

# The Mekong Explorer (13 days)

## Laos & Thailand



**Please note: This itinerary can be modified to your school's particular aims, learning objectives and budget.**

Laos and Thailand share both land and river borders, as well as similar Buddhist temples frequented by saffron-robed monks. Their languages and cuisines are also comparable, but beyond these surface similarities, the two nations diverge significantly.

This 13-day journey showcases the contrasts between these neighbouring nations. Highlights include a Great Race urban challenge in Luang Prabang, river kayaking, and a two-day boat cruise along the mighty Mekong River. Along the way, we'll explore the impacts of China's Belt and Road Initiative, encounter remote communities, and take in breathtaking scenery.

In Laos, we'll immerse ourselves in village life before heading to the mountains of Northern

Thailand for a three-day community project. Students will collaborate on meaningful initiatives, such as renovating a local school or building a brick home for a family in need. We'll also visit the Golden Triangle, where we'll delve into the history of the once-thriving opium trade.

Our journey concludes in Chiang Mai, where we'll participate in a traditional Thai cooking class and an invigorating Thai boxing session.

This unforgettable experience combines team-building activities, physical challenges, and cultural exploration, highlighting the stark differences between the two nations and their approaches to sustainability and development. A true tale of contrasts awaits.

## Day 1

### Luang Prabang (Laos)



Upon our arrival in Laos, our tour guide greets us at the airport and transfers us to our hotel. After settling in, we gather for a brief information session to go over the itinerary for the coming days and learn a few basic Lao phrases.

We then head out for an orientation walk through the UNESCO World Heritage-listed city of Luang Prabang. Once a regional capital of French Indochina, this charming town boasts stunning colonial architecture and breathtaking views where the Khan and Mekong Rivers meet. As the spiritual heart of Laotian Buddhism, Luang Prabang is home to serene

temples, a rich colonial heritage, and a unique blend of tradition and charm.

In the evening, we stroll downtown to enjoy dinner near the vibrant Night Market precinct. Here, we practise the art of respectful bargaining, Laotian style, while soaking in the lively atmosphere. *(meals: lunch, dinner)*

## Days 2 & 3

### Luang Prabang



We embark on a Great Race challenge to deepen our understanding of Luang Prabang. Divided into teams of 4-6 students, we complete a series of tasks designed to uncover the town's unique culture and social fabric. The challenge includes a climb to the summit of Mt. Phousi and tuk-tuk rides to various secret locations. Along the way, students will purchase items, observe local infrastructure—or the lack thereof—and compete with other groups while navigating cryptic instructions.

Later, we cycle through the countryside, following winding roads and back lanes. Our journey takes us to a handicraft village where we witness the traditional processes of handmade paper production and silk

weaving. We also visit an elephant conservation centre to learn about breeding programs and the vital efforts to protect these majestic animals.

On the third day, we visit the sobering UXO (Unexploded Ordnance) Centre. Here, we learn about Laos' ongoing struggle to clear the remnants of the Vietnam War. Between 1964 and 1973, over two million tonnes of bombs were dropped on Laos, with an estimated 30% failing to detonate. This tragic legacy has made Laos the most heavily bombed country per capita in the world. The centre features exhibits, survivor testimonies, and a viewing room where we watch a documentary on landmine clearance and see defused ordnance up close. *(meals: 2 breakfasts, 1 lunch, 1 dinner)*

## Day 4

### Luang Prabang



This morning we cross the Mekong River on a local ferry and take a short drive to Ban Chanh pottery village, where we meet a local family running pottery workshops. Our hosts introduce the history of pottery in rural areas and show us some basic techniques. It's then our turn to try our hand at pottery making and produce a masterpiece to take home. Leaving the village, we head to a local primary school meeting the principal, teaching staff and students. Here we learn about the Laos education system and see firsthand what conditions are like for students living in rural areas.

The afternoon is set aside for river kayaking on the Nam Khan River, led by our highly experienced water guide (helmets & life jackets provided). Paddling through calm stretches of water is one of the most memorable experiences for any traveller to this country.

On our last night in Luang Prabang, we engage in a traditional supper blessing ritual called a "Baci," followed by a performance of Laotian folk dancing. Be ready for the invitation to join the dance when it comes! *(meals: breakfast, 1 lunch, 1 dinner)*

## Day 5

### Luang Prabang - Pak Beng



Today, we board our private longboat for a two-day journey along the legendary Mekong River, which originates in Tibet and flows through six countries before reaching the sea.

As we cruise, we explore the river's critical role as a lifeline for fishing, agriculture, and hydropower. Our guide leads a discussion on the challenges posed by recent dam constructions and the environmental impacts of the new high-speed railway, part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, cutting through pristine jungles and dense forests.

