

VIETNAM AND LAOS

DETAILED ITINERARY

HO CHI MINH TRAIL TO VIENTIANE LAOS

Jan 23/24

Halong Bay.



On our journey to Vietnam and Laos, we experience the very best of two beautiful countries teeming with rice paddies, sandy coastlines, and lush green mountains of lush tropical vegetation.

We begin in Ho Chi Minh (Saigon). Explore the famous Cu Chi Tunnel complex and the Mekong Delta, where we enjoy a riverboat trip on the Tein River. We head over to Hue via the spectacular Hai Van Pass and enjoy a cruise down the Perfume River. Traveling to Hoi An, we explore this restored open-air museum and UNESCO World Heritage Site. In Halong Bay, enjoy a 1 night cruise aboard our comfortable barge, navigating the turquoise waters amid spectacular cliff-faced islands. Enjoy the sites of Hanoi, amidst shaded streets, French colonial architecture and the surrounding lakes of the downtown core. Mai Chau is known for its stunning scenery of palms, green mountains, rice fields and picturesque stilt

FACTS & HIGHLIGHTS

- 21 land days • Maximum 16 travelers • Start in Ho Chi Minh, finish in Vientiane • All meals included • Includes 3 internal flights • Explore Cu Chi Tunnel complex • Open air museum of Hoi An and Hue • Enjoy a traditional Batik workshop with a H'mong family • 1 overnight on a boat in Halong Bay • Mai Chau traditional village • Walk with the elephants at Manda Lao Elephant Conservation Center • Cook local dishes

DEPARTURE DATES & PRICE

Feb 06 - Feb 26, 2025 - **\$6595 USD**

Activity Level: 2

Comfort Level: Some long drives and travel on traditional boats.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Comfortable hotels/lodges with private bathrooms. Single occupancy cannot be guaranteed for 1 night on the boat in Halong Bay

ELDERTREKS



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EXOTIC ADVENTURES
FOR TRAVELERS 50 PLUS

houses and is home to the White Thai people. The culture and traditions of Laos are the least changed among Southeast Asian countries and here you will find ancient temples, exquisite scenery, an eventful history and exotic cuisine, all within the warm embrace of a welcoming people.

Near Luang Prabang, we cook for, and spend time with, local monks who show us their traditional and well preserved way of life. We learn about and walk with the elephants at the Manda Lao Conservation Center. A cruise down the Mekong brings to Pak Ou Cave (Buddha Cave), noted for their miniature Buddha sculptures.

This 21 day journey gives us plenty of opportunities to explore the traditional cultures of Vietnam and Laos - from a traditional Batik workshop, a morning spent with a monk, opportunities to sample street food and the chance to roll up our sleeves and cook a variety of local dishes.

DAY 1 HO CHI MINH CITY ARRIVAL

Arrival in Ho Chi Minh followed by a transfer to our centrally located hotel. The remainder of the day is free to explore Ho Chi Minh on your own or just relax after your long flight. Saigon, or Ho Chi Minh City, is the largest city in Vietnam. It is the bustling economic capital and cultural trendsetter of the country, yet holds the timeless traditions of an ancient culture. Enjoy welcome dinner at local restaurant.

Overnight in Ho Chi Minh.



Mekong Delta.





DAY 2 BOAT CRUISE TO THE CU CHI TUNNELS

We have an early morning pick up for our boat transfer to the Saigon River. We leave the bustling city behind as the riverside offers a wilder natural scene made of lush green foliage and mangroves. We disembark around 9:00 am and transfer to the Cu Chi site. We will have some time to explore this incredible maze of underground tunnels and learn more about how life was lived during war time. After a local lunch, we return to Saigon by boat with an expected arrival planned in the early afternoon. We will have the afternoon at leisure and later we will enjoy dinner in a local restaurant.

Overnight in Ho Chi Minh.

