



Free & Easy Traveler - Travel Prep Guide

25 Days in Laos Thailand & Cambodia: A Backpacker's Dream

Page 3	The Basics - Trip Duration, Start/Finish cities, Destinations
Page 4	Epic Experiences & Trip Details - What's Included, Activities
Page 5	Trip Details - Travel Budget
Page 6	Trip Details - Travel Budget, Trip Leaders
Page 7	Trip Details - Flying to Thailand, Meals, Allergies, Transportation
Page 8	Trip Details - Accommodation, Solo Traveler, Packing Suggestions
Page 9	Trip Details - Packing Suggestions
Page 10	Trip Details & Travel Essentials - Laundry, Passports, Insurance
Page 11	Travel Essentials - Immunization, Banking & Money
Page 12	Travel Essentials - Banking & Money, Travel Visas/Border Crossings
Page 13	Travel Essentials - Thailand into Laos, Laos into Thailand, Laos into Cambodia, Cambodia into Laos, Thailand into Cambodia
Page 14	Travel Essentials & Communication & Payment - Cambodia into Thailand, Reference/Contact person for LTC, Address in Thailand, Questions, Communication
Page 15	Communication & Payment & Cultural - Making Payments, Quick Facts on Thailand
Page 16	Cultural - Quick Facts on Thailand
Page 17	Cultural - Thailand's History
Page 18	Cultural - Quick Facts on Laos, Laos History
Page 19	Cultural - Laos History, Quick Facts on Cambodia

Page 20	Cultural - Cambodia's History
Page 21	Cultural - Local Customs, The King, Buddha, Monks, Dress Appropriately, National Anthem, Tipping
Page 22	Cultural & Ideas for Reading & Trip Locations - Bartering, The Khmer Rouge, Tentative Trip Itinerary
Page 23	Community Forests International - We Travel Carbon-Free, One Traveler, One Tree
Page 24	Community Forests International

The Basics

Duration: 25 Days

Start & Finish: Bangkok, Thailand

Adventure Type: Backpackers (age 18 to 27)

Trip Size: 15 – 22 (+2 group leaders)



Epic Experiences

Included in the Price

- Ride a bamboo raft down a river
- Traditional Thai family style dinner
- Observe the Buddhist almsgiving ritual
- Explore Angkor Wat
- Have one night in Bangkok
- Meet an Elephant
- Bathe under a Waterfall
- Trek through a tropical jungle
- Doi Suthep Temple Tour

Optional Activities

- Ride in a Hot Air Balloon
- Rock climbing
- Get any outfit you can imagine tailor-made
- Cooking Class
- Boat Trip
- Muay Thai Fight
- Elephant Show
- Snake Show
- Kayak and Cave Trip
- Bungee Jumping
- Zipling
- Tubing in Vang Vieng

Trip Details

What's included?

- Transportation for a day of activities in Chiang Mai
- Slowboat to Laos (3 meals incl.)
- All Taxes (GST, PST, Airport tax)
- Return international flights (in/out Bangkok) and airport transfers***
- Accommodations for your 25-day Free & Easy experience
- Group travel between destinations
- 2 knowledgeable and fun Free & Easy leaders
- Free and Easy Travel Guidebook
- 15 years of trip leading experience
- ***Land Only prices do not include your international flight, airport taxes or transfers

What isn't included?

- All meals and drinks (except those mentioned above)
- Activities outside of the ones listed above
- Any Visa or Visa fees

Travel Budget

SouthEast Asia is a very cheap place to travel, which is just one of many reasons that makes it so much fun! Your personal spending on the trip will include your food, drinks, shopping, entertainment and any activities outside of those included on your FNEZ adventure.

For the entirety of our 25-Day LTC Trip, "A Backpacker's Dream", we would recommend a budget of \$900 - \$1300. Any travel budget will fluctuate between personalities, so ask yourself: "What type of traveller are you?"

The Hippie

Brings about \$800-\$1000 for the 25 days. Eats local food, bargains well at the market, finds good prices on drinks and picks, and chooses their optional activities wisely! Often likely to continue travelling after their FNEZ trip is complete.

The Backpacker

\$1000-\$1200 spending money. A bit more frivolous, but is aware of their budget. Takes in most activities they are interested in, without going too extravagant. Likes to party, but always looking for a good deal.

The Rock Star

\$1200 - \$1400+ Not too worried about their budget, they'll do almost everything, including lavish amounts of shopping and partying often. There won't be too much holding them back from activities, as this is their trip and don't want to let anything pass them by!

To help you work out your budget, here are just a few examples of prices in SouthEast Asia. All prices have been converted from their local currency to US dollars. Please expect slight variations.

