

Essential Laos



DAY 1: arrive Vientiane :

Arrive at Vientiane. Clear your immigrations and transfer to the hotel. Vientiane, capital of Laos, is often overlooked by travellers due to Luang Prabang's status as one of the world's premier travel destinations. Busy and hectic in comparison to the rest of the country, it is actually quite sedate when compared to most other capital cities in Asia. Located on the banks of the Mekong River, the city has a population of less than a million and is a true blend of east and west. French Colonial architecture sits side-by-side with gilded temples and due to its status amongst many travellers as Laos '2nd city', you get to enjoy its wealth of highlights without the large crowds so often encountered in Luang Prabang. In the evenings, there is a night market lining the river bank, with some excellent local food stalls found nearby on Chao Anou Road. Elsewhere in the city you will discover a wide array of dining and entertainment opportunities, with something to suit every taste and budget. Overnight in Vientiane.

DAY 2: Vientiane, City Tour, Tuk Tuk Night Safari :

Your morning is dedicated to seeing the capital. First up is a visit to Wat Sisaket, the only temple to be left intact after the Siamese invasion in 1828. It's arguably the most beautiful temple in Vientiane and houses thousands of miniature Buddha statues within its walls. Next stop is Wat Phra Keo, built in 1565 to enshrine the Emerald Buddha statue, which was subsequently stolen by the Siamese and now sits in the Grand Palace in Bangkok, before moving on to the Patuxai monument - also called Anousavari. Here, you can climb up on the roof for fantastic panoramic views. Continue on to That Luang, the holiest place in Laos, and Wat Simuang, the most popular and venerated temple in Vientiane. You can also visit Talat Sao, the morning market, for a bit of souvenir buying (silk and silver jewellery are good bets) and an insight into daily life for the people of Vientiane. Complete your morning with a visit to the excellent COPE exhibition centre, highlighting the Lao people's continued

day-to-day struggle with the unexploded ordnance as a result of heavy bombing campaigns during the Vietnam War era. Having returned to the hotel, your afternoon is at leisure. South-East Asian cities are astonishing enough by day, but at night - as the air cools and day-jobs draw to a close - they are positively vibrant, especially around the street-food markets, which flower along the pavements as the sun sets. A trip to Laos wouldn't be complete without savouring some of the country's fantastic street-food. Take a tuk tuk to the night market near That Luang. The market doesn't see many tourists, but is a consistent favourite amongst the locals. Take your cue from the locals around you, but essentially you BBQ at your table on a small charcoal burning stove that is covered with a metal domed griddle, selecting your menu from a wide array of meat and seafood. Overnight in Vientiane.

DAY 3:Vientiane, Pakse, Champasak:

After breakfast transfer to Vientiane Airport for your flight to Pakse. Upon arrival take a short drive south to Champasak, a delightful Colonial riverside town with a relaxed vibe. Having checked in at your hotel, the remainder of your day is at leisure. Overnight in Champasak.

DAY 4:Champasak, Wat Phou Sunrise, 4000 Islands Tour:

Make an early morning visit to the fascinating pre Angkorian ruins of Wat Phou that are located near to the town and are one of South-East Asia's most dramatically situated temple sites offering superb views across the Mekong River. Designated a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 2001, the site dates back to the 5th century, predating the famous Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Whilst much of the origins of Wat Phou are unclear, it is believed that the original temple was built by the Khmer Hindus who eventually made Angkor Wat their capital. This impressive temple offers a stunning sunrise view, and at this time in the morning it will be deserted. Return to your hotel by around 8am for breakfast. After breakfast, cross over the Mekong River and drive south to Ban Hatsaikhone, where you'll board a local boat for a tour of the 4000 Islands. Although some of the islands are technically just sand banks, there are still hundreds of scenic spots to enjoy. By lunch time you'll reach the picturesque island of Don Khone and the afternoon is spent exploring the island by bicycle, admiring some of the old French Colonial buildings and the beautiful Lphi Waterfall. Returning to your boat, head back to the mainland and the impressive Khone Phapheng waterfalls, one of the largest and most powerful waterfalls in Southeast Asia, just a few miles from the Cambodian border, before returning to Champasak. Overnight in Champasak.