DAY 3 LESS TRAVELED PATHS OF THE MEKONG RIVER

Today we drive to a less traveled region of the delta, close to the mouth of the mighty river. We hop on our private boat and start the exploration. Our first

visit will be to a local factory where many kilns make activated charcoal from coconut hard-shells. Our next stop is Tam Hiep Island, where we walk the small village paths through huge orchards of longans (tropical Asian fruits) to visit a local family and sample various fruits and honey tea. Our quaint row boat will take us deeper into the countryside on smaller canals to enjoy the peaceful time. We travel by tuk tuk to a special farm where they plant Lá Sâm (Tiliacora Triandra), and where we will pick out some leaves for making and tasting a special herbal jelly. We will enjoy lunch with some special dishes at a homestay. After lunch, we can relax on the hammocks before returning to our boat where we will disembark and transfer to our hotel. We will enjoy dinner tonight at a local restaurant.

Overnight in Ho Chi Minh.

DAY 4 HO CHI MINH - FLIGHT TO DA NANG-HOI AN

Today we visit the Reunification Palace, the former residence of the President of South Vietnam, we will see the “War Room” from where the South Vietnamese forces were controlled, and where the North Vietnamese army finally took control in the “Fall of Saigon” on April 30, 1975. Our next visit is the War Remnants Museum, which was established in September 1975. It was previously known as the “Museum of American War Crimes” and contains countless artefacts and photographs documenting said crimes - the killing of civilians, spreading of chemicals, torturing of prisoners, and the effects of the war on the north. Planes, tanks, bombs, and helicopters are on display, and outside the museum are some rooms displaying cultural products of Vietnam. We then head to Notre Dame Cathedral, which was built between 1877 and 1883 with most materials having been imported from France. Neo-Romanesque in form, it is a major center of Catholicism in modern Vietnam, and one of the city’s major landmarks. (The cathedral is currently under renovation and our visit may be limited to the outside only. ElderTreks continues to monitor the situation.)

Later we are transferred to the airport for our flight



to Da Nang. Upon arrival in Da Nang, we will drive approximately 30 minutes to our hotel in Hoi An Ancient Town, an exceptionally well preserved example of a Southeast Asian trading port dating from the 15th to the 19th centuries.

Overnight in Hoi An.