Cambodia:

Local Meal: \$2-3

Western Dinner/Lunch: \$5

T-shirt at Night Market: \$2

Glass of Beer: \$0.50

Pitcher of Beer: \$2

Traditional Dance and Buffet Dinner (incl. transportation): \$8

Laos:

Local Meal of Street Food: \$1.25 - \$2.50
Fresh Baguette Sandwich: \$2
Western Meal in Restaurant: \$3.75 - \$5
Big Beer: \$1.25
Big Beer in Restaurant/Bar: \$2
Vang Vieng Tube Rental: (includes transport): \$15
Tubing in Cave and Kayaking Day Trip (incl. lunch,water): \$13
Rock-Climbing (Full Day): \$20
Hot Air Balloon Ride: \$80

Thailand:

Big Bottle of Water: \$0.50
1 Hour Thai Massage: \$6 - \$10
Pad Thai from Street Vendor: \$1
Local Meal with rice at restaurant: \$3.25
Western Meal: \$6 - \$10
Half a Fresh-Cut Pineapple: \$0.30
Fruit Shake / Iced Coffee: \$2
Big Beer (750ml) at 7/11: \$1.70
Big Bottle of Whiskey at 7/11: \$7 - \$10
Big Beer at Bar/Club: \$3
Fruity Cocktail: \$3
Whiskey Bucket (Giant Cocktail): \$8
Bungee Jumping,1st Jump (incl. T-shirt and photos): \$63
Elephant Show: \$6.25
Cooking Course: Half Day \$21 or Full Day \$28
Zip Lining: \$50 - \$75
Live Muay Thai Fight: \$10

Trip Leaders

Every Free & Easy trip is accompanied by at least two leaders. We like to call them “Leaders” and not “Guides” because they are essentially your well traveled, experienced friends! We hire local guides whenever knowledge of culture, history or safety are necessary (ie; temple tours or jungle treks). Our Leaders main goals are to ensure everyone on the trip is having the best time possible. Our leaders will arrange the group transportation between destinations, sort out rooms at the accommodations, plan any group meals or activities and assist in any additional activities that anyone may wish to take part in, and ultimately show you the best that each destination has to offer. They know the trip locations well, and have great relationships with all our contacts in each destination. Not to mention they are all extremely fun and easy going people who continue to showcase the essence of what makes us Free & Easy!

Flying to Thailand

Upon registration you can choose between booking your own flights or requesting Free & Easy to book flights for you.

If you book flights with Free & Easy:

- A flight itinerary will be emailed to you approximately 2 – 3 months before your trip's departure. (Assuming you have paid enough money on your account)
- One or both of your leaders will be at the airport in Bangkok to pick you up and arrange transport back to the guesthouse.
- Transportation will be arranged for you to get from the guesthouse at the end of the trip to get to the airport to catch your flight.
- You can also ask for any custom flights, and our flight team will give you a price quote for booking this for you.

If you don't book flights with Free & Easy:

- You will be contacted with information on meeting up with your group for the start of the trip in Bangkok.

Meals

The ability to experience local food, whether it's from a street vendor, a home stay, or a restaurant, is a huge part of travelling. You'll be able to ask your guides for great options to check out at every destination we go, but for the most part, the journey finding the food, tends to be just as good as the food itself! There will be times that meals will be provided for you, if you have any allergies or food preferences, i.e. vegetarian, please let your guides know!

Allergies!

If you have any allergies, especially food allergies, it is good to be prepared before coming to South East Asia. Peanuts are the most common one and it is used a lot in South East Asian cooking. When you try to make special requests when ordering at a restaurant it doesn't always go as planned. Best thing to do is check out Killer Peanut (killerpeanut.com) where you can choose from a variety of food allergies and get it translated into Thai. Simply print out the translation and then show it to the server when ordering food in Thailand. We also have friends and contacts in all 3 countries we visit that will be more than happy to help you out! This will make your life way easier when you arrive in Asia.

Types of Transportation on this trip

- Minivans: The most common mode of transportation on this trip. We rent private, A/C minivans which hold approximately 10 people.
- Night Trains: One night train will be taken on this trip when we leave Bangkok. Everyone has their own bed, bunk-bed style, and the cabin is A/C.
- Buses: We rent our own private bus to get us through Laos and Cambodia! A/C with room to spread out if you'd like!

- Tuk-Tuks: One of the more fun ways to get around and have an experience at the same time! These motorized little vehicles provide a quick and cheap way to get around. Always make sure you barter!
- Plane: We take a plane between Laos and Cambodia to make it an easy transfer between the two.
- Slowboat: From the Thailand-Laos border we take a slowboat all the way to Luang Prabang. It is a scenic trip on the Mekong River and we have the whole boat to ourselves!
- Bamboo Rafts: This may be our best mode of transportation! Sit down relax or try to steer yourself and 3 others down the river during our Jungle Trek! Try to stay dry!

