

Central Laos



The area at the waist of the country has traditionally been skipped over by most travellers. But improved roads and several sustainable tourism initiatives, which give you a full-flavoured taste of the 'real Laos', mean central Laos is more open to exploration than ever.

You might not be the first person to trek into the medieval limestone karsts of the Phu Hin Bun National Protected Area (NPA), but it will probably feel like you are and there won't be a banana pancake or happy shake for miles.

Instead, you'll find a diverse mix of ecology, environment and ethnicity that is very different to the north – and as much tough and memorable travel as you like. The Mekong River towns of Tha Khaek and Savannakhet, with their Lowland Lao communities, slowly crumbling French histories and lethargic lifestyles, will be your bases. This part of the country claims the most forest cover and the highest concentrations of wildlife, including some species that have disappeared elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

To find them, you could do 'The Loop' through Khammuan and Bolikhamsai Provinces by motorbike, detouring via the incredible 7km-long cave Tham Kong Lo in the process. Or trek into far-off Dong Phu Vieng NPA in Savannakhet Province to sleep with the spirits in a Katang village. Branches of the Ho Chi Minh Trail await the most intrepid, or just go forth and create your own trail...

HIGHLIGHTS

- Trek amid the gothic limestone karsts, subterranean caves and meandering rivers of the **Phu Hin Bun NPA** (p242)
- Do **The Loop** (boxed text, p252) and experience upcountry Laos; good roads, bad roads, stunning scenery, a big dam and unexpected challenges
- Soak up the colonial atmosphere of the historical districts of **Tha Khaek** (p244) and **Savannakhet** (p254)
- Stay in the remote villages of **Dong Phu Vieng NPA** (p262) and experience life in the spirit forests
- Go off the beaten track to **Tham Kong Lo** (p242) for a boat trip through this astonishing 7km-long limestone cave



