

South East Asian Exploration

Destinations: Thailand, Laos, Cambodia & Vietnam

Duration: 26 Days **Dates:** 14th March – 8th April 2016

-  Tracking families of Northern and Southern Buff-cheeked gibbons in the forests
-  Observing an incredible 15 species of primates including 4 species of Gibbon
-  Spotlighting and spotting 2 species of Slow Loris & a Large-toothed Ferret Badger
-  Enjoying a private cruise through stunning Ha Long Bay in northern Vietnam
-  Camping inside one of the Thailand's best and most biodiverse national parks
-  Enjoying a pod of Irrawaddy Dolphins around out boat in the Mekong River
-  52 mammal species including Pileated Gibbons & Annamese Silvered Langurs
-  Visiting the stunning city of Angkor Wat and the historic town of Luang Prabang
-  Observing over 175 species of birds including incredible Great Hornbills
-  Seeing very rare primate species such as Cat Ba Langurs and Delacour's Langurs



Tour Leader / Guides

Martin Royle (Royle Safaris Tour Leader)
 Tu (Thailand Guide & Driver)
 Khamta (Laos Guide)
 Guson (Laos Driver)
 Chandrup (Angkor Wat Guide)
 Wu (Khao Yai Spotlighting Guide)
 Suvat, Pim & Tam (Cambodian Guides)
 Mr. Hong (Cambodian Modulkiri Guide)
 Tau (Vietnam Gibbon Guide)

Hiep (South Vietnam Guide)
 Vin (South Vietnam Driver)
 Phong (North Vietnam Guide)
 Suc (North Vietnam Driver)
 Danny (Cambodia Driver)
 Hin (Cambodian Boatman)
 Lon, Pawn, Hout, Show
 (Cambodian Motos drivers)
 Voi (Van Long Guide)

Participants

Mr. Joe Boyer
 Mrs. Rhoda Boyer

Overview

Day 1:	Bangkok
Days 2-4:	Kaeng Krachen NP
Days 5-6:	Khao Yai NP
Days 7-8:	Luang Prabang
Days 9-10:	Nong Khiaw
Day 11:	Luang Prabang
Days 12-13:	Siem Reap
Day 14:	Ban Lung
Day 15:	Veun Sai CA
Day 16:	Ban Lung
Days 17-18:	Sen Monorom
Days 19-20:	Cat Tien NP
Days 17-18:	Sen Monorom
Days 19-20:	Cat Tien NP
Day 21:	Hanoi
Day 22:	Van Long Nature Reserve
Days 23-24:	Cat Ba National Park
Day 25:	Hanoi



Day by Day Breakdown

Overview

South East Asia is one of the world's most famous travelling destinations, full of incredible temples, ancient wonders, exquisite food, white sand beaches and a laid back vibe the countries of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam have something for everyone. But there is much more to this part of the world than the man made monuments, old civilisations and backpacker havens; the area is still home to huge tracts of pristine forest and these forests are home to amazing biodiversity. But these forests are some of the most under threat in the world, increasing human population, coupled with poaching and illegal logging are culminating in the forests and the animals they harbour becoming increasingly rare and endangered. This tour will visit some of these areas of wilderness with a means to increase awareness of the wonderful wildlife here and also the problems it is facing. We will also have the guidance of passionate local guides and conservation groups who are working tirelessly to increase sustainable ecotourism here.

So starting in Thailand and ending in northern Vietnam we will explore the wild areas in these countries and aim to see some of the world's most incredible species and particularly some of the rarest primates in the world. Thailand is well known for many reasons around the world but many people will not realise that within a half day drive from the bustling city of Bangkok are some massive forests still home to tigers, elephants, bears, leopards, gaur and many other large mammal species. We will start off by exploring a couple of these parks with some rare primates our major targets. As well as visiting some of the most popular parks in Thailand and later on in Vietnam we will also head to the other side of Asian national parks. The well run parks such as Cat Tien and Khao Yai give way to parks which have little or no protection, suffer on going deforestation and poaching and we will meet some of the people working hard to preserve what little forest is left. This is particularly true in Laos and Cambodia and in Cambodia we will head out to see a recently (2010) discovered population of endangered gibbons and see the problems that this population face for continued survival. As well as the forests of Mondulkiri and Ratnakiri we will visit the splendid ruins of Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Travelling around South East Asia it is impossible not to be drawn into the culture and see the many differences in food, religion, clothing and the way the peoples have lived. This cultural immersion will be no where more clear when we visit the historical city of Luang Prabang in Laos. Here the French colonial houses give way to ancient Buddhist temples, the orange clad monks mingle with the many backpackers who travel through here.

Another very interesting aspect of this trip is the affect that years of conflict and communism have had on this part of the world, with Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos still technically communist countries and having suffered millions of bombings during the American / Vietnamese war it is interesting to see how the countries and people have developed and also visit some caves and areas that were bombed repeatedly and where the Viet Cong set up their headquarters. Much of the forested areas remaining in Laos and Vietnam were the home of the Viet Cong and the bombs and landmines have had an untold impact on wildlife. Seen from the air the areas are massive but we would have to get in on the ground to see what wildlife was still around here.

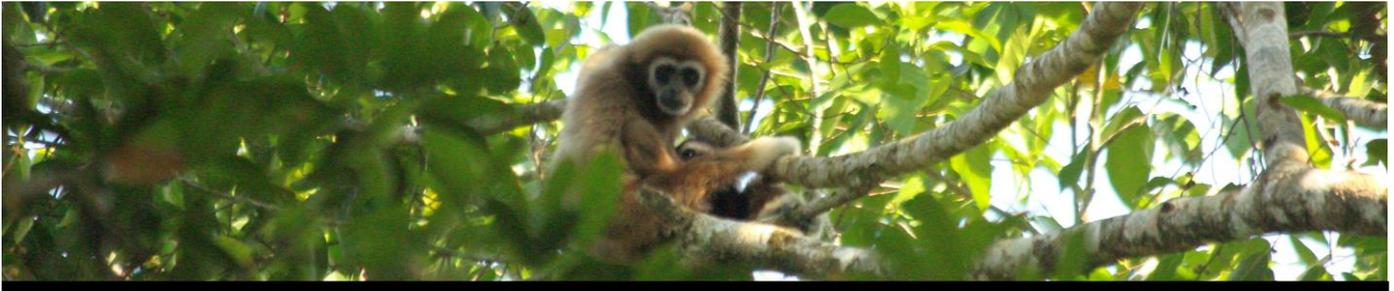
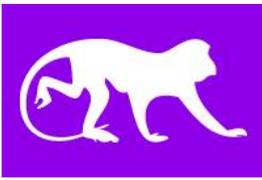
Travelling into Vietnam from Laos we will visit one of the natural world's best kept secrets; Cat Tien National Park, a huge park of forests, grasslands, lakes and hills which still harbours elephants, gaur, leopards, bears, rare primates, many endangered and endemic birds and Siamese crocodiles. After leaving here we will visit some other areas of Vietnam for wildlife but the contrast in the volume of life will be a stark contrast to the small nature reserves which are set aside for their natural beauty or for the protection of individual species. Often these are primates and they are the last remaining populations of their species in the world.

We will end this trip with a cruise around one of the world's most incredible landscapes, the sunken limestone karst mountains and islands of Ha Long Bay, with beautiful beaches, blue lagoons, wonderful cave systems and great sea food we will be in the perfect place to end the trip and prepare for life back in the hustle and bustle of the west.

All in all we believe that this is a true exploration of the wilderness areas in South East Asia, a unique itinerary that should result in some truly incredible and once in a lifetime moments and memories as well as showcasing some of the natural world at its best. All done with the expert help of wonderful local guides, some nice local cooking and friendly staff at all of the locations. There are not many places where you can tick off some of the world's most endangered and elusive animals one day, then visit a wonder of the ancient world the next and wash it all down with a cold beer and some hot noodle soup.

We at Royle Safaris hope you enjoy reading this trip report and that it takes you back to your time in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam; and all of the places we visited as well as the sightings log that will hopefully help you identify some of the animals you took pictures of.

Please contact us if you have any questions or queries we are always happy to help.



Day 1 **Bangkok**

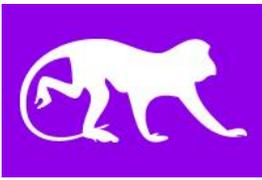
Arrival & Rest

Today Martin and our Thai naturalist guide Tu met Joe and Rhoda at the airport on arrival, it was a late flight into Bangkok so we just drove the short distance to the hotel, checked in and rested. Tomorrow we would leave with Tu after breakfast and travel to Kaeng Krachen National Park on the border with untouched Burma.

Day 2 **Kaeng Krachen National Park**

Traveling & Wildlife Watching

This morning we left the hotel at 7am, it took us a while to get through the morning traffic in Bangkok. At times it felt like 6.3million people in Bangkok were all out and heading in the same direction we were travelling in. But eventually we left the city and started to head into the countryside, the buildings gave way to rice paddies and then forest and as we climbed a little higher we entered Kaeng Krachen National Park. We drove into the park and started looking for wildlife straight away, however it was the middle of the day and the temperatures were very hot. In fact the whole of South East Asia was experiencing some of the hottest weather they have ever had; and when a hot part of the world (during the hot part of the year) is having a heat wave...it is very hot. So we didn't hold much hope of seeing any animals out and about at this time. But we scanned as we drove to our campsite hidden in the deep forest. Along the way we did see a couple of Indian muntjac and a troop of long-tailed macaques before arriving and having lunch at Ban Maka campsite. After lunch we waited a while until the temperatures cooled down, we then headed further up into the hills to search for a couple of target species here. The banded langur and the lar gibbon, which we suspected would be found in the higher reaches of the park where it is a little cooler and their preferred feeding trees are. Shortly after setting off we came to lots of Asiatic elephant tracks on the road, their dusty and dirty round footprints and round dung covering the tarmac and heading in the direction we were heading in. We hoped to come across this large family group of elephants but the tracks were from this morning (when it was much cooler) and it is very likely that the elephants will be low down in the inaccessible valleys and around the few permanent bodies of water, keeping cool. The sun had successfully dried out some of small streams that crossed the roads and also dried out the clay-like soils, this drying out draws the salts and nutrients to the surface of the soil and the butterflies love this. Their diet is very low in sodium and other minerals and when the soil is rich in minerals they come down to feed in their droves. We stopped a few times to observe and photograph the hundreds and thousands of colourful butterflies that lined the roads and covered all of the drying puddles. The first mammal we found on this drive was a black giant squirrel, this large squirrel can grow to 1.2m long but move around the trees just like smaller sized squirrels. This one was seen in the middle of its siesta, sleeping and sprawled out over a branch right over the middle of the road. Our vehicle woke the squirrel up and it slowly moved along the branch and out of sight, we were able to get out of the vehicle and get some close up views before the squirrel disappeared. But before the squirrel did vanish into the forest we found a family of ducky langurs close to the side of the road. Like the squirrel they were resting in the cool shade and allows us to get great views of them. They had 2 bright orange babies with them, like many langurs in South East Asia their young are born a very different colour from the adults; presumably so that they stand out as youngsters and the other juvenile langurs do not play too rough and they allowed to get away with the kind of thing that youngsters should be able to get away with as they find their way in the world. They change to the grey colour of the adults at around 2 months old and so they were still very young. We stayed with this family of langurs until they started to get a little disturbed by our presence so we left and carried on up the road, we set up a camera trap nearby a waterhole (but in only one night we didn't get anything), and then we found a great hornbill feeding on figs just off the road, the tree was a little down the slope and so the hornbill was nearly at eye level with us. Further on we stopped at a view point which offered us great views out over the unbroken forests of Kaeng Krachen and onto Burma in the distance. This unbroken primary forest is one of the largest continuous forests in South East Asia and most of the forest we were looking out on to had never been explored or scientifically surveyed. We know there are elephants, tigers and bears here but to be honest the numbers of these animals are unknown and there could be new species presence. The view just highlights that all is not lost in South East Asia and also the potential for larger growth of wildlife tourism in the area. As we stared out across the view a crested goshawk soared through the valley, still being very warm it was the only bird we saw in the blue skies, but a little further we found a small flock of birds feeding on flowers. These were the small and beautiful pin-tailed parrotfinches, as we watched the birds feeding in and around the flowers on the other side of the road we spotted a pair of langurs, at first we thought it was the rarer banded langur but when they came out into view more we confirmed them as the more common dusky



