

HARVARD

ALUMNI TRAVELS



SOUTHEAST ASIA ODYSSEY

January 5–23, 2025

PROGRAM SCHEDULE

Cruise the Mekong through Laos; explore the spectacular Angkor Wat and the sublime Ha Long Bay; and engage with local farmers and hill villagers on this comprehensive, well-paced adventure.

SCHEDULE BY DAY

B=Breakfast, L=Lunch, R=Reception, D=Dinner

SUNDAY, JANUARY 5

DEPART U.S. FOR HANOI, VIETNAM

In the evening, depart the U.S. for Hanoi, Vietnam.

MONDAY, JANUARY 6

ARRIVE HANOI

Arrive in the Vietnamese capital late this evening and transfer to your hotel.

Overnight: *Meliá Hanoi*

TUESDAY, JANUARY 7

HANOI

In the morning, get your first taste of Hanoi on a walking tour of Ba Dinh Square, a popular complex of cultural and historic sites.

This was the place where, on September 2, 1945, Communist Party leader Ho Chi Minh read the Declaration of Independence, officially establishing the nation of Vietnam. Today, his memory is honored by the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, a massive granite tomb complex inspired by Lenin's Mausoleum in

Moscow—inside of which Ho Chi Minh rests in a glass sarcophagus, visible to onlookers.

Also, see the bright mustard-colored French colonial Presidential Palace and the 1,000-year-old One Pillar Pagoda, built on a single stone pillar to resemble a lotus blossom.

After time for lunch on your own, take an orientation tour to gain a broader appreciation for this French-accented city with its broad, tree-lined boulevards and French-colonial architecture. Pass Hoan Kiem Lake in the heart of the city where legend has it that, in the 1400s, a deity rose from the lake and reclaimed the magic sword of Emperor Le Thai To, which was once used to drive the Chinese from Vietnam. Also, see the marvelous Temple of Literature, founded in 1070 and dedicated to Confucius. It later became Vietnam's first university and remains an active place of worship.

Your next stop is Hoa Lo Prison, also known as "Hanoi Hilton." Throughout the Vietnam War and for many years thereafter, the North Vietnamese Army controlled the prison and held American soldiers captive in order to torture and interrogate them. After this sobering visit, walk through the narrow streets of the Ancient Quarter (more commonly called the "36 Streets District"), where goods of all types are bought and sold. There are so many shops, each has its own separate street—Shoe Street, Sugar Street, Paper Street—to help

direct customers to their desired product. This is also one of the city's most popular gastronomic areas, with dozens of excellent restaurants, one of which will be the host venue for your welcome dinner tonight.

Overnight: *Meliá Hanoi (B, D)*

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 8

HANOI / HA LONG BAY

Depart early on a full-day excursion to Ha Long Bay ("Bay of the Descending Dragon"), Vietnam's legendary waterway sprinkled with some 2,000 islands and islets and surrounded by a fairytale landscape of limestone cliffs, secret grottoes, and hidden caves. A UNESCO World Heritage site, Ha Long Bay is the home of ancient cultures dating back 25,000 years.

Your tour here includes a boat ride on the placid waters and a lunch of local seafood specialties. Please note that the weather in this region can be cooler and quite foggy, but it adds to the mystique of the bay.

Return to your hotel in Hanoi tonight and have the evening free to sample some of Hanoi's renowned fares.

Overnight: *Meliá Hanoi (B, L)*

THURSDAY, JANUARY 9

HANOI / DA NANG / HOI AN

This morning is free to explore Hanoi on your own, or to relax and enjoy the amenities of your hotel.

In the afternoon, fly to Vietnam's third largest city, Da Nang; then continue to Hoi An, an ancient market city which had the largest harbor in Southeast Asia during the 1st century CE.

Now riddled with canals and waterways, Hoi An was originally the commercial capital of the historic Cham people before seeing a succession of Dutch, Chinese, Portuguese, and Japanese traders all contribute to the building of an architecturally diverse and colorful Old Town (which is now a UNESCO World Heritage site). During the early part of the 17th century, Hoi An was known as one of the most important trading ports in all of Asia,

welcoming tradesmen from as far away as Egypt and England. These days, the streets belong to pedestrians and bicyclists since no cars are allowed in the Old Town.

Enjoy dinner together tonight at a local restaurant.

Overnight: *Hotel Royal Hoi An – MGallery (B, D)*

FRIDAY, JANUARY 10

HOI AN

In the morning, begin your exploration by boarding a boat for a leisurely cruise along the Thu Bon River, which brings you to Hoi An's colorful central market. Here, get a taste of the clamorous sights and sounds of the market and have the opportunity to purchase a few souvenirs.

