

General Trip info

Map

Trip Code: ITLSV

Trip Length: 13

Trip starts in: Bangkok

Trip ends in: Vientiane

Meals: 5 Breakfasts included

Accommodation: Guesthouse (2 nights), Hotel (9 nights), Overnight sleeper train (1 night)

Transport: Longtail boat, Overnight sleeper train, River boat, Private Mini van, songtheaw

Daily Itinerary

Day 1

Bangkok

Sa-wat dee! Welcome to Thailand. Thailand's bustling capital, Bangkok is famous for its tuk tuks, khlong boats and street vendors serving up delicious Thai food. Your adventure begins with a welcome meeting at 6pm on Day 1. Please look for a note in the hotel lobby or ask the hotel reception where it will take place, and have your insurance details and next of kin information ready for collection. Bangkok has so much to offer those with time to explore, so perhaps arrive a day or so early and take a riverboat to Chinatown and explore the crowded streets, uncover the magnificent Grand Palace and the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, wander down the tourist mecca of Khao San Road, or indulge in some Thai massage. After the meeting tonight perhaps gather your fellow travellers together and tuck into some world famous street food.

Day 2

Bangkok

Begin the day with a river cruise down the Chao Phraya River to explore the famous 'khlongs' (canals) (approximately 1 hour). Life along these canals seems a world away from the chaotic streets of the capital. Pay a visit to Wat Pho, one of the 'trinity' of Bangkok temples, with a 46-metre long gold plated Buddha reclining inside. Even the feet of this statue are incredible, three metres long and intricately decorated with mother of pearl. The temple grounds are equally fascinating, filled with beautifully decorated stupas, halls, and shrines. This evening you'll head north to Chiang Mai on an overnight train journey, accommodated in air-conditioned sleeping berths (approximately 13 hours). Multi share compartments are air-conditioned, with bunk beds; sheets and pillow provided. Your baggage travels in the carriage with you. There is a food and drink service available on board. Sometimes the air conditioning can make the carriage quite cold so you may want to bring a warm layer of clothing.

Day 3

Chiang Mai

The most vibrant city in northern Thailand, Chiang Mai has many famous temples and an interesting old city area. Renowned for dazzling beauty and extremely welcoming locals, the 'Rose of the North' will leave you spellbound. Chances are, you won't want to leave. Embark on a scenic, winding drive up a mountain (around 45 minutes) to one of the country's most stunning temple complexes, Doi Suthep. A 300-step naga-guarded stairway leads you to the temples, and the climb is well worth the effort. The hypnotic atmosphere of chanting Buddhist monks and sweeping views of the city make this a most memorable experience.

Day 4

Chiang Mai

Today is free for you to explore, but there are also a few optional activities you can join if you want. Perhaps join a local cooking class today and discover the secrets of real Thai cuisine. You'll learn the key ingredients, how to use them, and what to use in their place if you can't get them at home. As well as taking your own comprehensive recipe book with you after the class, you'll feast on the fruits of your labour for lunch. Get active with a bicycle tour to discover the city and surrounding countryside from a different perspective, or be spirited away on an early morning Chiang Mai tour that puts you at the epicentre of Buddhist rituals. Learn to meditate, offer alms to monks, and make an offering at a temple. In the evening you can choose to wander through the enormous, colourful Night Bazaar, and perhaps relax at a fine restaurant along the riverfront. Make sure to sample some delicious traditional northern Thai food – the signature dish is kao soy, yellow wheat noodles in a curry broth, traditionally served with chicken or beef.

Day 5

Chiang Khong

Take a journey through rural countryside to the Thai border town of Chiang Khong (approximately 5.5 hours). Formerly known as 'Juon', peaceful riverside Chiang Khong remains an important market town for the surrounding hill tribes and for trade with Laos. Stretch your legs with a stroll around town, and if you find yourself with time, then Wat Phra Kaew and Wat Luang are both well worth a visit while you're here. Then maybe enjoy a final Thai drink and dinner, while Laos beckons from across the mighty Mekong.

