

Indochina

Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia & Vietnam



Roundtrip to Indochina

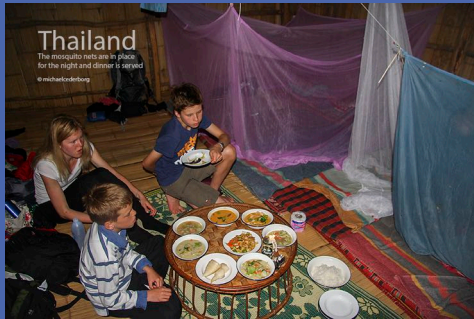
Having planned this trip for over a year, the family finally does a 5-week trip covering the five countries of Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. This was quite an adventure for the family as it included a back-pack vacation with partial trekking and memorable adventure.

Some of the arrangements had been pre-booked such as guided tours up in the golden triangle and our 2-day boat-ride down the Mekong river. Also, some of the domestic flights had been pre-arranged, not wanting to jeopardize not getting everyone on board a flight (being six people in all).

Apart from this, most of the hotels and other arrangements were booked as we travelled along, giving us a lot of flexibility and freedom. With internet, things are a lot easier in this respect compared to a few years back only.

We also had a plan with a lot of air in it, again to give maximum freedom to stay on at places we enjoyed especially or including detours unplanned for. We also had some time on the beaches and at hotel pools, as we travelled with our kids who at this time were still quite young. The family has been many times before to Thailand, and Bangkok, so we decide to rest-up and only do a few good restaurants in town. We make revisit to a favorite of ours – **The Cabbages & Condoms**, which is now the third or fourth time we visited. Good Thai food and an atmospheric setting. We do a bit of shopping at the MBK shopping center We also do visit the **weekend market of Jatujak (Chatuchack)** in the north of Bangkok. The sky train is the best to use from Silom road to the north end-station. We also **visit Sara Jane's as well as the Long Table restaurants**, both good choices. We stay at **the Narai Hotel**, 222 Silom Road www.naraihotel.com





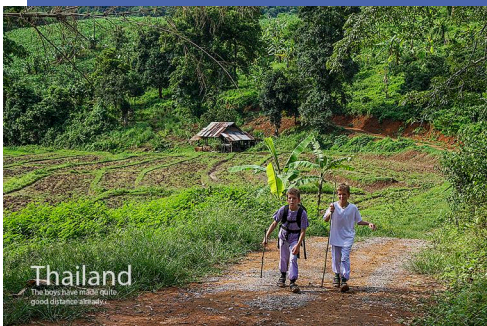
The golden triangle

Trekking among the hill tribes



After a domestic flight from Bangkok up to Chiang Mai, we arrive and meet the guides of www.trekthailand.com who look after us the following four days. We transfer to **the river Mae Kok and travel upriver on a Long-tail boat** to an elephant camp. We get to ride the elephants, and thereafter continue on foot with our back-packs for a full day through the hilly landscape crossing small rivers, walk through dense forest as well as rice fields. We reach a small village where **the Lahu people** lives.

We are booked to stay the night and are served some local food. We sleep in the hut on stilts built with bamboo. It is pitch dark and the pigs staying right under our floor make noise all through the night. I find a big tarantella in my sleeping bag, which makes my night on high alert. Our guide Ou-Thai Tariyachai tariyachai@hotmail.com is very professional and helpful. We were supposed to continue our trek for another hilltribe visit and one more night out in the forest, but Tove had problems with her lenses so we had to abort this second night and make our way back instead. We continued our journey with an unplanned stop-over in Burma (separate page) and went to visit a point where the three countries Laos, Thailand and Burma meets at the Mekong river, hence the name The Golden triangle. After this stop we drive to the border town of Chiang Khong where we are checked in to Portside hotel portsidehotel@hotmail.com, right on the Mekong river. Here we also celebrate Toves birthday with a birthday cake, flowers and a dinner.





