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Backpacking South East Asia on an Adventurous Route

By Parry Loeffler

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by: **Parry Loeffler**

The South East Asian region of the world – especially Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos – has become increasingly popular as a destination for those travelers seeking a more adventurous holiday than can be had merely sipping fruity, ice-cold drinks at your typical beach resort. However, an adventurous trip to these developing countries raises many questions and one of the first is what route to take, which I will try to answer in this article.

Most people with enough time would like to get a taste for all four that I've mentioned earlier, so I'll concentrate on a route that includes all of them. It would take about three months if you spent a few days at each stop. Keep in mind that there certainly are options available that would allow you to skip countries or even shorten the trip to fit into a more constrained timeline, but this should give you a good starting point for further research.

As far as getting around, travel by public bus, train, and boat is readily available and often full of adventure after all, traveling with a busload of chickens or the occasional box of frogs just adds to the fun, right? However, those looking for a little more comfort will usually be able to find more upscale options.

Many people that intend on doing a circuit though South East Asia will fly into Bangkok since it is a major hub. Bangkok is also rich with markets, temples, and plenty of fabulous food. Around Bangkok, there are several options for some side trips which allow you to get your feet wet. Kanchanaburi is a few hours away and is the location of the infamous bridge over the River Kwai and the Death Railway, the Erawan National Park, and the Three Pagodas Pass near the Myanmar border. If you are not going to the southern islands, but wouldn't mind checking out the beach scene, you could also take a few days and visit Ko Samet or Ko Chang (less expensive) to get a taste of island life. Both are only a few hours from Bangkok by bus.

Backpacking South East Asia on an Adventurous Route

Once you've had your fill of the Bangkok area, work your way north to Chiang Mai. I like the train and it can be taken overnight, for those low on time, or during the day for those that wish to see some of the beautiful countryside. Chiang Mai is much less hectic than Bangkok, has some opportunities for great sight seeing, and also has a great cooking school! If you want to check out some smaller towns in Thailand, you can do that from Chiang Mai with a little add-on side trip. It's a loop that goes by public bus to the wonderful village of Pai which is set up in the misty valleys that are laden with lush rice paddies, and then continues by bus or boat to Mae Hong Son, then by bus back to Chiang Mai.

In any case, from Chiang Mai, continue your journey north to Chiang Rai and onwards to Chiang Khong, which is the jumping point into your second country, Laos. You cross the Mekong River with a short boat ride and enter Laos on the opposite bank at Huay Xai. From there you immediately continue on to Luang Prabang by slow boat or fast boat (latter not recommended, unless you enjoy wearing a crash helmet), making an optional overnight stay in the rustic village of Pacbeng.

After spending a few days in Luang Prabang you could do a side trip up north, exploring the small

northern villages of Laos for a few days, or just head down to the chilled-out town of Vang Vieng by bus or air. The road route to Vang Vieng is sometimes the target of bandits, so be sure to check what recent activity has been like, and then make your decision – but the safety record of air travel may not be much more inspiring!

Vang Vieng is full of fun kayaking, biking and caving opportunities, so you'll want to plan for a few days there before moving on to the capital city of Vientiane. It doesn't seem too exciting for a capital city, so I wouldn't plan to spend too much time there, other than to visit the strange, but interesting Buddha Park.

Take the bus from Vientiane to Hanoi via the mountains and the Cau Treo border crossing into Vietnam. Hanoi is a very interesting place with lots to do and also offers a few interesting side trips: Sapa is a beautiful village set in the mountains, and Halong Bay, a Unesco World Heritage site, offers amazing views of thousands of mountainous karsts jutting up from the ocean waters.

In Hanoi, you can buy an "Open Tour" bus ticket that gets you all the way south to Ho Chi Minh (Saigon). It has a standard set of stops, but allows you to purchase add-ons for a few dollars each, two of which I highly recommend being Ninh Binh and Dalat. From Hanoi, the first stop will indeed be Ninh Binh. Not a particularly touristy town, but the launching point to visit the spectacular Tam Coc park and/or the Cuc Phuong National Park.

From Ninh Binh, move to Hue for a day or two, then on to Hoi An to check out the amazing tailors and beaches, then to Nha Trang (a partying beach town that can be skipped if you wish), and then on to your second add-on which is the mountain town of Dalat. >From Dalat, you can do another add-on stop in Mui Ne which is very quiet and good if you just want to relax and maybe poke around the local market a little bit.

The last stop in Vietnam will be Ho Chi Minh which offers plenty to see and do including a massage at the Vietnamese Traditional Medicine Institute for a couple of dollars. From there, you can cross into

Backpacking South East Asia on an Adventurous Route

Cambodia in a couple ways. The first is a bus ride through some beautiful country to Phnom Penh, and the second is a boat tour through the Mekong Delta which also deposits you in Phnom Penh. Be warned though: the roads in Cambodia are dirt and very slow going, but the scenery is incredible if your backside can take it.