DAY 5:Champasak, Pakse, Luang Prabang:

Your day is at leisure until your transfer to Pakse for your flight to Luang Prabang. Upon arrival transfer to your hotel. The remainder of your day is at leisure. Luang Prabang, the 'Jewel of Indochina', is a UNESCO designated World Heritage Site and regularly voted as one of Asia's premier travel destinations. The ancient royal city is surrounded by mountains and is situated at a junction of the Mekong and Khan Rivers. In the centre of the city is Mount Phousi, rewarding climbers of its 328 steps with stunning views of the surrounding temples and hills. A city where time has seemingly stood still, Luang Prabang is also an outstanding example of the fusion of traditional Lao architecture with structures built by the Colonial authorities in more recent times. Its unique, remarkably well-preserved townscape illustrates a key stage in the blending of these two distinct cultural traditions. In the evening there are plenty of great restaurants to choose from - we also recommend the local river side stalls for some truly authentic Lao flavours, washed down with the excellent Beer Lao! Overnight in Luang Prabang.

DAY 6:Luang Prabang, Tak Bat, Walking Tour, Weaving Villages, Monastic School Visit, Baci Ceremony:

An option for early-risers is to rise before dawn to witness tak bat, or the giving of alms, to the lines

of orange-robed monks leaving their pagodas to receive offerings of food from the residents of Luang Prabang. It's an iconic sight and for many one of the highlights of their stay in Luang Prabang, and can be arranged on any early morning during your stay. Your city circuit begins after breakfast at the former Royal Palace, now the National Museum, which gives a good overview of the local history. The next section of the tour takes in some of the city's temples, beginning with Wat Mai, a temple renowned for its golden bas-reliefs, before continuing on to Wat Xieng Thong, perhaps the most photographed temple in Luang Prabang, and the unique Wat Visoun, known as 'The Water Melon Stupa' due to its shape. Your last visit of the morning is the excellent Arts and Ethnology Centre which will give you further insight into the ethnic mix and culture of Laos. In the afternoon visit the weaving and textile villages of Ban Xangkhong and Ban Xienglek before returning to town to visit a monk school. After some time chatting with the novice monks finish the day by climbing Mount Phousi, to enjoy the stunning views across Luang Prabang and the Mekong River as the sun sets. In the early evening you have the opportunity to attend a Baci ceremony in the home of a local family. Its purpose is to call escaped spirits back to the body, a tradition that is very important for Lao people before major events such as weddings, births, travel or when welcoming guests. The ceremony itself is led by an older member of the family and involves gently tying cotton cords around your wrists, symbolizing friendship, good health and good luck on your journey ahead. Overnight in Luang Prabang.

DAY 7:Luang Prabang:

Your day is at leisure. Overnight in Luang Prabang.

DAY 8:Luang Prabang, Mekong River Cruise, Pak Ou, Luang Prabang:

An early departure by boat takes you up the Mekong River to the Pak Ou caves, which house literally thousands of Buddha statues, hidden from the looting Chinese Haw in times gone by. The statues range from a few centimetres to the size of a human. After a tour of the caves, continue to Kamu Eco Lodge on the banks of the river, arriving in time for lunch. The lodge features 20 canvas tents covered by thatched roofs, each styled in harmony with its surrounds and adapted to the local Lao style. Each tent has an attached private bathroom with shower, toilet, solar-powered warm water and electricity. In the afternoon you can enjoy this unique setting in a variety of ways. Options include rice planting, gold-panning, jungle walks to search for medicinal plants, traditional fishing, a local village visit, an archery contest, or simply relaxing and soaking up the atmosphere. Supper is served at the camp. Overnight at Luang Prabang

DAY 9:Luang Prabang, Mekong River Cruise, Luang Prabang:

Enjoy a peaceful breakfast and a further opportunity to walk nearby or even take a dip in the river before taking the short cruise back to Luang Prabang. Arriving in the late morning, and transfer you to your hotel. The remainder of your day is at leisure. Overnight in Luang Prabang.

DAY 10:DEPARTURE:

Your day is at leisure until your transfer to the airport for your onward flight.

Neptune Tours & Travels Pvt. Ltd.

Arihant Benchmark, 113/F, Matheswartolla Road
Near Topsia Crossing, Axis Bank Building, 3rd Floor
Kolkata - 700046, West Bengal, India

Tel: +91 33 4022 9591; Email : international2@neptuneholidays.com

