

# VIETNAM & CAMBODIA WALKS

We had fun laying out the walks and learned just recently that the American Volkssport Association (AVA) has formally agreed to sanction these walks as IVV walks! So we will be able to stamp AVA walk credit books for those of you who collect volkssport stamps.

Though we are still working out some program details with the cruise ship company, we are planning eight different walk venues. Because some of the walks are quite short, however, they will be sanctioned as six walks for AVA purposes. Some of our plans require cooperation from the ship, for which we are exceedingly grateful. We expect to have our itinerary requests finalized over the next couple of weeks. Here is a list of the walks:

*Saigon Walk:* This walk measures about 8 kilometers, but will feel longer. We'll be exploring several faces of Saigon, starting by the Jade Emperor Pagoda, and will make several stops en route at places like the Notre Dame Cathedral and Post Office, War Remnants Museum, and Ben Thanh Market. The walk features several connections with traditional Saigon – you'll feel the heartbeat of the city in the markets along busy streets, and in quiet gardens. You'll also share the Vietnam War experience (they call it the "American War"), and walk past places of significance during this tumultuous era in our shared history.

*My Tho/Thoi Son Island/Sa Dec Walk:* This is a 3-part walk conducted over 2 consecutive days in Vietnam offering us our first flavor of the Mekong River and the communities that thrive along its banks. My Tho provides an example of the bustling markets that seem to consume a fair percentage of everyone's time in Vietnam. Thoi Son is a quiet, rural island that gives us our first connection with the humble charm of the countryside. Sa Dec is a walk along a canal completely off the tourist track, and delightfully alive with the hum of life in small-town Vietnam.

*Koh Dek Chau Walk:* Our first walk in Cambodia is a one-way trail from the east to the west end of a Mekong island. It is immediately clear that life on this island is harder than where we have been thus far in Vietnam. It is more remote, and the lack of electricity is evidenced by a young entrepreneur delivering freshly charged batteries to the simple homes of the island. People are outdoors and engaging in life and engaging us – lots of smiles, a chance to watch a primitive rice-making operation, tons of kids who want to say "hello", and a Buddhist temple/school complex.

*Phnom Penh Walk:* The capital of Cambodia has seen hard times off and on over the past 30 years. Our walk here links together some of the primary historic and royal sites, and takes us by a few of the many wats (temples). It becomes evident that Buddhism has a much stronger presence here than in Vietnam. Monks in various shades of saffron-colored robe seem to pop up frequently throughout the city. We visit the National Museum at the end of the walk then, after a break for lunch, take in the impressive Royal Palace complex of the king next door. Phnom Penh appears well behind Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) in its development. Still, there is vibrancy here – and an astonishing and admirable minimalist attitude towards making a living. Overhead is virtually non-existent for many who operate businesses on the street from small carts or portable storefronts.

*Kampong Cham/Kampong Tralach Walk:* This two-part walk is conducted on two consecutive days. Kampong Cham is on the Mekong River, and our walk is a rural route connecting two locally important temple complexes. The highlight, however, is life in the countryside. We'll pass lots of rice fields, which may be under harvest in February. We'll walk through tiny communities of homes on stilts and, once again, be able to engage the locals. Our group of North American walkers will certainly cause a stir – one of the more enjoyable elements of taking the road less traveled. Part 2, Kampong Tralach, is on the Tonle Sap River, which drains the Tonle Sap Lake into the Mekong, except for the wettest part of the year when the Mekong is so high that Tonle Sap River flows backwards into Tonle Sap Lake, until the Mekong level lowers – got it?! Again, we'll be enjoying rural Cambodia on this route, along with a stop at different kind of Buddhist temple.

Angkor Temples Walk: This area was one of the surprises of the trip for me. I had not realized how advanced and far-reaching the Khmer Empire was, nor the “wow” appeal of their royal temples and royal city. Our walk will be a multi-part trail conducted in one day. We’ll leave early in the morning to beat the heat and walk through Preah Khan Temple, then bus to Ta Prohm Temple and walk through it. Both of these were temples built in the late 12<sup>th</sup> and early 13<sup>th</sup> centuries by the same king. Both have been left in their overgrown state, and the dramatic marriage of beautiful sandstone temples and invading jungle is spellbinding. From Ta Prohm, we bus to Angkor Wat Temple itself, the crown jewel of more than 70 archeological sites in the area. After we walk through Angkor Wat, we’ll continue along a canal that leads to a tethered hot air balloon. Here, you’ll have a chance to get a bird’s eye view of both the temple and the lovely green patchwork of rice fields and temple and forest.

Since the middle of the day is quite warm in the tropics, we’ll take a break, then come back in the afternoon to walk through Angkor Thom, the royal city. This 5-kilometer section will include a couple of very impressive ruins, with some of the most significant bas relief carving we’ll see, as well as a section of jungle and a nice stroll along the defensive wall overlooking the massive moat.

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