Day 6

Pakbeng - Mekong River

Board a slow boat for the two-day journey down the mighty Mekong River to Luang Prabang. The journey is relaxed, so you can experience the slow pace of village life and the breathtaking scenery along the river up close. The river boat is basic in nature, with a toilet, covered roof, and open sides to take in the fresh air. There are seats in the front of the boat and a small open area in the back where you can have a nap on the mat, play cards, read or have lunch. Dock at the small town of Pak Beng (after about 6 hours) to spend the night. Hmong and tribal Thai people are frequently seen on the main street, where vendors sell local textiles and handicrafts. Notes: Our guesthouse here is very basic — standard accommodation in this small, remote trading port. It can be quite cool from November to February so make sure you have some warm gear packed for this period. Due to dam construction upstream, water levels aren't as reliable as in previous years, and when the river is at its lowest from February to April, part of the journey may occasionally need to be made by land.

Day 7

Luang Prabang

Reboard the boat and cruise to the Pak Ou Caves, before arriving in the former royal capital of Luang Prabang (approximately 7 hours). An important religious site overlooking the river at the junction of the Mekong and Ou Rivers, the revered Pak Ou Caves consist of two sacred limestone caverns filled with Buddha images of all styles and sizes, brought by devoted villagers over the centuries. The lower cave, known as Tham Ting, is entered from the river by a series of steps and can easily be seen in daylight. The higher cave, Tham Phum, is deeper and requires a torch for viewing. The atmospheric World Heritage-listed city of Luang Prabang is a favourite of many travellers. Nestled in the hills of northern Laos on the confluence of the Mekong and Khan rivers, the city is claimed to be 'the best preserved city in South East Asia' by UNESCO. The city and its people retain a refined, yet relaxed, air and it's a wonderful place to wander the side streets and dusty lanes and seemingly step back into another era.

Day 8

Luang Prabang

Once the heart and soul of the ancient Lao Kingdom (Lan Xang) and designated a World Heritage site in 1995, Luang Prabang is endowed with a legacy of historic red-roofed temples and French-Indochinese architecture, not to mention some of the country's most refined cuisine, a multi-ethnic population and rich culture. Enjoy a guided tour around the Traditional Art & Ethnology centre, a non-profit museum dedicated to the collection, preservation, and interpretation of its traditional arts and lifestyles. In the afternoon, head south of town to the beautiful Kuang Si Falls, a picturesque, multi-level cascade that offers fantastically blue pools that are perfect for a mid-afternoon dip. Back in Luang Prabang this evening you'll have free time to make further discoveries, including walking around the popular Night Bazaar.

Day 9

Luang Prabang

Today is free for your own explorations. It's worth getting up in the misty early morning to view the procession of saffron-robed monks on their daily outing collecting alms, a practice that dates back centuries. The people of the town wait out the front of their houses with food for the monks to collect and take back to the temple. It is done early, as the monks cannot eat anything after midday. By giving food to a monk you 'het bon' or make merit, which should augur well for your next life. Make sure you don't miss Wat Xieng Thong, the most enchanting of Laos' monasteries. Inside you'll find monks eager to practice their English with you. A large hill called Mt Phu Si dominates Luang Prabang's skyline, topped by a glittering golden stupa. You can climb the 328 zig-zag steps up to the sacred gilded stupa and big drum of the Phu Si Temple for a panoramic view of Luang Prabang and its surrounds. The Dara Market sells everything and is a great spot to browse. If you'd like to experience more local culture, consider taking a long boat across the river to a traditional Laotian village.

Day 10

Vang Vieng

Take a private mini van through dusty villages and winding mountain roads to Vang Vieng (approximately 7 hours). The mountain scenery on the drive is as impressive as that of your destination. En route, take in scenes of small village life at various points along the hilly highway. Situated on the Nam Song River, Vang Vieng is surrounded by towering limestone karsts and is a great place to walk through local markets and along the riverside.

