

Thailand, Laos & Vietnam – ‘Unexplored – the Far North’

All year round: 23D/22N ex London, 22D/21N Chiang Mai to Hanoi.

A 3 week Thailand, Laos and Vietnam tour. Little more than one hundred years ago much of these northern reaches of Southeast Asia were still marked on maps as simply ‘unexplored’! This northern Indochina tour will offer you the chance to journey overland through some of these remote, off-the-beaten-track, but truly spectacular regions; from Thailand’s infamous Golden Triangle, across the dramatic mountains and jungles of Northern Lao and into the lush valleys and high peaks of Northwest Vietnam, inhabited by myriad traditional hill-tribe peoples. Travel from Chiang Mai to UNESCO World Heritage Luang Prabang and the mysterious Plain of Jars, the awesome limestone scenery and famous Vieng Xai Caves of Sam Neua Province, the picturesque old French Hill station of Sapa and on by train to our final destination, Hanoi.



Day 1 Depart London Heathrow Airport.

Day 2 Morning arrival in Bangkok and transfer to Chiang Mai, the cultural and historical capital of Northern Thailand. Afternoon free to relax or explore this charming, friendly city and an evening tour of the famous night-bazaar.*

*(For those wishing to arrive a day or two early in Chiang Mai various options include spa treatments or a Thai cookery class?)

Day 3 Leisurely morning to recover from your jet-lag by the pool or wander around one of the local markets before an afternoon drive through the mountains to neighbouring Chiang Rai Town; main commercial centre for the infamous ‘Golden Triangle’ region – so called because of it’s former notoriety for warlords and opium cultivation.

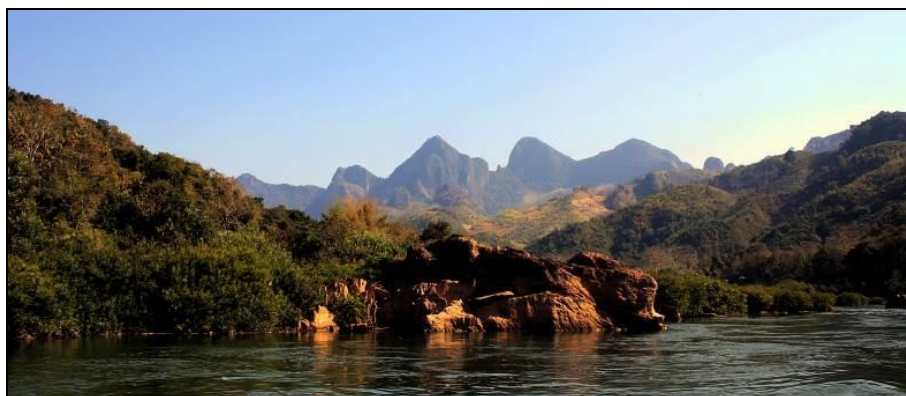
Day 4 Day tour of some of the main sites of this far northern region: beginning at the magnificent, mountain-top, botanical gardens at [Mae Fah Luang](#) and on to Sob Ruak where Burma, Laos and Thailand meet, for a visit to the unusual Opium Museum, before following the Mekong River via the historic, ruined city of Chiang Saen to our day’s destination, the scenic riverside town of Chiang Khong.



Day 5 Time to cross the Mekong into Laos itself where we’ll begin with a visit to the ruined French Foreign Legion outpost, Fort Carnot, located on a hilltop in Huay Xai Town and with wonderful views across the Mekong. From here we’ll continue upcountry with a drive through scenic mountains to the remote town of Luang Nam Tha near the Chinese border. Stop-offs on the way to visit villages of the Lanten and Khmu ethnic minorities as well as the spectacular, and only recently discovered, Kao Rao limestone cave system. Accommodation at a beautifully situated [eco lodge](#) on the banks of the Tha River.

Day 6 Day trip into the surrounding Nam Ha National Protected Area to hike through some of the spectacular scenery and visit some of the local hill-tribe villages to discover the traditional way of life of the area's ethnic Akha people. Guides will show you some of the various forest plants used by the hill-tribe peoples as medicine or food as well as cooking up a traditional style Akha 'jungle lunch'!

Day 7 Drive across the mountains of Oudom Xai Province to the picturesque village of Nong Khiaw on the banks of the Ou River. Stop-offs to visit a Hmong village and hill-tribe market on the way and overnight in traditional Lao style wooden chalets set high on the banks overlooking the river.



Day 8 Boat trip up the scenic Nam Ou; the section north of Nong Khiaw is perhaps the most spectacular stretch of the river winding through dramatic limestone escarpments and we'll also stop off at a Khmu/Hmong village inaccessible by road. Return to Nong Khiaw in the afternoon with some time to relax in this superb mountain setting; discover the area on foot or bicycle or just sit back on your balcony and admire the mountains and river below.

Day 9 Morning drive south, following the Ou River Valley, to the famous cave temples near Pak Ou. Lunch in a riverside café and village visit with an afternoon arrival in the ancient Lao capital of Luang Prabang. Sunset at the nearby Phu Si hill temple.



