TOUR CODE

SE2

ADVENTURESABROAD

THAILAND & LAOS

16 days

Updated 27/09/2013

Day 1 *Arrival in Bangkok*

Arrive in Bangkok, Thailand.

Overnight in Bangkok (airport area). Meal plan: Dinner, if required.

Day 2 *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 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. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 3 *Bangkok - Pitsanolok - Sukhothai - Chiang Mai*

Today we fly to Pitsanolok, the birthplace of King Naresuan the Great of Ayuthaya (reign: AD 1590-1605), and his brother Prince Ekathosarot. Phitsanulok has long been an important center for political and strategic reasons, and a major center of recruitment when Ayuthaya waged war with Burma. It was the capital of Thailand for 25 years during the 1448-1488 reign of Ayuthayaos King Boromtrailokanat.

On arrival, we are met by our bus and begin our sightseeing, including the monastery of Wat Phra Si Rattana Mahathat, commonly called by the inhabitants as "Wat Yai." This is the most important monastery of Pitsanulok, located at the foot of Naresuan Bridge on the city side of the river. The monastery was built in the reign of Phra Maha Thamma Racha I (Phraya Lithai) In AD 1357. It houses the Phra Buddha Chinnarat regarded as the most beautiful Buddha image in Thailand.

We continue to Sukhothai where we visit the Ramkhamhueng National Museum, an excellent introduction to the historic city, including much in the Sukhothai style. From here we proceed to Wat Mahatat, dominated by a 14th Century lotus-bud tower and encircled by a moat. Some of the best architectural ornamentation is found in the main tower. We also visit the remains of the Royal Palace.

We continue to Chiang Mai, arriving late afternoon.

Overnight in Chiang Mai. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 4 *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 marvelous 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.

Later we will visit the National Museum, home to a glorious collection of Buddhist images. We also visit Doi Suthep, which dominates the skyline to the west of Chiang Mai, characterized by the eagles-nest temple of Wat Phra That Doi Suthep. This is Northern Thailand's holiest shrine and one of Thailand's most important place of pilgrimage. The view on a clear day extends over a seemingly infinite plain, making Chiang Mai look surprisingly compact.

Overnight in Chiang Mai. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 5 *Chiang Mai - Mae Sa Valley - Chiang Mai*

We have a morning visit to the Mae Sa Elephant Rehabilitation Centre and an 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, elephants camps 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 ruination 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. As a result they are hunted and shot. The conservation centre was set up to redress the situation; we will see a demonstration whereby mahouts have the animals show their skills and learn about some of the many traditional roles the elephant has played in Thailand since the days of old Siam. We include an exciting one hour elephant ride.

Overnight in Chiang Mai. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 6 *Chiang Mai - Chiang Rai: Hill Tribe Village*

This morning we travel from Chiang Mai to Chiang Rai, founded in 1262 by King Mengrai. He decided that the site, in a basin between mountains, would be ideal for the new capital of the Lanna Kingdom. However, the capital was transferred to Chiang Mai only 34 years later and Chiang Rai declined in importance. Today it is 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 traveled 1,000 years ago. At some point during our visit to Chiang Rai, we wil pay a visit to the Hill Tribe Education Center 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. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 7 *Chiang Rai - Golden Triangle - Chiang Rai*

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. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 8 *Chiang Rai - Bangkok*

Today we fly from Chiang Rai to Bangkok.

Overnight in Bangkok. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 9 *Bangkok, Thailand - Luang Prabang, Laos*

Today we fly to Luang Prabang, Laos, a World Heritage Site.

In the 14th century, this city was established as the royal capital by Fa Ngoum, the first monarch of Lan Xang, the "Land of a Million Elephants." By this time, the city had already been the seat of local kingdoms for 600 years. According to legend, the site of the town was chosen by two resident hermits and was originally known as Xieng Thong --"Copper Tree City".

We have an orientation of this charming town, with its one main street lined with colonial era buildings housing shops and cafes. We have a chance to explore the town on foot and to climb to the top of Phu Si Hill. Looking directly downwards you can see that the former royal palace has a cruciform ground plan. We finish at Ban Phanom, a 300 year old weaving village is where shawls and sarongs are made from silk and cotton. The people in this area were originally from South China and were traditionally the King's weavers, soldiers and palace servants. The inhabitants make sarongs with dragon motifs, and shawls which are often dyed an indigo colour using a natural dye extract from a local plant. Some of the cloth woven in the village is embroidered with delicate silver and gold thread. Girls are taught from a very young age the skills which have been handed down from their forebears in Xishuangbanna District in China's Yunnan Province.

