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## Peoples of the Irrawaddy and Mekong: Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia

January 21 to February 20, 2012 (inclusive of travel from US)

### Introduction

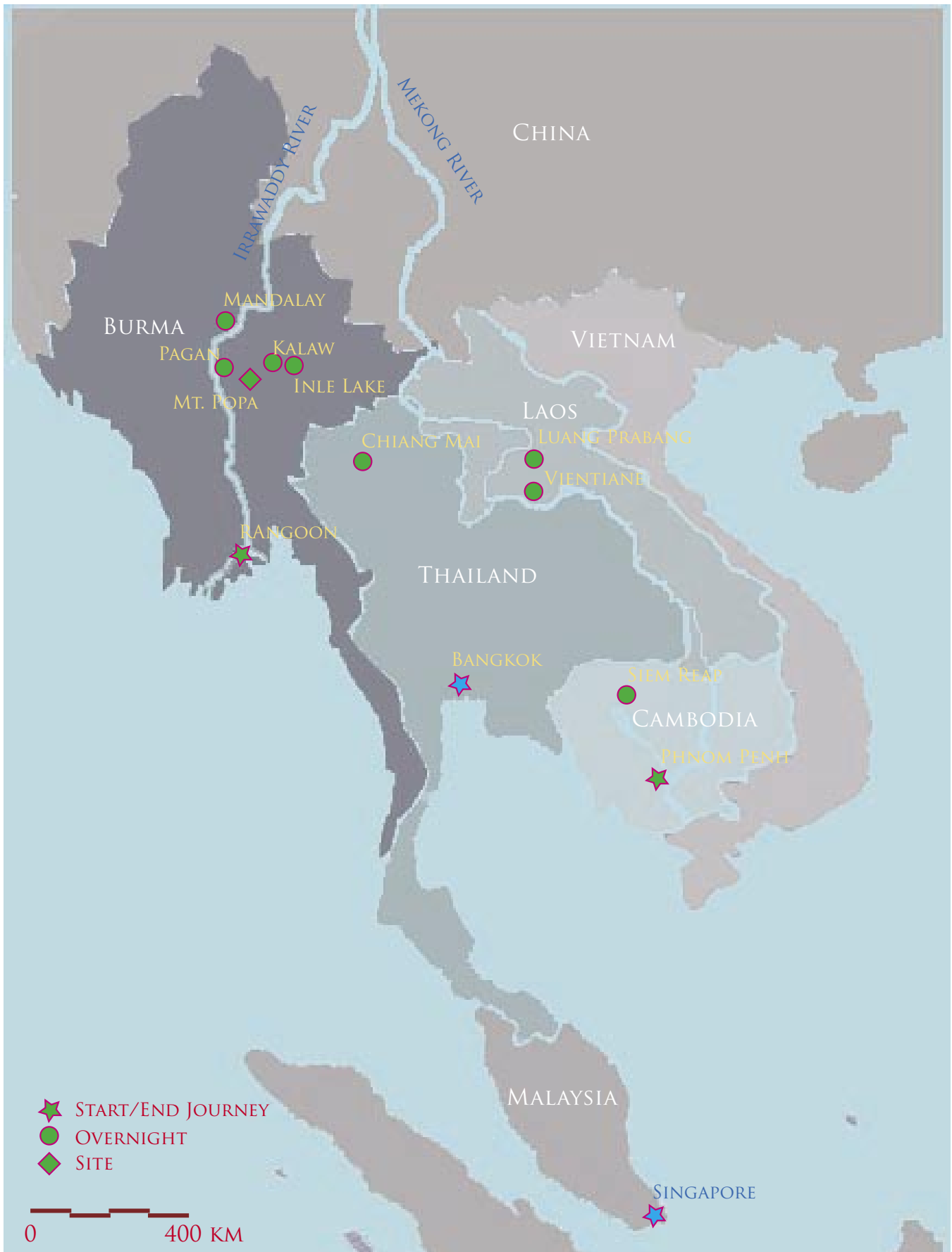
The focus of this trip is the ancient culture of Southeast Asia found in present day Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. It takes as its focus and guiding principle the interrelationship of cultures across the region and through the span of time. As we explore many of the extraordinary monuments of these great ancient civilizations at places such as Pagan (Burma), Chiang Mai (Thailand), Luang Prabang (Laos) and Angkor (Siem Reap, Cambodia) we will observe how these monuments are interrelated and how each great civilization influenced and was influenced by the others. So too today, these four countries are inextricably linked as their peoples migrate from one land to the next, and in fact we will have occasion to study the effects of migration and displacement on the cultural identity of the peoples.