Along the way, we stop at the Pak Ou Caves, a sacred site filled with thousands of Buddhist statues. Here, our guide provides fascinating insights into Buddhist traditions and the symbolism of the religious images within the caves. (meals: breakfast, lunch, dinner)

## Day 6

### Pak Beng - Chiang Khong (Thailand)



We continue our journey upriver on the Mekong, heading toward Thailand. Our first stop is a remote hill tribe community situated along the riverbanks, where traditional agricultural practices and a way of life unchanged for generations offer a glimpse into the past.

As we approach the Thai border, we notice a gradual increase in development and habitation along the river's edge. Upon disembarking, we complete visa formalities and cross the border by bus, driving over the bridge into Thailand. From there, we head to our hotel, marking the start of a new chapter in our adventure.

We are now in one of Thailand's most remote regions, a mountainous border area with a diverse ethnic population. Over the next two days, we will explore this fascinating region in depth. This evening, we settle into our accommodation on the banks of the Mekong River and enjoy our first taste of Thai cuisine. (meals: breakfast, dinner)

## Day 7

### Chiang Khong - Chiang Rai



We journey to the northernmost point of Thailand to explore the Golden Triangle, a region infamous for producing and smuggling a large portion of the world's opium from the 1950s to the 1970s.

Our visit begins with a short climb up a hill offering panoramic views of the river, which marks the borders of Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar. We then head to the province's impressive Opium Museum, a state-of-the-art facility established by the Thai Royal Family.

The museum features an extensive range of interactive exhibits and multimedia presentations, detailing the history of opium, its devastating impact, and the global narcotics trade. It also highlights the efforts led by

the Thai government and the King's mother to eradicate this destructive industry and promote sustainable alternatives.

From here, we travel south to the province of Chiang Rai. Once part of Laos, Chiang Rai was annexed by Siam in the 18th century following a series of conflicts between Thai and Laotian rulers. (meals: breakfast, dinner)



## Days 8, 9 & 10

### Chiang Dao



After breakfast, we visit the stunning White Temple, renowned for its striking and intricate architecture. Designed and funded by a celebrated local artist, this modern masterpiece is both a cultural and artistic marvel. From there, we journey to Chiang Dao, a region home to hill tribe communities. Many members of the Karen and Palong ethnic groups, who fled Myanmar during the 1980s and 1990s, have found refuge in this border province of Thailand.

Over the next three days, we engage in a community project, working alongside locals to either build a home or renovate a school. Our tasks include bricklaying, mixing cement, painting, and landscaping, providing

hands-on experience in construction and community development.

During our stay, we immerse ourselves in the traditions of the Palong people, whose way of life remains largely unchanged from their ancestral homeland. This experience offers a deep insight into village life, including traditional farming practices and the daily challenges the community faces, such as limited employment opportunities and seasonal water shortages.

Note: The village homestay facilities are basic. Each longhouse provides a thin mattress, pillow, and mosquito net, with communal sleeping arrangements. Showering facilities offer lukewarm water, and toilets are squat-style. Good-quality walking shoes or boots are essential for this experience. (meals: 3 breakfasts, 3 lunches, 3 dinners)

## Day 11

### Chiang Dao - Chiang Mai



We bid farewell to our host family and the local community as we depart the village in small vans. Our next adventure takes us to a nearby valley, where we soar high above the Mae Taeng River on an exhilarating zip line ride. Strapped into harnesses, we glide through a network of wires and ropes, zigzagging over dense forests and deep gullies, accompanied by plenty of excitement and laughter.

Afterwards, we travel by bus to Chiang Mai, where we return to the comforts of city life. Chiang Mai, a historic melting pot of cultures and former kingdoms, is known for its orderly layout and the relaxed demeanour of its residents. Our local guide takes us on a tuk-tuk

orientation tour, showcasing the city's highlights, including the ancient brick citadel and the surrounding moat.

In the evening, we visit a popular outdoor restaurant, where we prepare our meal on a traditional steamboat barbecue. (meals: breakfast, lunch, dinner)

## Day 12

### Chiang Mai



We start the day early with a Thai boxing (Muay Thai) lesson before the heat sets in. As Thailand's most popular sport for centuries, Muay Thai is renowned for its close-quarter combat techniques. This high-energy workout begins with a warm-up, followed by instruction in both defensive and offensive moves. Under the guidance of our instructors, we step into the ring for sparring practice, even facing off against professional fighters—a thrilling and memorable experience!

Next, we travel to an eco-village nestled in a picturesque valley, home to various ethnic minority groups, including the Dao, H'mong, and Long Neck

Karen. The Long Neck Karen, known for wearing thick golden coils around their necks, settled in northern Thailand in the early 1990s after fleeing conflict in Myanmar. As a group, we engage in a thoughtful discussion about ethical tourism, the challenges faced by refugee tribes, and the balance between commercialism and sustainability for the Karen and other ethnic communities in the region.

