

## GUIDE TO VISITING LAOS

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), or Laos as foreigners call it, is Southeast Asia's only land-locked country and shares borders with Thailand, Myanmar, China, Cambodia and Vietnam. One of Asia's least populated countries, the country covers more than 236,000 square kilometres and has a population of approximately 6 million. It has 16 provinces and one capital municipality. Its capital is Vientiane.

Much of the country is covered by rugged mountains and forests, with the main populations concentrated on the plains and plateaus and along the Mekong. The River is an important source of food for the locals and also forms a large part of the country's western boundary with Thailand. The mountains in the Annamite Chain form most of the eastern border with Vietnam.

Laos has a warm tropical climate with two distinctive seasons: the rainy and dry seasons. Most of the year is hot and humid. The wet season lasts from late May to October and the dry season from November to February when it is cool but quickly leads on to the hot months of March and April. During these two months, temperatures can reach up to 41°C degrees - a contrast to the low 12°C in December and January. In the winter months, temperatures can fall to zero in the north, with snowfall on higher ground. The average temperature is about 28°C, rising to a maximum of 38 degrees Celsius during April and May.

In Vientiane a minimum temperature of 19 degrees Celsius is to be expected during January. In mountainous areas, however, temperature drops to as low as 14-15 degrees Celsius during the winter months. The average precipitation is highest in Southern Laos, where the Annamite Mountains receive over 3,000 mm. annually. In Vientiane rainfall is about 1,500-2,000 mm, and in the Northern provinces only 1,000-1,500 mm.

### Vientiane Capital

The capital, Vientiane is a small and attractive city with its downtown colonial boulevard, the winding Mekong River, ancient temples, monuments and restaurants with Lao and foreign cuisines. Vientiane Capital has a population of about 805,000 in an area of 4000 sq km. The city proper, or built up area, centres around four districts, and has around 200,000 inhabitants. The name "Vientiane" is an anglicised version of

"Wieng Chan", which translates to "Sandalwood City". The city sits on a bend in the Mekong on flat terrain. Most of the government offices, hotels, restaurants and historical temples are in the central district near the river. The main streets in the downtown areas are Samsenthai Road, which is lined with small shops, Setthathirat Road where several famous temples are located and Fa Ngum Road, which runs along the river. Towards the north is Lane Xang Avenue, Vientiane's widest street, the main portion of which is a divided boulevard that leads from the presidential palace past Talat Sao (the Morning Market) to the Patuxay or Victory Gate. Wattay International Airport is located about 3 km west of the city centre.

The Patuxay Park is now a major tourist spot for the locals, especially those from the provinces. The condition of the roads has improved tremendously in the past years as more roads are being paved. Road repairs and pavement construction are common sights in Vientiane. That said, many parts of the city are still serviced by unpaved or gravel roads.

The capital serves as a transit point for tourists visiting the country. A tourist will typically fly into Vientiane from Bangkok and spend two days in the city before visiting Luang Prabang, Vang Vieng or Pakse, the capital of Champassak province in the south. The ancient capital of Luang Prabang, which is a UNESCO World Heritage site and a major tourist attraction, is a 9- hour drive away from Vientiane (on windy mountain roads) or 1 hour by plane. Vang Vieng, a popular backpackers' getaway, is a 4 hour drive from Vientiane en route to Luang Prabang. The pre-Angkorian Wat Phou, Laos' second UNESCO World Heritage site, is located in Champassak, which is also home to other tourist attractions such as Sipandone (the 4,000 islands) the Khong Pha Pheng falls, Bolovens Plateau and the Mekong dolphins.

### **Food and drink**

French and Italian cuisine are among the most popular as they are considered inexpensive and of a decent standard. Notable French and Italian restaurants in Vientiane include *Na dao*, *Cote D'Azur*, *Le Silapa*, *La Terrasse*, *Le Signature*, *Le Opera*, *Aria Italian Culinary Arts*, and *La Scala*.