Day 10 Nestled in the mountains, long isolated from the outside world, we'll discover UNESCO World Heritage Site, Luang Prabang's fabulous temples, French colonial architecture and taste Lao delicacies (and the famous Lao beer!) in riverside cafes. Morning is at leisure to allow you to wander the quiet, picturesque lanes or check out the hill-tribe handicraft market and an afternoon walking tour of the town including the National Museum & former king's palace, Wat Xiengthong and the Fine Arts School to see how traditional Lao arts and handicrafts are being preserved.

Day 11 Day trip through the surrounding hills to visit the spectacular Kuang Si Waterfalls and to discover the fascinating, traditional village life of some of the local peoples.

Day 12 Early departure for a drive along scenic mountain roads to Phonsavan Town in Xieng Khouang province – location of the famous and mysterious 'Plain of Jars'. Stops on the way include Khmu and Hmong villages as well as a reminder that this region played a major part during the Vietnam War as we visit a hidden cave temple that served as an army hospital during the combat. Late afternoon arrival in Phonsavan and atmospheric dusk visit to one of the famous jar sites.

Day 13 Morning visit to the [Mines Action Group](#) or MAG office to learn about the work they do in clearing land mines and unexploded ordnance in the area. We then travel out to the picturesque Jar Site 2, and begin our 1 hour trek along the ridge to the impressive Jar Site 3, consisting of over around 150 jars located on top of a hill and offering great views over the surrounding countryside. Lunch in Phonsavan before an afternoon visit to the atmospheric ruins of the ancient city of Xieng Khouang, now known as Mouang Khoun.



Day 14 Departure to the remote town of Sam Neua in the far northeast of Laos. Our drive will be broken up with visits to Hmong and Khmu settlements, a Tai Phong weaving village, as well as photo stops for the breathtaking scenery. We'll also visit the unusual [Hintang menhirs](#), (standing stones), about which practically nothing is known. Overnight in the small town of Sam Neua.

Day 15 We begin the day with a short tour around Sam Neua town, including a walk along the river to visit the local wet market, before setting off on the short 45 minutes drive to Vieng Xai Caves. This is where the Pathet Lao leaders lived during the 'Secret War'. The fascinating tour includes a visit to the 'Kaysone Phomvihane Cave', (the leader of the Lao communist movement), and the 'Prince Soupanouvong, (the 'Red Prince') Cave'. We'll finish with the 'Artillery Cave' offering stunning views over the surrounding countryside. In the afternoon an easy walk brings us to some of the lesser visited cave sites plus an opportunity to view more of the area's beautiful limestone karst scenery.

Day 16 Early morning departure through more spectacular countryside and past traditional Black Tai villages to the nearby border crossing at Nam Meo from where we'll head into the stunning scenery of Vietnam's Pu Luong National Park. A hike through the forest and overnight as guests of a White Tai village..



Day 17 On to Mai Chau and across the Da River to Nghia Lo district. This is a rugged mountainous and sparsely inhabited region of northern Vietnam where most of the local people you will see are from either the various Tai or Hmong minorities. Overnight in the small town of Nghia Lo.

Day 18 We'll continue a leisurely drive northwards to Tu Le passing through more glorious mountain scenery and a region settled predominantly by the Dzao ethnic group. We'll also have the chance to visit the rice terraces at Mu Cang Chai - reputed to be the country's most spectacular. Overnight in the small town of Tan Uyen.

Day 19 Our next leg takes us over the high mountain ranges along the Chinese border to our destination of [Sapa](#). This picturesque old French hill-station overlooking a spectacular valley, lies in the shadow of the mist shrouded Fansipan Mountain – at over 9,500 ft the highest summit in mainland Southeast Asia.

Day 20 Day hike through the area's incredible scenery – known to the French as the Tonkin Alps – terraced rice paddies, bamboo forest, towering peaks and crystal clear streams.

Day 21 Morning at leisure to explore the town, roam the bustling hill-tribe market or simply sit back on the hotel balcony and admire the view. Late afternoon transfer to nearby Lao Cai town for the night sleeper train to Hanoi.



Day 22 Arrival in Hanoi and check-in to a downtown hotel. Afternoon tour of the city: including Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum, the 11th century University, Hoan Kiem Lake and a walking tour of the narrow streets of Hanoi's bustling old commercial quarter. In the evening catch a performance of the highly original water-puppets.

Day 23 Morning departure for London, via Bangkok and evening arrival.*

*(Note a 2 day/1 night extension to explore the incredible scenery of World Heritage [Halong Bay](#) is available should you so wish.)

Note: this tour is offered with or without return flights from London. Persons not wishing to take up the flight option will join the tour on day 2 in Chiang Mai and depart in Hanoi on day 23.

Highlights: Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Golden Triangle, Luang Nam Tha, jungle trek, hill-tribe villages, Nong Khiaw, boat trip on Ou River, temples and colonial architecture of World Heritage Luang Prabang, Sapa hill-station, Hanoi, spectacular mountain scenery, rarely visited destinations, local food.

Accommodation: hotel, eco-lodge, homestay/guesthouse in a White Tai village, night sleeper train

Transport: minibus, boat, tuk-tuk, train

Group size: 2 to 12 persons

Meals: full board except lunch on days 2, 10 & 21 and dinner on days 8, 11 & 20

Difficulty: easy to moderate, maximum hiking – 5-6 hrs on day 6 and 4-5 on day 20. (All hikes can be tailored to suit any fitness level.)

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