

HARVARD

ALUMNI TRAVELS



JOURNEY THROUGH VIETNAM

OCTOBER 26 – NOVEMBER 9, 2023

PROGRAM SCHEDULE

ITINERARY HIGHLIGHTS: Hanoi, Ha Long Bay, Hue, Mekong Delta, Saigon

- Take a boat ride in Ha Long Bay, Vietnam's legendary and beautiful waterway sprinkled with some 3,000 islands and islets
- In Hue, enjoy a ride in a traditional cyclo and tour the Imperial Citadel, whose innermost complex houses the Forbidden Purple City
- Along the Mekong, experience the bustling floating vegetable market at Cai Rang
- Visit the Cu Chi Tunnels, marvels of engineering, stretching from Saigon to the Cambodian border

ACTIVITY LEVEL: Level 3

SCHEDULE BY DAY

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

THURSDAY, OCT 26 DEPART FROM HOME CITY

FRIDAY, OCT 27 ARRIVE HANOI, VIETNAM

We arrive in the Vietnamese capital late this evening and transfer to our hotel.

Overnight at *InterContinental Hanoi Westlake*

SATURDAY, OCT 28 HANOI

This morning we get our 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. Interestingly, Ho Chi Minh wished to be cremated, but the nation so mourned him that it chose to construct this edifice to house his remains. Inside Ho Chi Minh rests in a glass sarcophagus, visible to onlookers (his corpse goes under annual "upkeep" from September – early November; during this time we will not be able to pay an inside visit). For this visit, please dress respectfully and do not bring a camera inside – photos are strictly prohibited (our tour director will hold all cameras and cell phones outside the mausoleum). We also see the bright-mustard French colonial Presidential Palace, and 1,000-year-old One Pillar Pagoda, built on a single stone pillar to resemble a lotus blossom.

After time for lunch, we take an orientation tour to gain a broader appreciation for this French-accented city with broad tree-lined boulevards and colonial architecture. We 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 he had used to

drive the Chinese from Vietnam. We also see the marvelous Temple of Literature, founded in 1070 and dedicated to Confucius – it later became Vietnam’s first university and today remains an active place of worship. Our next stop brings us to 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, we 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, alongside houses and temples. There are so many shops, in fact, that 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 our welcome dinner tonight.

Overnight at *InterContinental Hanoi Westlake* (B, L, D)

SUNDAY, OCT 29 **HANOI/HA LONG BAY**

A tour highlight is in store today, as we depart early on a full-day excursion to Ha Long Bay (“Bay of the Descending Dragon”), Vietnam’s legendary and beautiful waterway sprinkled with some 3,000 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 was the home of ancient cultures dating back 25,000 years. Our tour here includes a boat ride on the placid waters and a lunch of local seafood specialties. Please note the weather in this region can be cooler and quite foggy, but it adds to the mystique of Ha Long Bay. We return to our hotel in Hanoi tonight and have the evening free to sample some of Hanoi’s renowned fare.

Overnight at *InterContinental Hanoi Westlake* (B, L)

MONDAY, OCT 30 **HANOI/DA NANG**

Following a morning at leisure, we fly this afternoon to Vietnam’s third largest city, Da Nang, situated at the mouth of the Han River on the country’s south central coast. Da Nang is the commercial and educational hub of central Vietnam, and the third biggest economic center after Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi.

Here we tour the acclaimed Museum of Cham Sculpture, home to the world’s largest collection of Cham sculptures and artifacts, all of which date from the 5th to 15th centuries. The Cham people are a small ethnic group which originated in Southeast Asia millennia ago – in fact, written records exist of Chams all the way back to the second century CE, but their numbers have dwindled to less than half a million worldwide. Culturally, the Cham people have been influenced by many forces ranging from Chinese to Indian to Arabian (indeed, the state religion was Hinduism for many centuries, but now a large number of 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.

After our touring here, we head to our beachfront hotel, arriving mid-afternoon. The remainder of the day and evening is at leisure. Dinner tonight is at our hotel.

Overnight at *Hyatt Regency Danang* (B, D)

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 31 **DA NANG/HOI AN**

Today we travel to the nearby town of 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 Cham people before seeing a succession of Dutch, Chinese, Portuguese, and Japanese traders all contribute to the building of an architecturally diverse and colorful village (which is now a UNESCO World Heritage site). Indeed, 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, as no cars are allowed in the old town – making it perfect for exploring on foot. We take a walking tour past the low, tile-roofed houses lining narrow streets; the Japanese covered bridge; and the Chinese communal house.

