

# Southeast Asia Explorer

Location: Thailand, Cambodia & Vietnam

Duration: 4 or 8 Weeks



# Who is this trip for?

If you're searching for an unforgettable adventure travel experience, looking to volunteer, and backpack your way through Southeast Asia's most sought-after destinations, then this trip is perfect for you!

Encompassing both wildlife & community-based volunteering projects alongside traditional backpacking, the Southeast Asia Explorer is perfect for first-time travellers and solo adventurers alike looking to set out on one of the world's most iconic and beautiful gap year travel routes... this truly is a once in a lifetime experience and one you'll never forget!



# Where will you go?

Whether it be exploring Chiang Mai and Bangkok, assisting on a vital house-building project in Cambodia, or marvelling at the stunning Halong Bay, you're sure to experience everything on this once in a lifetime trip to three of Southeast Asia's most famous destinations!

## Thailand

Thailand is, quite literally, the most renowned gap year and backpacking destination. From the culture and street food on offer in Bangkok, to the nightlife and idyllic beaches, this country has more than its fair share to take your breath away. Get ready for tropical landscapes and vibrant interactions that will broaden your mind and change your life.

## Cambodia

Best known for its stunning jungle landscape and hidden ancient temples, to visit Cambodia feels like taking a step back into a forgotten world. Travellers are fascinated by the country's rich cultural heritage, unique cuisine and relentlessly welcoming people, so much so that the country has become a Mecca for the modern backpacker.

## Vietnam

Nestled to the east of both Thailand and Cambodia, Vietnam might be an inextricable part of Southeast Asia, but it's also a world unto itself. Featuring caves, islands and some of the best beaches in the region, there's no shortage of things to do, whether you're an adventure junkie or you just want to lay in the sun.



# Your Itinerary



# Thailand

## Week One: Chiang Mai & Pai

You'll start your adventure in Thailand's northern capital Chiang Mai. Less intense than the hustle and bustle of Bangkok, but still quintessentially Thai, this is a historic city, the second largest in the country, with somewhere in the region of 300 temples. Trust us, you won't be at a loss for what to do! You and your group will have a chance to explore the hidden backstreets, sample some of the delicious street food, or simply kick back and absorb one of Thailand's greatest cities.

You'll also get to visit Doi Suthep Temple, one of Thailand's most sacred temples. Reached via a 306-step staircase, the temple sits above the city and offers stunning views of downtown Chiang Mai. A local hike to a beautiful waterfall, a bike ride through iconic historical parks, full of ancient ruins and a kayaking trip will round off your time in Chiang Mai!

After exploring all that Chiang Mai has to offer, you'll head over to Pai, a laid-back town in a picturesque valley close to the border of Myanmar.

There's no better way to get to know your new surroundings and enjoy the splendid scenery than by floating along with the current in an inflated rubber ring down the Pai River. Enjoying the sun, each others company and the local wildlife, all you need to do is sit back, relax, and let Thailand's majestic horizons pass you by!

Whilst in Pai, you'll also get the chance to discover centuries old stalagmites and stalactites in Tham Lod Cave, one of Thailand's most impressive and accessible caves. A natural limestone cave system, the internal walls are covered with massive formations and columns, some over 20 meters high. If you're lucky you'll also get the chance to see the large colonies of bats and swifts that call the cave home!



# Thailand

## Week Two: Elephant Sanctuary Volunteering

After a week of sightseeing in Thailand's biggest cities and backpacker hotspots, it's off to your first volunteering project at an Elephant Sanctuary in a stunning area of rural Thailand near Chang Khoeng.

The Elephant Sanctuary is a non-profit foundation which rescues elephants from a life in entertainment and provides them with a natural, safe environment free from exploitation and abuse. Set up with the sole intention of protecting elephants from the appalling living conditions and hardships experienced working in Thailand's tourist camps, this ethical and responsible elephant sanctuary is the perfect location for volunteers to directly help elephants live a happy and more natural life and 'give-back' to elephants who have spent their lives 'working' for humans.

The Sanctuary is a place where elephants can finally 'be' elephants, which is why they have adopted a **'No Contact – Hands Off'** approach to the elephants and gives you, as volunteers, the reassurance that you are respecting these animals and giving them a better life without causing them stress and harm. While you're there, you can expect to be involved in a variety of tasks such as observing the elephants in the forest, cleaning the elephant enclosure, preparing food for the elephants and maintenance work around the sanctuary. Away from the elephants, you can expect an immersion into Thai culture and community as you enjoy activities such as cooking classes and visits to local temples, as well as helping teach English to local children and helping care for other rescued animals at the sanctuary.

