Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos & Northern Thailand

Phillip Tang
Tim Bewer, Greg Bloom, Austin Bush, Nick Ray, Richard Waters, China Williams
Welcome to the Mekong Region ........ 4
Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos & Northern Thailand Map .......... 6
Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos & Northern Thailand Top 20 ........ 8
Need to Know ........... 18
If You Like ............... 20
Month by Month ........... 23
Itineraries ............... 26
Outdoor Adventures .......... 34
Travel with Children .......... 43
Countries at a Glance .......... 45

VIETNAM ............. 48
Hanoi ................. 49
Ninh Binh .............. 69
Tam Coc ............... 70
Cuc Phuong National Park ......... 70
Halong Bay ............ 71
Halong City ............ 72
Cat Ba Island ......... 73
Haiphong ............. 77
Ba Be National Park ...... 78
Mai Chau .............. 79
Lao Cai ............... 79
Bac Ha ............... 80
Sapa ................. 81
Dien Bien Phu ........ 85
Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park .... 87
Hue .................. 89
Aound Hue ........... 100
Danang .............. 102
Hoi An .............. 106
Around Hoi An .......... 114
Cham Islands .......... 114
Quy Nhon ............ 115
Nha Trang ............ 116
Mui Ne .............. 123
Con Dao Islands ...... 126
Dalat ............... 128
Cat Tien National Park .... 133

Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) ....... 134
Dai Nam Theme Park ..... 151
Beaches ................ 152
Cu Chi ................ 152
Mekong Delta .......... 152
Bac Lieu .............. 152
My Tho ................ 152
Ben Tre ............. 153
Vinh Long ............. 154
Can Tho ............. 154
Chau Doc ............ 156
Ha Tien ............. 156
Rach Gia ........... 157
Phu Quoc Island ...... 157
Understand Vietnam ......... 162
Survival Guide .......... 168

CAMBODIA .......... 178
Phnom Penh .......... 179
Phnom Chisor .......... 203
Phnom Tamao Wildlife Rescue Centre .......... 203
Tonlé Bati .......... 204
Udong .......... 204
Siem Reap .......... 204
Ang Trapang Thmor Reserve .......... 216
Floating Village of Chong Kneas .......... 216
Prek Toal Bird Sanctuary .......... 217
Temples of Angkor .......... 218
Angkor Wat .......... 218
Angkor Thom .......... 219
Further Afied .......... 226
Banteay Chhmar .......... 227
Battambang .......... 228
Around Battambang .......... 235
Prasat Preah Vihear Province .......... 236
Kompong Thom .......... 237
Kompong Cham & Around .......... 239
Kratie .......... 241
Stung Treng .......... 243
Mondulkiri Province .......... 245
Ratanakiri Province .......... 247
Contents

Koh Kong City ............ 251
Koh Kong Conservation Corridor ............ 254
Sihanoukville ............ 255
The Southern Islands ....... 263
Kampot ............ 266
Around Kampot ............ 270
Kep ............ 271
Understand Cambodia .... 275
Survival Guide ........ 280

LAOS ............ 288
Vientiane ............ 289
Phu Khao Khue National Protected Area (NPA) .... 304
Ang Nam Ngum ............ 308
Vang Vieng ............ 309
Luang Prabang ....... 315
Pak Ou Caves ............ 327
Tat Kuang Si ............ 327
Tat Sae ............ 328
Xieng Khuan & Hua Phan Provinces .... 328
Muang Ngoi District .... 336
Northwestern Laos ....... 340
Phongsali Province .... 347
Middle Mekong ....... 350
Bolikhamsai & Khammuan Provinces .... 355
Savannahkhet Province .... 363
Champasak Province .... 368
Pakse Region .... 378
Si Phan Don (Four Thousand Islands) .... 379
Bolaven Plateau Region .... 385
Understand Laos .... 388
Survival Guide .... 393

NORTHERN THAILAND ....... 401
Bangkok ............ 404
Ko Samet ............ 436
Trat ............ 439
Ko Chang ............ 442
Nakhon Ratchasima (Khon) ............ 447
Around Nakhon Ratchasima ............ 450
Khao Yai National Park ............ 450
Phanom Rung & Around ............ 451
Ubon Ratchathani ............ 452
Mukdahan ............ 455
Nakhon Phanom ............ 456
Nong Khai ............ 458
Nong Khai to Loi ............ 461
Loi ............ 462
Chiang Khan ............ 463
Chiang Mai ............ 465
Chiang Dao ............ 477
Tha Ton ............ 478
Pai ............ 479
Sukhothai ............ 482
Chiang Rai ............ 486
Golden Triangle ............ 490
Chiang Khong ............ 493
Nan ............ 494
Understand Thailand .... 497
Survival Guide .... 502