langur. We drove up to the top of the road, it doesn't quite get to the summit of the mountain, and we then headed back down and the sun began to get lower and lower in the sky. Going around one of the corners we came across a Fea's muntjac crossing the road, this is a rare sighting, in 30 years of guiding Tu had rarely seen this elusive forest dwelling deer before. The muntjac didn't stay around for very long before running off into the dense forest and out of sight. Continuing on and back to camp we also had great views of a common flameback and back at the camp a family of dusky langurs played on the lawn and in the large trees offering our tents shade. Also around the campsite this evening were some large and noisy tokay geckos, feeding Oriental pied hornbills and busy little grey-bellied squirrels. Then as the sun set we had our dinner and then Joe and Martin (along with Tu) stayed up and staked out the rubbish dump just behind the restaurant in hope of wildlife coming down to feed on the leftover food. As we sat quietly waiting we spotted a common palm civet followed by a masked palm civet and these were scared off by a more dominate and larger golden jackal. These carnivores snatched mouthfuls of food and went back to the forest edge in seclusion to feed, coming back for more when they had finished it. Another mammal that came and fed on the vegetables and fruit left out was a pair of Malayan porcupines. It is unlikely that any other species would show up as these are pretty much the 4 species that are seen around the rubbish dump and we were lucky to have all 4 show up within an hour, so we retired to our tents and got some rest.



Day 3 **Kaeng Krachen National Park**

Wildlife Watching

In the morning around the camp we had lots of grey-bellied squirrels and a troop of ducky langurs in the camp ground, feeding around the squirrels were black-crested bulbuls and a lone Oriental cuckoo. Martin then spotted a northern treeshrew in the under bush and at 7:30 we left the campsite and went up the hill road once again. To try and find the banded langurs which eluded us yesterday. There was fresh elephant dung all the way up the road and starting only around 100m from our tents, as well as the dung large sections of bamboo had been ripped off and was left half eaten on the road. Last night a family of elephants had been feeding around the camp in complete silence, also seen on the drive up were many ducky langurs feeding on the fresh leaves of trees near the road. Some of the dung was very fresh and less than 1 hour old but we couldn't make out where the elephants had gone and we didn't see them. We did hear a family of lar gibbons calling as we looked out over the valley from the view point, the gibbons were close by so we slowly drove towards the whooping calls and found the gibbons just off the road and with them a troop of banded langurs. The trees here were overhanging the road and formed a natural bridge and we watched from the road as the banded langurs and lar gibbons crossed over right above our heads. To see them this close was amazing and to watch the differences in the movements; the gibbons so quick and agile moving by swinging from branch to branch and the most thoughtful and slower (but still very quick) jumping and climbing of the langurs as they moved from tree to tree. They were all headed to the sunny tree tops on the other side of the road. With both species having diets of leaves they like to sunbath and warm their stomachs up with the sun's rays; this helps aid digestion. On the road a rare winter visitor stopped for a good sighting, a forest wagtail just walking casually up the road before heading into the forest and away from us. This wagtail doesn't wag its tail up and down like all of the other members of its family, but instead swings it from side to side. We stopped close to a dusky langur feeding low down in a tree and close to us, the beautiful morning light making the for great pictures of the langur. We had breakfast at a mountain campsite and as we were eating a family of lar gibbons came to feed in the same fig tree we had seen the hornbill in yesterday. We watched as the gibbons (very close to us and not obstructed by branches) feed on the figs and the younger members of the family played and swung through the tree. Also around this tree were dusky langurs, many species of birds including great, blue-throated and green-eared barbets and western striped squirrels. The langurs were peacefully feeding until the young male gibbon started to tease them and chase them around the tree. The adult female gibbon just sat there and fed her young baby in the sun as the langurs and younger gibbon played noisily. We watched this for a while until started our journey back to the camp, some other sightings before we packed up the camp and headed to our next location was a pair of streaked spiderhunters feeding on the pink banana flowers. As the sun rose and the air warmed up, the many butterflies started to come out and 'puddle' on the roads to collect salts and other minerals. There are over 420 species of butterflies known from the Kaeng Krachen National Park and it seemed like they were all well represented here. We spent some time photographing the butterflies as the morning light on their glittering and shimmering wings was amazing. We then packed up the camp and headed to the resort, after checking in we had lunch and then at around 3:30pm we headed back to Kaeng Krachen; immediately seeing a male and female pair of scarlet pheasants on the road and near a stream area a family of dusky langurs once again. One of the females had a very young and very orange baby with her, this is the youngest baby langur we had seen so far and she was very protective over it and



kept it hidden from us a lot. There were some bird birds around this afternoon, but in general it was a slow and quiet afternoon, near sunset we staked out a couple of waterholes and watched as an Indian muntjac came down and straight away alarm called. The muntjac was with her fawn and they were nervous, we hoped for and scanned the forest edge of a leopard or maybe even a tiger, but 2 golden jackals came out and despite the muntjac being significant bigger she was on edge and move away back into the forest with her fawn. The jackals however didn't come out into the open and stayed in the shadows themselves, no other animals came around the waterholes and we headed off as the sun was fading fast. On the way out we found a common palm civet crossing the road a large-tailed nightjar flying parallel to the road as well. Then after dinner Martin and Tu did some spotlighting around the lodge grounds and in a large stand of bamboo found a Asian (or Bengal) slow loris.

Day 4 **Kaeng Krachen National Park**

Wildlife Watching

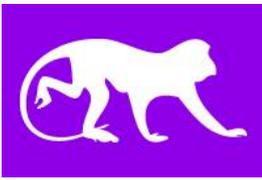
This morning Tu took us to some private land just neighbouring the national park, here the owner has kept the whole forest and has set up a little feeding station and a great photography hide. We arrived here shortly after sunrise we amazed at the abundance of animals around here. With many grey-bellied squirrels dominating the seed feed and drinking from a small pool, the dozens of northern treeshrews and western-striped squirrels being very fast as they darted in and out of the trees, down vines and chasing each other around. They were joined by a new species for the trip, over the course of the next few hours a small number of Indochinese ground squirrels came in and drank from the pool. But it was the bird life which was particularly impressive, with a family of lesser necklaced laughingthrushes around, feeding their large chick who noisily begged for constant feeding being the rowdiest birds. Also around with their chicks was a flock of red jungle fowls, the cocks fighting on occasion, an explosion of feathers and dust as the cocks fought quickly to determine dominance around the best feeding areas. Other birds who entertained us (either with their near constant presence or with sporadic visits throughout the morning included a scarlet pheasant, rufous-winged philetoma, Oriental-magpie robins, spotted doves, bar-necked partridges, rufescent prinias, white-throated fantails, large scimitarbills, pied fantails, black-naped monarchs, racket-tailed treepies, Indochinese green magpie, Abbott's babblers, emerald doves, grey-headed woodpecker and many more. It really is a birding hotspot and we all got great sightings and pictures. It was not just the birds and squirrels that made appearances to as a small number of lesser mousedeer also showed up and drank from the small pool, being very shy and nervous and often bolting away with the slightest noise or movement. This pattern of life and the abundance carried on until around 9:30am when the temperatures started to rise very high and we headed back to the resort at around 10am for late breakfast and to freshen up before heading back to hide in the afternoon. Shortly after arriving back at the hide a shikra came down from the branches and swooped at a bird, the smaller bird got away but the presence of the shikra scared off all of the birds and squirrels from the little pool for around 20 minutes, and then slowly but surely the bird started to come back. During the afternoon a pair of black-naped monarchs came down for a bath and fed on the insects around the pool for a while. Then the family of lesser necklaced laughingthrushes came back along with the grey-bellied squirrels, red-jungle fowl and a Indochinese green magpie which had a long bath and allowed for some great pictures. A pair of male and female mousedeer arrived, the small tusks of the male just visible on the top jaw. There were 2 species of partridges at the same time, the similar looking bar-breasted and scaly-breasted partridges, being close to each other their slight differences being obvious. Then a really nice sighting when a female lesser mousedeer arrived with her tiny fawn. Most of the rest of the afternoon was spent watching the same collection of species coming and going from the small pool and feeding around it. The highlights in the late afternoon being a pair of white-rumped shamas fighting and then a pair of northern treeshrews coming into the hide before realising that we were in there and they ran out nervously. We stayed until around 5:30pm and then headed back to the resort for dinner and a relaxed evening.



