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## ON THE ROAD

YOUR COMPLETE DESTINATION GUIDE  
In-depth reviews, detailed listings  
and insider tips



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## SURVIVAL GUIDE

VITAL PRACTICAL INFORMATION TO  
HELP YOU HAVE A SMOOTH TRIP

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THIS EDITION WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY

**Nick Ray**  
**Greg Bloom, Austin Bush,**  
**Iain Stewart, Richard Waters**

# PLAN YOUR TRIP

## YOUR PLANNING TOOL KIT

Photos, itineraries, lists and suggestions to help you put together your perfect trip

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## Look out for these icons:



Our author's  
recommendation



A green or  
sustainable option



No payment  
required

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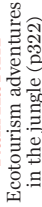
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Cycle through Thailand's golden age (p404)

### Bangkok

One night is never enough (p368)

### Temples of Angkor

The world's biggest and the region's best (p208)

### Sihanoukville

Beach capital of Cambodia (p249)

### Phnom Penh

The 'pearl of Asia' is back (p182)

### Mondulkiri

The wild east (p242)

### Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon)

High-octane high life (p135)

### Si Phan Don

Lap up the sleepy Lao lifestyle (p344)

### Hoi An

Culture and cuisine on tap (p107)

### Pha Taem National Park

Be awestruck by the Emerald Triangle (p426)





## OUR STORY

A beat-up old car, a few dollars in the pocket and a sense of adventure. In 1972 that's all Tony and Maureen Wheeler needed for the trip of a lifetime – across Europe and Asia overland to Australia. It took several months, and at the end – broke but inspired – they sat at their kitchen table writing and stapling together their first travel guide, *Across Asia on the Cheap*. Within a week they'd sold 1500 copies. Lonely Planet was born.

Today, Lonely Planet has offices in Melbourne, London and Oakland, with more than 600 staff and writers. We share Tony's belief that 'a great guidebook should do three things: inform, educate and amuse'.

## OUR WRITERS



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**Coordinating author, Cambodia** A Londoner of sorts, Nick comes from Watford, the sort of town that makes you want to travel. He lives in Phnom Penh with his wife Kulikar and his young children Julian and Belle. He has written for countless guidebooks on the Mekong region, including Lonely Planet's *Cambodia*, *Vietnam* and *Laos* books, as well as *Southeast Asia on a Shoestring*. When not writing, he is often out exploring the remote parts of Cambodia as a location scout and manager for TV and

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**Laos** Richard lives with his family in the Cotswolds, and, since his early years driving a battered motor-home around Central America, has had invisible wings on his heels that insist on seeing what's over the next hill. It's usually a jungle. He's worked and travelled in Laos for the last 10 years and it's still his favourite country. When he's not working for Lonely Planet he writes and photographs for British national newspapers and magazines. To read some of his blurb visit: [www.richardwaters.co.uk](http://www.richardwaters.co.uk).

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# itineraries

*Whether you've got six days or 60, these itineraries provide a starting point for the trip of a lifetime. Want more inspiration? Head online to [lonelyplanet.com/thorntree](http://lonelyplanet.com/thorntree) to chat with other travellers.*



## Three to Five Weeks Indochina Explorer

Begin in the Vietnamese capital of **Hanoi**, replete with boulevards and lakes. Take a junk cruise among the spectacular karst islands of **Halong Bay**, then head south to **Hué**, the old imperial capital and cultural hub of central Vietnam. Take the coastal road to the historic trading point of **Hoi An**. Continue to party at the beach town of **Nha Trang** or the sand dunes of **Mui Ne**.

Hit **Ho Chi Minh City**, the full-throttle face of new Vietnam, head on. Go underground at the **Cu Chi Tunnels**, then join the faithful at the **Cao Dai Great Temple** before plunging into the **Mekong Delta**.

Experience the contrasts of **Phnom Penh**, then loop around the lake to the old town of **Battambang**. Continue to **Siem Reap**, home to the world's most spectacular collection of temples at **Angkor**.

Board a flight to **Pakse**, then head north to the Lao capital of **Vientiane**. Finish up in **Luang Prabang** and see monks at dawn and an old Asia that is increasingly hard to find.





## Three to Six Weeks Mekong Meander

This trip trickles through an older Asia and includes some of the hottest spots in the region, as well as some of the less-visited backwaters. Leave behind the bustle of **Bangkok** for the **Golden Triangle**, where the borders of Laos, Myanmar (Burma) and Thailand converge. Step back in time into Laos and take a slow boat down the Mekong from **Huay Xai**, stopping the night in **Pak Beng**, to **Luang Prabang**. Soak up the magic before leaving the river for some relaxation in **Vang Vieng**.