Tadjielek, Burma

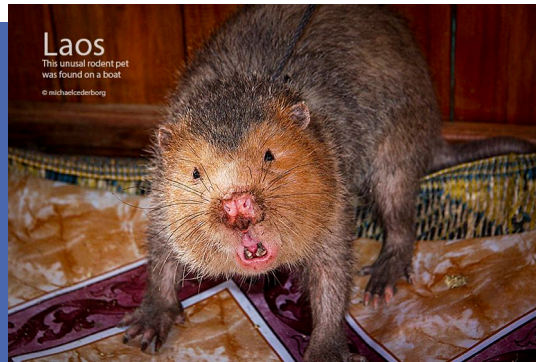
A shabby border town buzzing with activity

As we got an "extra" day, cutting the trekking short, we decided to go up to the Burmese border and see if we could get across in to the border town of Tadjielek. For me it was a revisit into Burma having been back in 1981, but for the family this was the first time. After a look of negotiations, we managed to bribe a local border official, as the usual procedure is that you need a visa beforehand. This was now sorted out with some crisp dollar bills instead.

We boarded our minibus and crossed the border into Burma for a full day's visit. We travelled on very poor roads to the small town of Tadjielek not far from the border. Visiting a few temples on the way as well. In Tadjielek, the main site to visit was a replica of the Schwee Dagon pagoda in Rangoon, which I had seen on my previous visit. Located high up on a hill we had a splendid view of the landscape. There was also a very busy market place, which many Thai seemed to visit crossing the border as it is so much cheaper here. The shop anything from food, clothes to simpler electronics.

The houses here were of course of much simpler construction. The river running through the city seemed to be quite polluted with all the garbage dumped into it.





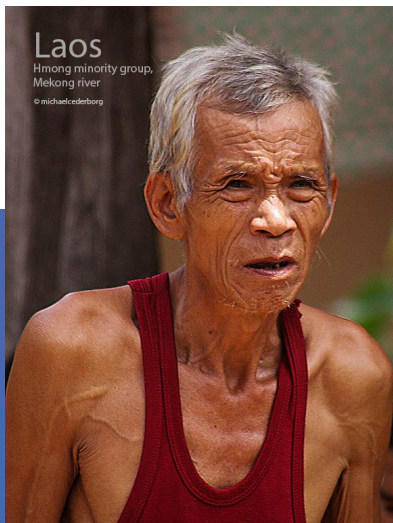
Laos (I)

A trip on the mighty Mekong river

We transfer down to the river and pass through customs and then enter the boat taking us across the short distance to the other side and Laos. Here is the Immigration point in Houixai. We have booked a "slow boat" all to ourselves taking us down river all the way to Luang Prabang with a few stops on the way. A Guide is included apart from the captain of the boat and his son and wife. We are served both lunch and dinner onboard the boat.

We glide down this mighty river for almost two full days and some 400 km. We watch all the activity on the river with fishermen, transporting vessels and more. We make a stop along the river to visit two separate tribes: The Hmong people and the Laolao people. Both are ethnic groups living far away from other people and authorities. They are almost self-sufficient and have a strong belief in their religion and spirits.

We are welcome into these villages, and it seems they are just as curious at us, as we are at them. The fact that my youngest kids are twins (10-year old's) has a very special meaning and is a good sign of luck from the gods in their religion.





Laos (II)

The Hmong People and Pak Ou caves

We learn the Hmong people were siding with the Americans a group spread out through all of Indochina and China primarily with some 4-5 million people in total. They are an Asian ethnic group and have been members of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) since 2007. During the first and second Indochina wars, France and the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) recruited thousands of Hmong people in Laos to fight against forces from North and South Vietnam and the communist insurgents. This CIA operation is known as the Secret War.

We stop in Pakbeng www.pakbenglodge.com halfway down to Luang Prabang and check in for the night at the Pakbeng lodge hotel. We seem to be the only people staying here. It is beautifully situated on a high spot overlooking the Mekong river. It is nice with a break from being on the river for a full day. We take a lovely dinner here.

After breakfast we continue on the river and arrive to the Pak Ou caves where we get off for a visit. They are used for worshipping and are said to be sacred. We finally arrive at Luang Prabang just before sunset. We take our luggage and climb up the rather steep river banks and walk a short distance to our hotel the top-rated Mekong Riverside Hotel. We stay here 3 nights and enjoy the beautiful city.