*The temples at Pagan in the early morning mist (this and all other watercolors by Stephen Harby)*

This ambitious and richly layered itinerary was proposed by John Walsh. Kristin Kelly, formerly of the Getty (both Museum and Conservation Institute) will accompany us as scholar and lecturer, and Stephen Harby has framed it all in a workable itinerary, which as always has been planned for optimum comfort, pleasure and enhancement of appreciation of the cultural uniqueness of each place. Bill Harrison, Executive Director of the Burmese Migrants Education Project in Chiang Mai, will join us along the way. He will facilitate our understanding of the present day realities of cultural exchange and dislocation from one region to another.

Reaching one of the major gateways (Beijing, Bangkok or Singapore) on our own, we will convene in Rangoon, Burma (now Yangon, Myanmar —for the purpose of this text original historic place names will be used), where we will spend thirteen nights on an itinerary created for us by one of that country's best established companies engaged in cultural travel. From Burma we will fly directly to Chiang Mai in northern Thailand whose ancient culture as well as present day migrant population owes far more to Burma than it does to the rest of Thailand to the south. We will next fly to Vientiane, the capital of Laos, which will strike us as one of the places least changed by the global march of increasing sameness. After two days there we will journey to the charming town of Luang Prabang, once the capital of the Kingdom of the Million Elephants, and full of Buddhist temples and French colonial architecture. We will fly on to Cambodia, recently emerged from its post Pol Pot hibernation and will start with three full days to see the great Khmer Temples, of which the famed Angkor Wat is but one of many. We will conclude our stay in Cambodia and our trip spending the last night in its capital Phnom Penh. For those who wish, there can be a last fling at the Oriental or Peninsula Hotel in Bangkok before returning to the reality of lives at home.



## Burma

Despite its political situation, or perhaps in a sad way, because of it, Burma (or Myanmar as its leaders would have us call it) remains a world apart. It is one of the few places on the planet that has not been overwhelmed by the tides of globalized homogenization. Rangoon (Yangon) is one of the few Asian capitals to retain its colonial urban fabric intact—if faded and crumbling. It reminds us what Singapore, Bangkok and Penang must have once been like. Its people are welcoming, travel services are efficient, and a visit there is free of the sorts of controls and restrictions that one might imagine from such a regime.

As to the question of whether a visit to Burma adds support to the government or opens a window to potential change, there are arguments on both sides. The people one encounters there, while unlikely to be candid about the political situation, will argue that a visit is a good thing from the point of view of the plight of the locals.

Our thirteen-night itinerary begins and ends in Rangoon, where we will fly independently from either Bangkok or Singapore, connecting directly from the US, or with a stopover as



*The Governor's Residence, our hotel in Rangoon*



*The serene landscape of the Irrawaddy River captured from the steamer's deck.*

individuals choose. Our hotel there, the Governor's Residence is located in the diplomatic enclave and once hosted foreign diplomats. Impeccably refurbished by the Simplon Orient Express outfit, it will be a good place to spend three nights recovering from our long trip and from which to explore the Schwedagon Pagoda, and the old British buildings of the capital.

We will fly from Rangoon north to Mandalay, to spend two nights, making an excursion one day to Amarapura and Inwa, two ancient royal capitals. The world's longest teak bridge and a 17th century teak monastery are among the treasures that await us there.