Visitors to Laos would no doubt ask to try the local cuisine. *Kualao* and *Tamnaklao* are suitable options. Popular local dishes include *Laap* (Lao salad with meat and mint leaves), *Tam Mak Hung* (spicy papaya salad)

and sour fish soup. These dishes are typically eaten with *Kao Niao* (sticky rice).

Other international cuisines available in Vientiane include Chinese, Indian, Japanese and Thai food. *Fu Man Lou* is one of the more popular Chinese restaurants in town. Other notable Chinese restaurants include *Peking* (in Mekong Hotel), *Liao Ning*, *Sze Chuan*, *May Yuan* (in Lao Plaza Hotel) and *Yi Bin Xuen* (next to Mercure). For lovers of Indian food, there is a range from *Taste of India and Rashmi Indian Fusion* to *Taj Mahal*, *Nazim* and *Fatima* which are frequented by backpackers. All serve halal dishes. Both *Fatima* and *Nazim* serve, inter alia, some familiar dishes like dosai and roti prata. Options for Thai food are more numerous. Some better establishments are *Ton Hom ASEAN Cuisine* and *Linda Sathaporn*. There are also restaurants serving “sindaat” (Lao version of the Korean BBQ) and “suki” (Steamboat) – including the Thai chain *Coca*. For Japanese food lovers, there are a few Japanese eating outlets including *Kiku* (in Lao Plaza hotel), *Tojo*, *Fuji*, *Fujiwara*, *Japan Tei* and *Sakura*. There are also a few Korean restaurants, such as *Arirang* and *Chowon*, which has an outdoor setting and reasonable prices. A North Korean restaurant, *Pyongyang*, serves authentic North Korean cuisine.

There are also some bistro-type establishments which serve food al fresco such as the immensely popular *Khop Chai Deu* restaurant (pub setting with good selection of Lao and western dishes) and *Bor Pen Nyang*, a pub-cum-restaurant on the 4th floor of a building facing the Mekong River. Other expatriate hangouts include *Joma*, *Swedish Pizza House* and *Scandinavian Bakery* which serve soups, sandwiches, salads and staples such as pizza, lasagne and quiche. *Sticky Fingers*, a well-known meeting place for Australians, serves an eclectic mix of dishes, including Mediterranean food (couscous and kebabs). For the more adventurous, there are lots of little stalls and coffee shops in town serving good “Pho”, wonton, roast pork and duck noodles. There are also a number of stalls along the river which serves up grilled fish and papaya salad.

### **Shopping**

There are a few small department stores selling the latest merchandise in apparel or household electrical products. There is one in the Chinatown or *Sihom* area – *Home Ideal Department Store*, a new Chinese Market (*Talat Jin*) near Don Pasak – *San Jiang Shang Chang* and several new stores in the city specialising in electrical and electronic goods. Most of

these goods are also available at the morning market (*Talat Sao*), which is a haven for those seeking more traditional Lao textiles, jewellery and precious stones. There are also a few boutiques around the city specialising in Lao textiles such as *Carol Cassidy's*, *Pheang Mai* and *Mai Come*.

### **Sports and Leisure**

Golf enthusiasts can show off their skills at the 18-hole Lao Country Club about 14 km from Vientiane or the shorter 9-hole golf course at "Km 6". If one would enjoy a more challenging course, the Dansavanh Golf Course near Nam Ngum Dam (an hour and a half drive from Vientiane) would be up your street. The hilly buggy course is very scenic. The green and caddy fees are among the lowest in the world.

### People

#### **Overview**

The Lao people generally adhere to a traditional way of life. Life centres around the family, and socially they live in a village (or Ban) where the Headman mediates and resolves their problems. Even in Vientiane, the city is divided up into villages. The majority of Lao are Buddhists. Unlike the Thais, they do not appear to pay much attention to social greetings and etiquette. The Lao give great respect and deference to the elderly, and are generally very patient in dealing with each other and foreigners alike. In social gatherings, both Lao men and women love to drink, *lamvong* (Lao traditional dance) and sing, and will be friendly and informal, even with foreigners. It is considered a great honour for the local Lao host if a foreigner drinks and dances, even if just a little, with the Laotians during their parties. When invited to a Lao home, it is polite to bring a small gift, either some flowers or chocolates or a souvenir from Singapore.