UNDERSTAND

The Mekong Region Today .... 510
History ............ 512
People & Culture .... 527

SURVIVAL GUIDE

Border Crossings .... 536
Directory A–Z .... 539
Transport .... 548
Health .... 552
Language .... 557
Index .... 567
Map Legend .... 575

SPECIAL FEATURES

Hue’s Imperial Enclosure
3D Illustration .... 92
Temples of Angkor
3D Illustration .... 220
Wat Phra Kaew & Grand Palace
3D Illustration .... 406
Wat Pho
3D Illustration .... 408
Plan Your Trip

Itineraries

The Classic

Traverse the fertile belly of the region, taking in the Mekong’s metropolises and its most iconic sight, Angkor Wat.

Like many Southeast Asian journeys, yours begins in Bangkok. Acclimatise with the sights, sounds, smells and divine culinary flavours of the City of Angels before flying or taking a bus to Siem Reap, gateway to the incredible temples of Angkor.

See the mother of all temples, Angkor Wat, the world’s largest religious building; the Bayon, with its enigmatic faces; and jungle-clad Ta Prohm. In the wet season, the boat trip from Siem Reap to colonial-flavoured Battambang is not to be missed. From Battambang continue south by bus to experience the contrasts of Phnom Penh, then make your way to Ho Chi Minh City by bus or boat via Chau Doc and the Mekong Delta.

Now you’re ready for some beach time. Take a bus to Mui Ne or Nha Trang on the South China Sea, then fly north to Hanoi – or meander overland via the historical hubs of Hoi An and Hue if you have time. Wind up with some sea-kayaking or a boat cruise among the karsts in Halong Bay.
This itinerary takes you from northern Thailand to Halong Bay, Vietnam, via the rugged and thrilling northern route. Traversing the Mekong’s highest mountains, you’ll get up close and personal with colourful hill tribes and have a range of outdoor adventures at your disposal.

Start in Chiang Mai, where every activity known to athletes – mountain biking, kayaking, abseiling, trekking, ziplining – has a following. Take the winding road to Pai, a mountain retreat that proves the hippie trail is alive and well. Then head on to Tha Ton, the entry point for boat trips down to Chiang Rai, itself a good base for responsible trekking. Cross into Laos and check out the Gibbon Experience at Bokeo Nature Reserve before continuing east to Luang Namtha for trekking, cycling, or rafting in and around the Nam Ha National Protected Area (NPA).

Head south to beautiful Luang Prabang on the banks of the Mekong to soak up the culture, before boomeranging north once more to explore the karst-laden wonderland of the Nam Ou (Ou River) on a boat ride or kayak trip out of Nong Khiaw. From here an adventurous overland trail runs east to Vietnam via Vieng Xai and the Pathet Lao caves, a sort of Cu Chi Tunnels cast in stone. Once over the border in Mai Chau, try the northwest loop through Dien Bien Phu to experience incredible scenery and some of the country’s most dramatic mountain passes.

Sapa, an old French hill station, is the gateway to the minority communities of this region. Consider a side trip to Bac Ha, home to the colourful Flower Hmong folk and great walking country. Head south to Hanoi, where you’ll appreciate that you bought your ethnic souvenirs directly from the minority people and not in the designer boutiques of the Old Quarter.

Still haven’t had your fill of adventure? Set off for Halong Bay. Take to the waters of Lan Ha Bay by local boat to see the ‘new’ Halong Bay without the tourists. Boating, kayaking and Robinson Crusoe–style camping are possible here, and there are some beautiful hidden coves. Then leave the water behind and head to the spectacular limestone outcrops of Cat Ba Island. Experienced craggers will find challenging routes here, and there’s instruction available for novice climbers as well.
This trip follows the famous river downstream from northern Laos all the way to its terminus in Vietnam’s Mekong Delta. En route you’ll encounter a wide range of landscapes, cultures and adventures as you slice through all four countries of the Mekong region.

