



Ho Chi Minh Trail

Vietnam and Laos

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DAY 1 Hoi An

On arrival you will be met and transferred to your hotel. This evening there will be welcome drinks and a tour briefing. **Accommodation: Anantara Hotel**

DAY 2 Hoi An

Free Day. Hoi An is a world cultural heritage site and a delightful town to commence our journey in Vietnam. In the narrow streets we will see architecture from the 17th and 18th centuries influenced by Chinese and Japanese traders who regularly used the port of Hoi An until the river silted up in the late 19th century. There are many shops selling handicrafts, numerous tea and coffee houses, and a relaxed ambiance amongst the locals. **Accommodation: Anantara Hotel**

DAY 3 Hoi An to Dong Hoi

This morning we leave Hoi An and drive north through Danang, past China Beach, and over the Hai Van pass ('where the clouds meet the ocean') to the picturesque fishing town of Lang Co. Here we will stop to stretch our legs and try some local coffee. We continue via Hue to our destination of Dong Hoi passing through the former Demilitarised Zone (DMZ 1954-75) and across the Hien Luong River, which symbolised the divide between North and South Vietnam during the American war.

Accommodation: Sun Spa Resort

DAY 4 Dong Hoi

This morning we will explore the town of Dong Hoi and the surrounding area. We travel on the Truong Son Road, or former Ho Chi Minh Trail, to visit Dong Loc T-junction. There are many stories of bravery under fire by the local people of Quang Binh province, and here we will learn of heroism by ten Vietnamese women who suffered during the American war. Today we will visit the Phong Nha National Park and travel by covered boat on the Son River to visit some local caves, including the spectacular Phong Nha Cavern. **Accommodation: Sun Spa Resort**

DAY 5 Dong Hoi to Vinh

We depart this morning on Highway One to the major city of Vinh. During the American war, Vinh was a strategic point and stockpile for arms and equipment destined for the southern battlegrounds. Vinh has a unique character and Vietnamese from other parts of the country have trouble understanding their unusual dialect saying that people from Vinh 'speak like birds'. Here we will visit President Ho Chi Minh's birthplace at Kim Lien Village, where the local authorities have faithfully restored the original house of bamboo and palm leaves. **Accommodation: Saigon Kimlien Hotel**



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DAY 6 Vinh to the Plain of Jars

We continue this morning along the former Ho Chi Minh Trail towards the border with Laos. The landscape becomes more mountainous as we leave the coastal plains and head into the Truong Song Range. The border crossing is at the Vietnamese village of Nam Khan and here we will complete the necessary formalities and head into Laos. We will meet our local Lao guide and continue to the town of Phonsavan where we will stay overnight. **Accommodation: Phou Pha Deng Hotel**

DAY 7 Phonsavan

We will pass many Hmong villages built along high crests, the local people practising slash and burn agriculture and still following animist beliefs. Eventually, the mountains give way to small hills. We arrive on the Plateau of Xieng Khouang, where bomb craters scar the barren landscape. It is reported that during the war years of 1967 and 1968, 500,000 sorties were flown by the American Air Force – a bomb dropped for every minute of the day for two years. In this area there were fierce clashes between Pathet Lao rebels and Nationalist troops of the Lao government. The North Vietnamese used the area as a staging point for supplies and equipment travelling to southern Vietnam. The Plain of Jars consists of a number of sites where large stone jars are perched on the crests of surrounding hills. These jars are shrouded in mystery and are believed to be over 2000 years old. As for their purpose it is thought they were funerary, however, the locals have legends that suggest the jars were built as giant storage containers for rice wine. We will discover the different jar sites and wander among these amazing structures. **Accommodation: Phou Pha Deng Hotel**

DAY 8 Sam Neua

We take the road heading eastwards towards Vietnam. At the market town of Muang Kham we turn to the north and continue to the village of Nam Neun. We follow the road across hilltops – the road is steep and winding. The flora of this area differs from the lower lands and in some areas the habitat of tigers still remains. We will pass numerous villages mainly of Hmong people. The key characteristics of Hmong dwellings are their large size and wooden construction with no windows and thatched rooves. We continue to the northern outpost of Sam Neua, remote in the Lao mountains. **Accommodation: Sam Neua Hotel**