Take a walking tour past the low, tile-roofed houses lining the narrow streets and Japanese covered bridge.

You are free this afternoon for lunch on your own before returning to the hotel for more time at leisure.

Later, attend an immersive and interactive Vietnamese cooking class. Watch a variety of traditional Vietnamese dishes being prepared and try your hand at creating everything from dumplings to banh mi to rice noodles. Enjoy the fruits of your labor for dinner and take home a recipe book filled with instructions on how to recreate these dishes.

Overnight: *Hotel Royal Hoi An – MGallery (B, D)*

SATURDAY, JANUARY 11

HOI AN / DA NANG / SIEM REAP, CAMBODIA

Get an up-close look at Vietnamese life today as you visit a neighboring village nestled amidst seemingly endless rice paddies. Gain a special insight into the everyday life of a local farming community as you walk through the village past modest homes, vegetable and fruit gardens, and the village temple and husking mill. It's a place where water buffaloes plow fields and villagers ride to the market with produce piled high on their bicycles. Living rooms of homes are open to the street, many

with pictures of Ho Chi Minh and shrines to their deities on display.

Enjoy lunch together in a local restaurant in a small village outside the town center, then continue to Da Nang by coach.

Upon arrival, tour the acclaimed Museum of Cham Sculpture, home to the world's largest collection of Cham sculptures and artifacts, which dates from the 5th to 15th centuries. The Cham people are a small group which originated in Southeast Asia millennia ago. Written records exist of Chams all the way to the 2nd century CE, but their numbers have dwindled to less than half a million worldwide. Culturally, the Cham people have been influenced by forces ranging from Chinese to Indian to Arabian (the state religion was Hinduism for many centuries, but now many Chams practice a hybrid form of Hinduism and Islam). Built in 1915, the museum is constructed in Cham style, with simple lines, smooth corners, and windows open to the sea air.

Transfer to the airport for the 1½-hour flight to Siem Reap, Cambodia.

Overnight: *Sofitel Angkor Phokeethra Resort (B, L)*

SUNDAY, JANUARY 12

SIEM REAP

Today marks the first of two full days touring the extensive Angkor Wat temple complex, a small-scale city built between the 9th and 13th centuries.

The day begins with a ride on traditional tuk-tuks to visit Angkor Thom, the last capital of the Khmers, whose once-mighty empire dominated much of Southeast Asia for more than 600 years.

Sites here include the Terrace of the Elephants, eight feet high and nearly 1,000 feet in length with a lotus seat at its center for the king; Terrace of the Leper King, with its emblematic and enigmatic statue of a king whose likeness remains a mystery; the Baphuon, an immense temple built in the mid-11th century and dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva; and the stunning Bayon Temple, an imposing stone edifice of 54 towers each carved with four serene faces and decorated

with bas reliefs detailing the reign of King Jayavarman VII (1181–1202).

Also, explore the 12th-century temple of Ta Prohm, a mystical, decaying Buddhist shrine fallen victim to the encroaching jungle. Built in memory of King Jayavarman VII's mother and abandoned after the fall of the Khmer Empire, the ruins here are a result of centuries of neglect; however, when efforts to conserve the temple began, it was decided that Ta Prohm would be left largely as it was and is, with massive tree roots virtually strangling parts of the stone façades, creating an irresistible tableau for photographers.

Enjoy lunch together at a local restaurant before this afternoon's visit to the main attraction.

Angkor Wat is a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of the three great Buddhist sites of the Eastern world (the others are Borobudur in Java and Bagan in Myanmar). Though often called a "lost city," Angkor Wat was never lost to the Khmer people. The temple complex was constructed as a Hindu temple dedicated to the god Vishnu by King Suryavarman II in the 12th century CE, but it gradually became Buddhist towards the end of the century. It took more than 500,000 artisans, workers, and slaves some 28 years to complete and comprises five towers, each reaching more than 180 feet high. In 1431, wars with nearby Tai kingdoms resulted in the destruction of the Khmer Empire and of Angkor. Even so, studies reveal that Angkor Wat was still inhabited or at least visited by Khmer people from the 15th to 19th centuries, a contention proven by the fact that one of its main temples contained Buddhist statuary from every century between. Today the site features magnificent temples and statues from Angkor, as well as various Hindu and Buddhist imagery.

Serenaded by the sounds of the jungle, enter Angkor Wat, the world's largest religious building, and witness the intricate detail of the bas reliefs and artwork depicting mythological battles and scenes of everyday life.