Day 5 **Khao Yai National Park**

Travelling & Wildlife Watching

At 5:30am we left the resort and started to travel eastwards to the largest and most popular national park in Thailand, Khao Yai. Unlike the remote part of Kaeng Krachen National Park which is all true wilderness and some forested hills that have never been explored, Khao Yai National Park has lots of infrastructure but still large numbers of wildlife. Along the way Tu took us along a road that is very good for a large and relatively rare species of primate, the stump-tailed macaque. This large troop live on a hill next to a main road and come down to the road in the morning to feed on the side of the road (having been fed for years by passing locals). We parked up and watched the troop and observed many nice behaviours with dominate males being pushed by young males,

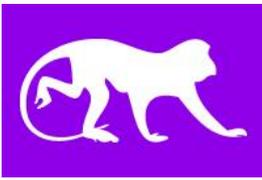


females and their babies and young macaques playing. As the sun rose high up into the sky the birds started to come out and we left the macaques, as the day got hotter they head from the road and back to the shade of the forested hill. For most of the rest of the drive we were stuck in the morning Bangkok traffic, stopping off for lunch along the way we then arrived in Khao Yai around 2:20pm, after checking in we headed straight into the park. The road into the park from the main entrance is beautiful, rising into the hills with massive tall trees either side of the road. Many of the larger kapok trees have huge giant honeybee nests hanging from the underside of the larger branches. We went direct to the main visitor centre so we could book our night safari tonight; at the visitor centre we found 3 semi tame sambar deer and the resident troop of northern pig-tailed macaques. Also around the visitor centre was a pair of female lar gibbons and an oriental honey buzzard soaring just overhead. After watching the gibbons briefly moving through the forest on the opposite side of a river than runs next to the visitor centre we headed to a large watch tower that overlooks a grassland and large lake. It is relatively easy to see dhole here but we were not that lucky, we did however see a very large water monitor lizard swimming across the lake and many brown-backed needletails flitting down around the water picking insects from low down off the water. The brown-backed needletail is the fastest non-diving bird in the world and their speed and agility was incredible over the water. They are capable of reaching speeds in excess of 240km/h. Sat in the hide for a few hours was a wonderful place to observe bird life but in general it was very quiet with a pair of oriental pied hornbills flying overhead and then the thousands of bats (black-bearded tomb bats and wrinkle-lipped free-tail bats coming out of their roosts being the main highlight. As the sun began to get lower in the sky the Chinese pond herons started to come back to their roost around the lake. We then left and headed towards the visitor centre to start our night safari, as we were getting into our vehicle we found a large-Indian civet foraging around the carpark and in particular the bins which are left as people come here for picnics. After watching the civet come quite close (around 3m away) we started our night safari; this is one of the highlights of a stay in Khao Yai and we hoped for many species and were not disappointed. With the help of our spotlighting guide Wan we found many sambar, the large population of sambar deer here is a very good sign for the future reintroduction of tigers here. We were also lucky enough to see a pair of Asiatic elephants close to the road, the elephants here were very easily seen but as the tourism has boomed here in recent years and they have now become more and more secretive and it is not a common sight anymore. These elephants were feeding just off the road and next to the elephants we found a small Indian civet slinking through the grasslands as well as several great-eared & long-tailed nightjars along the road. Interspersed with many sambar deer we found another large-Indian civet, Malayan porcupine and a common palm civet before heading out of the park and back to the hotel for a late dinner and some well deserved rest after a long day.

Day 6 **Khao Yai National Park**

Wildlife Watching

In the early morning we headed into Khao Yai National Park and on entering the forest we first came across a large flock of oriental pied hornbills flying through the trees over the road and we then had great views of a male Indian muntjac close to the road. Further along we found a beautiful Indian roller perched on a dead tree waiting for insects to fly by whilst warming up in the morning sunshine. In the open meadows next to the road we found a pair of male muntjac feeding as well as a male and female muntjac, a sambar and a troop of northern pig-tailed macaques. We drove up around a mountain road to visit a spot which Tu assured us had a spectacular view, along the way we had great views of a large male northern pig-tailed macaque before having a short walk to the view point. We walked through the forest for around 15 minutes before coming to the Pa Deo Dai cliffs and the views were stunning as Tu had promised. It is so dry here at the moment that all of the usual water holes that Tu says attract many of the wildlife had dried up. In fact this is a usually quite wet area of the forest and it was very dry, many plants were dying and it was obvious that this not a normal dry season. We walked back through the forest to the vehicle and then had a drink and ice cream at the top of the mountain whilst we assessed where to try next for wildlife. We decided to head to the visitor centre and then have a hike for 2-3 hours into the forest along a river to see what wildlife we could find by getting off the road and into the forest. On our way to the starting point of this hike we found another breeding pair of muntjac, it is safe to say that this is their breeding season and this usually solitary species are now most commonly found in pairs. Whilst we started our hike it began on a dry river bed, there were some pools of water in the river bed still and they were covered in butterflies and small fish were still inhabiting them. In the shadows of the large trees along the banks we spotted two pairs of large and noisy blue-whistling thrushes. There were some other birds species around the dry river including common mynahs, common koel, barn swallows, plain martins, white-rumped shamas, Chinese pond herons, ashy woodswallows, yellow-browed warbler, greater hawk cuckoo and black-crested bulbuls. Walking along we stopped to watch and photograph a common flying lizard (or dragon) climbing up a tree nearby the trail, as we watched Martin noticed some movement in the distance and through the binoculars spotted a male lar gibbon and then two female pileated gibbons. There have been reports of hybridisation between the two species of gibbons here and this may be what we were seeing with the two species in the same group. It is hard to spot gibbons in the middle of the day, the early morning is when they call and this is the best time to pinpoint where they are. So to find this rare species without them calling low down in the trees just 40m away from us was amazing. They didn't stay around very long and disappeared inside the thick foliage to get out of the sun and rest during the middle of the day. As the gibbons disappeared we carried on walking and had great views of a crested forest lizard on the leaf litter just next to the road. The path was a great place to see several species of lizards and skinks as they warmed up in the patches of sunlight exposed by the trail being cut



here. We turned around and headed back to the visitor centre in time for lunch and then in the afternoon we headed to a nearby forest that is connected to the park but not part of the national park. Here the Gampha forest reserve is being protected by the local communities as a population of guar lives around here and in the evening they come out of the forest and drink and can be seen close to the road. This is one of the best places in Thailand to see this huge and impressive species. On our way here we drove past agricultural land and wetlands, with many species of birds seen, the highlight of which being an osprey seen overhead. The farms around the forest reserve suffer from the guar coming in and feeding on their crops, so they are set up an observation centre and sell food and drinks and also accommodation to the many tourists who come here to see the guar each evening. Once we arrived we just sat and waited for the herd of guar to come out of the forest, it wasn't too long before the first individuals came out and it wasn't long after that than we had the whole herd come out and move to the water holes. We had great views of large males and the very small young calves that are only a few weeks old. As well as the gaur we had a flock of red-breasted parakeets coming out of the forest and to their roosting site.

Once the sun had sank below the horizon we headed back to the hotel for our last night in Thailand, tomorrow we would head over to Laos.

Day 7 Luang Prabang

Travelling & Sightseeing

We left the hotel at 7am and drove up and through Khao Yai, this is a slightly longer route to Bangkok but would allow us another opportunity to try and see some wildlife in the park. We stopped at a great view point as this road is taking us up and over the main mountains here and we had high altitude views over the park for the first time on our way out. There were few animals and birds around this morning, however we were slightly later than usual when it comes to wildlife watching and decided to have a bit of a rest this morning. Once we left the park we headed towards a Buddhist temple called Way Pee See, this is because of a colony of endangered Lyle's flying foxes. It was just outside of Bangkok and a species that we were unlikely to see anywhere else, when we arrived at the temple the sound and smell of the thousand plus flying foxes was evident. The large trees on the river bank were full of the large bats and we stayed for around 30 minutes and watched as the flying foxes took and flew around and then roosted again in the trees after they got used to our presence.

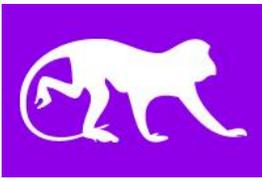
We then left and headed to the airport and said goodbye to Tu. The flight was straightforward and on leaving the small terminal in Luang Prabang we met our new cultural guide Khamta and were taken to our hotel to check in. The rest of the afternoon was free for us to relax and then after dinner in the town we explored the night market a little.



Day 8 Luang Prabang

Sightseeing

This morning we met our guide Khamta at 8:30am and set off to visit the morning market, this market is mostly selling fresh food from the nearby fields and rivers and is set up on a very narrow street every morning. The smells and colours of the produce (including wonderfully coloured flowers that are used for gifts to Buddha at various monasteries and temples). Unlike a lot of markets that are now touristy in Asia this market is still very much the 'supermarket' for the locals who come here in large numbers to buy many different foodstuffs. From the usual such as chickens, fresh fish, vegetables and fruit to the more local and unusual such as ox-blood in its gelatinous cubes and snakes, bats, grilled insects (worms, grasshoppers, bee's larvae, crickets, butterfly chrysalis), giblets covered with flies, caramelised pork's head, and all sorts of local leaves and herbs which are used to make the traditional dishes and give the distinctive taste of Laotian food. From here we walked to the nearby National Museum, this museum is located in the old Royal Palace and has some of the best examples of Lao temple architecture in its grounds. The most impressive building here is not the palace but Wat Mai Suwannaphumaham, its wooden sim (ordination hall) has a five-tiered roof in archetypal Luang Prabang style, while the unusually roofed front verandah features detailed golden reliefs depicting scenes from village life, the Ramayana and Buddha's penultimate birth. When built in 1821 to replace a 1796 original, this was the mai (new) monastery. The name has stuck. It was spared destruction in 1887 by the Haw gangs who reportedly found it too beautiful to harm. Since 1894 it has been home to the Sangharat, the head of Lao Buddhism. So after looking around this exquisite temple we moved onto the palace and the museum. The museum used to be a Royal Palace and some of the rooms such as the throne room and bedrooms are kept in the same conditions they were in when occupied by the Royal family. The palace was built in 1904 for King Sisavangvong after the previous palace was destroyed by invaders in 1887. The exhibits include royal religious objects, weapons, statues, screens and paintings from centuries past as well as the mirrored



Throne Hall, where we saw the crown jewels of Laos. A new pavilion houses the 2,000 year-old, 83-centimetre Prabang Buddha, which is made from solid gold and (to great interest to Joe) the garage contains the last king's collection of cars.