DAY 9 Viengxay Caves

This morning we will take the 45 minute drive to the town of Viengxay, travelling across a mountain pass to visit the famous caves of this area. After admission at the Kaysone Phomvihane Memorial Cave office, a guided tour will take us to visit the major caves that transformed Viengxay during the second Indochina war into a de-facto city between 1964 and 1973. It was during these years that Lao became involved in the 'secret war', which still remains largely ignored in war history. War was never declared on Lao (by the USA and its allies), however, military action was justified at the time because the North Vietnamese were using Lao as a base for their fight against the south. The caves were used to house leaders and fighters of the Pathet Lao army. We will take as much time as we need to discover this unique area then head back to Sam Neua for the evening. **Accommodation: Sam Neua Hotel**

DAY 10 Sam Neua to to Mai Chau

We depart early this morning in order to reach the town of Mai Chau in Vietnam. The drive is spectacular and remote with steep hill sides of slash and burn agriculture and limestone cast mountains rising from valleys where rice farmers cultivate their crop. Few foreigners venture along this way. After immigration and border formalities we meet our Vietnamese guide and drive to Mai Chau. **Accommodation: Mai Chau Lodge**



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DAY 11 Mai Chau

Take an easy walk around the villages that form Mai Chau. There are small markets, ethnic minority groups and the area was once a French hill station. Today we have the opportunity to relax and reflect on our journey so far.

Accommodation: Mai Chau Lodge

DAY 12 Mai Chau to Son La

Say goodbye to Mai Chau as we continue our journey to Son La through mountains and rice fields. In Son La we visit the former French prison built in 1908 to house dissidents against the occupying French. Vietnamese patriot Le Duan (the first Communist Party secretary) was held in this prison where he famously co-ordinated resistance against the French. **Accommodation: Hanoi Hotel**

DAY 13 Son La to Dien Bien Phu

We drive from Son La to Dien Bien Phu. The small town of Dien Bien Phu became the centre of world attention in 1954 when the French garrisoned their forces here in an attempt to block the supply lines of the Viet Minh revolutionary forces. The Vietnamese army encircled the French, taking the high ground and laying siege until the French finally capitulated bringing an end to the first Indochina war. This afternoon we will explore the Dien Bien Phu area. **Accommodation: Muong Thanh Hotel**

DAY 14 Dien Bien Phu to Paso

We visit the Dien Bien Phu Museum, the notorious hill A-1 battlefield, the former French command post and a captured tank. We continue to Lai Chau and then proceed to Paso through absolutely spectacular scenery. Paso offers fine opportunities for sightseeing, with Hmong and Dzao hill tribes in the area. **Accommodation: Paso Guesthouse**

DAY 15 Paso to Sapa

We drive from Paso to Sapa. From Paso, the road snakes up to Binh Lu, another breathtaking location with a bowl of terraced rice paddies ringed by mountains – an excellent place to view the surrounding countryside. From Binh Lu we drive through ‘heaven’s gate’, the pass between Vietnam’s two highest peaks and continue through rolling hills to the old French hill station of Sapa, a quiet town nestled on a hilltop with views to mountains all around. Most of the inhabitants are local ethnic minorities who come to town to trade with tourists and locals alike.

Accommodation: Victoria Hotel

DAY 16 Sapa

This morning there will be an optional walk around the rim of the valley to a rattan bridge and the ethnic Ta Van village inhabited by Dzay people. The walk is comfortable along well-established tracks, with spectacular views all around. We will return to the hotel by vehicle. **Accommodation: Victoria Hotel**

DAY 17 Sapa to Hanoi

Visit Sapa market and Ham Rong Mountain and the village of Cat Cat. Here we will see local Hmong people dying clothes and selling handicrafts. Near the village there are numerous waterfalls and an old pumping station built by the French. We will have a chance to freshen up at our hotel before taking the evening train to Hanoi. We transfer to Lao Cai station for the overnight night train to Hanoi.

Accommodation: Overnight on the Sapaly train



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DAY 18 Hanoi Arrival

We will be met at the station then transferred to our hotel for early check in and breakfast at the hotel. Free day in Hanoi. **Accommodation: Sofitel Legend Metropole**

DAY 19 Hanoi

Free day in Hanoi for sightseeing and shopping – maybe a visit to one of the museums or historical sights. Tonight is our farewell dinner, a special night to celebrate our time in Vietnam. **Accommodation: Sofitel Legend Metropole**

DAY 20 Departure

Farewell to Hanoi and the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Continue your travels or return home.



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