This project makes a real, sustainable impact on both the elephants and the community, and it's a unique opportunity to be part of something that makes a huge difference to the lives of both animals and humans!



# Thailand

## Week Three: Chang Khoeng - Bangkok - Koh Tao

After a magical week volunteering with elephants, and before heading down to the stunning Thai Islands, you'll make the journey from Chang Khoeng to Bangkok. You'll stop for a few days in the bustling capital, a rite of passage for all gap year backpackers!

One of the region's most iconic locations, Bangkok is known for its vibrant street life, ornate shrines and a completely unique micro-culture! The city is a must see for any budding gap year traveller, boasting world famous nightlife and an enviable collection of world heritage sites.

While you're here, you'll visit several temples and really immerse yourself in traditional Thai life. You'll climb the Golden Mount, which is a large golden palace, from which you can watch the stunning sunset over the sprawling city. And if that wasn't enough, you'll also have the chance to take a boat tour of the city's iconic canal system, a great place to watch the markets and the busy streets of the capital drift past. Trust us, after a few days exploring this amazing, energetic city you may never want to leave!

Your time in Bangkok will conclude as you hop on a bus to begin the journey south to Koh Tao.



# Thailand

## Week Four: Koh Tao & Koh Samui

A fitting end to your time in Thailand, no visit is complete without experiencing the idyllic beaches of the famous Thai islands!

At the southern tip of Thailand lies two of the world's most stunning islands: Koh Tao and Koh Samui. A mecca for 'gappers' and backpackers alike, included activities on Koh Tao include an island boat trip, jungle walks with stunning cliff-top views and snorkelling! Make sure to soak up the atmosphere in town or just kick back and soak up the sun, sea and sand on one of the many paradise beaches!

There are a plethora of optional activities available on the islands too. Koh Tao is renowned for its world-class scuba diving, so if you're qualified make sure you bring your PADI card and log book with you and you can take the opportunity to see one of Southeast Asia's best coral reefs, some impressive rays and maybe even a shark!

We'll head back to Bangkok where those booked onto the 4-week trip, your program ends here. You will be transferred back to Bangkok Airport for your flights home. For those of you heading into Cambodia, the adventure's only just beginning!





# Cambodia

## Week Five: Angkor Wat & Siem Reap Community Volunteering

After a bus journey through some of the most rural parts of Thailand, your first stop in Cambodia is Siem Reap. Much more relaxed than Bangkok or Chiang Mai, the difference in atmosphere will hit you straight away!

Angkor's vast complex of intricate stone buildings includes preserved Angkor Wat, the main temple, which is pictured on Cambodia's flag, and that's where you're headed next. The masterpiece of Angkor Wat is often thought to be the oldest religious site in the world – it's certainly one of the largest. Coming to Angkor Wat is like stepping into a different world, a space where time stopped moving. You'll have the chance to spend a number of days exploring the temples and the surrounding jungles of this incredible and unique place!

Whilst Siem Reap town is considered the gateway to the ruins of Angkor, this north-western town is also the epicentre of Cambodia's backpacker scene. With a variety of cuisines, culture and adventures at your fingertips, you'll love exploring this gem of a destination.

For your volunteering project in Cambodia, you'll be helping to make a real, sustainable difference to the lives of local people, building simple, sturdy wooden houses to provide shelter and security for local families living in need. You'll also have the opportunity to teach English in a local community centre.

Poor education, lack of skills and a shortage of job opportunities mean many rural Cambodians are still living in extreme poverty with inadequate shelter. The houses you're building replace fragile structures that offer little protection from the elements.

Your work to improve living conditions change lives, through better sanitation, increased security, better sleeping arrangements and healthier living. Children in secure homes are less likely to get sick and more likely to attend school. Volunteers work under the guidance of our skilled project partners to construct a house in one week. It's one of our most rewarding volunteer projects and you will never forget the memories you make!



# Cambodia

## Week Six: Siem Reap - Phnom Penh - Ho Chi Minh

After your fantastic work on the community volunteering project, it's time for a travel week as you make the scenic journey from Siem Reap in northern Cambodia to the nations capital Phnom Penh in the south.