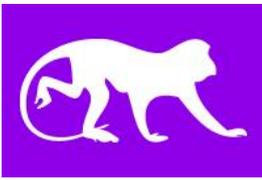
From here we moved to the largest and most significant temple complex in Luang Prabang, located at the opposite end of the small city and with views over the Mekong River is Wat Long Khoun. Also known as the 'Monastery of the Happy' the temple once served as a sanctuary for those seeking spiritual rejuvenation including any new king who would retreat to the Wat for three days cleansing and meditation prior to his coronation at Wat Xieng Thong. Wat Long Khoun is typical of local Luang Prabang architecture of the 18th century with two single level sections; the front part however was extended in 1937 as instructed by the then-reigning King Sisavongvong. This section is more elaborate in style and features gilded columns and intricate wood carvings. The older part contains Jataka murals which still retain some of their original vibrancy telling the story of the 547 lives of Lord Buddha. The murals also feature local myths and legends incorporating Buddhist morals of kindness and the importance of giving. Unfortunately, revolutionary vandalism in the 1970s and damp weather resulted in some damages to the murals. Walking around these buildings, entering the temples and looking at the incredible and intricate carvings and paintings. Many of which combine traditional Buddhist symbols and fragments of local life in Laos of both peasants and royalty. After here we stopped for some lunch in a nearby restaurant and then continued onto a couple of other temples, whilst not as extravagant as the other ones they showed elements of Buddhist culture that the others had not including young monks working hard and also the traditional long boats that are used for races up and down the Mekong. We then went to one of the oldest temples in the country, Wat Wisunarat, built in 1513 and during the reign of King Wisunarat (Visoun), Wat Wisunarat is Luang Prabang's oldest temple and was once home to the Prabang Buddhas. The history of the temple is colourful with it being originally crafted from wood before being burned by Black Haw riders in 1887. The Black Haw riders were part of the Black Flag military rebel group led by a Chinese commander at the end of the 1880s. Post invasion, it was rebuilt using stucco and brick and retains some original pieces including a stupa that was created in 1503 along with some other small Buddha icons although many were stolen during the Haw raid. From here we went back to the hotel to freshen up as the temperature has crept up well past 40°C now; the rest of the afternoon was free to rest and relax and then at around sunset Joe and Martin walked up Mount Phousi. Rising 150 metres above the centre of town, Mount Phousi cuts a distinctive figure on the Luang Prabang skyline. The hill is popular as a place to watch the sun rise or set over the Mekong River. From the summit Joe and I watched the sun set, however the cloud cover was such that the sunset was a bit of a let down after the long climb up. But along the way there are various Buddha statues which lighten up the climb to the top. After we determined that the sunset had finished we walked down and met Rhoda in the night market and then went to dinner.

Day 9 Nong Khiaw

Travelling & Sightseeing

This morning after breakfast we drove to Pak Ou Caves, located a little outside of Luang Prabang and on the other side of the Mekong. So we crossed the Mekong to visit what is one of the most respected holy sites in Lao. The caves have a history dating back thousands of years. Packed with over 4,000 Buddha icons, the caves, a shrine to the river spirit and Lord Buddha, are set in a dramatic limestone cliff at the point where the Mekong joins the Nam Ou River. There are two caves to visit, the lower cave called Tham Ting and the upper cave Tham Theung, both boasting miniature Buddhist figures that are mostly made from wood. After crossing the Mekong we climbed up around 30m above the river and into the Tham Ting. The statues are believed to have been left in the caves by local people for hundreds of years. Pak Ou translates to 'mouth of the Ou river' with the first cave entrance of Tham Ting being very visible from the water; the higher cave is accessed by stairs. The Buddha images in the Pak Ou Caves assume a variety of positions, from meditation to peace and nirvana (the reclining Buddha). Both caves are shrines to Buddha, offering places of worship with the largest image in Tham Ting being a popular place to burn incense and offer prayers. The smaller cave is the more peaceful, with glimpses of the Mekong providing a breath-taking backdrop.

We then crossed back over the Mekong and drove into the countryside towards the little village of Nong Khiaw, along the way we saw elephants and their mahouts working in the bamboo plantations and then stopped at a tiny village, Sop Kom on the banks of the Mekong. This village is famous for its textiles and we were shown some wonderful scarves, blankets and other traditional fabrics as well as other local products. Unfortunately many of these products are not very environmentally friendly and are the reasons why illegal poaching has such a huge market in Laos. Products such as rice whisky made with cobras, scorpions and geckos (all taken in huge numbers and completely unsustainably), but worse than this was the 'pharmacy' which had products such as elephant penis 'wine', muntjac antler 'wine', bear feet 'wine', tokay gecko 'wine' and of course tiger bone 'wine' as well as leopard, tiger and bear claws and teeth for sale as trinkets. This is a small village and the chances are that the one tiger (there were enough bones to be from just one tiger) has been used by the doctor for many years and possibly decades without further poaching, but if every village has one of these then that is an indication of the scale of the tiger (and other wildlife) poaching problem in South East Asia. Whilst not a shock as such it is never nice to see such blatant flaunting of the illegal poaching laws. We left here and headed to the small village of Nong Khaiw in which we would be staying, this quaint village on the banks of the Ou River is in the part of Laos that was subjected to huge amounts of bombing during the 'secret' war. This part of the Vietnam war saw huge areas of Laos and



Cambodia bombed by American airstrikes to find the pockets of Viet Cong and Khmer Rouge cells that had fled into the forests and caves to form governments and civilisation isolated and hidden from view. We would explore some of these areas in the next couple of days but for this afternoon when we arrived at the lodge we just relaxed and enjoyed the birds and butterflies that were feeding on the flowers and fruits in the garden and stunning views over the Om River. Because of the war here the people were forced to stop farming properly as they couldn't do anything that was conspicuous from the air and so they started to eat the animals in the forest and after decades of this there is hardly any wildlife left in these forests. Looking out over the river at the forested hills and limestone cliffs there should have been birds, squirrels, deer, langurs and gibbons living over there but there is hardly any life and certainly no primates anymore. It is such a shame and hopefully as the live mines and unexploded munitions that litter the forest floor here are removed that wildlife can come back and proper conservation can take over here.



Day 10 **Muong Ngoi**

Sightseeing

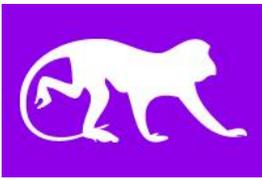
At 8:30am this morning we left and in our own traditional boat we set off down the Om River for around 1 hour until we reached the small village of Muong Ngoi, this village was very heavily bombed and there are bombs everywhere here. Bombs used in display, for trays, tables, ornaments and souvenirs are very prevalent and are a constant reminder of what happened here and that the world was largely oblivious to it. We spoke to some of the locals and walked the village, learning that everyone who lived here had to flee and head into the nearby caves to escape the bombing. We visited a local school ground and were shown pock marks and craters from hundreds of bombs that were all over the school ground and field that is now used by the children and buffalo alike. We learnt that this area was most heavily bombed with napalm during the Vietnam war and it is remarkable that the place has recovered so well and so fast and the people have rebuilt everything and the community now functions as normal after around 10-15 years living in the caves.

After walking the village and Rhoda having a hole in her shoe repaired by a local cobbler we had lunch and then headed back to Nong Khiaw on our boat. When we got back we were taken to some of the nearby caves that were used by the local people to live in and form the local government which ran this area of Laos. The limestone caves were huge and only accessible by a new stair case heading up some 60m up the vertical rock face. Some of the 'offices' and infrastructure was still in place in the cave, but most had been destroyed or robbed by now. However it was possible to get a good indication of the conditions that the people had to live in when they were being bombed. From here we went back to the village and had a nice sundowner drink and watched one of the most beautiful sunsets in Laos before dinner.

Day 11 **Luang Prabang**

Traveling & Sightseeing

After breakfast we left and started our journey back to Luang Prabang, along the way we stopped to see how the local water weeds were prepared for eating. They are collected in the local rivers and then dried, placed into squares in between bamboo mats to flatten them and dried with spices to form a thin cake. These are very tasty and unique to the Mekong River course and are particularly popular in Laos. After we arrived back in the town we went to look in some of the local shops for souvenirs and books and then after lunch headed to the local crafts centre. Ock Pop Tok is an award winning textiles centre that showcases the best in local textiles and employs many local women as well as teaching tourists the secrets of loom weaving and dying. After lunch here Joe and Rhoda were shown around the centre and the processes of how to make items like scarves and dyed some that they kept and made great souvenirs. From here we headed back into the town and before our last dinner in Laos we would have a traditional baci ceremony. Baci means calling the soul and is usually performed at events such as new year, weddings or a man entering monkhood, but also for people departing or returning from journeys. So in this respect it was fitting for us. Tonight was our last night in Laos but tomorrow Joe and Rhoda would wake up early and witness the alms giving ceremony where all of the dozens of monks walk the streets to receive little balls of rice as offerings. Watching the monks perform this ceremony in such quiet respect from the entire local population (a practise that has been carried out for over 700 years); is a great way to end our time in Laos before we head to our third country of the tour, Cambodia.



Day 12 **Siem Reap**

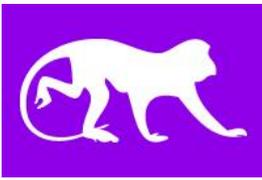
Travelling & Sightseeing

At 8:30am we left the hotel and headed the short distance over to the airport and caught flight to Siem Reap (which landed earlier than scheduled) and on leaving the airport met our guide Chandrup and driver Danny and straight away headed towards Tonle Sap Lake. This lake is enormous and one of the most important bodies of water in the whole of SE Asia, during the dry season (which this was) the lake is 2,700km² but amazingly when the rains arrive the lake swells to over 16,000km², this lake is utilised by hundreds of thousands of people and there are hundreds of floating villages on the lake that fish and collect the abundant mud snails that are sold all over the country and exported. The lake is only served by the Tonle Sap River which is a tributary of the Mekong and amazingly the lake is home to some 149 species of fish as well as countless species of birds and as of recently expanding populations of reintroduced Siamese crocodiles. Because the water level is so low in the dry season (0.5-1m deep) we were not able to gain access to lots of areas and instead just travelled to have a look at the floating villages and see the locals working hard on their fishing and fish farming. But it was the vast amounts of mud snails that were being caught, bagged up and transported back to the city which was staggering. Some thousands of tonnes are harvested annually and whilst this is not currently causing a decline in numbers or an ecological change, it cannot be sustainable in the long term. We cruised around the village and then back out down a narrow stream to our vehicle and then onwards to our hotel. After checking in we freshen up and left to meet Peter (who organised the logistics and also set up the gibbon tracking for ecotourism in Cambodia) as well as visit a Cambodian circus. We had dinner at the circus and enjoyed the wonderful acrobatics and story telling in this traditional Cambodian art form. Tomorrow we would explore one of the wonders of the ancient world and arguably the most famous site in the whole of South East Asia, Angkor Wat.