NOTE: The order of our sightseeing in Luang Prabang may vary depending on flight schedules that are subject to change.

Overnight in Luang Prabang. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 10 *Luang Prabang Area*

An early departure today takes to the Mekong River for a boat journey to visit the Pak Ou Caves. The boat is long and quite large, covered, with comfortable seat cushions, life jackets and a WC.

The Pak Ou Caves are two clefts in the side of a mountain stuffed with thousands of old Buddha images. The site has long been sacred for the Lao, even prior to Buddhism, when they worshipped spirits. The lower cave has over 4,000 images, ranging from 3 inches to 9 feet tall, stuck into nooks and crannies. The upper cave's Buddha images are placed far back into the cliff, so it's handy to have a flashlight. A real highlight of a trip to the caves is the breathtaking view of the mountains, villages, and fishermen during the 2-hour boat ride.

We return to Luang Prabang and visit the Royal Palace, a museum containing a collection of 15th-17th century Buddha statues including the significant Golden Buddha. The last member of the Lao royalty to live here was Sisavang Vong's son, Crown Prince Sisavang Vatthana. The private chapel is one of the most interesting wings of the palace. Here you will see the priceless gold Phra Bang Buddha in Abhayamudra (dispelling fear). It is made from 90% pure gold and is said to weigh 50 kg (110 lb).

We finish with a tour of the 16th-century Wat Xieng Thong with its richly decorated wooden interior. Wat Mai is another old temple of classic Luang Prabang design with gracefully curved roofs. We see many 400 year old wooden Buddha statues at Wat Wisunalat.

Overnight in Luang Prabang. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 11 *Luang Prabang - Xieng Khouang (Plain of Jars) - Phonsavan*

Today we travel by road to Xieng Khouang and the Plain of Jars.

Overnight in Phonsavan. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 12 *The Plain of Jars*

In the 18th and at the beginning of the 19th century, Xieng Khouang was the center of a kingdom of the Hmong (Meo). In 1832, it was conquered by the Vietnamese, annexing the entire region. The town of Xieng Khouang was totally destroyed during the Vietnam War. Even though it has been rebuilt in 1975, the name Xieng Khouang is now primarily used in reference to the province of the same name.

The highlight of our visit here is the "Plain of Jars." Scattered over the plain are hundreds of enormous limestone jars, each about 1 to 2.5 metres high, with a diameter of about 1 meter. There is still no explanation as to how the clay jars found their way onto the plain, nor what purpose they served. Archaeologists have come up with the wildest theories, among them a claim declaring them brewery cauldrons. More likely, the jars are enormous urns. Many jars were destroyed or damaged during the Vietnam War, when American planes bombed positions of the communist Pathet Lao.

Overnight in Phonsavan. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 13 *Phonsavan - Vang Vieng*

Today we travel by road to Vang Vieng, a small village nestled in a scenic bend in the Nam Song River and surrounded by breathtaking limestone scenery. This is rapidly becoming Laos's premier destination for eco-tourism. The outcrops have inspired many Lao legends and stories in Lao literature and are known as "Phou Suan Mon Nang Eua", meaning "Silk Tree Garden Mountains of the Princess". The area also contains an extensive network of caves some of which are outlets for underground streams.

The latter part of our drive is truly spectacular -- limestone cliffs and sheer drops. About 20 kms before Vang Vieng, we'll stop at a bridge with a lovely view of karsts. There's also an attractive immediately before the bridge.

Overnight in Vang Vieng. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 14 *Vang Vieng - Viangchan*

Today we travel by road to Viangchan (Vientiane), the capital of Laos.

Overnight in Viangchan. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 15 *Viangchan, Laos - Bangkok, Thailand*

Today we fly from Viangchan to Bangkok.

NOTE: Our flight to Bangkok usually takes place in the afternoon, though air schedules can change without notice. Time permitting in Viangchan we will visit the morning market and allow 30-45 minutes here for shopping and absorbing the local colour. We will then drive to Pha That Luang, the most important Stupa in the city/country, followed by a stop at Haw Pha Kaew, a temple now serving as a museum of religious artifacts.

Overnight in Bangkok. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 16 *Depart*

Departure from Bangkok.

BON VOYAGE!! Meal plan: Breakfast.