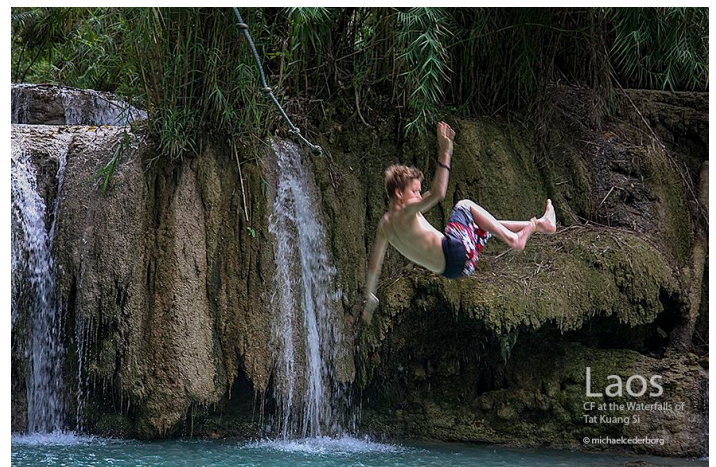




Laos (III) Luang Prabang and surroundings

Luang Prabang is a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1955. The city is almost intact and have survived the Indochina wars. A lot of French inspired colonial architecture mixed up with many temples of course. A visit to the Wat Xieng Thong temple is a must and the national museum which was previously the Emperors palace. We also visit the Wat Visoun, and Wat Mai temples. One of the better attractions is to walk the 300 stairs up the hill to visit the Wat Phousi temple with a view overlooking the city.

We fell in love with the Laotian kitchen. **It is the best food I have had any place.** Take some time and select carefully. We can **recommend the Tamarind** www.tamarindlaos.com and **brasserie L'Éléphant**, just to mention a few. Things to do and see include a ½ day trip out the Tat Kuang Si waterfall. **The night market in Luang Prabang.** The main street with all the bars and restaurants is nice. Don't forget to get a foot massage in one of the many massage parlors on the main street. **Visit the Phu Si and enjoy the sunset with a cold beer – highly recommended.** Luang Prabang, although a bit of a tourist spot and hang-out for back-packers is definitely worth a visit.





Angkor Wat (I)

A UNESCO World Heritage site

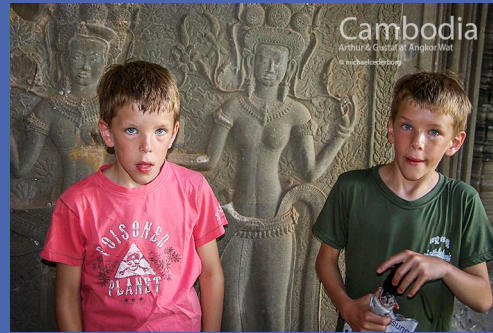
We flew from Luang Prabang, Laos to Siem Reap, Cambodia and checked in to our hotel Central Boutique Angkor Hotel www.centralboutiqueangkorhotel.com and relaxed by the pool for the rest of the day. Siem Reap is the city where one stays visiting the temple sight of Angkor Wat.

You will need at least 3-5 days in order to cover the main parts of this vast temple area consisting of over a hundred temples spread out. With four kids we decide 3 days should be enough with a guide and transport. We start out by visiting the main temple of Angkor Wat build in the first half of the 12th century during the reign of Suryavarman II and dedicated to Vishnu. This temple was built as the state temple and capital city for the king.

It was also the legacy of Angkor Wat and the other Khmer monuments in Angkor which directly led France to adopting Cambodia as a protectorate in 1863 and also invading Siam (Thailand) to take control of the ruins. In 1898 France decided to commit substantial funds to Angkor's preservation. Centuries of neglect had permitted the jungle to recapture many of the more significant structures. There was also a huge risk that many of these trees soon might crush the construction of many of the temples.

It was only in 1992 when UNESCO nominated Angkor Wat as a World Heritage site. Restoration work has also been interrupted by the Cambodian Civil War and Khmer Rouge control of the country during the 1970s and 1980s, but relatively little damage was done during this period.





Ankor Wat (II)

The whole area covers some 81 hectares. We eat lunch at one of the many restaurants inside the temple area. **Angkor Thom and Bayon temple** with 54 gothic towers decorated with some 216 Buddha faces is one of many visits we make. This site was also relatively less crowded with tourists.

In the late afternoon we decide to climb up to **Phom Bakeng from where you also are recommended to stay for the sunset**. Here you have a splendid view overlooking Angkor Wat and some of the other temples. However, be prepared to share the sunset with hordes of other tourists.