Day 13 **Angkor Wat**

Sightseeing

At 8am this morning we departed the hotel with Chandrup and Danny and headed to the massive temple complex of Angkor Wat, in fact it is the largest religious monument in the world. It was originally constructed as a Hindu temple of god Vishnu for the Khmer Empire and gradually transformed into a Buddhist temple toward the end of the 12th century. It was built by the Khmer King Suryavarman II and acted as the capital of the Khmer Empire. We first visited Banteay Kdei, this is a sprawling, largely unrestored, monastic complex in much the same style as Ta Prohm. It was originally constructed over the site of an earlier temple, and functioned as a Buddhist monastery under Jayavarman VII. As with other works of Jayavarman VII's era, it is a tightly packed architectural muddle, which like Bayon, suffered from several changes in the plans at the time of construction. It was also built using an inferior grade of sandstone and using poor construction techniques, leading too much of the deterioration visible today. A restoration project is underway on many of the towers and corridors, and some areas are blocked off. The fact these ruins are largely unrestored gives a great example of how the temples must have looked to people discovering them in the forest. However they are still used today as religious buildings and there are several golden Buddha's which still receive worship daily from ordinary citizens and monks alike. Some of the temples also had large colonies of Theobald's tomb bat as well as smaller numbers of Malayan horseshoe bats. Being a temple group that is not as popular as Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom the bats are still here as they do not get disturbed very much. In some areas the trees around the ruins had grown into the building and gave the typical 'impression' of ancient temples that everyone associates with Angkor Wat. However it wasn't until we left this temple group and headed to Ta Prohm that we entered the world of 'Tomb Raider' and really began to feel like we were exploring ancient wonders which had been reclaimed by the surrounding forest. Of a similar design to the later Jayavarman VII temples of Preah Khan and Banteay Kdei, this sprawling monastic complex is only partially cleared of jungle overgrowth. Intentionally left partially unrestored, massive fig and silk-cotton trees grow from the towers and corridors offering a 'jungle atmosphere' and some of the best 'tree-in-temple' photo opportunities at Angkor. Ta Prohm is well worth an extended exploration of its dark corridors and open plazas. This temple was one of Jayavarman VII's first major temple projects. Ta Prohm was dedicated to his mother. (Preah Khan, built shortly in the same general style, was dedicated to Jayavarman VII's father.) Ta Prohm was originally constructed as a Buddhist monastery and was enormously wealthy in its time, boasting of control over 3000 villages, thousands of support staff and vast stores of jewels and gold. Of the monastic complex style temples, Ta Prohm is a superior example and should be included in almost any temple itinerary. We stayed here and explored the carvings including the little aspara's (dancer) face that is perfectly surrounded by fig tree roots as well as the very mysterious *stegosaurus* carving in and amongst carvings of fish, wild boar, monkeys, birds and other wildlife. Exactly what the

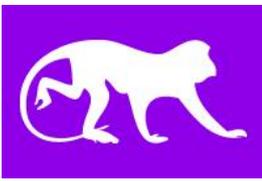


carving is meant to be no body knows but it cannot surely be that of a dinosaur, but the carvings are so good and accurate that it is also very unlikely that they have made such a mistake when carving a likeness for an animal they see so much. As the morning turned into the afternoon we headed to a city, not a temple. The city of Angkor Thom is a 3km² walled and moated royal city and was the last capital of the Angkorian empire. After Jayavarman VII recaptured the Angkorian capital from the Cham invaders in 1181, he began a massive building campaign across the empire, constructing Angkor Thom as his new capital city. He began with existing structures such as Baphuon and Phimeanakas and built a grand enclosed city around them, adding the outer wall/moat. He then constructed some of Angkor's greatest temples including his state-temple, Bayon, set at the center of the city. There are five entrances (gates) to the city, one for each cardinal point, and the victory gate leading to the Royal Palace area. Each gate is crowned with 4 giant faces. The South Gate is often the first stop on a tour. We didn't go into the city as the temperature was very hot and lunch was a good idea at this point, but we did walk along some of the walls and through the South Gate, the walls (called the Elephant Terrace) have huge elephant carvings (including the spiritual 3-headed elephants) guarding the city, these used to be personified by actual elephants during the reign of Jayavarman VII. The walls marked the site of a huge city which (at its peak) had 1,000,000 inhabitants at the same time in history as London only having around 50,000. This is a show of the strength and power of the kingdoms here and how advanced they were and would have been if it wasn't for the constant fighting with neighbouring countries and kingdoms in Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. As we drove a little further around the temples to get to our restaurant opposite Angkor Wat we passed many temples being restored. Most of the restoration being done by countries that have had a colonial or historical interest in the country or our Buddhist themselves such as France, Japan, India and China. But before we went to lunch we made a short stop at Bayon, this smaller temple is most famous for its many images of Buddha on the columns, towers and walls. The giant stone faces of Bayon have become one of the most recognizable images connected to classic Khmer art and architecture. There are 37 standing towers, most but not all sporting four carved faces oriented toward the cardinal points. Who the faces might represent is a matter of debate but it has been argued it may be Loksvara, Mahayana Buddhism's compassionate Bodhisattva, or perhaps a combination of Buddha and Jayavarman VII. Bayon was the Jayavarman VII's state-temple and in many ways represents the pinnacle of his massive building campaign. It appears to be, and is to some degree, an architectural muddle, in part because it was constructed in a somewhat piecemeal fashion for over a century. Another excellent reason to visit Bayon are the stunning bas-reliefs on the exterior walls of the lower level and on the upper level where the stone faces reside. The bas-reliefs on the southern wall contain real-life scenes from the historical sea battle between the Khmer and the Cham. It is not clear whether this represents the Cham invasion of 1177AD or a later battle in which the Khmer were victorious. Even more interesting are extensive carvings of unique and revealing scenes of everyday life that are interspersed among the battle scenes, including market scenes, cockfighting, chess games and childbirth. Also note the unfinished carvings on other walls, likely indicating the death of Jayavarman VII and the subsequent end of his building campaign. Some of the reliefs on the inner walls were carved at a later date under the Hindu king Jayavarman VIII. The surrounding tall jungle makes Bayon a bit dark and flat for photographs near sunrise and sunset.

From Bayon we had lunch and enjoyed views over the mote and large walls that surround Angkor Wat, with just the towers visible. After lunch we entered the wonderful and vast complex of Angkor Wat, walking over the large and largely restored bridge, lined with the seven headed Nagas. When we entered through one of the many gates into the grounds of Angkor Wat the scale and spectacle hits you. Angkor Wat is visually, architecturally and artistically breath-taking. It is a massive three-tiered pyramid crowned by five lotus-like towers rising 65m from ground level. At the apex of Khmer political and military dominance in the region, Suryavarman II constructed Angkor Wat in the form of a massive 'temple-mountain' dedicated to the Hindu god, Vishnu. It served as his state temple, though the temple's uncommon westward orientation has led some to suggest that it was constructed as Suryavarman II's funerary temple. Other temples of the same style and period include Thommanon, Banteay Samre, Wat Atwea and Beng Melea, which may have served as a prototype to Angkor Wat.

The temple itself is 1km² and consists of three levels surmounted by a central tower. The walls of the temple are covered inside and out with bas-reliefs and carvings. Nearly 2,000 distinctively rendered apsara carvings adorn the walls throughout the temple and represent some of the finest examples of apsara carvings in Angkorian-era art. But it is the exterior walls of the lower level that display the most extraordinary bas-reliefs, depicting stories and characters from Hindu mythology and the historical wars of Suryavarman II. It is in the viewing of the bas-reliefs that a tour guide can be very helpful. The first level of is the most artistically interesting. We begin our exploration with the bas-reliefs that cover the exterior wall of the first level, following the bas-reliefs counter-clockwise around the temple. Bas-relief highlights include the mythological Battle of Kuru on the west wall; the historical march of the army of Suryavarman II, builder of Angkor Wat, against the Cham, followed by scenes from Heaven and Hell on the south wall; and the classic 'Churning of the Ocean Milk' on the east wall.

The temple interior is not as densely carved as the first level exterior, but still sports hundreds of fine carvings of apsaras and scenes from Hindu mythology. Chandrup was very helpful when explaining the stories of the various chambers, statues and architectural forms to be found in the interior. Even though Angkor Wat was constructed as a Hindu temple, it has served as a Buddhist temple, since Buddhism became Cambodia's dominant religion in the 14th century. Joe and Martin climbed all the way to the top of the highest tower to get great views out over the whole complex and from here we departed from the opposite gate we entered and returned to the hotel to rest and have our dinner.



Day 14 **Ban Lung**

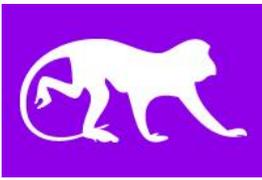
Travelling

This morning we left the hotel and the city of Siem Reap at 8am and headed eastwards towards the border with Vietnam and ultimately into some of the last remaining forests in Cambodia; however our final destination today is the quaint little town of Ban Lung. Located on the banks of a lake and our French style old colonial lodge is a great place to enjoy the evening view over the lake. We took the drive here at a leisurely pace taking in the endless rice paddies and seeming development affecting Cambodia, before arriving, checking and then before dinner meeting our gibbon guide Savet. Savet briefed us on the time we would be departing tomorrow to get to the conservation site and how we would explore the forests around where the gibbons live. This species of gibbon is called the northern buff cheeked gibbon and they were only discovered only in 2010. Since then around 500 gibbons are known to live around here and this makes this the largest population of this species of gibbon in the world and therefore incredible global importance. Tomorrow we would enter this forest and the next day hopefully see this incredibly rare and up until not long ago unknown species of gibbon.

Day 15 **Vuen Sai-Siem Pang C A**

Travelling & Sightseeing

Today we left lodge and with the nice early morning breeze blowing drove with Danny and Savet to the Sasan River, along the way we passed some cashew plantations (one of the most important cash crops grown here) and then shockingly live mine fields. We started noticing red marked posts in the ground either side of the road and on closer inspection saw that they were marked with skull and crossbones. Danny explained that they are the locations of known mines, however the landmine moving equipment had not got around to removing them just yet. The most startling thing about all of this was the fact that there were people living around the landmines, children playing here, literally in a minefield. It is incredible to think that nowadays there are people living in these conditions and with an estimated 300 million unexploded mines and bombs in the country and the current rate of removal it will be over 150 years before all of them are removed. We carried on and got to the river where we met Hin and went in the local boat and headed downstream on the Sason River to a Hmong (hill tribe) village that still lives pretty much as they always have done. Pim told us that there were around 7-8 Hmong tribes still living in and around the Ratnakiri area and there are 12 languages spoken in total. They all practise the traditional animist belief system where there are spirits and gods embodied in all living things such as the forest, animals and abiotic factors like the river, rain and the earth itself. In many respects this belief system is easier to understand and one all seeing and all powerful god. To see how this belief system was still practised was fascinating. The village we would visit is home to around 800 Chatcha people of the Hmong hill tribes. As we arrived on our boat we were first met the sight of all of the women in the village (and many of the children) on the sandy river bank. They were collecting water for drinking and cooking as well as washing their clothes and themselves in the river. Interestingly they were not collecting the drinking and cooking water direct from the river, but instead from a little further back. Digging holes in the sand and collecting the naturally filtered water. We were told that this is the way they do it now because there had been some problems with chemical runoff upstream and people had got ill. So they wait for the sand to purify the water now then collect it. We then walked up the riverbank to the village and at once the sight of so many children hit us, the local custom here is to around 2 kids every 3 years and the large stilted family homes can house 30-40 people in one large room. The village kept some pigs, sheep and chickens as well as having large rice paddies which are harvested twice per year. During the rice growing seasons the whole village move from these large houses to the fields and live in smaller and seasonably built homes, this is because they work in the paddies daily and so cuts down on the travel time to and from and also because it allows the family to protect their crop from wild animals. Probably the most startling fact of this village and the Hmong people's as a rule is that their average life expectancy is only 55! That is around 30 years younger than most of the western world and even 16 years younger than the Cambodian average of 71. We walked through the village and then into the 'ghost forest', this is the spiritual forest where the cemetery is. The animist graves are large (mausoleum like) and have various carved figures around them, these figures represent various things that will protect them or be given to them in the afterlife. It is always traditional for two elephant figures (usually just tusks) to be carved from wood and placed on the back of the tomb, these are to represent the elephants that carry the departed to the next life. At the front of the tomb are two human representations that carry things of value for the departed to take with them into the future. Traditionally these were things were for swords, armour, bows & arrows, scarves etc but nowadays we saw figures with wooden sunglasses, mobile phones and even AK47's, this is a sign of the modern world and the change in what people think is important