Leave behind the bustle of Bangkok and make a beeline for Chiang Rai near the Golden Triangle, where the borders of Laos, Myanmar (Burma) and Thailand converge. Crossing the Mekong into Laos at Huay Xai is like stepping back in time. Take a slowboat down the Mekong to Luang Prabang, stopping overnight in Pak Beng. Soak up the magic before leaving the river for some relaxation in Vang Vieng.

Continue to Vientiane and reunite with the mighty waterway. The Lao capital is a sleepy place with some great cafes, restaurants and bars – which you won’t be encountering for a while after here. Board a bus and follow the river southeast, stopping off in Tha Khaek and Savannakhet before arriving in Pakse. Visit the imposing Khmer sanctuary of Wat Phu Champasak, in the shadow of Lingaparvata Mountain; explore the waterfalls and villages of the Bolaven Plateau; or enjoy the laid-back islands of Si Phan Don.

Cross into Cambodia. If you missed the Irrawaddy dolphins near Don Khon in Si Phan Don, you can see them near the border at Preah Rumkel, or a few hours further south in the laid-back Mekong riverside town of Kratie. From Kratie, consider peeling off to visit the mountains of Mondulkiri Province, home to elephants, hill tribes and pristine nature.

Weeks in rural provinces will have you happy to see Phnom Penh, where the Mekong merges with another vital regional waterway, the Tonlé Sap. Take a sunset boat cruise or participate in an aerobics session on the riverfront promenade. When you’re recharged, board a fast boat downstream to Chau Doc, Vietnam, gateway to the Mekong Delta. Check out Can Tho, the delta’s commercial heart. Hotfoot it to Ho Chi Minh City for some fun; delve deeper into the delta with a homestay around Vinh Long, or make for the tropical retreat of Phu Quoc Island, a well-earned reward for following the mother river.
**NAM HA NATIONAL PROTECTED AREA (LAOS)**
Laos’ first established National Protected Area is home to a rich tapestry of ethnic groups, award-winning ecotrekks and some of the last wild tigers in the Mekong region. (p342)

**THAM KONG LOR (LAOS)**
You’ll be glad to see the light at the other end of this extraordinary 7.5km-long river cave in Laos’ remote Khammuan Province. (p357)

**HANG SAN DOONG (VIETNAM)**
Deep inside Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park, this spectacular cave is accessible only on hiking and camping trips offered by park rangers. (p87)

**BAI HUONG (VIETNAM)**
Just a short boat ride from the tourist mecca of Hoi An, this remote and beautifully situated fishing village in the Cham Islands now has a homestay program. (p115)
**PHA TAEM NATIONAL PARK (THAILAND)**
A cliff provides fantastic views of the normally vast Mekong River as it narrows to a wild, rocky channel. Trails into the park interior pass prehistoric wall paintings. (p464)

**CHI PHAT (CAMBODIA)**
This award-winning ecotourism project offers trekking, mountain-biking, kayaking and birdwatching in the lush Cardamom Mountains of the wild Koh Kong Province. (p254)

**PRASAT PREAH VIHEAR (CAMBODIA)**
Make the overland pilgrimage to this majestic mountaintop temple on the Thai border. Improving roads are making it more accessible than ever, so go now to beat the masses. (p236)

**BOLAVEN PLATEAU (LAOS)**
Mount a steel horse and ride past thundering waterfalls, remote minority villages and lush rainforests, then chill out in delightful backpacker retreat Tat Lo. (p385)
### Sights
- Beach
- Bird Sanctuary
- Buddhist
- Castle/Palace
- Christian
- Confucian
- Hindu
- Jain
- Jewish
- Monument
- Museum/Gallery/Historic Building
- Ruin
- Shinto
- Sikh
- Taoist
- Winery/Vineyard
- Zoo/Wildlife Sanctuary
- Other Sight

### Activities, Courses & Tours
- Bodysurfing
- Diving
- Canoeing/Kayaking
- Course/Tour
- Sento Hot Baths/Onsen
- Skiing
- Snorkelling
- Surfing
- Swimming/Pool
- Walking
- Windsurfing
- Other Activity

### Sleeping
- Sleeping
- Camping

### Eating
- Eating

### Drinking & Nightlife
- Drinking & Nightlife
- Cafe

### Entertainment
- Entertainment

### Shopping
- Shopping

### Information
- Bank
- Embassy/Consulate
- Hospital/Medical
- Internet
- Police
- Post Office
- Telephone
- Toilet
- Tourist Information
- Other Information

