colourful shophouses and temples reflect a diverse heritage, dating back to the 16th & 17th centuries, when it was a major port for Western, Chinese and Japanese traders. Today this is a thriving center of traditional crafts and a shoppers' paradise, best explored on foot.

We will wander through the cobbled streets, past low tile-roofed buildings, the bustling central market and the small harbour where colorfully painted boats are moored. Our walking tour will include visits to private house, where members of the same family have lived continuously for centuries in a traditional setting. We will visit one of the family chapels built by prominent merchants or official families as centres for ancestor worship. Our tour will also take us to a typical Chinese-Style Pagoda or Assembly Hall. At the Sa Huynh Museum, located near the Japanese Covered Bridge, we will see exhibitions from the earliest period of Hoi An's history.

We will be sure to visit some of the handicraft workshops in Hoi An where local products are being made. Lastly we will continue to the famous Japanese Covered Bridge Pagoda, first constructed in 1593 by the Japanese community of Hoi An to link the town with the Chinese quarters across the stream.

Overnight in Hoi An.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

### **Day 9**      ***Hoi An - Hue***

This morning we depart from Hoi An we will begin driving north to Hue. We will stop just outside Da Nang to visit the Marble Mountains, five stone hillocks, once islands, that now rise sharply from the surrounding rice fields. Riddled with caves and shrines, they are said to each represent one of the five elements of the universe. We will also tour the Cham Museum, an elegant colonial building that now houses the finest collection of Cham sculpture in the world.

From Da Nang we journey north past Lang Co, a lovely stretch of beach curving outwards between a clear blue lagoon and the South China Sea. We then continue along a steep mountainous road with spectacular views of the coastline, crossing the dramatic Haivan Pass, the high dividing line between the climate zones of north and south Vietnam.

Upon arrival in Hue we will start on our sightseeing tour. Hue served as the capital of Vietnam for more than 140 years, and today it houses ancient temples, imperial buildings and French-style edifices.

Overnight in Hue.

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Dinner

**Day 10**     ***Hue: Area Tour - Saigon***

We will start today with a visit to the Imperial Citadel. Located in the heart of Hue, this vast complex was built in the early 19th century and modeled after the Forbidden City of Peking. The original walls stretched for 10 km and were surrounded by a wide moat. Today, most of the buildings have been destroyed due to bombing during the Vietnam-American War, but the monuments that remain provide a fascinating glimpse into the court life of the Nguyen Dynasty.

Today we will also have an excursion to Dong Ba Market, a local market located near the Imperial City. Afterwards we will transfer to the airport for our flight to Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City). Upon arrival we will transfer to our hotel.

Overnight in Saigon.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

**Day 11**     ***Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City)***

A vibrant metropolis, Saigon teems with energy, activity and motion. Everywhere you look, you see the meeting of traditional and modern life. The emerging modern skyline stands cheek by jowl with colonial buildings and traditional temples. Outside on the streets, young professionals zip by on motorcycles, chatting on cell phones; inside the quiet temple courtyards, worshippers pray amidst clouds of incense.

Today we begin our tour of this exciting city with a visit to the historic center. We will stroll along Dong Khoi Street, formerly known as the Rue Catinat, the main shopping thoroughfare and heart of old colonial Saigon. We will pass by classic European-style landmarks such as the ornate City Hall (Hotel de Ville), the old Opera House (both may only be viewed from the outside), and pay a quick visit to the neo-Romanesque Notre Dame Cathedral and the Central Post Office.

Afterwards we will dive into modern history with a tour of the Reunification Palace. Formerly the Independence Palace of the South Vietnamese president, this 60s style was famously stormed by tanks on April 30, 1975 signifying the fall of South Vietnam. From here we continue to the harrowing War Remnants Museum, which comprehensively documents the travails of the long Vietnam-American War. A powerful experience, this museum is guaranteed to provoke strong emotions. Afterwards we will drive to the historic center in order to visit the Emperor of Jade Pagoda, one of Saigon's most interesting pagodas.

In the afternoon we will head out to Cholon (Chinatown). Here will we explore the highlights of this fascinating part of the city, beginning with a brief visit to Binh Tay Market, the vast wholesale market selling every kind of good from dried foods to t-shirts to electronics. We continue to Thien Hau Pagoda, built by the Cantonese congregation and dedicated to the heavenly goddess. We then end our tour at the central Ben Thanh Market, where vendors display a vast array of goods and handicrafts, appealing to every taste.