On your visit Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, you will experience one of the country's most important historical sites. The Cambodian Killing Fields are a number of sites where more than a million people were killed and buried by the Communist Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s. You'll have the privilege of visiting the best-known monument of the Killing Fields at the village of Choeung Ek. Today, it is the home of a Buddhist memorial to the victims, and a museum commemorating the genocide: the utmost respect is given to the victims of the massacres through signs and tribute sections throughout the park. Discovering the tragic history of this beautiful country only deepens your experience and your affection for its people.

After a sombre day experiencing some of Cambodia's tragic past, you'll have a few days to unwind in Phnom Penh: why not have a wander down the river-front, lined with parks, restaurants and bars, or visit the ornate Royal Palace, Silver Pagoda and the National Museum, displaying artefacts from around the country. If you're up for buying some souvenirs, the city's heart is the massive, art-deco Central Market.

Your time in Cambodia will come to an end as you finish the week crossing the border into Vietnam ready for the final two weeks of your epic adventure!



# Vietnam

## Week Seven: Ho Chi Minh - Nha Trang - Hoi An

You've made it to the last leg of your adventure! It's time to backpack from South Vietnam to North Vietnam in a whistle-stop tour of the best Vietnam has to offer, with no better place to start than the bustling Ho Chi Minh City.

Ho Chi Minh City (previously Saigon) is the former capital of Vietnam and boasts street food, markets, a short journey to the Mekong Delta and a gaggle of backpackers. It's the main hub for beginning any journey around Vietnam and a fantastic introduction to Vietnam's unique and brilliant way of life.

You will have the opportunity to tour the Mekong Delta – a vast maze of interconnecting rivers that support a fully functioning floating market, sample the world-famous street food, and relax with a bowl of steaming hot Pho – pronounced 'F-Uh', Vietnam's national dish. And any visit to Ho Chi Minh city wouldn't be complete without a trip to the infamous Cu Chi Tunnels to learn about the important role this network of underground tunnels played in the Vietnam War.

Next, it's an overnight train from Ho Chi Minh to Nha Trang. Trains are the best way to get around Vietnam, and an overnight journey is an experience in-and-of-itself!

Nha Trang is well known for its beaches and scuba diving and attracts large numbers of backpackers, probably because it's largely considered one of the world's most beautiful bays. There's vibrant nightlife to keep you occupied after dark, and you can kick back on the beach during the day. You'll be taking an island tour of Nha Trang to visit it's famous mud baths plus much more!

Next up is Hoi An, frequently described as the highlight of any backpacking trip to Vietnam, and is one of the region's most beautiful towns. Set in a shallow valley, the town is the home of the country's cuisine, features vibrant markets with inexpensive tailor-made suits, dresses and shoes, and is surrounded by countryside and rice paddies. You'll be renting bikes to get around the town (as is the local way) and take a bike tour of the surrounding area. What would Vietnam be without bikes?

Hoi An local market in the Old Town is perhaps the most quaint attraction you will experience during your journey. Immerse yourself in this wonderful area and utilise the stunning backdrops for your Instagram stories!



# Vietnam

## Week Eight: Phong Nha-Ke Bang, Hanoi, and Halong Bay

Designated a UNESCO World Heritage site, Phong Nha-Ke Bang is an absolutely remarkable place, and will mark a welcome change of pace from the city and town-based travel so far through Vietnam. It contains the oldest Karst mountains in Asia, and is riddled with hundreds of cave systems and spectacular underground rivers. Whilst you are here you will enjoy a boat tour to see these colossal caves up close.

Another overnight journey connects the national park and Hanoi – but you've finally made it, the last stop on your journey!