### Geographic
- Beach
- Gate
- Hut/Shelter
- Lighthouse
- Lookout
- Mountain/Volcano
- Oasis
- Park
- Picnic Area
- Waterfall

### Population
- Capital (National)
- Capital (State/Province)
- City/Large Town
- Town/Village

### Transport
- Airport
- Border crossing
- Bus
- Cable car/Funicular
- Cycling
- Ferry
- Metro/MRT/MTR station
- Monorail
- Parking
- Petrol station
- Skytrain/Subway station
- Taxi
- Train station/Railway
- Tram
- Underground station
- Other Transport

### Routes
- Tollway
- Freeway
- Primary
- Secondary
- Tertiary
- Lane
- Unsealed road
- Road under construction
- Plaza/Mall
- Steps
- Tunnel
- Pedestrian overpass
- Walking Tour
- Walking Tour detour
- Path/Walking Trail

### Boundaries
- International
- State/Province
- Disputed
- Regional/Suburb
- Marine Park
- Cliff
- Wall

### Hydrography
- River, Creek
- Intermittent River
- Canal
- Water
- Dry/Salt/Intermittent Lake
- Reef

### Areas
- Airport/Runway
- Beach/Desert
- Cemetery (Christian)
- Cemetery (Other)
- Glacier
- Mudflat
- Park/Forest
- Sight (Building)
- Sportsground
- Swamp/Mangrove

Note: Not all symbols displayed above appear on the maps in this book
OUR WRITERS

**Phillip Tang**
**Vietnam**  
Philip grew up on typically Australian pho and fish’n’chips. A degree in Chinese- and Latin-American cultures launched him into travel and writing about it for Lonely Planet’s *Canada, China, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Peru and Vietnam* guides. Follow Phillip Tang on Instagram: @philippetang

**Tim Bewer**
**Laos**  
After briefly holding fort behind a desk as a legislative assistant, Tim decided he didn’t have the ego to succeed in the political world (or the stomach to work around those who did). He quit his job at the capitol to backpack around West Africa, during which time he pondered what to do next. His answer was to write a travel guide to parks, forests, and wildlife areas of the gorgeous state of Wisconsin. He’s been a freelance travel writer and photographer ever since.

**Greg Bloom**
**Cambodia**  
Greg is a freelance writer, tour operator and travel planner based in Siem Reap, Cambodia, and Manila, Philippines. Greg began his writing in the late '90s working as a journalist, then editor-in-chief of the *Kyiv Post*, an English-language weekly in Ukraine. As a freelance travel writer, he has contributed to 35 Lonely Planet titles, mostly in Eastern Europe and Asia. He also organises adventure trips in Cambodia and Palawan (Philippines) through his tour company, Bearcat Travel.

**Austin Bush**
**Thailand**  
Austin originally went to Thailand in 1999 as part of a language study program hosted by Chiang Mai University. The lure of city life, employment and spicy food eventually led him to Bangkok. City life, employment and spicy food have managed to keep him there since, working as a writer and photographer. He’s contributed text and photos to more than 20 Lonely Planet titles including *Bangkok, Food Lover's Guide to the World* and the *World’s Best Street Food*.

**Nick Ray**
**Cambodia, Laos**  
A Londoner of sorts, Nick harks from Watford, the sort of town that makes you want to travel. He studied history and politics at Warwick University before hitting the road for a life in travel and has worked on about 50 titles for Lonely Planet since his first foray in 1998. Based in Cambodia’s Phnom Penh with his wife Kulikar and two children, Julian and Belle, he covers countries in Southeast Asia, including Myanmar and Vietnam, with the occasional diversion to Africa.

**Richard Waters**
**Laos**  
Richard is an award-winning journalist and works for the *Independent, Sunday Times* and *Telegraph*. Laos is one of his favourite countries, his journeys there started in ‘99 as a traveller, then as a journalist taking him into the still forbidden Xaisomboun Zone investigating the Hmong guerrilla survivors of the Secret War. This will be his 12th Lonely Planet book on Laos. To read more of his travel journalism visit: www.richardwaters.co.uk.

**China Williams**
**Thailand**  
China has been writing about Thailand for Lonely Planet for more than a decade. She grew up in South Carolina, taught English in rural Thailand, learned the art of punctuation as an editor and commuted across oceans and continents to Southeast Asia. She now raises two children in Ellicott City, Maryland (USA), and tends a suburban woods filled with wildlife.

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