Accommodations

We have a wide range of accommodations on this trip from beautiful, but slightly rustic, beach bungalows to hotel style rooms with A/C. We have chosen each of our accommodations based on quality, location, and relationships with the establishments. Plus there is so much to do on this trip you won't be spending much time in your room anyway!

All our accommodation is based on at least two-person occupancy. If you wish to have your own room you can pay an additional fee in order to do so. Please contact travel@fnez.com before your trip begins if you are interested.

Solo Travelers:

Lots of solo travelers come on our trips and it's a great way to step outside your comfort zone and make lots of new friends. Since all our accommodation is based on at least two-person occupancy you will be rooming with other members of the same sex in your group.

Packing Suggestions:

Keep in mind that the shopping is cheap in South East Asia so you may want to only pack half of your backpack, leaving room to buy new stuff once you arrive. Clothing is very cheap, and you can always find a good variety of stuff that is ideal for the tropical climate. Most people end up regretting how much they have packed when they realize how easily they could have bought new clothes once they arrived.

It is good to properly prepare supplies for the trip, but don't stress out too much about having everything you think you might need because chances are that you will be able to find whatever it is during your trip. Good quality shoes and/or sports sandals are an exception to that as they are only really available in larger cities. There are also many pharmacies that have medications and first-aid supplies.

In general, you want to avoid packing things that you really don't need to have. There are definitely certain luxuries that are good to have, but you don't want to lug something around for 25 days unless you are going to use it. Also, consider that the weight of your bag will likely be **INCREASING** throughout the trip, and having a lighter backpack simplifies life immensely. Honestly, look at what you have and cut it in half and you're probably good to go. You're gonna buy lots of new stuff.

Here's some ideas for what you might want to pack:

Travel Essentials

- Passport (with photocopies)
- Travel insurance (with photocopies)
- Airline tickets (with photocopies)
- Credit or debit card (see personal spending money)
- Any entry visas, additional passport photos or vaccination certificates required
- Cover for backpack/ziplock bags for travel essentials

Electronics/Entertainment

- Alarm clock
- Headlamp
- iPods, tablets
- Books, eReaders
- Camera (bring a few memory cards)
- All chargers
- Speakers

Clothing

- Swim wear
- Walking shoes/sport sandals
- Shorts
- Temple attire (something to cover your knees and your shoulders)
- Shirts/T-shirts
- Rain jacket
- Underwear
- Sarong (travel towel)

First-aid kit

- (all can be purchased in SE Asia)

Toiletries

- Deodorant is not nearly as good and often contains whitening agents. Bring some from home.
- Girls bring feminine hygiene products as they can be hard to find.

Laundry

Laundry facilities are offered by some of the places we stay. Ask your leaders to point out the best places to get laundry done. There will be times when there are no laundry facilities, however your guides will tell you this in advance.

Travel Essentials

There is nothing more important than your health and safety so make sure you read this carefully!

Passports

Everyone **MUST** have a passport for international travel. If you already have a passport, double check to make sure that it is still valid for at least 6 months from the return date of your trip. If it is not valid for a full 6 months from the day you plan on returning to your passport issuing country, you'll have to apply for a new passport before you leave.

The application process for getting a passport may seem simple, but for most people it ends up taking longer than it first appears. Sometimes it can take a few weeks to complete the entire process, so we definitely recommend not leaving it to the last minute.

Insurance

Everyone **MUST** have Travel Medical Insurance of some kind and bring proof with you for this trip. You might not need to purchase a medical insurance policy though because you may already be covered through some other way:

- Your parent's work health plan.
- With a credit card.
- Through a student or work health plan.
- Through private insurance.

If you purchased Travel Medical Insurance through us and decide to extend your plane ticket, you also have the ability to purchase an extension to your insurance policy. **PLEASE NOTE:** It is your own responsibility to be making any extension to your insurance so you cannot expect this will automatically happen when you extend your plane ticket.

If you need to extend your TIC insurance please call 1-800-670-4426

Please Note: At this time we only provide Travel Medical Insurance for those with valid Canadian citizenship.

Immunizations

There are no immunizations that are ‘required’ for entry into Laos, Thailand or Cambodia. For your own safety, there are some shots that are always recommended for travel to tropical countries.

- Hepatitis A.
- Hepatitis B.
- Typhoid.
- Tetanus.
- Diphtheria.

We also want to warn you that sometimes travel clinics are over cautious to the extreme and try to sell you everything under the sun. If you want a second opinion about something, do some more research online or contact us. This is often the case with Malaria medication. We suggest you try to learn more about the exact locations of any malaria danger before you commit to taking the pills. We can say truthfully, that currently none of the Free & Easy staff or owners take malaria medication when we are on any of our adventures. The feeling amongst many people is that the side effects of the pills are not worth the minimal risk in the regions we travel to. Rather than subject ourselves to the medications we choose to be cautious with mosquito repellent whenever they are present. Since we are not medical professionals we urge you to do your own research and make your own informed decision.

