

Trails of Indochina

Laos Overview

VIETNAM | CAMBODIA | LAOS | THAILAND | MYANMAR | INDONESIA | SINGAPORE | HONG KONG | CHINA

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.

ABOUT LAOS

LANDSCAPE

Laos is bordered by five countries: China to the north; Vietnam to the east; Cambodia to the south; Thailand and Myanmar to the west. The Mekong River, which forms a large part of the border with Thailand, has always been at the heart of Lao civilization and culture. Apart from the Mekong River plains, more than 70% of the country is comprised of highlands, mountains, and plateaus.

CLIMATE

Laos has two seasons. The green season runs from May through October and the dry season from November to April. For the most part, Laos is hot, although there is a good deal of fluctuation between summer and winter temperatures. The capital, Vientiane, ranges from the upper-20s Celsius (mid-70s Fahrenheit) in January to mid-30s Celsius (mid-90s Fahrenheit) in April and May. In the mountainous 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.

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.

PEOPLE

The population of Laos is approximately 7 million with 85% living in rural areas. Laos is one of Southeast Asia's most ethnically diverse countries with 47 ethnic groups, most of whom have kept their own customs, dialects and traditional dress. The government has classified the population into three broad groups: the Lao Lum (lowlanders), comprise mainly of ethnic Lao and Tay-Tai speaking people, make up 70 per cent of the population and predominantly live along the Mekong River; the Lao Theung (uplanders), composed of Mon-Khmer people, form

20 per cent of the population; and the Lao Song (highlanders), comprise of a variety of hill tribe groups including the Hmong, Yao, Haw, Akha, and constitute 10 per cent of the population, living in the mountainous areas.

RELIGION

Buddhism is an inherent component 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 is still commonly representing some of the region's most ancient religious practice. Animist shrines may be found in many parts the country.

HISTORY

In the 14th century a Lao warlord, Fa Ngum, founded the Kingdom of Lane Xang which literally means 'Land of a Million Elephants' and established the capital at what is now Luang Prabang. In the 18th century Lane Xang entered a period of decline caused by dynastic struggle and conflicts with Burma, Siam (now Thailand), Vietnam, and the Khmer kingdom. By the 19th century the Siamese established power over much of what is now Laos and was divided into three principalities: Luang Prabang Vientiane and Champassak. Late in the century the French succeeded the Siamese and integrated all of Laos into the French empire under direct rule except for Luang Prabang which was ruled as a protectorate. The Franco-Siamese treaty of 1907 defined the present Lao boundary with Thailand.

Laos achieved independence from French rule in 1954. Peace was short-lived, however, as the Americans began bombing eastern Laos in 1964 in a bid to target a section of the Ho Chi Minh Trail that passed through Lao territory. Fighting between the Communist Pathet Lao and royalist government in Vientiane ensued, ending with a ceasefire in 1973. In December 1975 the Pathet Lao took control in Vientiane, founding the current Lao People's Democratic Republic.

TIME ZONES

Laos operates on Greenwich meantime +7 hours. Please note that Laos does not have daylight saving hours.

COUNTRY CODE

Laos country code is + 856

MOBILE PHONES

Laos uses a GSM (GSM900/1800) mobile phone network. There are 4 main phone carriers in Lao, with Lao telecom and Beeline 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 (wifi) internet access available in the lobby or business center. 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.

CITY HIGHLIGHTS

VIENTIANE

Vientiane is Southeast Asia's smallest capital city with a population of 800,000 inhabitants. Located along a bend of the Mekong River in the north-west of the country, the city exudes a laidback atmosphere and old world charm with its mix of Chinese shop houses and French colonial architecture. The tree-lined boulevards and low traffic density makes the city an ideal place for walking and exploring ancient temples and pagodas including Wat Ho

Phakeo, a former royal temple, and Wat Sisaket, one of the capital's oldest temples which houses hundreds of small Buddha images. Apart from sightseeing, there is also excellent shopping for silver jewelry and hand-woven textiles which can be found at the Morning Market and a number of boutique shops. A visit to Vientiane is not complete without a relaxing sundowner at one of the many riverside bars along the Mekong River to enjoy a spectacular sunset view.

Getting here: Vientiane's Wattay International Airport is the gateway to most domestic destinations.

VANG VIENG

Formerly a pit stop between Vientiane and Luang Prabang, now Vang Vieng has become a destination for those keen to enjoy adventure activities such as kayaking, caving and rock climbing. The main attraction is the spectacular landscape and towering limestone rock formations riddled with caves. Over the year the town has become quite popular with backpackers for its river tubing and social cafes and bars.

While tubing in the river near Vang Vieng has become a popular activity, Trails of Indochina would like to remind you that this can be a dangerous activity. The river can be unpredictable, there are hidden rapids and rocks and you should never try tubing under the influence of alcohol. Additionally, we must advise that most Travel Insurance policies specifically do not cover for adventure activities (1) and (2) the nearest international hospital is in Vientiane which is 3 hours drive away.

