

TRAILS OF INDOCHINA

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Laos

COUNTRY OVERVIEW

(Updated Feb 2023)





Laos, a peaceful land-locked nation, is one of Southeast Asia's hidden gems. The stunning natural beauty of forested mountains and valleys teeming with wildlife combined with a fascinating Buddhist culture make Laos a superb destination for those seeking an adventurous and authentic cultural experience.

Most of Laos today remains relatively isolated and undeveloped. Its capital, Vientiane, is more like a big village than a crowded Asian hub and life throughout the country is slow-paced. The UNESCO World Heritage town of Luang Prabang continues to be the leading attraction for its glittering ancient temples, saffron-robed monks, authentic textile villages and sleepy riverside atmosphere. The far mountainous northern region and the southern provinces offer excellent opportunities for outdoor activities such as trekking, mountain biking, kayaking and canoeing.

The beauty of Laos is best discovered when you take the time to soak whether it be enjoying the sunset over the Mekong or interacting with monks at the temples.

History

Founded in the 14th century by Lao warlord, Fa Ngum, the Kingdom of Lane Xang, translating to 'Land of a Million Elephants', established itself in the capital that is now known as Luang Prabang. With a tumultuous era taking place in the region, the 18th century brought a period of decline, causing a dynastic struggle between Burma (now Myanmar), Siam (now Thailand), Vietnam, and the Khmer kingdom. By the 19th century, the Siamese established power over much of what is now Laos, and the region was divided into three principalities; Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Champassak.

Late in the 19th century, the French succeeded the Siamese and integrated all of Laos into the French empire, under the direct rule of all areas with the exception of Luang Prabang. Laos achieved independence from French rule in 1954, however, the peace and freedom were short-lived. The Americans entered the region in 1964 with intense bombings in eastern Laos in an attempt to target a section of the Ho Chi Minh Trail that passed through Lao territory. Fighting between the Communist Pathet Lao and the royal government in Vientiane ensued, finally ending with a ceasefire in 1973. It wasn't until December 1975 when Pathet Lao took control in Vientiane, founding the current Lao People's Democratic Republic.

People

With a population of approximately 7 million, 85% of Laos' inhabitants reside in rural areas across the country. One of Southeast Asia's most ethnically diverse countries, with 47 ethnic groups, Laos is filled with people who have managed to retain their own customs, dialects and traditional dress. The population has been categorized by the government into three broad groups; the Lao Lum (lowlanders), Lao Theung (uplanders), and the Lao Song (highlanders).

The Lao Lum group is comprised mainly of ethnic Lao and Tay-Tai speaking people, making up 70% of the population, predominantly residing along the Mekong River. The Lao Theung (uplanders), composed of Mon-Khmer people, forms roughly 20% of the population. Lastly, the Lao Song (highlanders), comprised of a variety of hill tribe groups including the Hmong, Yao, Haw, Akha constituting just 10% of the population. These groups live mostly in the country's mountainous areas.



Climate

Laos has two seasons. The rainy season runs from May through October and the dry season from November to April. For the most part, Laos is hot with average temperatures ranging from 30°C – 38°C (86°F - 100°F) in the daytime with higher humidity during the rainy season.

In Vientiane, the temperatures can range from a comfortable 27°C (80°F) in January to 30°C - 38°C (86°F - 100°F) during the hottest months from March to May. In the mountainous northern region in Luang Prabang, however, temperatures can plummet to near freezing at night in December and January. During the rainy season, the highest precipitation is in southern Laos (Pakse, Savannakhet) with rainfall averaging 30mm (12in) per month. The areas near the Mekong River may experience flooding during the rainy season.

Please note: It can sometimes be smoky during February and March (in Northern Laos) when local people burn the rice fields and forests to prepare for the annual crops. This may affect visibility and result in minor respiratory irritation due to poor air quality.





Religion

Buddhism is an inherent part of daily life in Laos and an important influence on Lao society and culture. Today more than 67% of the Lao population (predominantly lowland Lao and some other Tai-speaking groups) follow Theravada Buddhism. Predating Buddhism, the worship of animist spirits (phi) in Laos still commonly represent some of the region's most ancient religious practice. Animist shrines may be found in many parts the country.

Time Zones

Laos operates on UTC/GMT +7 hours. Laos does not observe daylight savings.

Country dial code

Laos country code is + 856 followed by city code

Mobile Phones & SIM Card

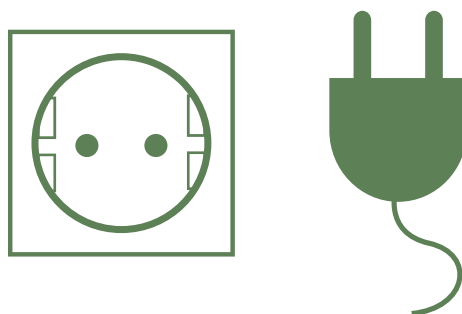
Laos uses a GSM (GSM900/1800) mobile phone network. There are 4 main phone carriers in Lao, with Lao telecom and Unitel having the widest coverage. It is easy to purchase a pre-paid SIM card in Laos (approx. US\$4) – just make sure your phone is unlocked to accept SIMs from other networks, or buy another handset. Handsets are cheaper in Thailand and Vietnam.