Overnight: *Sofitel Angkor Phokeethra Resort (B, L, D)*

MONDAY, JANUARY 13

SIEM REAP

Your destination this morning is tiny Banteay Srei, a temple built for the Hindu god Shiva in the 10th century with exceptional carvings in its sandstone walls. Banteay Srei's artistry on a miniature scale distinguishes it from other Angkorian temples and has earned it the nickname "the jewel of Khmer art" (its name literally translates as either "citadel of women" or "citadel of beauty").

Continue to Banteay Samre, an elaborate 12th-century temple dedicated to the Hindu god Vishnu. Banteay Samre is one of Angkor's most complete complexes, thanks to restoration efforts using original materials.

After lunch together at a local restaurant, visit the temple of Preah Khan, the "Sacred Sword," a 12th-century complex of halls and pavilions, causeways, and moats, and sculpted garudas and serpents built by King Jayavarman VII in memory of his father. The World Monuments Fund has maintained this piece of living history since 1991, preferring to leave it in its ruined state rather than attempt to improve or change the original structures.

Tonight, enjoy dinner accompanied by a traditional cultural dance show.

Overnight: *Sofitel Angkor Phokeethra Resort (B, L, D)*

TUESDAY, JANUARY 14

SIEM REAP / LUANG PRABANG, LAOS

This morning, visit Les Artisans d'Angkor, a development project where young adults are taught the traditional crafting methods of the region, including stone carving, woodworking, and lacquer application.

Head to the airport this afternoon for your flight to Luang Prabang, Laos. Upon arrival, transfer to your hotel and enjoy dinner together.

Overnight: *MyBanLao Hotel (B, D)*

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 15

LUANG PRABANG

Your introduction to Laos begins early today as you take part in a time-honored tradition: the "tak-bat" where hundreds of saffron-robed monks collect alms from fellow Buddhists. Every morning at dawn, the monks silently line the streets of Luang Prabang and receive helpings of sticky rice from townspeople. It is a symbiotic relationship; the monks eat the food, while townspeople receive spiritual redemption.

See glimpses of old Indochina as you visit the colorful open-air morning market, then return to your hotel for breakfast.

Later, set out to explore this ancient royal city nestled between the mountains and the Mekong. Your walking tour features the Old City, a UNESCO site, where you see the beautiful 16th-century Wat Xieng Thong temple complex; and the National Museum, formerly the royal palace, housing the personal collection of the last Laotian royal family.

Return to your hotel for an afternoon at leisure and then enjoy dinner together this evening.

Overnight: *MyBanLao Hotel (B, D)*

THURSDAY, JANUARY 16

LUANG PRABANG

Today, come face-to-face with one of Asia's most storied creatures and one of the world's most revered animals: the elephant.

The Elephant Village in the scenic Nam Khan River valley is a community-based eco-project intending to give elephants who have been endangered by extensive forest logging a new home. Meet the mahouts that train these majestic animals and demonstrate their uncanny ability to communicate with these highly intelligent gentle giants.

Next, visit a communal rice farm situated in the scenic Laotian countryside and get an inside look at the life of a local farmer and enjoy a lunch of traditional Laotian specialties. Learn about the climate and work necessary to grow rice and try your hand at some of the rice farming activities, as well as learn about

the other trades practiced here, including bamboo weaving, blacksmithing, and sugar cane processing.

Late this afternoon, return to your hotel, for an evening at leisure and dinner on your own.

Overnight: *MyBanLao Hotel (B, L)*

FRIDAY, JANUARY 17

LUANG PRABANG / MEKONG RIVER CRUISE / PAKBENG

Leave the roads behind and take to the river as you board a private riverboat for an upstream voyage on this remote stretch of the Mekong.

First, stop at the Ban Sang Ha “Whiskey Village.” Have a chance to observe the distillation process of Laotian homemade whiskey and enjoy a sample if you choose.

Then board your traditional wooden river cruiser, whose long, narrow shape allows you to sail leisurely along the Mekong with unobstructed views of the lush banks. Though simply outfitted, the boat offers a bar and dining area, and has more than enough room to spread out.

Make two stops along the way to visit villages and observe scenes of daily life by the river.

The first stop is at the Pak Ou Buddha Caves, which have been home to many thousands of Buddha statues and images since King Setthathirath declared the caves a holy spot in the 16th century. Enjoy lunch on board as the lovely scenery passes by.

In the afternoon, visit a weaving and fishing village where you have the chance to meet more residents.

Cruise on to Pakbeng, where you disembark and check in at your hotel overlooking the Mekong in time for dinner there tonight.