Banking & Money

The easiest way of getting and carrying your money is to simply use the bank machines in the country you are travelling. You can use your regular bank card, using your regular pin number, and the money will come out in the local currency (You need to make sure that you have “cirrus” or “plus” written on the back of your card). At nearly every destination on our trips, you’ll have easy access to a bank machine. This also means you won’t have to get local currency before you leave. Once you arrive, you can just use a bank machine right there at the airport.

Every time you need to make a transaction your account will be charged approx. \$5 fee from your bank and then a possible fee from the local bank. It can get a bit pricey if you’re making withdrawals every few days—so it makes more sense to take out a large sum and then just watch your spending! Although theft does happen sometimes we have found that it is quite rare. So we, ourselves, practice this method.

Be aware that if you are pulling money out on your credit card that this counts as a “cash advance” and you will immediately be charged interest on this amount and not have a grace period or get reward points like you typically would with other

credit card purchases. Additionally, you will still be charged those \$5 fees from your bank and the local bank. With this in mind the best option is always to pull out money using your debit card instead of your credit card.

Another suggestion we would like to reinforce is that we highly recommend that you have online banking during the trip. It allows you to check your balances, transfer money, and monitor your transactions from any internet café. In case of any issue with your bank card, online banking always simplifies a situation since you can easily transfer money to another traveler in your group who could then pull out money for you.

Another little helpful hint is signing over power of attorney to someone you trust (i.e., a parent). This means that they can have access to your accounts while you are away. This can help if you lose your bankcard, or there is a problem with it while overseas. It is also useful if you need someone to pay your bills, or make money transfers while you are away.

Travel Visas/Border Crossings:

Upon entry to Thailand (by air) most countries (please double check your country) are automatically granted a 30-day tourist visa.

During this trip we will be crossing borders quite a few times. This is normally a painless procedure but if you meet the wrong, grumpy customs official they could ruin your day quite easily (as with any country's immigration). We suggest that you are very serious and respectful towards the officials. It is ok that you insist on paying the proper amount at the Cambodian border (\$30). While your leaders will always be nearby if you have any issues, corrupt customs officials often like to select tour groups for additional processing (read: bribes). To avoid this, we will be crossing the borders individually, as solo travellers. We'll still be together the whole time, but if anyone asks, we're friends traveling together. When we go through customs we will all be filling out our own customs forms and paying for our own visas. It helps to have exact change. (\$42 in Laos and \$30 in Cambodia).

Below are some instructions on how to deal with each border crossing we will encounter. Examples of arrival and departure forms are on the following pages. Depending on which direction your trip is going, only half of these will be applicable to you.

PLEASE NOTE: Laos and Cambodian border crossings only accept USD. The Visa prices mentioned above are for Canadian Passport holders, please double check your countries Visa Fee.

Thailand into Laos (Huay Kon border crossing)

- You will go through Thai customs at the land border crossing of Huay Kon. Fill out the departure card and give it to the customs official. They will stamp your passport with the date you are leaving.
- We will cross a no mans land between the Thai departure office and the Laos entry office. Once there, you will fill out your visa application form and arrival card. You will submit a passport photo, 42USD, and the paper work.
- They will process the application and call your name when it is done.

Laos into Thailand (Huay Kon border crossing)

- Fill out the Laos departure card and give it to customs to receive your exit stamp.
- Cross the no mans land to the Thailand arrival office.
- Upon arrival in Thailand fill out the arrival card and give it to customs. You will receive a 30-day visa

Laos into Cambodia (Vientiane airport to Siem Reap airport)

- Fill out the departure card and give it to the Laos customs official. They will stamp your passport with the date you are leaving.
- Upon arrival at the Siem Reap airport, fill out a Cambodian visa application and an arrival card.
- You will need a passport photo, 30USD, and your paperwork. They will process your application along with your passport and call your name once your visa is ready.
- Submit your arrival card and passport to a customs official to get an entry stamp with the date your arrived in your passport.

Cambodia into Laos (Siem Reap airport to Vientiane airport)

- Fill out the departure card and give it to the Cambodian customs official. They will stamp your passport with the date you are leaving.
- Upon arrival at the Vientiane airport, fill out a visa application and an arrival card.
- Submit a passport photo, 42USD, and your paperwork for processing. They will call your name once your visa is ready.

Thailand into Cambodia (Poi Pet border crossing)

- Fill out the departure card and give it to the Thai customs official. They will stamp your passport with the date you are leaving.
- Walk about 100 meters and cross the road to the Cambodian visa office on the right side.
- Fill out the arrival card and have a \$20 bill and your passport photo ready. They might try to make you pay 1000 baht (which is a scam). Be firm and give them \$20.