Day 11

Vang Vieng

There's plenty to do in and around Vang Vieng, known as an adventure town thanks to its unique and varied surrounding country. The area is renowned for its many caves, many of which are easily accessible from the town. Perhaps the most famous is the cave of Tham Chang, a beautiful cavern fed by a natural spring making it a perfect spot for a refreshing swim. Hire bicycles to explore further afield, or if you're looking to relax or perhaps learn more about local niche industry, you can visit an organic mulberry farm just outside town and enjoy a meal there.

Day 12

Vientiane

Continue by private mini bus to the country's capital, Vientiane (approximately 3.5 hours). Possibly Asia's most laidback capital, Vientiane is a city where daily affairs are conducted at a relaxed pace. Hardly touched by the modernisation that has completely changed the face of other cities in South-East Asia, it has a wealth of cultural delights to discover on foot, or for the less energetic, by jumbo (tuk tuk). Faded colonial mansions, tree-lined boulevards and old temples create an atmosphere of timelessness, particularly in the older part of town along the Mekong River. Pay a visit to Wat Si Saket, the oldest temple still standing in Vientiane and home to almost 7,000 Buddha images. Visit COPE, an Intrepid Foundation-sponsored organisation dedicated to assistance those who have been injured by the multitude of unexploded ordinance across the country. This is an excellent cause and a chance to educate yourself about Laos' devastating war history. This evening, maybe join your fellow travellers for a celebratory dinner as your adventure comes to an end.

Day 13

Vientiane

There are no activities planned for the final day and you are able to depart the accommodation at any time.

Additional Information

Included Activities

Bangkok - Khlong boat canal tour
Bangkok - Wat Pho
Chiang Mai - Doi Suthep temple
Mekong River - 2 day boat trip
Luang Prabang - Pak Ou Caves
Luang Prabang - Traditional Arts & Ethnology Centre
Luang Prabang - Kuang Si Waterfalls
Luang Prabang - Alms giving
Vientiane - COPE visit

Optional Activities

Bangkok - Bangkok by Bike Urban Adventure
Bangkok - Grand Palace
Bangkok - Thai Massage
Bangkok - Jim Thompson's House
Chiang Mai - Thai cooking course
Chiang Mai - Bicycle tour
Chiang Mai - Urban Adventures - Mind & Soul
Luang Prabang - Royal Theatre
Luang Prabang - Mt Phu Si
Luang Prabang - Wat Xieng Thong
Luang Prabang - National Museum
Vang Vieng - Bicycle hire
Vientiane - Tuk Tuk to Buddha Park
Vientiane - Vientiane temples

Notes for Laos

For a small country, Laos is one of the most diverse places in South East Asia. Laos is graced with many serene and relaxed towns, a product of the country's Buddhist traditions of peace and respect. The wonderful city of Luang Prabang is no exception, with its vibrant market, ornate monasteries and the nearby Kuang Si waterfalls, it's a place most visitors spend at least a few days. Other highlights include the peaceful northern village of Luang Namtha, the base for some incredible treks and optional adventure activities in the forests and rivers of Nam Ha National Park. Vang Vieng, in the heart of the country, is another incredible town and known for its outdoor activities such as trekking, cycling and rock climbing!

Citizens of the UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, USA, Canada and most EU countries will need a visa to enter Laos as a tourist for up to 30 days. Citizens of Switzerland, Luxembourg, Russia South Korea and Japan will not need a visa. The easiest way to get a visa is to obtain it on arrival. This is available for almost all nationalities at most land borders and airports into Laos - the cost varies according to nationality, and you will need 1 passport photo. Citizens of other countries should check with the relevant consulates as to whether a visa is required, and whether it will be necessary to obtain a Letter of Invitation (only a small number of nationalities need to obtain a Letter of Invitation). A valid yellow fever vaccination certificate is required from travellers coming from areas with risk of yellow fever transmission (including transiting through an airport in an area of risk).