Laos is a predominantly Buddhist country and follows the Theravadan school of Buddhism which it shares in common with neighbouring Thailand and Cambodia, but up to 40% of the population, particularly in the highlands, are animists.

## **Festivals**

The main cultural festival in Laos is *Pii Mai* (or Lao New Year) which lasts for 3 days in April. It is usually accompanied by much revelry and the practice of water-throwing. One must be prepared to get soaked when one goes out during *Pii Mai*. The *Pii Mai* celebrations in Luang Prabang are the most elaborate in the country and given the compact nature of the town, the most concentrated. Another major festival is the That Luang Festival at the end of November. This is the largest temple fair, which lasts for a week and includes a trade show, carnival games and fireworks. Other interesting festivals include the Boat Racing festival which takes place in Vientiane in October on the Mekong River. The Rocket Festival in April/May just before the rainy season is best observed in the rural areas where local villagers fire colourful home-made rockets into the sky to usher in the rain.

## Money

The local currency is the Kip (LAK). The notes currently come in denominations of 500, 1,000, 2,000, 5,000, 10,000, 20,000 and 50,000. The Thai baht and US dollar are readily accepted. The current exchange rate is approximately S\$1 = 6,200 kip, US\$1 = 8,000 kip and 1 Baht = 255 kip. There are a number of commercial banks that can handle international financial transactions

With some exceptions, the best exchange rates are available at banks. At banks, travellers' cheques receive a slightly better exchange rate than cash. Banks in Vientiane can change UK pounds, German marks, Canadian, US, Australian dollars, French francs, Thai baht and Japanese yen only. The Singapore dollar is accepted only by one bank – Pongsavanh Bank.

Many hotels, upmarket restaurants and shops in Vientiane accept Visa and Master Card credit cards. A few also accept American Express. Credit card payments in Laos usually incur additional bank charges of 3%. The national representative for American Express is Diethelm Travel Laos. BCEL offers cash advances/withdrawals on Visa credit/debit cards for a 2.5% transaction fee if you take kip or 3.5% for US dollars. Thai banks in Vientiane charge more transaction fees. Tipping is not customary in Laos except in upmarket restaurants in Vientiane where 10% of the bill is appreciated - but only if a service charge has not already been added to the bill. Tips to porters in hotel range from 5,000 to 10,000 kip. Foreigners are not allowed to bring in more than US\$5,000

into Laos.

### Immigration and customs formalities

Both Lao and Singapore ordinary passport holders do not require a visa to enter each other's country.

There are no vaccinations required for entry to Laos. However, Hepatitis A, Typhoid and Japanese Encephalitis vaccinations are recommended for long-term visitors.

### Travel

Wattay International Airport is Vientiane's main airport for international flights. It is located 3 km west of downtown Vientiane. One can also travel overland from Udon Thani via the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge to Vientiane. The Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge, completed in 1994, is 1240 metres long spanning the Mekong River at a point 5 km west of Nong Khai in Thailand, and 20 km east of Vientiane. The Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge is operational between 6 am and 10 pm daily. A less common way is to travel to Savannakhet via Mukdahan in Thailand using the second Mekong Bridge which was opened on 20 December 2006.

Lao Airlines flies direct from Vientiane to Singapore three times a week. Other direct connections from Vientiane include daily flights to Hanoi. Less frequent (depending on the season) are flights to Ho Chi Minh City, Phnom Penh, Chiang Mai and Kunming. There are other flights from Udon Thani to Bangkok operated by Thai Airways, Nok Air and Air Asia. Internal air travel to the capitals of the provinces is limited except for Luang Prabang and Pakse (Champassak province).

