

# Land of a Million Elephants

## Thailand, Laos and Cambodia



### DAY 1: Arrive Chiang Mai

On arrival we will be met by our representative and transferred to your hotel. Tonight we will join our fellow travellers and prepare for our journey towards the Mekong River.

**Accommodation: DusitD2 Chiang Mai Hotel**

### DAY 2: Chiang Mai

Chiang Mai was founded in 1296 as the capital city of the Lanna kingdom and flourished for two hundred years before falling under the rule of the Burmese for another 200 years. During that time Chiang Mai became the centre of Buddhism in northern Thailand and there are many fine pagodas and Wats to visit. We begin our day with a visit the old city wall and the well-preserved Tha Pae Gate. We explore the old city including Wat Chiang Man, the oldest temple within the city walls, and continue to visit Wat Jet Yod with its seven-spire stupa believed to be built in the mid-15th century. After a local lunch we drive to Wat Soi Thep, a magnificent pagoda that overlooks the valley of Chiang Mai.

**Accommodation: Dusit D2 Chiang Mai Hotel**

### DAY 3: Chiang Mai to Chiang Rai

We head further north towards the border with Laos and our destination of Chiang Rai. Northern Thailand is a mountainous landscape, rice fields on the low lands and contour farming across the hillsides. We continue for Chiang Rai stopping for lunch at a local restaurant. Chiang Rai is deep in the 'Golden Triangle' with Myanmar to the west, China to the north and Laos to the east. It is a key trading town where manufactured goods, agricultural products, cigarettes and clothing pour across the borders to be distributed through Thailand and beyond. After checking into our hotel we will take a wander around the town and find some interesting Chiang Rai food!

**Accommodation: The Wiang Inn Hotel**

### DAY 4: Chiang Rai to Pak Beng by long boat

We leave our hotel by 7am for the 2 hour drive to Chiang Kong, set on the Thai side of the Mekong River. The countryside changes as we head towards river valleys almost in the foothills of the great Himalayan range. The Mekong rises in Tibet and travels for 4,600 kilometres until it divides into nine tributaries in the Vietnamese delta and spills into the South China Sea. Its course takes it through seven south-east Asian countries, the world's eleventh longest river and in terms of water discharge it ranks tenth in the world. We cross to the Lao side and the small town of Ban Houey Say where our local guide will meet us. Here we must clear customs and immigration before boarding our slow boat for our journey south towards Pak Beng. We will pass small villages of bamboo huts, sometimes no more than seven or eight rough looking dwellings, small children playing by the water's edge, fishing, swimming or just sitting. We will stop and visit some local villages and lunch is included today on board.



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Our stop for the evening is the rustic village of Pak Beng, located on a bend of the Mekong in the middle of nowhere. This is almost civilisation, set amongst a green hillside; Pak Beng is the 'commercial centre' of the region, just a handful of wooden huts and modest guest houses. We will disembark and stroll up the hill to our guest house for the night. **Accommodation: Le Grand Pak Beng Resort**

### DAY 5: Luang Prabang by Long Boat

By 8am, we set off again in our long boat down the Mekong to Luang Prabang. The landscape is shining, rich hillsides of green jungle, interspersed with cleared land for agriculture. It is amazing how the farmers can grow anything here on such steep hillsides; it seems all would just wash away with the first heavy downpour. The banks are speckled with thatched huts – small villages with populations of just 50 or perhaps up to 400, each village varying in its state of civilisation even though only small distances separate them. They like to keep to themselves, almost completely isolated but seemingly prosperous in their subsistence. We will stop at a Hmong village once again to stretch our legs, go for a walk and have a chat with the locals. We will continue down the river to reach the Tam Ting caves, and in particular the Pak Ou cave, said to be the home of the spirit of the Mekong and also home to hundreds of Buddha images. The caves are a spectacular sight; set against the right bank of the river with soaring limestone cliffs to the other side. Here the river is broad; further in the distance great mountain peaks rise, jagged and serene. The last stage of our river journey is in broad open water; here the river has expanded to twice its width. Gone are the swirling whirlpools and the rapids that race backwards. We near our destination, the former capital of Laos, Luang Prabang; our arrival is dramatic as the stupa at the summit of Mt Phousi comes into view, a sentinel standing over the city watching approaches from all directions. On arrival we will be transferred to our hotel. **Accommodation: Victoria Xienthong Palace Hotel**