In the afternoon, we head to a local farm for a hands-on Thai cooking session. Thai cuisine is famed for its harmonious balance of spicy, sour, sweet, and salty flavours. Guided by a skilled local chef, we begin with a tour of the farm to learn about the essential spices and ingredients that form the backbone of Thai cooking. Working in pairs, we prepare a variety of delicious dishes using traditional woks, which we later enjoy for dinner. *(meals: breakfast, lunch, dinner)*

## Day 13

### Depart Chiang Mai



On the final day of our journey, we begin with a visit to Doi Suthep Mountain (elevation 1,676m) and the iconic Wat Phra That Doi Suthep Temple. Here, we enjoy the cooler mountain air and stunning panoramic views of Chiang Mai below. After trying the traditional ringing of the bells and exploring the intricately decorated temple, we descend the dragon staircase to sample some delicious local snacks.

Thailand is home to approximately 4,000 elephants. While elephant riding was once a common tourist activity, ethical travellers now opt for more responsible experiences. We visit a reputable elephant sanctuary, where we learn about these magnificent animals and assist with their

feeding. Local experts discuss the critical issues of habitat loss, the differences between sanctuaries and commercialised centres, and the challenges of elephant rescue and breeding programs. We reflect on the steps needed to ensure a sustainable future for Thailand's elephants.

We transfer to Chiang Mai International Airport to begin our journey home, concluding an unforgettable trip. *(meals: breakfast, lunch)*

## Summary

### Grading

**Moderate;** To get the most out of this trip, you need to be in good health. However, anyone with a good level of fitness will be able to take part. Some outdoor activities include physical exertion, and there may be long periods of exposure to the elements. You will be expected to walk every day and carry your luggage for short distances. The itinerary may include bike riding, climbing steps and trekking. If your itinerary includes community service work of any description, you will be expected to work diligently during this component. Conditions here may be basic with simple accommodation and bathroom facilities. Suitable packing lists will be provided to match the content of the itinerary.

### Accommodation

School tours: Student accommodation is on a twin/triple share basis. Teacher accommodation is on a single room basis. Hotels usually hold a 3-star equivalent rating. Separate sleeping areas and bathrooms are provided for boys, girls, and staff members at homestays.

### Transport

Depending on the tour, modes of transport may include modern air-conditioned private coach, boat, train, plane.

### Your Tour Leader

A tour leader accompanies all group tours. Your tour leader is the person who most influences the success of your trip. They have been meticulously trained and are very experienced in running tours. Every tour leader is locally employed, therefore they are the best person to showcase their country and culture. Their expertise and knowledge creates an insightful and authentic experience of the region. They are with you throughout your trip from breakfast time until the group returns to the hotel in the evening. They are contactable 24/7.

For more information on the role of the tour leader, local guides and accompanying teachers, please refer to our website.

### Group Size

School tours: Minimum group size is 16 students with a minimum of 2 staff members.

There are no maximum participant numbers on any tour.

### Service-Learning Programs

The local community instigates all our service-learning programs in response to their genuine needs and goals. Every program is conducted only after careful consultation with local community leaders and authorities.

We assess each program during the consultation process to ensure that it's sustainable, ethical, and empowers local people. Each project is designed to have lasting economic benefits that build wealth within the community – we're not in the business of tokenistic hand-outs.

- **Physical construction projects.** These projects include building, repairing or improving housing, schools, libraries, washroom facilities or other infrastructure and fittings. We also work with communities that require water reservoirs, irrigation systems and animal pens.

As you can imagine, these projects require lots of physical exertion, sweat and some exposure to the elements. Undertaking a construction project involves hiring expert local tradespeople, assistant builders and transport providers. More substantial construction projects require purchasing locally produced materials, hiring cooks and booking local homestay accommodation, all of which inject money into the host community. Fundraising is usually required for these projects.

- **Environmental projects.** Our environmental projects are wide-ranging. They include activities such as: constructing greenhouses with suitable plants, planting cash crop gardens, such as mango and dragon fruit trees; constructing small dams; restoring native vegetation and habitat; setting up solar panels, installing fish farms, and maintaining conservation huts and hiking trails.

By taking part in these projects, students will develop their environmental awareness. They'll learn about environmental impacts and discover ways to measure the lasting success of an environmental project. As with physical construction projects, fundraising is usually required for these projects.

For more details about our service-learning programs, please refer to our website.

## Land Trip Cost and Details

Cost per traveller from A\$ 1,990

Based on a minimum of:

16 students & 2 accompanying teachers/staff members.

*\*Smaller or larger group sizes priced on application*

### Inclusions

- All accommodation, transport, activities, entrance costs and other programs as described in the itinerary
- Professional Adventure Travel tour leader throughout the trip & additional specialist guides
- Extensive destination-specific risk management and assessment
- Meals (and drinking water) as listed in the itinerary
- 24-hour **IN COUNTRY** support
- Pre-departure support, briefings and planning meetings
- Tips for tour leaders, local guides & drivers

### Exclusions

- International flights to Laos/from Thailand
- Travel Visa costs (if required)
- Cost of Community projects/Service-learning programs \$3600
- Spending money
- Travel insurance

## Contact details

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