Journey the Upper Mekong

Laos

Laotian Serendipity

Vientiane - Huay Xai (Upstream)

10 Days - 9 Nights
Upper Mekong
Laos

Southeast Asia’s most sacred waterway. Known as the “Mae Nam Khong” to Laotians, or “The Mother of Water”, the upper Mekong slowly meanders through the unchanged local life and captivating riverscapes of charming Laos. It is this imposing river that the last ruler of the Kingdom of Vientiane, King Anouvong, would cross to fight for his realm’s independence against the oppressive Siam empire.
In the early morning (around 7:30, please see details in our Dis-/embarkation guide) you check into Anouvong and we depart from Vientiane on a wonderful slow journey to explore the upper Laotian Mekong. Get acquainted with the ship and settle into your room as we journey along the Lao-Thai border upstream past quaint villages and verdant hills. We gather for a Baci Ceremony in your honour this morning for a traditional Laotian welcome. Our crew has also prepared a wonderful brunch, which is available during the late morning and over noontime on the sun deck. In the afternoon, our local expert presents a lecture on the history of Lao royalty with a focus on King Anouvong – this vessel’s namesake. Until we reach our first overnight stop, you can relax in the lounge, enjoy a drink at the bar and get to know your fellow travellers during the golden hour of dusk. For your first dinner, a culinary treat awaits. Step off Anouvong onto a secluded sandbank and savour a barbecue dinner in a romantic setting.

Baci is a popular Laotian ceremony of spirit-calling practiced at many special occasions in life: weddings, funerals, birth, departure or return of a trip, illness, birthday celebration of an ancestor, etc. Lao beliefs state that a human being has thirty-two organs, each with a corresponding guardian spirit (khouan). The Baci ceremony calls back any lost or roaming spirits, bringing harmony back to the soul as well as good luck and prosperity.

DAY ONE

VIENTIANE - SANDBANK

10 days - 9 nights

LAOTIAN SERENDIPITY

This longer cruise at a leisurely pace offers a blissful journey through beautiful Laos. Perfect to experience the unhurried riverine life with naturally stunning backdrops, paired with mesmerizing excursions and charming local rendezvous.

DAILY INSIGHT

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Early birds are welcome to join our daily morning exercise class (Yoga or Tai Chi) on the terrace deck. After a relaxing practice to the stunning backdrop of rolling hills and the majestic river, breakfast is served.

We cruise a few hours to reach our first destination of Phatat village, a small hamlet which looks over the Mekong, right at Thailand. By the local means of transportation, “Tok Tok”, we drive to a nearby Chopstick Factory. Have you ever wondered how chopsticks become perfectly round and all have the same dimensions? Here you will learn the answers to these questions.

After lunch on board, the vessel arrives at a village named Ban Pak Man. In this area, the Mekong is very calm and shallow with many small sandy islands along its shoreline, making it ideal to explore by kayak on your own.

For your evening entertainment, you can opt to join a screening of a popular classic movie.

While chopsticks have been and are called by many different names in Asia, such as “kuai-zi” in China and “hashi” in Japan, the word chopsticks is likely derived from Chinese pidgin English “chop chop”, meaning “quickly”. Therefore, chopsticks mean “quick sticks”, perhaps an apt description given by the earliest western explorers as they first experienced people nimbly eating with chopsticks. The earliest written English use of the word “chopsticks” is from explorer William Dampier’s book “Voyages and Descriptions”, published in 1699.
The morning hours are free as the vessel meanders along the river, giving you time to observe life on and off the shore. As we make our way upstream, we pass by Pak Lay on the west bank. To the west of Pak Lay lies the Nam Phouy National Biodiversity Conservation Area, which is home to the largest wild population of elephants in Laos. Despite its small stature, Pak Lay is the last sizeable town with access to a national road along the Mekong River until we reach Luang Prabang two days and nearly 200 km later.