Continue to **Vientiane** and reunite with the mother river. It's a sleepy place with some great cafes, restaurants and bars, which you won't be encountering for a while. Fly south to **Pakse** or wind your way down the river through **Tha Khaek** and **Savannakhet**. 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 and visit the mountains of **Ratanakiri**, home to elephants, hill tribes and pristine nature. Back on the river, call in at **Kratie** to see the rare Irrawaddy dolphin. Continue south to the revitalised Cambodian capital of **Phnom Penh**. Make a diversion by speedboat up the Tonlé Sap river to the boom town of **Siem Reap**, your base for the majestic **Temples of Angkor**.

Back in Phnom Penh, take a fast boat down the mighty Mekong to **Chau Doc**, gateway to the Mekong Delta. Check out **Can Tho**, its 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.



- » (above) Don Det (p347) on the Mekong River, Laos
- » (left) Streetside hairdresser, Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon; p135), Vietnam



## Three to Five Weeks Natural Highs

Starting in **Hanoi**, Vietnam has plenty to offer adrenalin junkies and nature lovers. Explore **Halong Bay** for some sea kayaking among the karsts. Experienced climbers with their own gear can leave the water far below, as the limestone outcrops around **Cat Ba Island** offer some excellent ascents. 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.

Heading south to central Vietnam, stop at **Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park**, a rising star in Vietnam that is home to spectacular caves, stunning jungle scenery and the chance for a boat trip into the karst system. Continuing down the coast is **China Beach**, a great place for budding surfers to test their board skills against some of the South China Sea's biggest waves.

Go under the waves at **Nha Trang**, the dive capital of Vietnam, before heading up towards the hills of the Central Highlands. Wind up, or down, in **Dalat**, a base for abseiling, cycling and rock climbing. Don't forget two of Vietnam's best-known national parks: the birding hotspot of **Cat Tien National Park**, which is home to the new Wild Gibbon Trek, and **Yok Don National Park**, home to elephants, both domesticated and wild.

After all this inland adventure, it's back to the coast to finish up. Try kitesurfing or wind-surfing in **Mui Ne** or just relax over a cocktail if you feel you have earned your rest. Then continue south to the islands of **Con Dao** to experience some underwater action. A marine national park, Con Dao is home to rare manatee (sea cow) and a nesting site for the green sea turtle.



## Two to Four Weeks The Khmer Empire

Following in the footsteps of the Khmer empire is a relatively straightforward proposition: much like the Romans, the ancient Khmers built a network of roads connecting the outposts of their empire. First, escape **Bangkok** for the seldom-visited region of northeast Thailand. Forget the Khmer theme for a day or two with a visit to the lush jungle and lovely waterfalls of **Khao Yai National Park**. Continue east to the ancient city of **Phimai**, one of the most important regional capitals during the time of Angkor. Head south to see the wonderfully restored temple of **Phanom Rung**, set atop an extinct volcano, and the nearby temple of **Meuang Tam**.

Dip your toe into Cambodia by crossing the border to visit the spectacular mountaintop temple of **Prasat Preah Vihear** (Khao Praa Wihaan in Thai). Take in the dramatic views as you'll be down below on the plains of Cambodia in a couple more weeks. If politics means the border is closed, you may have to attempt this from the other side at the end of the trip.

Enter Laos and crisscross the Mekong to visit the Khmer sanctuary of **Wat Phu Cham-pasak**, one of the oldest sacred sites in the region.

Cross into Cambodia and call in at **Kompong Cham** before swinging northwest again to the pre-Angkorian capital of **Sambor Prei Kuk**, the first great temple city in the region.

The climax of the pilgrimage is approaching: the incredible temples of **Angkor**. See the mother of all temples, **Angkor Wat**, the world's largest religious building; the **Bayon**, one of the world's weirdest temples with its enigmatic faces; and the jungle-clad **Ta Prohm**. Venture further to encounter the usurper capital of **Koh Ker**, and the River of a Thousand Lingas at **Kbal Spean** before taking a well-earned massage in **Siem Reap**.



## Four to Six Weeks Minority Report

This route covers the mountainous regions of the Mekong where hill tribes have long made a home. Start in **Chiang Mai**, cultural capital of northern Thailand, and make sure you visit the **Tribal Museum**. Take the winding road to **Pai**, a mountain retreat that proves the hippy trail is alive and well. Then head on to **Tha Ton**, the entry point for rafting trips down to **Chiang Rai**, itself a good base for responsible trekking. Cross into Laos at **Huay Xai** and check out the **Gibbon Experience** at Bokeo Nature Reserve before heading for **Luang Nam Tha**. Spend a day or two trekking with the award-winning **Nam Ha Eco Trek Service**, before continuing to **Muang Sing**, the hub for one of the most diverse minority regions in all Laos.

Head south to **Luang Prabang**, a beautiful World Heritage Site on the banks of the Mekong to soak up the culture, before boomeranging north once more to **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**, happy in the knowledge that all your ethnic souvenirs were bought direct from the minority people and not in the designer boutiques of the Old Quarter.

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