Overnight: *Le Grand Pakbeng (B, L, D)*

SATURDAY, JANUARY 18

PAKBENG / MEKONG RIVER CRUISE / CHIANG RAI, THAILAND

Back on board your riverboat today, cruise through more wild and diverse scenery, with mountain views framing the Mekong.

Have another lunch on board, then cruise to a remote village to go ashore once again and meet residents and take in more scenes of rural riverside life.

Later this afternoon, arrive at the Laos-Thailand border, where you disembark and enter Thailand, one of Southeast Asia’s regional powers.

After crossing the border, transfer to your hotel in Chiang Rai and enjoy dinner together.

Overnight: *The Riverie by Katathani (B, L, D)*

SUNDAY, JANUARY 19

CHAIANG RAI

In the morning, practice traditional Thai meal preparation at a cooking class in town. Experience what home cooking in Thailand is like as you shop for ingredients and prepare your meals, learning about the organic, locally grown fruits, vegetables, and herbs on the way. Choose from three different classic Thai recipes to prepare for your own lunch.

Afterwards, visit the contemporary Wat Rong Khun. Known to outsiders as the “White Temple” for its gleaming, intricately carved exterior celebrating Lord Buddha’s purity, Wat Rong Khun is not truly a temple at all. When local artist Chalermchai Kositpipat found the original temple in a state of disrepair, he purchased it and dedicated his life to rebuilding it into one of the most beautiful Buddhist shrines in the world. Delicate carvings along the entirety of the roofline give the impression of a building covered in tufted snow, but a closer inspection reveals dozens of finely sculpted dragons, elephants, and other figures. Inside, the images on the walls and ceilings combine traditional Buddhist and Hindu symbols with more modern pop culture icons who Kositpipat believes further the Buddha’s message, such as Superman and Neo from *The Matrix*. As with Antoni Gaudí’s

famous Sagrada Familia church in Barcelona, Wat Rong Khun is expected to take many decades to fully complete, but travelers may enter at any time.

Your full day concludes with a visit to the Chiang Rai night market, where you are free to enjoy dinner on your own from the stalls selling Thai street food.

Overnight: *The Riverie by Katathani (B, L, D)*

MONDAY, JANUARY 20 **CHIANG RAI / BANGKOK**

This morning, take a scenic drive along narrow mountain roads to the Doi Tung Royal Villa and Gardens, former home of the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej's mother, who led efforts against deforestation and the heroin trade in Northern Thailand. Now part of a development project, Doi Tung hosts families from the surrounding hill villages to stay and receive vocational, agricultural, and social training. After the training program is over, the families return to their village and put their new skills to work at local farms. Tour the home and the grounds here then enjoy lunch together at a local restaurant.

Late this afternoon, transfer to the airport for the hour-long flight to Bangkok. After landing in Thailand's capital, we enjoy dinner together at our centrally located hotel.

Overnight: *Royal Orchid Sheraton (B, L, D)*

TUESDAY, JANUARY 21 **BANGKOK**

Set out to explore sprawling Bangkok, in all its colorful, tumultuous, and modern splendor. Forty times larger than Thailand's next largest city and housing everything from multinational corporations to world-class health care centers, Bangkok is Thailand's heart and soul, and has been described as "the most primate city on earth" (a description applied to cities that dominate their respective nations).

Begin touring at the Bangkok Flower Market, a riot of multicolored blooms located in Bangkok's Old City. Ride "tuk tuks," traditional three-wheel open-air taxis, to Wat Pho

Temple, home of the Reclining Buddha. Covered in gold leaf, the icon measures some 49 feet tall by 151 feet long. Wat Pho is also the home to Thailand's largest collection of Buddha images, and the complex is also known for being the birthplace of traditional Thai massage.

Next, visit the nearby Grand Palace, an immense complex of ornate buildings, halls, and gardens spreading along the bank of Thailand's main river, the Chao Phraya. The original palace was built in 1782 by King Buddha Yodfa Chulaloke, the first king of the Chakri Dynasty, after he moved the nation's capital to Bangkok from Thonburi. Subsequent kings have augmented the complex, creating the magnificent compound we see today. Though it is no longer the residence of the monarch, the Grand Palace still hosts several official functions for the king throughout the year. Here see the elaborate Temple of the Emerald Buddha, with its venerated 31-inch-high statue carved from a single piece of jade.

After this full day of touring, have an evening at leisure for dinner on your own.

Overnight: *Royal Orchid Sheraton (B, L)*

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 22 **BANGKOK**

A morning visit to the Jim Thompson House reveals the prized Southeast Asian art collection of the American who revived the Thai silk industry.