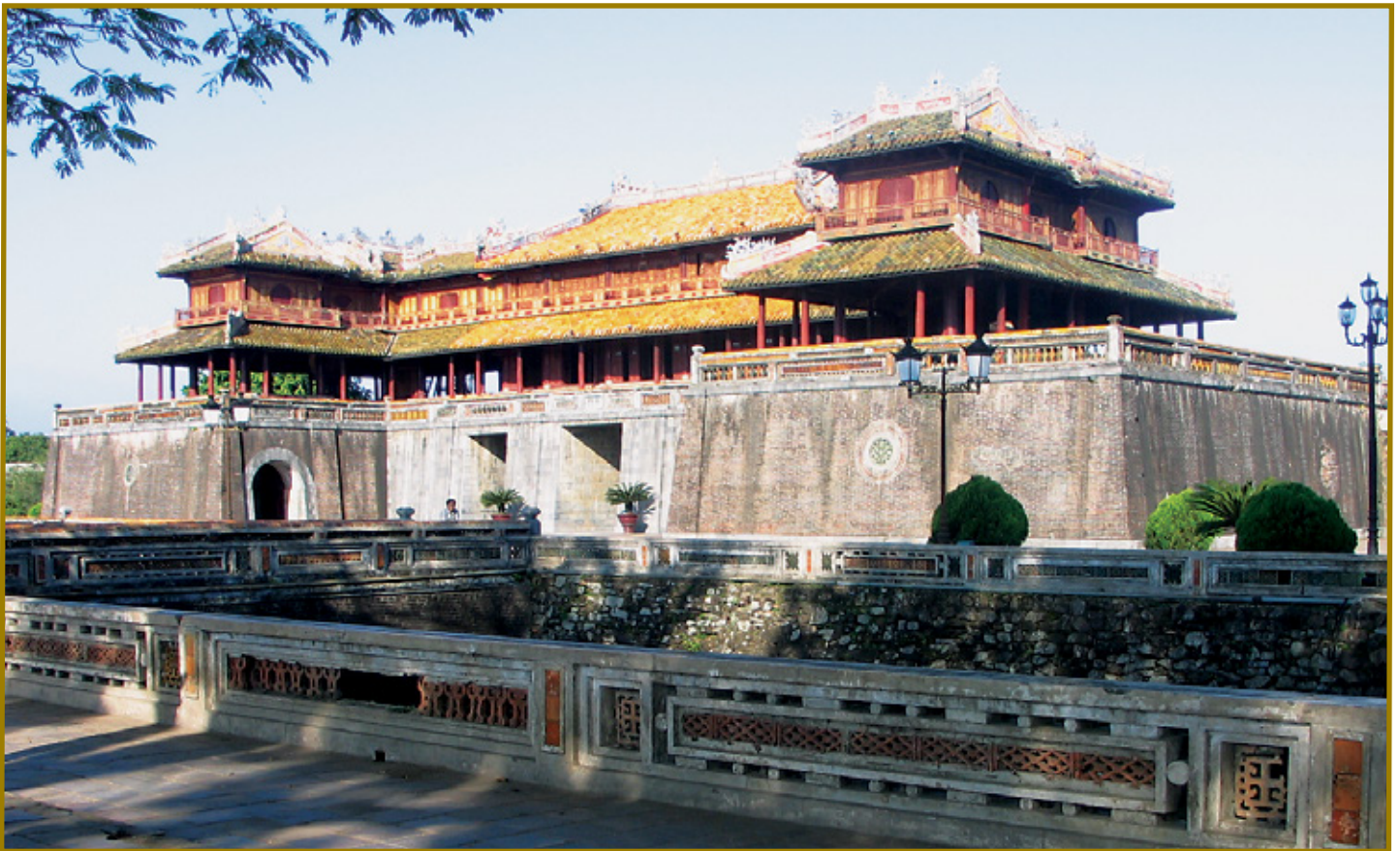
DAY 5 HOI AN FARMING, COOKING AND CRUISING FULL DAY

Today we explore Cam Thanh rural life. We’ll pass through picturesque villages where life moves at a slower pace, surrounded by rice paddies, local orchards and seeing the locals at work in the fields. Arrive at an organic farm, where we are welcomed by local farmers who happily share their story about this community-based project. Following an interesting conversation, we will be invited to join in their daily works, such as applying organic manure, making organic pesticides to control and prevent pests, and cultivating the soil for planting and watering. On completion of the gardening, we will return to the farmers’ house and use the products harvested from the organic vegetable garden to cook a Vietnamese lunch. Enjoy lunch with the dishes we’ve cooked at a garden-setting table (weather permitting).

In the afternoon, we will visit a bamboo studio before transferring to the village pier where a traditional boat will be waiting. The boat takes us to Thuan Tinh island where we change to ‘basket boats’ – as the local use, which will offer us the opportunity to have a closer look at the mangrove forest ecosystem and the daily work of the village fisherman. We return to the boat and cruise along Thu Bon River back to the town center and enjoy the view of ancient architecture from water level before transferring back to our hotel.

Overnight in Hoi An.

Hue



DAY 6 MY SON - WALK IN HOI AN TOWN

Today we visit My Son Holy Land of the Cham, one of the most important examples of Hindu influence in Southeast Asia. Although largely in a state of ruin today, My Son is often compared with other historical temple complexes in Southeast Asia, such as Angkor Wat of Cambodia or Ayutthaya of Thailand. We'll be given a brief introduction to Cham history and culture, and its Hindu influence, and then we will visit the remains of the carefully-crafted red brick temples replete with beautiful monuments and epitaphs.

There will be time this afternoon to walk the ancient streets of Hoi An; lined with Chinese traders' homes and wooden houses reincarnated as restaurants, cafés, and outlets for local artists, craftsmen and tailors. Hoi An's unique architecture is well displayed in what is arguably Vietnam's most charming town. Explore the beautiful 16th century Japanese Bridge. A symbol of Hoi An and a testament to its fascinating history, the Japanese Bridge was constructed around the early 17th century, though the exact date is unknown. The bridge, also known as the Pagoda Bridge (Chua Cau), was built by Japanese craftsmen who were part of a larger community of foreign merchants who were once active in Hoi An.