- Proceed another 50 meters to the entry point.
- Give the customs official your passport and they will give you an entry stamp.

Cambodia into Thailand (Poi Pet border crossing)

- Fill out a departure card and give it to the Cambodian customs official to receive your exit stamp
- Walk the 100 meters to the Thai immigration office on the left side of the road.
- Fill out the arrival card and give it to Thai immigration.
- They might ask you for a copy of a flight itinerary so its a good idea to have one.

Reference/Contact Person for LTC:

Thepkunya Subchareon aka P-Dao (Pee-Dow)
 28 T.Sriphoom
 Moonmuang Rd. Soi 9
 A. Muang Chaingmai
 50200
 THAILAND
 Tel. 053-210-687

Address in Thailand:

Wild Orchid Villa Guesthouse
 8 Soi Chanasongkram, Pra Arthit Rd.
 Bangkok, Thailand
 (This is a guesthouse that we frequently use for our group's arrival in Bangkok.)

Communication + Payment

Questions

Phone: 1-800-403-5208
 Email: travel@fnez.com

Communication

So you have signed up for a Free & Easy adventure and we hope to help make this the easiest travel experience of your life. We want to help you out with anything you need help with. However, there are always things that you will need to take care of yourself and we will make it as easy as possible to explain these things. So we need to have a bit of cooperation from your part and it start with actually **READING** our emails :). Please, make sure you read the emails we send leading up to your trip because we are sending them to make sure that you are as ready as you can possibly be for this travel adventure.

Most of the information we send will be coming through your "Your Trip" account. Please make sure that you have all of the requirements taken care of prior to your trip as well you can also view your account and balance owing and a place for us to give you your downloads and hear news of the upcoming trip. You should receive an email in your inbox notifying you when we do post something on there. Please notify us if you find that you're not getting the notifications.

Making Payments

Follow this [link](#) for a full outline of our payment options.

Check [here](#) for the payment schedules for all our trips.

The \$200 deposit reserves your placement on a trip. For all the trips, we have arranged the payment dates to allow you the maximum time to pay for your trip. If you would prefer to pay for the entire trip all at one time, that is no problem. You can also make larger payments earlier whenever it is convenient for you. The payment dates that we have listed are just guidelines that state the last possible date by which payments should be made.

We would greatly appreciate that all payments be made on time. Meeting this simple request makes our job much easier because it allows us to always be looking forward and preparing for the trips, rather than figuring out who and where we need to collect money from. If you expect that a payment will be late, please email us to explain when we can expect the payment. Payment schedules for each of the trips can be reached by clicking the link above.

PLEASE NOTE: All additional costs (for flights, insurance, fees & extras) will be added to your statement of account on the 'your trip' page. Please, ensure that you add any additional charges to your final payment unless we require it sooner.

Cultural

Quick Facts on Thailand

- Thailand means "Land of the Free", a phrase used to express pride in the fact that Thailand is one of only two countries in the world never colonized by a European power.
- Thailand shares a border with four countries: Myanmar (formerly Burma) to the north and west, Laos to the north and east, Cambodia to the southeast, and Malaysia to the south.
- Thailand is home to the world's largest gold Buddha, the largest crocodile farm, the largest restaurant, the longest single-span suspension bridge, and the world's tallest hotel.

- Most young Thai men become Buddhist monks for at least a short period of time before their 20th birthday.
- Buddhism is Thailand's largest religion with approximately 94.6% of the population practicing the religion. Muslims make up 4.6%, Christians 0.7%, and "other" 0.1%.
- The longest city name in the world is the full name of Bangkok, which is: "Krung Thep Mahanakhon Amon Rattanakosin Mahintharayutthaya Mahadilokphop Noppharat Ratcha- than burirom Udomratchaniwetmahasathan Amon Phiman Awatan Sathit Sakkathattiyawitsanukamprasi". It means "City of Angels, Great City of Immortals, Magnificent City of the Nine Gems, Seat of the King, City of Royal Palaces, Home of Gods Incarnate, Erected by Visvakarman at Indra's Behest."
- The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami devastated Thailand's coast, killing over 8,000 people. An estimated 1500 Thai children lost their parents and more than 150,000 Thais working in the fishing or tourist industries lost their livelihoods.
- A century ago, more than 100,000 elephants lived in Thailand, with about 20,000 of them untamed. Now, there are about 5,000 with less than half of them wild.
- The world's longest reigning monarch is Thailand's king: Bhumibol Adulyadej, who became King Rama IX in June 1946. He was born in the U.S. in 1927 when his father was studying medicine at Harvard. He owns a patent on a form of cloud seeding and holds a degree in engineering from Switzerland. He also plays the sax and composed Thailand's national anthem.
- Tiger Woods is the son of an American father and a Thai mother.
- Northern Thailand is a major producer of opium, which is a major source of income for the hill tribes. The northern tip of Thailand, the western tip of Laos, and the eastern corner of Myanmar make up what is called the "Golden Triangle" and is notorious for the production and trafficking of opium and heroin.
- Thailand has a reputation for sexual tolerance and is considered very safe for LGBT travelers. Transsexuals, also known as katoys or ladyboys, are very common in Thai society.
- In Thailand, the head is the most important part of the body. Consequently, no one must ever touch another person, even a child, on the head. Thai's always try to keep their heads lower than the head of any person who is older or more important, to show respect.
- The energy drink Red Bull originated in Thailand, and was originally called Red Guar (a kind of Ox).