Getting here: From Vientiane it is an approximately 4 hours drive and Luang Prabang a 5-6 hours drive.

LUANG PRABANG

Luang Prabang, once the royal seat of the Lane Xang Kingdom or "Land of a Million Elephants", is a sleepy town nestled in a mountain valley at the confluence of the Mekong and Khan Rivers in north central Laos. Considered as the center of Lao culture, the city offers a fascinating glimpse into the Buddhist religious practice and traditional lifestyle of the various hill-tribe groups in this northern region. The town is 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 those built by the European colonial authorities in the 19th and 20th centuries."

The town center has an outstanding range of restaurants, hotels, and souvenir shops. With a growing population of 100,000 inhabitants, the town is becoming busier in recent years. However, it is still relatively peaceful and quaint compared to other tourist destinations in the region, which is one of its most charming features. Nearby attractions include Pak Ou Caves which houses thousands of Buddha images, Kuang Si Waterfall and several cotton and silk weaving villages.

Getting here: There are daily domestic flights (40 minutes) from Vientiane. By road, it is a 8-9 hour drive from Vientiane and 5-6 hours from Vang Vieng. There are daily international flights from Hanoi, Siem Reap, Bangkok and from Chiang Mai.

PHONSAVAN - PLAIN OF JARS

The small dusty town of Phonsavan in northern Laos is the capital of Xieng Khuang province and gateway to the Plain of Jars. This region was one of the most heavily bombed in Laos and today is still littered with half a million tons of unexploded ordinance (UXO) and the evidence is everywhere. Bomb casings and other war remnants are used for every purpose imaginable such as fences, tools, and house decoration.

The main attraction to this region is the Plain of Jars. The gigantic stone jars are to Laos as Stonehenge is to England – an enigma. While there are many theories, nobody really knows why hundreds of huge stone jars are scattered across several sites on a barren Laotian plain. They are between 2500 and 3000 years old, and again no one knows why they were built. Carved from solid rock, most of these containers weigh from 600kg to a tonne per piece with the largest weighing six tonnes. The jars are set amongst beautiful scenery of rolling hills which are covered with a smattering of pine trees and green grass during the wet season.

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

PAKSE

Situated in southern Laos, near the Thai border, Pakse is the capital of Champasak province. The town itself features Franco-Chinese style architecture and a colorful market stocked with fresh produce grown in the nearby Bolaven Plateau, a highland region inhabited by a number of ethnic minority groups. The main attraction in Pakse is the Khmer-Hindu archeological ruin of Wat Phu Champasak which was built by the founder of the first Khmer empire, Jayavarman II. It is much smaller than Cambodia's Angkor Wat but still a rival to that ancient empire. Visitors to the complex should take note that some temples have very steep approaches with as many as 70 steps which can be difficult to climb. Although the tourism infrastructure is less developed than the popular north, the government has made efforts into promoting the region as an ecological friendly destination and improving the reliability of services. Other attractions in the Champasak region include the 4,000 islands of Si Phan Don near the Cambodian border; elephant trekking in Ban Khiet Ngong; Southeast Asia's highest waterfall, Khone Phapeng; and insight into authentic, traditional Laotian life on the islands of Don Khone near Pakse and Don Deng near Champasak Town.

Getting here: There are daily flights to Pakse from Vientiane (1hr 15mins) year round, whilst from Luang Prabang flights operate 3 time per a week in the low season and daily in the high season (1hr 50mins) on Lao Airlines. Direct flights LPQ- PKZ and PKZ- LPQ might be cancelled last minute in low season, from May- October.

VEHICLES

Vehicles are well equipped with air conditioning and typically 2008-2012 range. Wearing a seatbelt in Laos is still not common practice – be aware that the vehicles in which you travel may not be fitted with seatbelts in accordance with the current convention. In some areas, Toyota Hi-Ace or similar vans are used since they are the best choice available. The vehicles are perfectly fine but due to design, passengers in the back may have to lean forward slightly to see out the side windows, which are slightly lower than customary in western countries.

EATING & DRINKING

Lao cuisine has many similarities to Thai with lots of aromatic herbs and spices such as lemon grass, chilies, ginger and tamarind used to flavor dishes. The staple food of Lao is sticky rice usually served with fermented fish and fish sauce. Chicken and pork dishes are also popular but beef is expensive in comparison. A French influence with Asian-fusion touch is also apparent in Vientiane and Luang Prabang

SHOPPING

Laos is still developing, and so its people can be very persistent when trying to make money, especially around tourists whom they perceive as very wealthy. People will probably overcharge you, but rather than becoming irritated, join the game and bargain with a smile! It is also recommendable to check prices of the same items in the neighborhood before reaching a deal.

If you are being followed by street vendors and do not wish to make a purchase, often the best course of action is to say “no” firmly and politely (Lao word is: “Bo”), and continue on your way. Do not hesitate or linger, as this will encourage the seller to try and engage you further.

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.

Trails of Indochina and the guide cannot accept responsibility 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.