Ta Prohm located a little bit from the other main temple grounds, was also the site we liked the most. This temple site is very much in the same condition as it was found. **The photogenic and atmospheric combination of trees growing out of the ruins and the jungle definitely made it our favorite**. Many of the scenes from the movie "Indiana Jones" was actually shot on location here.

Siem Reap itself is not that interesting. There are a few good restaurants to choose from, but be selective as this place does attract many tourists. We were most pleased with **the Sugar Palm** on traphul Rd thesugarpalm@hotmail.com and also Les Orientalistes also in the center of town.





The Tonlé Sap

Everything floats on the Tonlé Sap lake

During our stay in Siem Reap, we decide to make a ½ day excursion out to lake Tonlé Sap. This is also Southeast Asia's largest lake located only 11 km from Siem Reap. The lake is a freshwater lake and is four times larger compared to the dry season. This is one of the world's most varied and productive ecosystems and a central and important food supply for all of Cambodia.

Many people depend on the Tonlé Sap lake for their livelihood. 90% of the people living either in the lake on floating villages or on/near the lake make their living from fishing.

To experience the life on the lake one has to take a tour out to visit these floating villages. Yes, a bit touristic, but at least you will get a feeling for the life on the lake. It is advisable to visit either early morning or in the late afternoon to catch the best light for photography. It is impressive to see the fishermen slinging their nets over their shoulders, while the women prepare meals and fish products to sell, and children playing games or taking a swim in a tub in these shallow waters.

Every boat seems to have some type of business serving food, a fruit stand, general store, a mechanic shop, and even a karaoke bar. On the Tonlé Sap, everything floats.





Phnom Penh

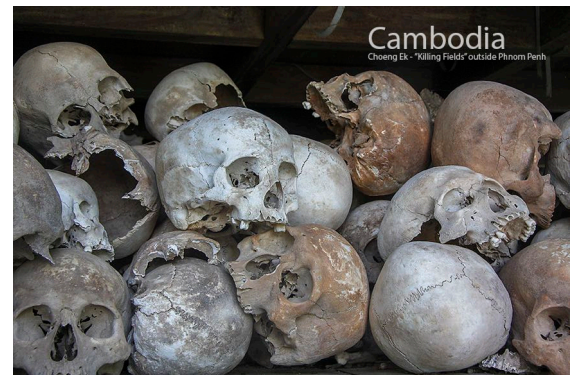
The Killing fields and much more...

From Siem Reap we take a public bus to Phnom Penh (5 hours). We arrive to **Phnom Penh and our hotel, Villa Lanka** www.villalanka.com located in the picturesque French quarters of the city. The hotel is also French inspired and imbedded in green with a lovely pool to relax at. We are also in the midst of an area with many good restaurants and bars.

We rest up in the afternoon at the pool and also take a "fish-massage" in a nearby massage parlor. This is worth trying. You stick your feet into a bath and have small fish eating away the skin which needs removing. You finish off with a complete body massage – heaven. Phnom Penh is the capital since the 15th century. French inspired with lots of charm although a large buzzing metropolis at the same time. We stay a couple of days and enjoy the good food the city has to offer. We travel around by bicycle rickshaws, which is a great way to see things. A visit to the market with lots of price worthy things to buy. **Khmer Borane near the Royal Palace is a Cambodian restaurant with excellent food.** Book ahead though.

We visit the **Tuol Sleng prison, used as a torture center during the Khmer Rouge war** and occupation. This is today a museum and a must to visit.

We continue out **to Choeung Ek (The Killing fields) outside the city.** This place served as the place where the Khmer Rouge committed mass-killings and where many people also are buried. Today this place has been turned into a museum. Take a Tuc-tuc out here from Phnom Penh. This gruesome place and the Tuol Sleng prison might leave you sleepless for nights on end.





Saigon

....is worth a visit for the food alone



We leave Phnom Penh, Cambodia for Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Vietnam by public bus. There are many companies to choose from and the prices are very decent (12\$) for a 6-hour ride. They depart from Psar Thomei I Phnom Penh and cross the border at Bavet-Moc Bai. You can get the visa at the border as long as you have a flight ticket out of the country.

In Saigon, which I prefer to still call the city, we check in to our hotel Ho Sen www.hosenhotel.com.vn. And rest up in the afternoon after the long travel. If you're a foodie, then you have come to the right place. District 1 is a good area to start looking. We had success with Quan Nam Giao (often fully booked – call for a table first) on Le Thanh Ton, Quan 1. Restaurant Quan An Ngoc on 160 Pasteur, Phurong Ben Ngbe Quan 1 also excellent. Pho 24 a cross-over sushi-Vietnam place serves very good stuff. Lemon Grass 4D Nguyen Thiep and last but not least Nam Kha restaurant.

