

Inspirational travel

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ABOUT LAOS

1. HIGHLIGHTS

Most travellers visiting Laos ensure they see the essential highlights of Vientiane and Luang Prabang, however if you have enough time and depending on your interests, the eco beauty (although backpackery) town of Vang Vieng, and the luscious scenery of the Bolaven Plateau and 4000 Islands in Southern Laos are also worth a visit. For more off the beaten track adventure, head into remote destinations such as Luang Namtha, known for its trekking, Muang Xay, the capital of the multi ethnic province of Oudamxay, and Nong Khiaw, located north of Luang Prabang where you will see beautiful limestone karst cliffs and discover hilltribe villages.

Luang Prabang

Luang Prabang offers small, boutique accommodation of different standards, fantastic restaurants, evening craft markets, silversmiths and silk shops, and a wonderful base to visit sites such as the 'Pak Ou' Buddha caves, ethnic minority villages, and waterfalls perfect for swimming in on a hot day. It is sleepy, quaint, and one of Buffalo's must see destinations in Indochina.

Vientiane

Compared to the hectic, bustling capitals in other Southeast Asia countries, Vientiane's deliciously relaxing atmosphere makes it feel like the small town it is. After you've done the round of temples, the best thing to do here is wander down to one of the riverside beer gardens, kick back with a cold Beerlao - the Lao national beer - and watch the sun set over the Mekong.

Vang Vieng

A predominately backpacker town where people go 'inner tubing' down the Nam Song River, however this scene can be avoided with private kayaking, caving and hiking adventures in the surrounding mountains.

Plain of Jars

Scattered in the landscape of the Xieng Khouang plateau Xieng Khouang, are thousands of megalithic jars. These stone jars appear in clusters, ranging from a single or a few to several hundred jars at lower foothills surrounding the central plain and upland valleys. Initial research of the Plain of Jars in the early 1930's suggested that the stone jars are associated with prehistoric burial practices. Excavation by Lao and Japanese archaeologists in the intervening years has supported this interpretation with the discovery of human remains, burial goods and ceramics around the stone jars. The Plain of Jars is dated to the Iron Age (500 BCE to 500 CE) and is one of the most fascinating and important sites for studying Southeast Asian prehistory. To visit the jar sites you would typically stay in Phonsavan.

Bolaven Plateau

Home to tea and coffee plantations and colorful hill tribes, offers a cooler climate, hiking and spectacular waterfalls. Accommodation available in this region is rustic.

Pakse & the 4000 Islands (Si Phan Don)

Forty five minutes from the Bolaven Plateau is the southern township of Pakse. From Pakse visitors can explore the 4000 island region, waterfalls, pre-Angkorian 10th Century temples, UNESCO World Heritage listed Champassak ruins, and tiny island villages that still maintain their traditional way of life. Cruises are the most popular way to experience the 4000 Islands.

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Other destinations include:

Huay Xai in the north, located on the Mekong and border with Thailand; Pakbeng, the half way point on the overnight slow boat between Huay Xai and Luang Prabang; Tha Khaek, located south-east of Vientiane on the banks of the Mkeong and a popular base for exploring Phou Hin Boun National Park & famous Konglor Cave; and Vieng Xai, a small village set among limestone karsts and rice fields, where you can see caves that Pathet Lao Nationalist party leaders ran their operations from in defiance to the West. The dark, dank rooms inside the caves are a stark reminder of the hardships these people were prepared to endure to fight for their country in the 'Secret War'.

Ref: <http://wikitravel.org/en/>

2. VISAS

If you are flying into Vientiane, Luang Prabang or Pakse you can purchase a tourist visa upon arrival. In either event the visa is valid for 30 days and costs between US\$30 - 42 (depending on nationality) and can be renewed. You can obtain a visa at most international borders, but as things change from day to day, it's best to check with the embassy first

3. MAP



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4. ARRIVALS

By Air: The main port of arrival by air is Wattay International airport in Vientiane. The following companies currently fly to Vientiane: Lao Airlines, Thai Airways International, Vietnam Airlines, Southern China Airlines and Air Asia. Regular flights are available to and from Bangkok, Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, Chiang Mai, Kunming, and Kuala Lumpur. There are also direct flight to Luang Prabang from Hanoi, Siem Reap, Bangkok and Chiang Mai.

The departure tax is included in your ticket.

Overland: Entry to Laos is possible from neighboring countries. Between Thailand and Laos the border can be crossed at Houei Say in Bokeo province, at the Friendship Bridge near Vientiane and at the second Friendship Bridge at Savannakhet. Border crossings between Laos and Vietnam are available at Laksao, Na Meo and Lao Bao.

5. MONEY

The Kip is the official currency of Laos. Bank notes are currently in denominations of 500, 1000, 2000 and 5000, 10000, 20000 and 50000. All major currencies, but especially the US Dollar and Thai Baht can be exchanged at banks. In Luang Prabang and Vientiane competitive rates are offered among numerous authorized private exchange bureaus. There is an exchange facility available at Wattay airport in Vientiane.

Exchange bureaus and banks will cash traveler checks in major currencies. Furthermore, most domestic and foreign banks in Vientiane will allow cash withdrawals on Visa. Also, major credit cards can be used in many restaurants and hotels. If you intend to travel to a more remote area we suggest you take a good supply of Kip with you.

The current rate of exchange is US\$1 = 8,400 Kip

Please note that the Laos Kip is non-convertible outside Laos.