Phnom Penh gets mixed reviews but does have a couple of must visits before you continue: the Killing Fields and S-21. When you do move on, you again have the choice of bus or boat up to Siem Riep. I prefer the bus because of the fantastic views and the insight into the lives of the country folk – trust me, you'll never forget it.

After spending some time gawking at the awesome ruins of Angkor Wat at Siem Riep, you can fly or bus it back to Bangkok, once again back where you started! Again, the bus is harsh, but worth it to see Poipet (I'll say it again: not to stay, but to see) and the night-and-day change visible in a matter of a few meters when you cross from the poverty of Cambodia into developing Thailand.

There you have it. That route can be done in 3 months if you don't choose every side trip mentioned (to do it all you'll want to add another couple of weeks). If you work it out, you'll find you can spend a few nights in each place, but don't make the mistake of creating some sort of concrete itinerary. Just be aware of your time, because you will want to spend lots of time in some places, while spending little in others and you really won't know which until you get there. Be flexible within reason, and remember:

it's all about having fun!

Once back in Bangkok, you now have the option to work your way south to the islands, and perhaps, onward to other countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, or perhaps they will have to wait until your next trip, and yes, you will want to come back.

One of the next logical questions is: What is it like to travel around these countries on a route like this? That's precisely the experience I detail in my book *Rice Crust from the Bottom of the Pot: A Journey Across South East Asia* (

). It's full of crazy adventures, wonderful

stories of my interactions with the locals, and even a few recipes collected directly from their kitchens.

Parry Loeffler is the author of *Rice Crust from the Bottom of the Pot: A Journey Across South East Asia*

Read it today... and get excited about your trip!

National Park Vacation At Borneo's Mesilau Nature Park, An Alternative To Kinabalu National Park

By Rich Adz

Backpacking South East Asia on an Adventurous Route

One of the most popular Borneo destinations is undoubtedly Kinabalu National Park, where Mount Kinabalu resides. Each year, thousands of visitors visited Kinabalu National Park for either a refreshing National Park Vacation to escape the hot tropical sun and catch a glimpse of the highest mountain in South East Asia, or to conquer the mystical Mount Kinabalu.

Nevertheless, for a unique National Park Vacation in Borneo, you must make sure that you drop by at the lesser known Mesilau Nature Park, which is just about 30 minutes by road away from Kinabalu National Park. From Kota Kinabalu, the capital of Sabah, Malaysia Borneo, it only takes approximately 2.5 hour drive to reach Mesilau Nature Park.

Mesilau Nature Park is located within the vicinity of Kinabalu National Park on the Pinosok Plateau near Kundasang town. The stretch of the road from Kundasang town to Mesilau Nature Park, which is about 2,000 metres above sea level, is extremely steep and winding. However, the road condition has improved immensely in recent times, which makes the ascending ride a breeze.

On the way, you will surely be captivated by the spectacular views of the Kundasang valley with terraced hill slopes planted with highlands vegetables, and parts of the scenic beauty of the Kundasang Mount Kinabalu Golf Course, a challenging 18-hole golf course for avid golfers, undeniably, the highest golf course in South East Asia.

But once you get to Mesilau Nature Park, you will notice that the place is more natural and "virgin" than the now "commercialized" Kinabalu National Park. As the Park lies at the base of Mount Kinabalu, Mount Kinabalu will look even more spectacular with a sheer wall of granite towering a few thousand meters from the virgin forest floor and ending in jagged peaks. This breathtaking sight is aptly called the Mesilau Pinnacles.

To experience the best of what Mesilau can offer, you will need to spend a night or two at the eco-friendly Mesilau Nature Resort, which is nestled amongst the trees at the foot of the mountain within the Park. The Resort itself is amazing since it was carefully planned and built to blend into its natural surrounding.

The chalets are on slopes surrounded by trees with the full view of the Mesilau River flowing below. And for food, the Kedamaian Restaurant is famous for its piping hot steamboat, and barbecue dinners, which makes it a good excuse to stay overnight.

Mesilau Nature Park is also the starting point for the alternative and more challenging route up Mount Kinabalu. If you are of an adventurous kind, do trek the route up to a kilometres or two even if you are not planning to climb Mount Kinabalu. Since the Mesilau Summit Trail is relatively newer and less crowded than the old summit trail, your chance of encountering (tamed) wildlife is also brighter.

One prominent feature of the route is the seemingly abundance of orchids (Rhododendrons) and pitcher plants. The world's largest pitcher plant, the "Nepenthes Rajah", is recorded to grow in abundance here. For most visitors, a less taxing guided nature walk around the Park is recommended.

It will leave you with lasting "natural" memories.

Backpacking South East Asia on an Adventurous Route

Mesilau will not fail to enchant you with its cool temperate climate (temperatures vary around 17–21 degree Celcius during the day and 10–15 degree Celcius at night) and serene surroundings as a truly astonishing nature's paradise. Mesilau Nature Park and its Resort is an ideal venue for relaxation or retreat.

The bio–diversity of the flora and fauna found here makes Mesilau a haven for naturalists. It is one of the best locations in Borneo for an unforgettable National Park Vacation.

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