After lunch, we stop at Don Saynhan village, where we take a short local “Tok Tok” ride to visit the so-called Khao Cave. The cave has been home to a large bat population for many generations and supplies the village with very potent fertilizer. You may like to venture inside and discover the remarkable stalagmites and stalactites.

Back on board, we continue cruising until we reach a quiet area for our mooring for the night. As the sun sets you should enjoy this moment with a sundowner.

**TODAY’S ROUTE**

Sandbank - (Pak Lay) - Sandbank

**TODAY’S DINING**

Breakfast, lunch and dinner.

**DAILY INSIGHT**

*Nam Phouy National Biodiversity Conservation Area hosts the largest population of elephants in Laos. Between 50 to 60 wild elephants live in this huge and unspoiled part of the country. Although the Nam Phouy’s population appears to be reasonably stable, they are incredibly vulnerable to the threats of poaching, illegal logging and loss of habitat.*

LAOTIAN SERENDIPITY
VIENTIANE - HUAY XAI
20 DAYS - 9 NIGHTS

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The daybreak starts – if you like – with our daily sunrise Tai Chi/Yoga or just snooze a bit longer in your room as the sun gently wakes you up.

Anouvong sails further north towards the nation’s famous hydroelectric power plant. This morning you should join our interesting lecture about the role of energy in Laos’ economy and how the country is set to become Southeast Asia’s battery.

After lunchtime, you then have two afternoon excursions to choose from:

You can set out in a small long-tail boat and go on an exploratory joyride upstream through the lush jungle along the remote, beautiful Nam Fuang River. After about 20-30 minutes, we stop over at the shore to explain the interesting jungle life of the local tribes residing in this area.

Alternatively, you can opt for a stroll through Khok Akha village with its very local charm. The village’s population of 350 is mainly comprised of “Lao Loum” (which translates to “lowland Laotian”) whose main income is from planting rice, fishing and selling wood. The village also sits a bit elevated on a riverside plateau so you might need some good footwear and a basic level of fitness, but the views and the opportunity to take home some wonderful photo memories are worth it.

Eventually, in the late afternoon, we arrive at the Xayaburi Hydroelectric Dam. The ship slowly passes through two ship locks, bringing the vessel up by about 30 meters. Here we have the chance to discover this enormous structure during a guided tour.

The vessel moors tonight in a quiet corner of the river.

TODAY’S DINING

LAOTIAN SERENDIPITY

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TODAY’S ROUTE

Sandbank - (Khok Akha) - Sandbank

LAOS

THAILAND

DAILY INSIGHT

The desire for continuity is the dominant theme among the Akha people’s beliefs, and for them, continuity is mainly in the relationship they have with their ancestors. For this reason, they learn the names of their male ancestors in chronological order until the “beginning of human beings.” They see themselves as a link in the great continuum of history. Everything they learn is integrated into this chain. The Akhas depend on their ancestors for life, food, health and safety. One day, they will take their place among the ancestors and their descendants will then have to turn to them to ensure subsistence and protection.
The morning is entirely at your own pace. Enjoy a relaxed and extended breakfast as you look out over the beautiful Mekong River and while away the time on the terrace or in the lounge with a good book and coffee.

In the early afternoon, we reach Ban Muang Kai village from where we set out for our today’s sightseeing. First, we visit the innovative and socially responsible Laos Buffalo Dairy Farm. Because dairy is a non-existent industry in Laos, most locals have never seen a buffalo being milked. Seizing on an under-utilized opportunity, the owners of the dairy farm rent pregnant female buffaloes from poor villagers six months at a time, where they milk, care, feed, and vaccinate both the mother and her calf before returning them to their owners. The milk is then used for a plethora of dairy products, including an assortment of cheeses, ice cream and yoghurt.

We continue to explore one of the most breathtaking sights in the area, the cascading Kuang Si Waterfall with its turquoise waters. It is a mere pleasure to hike leisurely through the natural park, and if you like you can refresh yourself with a swim in the pools (please bring your swimwear).