The next morning we will embark on a two-night cruise down the Irrawaddy River to Pagan aboard the replica colonial era boat Paukan or the privately chartered Amara. Along the way we will be able to continue to unwind as we glide slowly along past one stunning tableau of river life after another: villages of thatched houses, rafts of logs lashed together reminiscent of Huckleberry Finn, and local boats packed with passengers. We'll make several stops along the way, including

one to see a village where pottery is made for local export.

We will arrive in Pagan early the following morning, and will be met and taken to our hotel in a horse drawn Caleche. Pagan is a vast dry plain with hundreds of pagodas, stupas and temples whose ethereal and varied profiles rise up out of the mist and the cover of trees. The next two days will be free to explore on bicycle, horse cart or car.

Leaving Pagan by road, we will visit the sacred Mt. Popa where the Nats (spirits) sacred to the locals reside and whose lone peak rising up from the plain is festooned with spiky temples. This will bring us into the region of colonial hill stations, and we will stop at one, Kalaw, for the night. The next day we will continue on to Inle Lake, a center of Burmese rural life and crafts, with temples dotting the shores of the 13 mile lake. We will stay there on an island for two nights as a fitting end to this first segment of our journey before we fly via Rangoon to Chiang Mai.

## Detailed Itinerary

The tour will officially begin upon arrival in Rangoon on January 24 (Day 4), while the arrangements to reach there will be made on your own. We will be happy to provide assistance with these bookings through our expert agent, Tom Vise at Vista Travel: 617-588-4233.

Day 1 Saturday, January 21, 2012  
Depart Home for Asian gateway (Beijing, Bangkok or Singapore)

Day 2 Sunday, January 22 In flight, date line

(depending on timing of departure; e.g. TG 795 departs LAX 9:30 pm and arrives BKK 6:30 am on the second day).

Day 3 Monday, January 23  
Arrive major Asian gateway;

Day 4 Tuesday, January 24  
Depart Gateway for Yangon, Myanmar (Rangoon, Burma)

e.g. from Bangkok: TG 303 7:55-8:50 or TG 305 arrives 18:40 (this would permit a same day connection in Bangkok without spending the night).



British colonial era buildings in Rangoon run the gamut from stately neo classical to high Victorian Gothic



### Start of Services

Arrive and meet local guide; transfer to Governor's Residence, 3 nights

Day 5 Wednesday, January 25  
Rangoon

Morning free; afternoon visit to Schwedagon Pagoda

Day 6 Thursday, January 26  
Rangoon

Full day visit of city to include Scott Market, National Museum and Central Colonial buildings.

Day 7 Friday, January 27  
Rangoon to Mandalay

Depart Rangoon on late morning flight for Mandalay; Transfer to Rupar Mandalay Resort 2 nights; Afternoon tour of Mandalay



Left: Schwedagon Pagoda, Rangoon. Above: Thousands of crafts such as this one plied the Irrawaddy until the 1940s. Right: Bagaya Kyaung (Monastery), Inwa, near Mandalay, Built entirely of teak in 1834.



Day 8 Saturday, January 28  
Mandalay

The following program will vary depending on whether we take the large boat (*Paukan* or the smaller private boat *Amara*; this a function of the size of our group) Visit Inwa (Ava), Return to Mandalay and take a boat trip to Mingun and visit (if we are on *Amara*)

Day 9 Sunday, January 29 Mandalay

See Sunrise at Ubein Bridge and visit local temples then embark for two-night cruise on Irrawaddy to Pagan aboard *RV Paukan* or *RV Amara*.

Day 10 Monday, January 30 Irrawaddy

Cruising the Irrawaddy  
Various stops at local villages.

Day 11 Tuesday, January 31 Pagan

Arrive Pagan, disembark.

Hotel: Thiripyitsaya Sanctuary Resort, 2 nights. Afternoon visit of Pagan.

Day 12 Wednesday, February 1 Pagan

Full Day in Pagan visiting temples and stupas.



