

BANGKOK, LAOS & VIETNAM

Bangkok remains one of the best values in Asia. The city has a wide range of fine hotels with affordable rates and great service. One of my favorite hotels in the city is **The Sukhothai**. This 20 year old hotel is unlike any other in the city. The Sukhothai sits on a large plot of lush vegetation, gardens, and reflecting pools, right in the heart of Bangkok. The hotel is off Sathorn road, which is the main area for businesses and embassies. There is good shopping nearby and good access to the Skytrain, Bangkok's elevated public transit system. If you want to face the river, then book the Mandarin Oriental, Peninsula or the Shangri-La, all on the Chao Praya. BUT - if you want an authentically Thai hotel and appreciate modern and stylish design, then the Sukhothai is a good bet. The property's rates start in the low \$200s, complete with a wonderful breakfast buffet for 2, upgrade, and other benefits. The property only has 4-5 floors per wing, facing a series of indoor gardens, and is surrounded by taller apartment buildings and office towers, so you are in an oasis in the center of town. The hotel's 210 rooms are spacious (*smallest is 400 sq ft) and go up from there. All rooms have separate bath and shower, teak floors, and a simple Thai modern design that works. 80% of the rooms face the gardens, which are beautiful. Do not miss dinner or lunch at Celadon, the hotel's Thai restaurant, or the spa, with fantastic treatments. My favorite rooms were the executive suites facing the garden, with 800sq ft of space and spacious living/sleeping quarters. Tip: rooms on the 1st floor have double height ceilings and two small balconies facing the gardens.

The new Bangkok airport, **Suvarnabhumi**, is colossal. Bangkok is a hub for this part of the world, and there are a zillion flights leaving every 5 minutes, or so it seems. When you deplane, you walk for miles to get to a crowded immigration area. ON departure, many airlines do not have enough personnel to check you in and check-in lines of 1 hour (as I just experienced on Tuesday) are common. Give yourself at least 2 hours at the airport before departure. The line for security on departure is also long,. A great service (offered by A&K Thailand, Signature's destination specialist) is the VIP arrival/departure. You are met at the gate on arrival and whisked by golf cart to the short diplomatic line. On departure, you go through the crew/VIP security line which is a breeze. Well worth it! After you clear security, stop at the **Jim Thompson** shop at the airport, to stock up on silk items of the highest quality at duty free prices.

LAOS

Tourism to **Laos** is booming. This country, which was off the radar for decades, is experiencing a renaissance. Laos was a key battleground during the long war in Indochina, which ended in 1975. Once the war ended, the country sealed itself from the outside world for about twenty years. In the 1990s, the government slowly opened to the world, and backpackers, intrepid travelers, and global sophisticates flowed in.

There is much to see and in Laos, but the infrastructure is not quite there yet. The country does not have many four/five star hotels up to US traveler standards, trips by car take a long time, and there is no rail service to speak of. Thankfully, Air Lao is quickly adding flights within Laos, and this is making it easier to travel within the country, in 90 minutes or less, just about anywhere. Why come to Laos? First, it is the most unspoiled corner of SE Asia and it is a privilege to see it now. Secondly, the country is beautiful and has much to offer - nature, culture, shopping, adventure, exploration. Third, the people are wonderful - warm, welcoming, charming, without pretense. Fourth, the pace is unhurried and peaceful - a far cry from the teeming Bangkok, Saigon, or Hanoi. There are more people in metropolitan Bangkok than in all of Laos!

The #1 destination for travelers is **Luang Prabang**. This sleepy town on the Mekong River (one of the longest in the world) was designated 'World Heritage Site' by Unesco in 1995. The city is surrounded by hills and is notable for its peaceful atmosphere, has 30 world-class Buddhist temples and shrines, and is the spiritual heart of Laos. The town was the country's capital until the 16th century, when it moved to Vientiane. Top sights here : the National Museum (former royal palace with beautiful interiors - do not

miss the sacred Phabang statue and the great collection of vintage 50s/60s cars given the the King by US presidents in the past); the Wat Xieng Tong temple, the climb to the top of mt Phou Si (great views, especially at sunset); and participating in the early morning Tak Bat, or alms giving ceremony (offering food and rice the hundreds of barefoot monks who walk past you with their begging bowls is unforgettable). Spend some time walking along the riverfront, explore charming shops and the night market, and drink in the atmosphere. Outside of Luang Prabang, A recommended the day trip to the Pak Ou caves by longboat (about 2 hours each way), a visit to the temples on the opposite side of Luang Prabang (you will have 400 year old temples by yourself), or perhaps a visit to the beautiful Kuang Si waterfalls, if you are 'temped out'.