Internet

Many hotels have wireless (Wi-Fi) internet access available in the lobby or business centre. There are many cheap internet cafes in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, and a couple in smaller towns. Be careful not to save your password or sensitive information on public computer terminals.

Electricity

Laos has 220V, 50Hz electricity. As both two-prong and flat pins are in use you would be wise to bring an adaptor. Three-pin plug adaptors are usually provided by hotels; just ask the reception. In all countries, protect sensitive electronic equipment like laptops from power fluctuations by using a surge-protector.





NORTHERN REGION

Luang Prabang

A sleepy town nestled in a mountain valley at the confluence of the Mekong and Khan rivers in north-central Laos, Luang Prabang is the former royal capital of Laos and is the spiritual and cultural center of the country. Endowed with a picturesque landscape of palm-lined riverbanks, ornate golden temples, and ancient monuments. Amongst the backdrop of the towering Mt. Phousi, it is no wonder that UNESCO declared Luang Prabang as a World Heritage Site in 1995 describing it as an “outstanding example of the fusion of traditional architecture and Lao urban structures.” With a population of nearly 62,000 inhabitants, the town has become busier in recent years, though still remains peaceful and quaint compared to other tourist destinations in the region. Nearby attractions to include Pak Ou Caves, which houses thousands of Buddha images, Kuang Si Waterfall, and several cotton and silk weaving villages for a cultural experience.

Getting here: There are daily domestic flights (40 minutes) from Vientiane. By road, it is an 8-9hr drive from Vientiane and 5-6hr from Vang Vieng. There are daily international flights from Hanoi, Siem Reap, Bangkok and Chiang Mai. Train connecting Vientiane - Luang Prabang takes approximately 2hrs.

Phousavan

The small dusty town of Phonsavan in northern Laos is the capital of Xieng Khuang Province. One of the most heavily bombed regions in Laos, today is still littered with roughly half a million tons of unexploded ordnance (UXOs). Showing evidence in daily life, bomb casings and other war remnants are used for everyday purposes including fences, tools and house decoration. Reminiscent of England’s Stonehenge, the main attraction of Phousavan’s nearby region is the Plain of Jars. An enigma with many theories, nobody really knows why hundreds of huge stone jars are scattered across several sites on a barren Laotian plain. Dating back 2,500 to 3,000 years, these massive jars are carved from solid rock, weigh up to 13 tonnes and are set amongst the beautiful scenery of rolling hills.

Getting here: There are four flights a week from Vientiane Lao Airlines. The flight takes 30 minutes. Please note that these flights have been prone to cancellation and delays.



Luang Prabang



Phousavan



CENTRAL REGION

Vientiane

Southeast Asia's smallest capital city, Vientiane's population registers in at roughly 800,000 inhabitants. Located along a bend of the Mekong River in the northwest of the country, the city exudes a laid-back atmosphere and old world charm with its mix of Chinese shop houses and French colonial architecture. Vientiane's tree-lined boulevards and low traffic density make it an ideal place for walking and exploring ancient temples and pagodas, including Ho Phakeo, which is a former royal temple, and Wat Sisaket, one of the capital's oldest temples and houses hundreds of small Buddha images. Apart from sightseeing, Vientiane is known for its excellent shopping of silver jewelry and hand-woven textiles, which can be found at the Morning Market and a number of boutique shops.

Getting here: Vientiane's Wattay International Airport is the gateway to international and domestic destinations. It is a 1hr15min flight to Pakse and a 40 mim flight to Luang Prabang.

Vang Vieng

Once known for being a rowdy tourist town, nightlife attracting backpackers from around the world, Vang Vieng has cleaned up its act. From night-life activities to adventure experiences that highlight this town's natural beauty and mesmerizing surroundings, Vang Vieng is now being recognized for all the right reasons. Located deep within central Laos, highlights include the rivers, mountains, caves and relaxed lifestyle. Lazy days surrounded by a tapestry of green means imminent relaxation in Vang Vieng.

Getting here: From Luang Prabang it is a 5-6 hr drive. From Vientiane, it takes an approximately 1,5hr drive via new express way or approximately 1hr by the new Laos-China train.