What about Tipping?

Although tipping is not mandatory and is based on your personal assessment of the service you've received, please see below for a general guideline:

US \$5 per person per day for the guide and about half that for the driver.

6. CLIMATE

Laos has three basic seasons. The monsoon period lasts from May to October. After the monsoon there is a dry period from November through to March. From March until the approaching monsoon the country experiences its hottest weather. The best time to visit Laos is between November and February when there is less chance of heavy rain and the temperature is cooler. Please note high season is October to April and low season is May to September. Peak season is November to February.

7. SAFETY

Traveling in Laos is generally very safe. The majority of hotels either have a safety deposit box at the reception desk or in the rooms, or both. Just to be on the safe side when traveling anywhere in the country you should exercise common sense.

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8. CUISINE

Traditional Lao food is dry, spicy and absolutely delicious. The most commonly used ingredients are lime juice, lemon grass and coriander. The majority of Lao food uses fresh vegetables and freshwater fish, due to the country's landlocked location. Other popular meat dishes involve chicken, duck, pork and beef. Lao food is traditionally eaten with sticky rice. In the countryside people eat on a communal basis, sitting on the floor and sharing the dishes. One of the most common Lao dishes is Laap, a traditional food made from minced chicken or duck mixed together with lime juice, garlic and chilies and broth with uncooked rice grains that have been fried and crushed. Laap is usually eaten with a plate of raw vegetables and sticky rice. Another popular dish is Tam Mak Hounng a salad made from sliced raw papaya, garlic, chili, peanuts, sugar, fermented fish sauce and lime juice and it has a reputation as being very spicy! Barbecued som moo is also delicious. Som moo is fermented pork sausage and is often served in this Vietnamese style. Known as Naem Nuang, it is served with transparent rice paper, thin noodles and lots of herbs, vegetables, lettuce and a sauce. The basic idea is to take all the ingredients and create your own spring roll.

9. CLOTHING

Modes of dress in Laos very much depend on gender and age but in general Lao women wear silk skirts, blouses and scarves to attend important ceremonies, whilst Lao men wear a sarong or long pants. Visitors should wear light, comfortable clothing that is easy to launder. The winter months and rainy season in the northern region can get cool so a sweater or light jacket will come in handy. Good walking shoes and sandals that can be easily removed are recommended especially when entering temples and people's homes.

10. PEOPLE

Laos' population currently stands at approximately 6 million. 85% of the country's inhabitants still live in rural areas. The Laos people divide themselves into four distinct categories: The Lao Loum (50%), Lao Thai (approx. 15%), Lao Theung (25%) and Lao Sung (10%). Most differentiation appears to be made upon where the people live. For example Lao Loum means Lowland Lao and relates to those who have traditionally lived in the Mekong Valley. Lao Theung translates as Upland Lao and Lao Sung as Highland Lao. Many subsections exist within each category, particularly for those in the hills and mountains.

11. LANGUAGE

The official language spoken in Laos is Laotian or Lao. The ethnic groups of the country speak their own languages, most of which are not mutually intelligible. The Lao language is a member of the Tai language group, sometimes known as Tai-Kadai or Kadai. Thai is well understood in Laos, since Lao people will watch Thai television and listen to Thai radio.

French, English, Russian and Chinese are spoken by some members of the population, although none can be considered widely understood. As a general rule, older Lao may speak some French and younger Lao may speak some English or Russian.

12. PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

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Laos has a number of religious and cultural festivals. Here are some of the more important ones:

Sikhottabong Festival (February)

This religious festival is held at Sikhottabong stupa in the region of Khammouan.

Wat Phou Festival (February)

This festival is celebrated on the full moon of the 3rd month of the lunar calendar in the grounds of the enchanting pre-Angkorian Wat Phou in Champasak. Festivities include elephant racing, buffalo fighting, cock fighting and performances of traditional Lao music and dance.

Lao New Year (April)

The Lao New Year or Pi Mai Lao usually occurs in April. This is the nation's biggest holiday and the entire country celebrates. People remove Buddha images from the temples to anoint and clean them with scented water. Street parties that invariably involve people dowsing one another with water then follows. This is essentially an act of cleansing and purification in anticipation of the end of the dry season. This is best seen in Luang Prabang.

Vientiane Boat Racing Festival (October)

At dawn donations and offerings are made at temples throughout the city. In the evening candlelight processions are held around the temples as hundreds of candles with flowers and incense are cast into the Mekong River in thanksgiving. The following day an exciting boat race is held on the Mekong.

That Luang Festival (November)

This religious festival is held in and around the splendid That Luang stupa. Hundreds of monks gather to accept alms and floral offerings from the people. The festival includes a grand fireworks display at night, and a trade fair, showcasing Lao products, will take place during the day.

13. PHONE AND INTERNET

Vientiane's General Post Office is located beside the Morning Market. Normal mail service is inexpensive and generally reliable, however for urgent or valuable mail (either to or from Laos) EMS or courier service is recommended.

The GPO offers public telephones for local, national and international calls. Phone card (available at appointed shops) booths are available for domestic and overseas calls. Most large hotels have IDD lines, but calls are expensive. Country code: 856. Outgoing international code: 00. A number of Internet cafes have sprung up in recent years including the PlaNet chain in both Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

The international dialing code for Laos is 856.

14. BUSINESS HOURS

Government offices open at 8am, are closed for lunch between 11am and 2pm and generally close around 5pm. Private businesses and shops usually keep longer hours