Overnight in Saigon.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

**Day 12**     ***Saigon, Vietnam - Phnom Penh, Cambodia***

This morning we will fly to Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

We will spend the balance of our day exploring this city! Phnom Penh is a chaotic, energetic and always fascinating city. Graceful tree-lined boulevards and riverfront promenades are reminders of bygone eras; today they teem with life and activity, as motorcycles weave in and out of traffic, vendors hawk their wares, and pedestrians go about their business.

We will start our tour at Wat Phnom, the birthplace of the capital city. From here we continue on to see Royal Palace to witness the splendor of Cambodia's royal heritage. This is still the official residence of King Norodom Sihamoni. We will also see the adjacent Silver Pagoda, also known as the Pagoda of the Emerald Buddha, and the elegant National Museum, which contains a comprehensive collection of Khmer art.

In the afternoon we will learn about a chapter from Cambodia's more recent, tragic, past at the Tuol Sleng Museum (Museum of Genocide). Formerly the Tuol Svay Prey High School, in 1975, this became the interrogation and torture facility for the Khmer Rouge regime -- at that time known as Security Prison 21, or simply S-21. Kept largely unchanged, this prison now showcases photographs and exhibits about the thousands of victims that passed through these doors -- only seven of whom came out alive.

Finally, we will explore the modern-day city, and visit one of Phnom Penh's two great markets, the Central Market or the Russian Market. The Central Market is located in a distinctive domed Art Deco building (currently under construction, but can still be visited). The sprawling Russian Market is a labyrinth of stalls selling everything from CDs and DVDs to silks, crafts, jewelry and more.

Overnight in Phnom Penh.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

### **Day 13      *Phnom Penh - Siem Reap***

This morning we head to the airport for our flight to Siem Reap. Upon arrival we will commence with our day of sightseeing.

The fortified city of Angkor Thom covers an area of 10 square km. Enclosed by a wall and wide moats; the city includes many of Angkor's most popular sights. We will enter by the monumental South Gate over a causeway lined on either side by statues of demons and gods, each carrying a giant naga. We then continue to the Terrace of the Elephants and the Terrace of the Leper Kings, former spaces for public ceremonies, both adorned with dramatic bas-reliefs. Today we will also visit the ruined Baphoun, Royal Enclosure, and Nakas before continuing to the mysterious Bayon Temple. In this temple, one of the most popular and compelling in Angkor, we explore the galleries of beautifully preserved bas reliefs and ascend narrow stairs to reach the central sanctuary, where we will find giant stone faces smiling enigmatically down at you from every angle.

Tonight we will watch the sun set over the Cambodian countryside from the upper terraces of an ancient Angkorian temple.

Overnight in Siem Reap.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

### **Day 14      *Siem Reap & Angkor Wat***

The crowning jewel of Khmer architecture, Angkor Wat is the national symbol and the highlight of any visit to Cambodia. The largest, best preserved, and most religiously significant of the Angkor temples, Angkor impresses visitors both by its sheer scale and beautifully proportioned layout, as well as the delicate artistry of its carvings. To approach the temple, we first cross the vast moat, continuing along a broad causeway lined with naga balustrades. As we enter the main building, we ascend through a series of galleries and courtyard before reaching the central sanctuary, which offers beautiful views back over the causeway and across the surrounding countryside. On the way, we stop to enjoy the intricate stone carving that adorns nearly every surface, with some 1,700 Apsaras, or celestial dancers, sculpted into the walls. Along the outer gallery walls run the longest continuous bas-relief in the world, which narrates stories from Hindu mythology, including the famous Churning of the Ocean of Milk. Angkor Wat is stunning at any time of the day.

Our sightseeing will also feature Ta Prohm: one of the most popular attractions of Angkor as much of the jungle has not been cleared and it looks very much as most of the Angkor monuments would have appeared when European explorers first stumbled across them.

Seemingly miniature in comparison to the other Angkor temples, Banteay Srei is considered to be the jewel of classical Khmer art. Built in pink sandstone, the walls are covered in exquisitely preserved carvings of unusual delicacy. Because of its small size, fairy-like atmosphere and extraordinary examples of Khmer sculpture, this temple is often a favorite with visitors.

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Overnight in Siem Reap.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

**Day 15**     ***Departure from Siem Reap***

Departure from Siem Reap.

HEN GAP LAI!

Meal Plan: Breakfast