Notes for Thailand

Lying deep in the heart of South East Asia, Thailand is a country brimming with culture. A firm favourite with travellers for many years thanks to the welcoming nature of its people, the country boasts a wonderful blend of the exotic and the familiar. Visit incredible Buddhist temples, atmospheric markets and buzzing cities, perfectly juxtaposed with rural villages, forests, jungles and the beautiful islands of the Gulf of Thailand. Enjoy the perfect amalgamation of ancient and modern as you experience the wealth of activities on offer throughout this fascinating 'land of smiles'.

Citizens of the UK, USA, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia will not require a visa to enter Thailand as a tourist for up to 30 days. Citizens of Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and most 'western' EU countries will not require a visa to enter as a tourist for up to 30 days if arriving by air, or up to 15 days if arriving through a land border. In all cases, this may be extended for 30 days at the immigration department in Bangkok once in the country. Citizens of other countries should check with the relevant consulates as to whether a visa is required. Please note that certain Eastern European nationalities (whether members of the EU or not) will need a visa, but some nationalities can obtain the visa on arrival while others will need to obtain it in advance – please check carefully what the situation is for your nationality. A valid yellow fever vaccination certificate is required from travellers coming from areas with risk of yellow fever transmission (including transiting through an airport in an area of risk).

Important Notes

The routes, activities and places visited as described in these trip notes are intentions and are meant as a rough guide only.

These trip notes have been compiled to help you prepare for your journey once you have booked. They include the full itinerary and dates, and information about kit lists, meeting hotels, insurance, vaccinations, visas, and other information that will help you get ready for your trip.

These notes are updated regularly, so please ensure you have an up-to-date version of these trip notes.

The planned route and itinerary is the intention, but exact night stops and inclusions cannot be guaranteed. It occasionally happens that there must be a change to our planned itinerary - this may be for a variety of reasons, such as climatic, road or bureaucratic conditions. By their very nature, adventure travel needs to be approached flexibly and some regions can be unpredictable. Some Imaginative Traveller journeys go through off the beaten track areas, which often have poor infrastructure and less stringent safety standards than we are used to at home.

Our Groups

Our groups are made up of people from around the world and are usually an interesting mix of nationalities and ages. On average there is a pretty even split, males to females and between solo travellers, couples and small groups of friends. We believe that adventure travel should be open to as many people as possible and so although some trips have a minimum age limit, as long as you are fit, healthy and passionate about travel, we are happy to take you. One of the highlights of group travel is the camaraderie and friendships that are formed along the way, and as well as the variety of people that you will meet.

The maximum group size depends on the operator and the style of transport, but will usually be a maximum of 15-16 or up to 21-22 on our overland journeys.

Accommodation

Imaginative Traveller trips are designed for shared accommodation, whether staying in hotels, hostels, homestays or campsites, and therefore do not involve a single supplement. Single travellers will share with people of the same sex for the duration of the trip and those that book together will usually be able to share accommodation.

The type, variety and standard of accommodation will vary greatly depending on what options are available in the region you are travelling; hotels can vary from very basic rooms without electricity or running water to high standard hotels with good facilities! Generally in hotels most rooms will be twin-share. Hostels, gers and yurts are nearly always multi-share.

Many trips will feature a stay in a local homestay or community tourism initiative, allowing us to experience a slice of local life in the areas we travel through. On our overland trips, we will sometimes camp in campsites ranging from rather basic or even wild camps to those with excellent facilities, including swimming pools, restaurants and bars.

Dietary Requirements

If you have any dietary requirements please tell us at the time of booking and also remind your leader at your welcome meeting. Our crew will try to cater for any particular dietary requirement or food intolerance whenever possible.