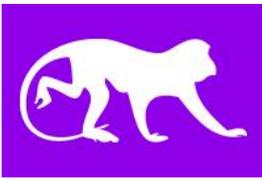
now compared to the not so long ago days. This forest was home to many species of birds and including stripe-throated bulbuls, grey-headed parrots, Asian paradise flycatchers, blue-tailed bee-eaters, common iora and blue-winged minla. Unfortunately for these birds there were so many young boys around here with slingshots. Birds in rural Cambodia (and most of South East Asia) are used for target practise and this has led to huge declines in their numbers. We then headed back to the river and back down the river to a larger village and the headquarters of the conservation area. We had our lunch here as our motos and drivers arrived from the nearby village. They would take us the 45 minutes or so down dirty tracks, over dry paddy fields and into the forest. Along the way there were various species of birds flying around but no mammals seen, it was not surprising as we saw huge swathes of forest being cleared for logging and the rest of the area was mostly paddy fields. It was only around 30 minutes into the journey when the forest started to look more substantial and what could be home to primates. After arriving at the conservation centre we were given a brief tour around (it is a basic field site) and then taken on our guided walk into the forest and surrounding meadows. The ever present noise of chainsaws and the tales of local corruption not allowing adequate policing of illegal activities here was ominous and there was a distinct lack of wildlife seen. Walking into the forest we did spot some Asian red-cheeked squirrels moving very quickly among the trees and rufous treepies flitting from tree to tree as they mobbed a Pallas's squirrel. As the sun got lower and lower in the sky the amount of bird life was getting better as they came back to roost. Flocks of grey-headed parrots, various egrets, a lesser coucal, red-vented barbets, and racket-tailed treepies were the most common and obvious species. In an old and half hollowed out tree Martin found a solitary greater-false vampire bat roosting, but that was the last sighting of the day. On our way back to the conservation site Tam made a ball from rattan, this is a traditional Cambodian game where the rattan ball is kept in the air using the feet and knees only. After dinner Martin and Tam went out for a quick night walk, only tokay geckos and various moths were around tonight and we didn't spend very long here before heading back and getting prepared for an early start tomorrow. We would have to get up early and head to the habituated gibbon family's territory before dawn and in time to hear them start their morning calls. This species only typically makes their territorial calls for around 10-15 minutes per morning and when they are not calling they are very hard to find. So we had to be in their territory for when they are calling (around dawn), so it would be around 3:30am start tomorrow and some sleep tonight would be a great idea.



Day 16 **Vuen Sai-Siem Pang C A**

Wildlife Watching & Travelling

This morning we left at 4am and walked around 2.5 hours through the dark into the forest, the strange calls of nightjars echoing through the still night. When we finally arrived at the territory of the habituated gibbon family it was still dark and we were very unlikely to have missed their calling window. We sat and lay down and listened to the forest at night and just as the sun was beginning to brighten up the sky a little a different family of gibbons started to call. Their calls were loud in the still night, along with the gibbons a red jungle fowl started to crow and the cicadas began their morning calls. Then out of the blue the whooping calls of our group of gibbons started, they were very close, only around 100m away. Tam ran into the forest in search of the troop and we all followed as quickly as we could. It wasn't hard to follow Tam's trail and of course we were heading in the general direction of the gibbons calling and within 15 minutes we found the family. We spent a total time of around 1.5 hours with the family and enjoyed some of the best primate watching imaginable. At first the gibbons were travelling around the canopy from their sleeping trees and their feeding trees. So we followed as best as we could through the thick under bush until they slowed and settled and started to feed on the figs and leaves. There are not many trees in fruit at this time of year and so they feed predominately on leaves and these are typically at the top of the trees. But we were lucky and we found the gibbons low down, including some great views of them only 4-5m up and unobstructed but branches and leaves. The group contained an adult female with a young baby, 2 adult males and one male who is 2.7 years old. They know the exact ages as they have been followed and studied every day since they have been habituated in 2012. It is incredible to have such close and prolonged views of such a rare primate and watching as the young male played in the tree tops and the mother interacted with her baby. Seeing intimate behaviours such as these as well as watching them move so effortlessly through the trees is a joy. As the group began to really settle down and stay put in the same tree, preparing for their mid-morning rest period we decided to leave them in peace and head back out of the forest to the grasslands where we had breakfast before walking back to the camp. The temperatures were already getting high and the walk back was very hot. There were some birds around including yellow-crested mynahs, blue-winged leafbirds, blue-tailed bee-eaters and blue-rumped parrots among other species as they began their days moving from roosting sites to feeding sites and patrolling their territories calling to potential rivals. We



arrived back at the conservation centre at around 10:15 and we packed up our stuff and left via motos again across the paddy fields and back to the village. From here we caught the ferry over the Sasan River and met up with Danny again on the other side, we then drove slowly back to Ban Lung. Once back at the accommodation we freshened up, had lunch and then visited a nearby volcanic lake, Boeng Yeak Lom. This is a beautiful emerald-hued crater lake of almost near perfect circular shape, set amid the vivid greens of the towering jungle. It is one of the most peaceful, beautiful locations Cambodia has to offer and the water is extremely clear. Several wooden piers are dotted around the perimeter, making it perfect for swimming. The lake is believed to have been formed 700,000 years ago and some believe it must have been formed by a meteor strike as the circle is so perfect. The indigenous minority people in the area have long considered Yeak Lom a sacred place and their legends talk of mysterious creatures that inhabit the waters. After visiting this lake we had dinner at the lodge and then a good early night after the long days and hot traveling over the last couple of days.

Day 17 **Kratie**

Travelling & Wildlife Watching

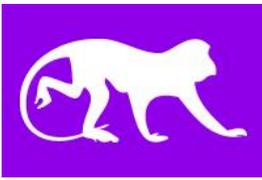
This morning we had a more civilised departure time, and at 7:30am we left Ban Lung and travelled further south-east towards the Vietnamese border and to a town on Mekong River. After around 3 hours of driving (mostly following the Mekong River) we arrived at Kratie, most of the way we were passing rubber plantations which is a huge part of the economy of Cambodia. We travelled straight to an area of the Mekong called Kampi Pools, this is an area of deep water troughs in the river which make very good habitats for fish. During the flooding season the fishing is very good, but during the dry season the area is taken over by the endangered and very elusive Irrawaddy dolphin. This is by far the best place in the world to see this species and at 10:45am hired a boat and headed out slowly and as quietly as possible into the lake. It wasn't long before we saw some of the pale, bulbous headed dolphins as they rose to the surface to breath. There were at last 5 individuals including 2 young calves still staying very close to their mothers. We watched as they fished occasionally, speeding up in their rate of breathing, movements and become more erratic as they excitedly chased the fish around. Towards the end we saw a behaviour pretty unique to the Irrawaddy dolphin as they rose above the water to blow water from their mouths in a long squirt. Whether this is for communication between individuals in the group or a display for rivals or just a dolphin having fun, we do not know. But it is fun to watch the dolphins make a circle with their mouth and fire long jet or water out. We then headed to the town of Kratie for lunch before continuing our journey to the Mondulkiri area and Sen Monorom. Along the way we passed black pepper plantations, some of the best black pepper in the world is grown here, we then passed a huge monument to Cambodian and Vietnamese fighters who were lost during the numerous wars and battles that this part of the world has seen in the last 100 years. As we approached the province of Mondulkiri, which is the second largest forest area in Cambodia behind the Cardoman Hills and is still home to some wonderful wildlife. We drove through some large sections of forest, however as with most of the wilderness areas around SE Asia the wildlife has been poached and hunted out and the ones that survive are very elusive and risking landmines and bombs as well as poaching snares. When we were there tigers were still reported from the Mondulkiri forests however just 2 weeks after the trip the Cambodian government declared tigers extinct in the country and it is most likely through the complete lack of food for them in the forests. As we approached the town the forest started to disappear in favour for grazing land and crop plantations. After we arrived at the lodge we checked in and relaxed for the rest of the day, watching the grey-headed parakeets coming into roost around our cabins as the sun went down.



Day 18 **Sen Monorom**

Wildlife Watching & Cultural Experience

At 8am we left to visit Mondulkiri Sanctuary, we would spend time with a small herd of rescued elephants. The captive elephant industry in SE Asia is rampant and unregulated with many of the elephants illegally caught from the wild and held in appalling conditions and forced to work far too long each day. So there is a growing wave of people buying elephants from these people and also collecting elephants that are too old to work and have to retire and giving them the best possible life. One such man is Mr. Hong, he was the leader of the small hill tribe village nearest the sanctuary and he had 5 elephants of various ages at present and each morning people can pay to visit him and then follow as the elephants walk through the forest and bath in the river, living as natural a life as possible. The elephants are not ridden anymore and are never asked to work. It is as close to a retirement home as possible, where the elephants are fed well and everyday get the care and attention they crave as social animals whilst being in the forest and feeding on their natural food and bathing in the rivers to their hearts content. Never chained and free to wander their mahouts follow them and at the end of the day the elephants start to head back towards their stable on their own. It is a great system for caring for these once abused animals, we just hope that the future lies in



making sure that the working elephant and tourist elephant industry is banned as opposed to a future in more and more of these retirement homes for the elephants.