*One of the many stupa/temples in Pagan*



*The Ubein bridge is a teak structure linking several communities across the marshes and fields and teems with local color.*

Day 13 Thursday, February 2 Pagan-Kalaw

Depart Pagan by Road for Mount Popa; continue on to Kalaw, a hill station from the colonial era. Stay at Pine Hill Hotel, 1 night.

Day 14 Friday, February 3 Inle Lake

Continue by Road to Inle Lake  
Hotel: Inle Princess Resort, 2 nights

Day 15 Saturday, February 4 Inle Lake

All day touring of Inle Lake.

Day 16 Sunday, February 5 Inle Lake-Chiang Mai

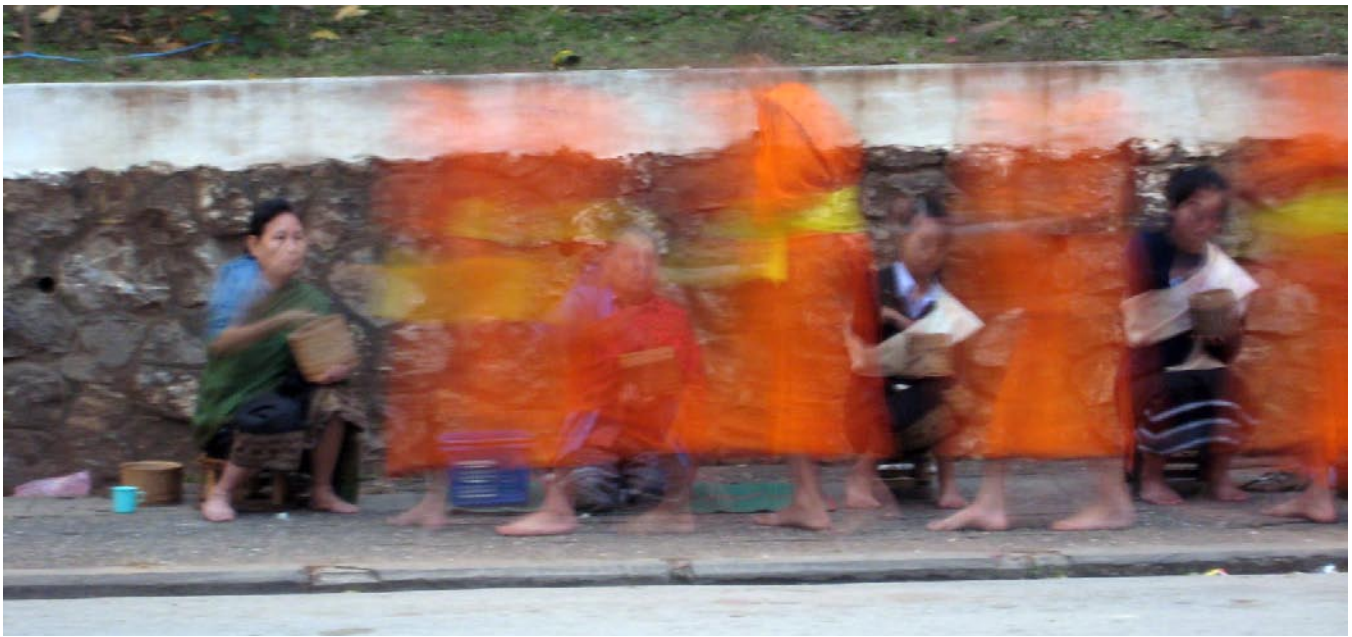
Morning departure for Yangon (Air Bagan W9 011 9:40-10:35) connection for Chiang Mai (Air Bagan W9 9607 14:50-18:10).

### Thailand

The Thais take great pride in the fact that their country, unlike neighboring Burma, Laos, and Cambodia, has never been under colonial domination by any western power. Nevertheless, the region of northern

Thailand that we will be entering has been less connected culturally and politically to Bangkok in the south than it has been to both Burma and Laos. Its geographic position has placed it on the key trade routes of the region—both the silk routes linking China to the west as well as more local connections. The 14<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century Lanna (Million Rice Fields) kingdom extended all the way east to Luang Prabang. The area was under Shan (Burmese) domination for two centuries from 1556 when they captured Chiang Mai.