A few of suggested excursions in and around Saigon might include: The War memorial museum and the tunnels outside of the City. This is where the Vietnamese hid during the US bomb raids. Saigon has everything a city can offer from great food, good shopping, Jazz & Blues bars. A visit to the presidential palace, the Notre Dame cathedral, and the old French post office, the townhall and the French built national theater are all worth visiting.

The market, also opened at night, Ben Thanh should of course be included with many good offers. The Cu Chi tunnels used by the FNL, mentioned above, also served as a hospital and living quarters during the war. A visit to the city Tay Ninh outside Saigon has the Cao Dai temple which should be visited as well depending on time.





Hoi An

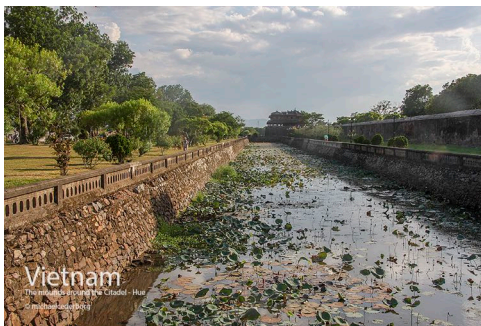
The city of a thousand lantern...

We fly up to Danang and then take minibus down to Hoi An. Initially the plan was to stay on the beach resort of Nha Trang / Qui Nhon, but having research, I became clear to me that this is an over-exploited tourist resort and nothing more. I am so happy we skipped this and stayed up in Hoi An instead. We have booked ourselves for four days into the very nice Vinh Hung Riverside Resort www.vinhhungresort.com. This is the most exclusive and expensive place to stay at here, but certainly an oasis and worth it. The rooms are spacious and the pool area is good. It is also on the beach front with an excellent view overlooking the activities on the water. The service delicious Vietnamese tapas food every afternoon all-inclusive to the guest.

Hoi An is a lovely small town with some really beautiful architecture, some dating back to the 18th century. Most, which can be reach on foot. They are also world renowned for manufacturing lanterns. It looks quite amazing at night when they are selling these all lit up in the market place. The city does attract a lot of tourist of course, but with this also a lot of really good restaurants to choose from. Restaurant Cave is owned by a Swedish guy named Carl Andreasson and is located on 53 Nguyen Phuc chu. He offers amazing Vietnamese food and cross-over dishes. Mango and Casa Verde can also be recommended. You have to try the Poh soup when in Vietnam, it became instantly a favorite of mine.

On Nguyen Thai Hoc is a French scuba diving center www.charmislanddiving.com. We used them for a snorkeling trip out to the reefs. It takes an hour out to the islands from where you can dive or snorkel. Not as good as other reefs around southeast Asia, but one of the best on this coast at least.



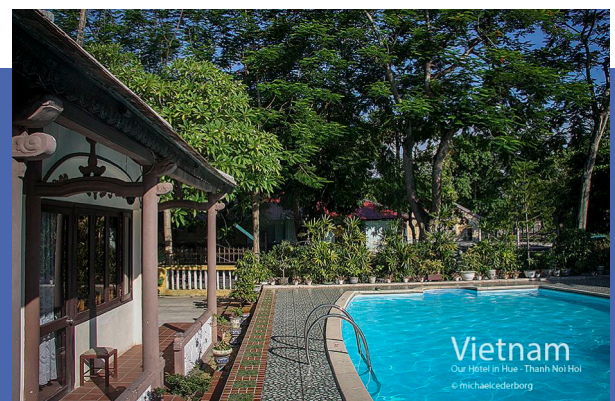


Hue The old Capital of Dang Trong

We decide to make a detour up to the old capital of Hue. This is located near the DMZ – the De militarized zone, which used to be the demarcation line between north and south Vietnam when they were separated. This city is less visited by foreign tourist, and subsequently a nice way to get away a little bit. We decide to stay 3 full days to explore the old city. The old imperial palace and citadel is the most spectacular of course and takes up a considerable part of the town with its mounds and walls. It is a UNESCO Heritage of course. Even better, it is located on walking distance from our hotel the Thanh Noi Hoi www.thanhnoihotel.com. It is a 3-star quite basic place, but adequate for us and has a pool as well.