Thailand's History

Ancient Thais likely migrated from Southern China where they originated some 4,500 years ago. Under pressure from increasing Chinese population, they moved southward through Burma down to the Indo-Chinese peninsula, the "Thai Noi" then established their capital in Sukhothai, the northern province of Thailand.

Thailand has had several capital cities: Chiang Mai, Ayutthaya, Thon Buri, and currently, Bangkok.

By the 13th century the Thais had settled within the Southeast Asian mainland, making Sukhothai the "first kingdom". The Sukhothai era marked a period of great cultural development. Due to the kingdom's prosperity, this is regarded as a "golden age" in Thai history.

Then in the 1350, a new dynasty led by King Ramathibodi I (Uthong) established a new capital at Ayutthaya. The Ayutthaya Kingdom survived several wars with Burma before falling to the invading Burmese in 1767.

Following this defeat, the Thais led by King Taksin retreated south and established another capital at Thon Buri. On his death in 1782, the King was succeeded by King Phra Buddha Yodfah Chulaloke (Rama I) who moved the capital across the river to the present location in Bangkok as Thon Buri was too vulnerable to Burmese attack. The King founded the Chakri Dynasty which rules the country to the present day (Rama IX is the current monarch in Thailand and has ruled for over 60 years).

In July 1917, Thailand joined World War I on the allied side. And in June 1932 Thailand became a constitutional monarchy. On 8 December 1941 Thailand agreed to let Japanese troops to pass through the country to invade British Malaya. The Japanese then occupied Thailand and, with its hand forced, Thailand declared war on the Allied powers in January 1942.

Despite officially being allies with Japan, over 90,000 Thai guerrillas fought the Japanese occupation force. Thailand joined the UN in 1946.

In May 1946, a new constitution for Thailand was proclaimed and later that year King Bhumibol (Rama IX) began his reign.

Thailand has struggled with the transition from a monarchy towards a democracy, and military coups have been popular (though generally non-violent) in the 20th

century. Today the country is stable both politically and economically, having weathered the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s quite comfortably.

Quick Facts on Laos

- Since December 1975, the official name of Laos has actually been “Lao People’s Democratic Republic” – but to this day, everyone still calls it Laos.
- The Laotian New Year celebration is a 3-day-long festival held from April 13 to 15.
- The Khone Papeng, which is found in Laos, is the largest waterfall in the whole of Southeast Asia.
- Laos has been dubbed the “World’s Most Bombed Country.” Over two billion tons of bombs were dropped in Laos during the Vietnam War.
- The jars in the mysterious Plain of Jars (located in central Laos far off the tourist trail) are each big enough to hold a person. They date from 500 BC and the largest of these earthen jars weighs more than six tons!
- The highest point in Laos, the Phou Bia, is unfortunately not open to tourists because it is filled with unexploded ammunition.
- Laos’ biggest agricultural export is coffee.
- A full 80% of all Laotian work is in agriculture.
- Laos is a landlocked country with no direct links to the sea.
- Bun Bang Fai or “Rocket Festival” is exactly that. Laotian revelers light off hundreds of homemade rockets on the night of the May Full Moon in a rain-festival offering that predates Buddhism.
- The Mekong River, the longest river in Southeast Asia, forms the border between Laos and Thailand.
- The “Golden Triangle”, where Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar (Burma) meet on the Mekong River has long been a source of poppies for the opium trade.

Laos History

Unlike in Vietnam, the ancient people of Laos were influenced more by Indian than Chinese culture. From the 1st century AD Indian merchants introduced Theravada Buddhism into Laos. From the 9th to the 13th century the Khmers from Cambodia ruled much of what is now Laos.

In the late 1800s, France expanded its regional influence into Laos. In 1941, the French fought a war with the Thais for Laotian territory. Following French surrender, The Japanese (who were Thai allies) forced an armistice and parts of Laos were given to Thailand. Then in April 1945 the Japanese forced the pro-French King Sisavang Vong to declare independence from France. Following the Japanese surrender in September Laos became briefly independent; however, Laotian independence did not last long. In March 1946 the French invaded Laos and by May 1946 were in control of the country again.