Health

You need to be in good physical health in order to participate fully in our trips. When selecting your trip

please make sure you have read through the itinerary carefully and assessed your ability to cope with the style of travel on that trip. We are always happy to give extra advice if you have additional concerns. Please note that if, in the opinion of our leader, you are unable to complete the itinerary without undue risk to yourself and/or the rest of the group, Imaginative Traveller or our partner operators reserve the right to exclude you from all or part of the trip.

You should consult your doctor for up-to-date medical travel information prior to travel, particularly if you have a pre-existing medical condition. We also advise you to declare any pre-existing medical conditions to your travel insurers upon purchase.

Altitude

Imaginative Traveller offers some trips that travel to above 2,800m altitude above sea level - it is imperative at high altitudes to drink lots of water to stay hydrated, be careful not to get burned by the sun, and try not to exert yourself too much. Some pre-existing medical conditions are known to severely worsen at high altitude and be difficult to adequately treat on the ground, leading to more serious consequences. It is imperative that you discuss your pre-existing medical condition/s with your doctor. We understand certain medications are reported to aid acclimatising to high altitude; please discuss these options with your doctor.

Yellow Fever

A valid international certificate of vaccination against Yellow Fever is required in many countries. You may need to present this on arrival at the airport or border crossing. Some countries will refuse entry if you are unable to present your certificate - please see each country's note above for details. It's also quite common for your home country to request a Yellow Fever certificate on your arrival back home.

It is your responsibility to check with your doctor well in advance of leaving home about the Yellow Fever requirements for the countries you'll be visiting.

Malaria and other mosquito-borne diseases

Some areas we travel to have the risk of contracting malaria. If this applies to your trip, please get expert advice before travelling about types of malaria pills and take them as instructed. Recommended types do change from time to time and from area to area. Consult your GP / travel clinic for the most up-to-date requirements and to find the right option for you. If advised by your doctor to take a course of anti-malarial tablets, please complete the course as instructed as malaria can often manifest itself upon your return home if the course is not followed.

Other mosquito-borne diseases such as Dengue Fever, Chikungunya and Zika are continuing to spread and becoming a bigger problem around the world. Bite prevention is vital to avoid contracting any of these diseases as there are no vaccines or specific treatments available. Health professionals have issued warnings for pregnant women travelling to areas affected by the Zika virus.

The mosquito usually bites between the hours of dusk and dawn and so covering up by wearing long-legged and long-sleeved clothing, preferably light coloured and buttoned at the wrists, can help. Do not sleep without closing windows, use a mosquito net where possible and use mosquito repellent applied directly to your skin or soaked into your clothing.

Vaccinations

Recommended vaccinations and other health protection vary according to different regions and recent bulletins issued by health authorities. It is essential to get the latest advice on the region(s) you are planning to travel in so please check with either your doctor or travel clinic in good time before you travel.

We also recommend you check out any specific health advice for the country you are travelling to either via your GP or the following websites: www.nathnac.org or www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk

In the UK, we have been working with Nomad Travel for many years and their website has comprehensive,

up-to-date vaccination and health information. You will receive a 10% discount off all vaccinations given at Nomad Travel clinics.

Activities

Included activities are listed in the day-to-day itinerary, all other activities are optional and at your own expense. If you choose not to participate in the included activities on this itinerary, the cost will not necessarily be refunded; this is something you will need to check with your leader.

A selection of optional activities is listed in the day-to-day itinerary. This list is designed to be a helpful guide as to what is commonly available in each location, and is neither an exhaustive list, a guarantee that the activity is available, or an endorsement or recommendation. Please note that certain activities may not be available on your particular visit if they are overbooked, underbooked, out of season, or for any other reason - the list of activities is made according to our latest information and in the best faith, but please be aware that things may change between our last visit and your arrival. Please also note that it may not be possible to do all the activities listed in the time available at each destination, and it is recommended to give yourself extra time in your joining or ending city if you would like to participate in some optional activities there.