Hidden away on a quiet street in the center of the city, this home presents an excellent example of traditional Thai residential architecture, and houses a highly regarded collection of South Asian art. During World War II, American Jim Thompson was posted in Bangkok as a U.S. intelligence agent. After the war ended, Thompson remained, and founded the Thai Silk Company Limited in 1948. The silk industry had been faltering in Thailand, but Thompson's company achieved worldwide fame when his silks were used for costumes in the Rodgers & Hammerstein musical, *The King and I*. The Thai Silk Company Limited is credited with creating the bright tones and dramatic colors of Thai silk, and Thompson's

commitment to local labor allowed thousands of Thailand's lowest-income workers (many of them women) to escape poverty.

After exploring Thompson's house and hearing about this fascinating American's life, your final afternoon on tour is at leisure before a farewell dinner this evening.

Overnight: *Royal Orchid Sheraton (B, D)*

THURSDAY, JANUARY 23 BANGKOK / DEPART FOR U.S.

Depart for the airport for return flights to the United States. Depending on flight schedules, some guests will leave in the morning and return to the U.S. this evening, while others will depart this evening and return to the U.S. one day later (January 24). Guests with evening flights will have hotel rooms reserved for late check-out.

Note: Guests on the "Singapore" Post-Tour Extension will fly today to Singapore (please see the extension itinerary for more information).

Meals: *B*

OPTIONAL EXTENSION: SINGAPORE JANUARY 23–26, 2025

Though it's one of the smallest nations in the world by area, Singapore has played a large role in world history from its position at the tip of the Malay Peninsula. This thriving metropolis has hosted human habitation for centuries but was officially founded as a British colonial trading post in 1819 and became a sovereign nation in 1965.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 23 BANGKOK / SINGAPORE

After your flight in late this morning, transfer to your hotel, enjoying a panoramic orientation tour of this historic island city-state along the way.

Pass the Padang parade ground, with its world-famous cricket ground; Parliament House; Supreme Court; and Singapore City Hall.

After dinner at a local restaurant, take a leisurely bumboat ride along the Singapore River. These small crafts are typically used to ferry supplies to larger ships anchored offshore and are the perfect size for exploring the historically significant river that winds through the heart of the city.

This waterborne perspective shows off the city's dazzling lights, and we also witness the magnificent Spectra light and water show with its colorful fountains and orchestral accompaniment.

Dinner is included at a local restaurant tonight.

Overnight: *Carlton City Hotel (B, D)*

FRIDAY, JANUARY 24 SINGAPORE

Start today with a visit to the National Orchid Garden within the Singapore Botanic Gardens, which houses some 60,000 orchid plants.

Next experience Singapore's diverse mélange of ethnicities and cultures on a tour of several neighborhoods. First, pass through Little India, its bustling streets showcasing aromatic spices, colorful flower shops, and curry houses. In Kampong Glam, see the Sultan's Mosque, with its golden dome, and browse colorful eateries and shops selling carpets, perfumes, and much more. Then visit Chinatown, where the historic storefronts have been lovingly restored as restaurants, teahouses, and shops. End at the magnificent Thian Hock Keng Temple, dedicated to the worship of the Chinese sea goddess Mazu and boasting exceptional architecture and ornate carvings.

The afternoon and evening are at leisure, with ample time to enjoy Singapore's diverse range of cuisines, attractions, and experiences.

Overnight: *Carlton City Hotel (B)*

SATURDAY, JANUARY 25

SINGAPORE

Your final day in Singapore begins with a visit to one of the city's top destinations: Gardens by the Bay. Covering over 250 acres of reclaimed land adjacent to Singapore's Marina Reservoir, this urban oasis cost over one billion dollars and brought some much-needed green space to the city when it was completed in 2012. Also visit the two vast conservatories: the Flower Dome and the Cloud Forest.

On your final stop this morning, visit Marina Bay to view the magnificent Merlion statue and fountain. Singapore's official tourism mascot, the mythical half-lion, half-fish Merlion stands as a symbol of Singapore's origins as a fishing village as well as its original name—Singapura—which means "lion city."

Enjoy the afternoon at leisure and lunch on your own.

In the evening, gather at a local restaurant to toast your adventure at a farewell dinner.

Overnight: *Carlton City Hotel (B, D)*

SUNDAY, JANUARY 26

SINGAPORE/ DEPART FOR U.S.

Depending on flight schedules, some guests will leave in the morning and return to the U.S. this evening, while others will depart this evening and return to the U.S. one day later (January 27).

Guests with evening flights will have hotel rooms reserved for late check-out.

(B)