Then in 1950 the Pro-Communist Prince Souphanouvong formed an organization that became known as Paphet Lao (Land of the Lao). At first it was a relatively small organization backed by the Vietnamese Viet Minh who were also fighting the French for independence.

The French were rapidly losing control of their Southeast Asian colonies and in 1953 they withdrew from Laos, which became an independent, Constitutional Monarchy.

In the 1960s Laos became drawn into the wider Asian War. From 1964 to 1973 the USA carpet-bombed Laos in attempts to destroy the Ho Chi Minh trail which ran through Laotian territory (They (the USA) were also unofficially fighting the Paphet Laos who were allied with the Viet Minh). Then in 1975 South Vietnam and Cambodia fell to the Communists. The Paphet Laos seized control from the monarchy, and The Lao People's Democratic Republic was founded in December 1975.

A full Communist regime was introduced. However in 1988 the government of Laos introduced market reforms. As a result the economy of Laos began to grow rapidly.

Today Laos is still a poor country but it is developing rapidly (from the late 1980s to

- 2010 the economy grew strongly). Laos joined ASEAN in 1997.

Quick Facts on Cambodia:

- The Cambodian flag is the only national flag that has an image of a building – Angkor Wat.
- Cambodia has been changing its name whenever a new government was installed: It was called the Khmer Republic during its republican years, Democratic Kampuchea under the Khmer Rouge regime, and People's Republic of Kampuchea under the leftist group called Salvation Front. Today, in its latest government form, it is officially called the Kingdom of Cambodia.
- During the four-year rule of the Khmer Rouge, one-fifth of Cambodia's population was killed. Many were educated people, priests, and monks.
- Half of Cambodia's current population is younger than 25 years old.
- Traditionally, birthdays are not celebrated in Cambodia. Older people might not even know their birthdays.
- In recent times, the country's biggest source of income has been the textile industry. The second largest source of Cambodian income is tourism.
- Cambodia has one of the highest deforestation rates in the world. Between the years 1990 and 2005, the country has lost 25,000 square kilometers of forest.
- By some estimates around 80% of Cambodians are reliant on subsistence farming for their livelihood.

- The majority of Cambodians are Buddhist, although there are many Muslims in the east of the country, as well as increasing numbers of Christians around Phnom Penh. All religions were persecuted under the Khmer Rouge.

Cambodia's History

The 20th century was disastrous for Cambodia. Yet not all of Cambodian history is to the Khmer Empire, which left behind incredible monuments such as Angkor Wat.

Pre-modern history in Cambodia is punctuated with wars between the kingdom of Siam (now Thailand), as well as the Vietnamese. In the mid 19th century, the Cambodia became a French protectorate state.

The country was occupied by Japan in World War II, and became “collateral damage” in the Vietnam War, with secret bombings and cross-border incursions.

In 1975, a horrific and tragic era of Cambodian history began as the Communist Khmer Rouge came to power. They were led by Pol Pot, also known as ‘Brother Number One’. Conservative estimates of the deaths caused by Khmer Rouge policies are around 3 million. Religion was banned, and the educated classes were systematically eliminated.

Agricultural collectivization and urban resettlement in Cambodia had catastrophic results. Famine resulted in hundreds of thousands, if not millions of deaths in the 1970's. The reign of the Khmer Rouge ended only due to a Vietnamese invasion in Dec. 1978.

Pol Pot's soldiers fled to Thailand and they were welcomed by the Thais who feared a Vietnamese invasion. The Khmer Rouge continued a guerrilla war against the Vietnamese. However the Vietnamese forces withdrew from Cambodia in 1989.

Today Cambodia is a poor country but there is every reason to be optimistic about its future. In the early years of the 21st century the Cambodian economy grew rapidly. While Cambodia suffered badly during the recession of 2009 it soon recovered and today Cambodia's is growing, buoyed by recently discovered offshore oil. Today the textiles industry in Cambodia is booming and tourism is also an important industry. However the majority of people in Cambodia still make their living in agriculture.

Please Note: During our stay here we will have an opportunity to learn much about both the contemporary and ancient history of Cambodia; we encourage you to do so!

Local Customs

There are some differences in everyday life here that you should know about to help you get by and avoid offending anyone!

The King

Thailand's Royal Family is extremely respected and all visitors to the country are expected to show respect for the King, the Queen and the Royal Children. The current king, King Rama IX, is very beloved by the people and both the local people and Thai law will meet any sign of disrespect very strictly. The penalty for 'lese-majeste' (defaming the Royal Family) is up to 15 years in prison!

Buddha

Every image of the Buddha is sacred in Thailand and Laos. Always ensure that you show the proper respect to the many beautiful Buddha monuments in the country.