The many remaining Shan temples are even today the home of Burmese monks and have become centers for the migrants from Burma. Bill Harrison will show us the work being done to educate migrants—an exploited minority for whom no social services are provided by the Thais—and to increase their understanding of the cultures of their native country and their hosts. Our four nights in the area will spent in Chiang Mai with forays into the surrounding countryside. We will be seeing temples of both Thai and Burmese styles, visiting centers run by the Burmese Migrants Education Project, and pausing for traditional Thai massage and steam baths.



*Above: At sunrise in Luang Prabang monks process from their temples to receive alms of food offered by the locals. Below: The Mekong River at Luang Prabang*

Day 16 Sunday, February 5, Cont'd.  
Chiang Mai

Arriving in Chiang Mai in the evening, transfer to Tamarind Village Hotel: 4 nights.

Day 17 Monday, February 6  
Chiang Mai

To be seen among other things: Wat Jet Yod, Wat Doi Suthep, Wat Ton Kwain, etc. Visit to Baan Hom Samunphrai, a Herbal Health Centre.

Day 18 Tuesday, February 7  
Chiang Mai

Continue with sites in and around Chiang Mai.

Day 19 Wednesday, February 8  
Chiang Mai

Continue with sites in and around Chiang Mai.

Day 20 Thursday, February 9  
Chiang Mai to Vientiane

We will depart Chiang Mai in the morning for Bangkok on Thai Airways (TG 101, 8:10 to 9:20, continuing to Vientiane on TG 570 11:45-12:55) arriving there in the afternoon.

### Laos

Our stay in Laos of four nights will be divided between Vientiane, the country's laid-back capital, where we step back in time many decades, and Luang Prabang. Its cultural links include those with Chiang Mai as well as to the Khmers in present day Cambodia. The



town, really a village, is sited on a peninsula formed by the Mekong and a small tributary, and the whole is set in a picturesque valley ringed by mountains.

Day 20 Thursday, February 9, contd.  
Arrival Vientiane

Hotel: Settha Palace, 2 nights

Day 21 Friday, February 10 Vientiane

Full day visiting Vientiane: An early start enables us to visit the fascinating local market of Thongkham which is where the locals shop and a wide variety of weird and wonderful foods are on offer. We continue to explore Vientiane capital by visiting the major sights of the capital: Wat Sisaket (the oldest, with thousands of miniature Buddha statues), Wat Prakeo (the former royal temple), That Luang Stupa (of Lao's national precious heritage), Patuxay Monument (well known as Vientiane's own Arc de Triumph). The final visit of the morning will be the excellent COPE exhibition centre, highlighting a much overlooked aspect of Laos and a major problem many of the local people face on a day to day basis in the form of unexploded ordnance as a result of heavy bombing campaigns during the Vietnam War era. Lunch can be taken at the excellent Mak Phet Restaurant, which helps to train disadvantaged youth for a career in the hospitality industry. This afternoon we visit the quirky yet impressive Buddha Park, an enchanting collection of Buddhist and Hindu sculptures on the Mekong riverside meadow. They were created by a mysterious monk spreading his philosophy on life and revealing his ideas about the universe. Upon returning to Vientiane we have the option of stopping at the Lao Disabled Womens Centre, which provides valuable training and schooling. A spectacular view of the Mekong River at sunset is a perfect way



Sites of Vientiane: (from top) Patuxay Monument, Wat Sisaket, and the School of Medicine (photos this page by Kristin Kelly)

to finish the day.

Day 22 Saturday, February 11  
Vientiane to Luang Prabang

We will take a short flight from the capital north to the relatively simple and provincial riverside hamlet of Luang Prabang. (Lao Airlines QV101 11:50 to 12:30)

Hotel: Satri House, 3 nights

Day 23 Sunday, February 12 Luang Prabang

An optional early start gives us the fantastic opportunity to participate in the daily morning ritual of saffron-clad monks collecting offerings of Alms from the faithful residents. This procession is very unique in Laos, being the only Buddhist nation still preserving the tradition. Afterwards, we have the option of visiting the local morning market, before returning to the hotel for breakfast.