Overnight in Hoi An.

DAY 7 TO HUE VIA MY KHÊ BEACH AND PERFUME RIVER

Today we drive to Da Nang for a short stop at My Khê Beach. We continue our drive to Hue via the spectacular Hai Van Pass. In Hue, we take a boat ride on the Perfume River to the Thien Mu Pagoda then enjoy a cyclo ride, stopping to visit an ancient garden house.

Overnight in Hue.

DAY 8 HUE HERITAGE AND PEOPLE

Hue was Vietnam's last feudal capital and today we will get an insider's point of view into the highlights of this nostalgic city. Our first stop is a visit to Tu Duc Tomb, which is located near the quiet Thuy Bieu Village, close to city center. The sprawling compound is centered on the lake and several waterways, which includes numerous memorials connected by attractive walkways. Next, we'll visit a local garden house where our host will welcome you with hand-made ginger jam and tea. We veer off the main roads and walk around the village to explore the daily local life in the peaceful countryside, before enjoying some traditional dishes of Hue.

After the delicious home hosted lunch, we will visit the Imperial Citadel, the best-preserved remnant of the vast citadel and royal quarters that once existed on the site. Here we can see the ravages of time and war on what was the carefully designed capital of the Nguyen Dynasty. Built in the early 19th century by armies of conscripted laborers under Emperor Gia Long, the citadel was surrounded by a 10-kilometer moat while earthen walls formed the outer perimeter.

Overnight in Hue.

DAY 9 HUE - FLY TO HANOI

This morning we transfer to the airport for our flight to Hanoi. Upon arrival we will check in to our hotel and have lunch. Later this afternoon we will embark on a sunset jeep tour around Hanoi, enjoying the sights and sounds of this bustling city.

Overnight in Hanoi.

DAY 10 LIFE IN HANOI

Today we have the opportunity to see Hanoi as very few others do! This day is the perfect blend



Hoi An

of Hanoi's iconic cultural sites and off the beaten path areas where we can experience the local life. First we'll head south of Hanoi and enter a very special district. It suddenly feels like stepping back in time, into the 1960's when Hanoi was a quaint capital populated mostly by modest workers. Wander around these narrow alleys covered in colorful market stalls, feel the incredible vibe and let the guide tell you the story of these unusual big yellow buildings. Following a coffee break, we transfer to the Temple of Literature, built in 1070, which is dedicated to Confucius in Hanoi. For lunch, we will walk to a nearby street food shop. There are several options to choose from including a popular favourite -the Bun Cha flame-grilled pork meat served with sticky rice noodles.

This afternoon we continue to the garden of the Presidential Palace, where we can see the one-pillar pagoda and the house on stilts where Ho Chi Minh lived. Afterwards, we have a quick fresh beer in a local Bia Hoi, the Vietnamese version of a pub, before we return to hotel.

Overnight in Hue.

DAY 11 HANOI - MAI CHAU

We depart early this morning and head towards Mai Chau - a beautiful valley with a patchwork quilt pattern of rice terraces and villages which are home to the White Thai people. Mai Chau is known for its stunning scenery of palms, green mountains, rice fields and picturesque stilt houses. On arrival, take some time to freshen up, relax and enjoy lunch.

In the afternoon, we will stroll around the nearby Thai villages and learn more about the local lifestyle and culture while enjoying views of the surrounding rice paddies and mountains.

Overnight in Mai Chau.

DAY 12 MAI CHAU - H'MONG FAMILY, BATIK WORKSHOP

We depart this morning for a 1 hour drive to the heights of Hoa Binh province and the rocky plateau of Hang Kia. The scenery is ever changing as we head higher up where plum trees and corn fields replace the rice paddies. We enter H'mong ethnic lands, where people are colorfully dressed and living in wooden cottages. We are welcomed by a local H'mong family, whom we will do a traditional Batik workshop with. Learn ancestral techniques and unveil the secrets of the H'mong fabric. We have lunch at the local home, an opportunity to discover a little more about the H'mong culture through the gastronomy.