SOUTHERN REGION

Pakse

Situated in southern Laos near the Thai border, Pakse is the capital of Champassak Province. Featuring Franco-Chinese style architecture and a colourful markets, the main attraction near Pakse is the Khmer-Hindu archaeological ruin of Wat Phu Champassak, a temple built by the founder of the first Khmer empire, Jayavarman II. A UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2001, this ornate temple, while smaller than Cambodia's Angkor Wat, it still rivals that of the ancient empire. Pakse's region is highlighted as an eco-friendly destination and still remains off the beaten track. Attractions in the Champassak region include Southeast Asia's widest waterfall, Khone Phapeng; and insight into authentic, rural life on Don Khone and Don Daeng Islands near Champassak Town.

Getting here: There are daily flights to Pakse from Vientiane (1hr 15mins) year round. From Luang Prabang, there are 3 flights per week in low season and daily flights during high season (1hr 50min).

Si Phan Don Islands

Located in Southern Laos, Si Phan Don Islands also known as '4,000 islands' is located in the Champassak region. Though there are thousands of islands, half are submerged in the Mekong River during rainy season. The main four largest islands which tourists tend to visit are Don Khone, Don Som, Don Det, and Don Khong. With no ATMs, little Internet and a bit of a challenging transportation route to the region, the beauty is worth it for those who want to venture to undiscovered treasures. The islands are accessible by way of Pakse, which offers a superb stopover.



Wat Phu Champassak



Si Phan Don



Lao cuisine has many regional variations, due in part to the fresh foods local to each region. Popular with the Laotian population, fresh vegetables and herbs are found in most Lao meals. Meat and fish are also abundant and usually grilled or steamed. As a result, dishes are fresh and healthy. Lao food is traditionally eaten with sticky rice using fingers. In the countryside, meals are family-style which means sitting on the floor sharing food. Lao traditional food is dry, spicy based on fish, buffalo meat, pork, poultry and especially herbs.



Larb

A savory and tangy meat-based salad, larb uses a variety of minced meat flavored with mint leaves, chilli, fish sauce and lime juice. Ground toasted rice (khao khua) is typically added. Larb can be made with chicken, beef, duck, fish, pork or mushrooms.



Kaipen

A popular snack, kaipen is made of river weed harvested from the Mekong Delta and other rivers in Northern Laos, peppered with sesame seeds and sun-dried into paper-thin sheets. Raw kaipen is stored in rolls. For consumption, the kaipen sheets are flash-fried in a pan and usually served with chilli paste.



Khao Poon

Lao noodle soup is made with long-simmered chilli and meat (e.g. fish, pork, chicken). This soup is ladled on cooked rice vermicelli and a bed of chopped vegetables including shallots, spring onion, coriander, mint leaves and string beans.



Sai Oua

Sai Oua is a sausage typically eaten as an appetizer or snack. Chopped pork meat is seasoned with herbs including lemongrass, kaffir lime leaves, shallots, cilantro, galangal and flavored with fish sauce. This grilled sausage is often served with sticky rice and fresh vegetables.

SHOPPING



Vientiane and Luang Prabang are popular shopping destinations, particularly for handcrafted goods such as textiles, silver, woodcarving, and rattan woven baskets. Many of the handcrafts can be purchased at markets and are available in boutique and souvenir shops.

There is no fixed price when shopping in markets or from street vendors so you can choose to bargain or accept the offered price. Markups can range from 20-50%. Though some people may find haggling fun, the sellers' livelihood depends on these sales so be mindful of this when making a local purchase. If you are approached by a seller and do not wish to make a purchase, just say 'no' or 'Bo' in Lao. If you continue to look interested, they will continue to bargain until a purchase is made.

If you choose to ship items home, we highly recommend that you buy shipping insurance and check the policy details. As shops are not responsible for damages incurred en route, it's better to be safe than sorry. Please ask your Tour Guide for assistance. Trails of Indochina and our guides are not responsible for any misrepresented or faulty goods. We do not take responsibility for following up on merchandise that you choose to ship home. Our guides only make suggestions, not guarantees.





Textile & Handicraft Shopping

Laos is known for their silk weaving which range from scarves, clothing, to intricate wall hangings. You will find more boutique shops in Vientiane and Luang Prabang that sell specialty design silk textiles. Local markets sell fabrics as well as ready to wear silk clothing and scarves. To learn more about silk weaving, visit Carol Cassidy's workshop in Vientiane and Ok Top Pok in Luang Prabang.



Dining

Lao cuisine is very similar to its Thai and Vietnamese neighbour's culinary offerings. Spicy soup, sticky rice and a range of meat-based side dishes make up a meal, shared by all at the table. There are more options for international dining options such as French, German, Italian and Vietnamese in Vientiane and Luang Prabang.



Relaxation

International-standard spas can be found mainly in hotels in Vientiane and Luang Prabang that offer traditional therapies and international spa treatments. There are also local massage and hair salons which are inexpensive though service can be inconsistent.