After breakfast, our visit starts with That Makmo, known as 'The Water Melon Stupa' due to its shape and the Wat Visoun located within the same complex. Next we visit the excellent Arts and Ethnology Centre which gives us a further insight into the ethnic mix and culture of Laos. We also visit the magnificent Wat Xiengthong, with its roofs sweeping low to the ground, representing the classical Luang Prabang style. We then board a cruise upstream on the Mekong River, which gives us a panoramic view of the tranquil countryside. Our first stop is the village of Ban Muangkeo where we start a short trek to reach the mysterious Pak Ou Caves, two linked caves crammed with thousands of gold lacquered Buddha statues of various shapes and sizes left by pilgrims. We then return to Luang Prabang by road via Ban Nongxai, an artisans' village and also to visit a



*Temples of Luang Prabang:*



silversmith workshop. We arrive back in Luang Prabang by late afternoon.

Day 24 Monday, February 13 Luang Prabang

Morning Visit to temples across the river and a local weaving center in Ban Xangkong and Ban Xienglek. Balance of day at leisure to shop and explore on one's own.

Day 25 Tuesday, February 14 Luang Prabang to Siem Reap

We will depart late morning for our flight to Siem Reap, Cambodia, the modern town, where the great Khmer sites of Angkor are found. (Vietnam Airlines VN 931 10:40 to 12:00)

### Cambodia

Flying from Luang Prabang non-stop, we will arrive in Siem Reap, where we will spend four nights. We will have ample time to see the many major temple sites as well as the less often seen outlying places, including the temple of Preah Vihear on the border with Thailand (if the political situation permits). We will conclude our trip in Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital. It has recently undergone

a significant transformation from the grim decades following the war as the Khmer Rouge lingered on in parts of the country and the country remained isolated and mired in poverty, shunned by all but the most intrepid (your leader visited in 1995 and had it to himself). All of that has changed, as we will discover both here and in Phnom Penh. It has become a bustling tourist destination, as befits the importance and wonder-of-the-world

status of the great temples dating from the Khmer empire in the 9<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries AD.

Day 25 Tuesday, February 14, cont'd. Luang Prabang to Siem Reap

Arrival Siem Reap; Hotel: Angkor Village, 4 nights.





Day 26 Wednesday, February 15 Siem Reap

Touring Angkor Sites to include: Angkor Wat; Angkor Thom monuments (Terraces of Elephants and Leper King), Bayon Temple; Baphuon Temple (world's largest jigsaw puzzle); Preah Khan; and if there is time, an excursion to Beng Mealea. Ta Prohm, Banteay Srei (10th century), gates of Angkor Thom.



Tour to Museum and other city sites.

Day 27 Thursday, February 16 Siem Reap

Continued Touring Angkor Sites

Day 28 Friday, February 17 Siem Reap

Continued Touring Angkor Sites

Day 29 Saturday, February 18 Siem Reap to Phnom Penh

Depart in late morning on a non-stop flight (Cambodia Angkor Air K6 100 8:50-9:35); Transfer to Phnom Penh's historic grand Hotel, Le Royal, for lunch/check in 1 night.



*Top: Preah Khan Temple, above and below: Angkor Wat at dusk and at dawn.*

Day 30 Sunday, February 19 Phnom Penh to Bangkok or other Gateway for homeward travel.

Individual Transfer to airport for individually arranged homeward travel.

### Conclusion of Services

The following information is for individual planning purposes and can be arranged or modified to meet individual participants' needs.

E. g. Depart for Bangkok (Thai Airways, TG 581 10:05- 11:10 am)

Day 31 Monday, February 20  
Depart Gateway for Home

E.g. from Bangkok to Los Angeles: (TG 794 19:30-19:20 same day)