### DAY 6: Luang Prabang

You can hear the drums and gongs of Luang Prabang starting their rhythm around 5am every morning. The city is the spiritual home of Laos, a country predominantly Buddhist, and in this town there are many wats, monasteries and temples with hundreds of monks. Each morning as the sun rises the monks take the first of their two daily meals by calling for alms, their bowls tucked under their arms. They Indian file past the town's inhabitants accepting sticky rice, vegetables, fruit and meat, even the odd pack of cigarettes! We will take a walking tour of the old city and visit some wats and monasteries just to get everyone orientated. There is fantastic shopping, endless handicrafts, the local Hmong market and plenty of cafes and restaurants. **Accommodation: Victoria Xienthong Palace Hotel**



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### DAY 7: In Luang Prabang

Laos is an 80 per cent agrarian country with an agriculture sector oriented towards the production of rice, or more commonly, sticky rice. This morning, we will have an opportunity to experience Living Land Farm, an organic farm and a community enterprise run for the benefit of the Lao people. We will learn and practice steps in rice production, including planting, transplanting and how water buffalos assist in the cultivation process. This is a pleasant and fun experience that offers an insight into the daily lifestyle of a local community. The excursion takes approximately three hours. In the afternoon there will be free time. **Accommodation: Victoria Xienthong Palace Hotel**

### DAY 8: Luang Prabang to Vang Vieng by rail

The recently completed rail service from Luang Prabang to Vang Vieng and onto Vientiane has revolutionised transport and tourism in Laos. Today we have an opportunity to travel by train to the river town of Vang Vieng, a spectacular journey through the Lao countryside. Departure times and will be confirmed the day before travel – the journey duration is two hours. On arrival in Vang Vieng we will transfer to our hotel. **Accommodation: Riverside Boutique Resort**

### DAY 9: In Vang Vieng

This morning, we visit Tham Pu Kham Cave and its popular blue lagoon – the perfect place for a refreshing dip or a casual walk. We will have lunch at a local restaurant and relax in the recreational atmosphere of the Tham Phu Kham area before our last visit of the day; Tham Chang Cave. During the Indochina War this cavern was used as a place of sanctuary for villagers escaping bombing raids. The remainder of the day is at leisure. **Accommodation: Riverside boutique Resort**

### DAY 10: Drive to Vientiane

We depart Vang Vieng to Vientiane by the express way which takes approximately one hour. On arrival we will visit Wat Sisaket, famous for its cloister wall housing thousands of tiny Buddha images. We continue on foot to the nearby Ho Phra Keo, one of Laos' most highly venerated temples. Then proceed to Patouxay (Vientiane's Arc De Triomphe), a war monument in the centre of town built between 1957 and 1968. There will be some free time this afternoon. **Accommodation: Slana Boutique Hotel**

### DAY 11: Vientiane to Pakse

This morning we will head back to Vientiane airport for the short flight to Pakse in the south of Laos. Once again we are by the Mekong River and close to the Khon falls where the river tumbles across a ten kilometre wide cataract. We continue to the small town of Champasak and visit the splendid Khmer temple called Wat Phou. Built in the pre-Angkorian period around the 10th century this majestic structure folds into a sandstone



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mountain range ascending slowly through a series of balustrades and small halls. There is a museum at its base giving us an overview of the temples history before we continue for lunch then by local boat to Dong Daeng island and our accommodation for the evening. **Accommodation: La Folie Lodge**

### DAY 12: Dong Daeng Island

Some free time for us today to relax by the Mekong . There is an optional cooking lesson or escorted bicycle ride for those who are interested. **Accommodation: La Folie Lodge**