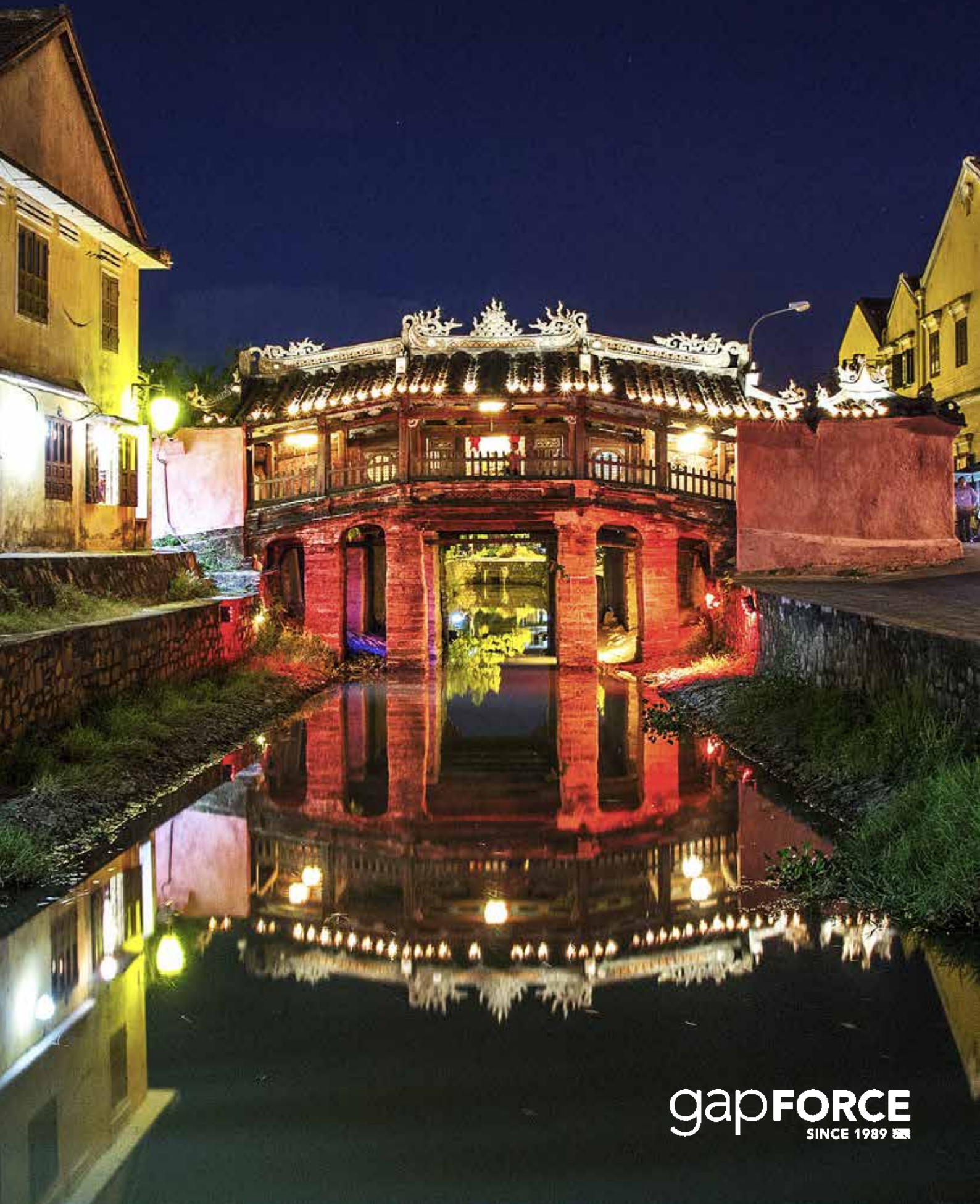
Hanoi is the capital of Vietnam and arguably the most well-known part of the country. It's also the easiest part of Vietnam to spend time in, with tourists regularly losing hours and days to a city which it's impossible not to love. You'll be staying in a backpacker-centric hostel and can take part in the guided tours of the city that the hostel provides.

Although most of your time in the city will be free to explore and shop, you will also be taking a trip to Halong Bay, a series of inter-connecting islands just off the coast of Hanoi, another otherworldly location and the perfect place to bring your Southeast Asia adventure to a stunning end!

After an unforgettable 8-weeks in Southeast Asia you will be transferred back to Hanoi Airport for your flights home.



# What's Included



## What's Included:

- Pre-departure support
- Airport pick-up & drop-off
- Gapforce Expedition Leader
  - Local project staff
- All accommodation for the duration of the trip
  - Three meals a day
- Project equipment and Donation
  - 24/7 emergency back-up
- Financial Failure Protection

## Trips & Activities:

- Chiang Mai: Doi Suthep Temple, Waterfall hike, Bike/kayak tour
  - Pai: Tham Lod Cave, Tubing
  - Bangkok: Floating Market, Golden Mount
  - Koh Tao: Snorkelling, island boat trip
  - Siem Reap: Pass to visit Angkor Wat\*
- Phnom Penh: Trip to the Genocide Museum and Killing Fields\*
  - Ho Chi Minh: Mekong Delta tour, Cu Chi tunnels\*
    - Nha Trang: Mud baths, Boat trip\*
      - Hoi An: Bike tour\*
    - Phong Nha Ke Bang: Cave & Boat Trip\*
    - Hanoi: Halong Bay day trip\*

\*Only applicable to participants that take part in the full 8-week program.