In Vientiane, there are few taxis available and cannot be flagged down. They are only stationed at the Wattay International Airport, larger hotels (such as Lao Plaza Hotel) or the Talat Sao (morning market). Taxi services are also available to and from the Friendship Bridge. For commuting within the city, the most popular transport is the *tuk-tuk*. It would be helpful to be able to speak a little Lao in order to convey the precise destination and bargain with the driver.

### Health and hygiene

It is advisable to bring a first aid kit containing antiseptic cream, anti-fungal cream, insect repellent, plasters/band aids, water sterilization

tablets, gauze and sealed bandages, Lomotil for emergency diarrhoea treatment, aspirin/paracetamol, multi-vitamin and mineral tablets.

### **Precautions**

11.5 Bacteria thrives in the tropics and the best way to combat them is to keep up standards of personal hygiene. Most health problems experienced by travellers are a direct result of something they have eaten. Avoid eating uncooked vegetables and fruits that cannot be peeled. The simple rule while travelling outside the capital is try as far as possible not to drink river or tap water. Tap water in Vientiane is generally of a higher standard though bottled water is still recommended for drinking.

## PLACES OF INTEREST IN VIENTIANE

### Wat Ho Phakeo

Wat Haw Phakeo was re-built from 1936-42 and supposedly followed the exact same plan as the original built in 1565 by King Sayasetthathirath to house the Emerald Buddha 1565-1779 as his personal place of worship. The Lao claim that this temple was the original home of the Emerald Buddha which was taken away by the Siamese in 1779. For this reason and unlike other temples in Laos, monks have not taken up residence here. The temple now functions as a small museum with a myriad of Lao Buddhist statues and artefacts on display. From the terrace of Ho Pra Keo, one can enjoy a view overlooking the president's Palace (former Royal Palace) and garden.

### Patuxay

Patuxay is a large monument reminiscent of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. It built in 1957 by the Royal Lao government. While the Arc de Triomphe in Paris inspired the architecture, the design incorporates typical Lao motifs including "Kinnari", a mythical bird woman. Climbing atop the monument, visitors can get a panoramic view of the city. The PRC government assisted the Lao government to renovate the monument and surrounding park for the 10th ASEAN Summit in 2004 at a cost of US\$1 million.

### That Luang Stupa (Great Sacred Stupa)

That Luang is considered Vientiane's most important site and the holiest Buddhist monument in the country. According to local legend, a stupa was first built here in the year 236 of the Buddhist calendar (307 years before AD) by emissaries of the Moghul Emperor Asoka and it is supposed to have contained a relic remain of the Buddha (his breast bone). It was first built in its present form, encompassing the previous building, in 1566 by King Setthathirat, whose statue stands outside. The temple was destroyed and rebuilt several times due to plundering invasions in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. The French finally restored the monument in its final form in 1930. The 30 metre-high spire dominates the skyline and resembles an elongated lotus bud, crowned by a banana flower and parasol. Today it is the most important national cultural monument.



### Kaysone Museum

Kaysone Museum was opened in December 2000 as a tribute to the late President Kaysone Phomvihane. The museum-memorial is inside the former USAID/CIA compound from where the “Secret War” was orchestrated. During the 1975 takeover of Vientiane, the Pathet Lao forces ejected the Americans and occupied the compound. Kaysone Phomvihane lived there until his death in 1992. The museum in his honour was built in monumental style with financial assistance from Việt Nam. The exterior is designed in traditional Lao style but the interior layout is strongly reminiscent of that of the Hồ Chí Minh Museum in Hà Nội. The museum largely displayed exhibits which chronicle the founding of the Lao Issara and the IndoChinese Communist Party as well as the life of Kaysone Phomvihane. Some rooms display pictures of Laos’ most important cultural and historic sites while other contains personal artifacts which belong to Kaysone Phomvihane during his youth and days in the War of Resistance.