CULTURAL ETIQUETTE

- *The Lao people consider it disrespectful to touch someone on their head. It's also impolite to gesture with your feet or prop them up on furniture; to do so implies that you look down on the people sitting around you.*
- *Keeping an arm's length of personal space is the norm.*

- *Touching during conversations is limited; this is especially the case for the opposite sex.*
- *Revealing clothing is unacceptable. 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 pagodas. Shoes are usually removed upon entering private homes too. Please do not wear orange when visiting a temple, as this is the color of the monks.*
- *Public displays of affection between men and women may embarrass your host. On the other hand, it's perfectly normal for a pair of men or a pair of women to link arms or hold hands.*
- *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

In general, Laos is very safe for travelers, although petty theft does happen once in a while. Where possible, secure your valuables in the hotel safe. Remember to record your credit card information and avoid carrying large sums of money—just in case.

- Have a photocopy of the personal information section of your passport and the visa page, and keep it separate from your passport. This makes getting a replacement much easier if your passport is lost or stolen.
- Carry a list of emergency contact numbers with you and fill out the emergency contact information section in your passport (if there is one).
- Do not leave your wallet or mobile phone in the back pocket of your pants or anywhere else that's easily reached (like an outer zip-up compartment on a backpack). Be especially vigilant in markets and other crowded places like ports and train stations.
- Use common sense and don't walk alone after dark. If confronted by a mugger, do not resist. You're always better off taking a taxi or tuk tuk at night; ask your hotel or restaurant to arrange.
- If you choose to ride a motorcycle or bike, wear a helmet. It is not recommended for non-experienced drivers to drive a vehicle or ride a motorbike.
- When crossing the street on foot, move at a slow and steady pace.
- There is a danger from unexploded land mines in many parts of Laos, particularly in Xieng Khuang Province (Plain of Jars) and the Lao-Vietnamese border area along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. You are advised to not stray off well used roads and paths. Mined areas are often unmarked.

PACKING

PACKING ESSENTIALS

What you take will naturally depend upon where you are traveling, and it can often be difficult to decide what to pack, nevertheless the following should act as a useful checklist of essential items worth thinking about taking.

- Passport – Ensure that it is valid for a minimum of 6 months and in good condition with empty pages available. Make a photocopy as well
- Comprehensive Travel Insurance – Ensure that it will be valid for the whole journey
- Passport Photos – Will invariably be needed for identification passes and certain visas
- Emergency contact numbers: Trails of Indochina, Insurance Company, friends and family.
- Debit/credit card cancellation numbers
- Printed air tickets and Itinerary
- Money belt – Ensure that it is discrete and comfortable to wear

- First Aid kit - Basic travel kit to cover basic mishaps which may occur along the way
- Personal Medication –with international doctors’ note to ensure easy passage of medication across international borders
- Sun block – High UVA protection ideally
- Sunglasses & sunhat
- Comfortable walking shoes
- Mosquito spray & insect repellent
- Long sleeve top and trousers – Useful to protect against mosquitoes at dawn and dusk and the sun throughout the day
- Camera & battery
- Security code pad lock
- A small amount of USD currency small denominations.

CLOTHING

Since the weather is consistently warm throughout the country, it is advisable to bring comfortable lightweight, loose fitting, cotton clothing and long-sleeved items for protection from mosquitoes and the sun. During the rainy season an umbrella and open-toe sandals are recommended. A jacket may be needed in hotels and restaurants using excessive air-conditioning. A hat and high-factor sun block is advisable for protection against the hot sun when sightseeing. T-shirts and knee length shorts are acceptable for visiting temples or pagodas. From November to January, particularly in the northern mountainous region, the temperature can dip below zero so you will need to bring a sweater or a light jacket. Since the cities and towns in Laos are ideal for walking, be sure to bring comfortable and supportive walking shoes.

TOILETRIES & MEDICATION

While imported beauty products are available in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, you are advised to pack staples like sunscreen, contact lens solution, tampons and mosquito repellent. It is advised that your prescription medication is in its original box with the label along with the prescription to avoid any complications that may arise at Customs. Many medicines are available in Southeast Asia without prescriptions. If you plan to purchase medication, choose a reputable supplier and read the labels carefully, particularly paying attention to expiration date. Please note a lot of the available medication in Laos is purchased from Thailand with labels only in Thai.

TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

You should bring a money-belt to safely carry your travel documents and cash, and ensure that your luggage has a lock. Bring photo-copies of your passport and visa, plus some extra passport-sized photos if you’re applying for on-arrival visas. When flying into or within Laos, you will probably be given baggage claim tags (they will be stuck to the back of your ticket). Keep these, as you might need to show them when leaving the airport.

CONTACT US

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

Trails of Indochina - Laos

83 - Chanboupha Street, Unit 06, Village Meaun Na,
Luang Prabang, Laos

Tel: (856) 71 260 456 | Fax: (856) 71 260 457

Country Manager 24-hour contact: (856) 020 5597 1123

laos@trailsofindochina.com

www.trailsofindochina.com