

# On the Road



**AUSTIN BUSH** *Coordinating Author*, **MARK ELLIOTT & NICK RAY**

It's a rare thing indeed when all the authors of a particular Lonely Planet guide are able to meet up *in situ*. But Team *Laos* was fortunate enough to arrange just such an encounter in Vientiane. Fuelled by numerous towers of Beerlao, we traded war stories, gossiped about our beloved employer and conducted some exceedingly in-depth 'research' at several watering holes. The result is a guide that we feel is collaborative, authoritative and fun, with, not surprisingly perhaps, the distinct hoppy aroma of a particular Lao brew... Pictured from left to right: Mark Elliott, Nick Ray and Austin Bush.

# Destination Laos

For centuries Laos was a buffer state, wedged between a pair of bigger neighbours, Thailand and Vietnam, and busy paying tribute to one, the other or both. In the 1960s and 1970s this balancing act came undone in spectacular fashion when, split down the middle in its role as a Cold War proxy for both American and communist forces, Laos became the most bombed country in history (see p35).

But nearly four decades after the end of the Second Indochina War, Laos is finally growing out of its role as buffer state and is becoming a crossroads in an increasingly globalised region. Pockets of pristine environment, diverse cultures and quite possibly the most chilled-out people on earth also mean that Laos is fast earning cult status among travellers.

Much of this change in Laos is relatively recent, having come in the years following the liberalisation policies of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and was largely funded by Western governments, financial institutions such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, and NGOs. But these contributors are increasingly being replaced by private enterprise and the world's newest superdonor – the People's Republic of China.

The physical signs are increasingly apparent. While most roads in Laos are still little more than country lanes, today many of the main routes are sealed, and Laos is now an important link in the so-called East–West Economic Corridor – a 1500km network of roads that connects four of the six Mekong countries. Laos will make some incidental money from the traffic on these roads, but the greater effect is in making its natural resources more accessible, and thus more open to development, most notably by the mining and energy sectors. If all goes to plan the money expected from a dizzying number of projects will allow Laos to help relieve poverty independently and break the reliance on foreign aid.

There are, however, a lot of real and potential downsides to this 'progress'. Having China as a major source of funding and as a political role model is unlikely to encourage the Lao government, which is already fearful of the effect opening up to the world will have on its culture and control, to adopt democratic reforms. In short, don't expect basic freedoms like speech, assembly or even uncensored song lyrics any time soon.

But it is this very cultural isolation that, ironically, has contributed to Laos's popularity as a tourist destination. The country still retains much of the tradition that has disappeared in a frenzy of bulldozers, concrete and reality TV elsewhere in the region. Village life is refreshingly simple and even in Vientiane it's hard to believe this sort of languid riverfront life exists in a national capital. Then, of course, there is the historic royal city of Luang Prabang, where watching as hundreds of saffron-robed monks move silently among centuries-old monasteries is as romantic a scene as you'll experience anywhere in Asia.

Away from the cities, the rivers that wind down to the Mekong, the forested mountains of the north, the gothic limestone karsts of central Laos and the 4000 riverine islands of the deep south are drawing travellers who are looking for nature, adventure or both. Kayaking, caving, rock-climbing and biking are all available, but it's the community-based trekking that is most popular because it combines spectacular natural attractions with the chance to experience the 'real Laos' with a village homestay (see the boxed text, p45) – while spending your money where it's needed most.

## FAST FACTS

Area: 236,800 sq km

Border countries: Cambodia, China, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam

Population: 6.8 million (2009 estimate)

Official language: Lao

Literacy: 69%

GDP per capita (purchasing power parity): US\$2110 (2008 estimate)

Inflation: 8.6% (2008 estimate)

Original name: Lan Xang Hom Khao (Million Elephants, White Parasol)

Approximate number of elephants in Laos today: around 2000

Laos's share of the Mekong River: 1865km

In recent years, the Lao government has recognised that ecotourism (see the boxed text, p73) has grown into a primary source of income and helps channel money to some of the poorest parts of society. And many small-scale projects, from community-based treks and tours in Khammuan Province to the Jhai Coffee Farmer Cooperative (see the boxed text, p300) on the Bolaven Plateau, are improving the deal for the rural poor.

But Laos's environment faces alarming threats. Unplanned or illegal logging has been a serious problem for years. But it's the dozens of hydroelectric dams (see the boxed text, p81) due to be built in the next decade, many by companies with poor reputations for looking after local communities or the environment, that have the potential to change ecosystems dramatically, rapidly and permanently.