Beyond Luang Prabang: Visit Muang La, a great mountain lodge about 5 hours North of town, to enjoy hikes, bike rides, visits to remote hill towns, and dips in the lodge's hot springs; you can also fly to Pakse in the South to see the stunning Wat Phu Champasak temple (Laos' 2nd world heritage site and a smaller version of Angkor temples) and the 4,000 islands region of the Mekong, before it goes into Cambodia.

Practical advice: Weather is hot, hotter, hottest. Bring a good insect repellent as mosquitoes are intrepid and in force early in the day/in the evening. Do not change a lot of money into Kip as you cannot take Kips out of the country. Use cash (dollars) for just about everything. The only thing you must pay in Kip are the entrance fees to museums (typically 1.26 or so at 8,000 Kip to 1 USD). A good ground operator is a MUST - especially to get a guide with a good command of the English Language. Note - a lot of travel companies are 'outsourcing' their Laos business to 3rd parties, and many travelers complained about their guides and drivers. Remember: You get what you pay for!

At the moment, there are not many 4/5 star hotels in Laos. The country's hotel portfolio is not on par with the high end hotels in Thailand or Vietnam. Having said this, there are a number of charming hotels that offer great experiences and deliver good service.

In Luang Prabang, the #1 choice is **La Residence Phou Vao**. This hotel is part of Orient-Express. Originally, the hotel was built by the Pathet Lao regime as a residence for guests. Over the years, the hotel expanded, renovated the rooms, added a spa, and created a haven on a hill overlooking Luang Prabang and the hills beyond. The hotel is not in the city center (will explain shortly why this is a plus) but there is a shuttle service that takes you back and forth to the main post office (central location) or on demand to restaurants at night. The hotel feels very intimate, as it has only 32 rooms and 2 suites. Rooms are spacious and have an open bedroom-bathroom plan, with a terrace. There are also 2 suites which have a separate living area with a bed than can accommodate a 3rd person easily. The hotel has a beautiful spa (with a small pool), great restaurant, and a refreshing infinity pool which I highly recommend after a day of temple hopping and adventures in town. Peak season is November to March. The service is superb - 4 staff members per room make you feel as if you were the only guest. There is a small library with free internet (a nice touch) and helpful front desk. Write to the hotel ahead of time to make sure your clients get their room preferences and special requests fulfilled. Note: meals are expensive on property, so you may want to dine in town and have the shuttle take you to your restaurant.

If you want to stay in town, the top choices are Masion Souvannaphoum (24 rooms) the charming former royal residence; or Villa Santi (25 rooms). Aman junkies can stay at the Amantaka, a former hospital, with 24 individual bungalows around a vast grassy courtyard. The downside of staying in town is that because there are 30+ temples, monks get up around 4am and start ringing bells at that hour. If you stay at La Residence Phou Vao you may hear the odd rooster crowing around 6am, but at least it's not bells at 4am!

Beyond Luang Prabang: For adventures, book Muang La resort (5 hrs North of LP - see www.muangla.com for more details). In Vientiane, the top choice is the Settha Palace hotel www.seethapalace.com

Visa: US citizens need a visa. You can get a visa on arrival at Luang Prabang or Vientiane airports. Bring 2 passport photos and \$35 cash to the visa window on arrival at Luang Prabang Airport.

Getting There: There are nonstop flights to Luang Prabang (LPQ) airport from Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Siem Reap, Hanoi, and from Vietniane, Laos' capital.

After the 90F degree heat of Laos, arriving in **Hanoi** was a shock. I stepped off the plane and it was easily 40 degrees cooler. During winter, Hanoi has lower temperatures, and many overcast days. The airport is located 30-40 minutes from the city center, and the traffic is heavy, especially at rush hour. Within the central part of Hanoi, there are zillions of motorbikes, especially on the major streets. In addition, many intersections have no stoplights, so crossing the street is a leap of faith. The locals' advice: just keep walking slowly, and do not look into the oncoming traffic - which took some getting used to.