### Wat Sisaket

Wat Sisaket was built in 1818 during the reign of King Chao Anou, the last king of the Lane Xang Kingdom of Vientiane. Today, it is considered the oldest temple still standing in Vientiane while others were destroyed by the Siamese during Chao Anou’s failed rebellion in 1827. The French had since restored the temple in 1924 and again in 1930. The temple is an important heritage temple in terms of philology, epigraphs and iconography in Laos. The temple was constructed in the early Siamese style but surrounded with a thick-walled cloister. The interior of the cloister is riddled with small niches that contain over 2000 silver and ceramic Buddha images. The total number of Buddha statues at Wat Sisaket currently stands at 6840. Most of the images are from 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century Vientiane but a few hailed from 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century Luang Prabang.

### Wat Simuang Temple

Built in 1956, it is believed that the original city pillar of Vientiane is found in Wat Simuang and guarded by the spirit of a local girl called “Si” Local legend has it that Nang Si, who was pregnant at the time, leapt to her death as a sacrifice, just as the pillar was being lowered into the hole. A very colorful Phasat Pheung (wax pavilion procession) attracts large crowds to Wat Simuang temple, taking place just two days prior to the That Luang Festival in November.

### Xieng Khouan Buddha Park

The Xieng Khouan Buddha Park was built in 1958 and contains a collection of Buddhist and Hindu sculptures, scattered amongst gardens and trees. Built about 28 kilometers south of Vientiane at the edge of the Mekong River, the town of Nong Khai in neighboring Thailand can be seen on the opposite side.

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## LUANG PRABANG - A UNESCO HERITAGE SITE

### Visiting Luang Prabang

As indicated with its 33 Buddhist temples, Luang Prabang is a spiritual place. Every morning at day break, 5 am, the entire village lines the street to give 'alms' or perform 'merit-making' to the monks who are studying at these temples.

Luang Prabang enjoys a tropical monsoon climate. There are two seasons in this weather: one dry and one wet. The dry season comes from November to May while the rainy season lasts from May to October. Overall, the annual average temperature is approximately 77 degrees Fahrenheit and it is very humid most days, with annual precipitation of approximately 1300 mm.

When it is coldest in Luang Prabang, temperatures can rest at around 60 degrees Fahrenheit. During the colder months, it gets chilly at night and in the very early morning.

During the hottest time of the year in the dry season between March and May, temperatures can reach 90 to 100 degrees F.

The best time of the year to visit is between October to March when the temperatures are in the comfortable 70s.

### Transportation

#### Getting There

Luang Prabang has an international airport connection that connects with Vientiane Capital, as well as Bangkok and Chiang Mai in Thailand.

#### Getting Around

The main sites in town can be reached by foot (Mekong River, Wats, museums, restaurants, night markets) or one can hire a bike for as little as US\$1 (8,000KIP). To get out of town to see the caves or waterfalls or to go trekking there are a number of tour companies to choose from and that offer quite an array of activities.

## **Accommodation**

There is a range of boutique inns and hotels that are full of charm and historic importance in Luang Prabang, from the high-end hotels to the cheap back-packers hostels.

In terms of mid-range lodging, Luang Prabang is packed full of small inns and guest houses, and without personal recommendation it can be hard to make a choice of where to stay. Back-packers may wish to turn to budget lodgings, although one must be prepared for the low standard of the rooms, given their cheap prices.

## **Things to Do**

### **Alms ceremony**

As an old tradition, monks walk down the street of Luang Prabang at dawn every morning to collect alms of rice from kneeling villagers (and early-rising tourists). Visitors can seek the help of their guesthouse host to assist them the day before in the preparation of the alms if they would like to participate in the alm-giving ceremony in the morning.

### **Phou Si**

This is the main hill in the city from which one can have a good view of the whole area. It's not a very steep climb from the bottom, and sunrise and sunset are the most sensible and rewarding times to go up. There is a near-panoramic view from the top.

### **Vat Xieng Toung**

This is the oldest and one of the most beautiful monasteries in town. It opens from 6am to 6 pm.