Back on board, the ship now sails towards Luang Prabang, where we should arrive in the early evening. Dinner is served on board upon our arrival, and you can have a first glimpse of the old town this evening. Explore this picturesque town, which is in walking distance from the pier, and let the colonial days come back to life before your mind’s eye.
Today we start the day with a wonderful exploration in one of Southeast Asia’s most unique cities. After breakfast, we head out directly from the ship for a walking tour to discover ancient Luang Prabang. In celebration of the 20th UNESCO Anniversary in 2015, a book was published which highlights myriad aspects of this charming World Heritage Site. We set out on foot for an “off the beaten track” guided walking tour to explore the old town with its peninsula where the Mekong and Nam Khan River meet. See Luang Prabang’s distinct architecture and hear interesting stories about the houses and the places you pass. We stroll along the main road and stop at a wonderful antique place lined with mango trees. The 100-year-old Lao-style building brims with an old-world atmosphere. One of the houses, the Lamache, was once home to noble families and later the appointed ice cream supplier to the royal family. There is no better place to have a “Lao Tea Break” with Lao coffee or herbal tea, traditional snacks or artisan ice cream.

We return to the vessel for lunch and refreshments before our afternoon discovery of Luang Prabang continues with a visit of the Royal Palace – which is now the National Museum. The museum displays interesting local art and other exhibits which used to belong to the Lao royal family. After the museum tour, you have some time on your own to explore the city centre further, or you may just sit in a street café enjoying the “sabai-sabai” atmosphere before returning to the ship.

In the early evening, we invite you for a sunset aperitif on the terrace deck which is accompanied by a classical local dance performance. Afterwards, we leave the vessel this evening for an outside dinner in one of the city’s nicest venues to enjoy delicious food in a wonderful Lao-styled ambiance. The rest of the evening can be spent exploring the night market of Luang Prabang or back on the boat.

If you visit the Wat Xieng Thong temple, you may see that the rear wall of the main building is encrusted with colored glass pieces on a red background, representing the Bodhi Tree. According to Buddhists, this is the Tree of Enlightenment under which Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment. The Bodhi Tree is considered as a place where one can seek refuge from worldly desires.
For the very early risers, we have a special treat today. Before the daylight bask the town in warm golden tones, the morning alms round, referred to as "Tak Bat" in Lao, is a living Buddhist tradition for the people of Luang Prabang and dates back generations. Wake up before dawn to witness a procession of hundreds of saffron-robed monks in the early morning light, a truly spiritual experience! After the almsgiving, walk along the morning market and watch as the town comes to life before returning to the ship in time for breakfast.

We say good-bye to Luang Prabang and sail further upstream. During the morning we get to know Mr. Francis Engelmann, a writer and retired consultant to UNESCO on heritage preservation projects since 1994. Born in Paris in 1947, Mr. Engelmann has lived in Laos for over 20 years and knows its many facets like the back of his hand. In his presentation, Mr. Engelmann shares some of his expertise on the country’s rich cultural heritage, the turbulent history and the day-to-day life of Lao people.

We arrive in the village of Muang Keo where you get the chance to observe local weavers and whisky distillers honouring their timeworn traditional crafts. From Muang Keo, we take a short and easy trek to the famous Pak Ou Caves, located directly on the Mekong’s rocky shore and opposite the mouth of the Ou River. There are two spacious limestone grottoes which house approximately 4,000 sacred Buddhist statues and images ranging from mere centimetres up to 2m (7ft) in height.

Once back to the ship we recharge for a little more adventurous action later in the afternoon (optional activity): Take a kayak and discover the peaceful, flowing river on your own and observe life on the shores from a different perspective.

We make our way upstream during the late afternoon and find our overnight spot near the local village of Gaeng Hang Ngai. You can relax on the sun deck or in the privacy of your room and take in the magnificent views of Laos’ countryside.