Monks

Throughout Thailand, Laos, and even in Cambodia you will see Buddhist monks; they have shaved heads, wear saffron robes and are highly respected wherever they go. If you wish to take a picture, please ask first and if you are female you must never touch them, not even when walking past them on the streets. Monks are not permitted to touch females and if they do, they must go through an extensive series of prayers to cleanse themselves.

Dress Appropriately

In any holy sites (temples, palaces, etc.) you must have your shoulders and knees covered at all times. In everyday life, Thais, Laotians, and Cambodians dress pretty casually and in a western style, however, the women are a little more conservative and the men typically only remove their shirts on the beaches. So keep your shirts on in the city and try to tone down the sexy, revealing outfits!

National Anthem

In Thailand, you may encounter the National Anthem being played at a train station or government building at either 8:00 AM or 6:00 PM. You are expected to stand when it is being played. It also plays before every movie in the cinema so remember to stand when you hear it.

Tipping

Generally in Southeast Asia people do not expect you to tip them but they aren't shocked if you do, either and they really appreciate it when they are tipped. Most of them make quite a meagre income so even just a little bit goes a long way for them.

We at Free & Easy recommend tipping for good services, but it's not necessary to tip 20% like at home.

Bartering

All of the countries on the LTC buy and sell mostly on a bartering system. Very few things outside of official stores have a set price; meaning you need to get good at haggling for the best price possible if you don't want to get ripped off. The best way to get good at this is to try and try again, be firm and a good general rule is to halve whatever price they ask for first.

The Khmer Rouge

Cambodia is still recovering from the genocide of the 1970's under the Khmer Rouge government. We encourage you to learn more about the history of Cambodia, and remind you that it can be a sensitive subject of conversation in this country.

Ideas for Reading

First They Killed My Father - Loung Ung
Lucky Child - Loung Ung
When Broken Glass Floats - Chanrithy Him

Buying some sort of guidebook on Thailand, Cambodia and/or Laos would also be a good idea because it'll have lots of info on things like the culture, history, and geography. It'll have maps and in-depth info on traveling the country. Books like the Lonely Planet or the Rough Guide are especially good if you are planning to travel on your own after the trip because they have all sorts of info on how to get around, where to stay, what to do, and how much things cost. There are also other books like National Geographic and the Insider Guide that have lots of pictures and are better for giving a more in-depth background on Thailand in general. If you don't need the practical travel information, a book like this might be better.

A good place to start is Amazon, Chapters-Indigo or your favourite local book store!

Trip Locations

Day 1 - Bangkok

Day 2-5 - Siem Reap

Day 6-10 - Vang Vieng

Day 11-13 - Luang Prabang

Day 14-22 - Chiang Mai

Day 23-25 - Bangkok

PLEASE NOTE: The above itinerary is tentative. You will receive your confirmed Free & Easy Traveler trip itinerary with the exact routing at least 30 days prior to your departure.

Please be advised we are constantly keeping an eye out for warnings and are well informed on the happenings in the places we go. Our ground team is frequently sending us first hand updates, ensuring the destinations we bring our groups to are safe!

Community Forests International (CFI)

Free & Easy Traveler has joined forces with Community Forests International (CFI) to turn the joy of world travel into an act of global conservation. Travel is an extremely important part of our lives, getting to see and experience the world is what keeps us all connected and reminds us that we all live in the same world and deal with the same problems. But traveling around the world comes at a price and we are well aware of the many buses, planes, ships, etc. that we use to travel that harm the environment. Greenhouse gas emissions are driving increasingly dangerous climate change to the point that some of the places we love most are under threat and we don't want to contribute to the continuing destruction. So we decided to take action.

We Travel Carbon-Free

By tracking the flights of our staff members and calculating the resulting greenhouse gasses, we support CFI to go out and protect and manage a forest in Canada to pull those gasses back out. These emissions become securely stored at CFI's Whaelghinbran Farm. Read more about how CFI offsets our carbon here.

One Traveler, One Tree

But we didn't stop there. Much of the work that CFI does supports community tree planting efforts in Africa and Canada. This work is having incredible results, and we wanted to strengthen their efforts so we decided that for each traveler that comes on a trip with us, we'll provide CFI with the support to plant a tree to help offset that traveler's carbon emissions.

These trees are being used as tools of environmental and social restoration. In Canada, some of these trees were planted along a degraded watercourse and will go on to provide habitat for salmon, trout, hawks and king fisher, just to name a few. In Africa, where CFI was born, these trees were planted as a part of ongoing restoration of degraded lands on the island of Pemba, Tanzania. These trees rebuild the soil that was too poor to grow crops, allowing for trees like mangoes and cassava to thrive and produce food.

We look forward to continuing our relationship with CFI and, along with your help, making the world a greener place to live and travel in! If you want to offset your travel emissions with CFI, or want to support tree planting around the world, find out how here.