In the afternoon, we will take a 3 hour downhill hike back to the valley of Mai Chau. The hike is scenic, on single trails and rather easy (can be a bit slippery in wet weather). Walking down offers great views over wild stretches of land secluded between mountains. It ends in a sub-valley of Mai Chau called Mai Hich, where our vehicle awaits to transfer us back to the lodge. If you prefer not to do the hike, the car will drive you back from Hang Kia to the lodge in the afternoon.

Enjoy some time by the swimming pool before dinner tonight.

Overnight in Mai Chau.

DAY 13 TOWARDS NINH BINH, BOAT JOURNEY

We exit the reserve in the morning and start our journey east towards the Ninh Binh region; the so-called inland Halong Bay. Our first visit is to the Hoa Lu district, which was the capital under the Dinh and Early Le dynasties in Vietnam in the 10th and 11th centuries. Its palaces, pagodas, tombs and pavilions

were built by different dynasties and still carry the features of an ancient imperial capital.

After lunch at a local house, board a sampan for an extended journey along the winding river lined with trees and the limestone mountains of Trang An. We will stop at several small, historic temples which are the pride of the area's inhabitants. The lush forests, clear river water, fresh air, magical caves and dramatic mountains will charm you from first glance. After the boat trip, we will transfer to Tam Coc for our dinner and overnight.

Overnight in Tam Coc.

DAY 14 HALONG BAY OVERNIGHT

After breakfast this morning, we depart for Halong Bay, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Upon arrival in Halong we will board your boat for an overnight cruise where we will enjoy views of the more than 3,000 limestone islands rising majestically out of the turquoise bay. We will pass grand rock formations, quaint fishing towns and sample a delicious lunch of freshly caught fish and seafood.

In the afternoon, we'll visit Trinh Nu Cave - one of the finest sunlight-filled caves with a stunning assortment of stalactites and stalagmites. We can take a swim in the

jade-colored water or sunbathe on the private beach nestled behind the cave. Later, we return to the boat for relaxation.

Overnight aboard the boat in Halong Bay.

DAY 15 HALONG BAY - HANOI - FLIGHT TO LUANG PRABANG, LAOS

One of the most special experiences for travelers in Vietnam is to watch the sunrise over Halong Bay. Rise early to watch this spectacular and peaceful scene. After breakfast we continue cruising through the bay to visit Sung Sot Cave, which is not only a beautiful spot but also an archaeological site. We enjoy brunch on board before we arrive at the wharf in the late morning. We will transfer to Hanoi for our flight to Luang Prabang, Laos. Upon arrival we will transfer to our hotel where we will enjoy dinner.

Overnight in Luang Prabang.

DAY 16 A MONK'S LIFE, LUANG PRABANG

We set off after breakfast for a visit to the morning market where we will meet our host and together select all the ingredients that will be needed for our upcoming authentic cooking class, located in a small village



outside of Luang Prabang. We will experience how typical Laos dishes such as Laap Laos, Orlam soup and papaya salad are cooked. The food is then brought to a local temple to offer as the monks' lunch, and as part of this ritual, your name will be included in a blessing chant. Later, we join in an open talk about Buddhism in Laos with monks where we will also have the chance for further exchange with the community. We will return to Luang Prabang for a light lunch with the food that we prepared earlier.

After lunch, we have an orientation of Luang Prabang. First we visit the National Museum. Housed in the former Royal Palace, uninhabited since the royal family was deposed in 1975, the museum showcases many treasures of Laos' royal past and allows visitors to glimpse the private and public quarters of Lao royalty. Also displayed here is the Prabang, the sacred Buddha image for which Luang Prabang was named. We visit the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Center, where we will learn more about Laos' ethnic groups, particularly the minorities around the country. We visit Wat Xieng Thong – Luang Prabang's largest and most splendid temple, best known for its impressive Tree of Life mural depicting the Buddhist story. We close the day by climbing the 328 steps leading to Phousi Hill. It cuts a distinctive figure in the center of the Luang Prabang skyline. The hill, with spectacular 360-degree views, is popular as a place to watch the sun rise or set. Later we can visit the Luang Prabang Night Market, which offers a lovely variety of handmade textiles crafted by local and hill-tribe people, along with street food, knick-knacks and friendly banter.