We then have the rest of the day at leisure to either remain in Hoi An and explore on our own (the town boasts numerous art galleries, shops, and tailors), or to return to our beachside resort for a relaxing afternoon. Tonight we return to the town of Hoi An for a cooking lesson and dinner.

Overnight at *Hyatt Regency Danang* (B, D)

WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 1 DA NANG

This morning we visit a neighboring village, nestled amidst seemingly endless rice paddies. Here we gain a special insight into the everyday life of a local farming community as we walk through the village past modest homes, gardens of vegetables and fruit, the village temple, and husking mill. It's a picture of a life many people live, but we rarely consider: water buffaloes plow the fields, villagers ride to market with produce piled high on their bicycles, and owning a television set connotes a certain level of prosperity. We see into the living rooms of homes open to the street, many with their pictures of Ho Chi Minh and shrines to their deities. Depending on the season, we may see the villagers engaged in threshing and harvesting.

We enjoy lunch together in a local restaurant, then have the remainder of the afternoon and evening at leisure.

Overnight at *Hyatt Regency Danang* (B, L)

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 2 DA NANG/HUE

We depart this morning by coach for the ancient imperial capital of Hue, whose temples and attractions evoke its past grandeur as home to emperors and mandarins. Hue was the capital of Vietnam during the reign of the feudal Nguyen lords, from 1802 until 1945, and remained on the world stage due to its location near the border between North and South Vietnam. The city suffered considerable damage throughout the Vietnam War, coming mainly during the Tet Offensive of 1968. In contrast to many cities in Europe whose historical ruins were rebuilt after conflicts, Hue's fascinating architecture was left as rubble for many years, as a slight from the Communist regime towards the previous "reactionary" Nguyen rulers.

After checking in at our hotel, this afternoon we enjoy a ride in a traditional cyclo, a three-wheeled bicycle in which passengers sit across a bench in front and the driver pilots from behind. From this unique vantage point we tour the Imperial Citadel, whose innermost complex houses the Forbidden Purple City, where only the emperor, his family, and his servants were allowed entrance. A vast complex of palaces, residences, temples, courtyards, and gates, the Imperial Citadel was built in 1804 to resemble the Forbidden City of Beijing, and was guarded by more than six miles of moats and walls six feet thick. Today it is protected as a UNESCO World Heritage site. We also visit the Dong Ba central market where locals buy their produce, fish, meat, and sundry items such as Vietnam's ubiquitous conical hats, ironware, jewelry, and tea.

Tonight, we enjoy dinner at a local restaurant accompanied by traditional music.

Overnight at *Saigon Morin Hotel* (B, D)

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 3 HUE

This morning we cruise along Hue's Perfume River by sampan, a traditional, flat-bottomed boat used by coastal fishermen. Our destination is peaceful Thien Mu Pagoda, a Buddhist monastery that ranks among the city's oldest and most important monuments.

The pagoda was built in 1601 by the first ruler of the Nguyen dynasty, and its seven-story octagonal tower makes it the tallest religious building in Vietnam. After admiring this symbol of Hue, we visit the palatial Tomb of Minh Mang (c. 1840), with its pavilions, reception hall, summer house, lakes, gardens, and courtyards modeled after the Ming Tombs of China. Surrounded by a forest and sitting on the west bank of the Perfume River, this complex contains an elaborate series of gates, pavilions, staircases, and bridges (three of which span the evocatively named Lake of Impeccable Clarity), all leading to the emperor's tomb. The tomb is only opened once every year, on the anniversary of Minh Mang's death (January 20).

We enjoy lunch at a local restaurant then visit two other tombs: Tu Duc, sitting in a narrow valley in a pine forest and considered one of the most beautiful works of royal architecture from the Nguyen dynasty; and Khai Dinh, an elaborate architectural mélange of European and Asian, ancient and modern styles. Dinner tonight is on our own.

Overnight at *Saigon Morin Hotel* (B, L)

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 4 **HUE/MEKONG DELTA/CAN THO**

Today is a travel day that begins with an early morning departure for the airport, where we board the one-hour flight to Saigon. Upon arrival we board our motorcoach for a relatively long (4.5-hour) transfer to the busy river port of Can Tho, the provincial capital where the various waterways that comprise the Mekong Delta converge – and where we spend the next two nights at our riverside hotel.