A relatively small country that is easy to travel around, Laos has a variety of ways to navigate throughout. Proving more difficult in the rainy season due to the lack of infrastructure, the short distances between cities and easy flight accessibility means that no destination is too far from another.



Cars/ Buses

Road travel in Laos can be by private car or public buses. There are a wide range of automobile options from 4-seater cars, 15-seat vans, and 36-seater buses in big cities like Vientiane and Luang Prabang. There are also options to travel by public bus. 'VIP buses' which have reclining seats and air conditioning are an inexpensive way to travel by road.



Train

A new semi-high-speed train that connects Vientiane to Kunming, China has been in service since late 2021. The train reduces travel time significantly. From Vientiane to Vang Vieng it takes 1hr and to Luang Prabang only 2hrs. Tickets may only be purchased minimum 3 days in advance in person with a passport.



Cruises

The Mekong River is the longest and most important river route in Laos and is navigable year-round between Luang Prabang in the north and Savannakhet in the south. Travelers may enjoy a relaxing day river cruise or an overnight journey on the newly launched Anouvong Cruise that connects Luang Prabang with Chiang Rai.



Flights

Laos has air connections with regional countries including Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, China and South Korea. Lao Airlines is the national carrier and services domestic and international routes. Other international airlines operating to and from Laos include Thai Airways, Vietnam Airways, Singapore Airlines, Bangkok Airways and Korean Air.



Cultural Etiquette

- For men and women greeting either men or women of the same approximate age, greeting those of higher social status (monks, teachers, doctors, government officials), or greeting someone who is your elder - the “nop” greeting is used. This is when the hands are placed in a prayer position and then touched to somewhere between the chest and top of the head.
- In Laos, revealing clothing should be avoided. Shorts are generally fine, as long as they aren’t too short.
- When visiting pagodas and temples, shorts and tank tops are unacceptable. Your knees and shoulders must be covered. Footwear and socks must be removed in religious sites. Shoes are often removed upon entering private homes too.
- For women, it is best to avoid touching or sitting next to monks.
- Lao people are deeply religious, and for most of them, Buddhism plays an important role in their lives. Buddhism and traditional values place great importance on family, friends and social harmony. Please be mindful of this.
- Beckoning someone with the palm upwards is considered rude. The correct way to call someone over is to extend your hand with the palm downward and flap your fingers towards your wrist. To ask for the bill in a restaurant or shop, extend one hand in front of you with the palm raised and pretend to write on your palm with the other hand

Safety Tips

- Unexploded ordinances (UXOs) exist in many parts of Laos, particularly in Xieng Khuang Province (Plain of Jars) and near the Lao-Vietnamese border area along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. You are advised to not stray off well-used roads and paths. It is important to note that mine-filled areas are often unmarked and caution should still be exercised.
- Be sure to look both ways when crossing the street In Laos, it should not be expected for vehicles to stop or drive around you.
- Take caution with your wallet, mobile phone, and jewelry when walking outside. Avoid leaving these in exposed pants pockets or anywhere else that is easily reached like an outer zip-up compartment on a backpack. Be especially vigilant in markets and other crowded places.
- If you choose to ride a motorcycle or bike, it is always advisable to wear a helmet. It is not recommended for non-experienced drivers to drive a vehicle or ride a motorbike.



Laos is a country rich in historical treasures, beautiful landscapes and resilient people. Before you visit, we recommend some wonderful reading and informative movies to understand and learn more about this enchanting country.

Books

- *The Bamboo Palace*, Christopher Kremmer (Harper Collins, 2005)
Half history book and half travelogue, this engrossing account relates the author's travels in Laos in search of the lost royal family – the 60-year-old ancient Lao dynasty. Brilliantly written and an enthralling read! (See also 'Stalking the Elephant Kings' by the same author.)
- *One Foot in Laos*, Dervla Murphy (John Murray 1999)
One of our favourite travel writers, Dervla Murray turns her attention to Laos with this excellent travel book including insights and comments on the history, current situation and fears and hopes for the country's future.
- *Ant Egg Soup*, Natacha Du Pont de Bie (Hodder and Stoughton, 2005)
An anecdotal account of a food tourist travelling through Laos. The people she met, places she visited, dishes she sampled, including some recipes and sketches. You could even try out some of the recipes at home – if your grocery store started stocking ant's eggs!

Film

- Laos has not appeared too much on the big screen or indeed the small one. In 2008, *Good Morning, Luang Prabang* was released to critical acclaim. It was the nation's first privately funded movie, a love story between a Thai photographer and a Lao tour guide.
- *The Most Secret Place on Earth* is a documentary by filmmakers Marc Eberle and Tom Vater, uncovering the history of covert American involvement in Laos during the '60s. The film interviews key players of the secret war including former CIA agents, American



CONTACT US



If you have any questions or encounter any issues, please contact us at our Laos office so we can provide an immediate solution.

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