### DAY 13: Four Thousand Islands and the French Railway

We check out from our riverside hotel and drive a short distance south to the village of Nakasang where we board our local boat for an excursion to Don Det and Don Khon Islands. We are greeted by stunning river landscapes as we venture amongst islands that form the first cataract of the Mekong River. It was here in 1867 that the French exploration of the river came to a standstill. Unable to breach the falls and find a way through the surging torrent upstream to calmer waters they dismantled their boats and carried them across the falls. Later in 1894 as the French consolidated their colonial hold over Indochina they conceived of an ambitious project to build a railway for 14 kilometres across these islands to transfer their boats to the upper river. The railway flourished until the late 1930s when roads became an easier way to transfer goods and people. Vestiges of the railway remain for us to visit today. We return by local boat and a night on Khong Island. **Accommodation: Pon Arena Hotel**

### DAY 14: The Khon Falls and across the Border

A fascinating day ahead as we head for the border between Laos and Cambodia and our destination the small town of Sa Em. Before we leave Laos we will visit the spectacular Khon Phapheng Falls in an area called Si Phan Don which literally translates to 'Four thousand islands'. At this point the Mekong River broadens and during the rainy season a series of cascades over ten kilometres wide turn the river into a raging torrent .We can get close to the falls where spectacular views await. Farewell to Laos as we continue to the border then drive for two hours by our bus into the remote north west of Cambodia and our destination of Preah Vihear (Sa Em village). **Accommodation: Preah Vihear Boutique Hotel**

### DAY 15: Preah Vihear

Many of us are familiar with the recent history of Cambodia , its struggles with war and the violence of the Pol Pot period. In many ways the country is still recovering from an unprecedented period of destruction to its society and infrastructure. One thousand two hundred years earlier a civilisation called the Khmer ruled in Cambodia and also over what is now Thailand and Laos. In an incredible period lasting almost



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500 years the Khmer Kings constructed thousands of temples to honour their Hindu gods. Predominately from sandstone and on a laterite base the balustrades, hall ways and worshipping halls are beautifully decorated with intricate carving that still dazzles and bewilders so many years later. The temple of Preah Vihear was unreachable during the Pol Pot period and then even after peace had finally come Preah Vihear became the centre of a border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia that ended in a military standoff which was eventually settled in favour of Cambodia. Perched on top of a mountain with commanding views Preah Vihear is a fine example of early Khmer architecture and rarely visited by foreign travellers. **Accommodation: Preah Vihear Boutique Hotel**

### DAY 16: The Khmer Way

We travel further south today with visits to the temple complex of Koh Ker which is situated on what was known as the old Khmer way. This road linked Siem Reap with Preah Vihear and onto Wat Phou in Laos where the Khmer Empire extended its reach. Whilst the temples were to their religious beliefs they also acted as frontier outposts to garrison soldiers and prepare attacks on their enemies. This temple is pyramid shaped and was also used by Pol Pot during the 1980's as a stronghold. We continue for lunch then onto Siem Reap. **Accommodation: Shinta Mani Hotel**

### DAY 17: Angkor Wat and Siem Reap

There are few places in the world where the forces of culture, intelligence and vision come together so splendidly; the region of Angkor on the north-western edge of the Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia is one of those special places. The two distinct seasons mean that for five months of the year torrential rains soak the sandstone temples promoting jungle growth all around the temple sites. Indeed when the French archaeologist, Mr Henri Mouhot, re-discovered the Angkor area in 1860 he must have been amazed to see massive sculptures, enormous city walls covered with jungle vines and enormous trees with their roots sometimes spilling over the temple rooves into the hallways and entrances like a giant octopus. Since the French discovery, many of the sites have been cleared and many are under restoration work with assistance from Japanese and French organisations. Today we will visit the south gate of Angkor Thom, Bayon, Royal Enclosure, Phimeanakas, the Terrace of the Leper King and Angkor Wat. Our farewell dinner is included tonight. **Accommodation: Shinta Mani Hotel**

### DAY 18: Departure

There will be some free time this morning before transferring to Siem Reap International Airport for your onward flight.



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