Hanoi's history goes back over 1,000 years. The city is near the banks of the Red River, and has a series of lakes within the metropolitan area. There are many wide boulevards with big trees, and, in general, Hanoi feels older and more staid than Saigon. In Hanoi, do not miss: The **Temple of Literature** (modeled after the Temple of Confucius in Qufu, China), a series of beautiful structures, altars, and pavilions; The **old quarter** (resist the temptation to ride a cyclo here, as the streets are narrow, filled to the rafters with people and vendors, and nonstop motorcycle traffic); the beautiful **Opera House**, **Dong Xuan Market** - by far the most interesting; **Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum** and museum next door; and a stroll or drive through the old **French Quarter**. My single favorite experience was seeing the famous **Thang Long water puppet theater**. This is a tradition of over 1,000 years, and the performance lasts under 1 hour (cost \$5, try to get a seat in the 2 front rows for best views). The puppeteers are behind a curtain, waist deep in water. The performance has live music and is charming, even if you do not understand the story. Worth the visit!

The best place to stay in Hanoi, by a mile, is the **Sofitel Metropole Hotel**. This landmark hotel, built in 1901, has been welcoming presidents and celebrities for over 100 years. The hotel has 2 wings. The original Metropole wing and the new Opera wing. Rooms either face the street, or the courtyard, which has a garden and a small pool. Three years ago, the hotel built a phenomenal spa with excellent treatments at affordable prices (compared to US). Rooms in the old wing start at 280 sq ft and have wood floors and many with high ceilings. There are only 3 suites on this side, named after Chaplin, Graham Greene, and Somerset Maugham. In the new (Opera) wing the rooms have a more modern feel and a number have access to the Club, which offers various presentations daily (worth the upgrade). All Grand Premium and Suite rooms have access to the Club. The hotel is the center of social life in Hanoi, so make sure you book reservations for lunch and dinner at one of the hotel's French or Vietnamese restaurants. Although the rooms on the Old Wing are charming, the new (Opera) wing are quieter. You can walk from the Sofitel to the main lake and many of its top attractions, including the water puppet theater I mentioned above.

Halong Bay: This area was named a World Heritage Site by Unesco, and rightfully so. It is one of the most unique places in Indochina, or the world, for that matter. Halong Bay is enormous, over 600 sq miles, with more than 2,000 limestone islands and rock formations. No two vantage points are the same, and if you are lucky and have sunny weather Halong Bay will blow you away, no matter how well traveled you are.

Unfortunately, getting to Halong Bay is no picnic. You drive for about 4 hours from Hanoi on a paved, but very busy, road. The drive is not particularly interesting until you get near Halong Bay. The only other way to get there is by helicopter (a hassle and sky high expensive), so might as well pack a sense of humor and go by car. Mercifully, an enterprising man built two huge rest stops at mid point, complete with a restaurant where you can get something to eat, clean bathrooms, and Walmart-sized shop with every Vietnamese souvenir you can think of. If you are going to Halong Bay, an overnight cruise is a MUST. Do not make the mistake of driving over/back in a day which is exhausting and you will not see much of Halong Bay. To really appreciate the place, you have to overnight on a ship. There are over 100 ships of one sort or another. Book either Ginger, Jasmine, or the Violet -- because these are the smallest. These are the best boats, with the best cabins, dining, and service. The Violet has only 6 cabins (enormous, each with its own terrace). The cabins to book are the forward cabins, if you have a choice - less engine noise and super views of the front of the ship. Once on board, you can go by zodiac to fishing villages,

explore ancient caves, or stay on board and take in the views. My favorite experience here: **kayaking** at sunset around Halong Bay -- simply priceless! The ship can arrange this and the kayaks are in good condition. A guide takes you around, and you explore the bays, islands, and more remote parts of the area. Worth the trip!

Danang: You will be blown away with Danang's new airport. Danang is in central Vietnam, on the coast, and roughly in the middle of the country. Near Danang is China Beach, where American soldiers first landed in Vietnam in the 1960s, and also near the old DMZ, which separated North from South Vietnam. Danang is in the middle of a building boom, and there is one new hotel on the beach after another - a new Hyatt Regency, a new Intercontinental, the list goes on. Getting to Danang is easy, with many nonstops from Saigon, Hanoi, other cities in Vietnam, as well as service from Seoul on Asiana and Korean Airlines.