### **Bear Rescue Centre**

Located adjacent to the way to the Kuang Si Waterfalls, the Bear Rescue Centre has a enclosure for endangered Asiatic Black Bears that have been rescued from poachers.

### Kuang Si Falls

This is a large multi-stage waterfall, accessible by boat or truck hire, some 29 km south of Luang Prabang. There are food and tourist stalls outside the waterfalls. It is worth putting a whole day aside (or more) to visit the falls. There are multiple pools at different levels, all of which are reportedly safe to bathe in, and are extremely picturesque.

### Tad Sae Waterfalls

These are step waterfalls which are not as big as Kuang Xi, but nonetheless still very beautiful. Visitors can bathe at the waterfalls and elephant rides are also available. Access to the waterfalls is only available via the river boats.

### Pak Ou Caves

The famous "Buddha caves" are north of town on the Mekong and can be reached by road (approx 1 hr) or river boat (around 1.5 hrs). Visitors can finish the trip at the 'whisky village' where the local Laolao (lao rice spirit) is made. There are two caves - one on the entry level and another - the upper caves - on top of the hill. Visitors are advised to bring along or torch to see the upper cave, as it is dark.

### Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre

This small but perfectly formed museum is dedicated to the ethnic cultures of Laos.

### Ock Pop Tok Living Craft Centre

Situated on the banks of the Mekong just 2 km south of Luang Prabang town, the centre offers an informative free tour to all visitors. Operating as a fairtrade traditional weaving centre, visitors can also take classes in bamboo / textile weaving, dyeing of silk, drawing batik or just relax at the Mekong garden cafe.

## **Food**

Food in Luang Prabang ranges from the standard Southeast Asian backpacker fare to more traditional Lao dishes, including buffalo sausage right up to very high quality French cuisine. There are also numerous market stalls for cheaper food, including baguettes and pancakes. Stalls along the alleyways between the night market end of Sisavangvong Road and the Mekong offers superb Lao street food at bargain prices.

## DO'S AND DON'TS FOR CULTURALLY SENSITIVE TRAVEL IN LAOS

- The Lao word for hello is "Sabai Dee", usually said with a smile. Touching or showing affection in public will embarrass your hosts.
- Traditionally, Lao people greet each other by pressing their palms together to "nop", although it is acceptable for men to shake hands.
- In Laos, your head is "high", your feet is "low". Using your feet for anything other than walking or playing sport is generally considered rude.
- Touching someone's head is very, very impolite.
- Lao people appreciate clean and neatly dressed visitors.
- Being topless in public is impolite.
- Please remember to take your shoes off before you enter a Lao person's home.
- Remember, your head is "high", your feet is "low". It is polite to gently crouch down when passing someone who is seated. You should never step over someone in your path.
- Kissing and hugging in public is impolite. Please be discrete.
- Lao people speak softly and avoid confrontation. Please do not shout or raise your voice.
- Before you take a photograph of someone, ask if it is OK.
- Please do not distribute gifts to children as it encourages begging, but give to an established organisation or village elders instead.
- Try eating delicious Lao food whenever you can. It helps local businesses and Lao farmers
- Please show respect and dress neatly while in temples and when

taking photos.

- There are many other sacred items and sites in Laos. Please don't touch or enter these places without permission.
- Monks are revered and respected in Laos. Women should not touch a monk or a monk's robes nor his alms bowl.
- Please help to keep Laos clean and beautiful by not leaving litter. Picking up rubbish sets a good example for Lao youth.
- The illegal sale of wildlife and wildlife products endanger many species native to Laos. Help protect Lao wildlife by refusing to buy wildlife products.
- Please help prevent forest fires.
- Laos loses a little of its heritage every time an antique is taken out of the country. Please do not buy antique Buddha statues or other sacred items. Instead, support local craftsmen by purchasing new, quality handicrafts.
- The use of drugs is illegal in Laos. The consequences will be severe for you and Lao society.

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