If you do any optional activities, you do so at your own risk and it must be clearly understood that your participation is your own decision and does not form part of your contract with Dragoman. You may be required to sign/complete a waiver form or optional activity form for some optional activities.

Insurance

It is a condition of booking that you have comprehensive travel insurance. Without evidence of valid travel insurance you will not be allowed to start the trip. This can be arranged by Imaginative Traveller through our website or by contacting our team of travel consultants.

If you prefer to arrange your insurance independently, it should have a minimum medical (including repatriation) cover of £2,000,000. We recommend that any policy also has a minimum level of cover for Personal Liability of £2,000,000 and for Cancellation and Curtailment of £5,000. Cover for loss of baggage, personal effects, money and other inclusions are down to personal choice although please bear in mind that personal effects are more likely to go missing whilst travelling and you should ensure that your policy is adequate to cover the value of your personal effects e.g. cameras, tablets, phones etc. Please note that Imaginative Traveller and our partner operators are not responsible for your personal effects and are not insured for their loss.

If you prefer to arrange your insurance independently, it should cover you for any activities that you may wish to participate in, such as white-water rafting, trekking, horse-riding, etc. and the 24-hour Emergency Assistance Company must be experienced in handling situations in developing countries if applicable (e.g. they have the ability to arrange repatriation from remote areas such as the Sahara or trekking in the Andes). If you are travelling to high altitude (such as embarking on a trek to the summit of Kilimanjaro), please make sure that this is also covered.

Please double check if you have annual travel and/or credit card policies to ensure they have the cover you require, as many of these policies are not suitable with adventure travel to remote areas. Many credit card medical insurance policies are not valid for travelling outside your country of residence or outside the EU.

Please also check the age limits on any policy you wish to take out and make sure that you thoroughly inform the insurance company of any pre-existing conditions.

Passports

Check that your passport will still be valid for 6 months after the end of the trip - this is important as some countries WILL refuse entry to anyone whose passport is due to expire. A temporary or emergency passport is not valid on our trips. You will need to provide us with your passport details prior to departing for your trip. If you change your passport please remember to inform us.

Pre and Post Trip Accommodation and Transfers

At Imaginative Traveller we believe you should make the most of the places you visit, so if you would like to see more of the joining or finishing point cities, why not book additional accommodation to extend your stay? We can take away the hassle of time zones and language barriers by making the booking for you. This accommodation is only available at the joining or finishing city of your trip, immediately before or after the trip you are travelling on. Please note our rates do not reflect last minute walk-in rates or internet specials.

We can also book arrival airport transfers for you as long as we have your flight arrival details. These are normally payable in cash upon arrival; however we do have pre paid transfers in a few destinations.

Please contact our reservations team for details of the accommodation and transfers that we can offer, as not all hotels offer this service.

Responsible Tourism

Imaginative Traveller is committed to ensuring that we have a positive impact on local communities and that we implement policies to minimise any negative impact on the local environment. We recognise that we are guests of local communities and strive to make them benefit directly from our visit. You can find full details of Imaginative Traveller's responsible tourism policy on our website.

Issues on the trip

While we always endeavour to provide the best possible holiday experience, due to the nature of travel and the areas we visit sometimes things can and do go wrong. Should any issue occur while you are on your trip, it is imperative that you discuss this with your group leader or our local partner straight away so that they can do their best to rectify the problem and save any potential negative impact on the rest of your trip.

We recognise that there may be times when your group leader may not be able to resolve a situation to your satisfaction. If this is the case please contact our customer relations department on

customer-relations@imtrav.net

You may also choose to provide details in your feedback questionnaire which we ask you to complete at the end of your trip, but we do ask you to be aware that it is very difficult for us to provide any practical help after the trip is complete.

Feedback

After your travels, we want to hear from you! We rely on your feedback. We read it carefully. Feedback helps us to understand what we are doing well and what we could be doing better, and it allows us to make improvements for future travellers.