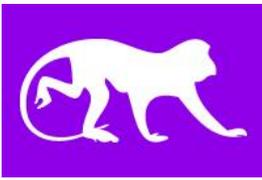
When we arrived in the sanctuary we were introduced to the elephants, the 4 females were aged 29, 35, 44 and 62 and he also had an old bull, a very old bull aged 82 years old. We walked down towards the river with the elephants, through Mr. Homgs cashew nut plantations, the elephants feeding on the best of the nuts and other vegetation along the way. Walking with the elephants was a great experience and watching as they slowly walked in single file, communicating along the way was great to see. We walked down with the trail to the river and the edge of the forest with them, once we got the river the temperature was getting very hot and to avoid spending the middle of the day in the heat (knowing how we can suffer in the heat) we decided to head back towards the village and allow the elephants to wander the forest for the rest of the day at their leisure. We walked back through the forest and spotted several species of birds such as common tailorbirds, Asian house martins, red-whiskered bulbuls, Eurasian blackbird, Oriental white-eye, rufescent prinia, moustached barbet and dozens more. We also spotted a foraging Pallas's squirrel moving quickly through the trees, walking through the forest the sounds and smells of the forest overwhelmed us. We walked up and down the narrow pathways spotting a spotted-supple skink sunbathing on a rock in the path and then watching the herd of elephants feeding in the bamboo on the opposite side of the valley. It is not hard to imagine herds of wild elephants once feeding along these hills and wandering in the forests but the chances of them coming back fully depends on the cooperation of local people (like the village that Mr. Hong heads), the national government and NGO's who can promote sustainable ecotourism. We eventually arrived back at the lodge and rested here whilst we had lunch; then in the late afternoon we were taken to another area of the forest to have a walk. This is the buffer area from a local plantation and the forest, walking around here we watched many birds such as yellow-crowned woodpeckers, ashy drongos, golden-crested mynahs, Australasian bushlark and green bee-eater all coming back to their roosts and found tracks from Burmese hares and common palm civets as well as seeing the sleeping nest of a common palm civet. After these we were taken to Mr. Hong's traditional home, his family was there, wife, mother in law and his 7 seven children all in a very small, dark and smoky hut. We sat on the raised platform that lines one side of the hut, the other platform is reserved for the sleeping area as the whole family sleep together in the hut. The other side is for cooking and eating and we sat cross legged around the banana leaf mats and were presented with various dishes all prepared by Mr. Hong and his family. He was a very good cook and had in fact cooked with Gordon Ramsey when he was over in Cambodia researching different cuisines. We were treated to aubergine cooked in bamboo, BBQ pork and many different stir fried vegetables and rice dishes. We also tried some of his rice wine, this is a potent whiskey like liquor which is stored in huge earthen jars and drunk communally through bamboo straws. We were told a very go folk story about the origins of his tribes language and why they do not have a written word. The story goes that way back when all of the children from the different tribes were asked to attend a school and teach their own languages and learn the common Khmer language. All of the children brought their own paper, made from coconut palm leaves to write their alphabet and language on, but the people from Mr. Hong's tribe (a member of the Hmong peoples) used the traditional dried buffalo hide as paper. So they wrote their alphabet on this and were about to share their language. But then it rained and as the rain fell on the buffalo hide it softened it and released the smell of the meat. When all of the children started to hang their papers up to dry after the sun came out local dogs ate the buffalo hide paper as it smelt like food and the language was lost for ever. It is the original 'my dog ate my homework story'.

After eating our fill and drinking some of the rice wine we left the village and headed back to the lodge, on the way we found a large red-tailed racer crossed the road and slithered off up the dirt bank on the side of the road and away into the agricultural land. This is a large and impressive looking snake and they are also among the most common in SE Asia as they feed heavily on mice and rats which are prevalent around rice paddy fields. This was the last sighting of note today and tomorrow we would leave Cambodia and head to our final country of the trip Vietnam.

Day 19 **Cat Tien National Park**

Travelling & Wildlife Watching

This morning to the chirping of grey-headed parakeets and noisy mynahs we woke and breakfasted at the lodge before leaving for the border. Along the way we passed through a large area of forest and with it being earlier in the morning than we had driven through the forest the other day we saw some more wildlife, firstly a large male northern pig-tailed macaque crossed the road and then briefly a northern slender-tailed treeshrew ran quickly away from the side of the road. The rest of the journey to the border was uneventful and when we arrived we said goodbye to Danny and proceeded through the passport checked and when safely on the Vietnamese side we met our new guide Hiep and our driver Vin and drove with him towards the largest park in Southern Vietnam and the countries most popular national park, Cat Tien National Park. Along the way we stopped for some lunch and changed some money and then headed along the very windy and hilly roads (which were under repair and very bad), once we left the towns and settlements we started to pass plantations or palm leaves (used to make handicrafts and mats), rice paddies, rubber and of course the popular cashew nut. As we got closer and closer to the park a Indochinese ground squirrel ran across the road. Before we arrived at the park we passed the area called Cat Loc Nature Reserve, this is the last place on mainland Asia in which the Javan rhino lived before they were declared extinct here in 2011. It is such a shame that the park and forests around here only got better protection and more money for infrastructure after the rhino was declared extinct as the park and surrounding forests are large enough to maintain a



population of them if the government could have been bothered to do anything whilst the species was still around. To get to the park and the lodge we first had to cross the Dong Nai River in a little ferry and then take a short trip down to the lodge (around 5 minute drive into the forest). After setting into the lodge we had dinner, the lodge restaurant has its own little cast of geckos. Small tropical house geckos and the much larger tokay geckos that live in the rafters of nearly ever building in SE Asia and are particularly prevalent and noisy here. We watched as a small (around 10-12cm long) tropical house gecko was grabbed and swallowed whole by a huge tokay gecko. It happened so fast that Joe and Martin had to double take and recount the geckos on the wall to make sure one was really missing.

After dinner Joe and Martin were picked up from the lodge and taken to the park headquarters (next to where we disembarked the ferry) and climbed aboard one of the national park operated night safari vehicles. Most of the wildlife in the park is nocturnal and we hoped for some interesting sightings to go along with the most commonly seen animals such as sambar deer, barking deer and wild boars. On the way to the headquarters we had a small Indian civet cross the road and walk parallel with the road for a while allowing great views. This was a great way to start and we had high hopes. Shortly after starting out, in the grasslands either side of the road we found many sambar deer, including adult fantastic adult males with brilliant antlers, many females and some small babies. We then had a large-toothed ferret badger very close to the vehicle and ambling alongside for a short way until it disappeared into the forest. A little further along we found a male Indian muntjac feeding and then two common palm civets alongside the road before they slung off into the bamboo. Just as we were starting to make our way back we spotted a pair of Malayan porcupines in a field. All in all this is a very good night safari and a great start to our time in Cat Tien National Park. We arrived back at the lodge and got some sleep, tomorrow would be an early start.

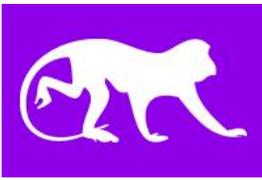


Day 20 Cat Tien National Park

Wildlife Watching

At 5am we left the lodge with the local gibbon guide Tau, we walked into the forest and set up some hammocks in the dark at a wonderful and enormous fig tree. We lay in the dark as the morning sunlight slowly started to come through canopy above, we waited for the gibbons to start calling. We were slap back in the middle of their territory and it wasn't long before their distinctive whooping call echoed through the forest. It was 5:20am and we left with Tau and quickly moved through the forest in the direction of the calls, the next couple of hours was very similar to how the gibbon tracking in Cambodia went. With us quickly moving to find the family and then following them through the trees as best we could. As the sun rose properly the diurnal cicadas started their morning calls, along with the cicadas the eastern striped squirrels started their daily routine, running around quickly along the thin branches and vines of the middle storey. There were many squirrels around in the forest this morning including Asian red-cheeked squirrels running in the trees chasing each other. Then we found the gibbons, a small family group of 3, 2 males and 1 female. When we found them they were feeding on some fruit in an exposed tree and then they started to move off. At this time of the morning they rarely spend more than 10-15 minutes in one tree feeding before moving onto another tree. As we walked around following the gibbons we disturbed a feeding sounder of wild boar and heard as they ran off into the forest and away from us. We followed the gibbons for around 1 hour and then left them in peace, this species is very similar in appearance to the one we saw in Cambodia and up until 2010 they were believed to be the same species, but genetic studies found out they had been separated by the Mekong River for over 500,000 and had evolved into distinct (yet similar) species, this one now being called the southern buff-cheeked gibbon. By seeing this species we are likely to be the very first non-scientists to have seen both these species in the wild. On our way back to the lodge we walked a different route and took our time to see what else we could see, we found some interesting birds including green imperial pigeons, streak-eared bulbul, common tailorbird, black coucal, stripe-throated bulbul, white-rumped shama and Asian koel. We also had amazing close up views of a female great roundleaf bat and her young. The baby was still too young to support itself and she cradled it in her wings. She had chosen a hollowed out tree stump and we could walk up to it and see at eye level the female and baby. It was incredible to see bats this close and a mother and baby was such a treat. We then arrived back at the lodge and had late breakfast / lunch.

During the afternoon we headed out on a jeep safari up the road away from the headquarters and away into the forest, along the way we saw many birds including a male and female red jungle fowl on the road and various bulbuls flittering around the bamboo next to the road. Along the way we stopped and off and explored the forest to visit various sites such as a huge trunk fig tree, this tree is well over 1,000 years old and has the most incredible and vast network of roots. The tree itself covers over 1,000m² of ground and looks like a setting from *Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter*, it is a truly magical place and as the tree continues to grow it could be amongst the largest



living organisms in Asia before long. What must be very special is the sight of animals coming down and in between the tangled jungle of roots and branches at the crystal clear spring water as the tree is located right on top of a spring. We then carried on along the road and overhead spotted a flock of 17 greater adjutant storks circling on thermals. This is a critically endangered species and Cat Tien National Park is one of the key areas for their continued success. It was great to see so many together, one of the larger flocks of this troubled species. As we slowly made our way back to the lodge we stopped at the massive reddish wood tree called the Uncle Dong tree. Uncle Dong was the former president and this massive 700 year old hard wood is named in his honour, it is amazing that a tree so highly sought after by loggers has survived this long. There is a large chainsaw scar in the trunk but the tree clearly survived this and today gets the protection of the national park to continue growing. After coming back to the lodge and having lunch we went for a bike ride towards the grasslands beyond the park headquarters, however we came back a little early as Joe wasn't feeling 100% and the temperature was very hot for cycling; so decided that only Martin would go out after dark to see what they could see and target the very small and incredibly cute pygmy slow loris. So after dinner Martin headed out down the main road spotlighting, looking into the tangle of vines and branches just off the road it only took around 20 minutes to find the distinctive eye shine of a pygmy slow loris at around 3m off the ground and very close to the road. The slow loris just stayed still and stared back allowing for great views and some pictures.