Nam Hai, a stunning resort on the ocean, and a Signature hotel. The Nam Hai is by far the best place to stay in central Vietnam. The property is part of the GHM group, the sister brand of Aman Hotels. The resort is very spread out, as accommodations are 100 free standing villas, starting at 800 sq ft and up. About half of the villas have their own pools, and all have views of the ocean. Villas have 1 to 5 bedrooms. The resort is ultra-modern and design oriented, so think 4enormous terraced swimming pools, the last one on the edge of the sea, lots of steps and different levels, jaw dropping architecture and sense of arrival - whether you are entering the resort, the restaurant, your villa, or your bathroom – with indoor/outdoor shower. You stay at the Nam Hai for the service, the cuisine, the design, the superb spa (a destination in itself) and the beach, of course, best enjoyed from April to September. The resort offers a free shuttle to Hoi An, only 15 minutes away. The other advantage of the Nam Hai is that the hotel is ten minutes away from 2 of Vietnam's top golf courses.

The main attraction in this region is **Hoi An**, a charming city on the banks of the Thu Bon river. Hoi An is a Unesco World Heritage site, and its old quarter goes back nearly 500 yeras. Hoi An was a key trading post in SE Asia, and you can see remnants of Japanese, Chinese, and European architecture. The Old Quarter is very compact, and easily seen in a few hours' time. Do not miss the old Cantonese Assembly Hall from 1885, the Japanese covered bridge from 1593, and a number of old houses you can visit - especially Phung Hung, Tan Ky and Quan Thang which are the most beautiful. You can also have clothes made here, as Hoi An has dozens of tailors that can copy garments or make new ones in a matter of hours (a new men's suit can be sewn in 1 day, believe it or not!). Hoi An is also home to many charming cafes and restaurants. There is a hotel right in town called Life Resort, so if you want to be in town, then this is where you want to stay. However, please note that Hoi An floods every year with the Monsoon, and a number of rooms at the Life Resort and other venues in town can have a musty smell from the receding waters. If you wanted to stay at a less-expensive resort on the beach, then my recommendation would be either the Hyatt or the new Intercontinental.

Although you can fly to Hue from Saigon or Hanoi, the drive from the Danang is beautiful, especially the section of the Hai Van Pass in the mountains.

Hue is a relatively small city (by comparison to Saigon or Hanoi) on the Perfume River is the most significant cultural and historical center in Vietnam.

Hue is manageable, and does not have the horrendous traffic of Saigon and Hanoi. Hue is famous for its intellectual and religious traditions, its architecture, and of course for being the seat of power during the Nguyen dynasty, Vietnam's royal family, who were in power from the early 19th century until 1945, when World War II ended. Note – many travelers come to Hue for the day (from the coast) and I think this is a big mistake, as you need 1 or 2 nights to take in all the sites and really experience this city and its environs.

Hue Highlights: First and foremost, The Citadel. This World Heritage Site was established in 1802. The Citadel is an enormous fortress enclosing the imperial, civic, and forbidden cities. Think of a slightly smaller, tropical version of the Forbidden City in Beijing, and you get the idea. The Citadel is a vast

complex and you can spend hours visiting all the sites within the walls of the complex. My advice is to start at the Ngo Mon Gate, a massive stone entrance with a watchtower, where the emperor used to sit on state occasions. Once inside, visit the restored royal theater, the Hung Mieu temple, royal library, and Hiem Lam pavilion. The place is ! Note – not all the buildings have been restored, so you have to use your imagination in certain sections to get an idea of the splendor of the place. Beyond the Citadel, Hue has superbly beautiful pagodas, especially Tu Dam, Thien Mu, and Bao Quoc. Hue is also famous for its 7 imperial tombs. The tombs are scattered in the countryside outside the city. The tombs are enormous complexes, complete with gardens, buildings, places of worship, pavilions, the works. Of the 7, the only 2 open for viewing when I was in Vietnam are the Khai Dinh (on a steep rise – make sure you go all the way to the top), and Minh Mang (built around a series of lakes and gardens – absolutely stunning). A third tomb is about to open this year, so check with Trails of Indochina for latest information. Hue is also a great place to enjoy Vietnamese cuisine, a leisurely cruise on the Perfume River, or ride a cyclo (a pleasant ride – not the hair-raising experience of Hanoi's old city!). Here again, a great guide + driver are musts.