Overnight in Luang Prabang.

DAY 17 BAMBOO EXPERIENCE AND KUANGSI WATERFALLS

After a short transfer to the outskirts of town, in a tranquil setting of rice fields and lush green trees, we discover the importance of bamboo in the Laotian culture. We spend the morning learning about several aspects of the local culture, from crafts to music and food. We will have a chance to learn from a skillful craftsman and to enjoy a hands-on cooking class. We will then dine on the food we have prepared.

This afternoon, we drive out through beautiful landscapes of rice fields, hills and villages. We will stop to visit an ethnic minority village to learn about their traditions and culture. We continue to Khuang Si Waterfall, where water tumbles over tiered limestone formations into crystal clear pools, ideal for escaping the heat. Between cooling off in the pools, you can also explore the lush forest setting around the falls. A short walk brings you down to the waterfall where you will have time to swim or simply relax by the water's edge. We return to Luang Prabang in the late afternoon followed by dinner in a local restaurant.

Overnight in Luang Prabang.

DAY 18 MANDA LAO ELEPHANT CONSERVATION CENTER

After breakfast, we drive out of Luang Prabang to Manda Lao Elephant Conservation Center. Upon arrival we will receive an in-depth introduction into elephant behavior and communication. We will then cross the Nam Khan River by long tail boat for the first introduction to our elephants. Manda Lao guides will introduce guests to our elephants and mahouts, providing a background on the elephants.

We will be provided bananas and/or sugar cane to feed the elephants.

We will set out to walk with the elephants through the jungle as they interact with each other and forage on native foods. Our guides continue to explain elephant behavior as they guide us through the forest. The trek is 2.5 kms and takes about 1.5 hours - it is flat and shaded most of the way.

After some final treats for the elephants, we leave the elephants and mahouts in the jungle and begin the trek back to the center with our guides. We will enjoy a traditional Lao cuisine lunch made primarily from local organic produce before returning to Luang Prabang in the afternoon.

Overnight in Luang Prabang.

DAY 19 MEKONG CRUISE TO PAK OU CAVES - VIENTIANE BY EXPRESS TRAIN

After breakfast, we will enjoy a cruise on the Mekong River to Pak Ou Caves. Located upriver from Luang Prabang right on the river bank at the confluence of the Mekong and Nam Ou Rivers, Pak Ou Caves are a well-known Buddhist pilgrimage site with many statues and statuettes of the Buddha in the traditional Luang Prabang style. The caves are known for the miniature Buddha sculptures which take many different positions. On the way, we stop at the villages of Ban Xangkhong where Saa paper woven textiles are made by hand. We also visit Ban Xanghai, where “Lao-Lao” rice whisky is produced.

We will enjoy lunch at a local restaurant before transferring to Lao-Chinese Railway station for our 2 hour journey to Vientiane, the capital city of Laos.

Overnight in Vientiane.

DAY 20 CITY TOUR AND BUDDHA PARK

On our city tour today we will see Wat Sisaket Temple, the oldest temple with thousands of miniature Buddha statues. We will also see the former royal temple of Wat Prakeo, which previously housed the famous Emerald Buddha image. We then continue on to visit the COPE center where you will learn about this remarkable educational center, a heartbreaking but compelling place that teaches us about Laos’ Hidden War.

On the way to Lao’s national precious heritage, the famous and sacred structure of That Luang Stupa, we stop enroute to take some pictures of the imposing Patuxay Monument, which is well known as Vientiane’s own Arc de Triomphe.

In the afternoon we transfer out to see the Buddha Park, a scattered enchanting collection of Buddhist and Hindu sculptures on the Mekong Riverside meadow, close to the Friendship Bridge. There are approximately 200 religious images dating back over 500 years, which were created by a mysterious monk spreading his philosophy on life and revealing his ideas about the universe. A spectacular view of over the Mekong River at sunset is a perfect way to finish the day.