Day 21 **Cat Tien National Park**

Wildlife Watching & Travelling

At 7am Rhoda, Martin and Hiep went out on a jeep safari, with Joe still resting. Our target today being the very rare and hard to see black-shanked douc langur; however the temperatures had been so hot recently that they were heading out from their sleeping trees into the thick and nearly impenetrable forest earlier and earlier and due to new park rules we were unable to get to their sleeping trees before they had already left. So it was going to be hit and miss if we could find them as it would be pretty warm by the time we got to the area where there are usually seen. Along the way we saw some birds including warblers and babblers but it was generally quite quiet until Martin spotted a very rare Annamese silvered langur, this is probably the rarest primate in the forest here and the view was fleeting, as we stopped for a closer look the monkey jumped off and away into the forest. Other sightings we saw as we drove to and then beyond the starting point for Crocodile Lake (a hiking trail) were orange-breasted trogon, black-and-red broadbill, Imperial green pigeons, Pallas's squirrel, a pair of giant black squirrels which crossed the road on branches and an Indochinese flying lizard but no black-shanked douc langurs. It looked like we had missed the narrow window between when they wake up in their large and mostly open sleeping trees and head into the inaccessible feeding areas in the forest. After around 1.5 hours of driving and scanning each of the likely trees Martin spotted a small troop of primates in a tree around 50m away, through the binoculars they were clearly the beautifully coloured black-shanked douc langurs. They were skittish about us, even at this distance and they were in the tree and we were on the ground. But we watched as they moved through 4-5 bare trees and eventually settled down. Watching for around 15 minutes we saw their blue coloured faces showing various expressions. The group was made up of one large adult male, several females and a couple of youngster, the younger langurs playing around excitedly. Despite them being skittish and around 50-70m away by the time they settled they allowed us to have some fantastic views and we were very happy to have got our main primate species this morning. They then moved on and out of sight and so we carried on back towards the lodge, we would be leaving this afternoon for Hanoi and so wanted to get back for a late breakfast with enough time to pack. The last sighting of note we had in the park before we left was a stunning Siamese fireback pheasant crossing the road.

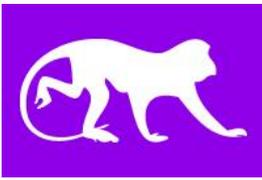
At 12pm we left the lodge, caught the ferry back over the Dong Hai River and into our vehicle, our first stop today would be Ho Chi Minh City airport, on the way we drove past black pepper, coffee, dragon fruit and mahogany plantations before arriving at the airport at around 3pm. We checked in and the flight was on time and once we arrived we met our new local guide for the north of Vietnam, Phong. It was quite late by the time we arrived at the hotel and we got a good nights sleep after dinner.



Day 22 **Van Long Nature Reserve**

Travelling & Wildlife Watching

This morning we departed the hotel at a later time than usual and travelled the 2-3 hours towards Ninh Binh. We left later than usual to avoid the rush hour traffic that can reduce Hanoi to a standstill. Driving through the hustle and bustle of Hanoi we passed some of the hundred plus lakes that dot the city and then entered the suburban farming area, just on the outskirts of the city is a green belt of rice paddies and small fields growing everything imaginable. This is one of the most fertile parts of Vietnam, it is part of the Red River delta and one of the main reasons why



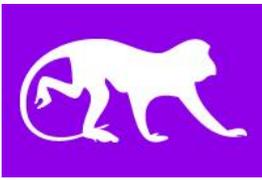
Hanoi was founded in the first place and the area is still responsible for producing most of the food that the city consumes daily. We then crossed a bridge overlooking the Red River Delta and the field started to change to fish farms and then the buildings became less and less until we were back in the Vietnamese countryside. We were heading towards Ninh Binh which is known for its very impressive limestone karst formations and mountains which dot the otherwise very flat terrain. The sharp and near vertical rocky outcrops started to be seen all around the farms and paddy fields. They are often topped with deep green as the forest and indigenous plants cling onto survival by growing at the tops of these karts. It is these karts which are also the main home for another primate we are looking for this afternoon, another rare and largely endemic species to Vietnam, the Delacour's langur. The best place to see them is at a small wetland nature reserve that is also protecting a good amount of limestone karst, this site is of huge importance as the limestone is utilised in the cement making process and all around here in the distance are cement factories. More karsts need protecting and maybe by increasing tourism to Van Long Nature Reserve the local government will see the benefit of protecting the area. Films (such as *King Kong 2017* are filmed here, they had just finished filming the week before we left), photography, general tourism and wildlife watching make this area very valuable to the locals and surely more valuable than the short sighting exploitation for cement production.

Once we arrived at the small village of Van Long we had lunch, it was still a little early to try and see the langurs as they are only observable in their sleeping areas in the early morning and late afternoon, the rest of the day they disappear to feed deep in the forest and avoid the heat of the day. After lunch we drove around some of the paddy fields to take in the whole view of the karts and the mountain called Cat Scratch mountain, so called as the karts formation here appears in long vertical cuts in the rock that look like a giant cat has used the cliff face as a scratching post for centuries. We then made our along a paddy field dyke to the little harbour and we met our guide Voi, he works here and specialises in showing people the langurs, most tourists that come here come for the stunning rock formations (which are incredible) but are at their best away from the main sleeping sites for the easiest seen groups of Delacour's langurs. We started out in our small and traditional style wooden boats and paddled slowly out towards the looming cliffs. It looked otherworldly, the grey low lying clouds adding a mystifying element to the whole experience. Almost as soon as we set off Voi had spotted a langur moving among the rocks. It was too far for the rest of us to get eyes on it and we continued to head closer. We first stopped at a commonly used sleeping spot for a large family of the langurs and they were there. At first just 6 individuals including 2 adult males, 2 adult females and their buff/orange coloured babies. Like many species of langur the young are a different colour from the adults and the bright orange colouration was easy to spot amongst the pale rocks and black and white coloured adults. And with only around 150 left in the reserve (250 in total) it was great to see young around. They moved so skilfully over the very sharp and narrow edges to the limestone ridges. We watched as they played, groomed and rested on near impossibly thin ledges. As we watched more individuals appeared from over the ridges and the vegetation, first another 4 and then eventually the whole group, which was around 20 all together. We then moved a little way along and found a lone young adult moving quickly through the rocks and had distant views of a mother and baby, the mother carrying the youngster on her belly as she jumped from rock to rock to get to the rest of the group. We watched as another mother and baby came along and then a young adult, the adolescent came along and tried to get one of the babies off the mother to play, but the mother wasn't having any of it and they moved away and towards a large male. The male's presence stopping the adolescent's behaviour. The next group along had 3 adults and 3 youngsters in it, the youngsters all playing the trees, chasing each other and jumping from tree to tree as we watched another adult came down and joined this small group. As we travelled to find the next group we saw many species of birds along the way, including many flocks of cattle egrets flying overhead on their way to their overnight roost. In the next group we found another 4 individuals and then as we were turning around to head back another 2 moving through the rocks. All together we spotted around 10% of the global population of this species which is incredible. They are doing better and better in recent years however without increased protection there is a good chance that the cement factories could plunder this habitat and cause the extinction of this species. Just as we left another group of 6 came out and perched themselves on top of a ridge, almost like giving us a guard of honour as we left and travelled the short distance back to the hotel for dinner and a good nights sleep.

Day 23 **Cat Ba National Park**

Travelling

Today we left Ninh Binh in the pouring rain, whilst the rest of South East Asia was experiencing a heat wave the north of Vietnam showed us its typical weather for this time of year. Low hanging clouds, grey skies, drizzle and fog are synonymous with northern Vietnam and today started in that perfect fashion. We travelled by vehicle through the lowlands of the Red River Delta, through rice paddies and small idyllic villages for over 3 hours until we arrived at the port town of Hai Phong. We had lunch here and then boarded the hydrofoil ferry to take us the 32km out into Ha Long Bay to Cat Ba Island. We arrived on the island at 1pm and headed out of the main town and to our hotel, checked in and then spent the rest of the day to rest and relax. Cat Ba is the largest island in the Ha Long Bay, this bay is most famous for its 1,000 plus islands. These photogenic islands are limestone karsts, just as we had seen in Ninh Binh, but these were submerged in the sea and left precipitous mountains topped with remnants of forest. The area is home to many floating fishing villages, tourist havens and has been the location for dozens of Hollywood films. But for us it would be the critically endangered Cat Ba langur that would be our main



target. They are among the rarest animals on the planet, with around 62 left in the wild. A large percentage of the island is designated as a national park and there is some excellent conservation being done here with is great news. Also the inaccessible features of the karsts make development on many of them impossible, but that does not mean all is good for the Cat Ba langur going into the future. The main threat now is poaching, as the local people enjoy to eat the monkeys and with so few left, just the lose of one adult female could be catastrophic. We hold very little actual hope of seeing one tomorrow but we would keep our eyes peeled as we cruised around the bay tomorrow.

Day 24 **Cat Ba National Park**

Wildlife Watching & Sightseeing

At 8:30am we left the hotel and boarded our own boat to cruise the beautiful Ha Long Bay, going in search of serenity, stunning scenery and of course the critically endangered and elusive Cat Ba langur. As we cruised we passed many small floating houses all with fish farms netted underneath and linked to other houses with narrow boardwalks. These connected to form villages, these people are permanently resident on the sea and depend on fishing completely. Also dotted around the stunning limestone islands were tourists in their sea kayaks, experiencing the bay and its many grottoes and caves in their own time, sometimes camping on the isolated and pristine beaches, getting lost in their own little piece of paradise. We travelled to a large lagoon where the langurs are seen more often than anywhere else, however Martin suspected that this was because this is the main tourist spot and so if more people are here then it stands to reason they will be spotted here, more than in places where nobody goes, as nobody would see them. There were lots of bird species around and we spotted many black-eared kites flying around looking for food thrown overboard by the many fishing and recreational boats here. We entered the lagoon in a small local boat and through a 40m long cave, the lagoon was stunning, a rounded shape cut off from the outside bay by all by the 10m wide cave we had come through. As we cruised slowly around the lagoon scanning intently Joe caught a glimpse of something moving high up on the cliff, he described it as large, black and with a long tail. Whether it was a Cat Ba langur we do not know, there are also giant black squirrels here and Joe didn't see it well enough to say conclusively. We stayed around and tried to find the animal again but it was spotted near the top of the cliff and if it went onto the summit we would never see it again.

So we left the lagoon and went for lunch on board the boat, as we were eating Phong called as he had spotted monkeys in the tree nearby, through the binoculars, resting in a tree around 70m away from us and 40m up the cliff in a small gorge were 4 primates. They were clearly langurs, with the distinctive very long tail, slender limbs and small head when compared to the more robustly built macaques that also live around these islands. Even the light was not great we could also see the pale heads of the langurs which is another distinctive feature of this langur, sometimes called the white-headed langur. They were staying in the shade of the large tree and not moving very much as it was the heat of the day. As we watched they slowly started to groom themselves and then settled down to rest, we decided we should get back and beat the tide. We headed back to the hotel, and had the rest of the day to relax and walk around the forest at the back of the resort or head into the main town just 10 minutes down the road.



Day 25 **Hanoi**

Travelling

This morning was spent relaxing in the resort, our hydrofoil was not due to depart until 2pm and so we stayed here, walked around the main town and had lunch before being taken back to Hanoi. Martin we due to fly back from Hanoi tonight and so he said his goodbyes at the hotel and left Joe and Rhoda to their dinner.

Day 26 **Home**

Departure

Today Phong collected Joe and Rhoda from the hotel and took them to the airport in time to catch their return flight home.