## Not Included:

- Flights
- Travel insurance
- Visa & vaccinations
- Spending money
- Optional excursions/activities
- Personal packing kit list items (provided upon booking)
  - Tips and gratuities

Please note that due to the nature of expeditions, prices, dates and itinerary may vary. Please call for details.



# Additional Information



## Accommodation

You will stay in a variety of diverse accommodations throughout your trip including local hotels, hostels and volunteer guesthouses. Most accommodations will be dorm style with shared bathrooms.

The accommodation at the elephant sanctuary will be in traditional Thai-style huts (with mattresses and bedding on the floor). The bathrooms will be shared and have cold-water showers. There is no Wi-Fi at the sanctuary so you may wish to purchase a local sim-card after arrival – or enjoy being off-grid for a week!

## Meals

Three meals a day are included, and these will be a mixture of local and western cuisine. Meals whilst at the volunteering projects are cooked for you, then whilst we are travelling we will either buy food to cook at our accommodation or visit local restaurants and cafés. Vegan and vegetarian diets can be catered for, please check with us regarding further dietary requirements and/or allergies.

## Staff

Throughout your expedition you will be accompanied by a Gapforce Expedition Leader.

Gapforce is renowned for the select team of enthusiastic leaders who run our worldwide expeditions. We hire great people experienced in delivering inspiring and safe travel experiences, many of whom have graduated from our 3-month Expedition Leader Training.

At various stages of your expedition we utilize the services of local support staff including project co-ordinators, drivers and guides. Their expert local knowledge is invaluable and they undergo a thorough screening process to ensure they are safe and reliable, in most cases Gapforce has been working with these staff for many years.

## Visa

It is up to you to sort out your individual visa requirements and ensure you fulfil any other entry requirements stipulated for the destination country. Please check the regulations using the advice of your home countries government before you get on the plane. Visas can take several weeks to process, so make sure you allow time for processing.





## **Flights**

The arrival airport in Thailand is Chiang Mai, and the departure airport is Hanoi (8-week trip) or Bangkok (4-week trip). You are responsible for booking your own flights/transport to the start point of the expedition (at the in-country airport). Information and advice about booking flights will be provided upon booking but please do not hesitate to contact us if you need further assistance.

## **Insurance**

We insist that you have repatriation and medical insurance before you travel with us on our trips and expeditions. Please check that your insurance will return you to your home country in the case of any type of emergency. We also strongly recommend that your policy includes cancellation & curtailment cover. If you intend to dive, it must insure you to dive down to 30m.

## **Medical**

It is your responsibility to check with your own doctor or travel clinic which vaccinations are recommended for your expedition and we recommend you do this at least 2 months prior to the start of your expedition. You must also complete a Gapforce medical form and have it signed by your GP or Doctor.

## **Kit**

Upon booking you will be provided with a comprehensive kit list. Being prepared is of paramount importance and our advisors are happy to help with any kit related queries you may have.

## **Spending Money**

Depending on the duration of your stay, we advise you budget for \$70 – \$90 or £55 – £70 a week to cover items not included in the itinerary such as additional drinks, or optional excursions.

## Transportation

You are responsible to getting yourself to and from the start point of the expedition.

During the expedition, program transfers are included. Travel is a combination of day and overnight journeys using a range of transport including public and private buses, trains, boat taxis and pick-up trucks. Please note that seatbelts do not come as standard on road transport in Southeast Asia, so some journeys may not have seatbelts available to all participants. Please give us a call for more information on individual journey details.

## Climate

Although relatively compact, Southeast Asia has a large variation of climates, with weather patterns varying wildly within even the same country.

Being close to the equator, Southeast Asia benefits from a tropical climate - the entire region is within the tropical and subtropical climatic zones so you can expect hot and, at times, humid weather with average daily temperatures between 25 and 35 degrees Celsius, reaching over 40 degrees at peak times of the year (mid-February to May).

The region experiences it's dry season usually between November and May. At other times it can and does rain, but there is no wrong time to visit. Beautiful beaches, sacred temples, epic jungle treks, and mythical mountain vistas await whenever you plan your trip.



## Fitness Requirements

This program is action packed with most days filled with activities and sightseeing interspersed with slower days for travel and relaxation. There will be some days you find yourself on your feet all day, so you should be comfortable walking 4-5 hours a day, including up hills and on rough paths. You may also be required to walk between transport hubs and the accommodation, so you must also need to be able to walk comfortably for up to 30 minutes carrying your full backpack.