We make a ½ tour on Perfume river, highly recommended. There are many lovely stops and sights along the way such as Tien Mu pagoda. You also get to experience all the activities on as well as near the river. Many good photo-opportunities.

We found a recommended restaurant called Lac Thien on 6 Dinh Tien Hoang street which is operated by a blind guy. All the staff are also blind, which makes the experience a little different. The food in itself is worth a visit. Thao Garden on Jardin de Y Thao was very good as well. It was a little difficult to find the place at first. It is located in a residential area and housed in villa with a very green and lush garden. Try also La Residence www.la-residence-hue.com which is inside an old and beautifully renovated hotel, which used to house the French embassy in the old days. Top quality food, but also expensive. Last but not least, Hotel Saigon Morin www.morinhotel.com.vn near Le Loi street. Also, an old hotel built at the turn of last century. Nice food, but the rooms were a bit too pricy.





Hanoi

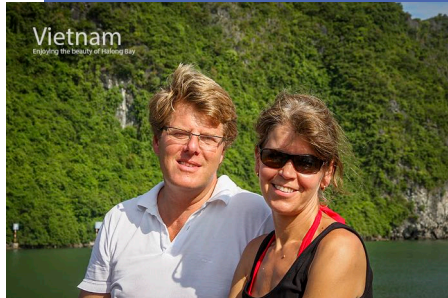
The Capital of Vietnam

We fly from Danang up to Hanoi and spend three full days there. **We check in to Royal Hotel 3** www.hanoiroyalhotel.com on 88 Hang Bac street in the Old Quarter district of Hanoi. Again, located in the midst of all the restaurants and shopping. The old parts of Hanoi is swarming with activities, food stalls and various shops. The kids absolutely love this. **Ho Chi Minh mausoleum is worth a visit as is the Old Quarters in themselves.**

There is a mixture of back-packers in as well as a tad bit better hotels with spacious rooms and A/C, but still at reasonable prices. If one wants a step up, then the French Quarters is the next level here. I love the city of Hanoi with its broad boulevards lined with trees. The architecture with many old colonial okra colored houses can be found with French balconies.

Hanoi, has more charm compared with Saigon. Here we are lucky with just about all the restaurant choices we make. A few which we selected includes: **Mandarin Restaurant** www.oneasia.biz, on 74 Xuan Dieu street, Tay Ho district. **An excellent choice for Poh soup is Little Hanoi** on 14 Ta Hien street in the Old Quarters. **Bobby Chinn** on 1 Ba Trieu (Asian-Californian cross-over) with ok prices as well. **Quan An Ngon** on 18 Phan Boi Chau (**Open-air food court and up-market street-food place**). **Hoa Sua** on 28a Ha Hoi (Vietnamese combo plates). This was our favorite – a little difficult to find but don't give up – as it was well worth it. All the food here prepared and served by young Chef-trainees, and as part of a restaurant education. Superb choice.





Halong Bay

The beautiful archipelago

The last stop on our Indochina adventure is a trip out to the Vietnamese archipelago and Halong Bay. This is a nature paradise with over 3000 islands scattered with mountains sticking straight up from the water making this a scenic national park of its own. James Bond has been here to film as has many other movies. We have booked ourselves for a 2-day tour with a Junk cruise around the bay area. One needs at least one-night stay-over to make it worthwhile. There are many operators to choose from. Make sure to compare and not book a too cheap arrangement, as the cruise ships have very different standards. **We choose Oriental Sails** www.orientalsails.com. The prices are negotiable as well.

We had airconditioned cabins with bathrooms in each of the rooms. We were positively surprised with the high standard and the food. There were only one or two more couples on the ship, so we had a lot of space to ourselves. They arrange small excursions from the ship to visit the floating villages, some caves and various canoe and kayaking activities. Plan for 3-4 hours transport in both directions to/from Hanoi. They will include this in the package you book.

Also, be prepared for many other tourists visiting this bay area. However, on a Junk you will have some privacy of course. The views are spectacular. Especially the sunrise and sunset over the mountains and the water. We make our way back to Hanoi and stay one more night before our flight departure from Hanoi via Bangkok home to Stockholm again. Very pleased with our Indochina family tour celebrating me turning 50 years old.