Pak Ou Caves gives you a glimpse of your future. Here you can choose a numbered baton at random out of a basket. A paper with matching number predicts your fortune and also includes wisdom and philosophical guidance.
Early birds are welcome to join our daily morning exercise class (Yoga or Tai Chi) on the terrace deck. After a relaxing practice to the stunning backdrop of rolling hills and the majestic river, breakfast is served. As we cruise along in the morning, our local expert hosts a lecture about Asian elephants, particularly the Laotian species, their cultural importance in the past and the current threats which have brought them to the brink of extinction.

In the late afternoon, we arrive in the small town of Pakbeng. This riverside settlement is halfway between Luang Prabang and our final destination, Huay Xai. Many locals also stop here when they travel or transport goods between these two “hubs” on the upper Mekong. We visit a lovely hill-top temple with amazing views of the gently flowing Mekong below.

We then have the chance to expand on the knowledge from our morning lecture when visiting an elephant preservation sanctuary. The elephants here used to work as logging elephants and can live in peace and safety here as they now lack the ability to survive in the wild. The sanctuary is designed under the aspects of ecotourism, and its management looks strongly after sustainable tourism while supporting this threatened species.

Back on board, we continue cruising upstream with some scenic views before we stop for the night at a sandbank.

After dinner, there is a famous Laotian “comedy” movie scheduled in our nightly “on-board cinema”. The movie, called “Chang” (Laotian for “elephant”), was shot not far away from our current location in 1927 and was made by the same producer as the first King Kong movie.
After breakfast, our morning lecture provides you with interesting insights and facts about Laotian culture of the diverse tribes living along the upper Mekong. In addition to the lecture, you are welcome to join an authentic Laotian cooking class to learn how to prepare some of the delightful and easy-to-make local foods. The rest of the morning is at your disposal as we sail through lush vegetation and gently rolling verdant hills.

In the afternoon we arrive at Huay Palang village, home of the Khmu minority. The locals’ lifestyle here depends fully on the Mekong as a means of transportation and a primary food source. The village consists of approximately 85 families. Learn about the local art of weaving Bamboo mats, which you can try your hand at if you like. Local households also produce their own alcohol by distilling rice to make the famous Lao whisky. We are sure you are curious to understand all the steps of the production process.

As the sun sets over the Mekong River, we return to the boat for a farewell Baci Ceremony, held by the village elders and meant to send you off on safe travels after spending a final night aboard Anouvong. To make the last evening particularly memorable, our culinary team prepares a wonderful dinner for tonight. Enjoy tasty Laotian specialities prepared by our expert chefs and have a grand time together with your newly made friends. Join our staff to celebrate this wonderful journey and dance the night away.

LAOTIAN SERENDIPITY
VIENTIANE – HUAY XAI
20 DAYS – 9 NIGHTS

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DAY NINE

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The last sunrise aboard paired with a morning Thai Chi is the perfect way to commence your final day. Enjoy the sumptuous breakfast buffet afterwards as we voyage towards the Thai border and Huay Xai.

The ship arrives this morning at the junction with the Nam Tha River, one of the Mekong’s major tributaries. The Nam Tha, which translates to “Green River”, begins near the Chinese border, 325 km to the northeast, and ends at this crossing with the Mekong. Kick back and relax or join our local handicraft workshop before lunchtime.

We continue journeying over the last hours until we reach the final destination of Huay Xai (approximately 15:00 o’clock). After check-out, we assist you with border crossings (Laos and Thailand) before bidding you farewell in front of the Thai immigration office. (The process of passing through both immigrations can take up to one hour, please see details in our Dis-/embarkation guide).

All mentioned times are approximate. Although it is our intention to operate the proposed itinerary as outlined above, we cannot be held responsible for any changes of the program and activities that might be necessary due to operational factors.