And don't forget the heat and humidity, particularly at the hottest time of year (mid-February to May) where temperatures can reach 40 degrees Celsius, so you should be prepared to do the above in temperatures higher than you might be accustomed to back home.

Due to close proximity to water during your trip (e.g at swimming pools and on boats) you must be able to swim and be confident in and around water. To participate in any activities that take place in open water e.g. snorkelling, you must be able to swim 200m

If you are unsure of your suitability to participate, please contact us prior to signing up. We can provide further information on what to expect so that you can discuss your suitability with your doctor and make an informed decision on whether to join.



## Supervision and Optional Activities

During the course of your expedition, there will be times outside of scheduled group activities when you are not under the direct supervision of Gapforce staff. During these times, your leaders will be in the vicinity but may not be able to intervene immediately in the event of an emergency and you are therefore expected to act responsibly and be safety minded at all times. For any times when they are not physically with you, your leaders will provide you with their contact details should you need their assistance.

Any optional activities not included in the program fee that you choose to book with local activity providers will not have been risk assessed by Gapforce and you will therefore be outside the jurisdiction of Gapforce from the moment the activity begins until you return to the group. Check with your insurer beforehand that you are covered for that particular activity.

## Travel & Covid-19

Gapforce always follows the advice of the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and will not run programs to a destination whilst the FCDO advises against travel for tourists.

At destinations that the FCDO considers to be safe, Gapforce will be implementing preventative measures aimed at reducing the risk of participants and leaders becoming infected. All group members will be expected to follow required safety protocols and instructions, however there will still remain a risk of exposure to the virus that could lead to infection or other consequences, such as periods of quarantine, during your program. By travelling on one of our programs, participants are confirming that they accept the risks of travel during this pandemic and will not hold Gapforce responsible if they become infected with the virus or if their program is otherwise disrupted due to Covid-19.

It is recommended that all participants have adequate insurance that covers them for covid-related incidents including medical cover, cancellation, curtailment and quarantine costs. Check you meet the entry requirements of the destination before travel. Any covid tests required before or during the program will need to be paid for by the participant if not provided free of charge by the State.

# Our Credentials



Here at Gapforce, we are committed to providing the highest levels of customer service, and we demonstrate this through our accreditation and membership of the following organisations:

## Protected Trust Services (PTS)

Through our membership of PTS, we offer full financial protection for all customer money paid to us through Package Travel Regulations compliance and the PTS trust account. Businesses must have extensive experience in travel and undergo stringent financial and risk checks to qualify as a member of PTS. Our PTS membership number is 5482.



## Year Out Group

We are a full member of the Year Out Group; an association of approved gap year organisations committed to providing high operating standards. In order to become an approved organisation, members must evidence a demanding set of criteria including liability insurance, financial protection, program authentication, risk assessments and crisis management plans.



## Young Explorer's Trust (YET)

Our Gap Year and school group programs are BS 8848 compliant following an external audit of our operating standards by a panel from YET. British Standard BS 8848 are standards set "for the provision of visits, fieldwork, expeditions and adventurous activities outside the UK". These rigorous standards provide a recognised benchmark against which to assess the acceptability of safety and general good practice on overseas expeditions.



## WYSE Travel Confederation

We are a member of the World Youth Student and Educational (WYSE) Travel Confederation. Their global community consists of over 600 members in 70 countries and aims "to contribute to the personal and professional growth of students and young people and positively impact our global community by fostering international understanding, responsible international travel, cultural exchange and education".



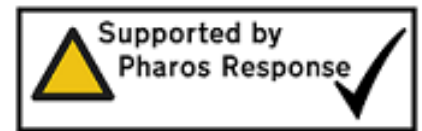
## The Duke of Edinburgh's Award (DofE)

We are an Approved Activity Provider (AAP) for the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, a leading youth development charity. By encouraging them to take part in new and exciting activities, the DofE Award aims "to inspire, guide and support young people in their self-development and recognise their achievements".



## Pharos Response

We utilise the services of Pharos Response to ensure our staff both at home and overseas have access to comprehensive emergency and critical incident support. Through their team of experienced incident managers, Pharos Response provides 24/7 support and assistance in the event of an emergency.



## Travel Aware

We've partnered with Travel Aware to ensure British nationals are better prepared for a safe and healthy trip abroad. Together with the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, they provide essential travel advice and up-to-date country information for those living and travelling overseas.



# gap FORCE

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