

## THE HEART OF LAOS

### A Journey Through Nature, Culture & History

9 days

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#### Day 1 Arrival in Luang Prabang

Arrival in Luang Prabang - Welcome to Laos!

Overnight in Luang Prabang.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

#### Day 2 Luang Prabang: Town Touring

Today we delve into the heart of Luang Prabang, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a captivating blend of old-world charm and modern-day Laos.

This city boasts a rich history that stretches back centuries. In the 14th century, Fa Ngoum, the first monarch of Lan Xang ("Land of a Million Elephants" - a charming and evocative nickname from times gone by, though sadly, latest figures indicate that Laos's population of wild elephants is in the range of 800-1,200), established Luang Prabang as the royal capital.

However, the city's history extends even further back. By this time, Luang Prabang had already been the seat of local kingdoms for 600 years. Legend has it that the site of the town was chosen by two resident hermits and was originally known as Xieng Thong - "Copper Tree City."

Today, we'll have an orientation of this charming town, with its one main street lined with colonial-era buildings now housing shops, cafes, and art galleries. We'll have the opportunity to explore the town on foot, soaking in the atmosphere and discovering hidden gems.

Later, we'll climb to the summit of Phu Si Hill, offering panoramic views of the city. From this vantage point, you can even make out the cruciform ground plan of the former royal palace below.

Overnight in Luang Prabang.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 3 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.

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### **Day 4 Luang Prabang - Train to Vientiane - Fly to Pakse**

This morning we embark on a journey through Laos on the sleek Train C97, a marvel of modern engineering connecting Luang Prabang to Vientiane (Viangchan)\* in just 2 hours. This high-speed train, part of the Laos-China Railway, offers a comfortable and scenic travel experience. The train's interior boasts spacious seating with charging sockets, ensuring a relaxing ride.

Departing Luang Prabang, we'll witness lush landscapes, traditional villages, and the stunning Mekong River. The journey includes a stop at Vang Vieng, known for its dramatic limestone formations and adventure activities. As the train glides toward Vientiane, we'll enjoy panoramic views of the countryside and the vibrant life along the riverbanks.

Arriving in Vientiane, we connect with our onward flight to Pakse, arriving in time for dinner.

\* Vientiane is the most commonly-used spelling for the capital in English, while Viangchan is the older spelling, often used in older texts or by those who prefer to use a more traditional or phonetically accurate spelling. For the sake of clarity/consistency, we'll adhere to the version more commonly known in the West.

Overnight in Pakse.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### **Day 5 Pakse Market - Vat Phou Temple - Don Khong**

Situated in southern Laos, near the Thai border, Pakse is the former capital of the Kingdom of Champasak. The highlight of this one-street town is the picturesque pre-Angkorian Wat Phou Temple, nestled on the west bank of the Mekong River. Built between the late 10th and early 11th centuries, the temple was designated as a World Heritage Site in 2001, inscribed for being an outstanding example of the integration of symbolic landscape of great spiritual significance to its natural surroundings. Notice the most impressive carvings, cut deep into the stone.

We'll also stop in at the bustling Pakse market. This vibrant market is a sensory feast, overflowing with the sights, sounds, and smells of Laotian life. We'll wander through the maze of stalls, overflowing with fresh produce, fragrant spices, local handicrafts, and the ever-present aroma of Lao coffee.

We continue our journey to Si Phan Don, which means 'Four Thousand Islands' in the Lao language, is a scenic stretch of about 50km along the Mekong River. Si Phan Don is characterized by numerous islands, half of which are submerged when the Mekong River is in flood.

Overnight Don Khong (Khong Island).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### **Day 6 Phan Don - Phapheng Waterfalls - Pakse**

Today we'll embark on a boat trip among the numerous islands of Si Phan Don. Our first stop will be Khone Island, where we'll explore the remnants of the French colonial era. We'll visit an old pier, a former railway station, a historical hospital building, and the maritime office, offering a glimpse into the island's past.