Where to stay: La Residence. This charming, art deco hotel, offers 122 rooms and suites in the heart of Hue, on the banks of the Perfume River. The hotel's core is the former residence of the French Governor built in the 1930s. Since then, the hotel built two wings in the same style. The hotel has a pool and rooms with views of the river. My advice is to book a room facing the pool/gardens, or the river. The rooms facing the city can be noisy. There are a number of charming suites in the main building, decorated as they were designed in the 1930s. The hotel has a small spa and gym.

If you are looking for something completely different and don't mind a 10-15 minute drive into town, then stay at the Pilgrimage Village resort, right outside Hue. This is a simple, stylish hotel, made up of a series of free standing brick buildings with wood interiors and lush vegetation, housing either 4 bedrooms (2 on each floor), or private villas with plunge pools. Hotel is very affordable, with rates starting in the \$150s and up.

Hanoi has many attractions and cultural sites. Saigon is more open, friendlier, more vibrant, more welcoming than Hanoi. By far, Saigon today is Vietnam's commercial center. This is where banking, business and commerce take place in Vietnam. The city is modernizing and growing at a breakneck pace, so if you can, visit now. Saigon's history goes back only 300 years or so. The city took off in the 19th century, when it became capital of French Cochinchina, one of its provinces in Indochina. Saigon used to be called 'The Paris of the Orient' for its French architecture, fine dining, and lively nightlife.

Highlights: By far the most interesting part of Saigon is the Dong Khoi, or historical district. You can explore on foot, and visit the Old Post Office, Notre Dame cathedral, People's Committee Building And Municipal Theater (all built by the French during the colonial period), as well as landmarks such as the Rex Hotel, home to US journalists covering the Vietnam war. The other interesting neighborhood I Liked was the Cholon, home to Chinese traders in years past. In Cholon, do not miss the Quang Am Pagoda, bustling streets, and traditional medicine shops. Of all the pagodas in Saigon, the most Impressive is the Jade Emperor pagoda, built about 100 years ago. Museum-wise, the 2 top sites are the Reunification Hall (former home of the president of S Vietnam and a fascinating time capsule of the 1960s), and The War Remnants Museum. Note: the War Remnants Museum is not for the faint of heart. This is a series of exhibits documenting the horrors of war, from the point of view of the Vietnamese people. If you are Interested in the 20th century history of Vietnam and the war, by all means visit. Otherwise, skip -- way too intense for most people, especially children. Outside Saigon, you can visit the Cu Chi tunnels, a complex system of tunnels built by the Vietnamese during the war. Again –the tunnels are not for the adventuresome, and those interested in the history of the war. The tunnels are grim and narrow. If you are claustrophobic, you need to skip this visit. If you are interested in religion, visit the Cao Dai Holy See. Cao Dai is a home grown Vietnamese religion, Established in 1926, that brings together Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and Vietnamese beliefs.

Where to stay: Park Hyatt Saigon. This seven year old hotel offers 244 rooms, including 20 suites. The hotel is superbly located in the center of the city and has world-class service. The breakfast buffet in the

morning alone is worth the price of admission. My favorite rooms were the Park Deluxe, with terraces and direct access to the hotel's pool. The hotel also has a gym and spa. The property is the center of social life in Saigon, and busy all day. Location is in District 1, which means you can walk to all the main sites in Dong Khoi area. If you want a lower-priced alternative in Saigon, try InterContinental, also in the #1 district downtown, but not as expensive as Park Hyatt.

Money matters: Vietnam uses the Dong as its currency. Today, the exchange rate is roughly 20,000 Dong to 1 USD. Needless to say, doing the math takes some effort, especially when you get a restaurant bill for 1 million (Dong, that is!). My advice is to change a few Dong (\$50 or less), to cover the price of admissions at certain national sites that only accept Dong. Everyone else in Vietnam gladly accepts (and prefers!) USD. Tip: change \$100 into \$1 and \$5 bills before you leave home, as getting change in Vietnam for smaller USD denominations not always possible. Many shops and hotels allow you to settle bill in USD or Dong, and can quote you prices in either. When shopping, get quotes in Dong (for a slightly lower price) but pay in USD. Do not get stuck with Dong, as it is worthless outside Vietnam.