We arrive late afternoon with time to relax and enjoy the hotel's amenities before we meet for dinner here tonight.

Overnight at *Victoria Can Tho Resort* (B, L, D)

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 5 **CAN THO/MEKONG DELTA**

We rise early for today's excursion by boat to the bustling floating vegetable market at Cai Rang, one of many such markets on the Mekong's lower reaches. Lifeblood of southern Vietnam (and the world's 12th-longest river), the Mekong River is surpassed only by the Amazon in terms of aquatic biodiversity. Millions of people live within the mighty river's drainage basin, which counts as one of the country's two "rice bowls," as well as a major producer of vegetables and tropical fruit. It is along the river that locals conduct the business of everyday life, as we see farmers lined up cheek to jowl displaying and selling their goods from bamboo poles suspended over their boats as a form of advertising. After this scenic outing, we visit Old Can Tho market on foot, soaking up more of Vietnamese market life.

We enjoy lunch at a local restaurant, then have the remainder of the day and evening at leisure.

Overnight at *Victoria Can Tho Resort* (B, L)

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 6 **MEKONG DELTA/SAIGON**

Today we travel by coach to Cai Be in the upper reaches of the storied Mekong. Here we board motorized sampans for an up-close look at river life as we explore the maze of tributaries and inlets that lead to tiny settlements and villages populated by fishermen and farmers. Reminiscent of the canals and creeks of the American bayou, these channels wind through the overgrown landscape and provide transport, trade, and connection to the outside world for these settlements.

We enjoy lunch at a local restaurant, then travel by coach to Saigon (the name Ho Chi Minh City is used interchangeably). Once the proud capital of South Vietnam, Saigon was renamed in 1976 by the war's Communist victors as Ho Chi Minh City and virtually closed to the outside world. Since the institution of economic and political reforms in the mid-1980s and the reentry of a peaceful and united Vietnam into the community of nations several years ago, Saigon has once

again reclaimed its more cosmopolitan outlook – and its former name.

We reach our hotel late this afternoon, and dinner is on our own in this vibrant city. As always, our tour director will be on hand to offer restaurant recommendations.

Overnight at *Sofitel Saigon Plaza* (B, L)

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 7 SAIGON

History comes alive this morning with a visit to the Reunification Palace, the former South Vietnamese Presidential Palace and wartime headquarters that remains preserved just as it was on April 30, 1975, when Communist tanks entered the city. We also tour the History Museum, housing a fine collection of art and artifacts of Vietnam's indigenous peoples. We continue on to see the stunning Central Post Office and the Jade Emperor Pagoda, which was built in honor of this supreme Taoist god. Constructed in 1909 by Saigon's Chinese community, the pagoda is still a working shrine used by locals and is known for its intricate wood panel carvings and statues depicting scenes from Taoist and Buddhist lore.

Later we attend a traditional water puppet performance, then enjoy dinner together at a local restaurant.

Overnight at *Sofitel Saigon Plaza* (B, D)

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 8 SAIGON/CU CHI TUNNELS

On this morning's tour we visit a place of infamy: the Cu Chi Tunnels. Built over a period of 25 years beginning in the 1940s to sabotage the French occupiers, the tunnels are marvels of engineering, stretching from Saigon to the Cambodian border. Parts of the tunnels descend several stories deep, and include living areas, storage facilities, weapons factories, field hospitals, and kitchens. Americans will be most familiar with the tunnels because of the role they played during the war, when these tunnels allowed

the North Vietnamese to engage in combat in an area completely surrounded by Americans and South Vietnamese. Those who choose to will have a chance to descend into one of the tunnels, while those choosing to remain outside will have ample opportunities to tour the excavations above. Our guide will tell us about each tunnel's length and level of difficulty before we enter. If we choose to go underground, wear clothing that can get dirty (we will also need a pair of sturdy walking shoes).

We return to our hotel in time for lunch on our own then the remainder of the day is free to explore as we wish. Saigon boasts virtually hundreds of pagodas and places of worship worthy of our time, including the Giac Lam Pagoda, the city's oldest. Other options include a stroll along the city streets; a shopping excursion for fine silks and locally made crafts; or a visit to one of the colorful free markets or the Saigon Opera House. Tonight we gather for a farewell dinner.