Next, we'll visit Li Phi Waterfall, locally known as Taat Somhamit, and nicknamed the "Corridor of the Devil." This powerful waterfall offers a dramatic display of nature's force.

We'll then cruise closer to the Cambodian border, keeping a watchful eye out for the critically endangered Irrawaddy Dolphins. These shy creatures are not always easy to spot, but the possibility of encountering these magnificent animals adds an element of excitement to our journey.

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In the afternoon, we'll disembark the boat and travel by road to visit the Konephapheng Waterfall, the widest waterfall in all of Southeast Asia.

After our visit, we'll make our way back to Pakse, concluding our day with a memorable journey through the captivating Si Phan Don archipelago.

Overnight in Pakse.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### **Day 7 Pakse: Bolaven Plateau - Fly to Vientiane**

Our day begins with a picturesque drive from Pakse to the Bolaven Plateau, a region renowned for its stunning natural beauty and rich cultural heritage. As we wind our way through the rolling countryside, we'll pass by rice paddies, banana plantations, and quaint villages, offering a glimpse into traditional rural life in Laos.

Once we arrive at the Bolaven Plateau, we'll have the chance to explore the region's many attractions. One of the highlights of the day will be a visit to the majestic Tad Fane Waterfall, one of the tallest waterfalls in Laos. We'll take a short hike through the lush forest to reach the waterfall.

In addition to the waterfall, we'll also have the chance to explore the plateau's many other hidden gems, including remote villages and hidden waterfalls. We'll take a leisurely walk through the forest, immersing ourselves in the sights and sounds of the natural world, and learning about the unique flora and fauna of the region.

For coffee lovers, we'll also visit a local coffee plantation, where we'll learn about the process of coffee production, from harvesting to roasting. We'll have the chance to sample some of the region's famous coffee, and learn about the importance of coffee production to the local economy.

As the day draws to a close, we'll return to Pakse and board a short flight back to Vientiane.

Overnight in Vientiane.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### **Day 8 Vientiane Touring**

Today's sightseeing takes us to Pha That Luang, a gold-covered large Buddhist stupa in the centre of the city. Since its initial establishment, suggested to be in the 3rd century, the stupa has undergone several reconstructions as recently as the 1930s due to foreign invasions of the area. It is generally regarded as the most important national monument in Laos and a national symbol. The architecture of the building includes many references to Lao culture and identity, and so has become a symbol of Lao nationalism.

We also stop at Haw Pha Kaew, a temple now serving as a museum of religious artifacts. It was a royal family temple for worshipping the Jade Buddha and holding religious ceremonies. The magnificent temple is three storeys high with gorgeous palace hall and huge Buddha altar. However, in 1779 A.D, the King of Siam with his army invaded the city and looted the Jade Buddha as well. Many precious collections can be seen there, such as the gold throne, the wood carving of high quality and statues of Buddha of various sizes and shapes.

We also travel to Buddha Park (aka Xieng Khuan), a famous sculpture park with more than 200 religious statues including a huge 40-metre high reclining Buddha image. It was built in 1958 by Luang Pu Bunleua Sulilat, a monk who studied both Buddhism and Hinduism. This explains why his park is full not only of Buddha images but also of Hindu gods as well as demons and animals from both beliefs.

This evening you may wish to take a stroll along the river front and take in the giant sprawling market, with its instantly recognizable red-roofed stalls and crowds of people who come to snap up a bargain or just soak up the laidback Mekong atmosphere.

PLEASE NOTE that some or all of today's sightseeing and your departure tomorrow may be managed and guided by one of our local associates. This is due to the fact that your Tour Leader may be leaving early today with travellers who have chosen to extend their tour to include Vietnam.

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Overnight in Vientiane.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

**Day 9 Departure**

Departure from Vientiane.

BON VOYAGE!!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast