

ASEAN HERITAGE TRAIL

MEKONG

A River for Indochina





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A River for Indochina

Map

Attractions not to be Missed

Museums and Cultural Attractions

Gastronomy Delights

All About Craft, Design and Textile

Living Arts Highlights



Mekong, A River for Indochina

The Mekong River is one of the most important river in Asia and particularly in Southeast Asia as it goes through five countries of the region — Myanmar, Thailand, Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam. The river crosses Asia on a length of 4,345 km from its headwaters in the Tibetan Plateau to the South China Sea, making it the seventh longest river in Asia and the twelfth longest in the world. The river flows along 2,500 km of land in Southeast Asia. It has a length of roughly 100 km in Myanmar, of 1,900 km in Laos, of 920 km in Thailand, of 500 km in Cambodia and of 220 km in Vietnam. The Upper Mekong features turbulent rapids, steep gorges while the Lower Mekong in ASEAN is more placid and incredibly wide.

It is said that the first European to have set an eye on the Mekong River was Italian trader and adventurer Marco Polo in the 13th century. Three centuries later, Portuguese Dominican missionaries Father Gaspar da Cruz was the first to describe travelling on the Mekong River around 1555. He was then followed by Dutch explorer Gerrit van Wuysthoff who reported about his travel along the river in 1641.

However, it will be French who will strongly shape the destiny of the lands and countries along the Mekong. Their influence is lasting until today in architecture, cuisine, culture (many of the temples were preserved by French archeologists), education or even in the daily vocabulary used in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam.

The French were caressing the plan to use the Mekong to navigate into China and extend further the influence of the French Empire. However, their expansion into China never materialized as navigation was cut by the impressive Khone Falls in Southern Laos. However, all the river from the banks to Lao PDR through Cambodia and further up to the Mekong Delta in Vietnam became a major trading area. Many cities settled during French times along the Mekong River, prospered through trade, reflected in some fine examples of colonial architecture.

French influence also reached Thailand (by then Siam). As the Kingdom started a gigantic effort of modernization under King Rama V the Great, cities along the River received a French touch as they started to expand. The French style was indeed seen as a way to look more modern, making Siamese cities along the Mekong on pair with their Laotian or Cambodian counterparts. Another influential factor has been the immigration of Vietnamese and then Laotians to Thailand from the 1920s to the 1960s as they fled political repression from the colonial power and later the various wars in Indochina. These new emigrants contributed by their customs and traditions to give further an Indochinese touch to Northeast Thailand.

In recent years, efforts have been done to connect Thailand to its Indochinese neighbours with a remarkable success. Just 25 years ago, there was no bridge linking countries over the Mekong River. The first bridge —now gone into history books— opened in 1994 between Nong Khai in Thailand and the province of Vientiane in Lao PDR. Until 1994 there were not even bridges across it. There are now more than two dozen bridges passing over the Mekong these days with ten bridges being international checkpoints. The largest number connects Thailand to Laos. Expect to see more bridges in the near future, some also for rail links.

As connectivity between all the countries bordering the Mekong River improves almost on a monthly basis, it is then more convenient than ever to explore the historical treasures of this river who shaped former Indochina. Classical European architecture in Mekong cities blend marvelously today with traditional temples and local wooden houses while sleepy villages continue to carry this indolent easy way of live characterizing life along the Mekong River. The Mekong has also been a major element of life to one of the world's architectural marvel, the fabled city of Angkor Wat.

With travel being easier than ever, it is time to enjoy the myriad of cultures along the Mekong River and dream of Indochina...



ABOUT THAI-LAO FRIENDSHIP BRIDGES

When it opened back to April 1994, it was a true sensation. The first Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge (Saphan Mittraphap in Thai) was built with the support of Australia. Stretching over 1,100 meter, the bridge is open to road vehicles and trains and connect Nong Khai to Vientiane. The majestic bridge is still one of the busiest, if not the busiest bridge across the Mekong as it sees every year over a million foreign visitors in each direction.

The first Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge remained the only one over the Mekong River for another 13 years when the 2nd Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge opened between Mukdahan and Savannakhet on a 1,600-meter length. In 2011, the 3rd Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge opened on a length of 1,460 m between Nakhon Phanom and Thakhek in Khammouane Province. The 4th Thai-Lao Bridge, opened in 2013, is the smallest of all Mekong bridges. Its length is only 630 meters and it connects Chiang Khong in Chiang Rai Province to Ban Houayxay in the province of Bokeo in Laos.

Two more bridges are in planning. The 5th Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge could link the province of Bueng Kan to Borikhamxay in Laos while another bridge would link Ubon Ratchathani with Salavan province.

Mekong, A River for Indochina

Thailand

- Chiang Khan
- Nong Khai
- Sakon Nakhon
- Nakhon Phanom
- Mukdahan
- Ubon Ratchathani

LAO PDR

- Luang Prabang
- Vientiane
- Savannakhet
- Champassak

Cambodia

- Stung Treng
- Kratie
- Phnom Penh
- Neak Loeung
- Kampong Cham

Vietnam

- Tan Chau
- Sa Dec
- My Tho
- Vinh Long



Wat Supattanamaram in Ubon Ratchathani, THAILAND



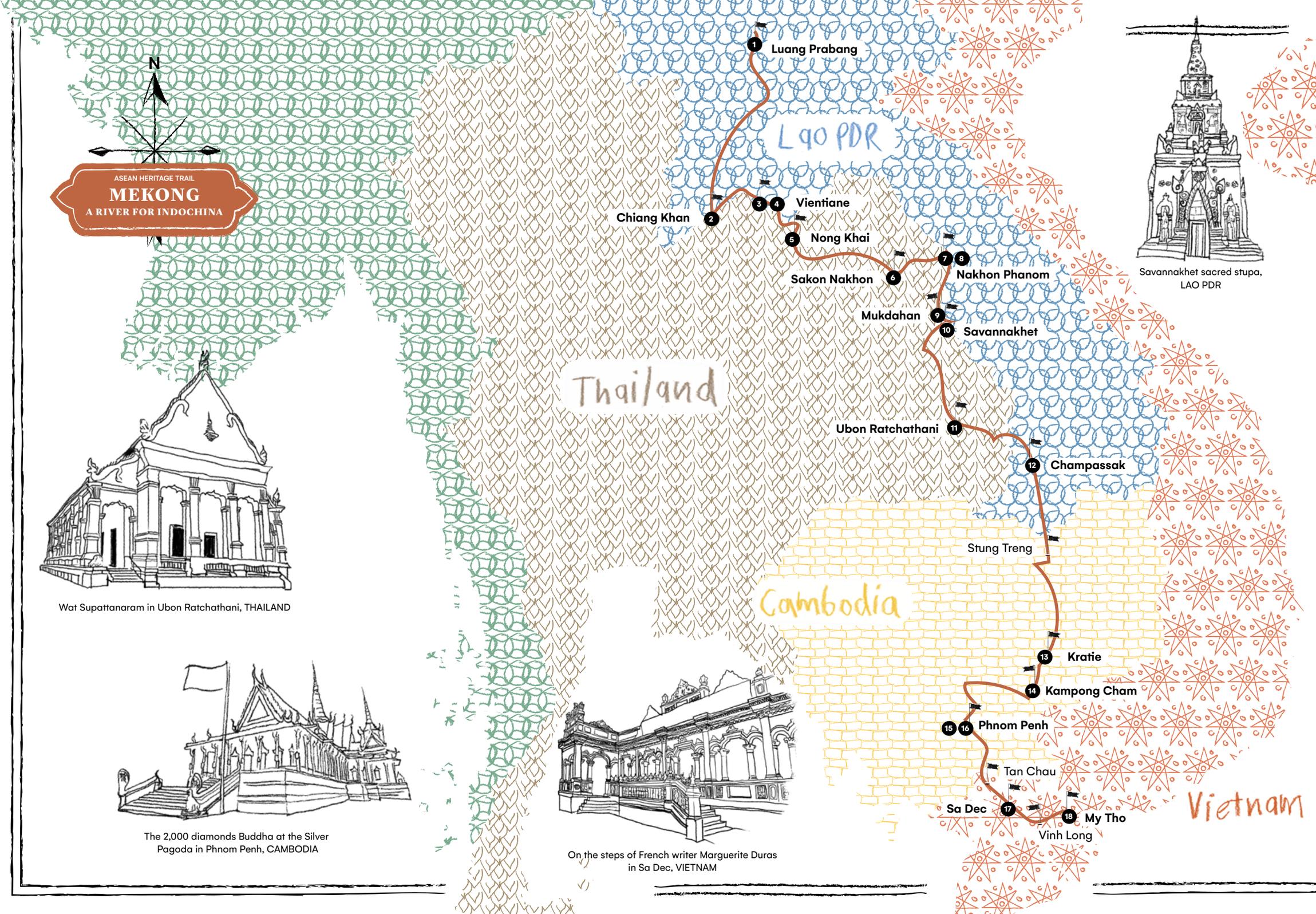
The 2,000 diamonds Buddha at the Silver Pagoda in Phnom Penh, CAMBODIA



On the steps of French writer Marguerite Duras in Sa Dec, VIETNAM



Savannakhet sacred stupa, LAO PDR



Attractions not to be Missed

1 Perfect Peninsula in Luang Prabang

Luang Prabang, LAO PDR

The old town of the former royal residence city of Luang Prabang is insert like a diamond inserted in a necklace of the Mekong River. Luang Prabang historical heart is indeed a peninsula and visitors can embrace its panorama from the top of Phou Si Hill, overlooking the royal palace.

2 Chiang Khan (Thailand) alms procession

Chiang Khan, THAILAND

The charming small town lines up its century-old wooden houses along the Mekong River. Most of the communities living in the peaceful town came from Laos, escaping France colonial regime and were at a later point joined by migrants from Vietnam and China. Chiang Khan retains a very traditional atmosphere. Locals said that Chiang Khan is a pendant to Luang Prabang due to its strong religious life. Like in Luang Prabang, monks collect alms in a long procession every morning. Wake up early to see a 'ribbon' of saffron and orange robes as monks walk along the narrow roads.



Perfect Peninsula
in Luang Prabang



3 A Lao version of Paris Arch of Triumph in Vientiane

Vientiane, LAO PDR

In recent years, the old town of the Laotian capital Vientiane nestled along the Mekong have given way to new structures showing how Vientiane wants to turn into a contemporary town. French influence can still be seen along Sethathirath Road lined with old colonial houses while Patuxay (Victory Gate) is a strange triumphal gate built in 1957 and echoing Paris own version of Arch of Triumph. Like it or not, there is a great view from the top...



4 Gold of Vientiane

Vientiane, LAO PDR

That Luang Stupa is the symbol of Laos. Built in 1566, it is today considered the most important national cultural monument of the country. With its stupa painted in gold, the temple is turning into dark orange or pink in the sunset. Not to be missed.

5 Sunset at Nong Khai Riverfront

Nong Khai, THAILAND

Nong Khai is a peaceful town along the Mekong which has turned into a popular tourist attraction as it is the first stop into Thailand from Laos. The riverfront has been renovated with Naga statues and a fantastic panorama over the Mekong, particularly at sunset. Even better is to dine there and enjoy both the sunset and Nong Khai Vietnamese/Thai cuisine. The old town has a couple of French influenced buildings such as the Governor's residence.

6 Indochina village in Sakon Nakhon

Sakon Nakhon, THAILAND

Tha Rae is one of Thailand most beautiful village with its beautiful arched houses and window ornate with balconies. While some have been restored, many of these houses are crumbling, adding to the village charm. This very Indochinese architecture finds its origin in the high number of Vietnamese migrants who fled the colonial regime. The population then built their homes in the same European-Indochinese style prevalent in Vietnam and turned Ban Tha Rae into the largest Roman Catholic community of Thailand.

7 Cosmopolitan Nakhon Phanom

Nakhon Phanom, THAILAND

It can be easily said that Nakhon Phanom is probably the most charming city along the Mekong in Thailand. Facing Thakhek in Laos, Nakhon Phanom emulated in its development the French Indochinese style- at that time a sign of a modern city. There are at least dozens of colonial style buildings in the city centre which gives Nakhon Phanom its uniqueness. The most impressive are the Governor's residence —today a museum—, Nakhon Phanom city library, which evocates an Italian palazzo while villas and a neo classical school are lining along Sunthorn Wichit Road.

Indochina village
in Sakon Nakhon



Cosmopolitan
Nakhon Phanom



In the shadow of
a Vietnamese clock tower
in Nakhon Phanom



8 In the shadow of a Vietnamese clock tower in Nakhon Phanom

Nakhon Phanom, THAILAND

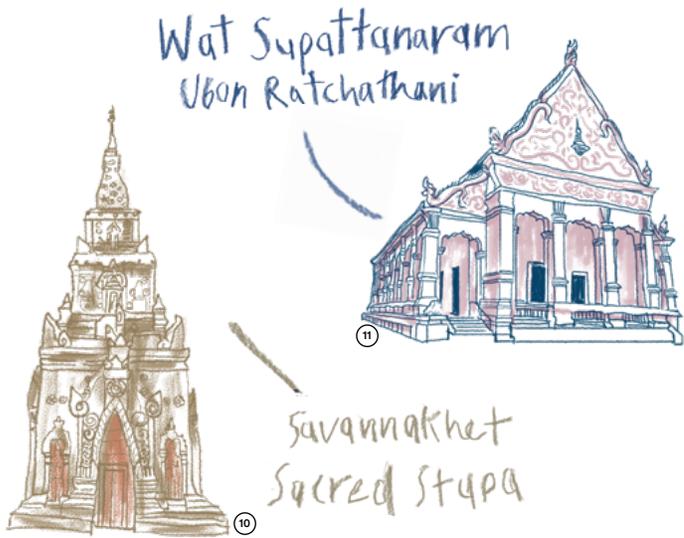
In the middle of Nakhon Phanom market area stands a clock tower in typical 1960s style. The structure was built by the Vietnamese community in 1960. Nakhon Phanom is the closest place in Thailand to Vietnam and its geographic position turned the town into a forefront post in the USA-Vietnam war. While the clock is not so interesting, it stands in the middle of Nakhon Phanom popular walking street which is filled up at night with dozens of restaurants, pubs and pop-up shops.



9 Thailand most striking church in Mukdahan

Mukdahan, THAILAND

30 km north in the village of Songkhon, World War II claimed the life of seven Catholics, who became victims of religious persecution as Catholicism was considered a forbidden foreign religion. The seven martyrs were beatified in 1989 and a new church was built for commemoration. "The Seven Martyrs Catholic Church of Songkhon" is considered the largest and the most beautiful contemporary church in Southeast Asia. It received an award from the Association of Siamese Architects under Royal Patronage in 1996. Architect Achapol Dusitnanond got inspired by the idea of conflict with architectural elements opposing each other.



10 Savannakhet sacred stupa

Savannakhet, LAO PDR

That Ing Hang Stupa is the historical attraction not to be missed in Savannakhet, Laos second largest city and formerly a trading post between Thailand and Vietnam during French colonial times. Built in the 16th century, the temple is a revered place of worship for Laotian but also for Thai and shows beautiful carving and decoration on its 9-meter high stupa. Stroll as well around Savannakhet for its high number of French colonial structures.

11 Temple city Ubon Ratchathani

Ubon Ratchathani, THAILAND

There are at least a dozen temples in Ubon Ratchathani with two to three not to be missed... Wat Supattanaram is a royal temple of the Dhammayut sect along the Mun River. The 1853-built temple is all white and is an unusual mix of Thai, Chinese and European style. It might look like a theme park dedicated to Buddhism with its hundreds of colourful statues. The relative recent temple is a maze of hundreds of Buddhist and Hinduist figures paint in vivid colours. Like in a dream! Impossible to visit Ubon without looking at the 200-year old Wat Thung Si Mueang with its exquisite script repository on stilts with its walls covered by delicate paintings.

12 A village as a royal residence in Champassak

Champassak, LAO PDR

The sleepy village of Champassak gave the name to the Province as it was surprisingly the Southern residence of Laotian kings in the past. Along its roads stand many colonial style houses including an imposing yellow villa which used to be the King's residence. There are also the mausoleums of the royal family in one of the city's temples. The small town is the base to explore UNESCO listed site of Vat Phou, a temple being a perfect example of classic Angkor style architecture.



13 Sleeping in the Governor's residence in Kratie

Kratie, CAMBODIA

Imagine to be the appointed French governor of a Cambodian province and take residence. This is what can be done at le Relais de Chhlong, 30 km from Kratie in a village full of crumbling colonial structures. Le Relais de Chhlong became the residence of the Governor's in 1916 and is now open for tourists as a boutique hotel with views of the Mekong River. Kratie riverfront is also lined with fading colonial houses.

14 Kampong Cham, eclectic architecture

Kampong Cham, CAMBODIA

It's slow pace of life makes Kampong Cham into a new destination for adventurers. The city is a good stop-over on the way to Laos or Northeast Cambodia with its large boulevards along the Mekong River and its diverse architecture of French colonial buildings, Chinese shop houses as well as ancient Khmer temples such as the Angkorian temple of Wat Nokor as well as 150-year old Wat Maha Leap, one of the last wooden pagodas in Cambodia with beautiful murals.



15 A Palace overlooking the Mekong in Phnom Penh

Phnom Penh, CAMBODIA

Started from 1886 and developed during 25 years, the Royal Palace has been the primary residence of Cambodia's monarchs and was auspiciously constructed at the cross division of the Tonle Sap River and the Mekong River. The Throne Hall with its 59m-high tower is open to the public as well as annex pavilions containing memorabilia. Unfortunately, the cast iron pavilion, a gift of French Emperor Napoleon III, has been waiting for its renovation for over a decade.

16 The 2,000 diamonds Buddha at the Silver Pagoda, Phnom Penh

Phnom Penh, CAMBODIA

Within the Royal Palace compounds is the Silver Pagoda, Cambodia chamber of treasures. The pagoda takes its name from the 5,329 hand crafted silver tiles paving the floor. It contains also the Emerald Buddha made of crystal and an incredible golden life-sized Buddha Maitreya –also known as the Buddha of the Future. The statue is made of 90kg pure gold and is adorned with over 2,000 diamonds, including a 25-carat diamond in the crown as well as a 20-carat diamond in the chest. The gallery surrounding the pagoda is decorated with murals showing Cambodia classical painting.



17 On the steps of French writer Marguerite Duras in Sa Dec

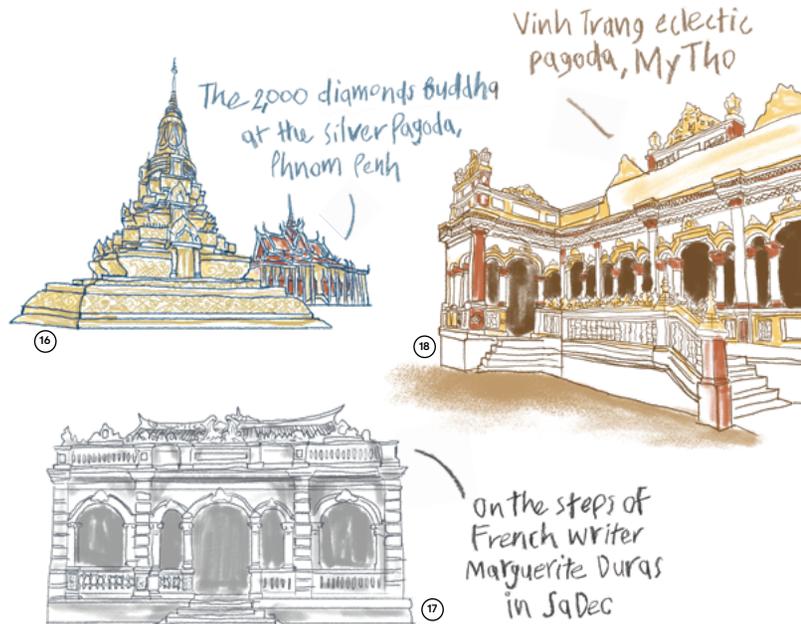
Sa Dec, VIETNAM

French writer Marguerite Duras was born in Saigon and her childhood in South Vietnam inspired her in her writing, particularly for her most famous novel "The Lover". The writer lived in Sa Dec between 1928 and 1932 when her mother, a bankrupt colonial widow, ran a school there–still to be seen today. In Sa Dec, Duras as a 15-year-old schoolgirl met Huynh Thuy Le, 27, the son of a wealthy Chinese family. The man inspired the novel and the house where he really lived has been reopened to the public with its blend of Chinese, Vietnamese and French architecture with its intricate sculptures, arcades, tiles and furniture.

18 Vinh Trang eclectic pagoda, My Tho

My Tho, VIETNAM

Vinh Trang Pagoda is located a few km away from the city of My Tho at the mouth of the Mekong. Located along the Bao Dinh Canal, the temple is surrounded by lush gardens and fruit trees. It is an amazing blend of Chinese, Indochinese and French styles as it was reconstructed in 1907 following destructions by a tropical storm. Art deco style was added in the 1920s and 1930s with the construction of the main triple gate and the reconstruction of the ceremonial hall. Many statues of bodhisattvas and guardians as well as a human-sized statue of the Jade Emperor can be admire.



Museums and Cultural Attractions

Many local museums show in particular local way of life as well as the history of the region. Interesting for travellers looking to gain knowledge about communities.



Museums and Cultural Attractions

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THAILAND

Nong Khai Aquarium. Opened in 2009, Sirindhorn Aquarium or Nong Khai Aquarium is the largest of its kind in Isan helping visitors to learn about fishes and water life in the Mekong but also around Thailand.

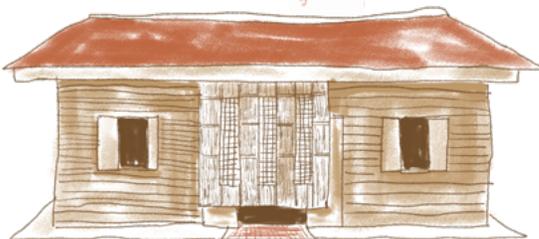
Nakhon Phanom Museum. The small museum is located in the former Governor's residence built between 1912 and 1914 in a style imitating state villas of French Indochina. The museum contains old pictures of Nakhon Phanom, personal objects and furniture of former governors as well as all the preserved bedroom where the late King Rama IX the Great spent a night in 1955.

Ho Chi Minh House, Nakhon Phanom. Vietnamese national hero Ho Chi Minh, who fled French Indochina to fight for the independence of his country, lived in this small simple wooden house in Ban Na Chok village, within Nakhon Phanom city today, from 1924 to 1931. The museum contains memorabilia of daily life used by "Uncle Ho", the place being also honoured by many Vietnamese.

Ho Kaeo Tower, Mukdahan. This is the only museum in Thailand where you can see local tools and art as well as historical artefacts from an observatory tower. Opened in 1996, the tower stands 65.5 meter over town and has two floors dedicated to Mukdahan history and its people. The reward of visiting the museum is the panorama on the top floor with a 360° perspective over the city, the Mekong and the nearby city of Savannakhet!

National Museum, Ubon Ratchathani. Antique statues and objects including potteries but also local cultures, arts and textile coming from all of Lower Isan are on show at the museum through ten exhibition rooms showing the strong link between Ubon, the former Khmer empire and Laotian Kingdoms. Highlights are Shiva and Uma sculptures, aged 1,300 years and a 1,500 years-old Ganesh sculpture.

Ho Chi Minh House,
Nakhon Phanom



Vat Phou Temple Complex,
Champassak



Vat Phou Temple Complex, Champassak

THAILAND/LAO PDR

Nong Khai and Vientiane twin Buddha Parks. It is an unusual feature in the world and a unique place to visit– or better say a unique double–place to discover. The park was started in 1958 by Luang Pu (Venerable Grandfather) Bunleua Sulilat, a priest but also a shaman mixing both Hinduism and Buddhism. He concretises his vision by building the Buddha Park–also called Xieng Khuan (Buddha Park) located today near to the first Thai–Lao Friendship Bridge. The park has 200 statues of Hindu and Buddhist deities made of concrete. Fearing the Communist revolution of 1975 in Laos, Luang Pu Bunleua Sulilat fled into Thailand where he rebuilt around 1978 the same park with its extravagant sculptures. Named Sala Keoku, it even offers views on its twin parks across the border...

LAO PDR

Vat Phou Temple Complex, Champassak. Some 10 km away from Champassak village, the Vat Phou temple complex is one of Southeast Asia's most striking examples of early and classic Angkorian architecture, showing the importance of the then Khmer empire. The site was part of the old city of Shestrapura. Visitors can stroll along majestic ancient ruins, visit the museum and admire the panorama over the Mekong from the top of a hill with a sanctuary.

Gastronomy Delights



CAMBODIA

National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh. If there is one French legacy to be remembered in Phnom Penh, it should then be the National Museum. It was created in 1920 by French historian George Groslier who fought to preserve Cambodian arts and craft. The museum was inaugurated in 1920 offering in its reinterpreted Khmer style architecture a dozen of rooms dedicated to Cambodian arts around a splendid patio. It offers the world's largest collection of Cambodian craft and arts, including masterpieces of Angkor. Over the last decade, many stolen pieces have been back to the museum to the enjoyment of all.

VIETNAM

Ba Duc Ancient House, Dong Hoa Hiep Commune is an hour away from Vinh Long. The mansion was built in the 1850s and is a blend of French and Vietnamese architecture. Looking French from the outside with its arcades and verandah, the inside is a typical Vietnamese imperial court style mansion with its patios. Beautiful furniture can be seen while traditional Vietnamese music concerts are organized in the garden for visitors.



National Museum of Cambodia

Ba Duc Ancient House

A FRENCH RAILWAY OVER THE MEKONG

Khone Falls in Laos are the most impressive waterfalls on the Mekong. They are the largest in Southeast Asia with rapids stretching along 10 km through a thousand of islets, islands and waterways, giving the area the name of Si Phan Don (4,000 Islands). While tourists today enjoy to take spectacular pictures of Khone Falls, they gave hundred years ago headache to French who saw their Empire expansion's dream into China jeopardized by the non-navigable falls... To transport goods, French built a 7-km long railway to transport goods and passengers and board them again on boats. The railway opened in 1893 and was operating until WWII. Plans to reactivate the line never turned concrete. Tourists can meanwhile stroll along the rail tracks, the viaduct and admire two steam locomotives.

The Mekong is often called river of life as it has been bringing for centuries a living to local communities staying along its shores. Vegetable, rice and of course fishes are the main staple in the region. International organizations estimate that agriculture provides food security and livelihoods for approximately 60% of the Mekong River Basin's population. The Mekong Delta is considered one of the largest region for rice production where farmers can eventually harvest up to seven rice crops in a two-year period. Cassava, sugar cane, soybean, maize but also water lilies (lotus) are grown in all countries along the Mekong River and use in cooking.

Specialty products are also grown along the Mekong River such as Macadamia nuts in Loei, Thailand, coffee on the Bolaven Plateau in Laos and cocoa beans in the Mekong Delta region in Vietnam.

Dishes generally include fish, fresh or dry and are accompanied by rice. They are often served with fragrant sauces using shallots and onions, garlic, coriander, kaffir lime, mint, turmeric, ginger, chillies and fermented fish sauce. Popular dishes to be found in both Isan and Lao PDR are spicy Laab and papaya salads while soups with a sour taste and Amok (a fish in banana leaves). In Southern Vietnam, pork barbecues and staples of rice or tapioca noodles are popular dishes.

If you look at lively and pictorial fresh markets, look at floating markets in the Mekong Delta. An hour away from Vinh Long, Cai Be Floating Market is a must-see. Despite the construction of new bridges to cross the Mekong, the market remains one of the largest in the region and a perfect place for pictures with Cai Be French-style cathedral in the background. Dozens of boats sell every day mostly fruits and vegetables. How to recognize what is on sale? Long bamboo poles carry a sample of the sold product.



VIVE LA BAGUETTE/PÂTÉ

Another lively French legacy is French bread with fresh baguettes being sold all across Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam. Any city or village in the region will have an outlet selling sandwiches (Banh Mi in Vietnam), generally filled with pork breast filet or French style pâté and accompanied by diced cucumber and carrots, coriander, all topped with chili sauce! Similar sandwiches are available in Nakhon Phanom and Nong Khai.

ICONIC DISHES TO TRY ALONG THE MEKONG, RIVER OF INDOCHINA TRAIL

NORTHEASTERN THAILAND/LAO PDR

Laab is a spicy salad made of minced meat, poultry or fish mixed with onions or shallots, chillies, coriander and mint. Duck or lamb laab are particularly tasty! While the meat or fish is always cooked in Thailand, Laotian will prefer a raw version. But restaurants will serve on request the cooked laab.

Papaya Salad. Called in Laotian Tam Mak Hoong and Som Tam in Thailand, the green papaya salad in both countries offer different tastes. Other ingredients include palm sugar, lime, garlic, tomatoes, dried shrimp, chillies are pounded together in a traditional mortar and pestle. The Lao version has a stronger taste as locals will use a lot of fermented fish sauce. Thai will add peanuts to the dish and more sugar than Laotians while Laotian will prefer to serve the salad accompanied with raw eggplants and sticky rice. In Vietnam exists a mango salad (goi xoai) made of green mangoes, shrimps flavoured with mint, Thai basil and coriander.

Grilled Chicken –Kai Yang (Thai) or Pìng Kai (Laos), is a traditional dish from Laos and Isan and served with green papaya salad and sticky rice. The chicken is marinated in fish sauce, garlic, turmeric, white pepper, coriander and chillies. Palm sugar is added in Thailand.



THAILAND

Vietnam-inspired food is largely available in Nakhon Phanom and Nong Khai such as 'khai kratha'– eggs fried in individual pans accompanied by Vietnamese style sausage or minced pork meat. Fresh spring rolls in rice paper or fried spring rolls with pork meat, spring onions and carrots are also Thai-reinterpreted Vietnamese dishes.



LAO PDR

Coffee has been introduced by French to the Bolaven Plateau near to the Mekong. At an altitude of 1,000 to 1,300 meters, the area has a relatively cool climate and high rainfall and is perfect to grow both Arabica and Robusta beans. There are possibilities to visit organic coffee farms around Paksong, Bolaven Plateau main urban centre as 5,000 people are involved in coffee growing.

CAMBODIA

Somlor Machou. This soup generally accompanies any meal in Cambodia. The soup is gently spiced but has a very distinctive sour taste and is cooked either with fish, shrimp or beef with kaffir lime often added to enhance the soup's flavour.

Amok. Although served in Thailand, Khmer Amok is a not-to-be-missed specialty. Often served inside a coconut shell, the fish is stewed in a banana leaf in a stew made of coconut milk, turmeric, galangal, garlic, kaffir lime, chillies and palm sugar. The dish has a very smooth rich texture.

VIETNAM

Bánh xèo means "sizzling pancake" is made of rice flour, water, and turmeric powder. It is stuffed either with vegetable or with meat such as pork, shrimp, green onions, mung bean, and bean sprouts. It is served in the Mekong Delta area with lettuce, mint, Thai basil, and fish mint.

Hu Tieu or Kuy Teav is available in both South Vietnam and Cambodia. It is prepared with thin rice noodles cooked in a caramelised garlic oil, oyster sauce, soy sauce and sugar. Noodles are then drowned in a broth made from pork bones, dried squid and seasoned with a bit of fish sauce.

Nem Nuong, a southern specialty which is made of barbecue pork skewers wrapped in rice paper accompanied by diced cucumber, green banana, starfruit and topped with herbs. Thai versions of the dish (called Naem Nueang) are on offer at many Vietnamese restaurants located along the Mekong riverfront in Nong Khai.



All About Craft, Design and Textile

Isan, Laos and Cambodian craft in the region is largely influenced by textiles with the production of exquisite cotton pieces but also silk textiles. Crafts are mostly done with natural resources such as bamboo, rattan and clay while South Vietnam is seeing the emergence of a young generation of designers, eager to reinterpret traditional Vietnamese objects of daily life.

Suntree Art & Culture Market, Nakhon Phanom is a brand new market place open along the Mekong River dedicated to organic agriculture and community crafts. It is the right place to look at organic farm production, see an earthworm farm and a space where villagers show the art of traditional Thai crafts. The market sells local textiles, food, and ethnic handicrafts. Phu Thai textiles are among the most colourful with sophisticated patterns to be admired.

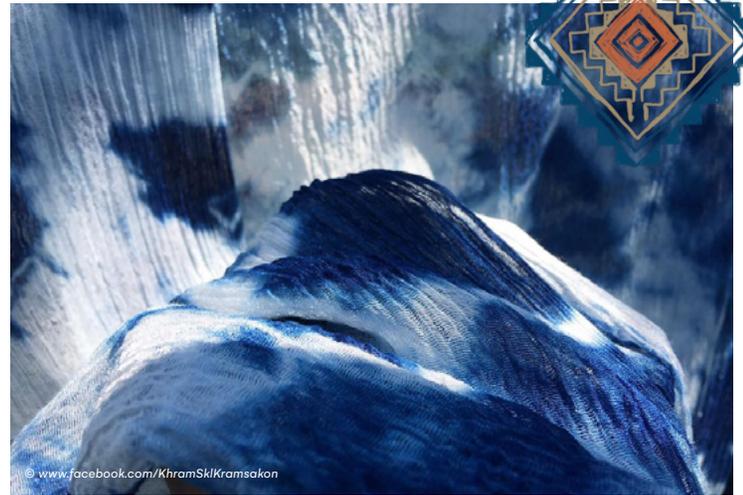
Ban Non Ruea, Sakon Nakhon is a famed village for the creation of Indigo-dyed fabrics using a plant called khram. It is a unique heritage in the region which has turned Ban Non Ruea but also Ban Tham Tao villages into the largest producer of khram in Thailand. Each village in the area has its own pater and sell exquisite pieces of handloom indigo fabrics while also teaching to visitors the art of dyeing handmade cotton pieces.

Rainbow or Klimt style buffalos? Ubon Ratchathani-born artist Maitree Siriboon wants to protect water buffalos as they slowly disappear from Isan upcountry landscapes they are replaced by machines. He painted a few years ago with natural dye the buffalos, turning them into art pieces to save them from being slaughtered. Photo exhibitions of his art buffalos have been shown around the world. His Isan Dream Homestay (24 km from town) declines the topic with ceramics, paintings, pictures and tee shirts representing the animal. Crafts are produced with all the creativity of an Isan artist.

Isaan Object. The trendy sophisticated furniture and design objects are mostly presented in some of Bangkok most elegant malls. They are however all made in Isan using local craftsmen to produce a contemporary line of textiles, clothes, mats, silverware, potteries and furniture such as armchairs or beds. Some of the villages working for Isaan Object are located in Nakhon Phanom, Sakon Nakhon and Ubon Ratchathani.

The Cambodian krama scarf symbolizes Cambodia more than any other textile piece. The cotton scarf generally shows a checkerboard or lines patterns and can show the most incredible combination of colours. A krama is not only a scarf but also a hat, a bag to carry goods or a hammock for babies!

Ban Non Ruea,
Sakon Nakhon



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Reviving traditional crafts from Cambodia has been the inspiring force behind Artisans Angkor, a wonderful line of textiles, clothes and craft ranging from sculpture to jewels, from dishes to cushions. Artisans Angkor has two shops in Phnom Penh, one near the Central Post Office and the second one at the airport, offering extreme high quality products.

Carol Cassidy's Lao Textiles, Vientiane has helped reviving Laotian silk with modern patterns and a combination of unusual colour shades. The shop is located in an old French colonial mansion with a workshop open for visit as well.

In Luang Prabang, Ock Pop Tok offers fabulous silk pieces in delicate colours designed and woven by local Laotians on a community-based project.

Iconic conical hats in Tien Giang, Vietnam. Not always easy to put in a suitcase, the conical hat is a symbol of Vietnam traditional costume. To see the delicate art of manufacturing conical hats and take one home, visit in the province of Tien Giang the villages of Than Cuu Nghia, Tan Ly Dong or Tan Ly Tay.

Sedge mats from Long Dinh village (70 minutes away from Vinh Long) are these days exported all around the world and the manufacturing of these colourful mats made of sedge can be seen all across the village at various production sites.

Living Arts Highlights

Wax Candle Festival in Ubon Ratchathani



Christmas Star Parade, Sakhon Nakhon. The celebration takes place every year in Ban Tha Rae village in Sakhon Nakhon, home to the largest Roman Catholic community in Thailand. Houses are all decorated with stars while a procession of light takes place between December 23 and 25. It is certainly the most spiritual Christmas festivity in Thailand.

Phi Ta Khon Festival. The city of Dan Sai near to Chiang Khan is home to the Phi Ta Khon Festival, sort of carnival asking for the protection of the spirit of the Mun River. The main event takes place on Friday with a grand procession of men and boys wearing colourful masks and costumes. Masks are made from a woven cone used to steam sticky rice and the face carved from wood or banana trunks. The clothing was traditionally sewn from colourful pieces of cloth, but nowadays is usually a kind of jumpsuit patched from several colorful fabrics. A second smaller parade takes place on Saturday. It is possible to buy masks from local artists.

Illuminated Boat Procession in Nakhon Phanom is held annually to mark the end of Buddhist lent (the rain's retreat) and the return of Buddha back to earth. The event occurs at the end of October or early November. Colourful extravagant boats illuminate at sunset the Mekong River in front of the city hall. A major long boat race festival is also held generally in October in Nong Khai with Laotian and Thai boats in competition.

Wax Candle Festival in Ubon Ratchathani. Wax carving skills of craftsmen coming from Ubon Ratchathani and surrounding provinces are shown during the Festival. Ubon event is the most important in Thailand and is hosted during the days of Asanha Puja, which commemorates the Buddha's first sermon. Giant candles floats are organized in processions surrounded by dancers. They often represent scenes of Hindu and Buddhist mythology sculpted in wood or plaster and coated with wax. The parade lasts at least two days.

Vat Phou Festival in Champassak (Lao PDR) is organized each year around February to pay homage to the sacred site. Around the pre-Angkorian remains of Vat Phou, pray ceremonies are organized while festivities include a food festival, traditional Lao music and dances as well as elephant races, cock and buffalo fighting.

Cambodia Water Festival along the Mekong (known in Khmer as Bon Om Touk) takes place once a year, generally in November, to celebrate the natural reversing of the flows between the Tonle Sap and the Mekong River. The celebration lasts three days with fluvial parades, boat races, fireworks, prays and merits at temples.

Sa Dec Flower Village, Vietnam is 4 km away from Sa Dec. The village is considered the flower capital of the Mekong Delta and shows how skilled florists grow hundreds of plants –particularly bonsais– and colourful flowers in the canals. There are entire gardens set up on boats! However, it is best to avoid the village during the Tet festival and week-ends due to overcrowding...

Ok Om Bok Festival, Tra Vinh, Vietnam is also called Moon Offering Festival is a traditional folk festival by Khmer people living in the Mekong Delta. The festival is hosted on October 15 and is a way to honour the moon which helps to grow rice crops. The festival consists of offering to the Moon, lanterns parade on Ba Om Lake and “Ngo” race (a boat in a shape of a Naga). Tra Vinh is 90 minutes away from My Tho.

OK Om Bok Festival, Tra Vinh Vietnam



THE WORLD OF GIANT NAGAS

Nagas are part of the belief of Northeastern Thais and Laotians living along the Mekong. Legends tell about a giant snake with a golden crest often represented with a kind of dragon head and fish body. The Naga appears generally in the Mekong River by the end of the Buddhist Lent and brings fertility to the land he appears. Locals believe that the Naga is semi-divine and possesses supernatural powers.

People then tend to put on the Naga any of the large waves occurring sometimes in the rivers. In Laos, the Naga is seen as the protector of the city of Vientiane. Many temples and giant sculptures along the river pay homage to the fabled creature.

In Nong Khai, during the Rocket Festival at the end of the Buddhist Lent in October, it is said that the Naga will appear and create fireballs on the surface of the Mekong River. Glowing balls come on the surface of the Mekong before disappearing with no credible scientific explanations during that time. It is finally more romantic to believe that fireballs come from the Naga itself.

Information

Going along the Mekong Heritage Trail is turning increasingly easy thanks to bridges crossing the Mekong, new border checkpoints and more flights connecting secondary cities to Bangkok.

Visa

While Thailand provides free visa on arrivals to most countries around the world, it is possible to get a visa on arrivals at most border checkpoints in Cambodia and Lao PDR. E-visa for tourists is now proposed for travellers to Vietnam while only a few countries are exempted of a tourist visa.

Flying

From both Bangkok Don Mueang and Suvarnabhumi airports, there are direct flights to many cities along the Mekong River. Domestically, flights are available to Loei, Udon Thani, Sakhon Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom and Ubon Ratchathani. Both Udon Thani and Ubon Ratchathani have limited flights to Chiang Mai, Hat Yai, Phuket and U-Tapao.

Bangkok is also linked by non-stop flights to Luang Prabang, Pakse and Vientiane in Lao PDR, Phnom Penh in Cambodia, Ho Chi Minh City and Can Tho in Vietnam. Chiang Mai is also connected to Lao PDR. There are regular domestic flights from Vientiane to Pakse and Savannakhet as well as to Cambodia and Ho Chi Minh City

Other transportation

There are boats along the Mekong River for visitors from Nan wishing to reach Luang Prabang —via Pakbeng. The Mekong is also navigable between Nakhon Phanom and Ubon Ratchathani/Champassak.

Rail connections are available from Bangkok to Nong Khai, Ubon Ratchathani and Udon Thani as well as to Phnom Penh.

NORTHERN THAILAND
www.tourismthailand.org

www.museumthailand.com

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www.tourismlaos.org

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Vietnam.travel



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Tourism Authority of Thailand
1600 New Phetchaburi Road, Makkasan,
Ratchathewi, Bangkok 10400, THAILAND
Tel. +66 2250 5500
Call Center 1672