Overnight at *Sofitel Saigon Plaza* (B, D)

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 9 DEPART FOR U.S.

Today we depart for the airport and our flight 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 on Day 16. Guests with evening flights will have hotel rooms reserved for late check-out.

Guests on the "Cambodia: Angkor Wat & Phnom Penh" Post-Tour Extension will fly mid-day to Siem Reap, Cambodia

(B)

OPTIONAL EXTENSION: CAMBODIA: ANGKOR WAT & PHNOM PENH

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 9 SAIGON/SIEM REAP, CAMBODIA

We fly today to Siem Reap, Cambodia, where we meet our Odysseys Unlimited representative at the airport and transfer to our hotel. Then we head out this afternoon for our first excursion, which takes us to the South Gate of Angkor Thom, the last capital of the Khmers whose once mighty Khmer 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 source of speculation; and the stunning Bayon Temple, an imposing stone edifice of 54 towers each carved with four serene faces and decorated with bas reliefs detailing events of the reign of King Jayavarman VII (1181–1202). After our first taste of the Khmers' abundant cultural treasures here, we gather for dinner together at a local restaurant.

Overnight at *Sofitel Angkor Phokeethra Golf and Spa Resort* (B, D)

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 10 SIEM REAP/ANGKOR WAT

This morning we transfer to the Angkor Wat complex of temples, a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of the three great Buddhist sites of the Eastern world (the others are Borobudur in Java, Indonesia, and Bagan in Myanmar). Upon arrival we visit the 12th-century temple of Ta Prohm, a mystical, decaying Buddhist shrine dedicated to the encroaching jungle. Built in memory of King Jayavarman VII's mother, the ruins here have not been touched – they are exactly as they were when first discovered, with massive tree roots virtually strangling parts of the stone façades. More than 100 temples stand here, struggling to keep the jungle at bay. Our next destination is the temple of Preah Khan, a complex of halls and pavilions, causeways and moats, and sculpted garudas and serpents built by King Jayavarman VII in memory of his father and is maintained by the World Monuments Fund.

After returning to the hotel for lunch on our own, this afternoon we visit the main attraction: Angkor Wat itself.

For many years, Angkor Wat was rumored to be a lost city, hidden from the world until its discovery by French explorer Henri Moughot in the mid-19th century. In fact, however, it was very much a living city until 1431, when the Thais forced the Khmer court to move southeast. Studies reveal that Angkor Wat was inhabited until recently, a contention proven by the fact that one of its main temples contained Buddhist statuary from every century between the 15th and the 19th. Today the site contains magnificent temples and statuary from the Angkorian Empire, which in its heyday rivaled those of Greece and Egypt; as well as various Hindu and Buddhist imagery. It took more than 500,000 artisans, workers, and slaves some 37 years to complete and comprises five towers, each reaching more than 180 feet high. Serenaded by the sounds of the jungle, we enter Angkor Wat Temple, the world's largest religious building. Here we witness the intricate detail of the bas reliefs and artwork depicting mythological battles and scenes of everyday life.

Then we return to the hotel and enjoy dinner together, followed by a cultural dance show.

Overnight at *Sofitel Angkor Phokeethra Golf and Spa Resort* (B, D)

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 11 SIEM REAP/PHNOM PENH

Our day begins with a visit to tiny Banteay Srei, a temple built for the Hindu god Shiva in the 10th century with exceptional carvings in its red 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." We continue on 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. Following our visit, we board an afternoon flight to Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital.

We arrive in the city early this evening before checking in to our hotel where we enjoy dinner together.

Overnight at *Hyatt Regency* (B, D)

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 12 **PHNOM PENH/DEPART FOR U.S.**

On Phnom Penh/Depart for U.S.

We begin our morning with a guided tour of the Royal Palace, a complex built in 1866 by King Norodom. Residence of the Cambodian king and ceremonial heart of the government, the palace comprises a number of structures within a pagoda-style compound. Next we visit the National Museum, where we see treasures from Angkor Wat, among other artifacts. After our exploring here, the remainder of the afternoon is at leisure to discover more of the city; perhaps to browse the Central Market or relax at a café.

Dinner is on our own tonight and we have day rooms reserved at our hotel so we may rest before our transfer to the airport for our flight home. (B)

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 13 **ARRIVE IN U.S.**

We arrive in the U.S. today and connect with our flights home.