Overnight in Vientiane.

DAY 21 DEPART VIENTIANE

We depart for the airport to board our international flights homeward.



QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. HOW BIG ARE THE GROUPS?

Each group is limited to 16 participants. Small groups are an important ingredient in adventure travel. They allow for more interaction and more personalized service throughout the itinerary.

2. WHAT IS INCLUDED IN THE TOUR PRICE?

All accommodations throughout; all meals, starting with dinner on day 1 and finishing with breakfast on departure day (i.e. the last day of the ElderTreks tour); bottled drinking water throughout the trip; all internal transportation; airport transfers on day 1 and departure day (i.e. the last day of the ElderTreks tour); all day trips and entrance fees as outlined in the itinerary; tips for hotels (porterage), national guide, bus driver, restaurants and spot guides; services of a trip leader.

3. WHAT IS NOT INCLUDED IN THE TOUR PRICE?

International flights, tips to ElderTreks tour leader, alcoholic drinks, visas and travel insurance.

4. ARE THESE EDUCATIONAL TOURS?

Yes, in the broadest sense of the word, “educational”. We visit cultural centers and historical sites, and have discussions on various aspects of Vietnamese politics and history, but these are only a few aspects of what we do. We believe that it is equally educational to meet local people on a non-commercial basis, visit their homes and even try to learn a few words in the native language. Sometimes the most “educational” moments are spent walking through a street market.

5. HOW DO WE TRAVEL WHILE IN VIETNAM AND LAOS?

All land transportation is included in the price of the trip. We have our own minivans or bus for road travel, as well as internal flights.. We also travel by boat and cyclos.

6. WHAT ARE OUR ACCOMMODATIONS LIKE?

We always stay in good accommodations — hotels and 1 night on a houseboat in Halong Bay (single cabins cannot be guaranteed.), where rooms have a private bath or shower. The accommodations have been chosen on the basis of location, atmosphere, and charm.

7. WHAT ABOUT WEATHER?

Vietnam and Laos has three different climactic zones (southern – hot, central – warm and northern – cool) each of which has very distinct weather patterns. You should be ready for

a good deal of sunshine and temperatures into the 80s°F (27°C), but you can also encounter cooler temperatures in the north, high 50s°F (10°C) low 60s°F (16°C) in the winter months.

8. WHEN IS PAYMENT DUE?

A non-refundable deposit of \$500 USD (plus insurance if you require it) is due at time of booking and will reserve your place on the tour. Payment of the full land cost is due 120 days before departure. Cancellation charges are applicable and are outlined in the “Terms and Conditions” section of our catalog.

9. IS MEDICAL INSURANCE REQUIRED?

Insurance coverage is not included in the cost of your trip. Please note that medical insurance is not required for this adventure but is recommended. ElderTreks offers comprehensive travel insurance and we are happy to provide you with a quote if you call our office. If you are purchasing insurance elsewhere, please ensure you provide the details to ElderTreks as soon as possible.

**Please note those travelers with pre-existing medical conditions must take out travel insurance at the time of deposit*

10. WHAT MEALS ARE INCLUDED?

All meals during the itinerary are included, starting with dinner on day 1, and finishing with breakfast on departure day. We eat a variety of local foods prepared in a wide range of settings. In many cases, we simply order a number of dishes and share, allowing you to sample new foods and decide what you enjoy best.

11. WHAT SHOULD I TAKE ON THE TOUR?

There is a detailed “What to Take” list in our Trip Kit, which we will send to you after you have booked the trip.

12. CAN YOU ARRANGE MY FLIGHTS?

We would be happy to take care of your air arrangements. ElderTreks offers personalized flight itineraries — not group flights. Stop over en route, come in a few days early, or extend your stay. Call us for a customized flight itinerary.

13. WHAT IF I WOULD LIKE MORE INFORMATION?

If you have any further questions about the trip, please do not hesitate to contact our office for additional information. A Trip Kit containing further details on the destination will be sent to you once you have booked the trip.



Spectacular scenery at Halong Bay.