The challenge for Laos is to balance all these competing interests, to make the most of its opportunities as a conduit of trade and tourist destination without being overwhelmed by the interests of others. For a country with much experience of being squeezed by outsiders, but little in the way of successful outcomes, it won't be an easy road. But for travellers with a desire to witness a country truly in flux, with one foot seemingly steadfast in a Communist-era time warp, and the other stepping towards a modern future, the Laos of today is a fascinating destination indeed.

# Getting Started

With 30-day visas now available to most travellers when they arrive (p328), your most pressing pre-departure concerns are finding good books to read up on Laos, working out which route to take and getting enough cash to last you through the trip. Laos is a low-maintenance destination and an easy place to travel that's most rewarding to those ready to embrace the laid-back Lao way of life. Don't expect everything to be on time; do pack a smile and prepare to slide down a few gears.

## WHEN TO GO

The best time for visiting most of Laos is between November and February, when it rains the least and is not too hot. It's also Laos's main season for both national and regional *bun* (festivals; see p319).

If you plan to focus on the mountainous northern provinces, the early rainy season (around June) is not bad, as temperatures are moderate at higher elevations. The mountains are also (relatively) tolerable during the hot season (from March to May), although they're often obscured by smoke from swidden agriculture. Southern Laos, on the other hand, is best avoided during the hot season, when day-time temperatures break into the 40s and nights aren't much cooler.

The rainy season is not as bad as you might think. While it will rain – very heavily – the downpours are often fairly brief and can be bracketed by long periods of sunshine. The rains also clear dust from the skies and land, making everything clearer and brighter. Of course, there are downsides; unsealed roads can become quagmires and extensive travel in remote areas like Salavan, Phongsali and Sainyabuli might be impossible. River travel can be a good alternative during these months. If you intend to travel extensively by river, November is the best; flooding has usually subsided yet river levels are still high enough for maximum navigability. Between January and June, low water can make navigating some rivers difficult.

December to February and August are the peak tourist times. January, in particular, is very busy and booking ahead is advisable.

## TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

Travelling responsibly in Laos involves little more than being considerate. Consider what impact your actions will have and you'll most likely do the right thing by yourself and the people and country of Laos. Environmental considerations include the obvious, such as avoiding littering and not having your towels washed every day, but are also impacted by the companies you choose to use for activities such as trekking; for green businesses in Laos see p375. Perhaps the most satisfying, sustainable and memorable responsible travel is using homestay accommodation. Not only do you bring money directly into the community, but you'll also get the chance to experience the 'real Laos' firsthand.

## COSTS & MONEY

Laos is an inexpensive country to visit by almost any standards. Not including transport you could squeeze by on US\$7 a day in the provinces, somewhat more in Luang Prabang and Vientiane. But that means slumming it in the very cheapest guesthouses and eating nothing but noodle soup. A budget of US\$20 a day brings with it decent food and simple accommodation (p312) with basic attached bathroom. When you add air-con, hot water and *jalang*

See Climate Charts p316 for more information.

(Western) food, costs are around US\$25 to US\$30 per day if you economise. The sky's the limit if you plump for top-end dining and hotels (Luang Prabang's priciest suites cost more than US\$1400) but such luxuries are limited to Vientiane, Luang Prabang and a very few tour-friendly locations.

Add to these estimates the cost of transport, which varies considerably depending on how fast you're moving. Flying domestically (p339) costs from US\$80 to US\$160 per sector. Long-distance boat rides typically cost around US\$10 and are an attraction in themselves. Most bus trips cost between US\$2 and US\$20; see the boxed text, p114 for a better idea of costs. Also be sure to factor in enough for the various adventure activities that make Laos so special – eg from around US\$18/35 a day in a group/alone for organised treks.

Most of your costs will be paid in Lao kip but, depending on where you are, you might be able to use US dollars, Thai baht and even Chinese yuan (RMB). Indeed in some border towns they're preferred. In this book we quote prices in the currency that any given establishment prefers. Credit cards are really only accepted in Vientiane and Luang Prabang. ATMs are still only available in a handful of provincial capitals so pack plenty of convertible cash (US dollars or Thai baht) especially if you're arriving at more remote borders or plan to go trekking before reaching a larger city.

## READING UP

Relatively little has been written about Laos but there are enough books to keep you interested before you leave and while you're on the road.

### Travel Literature

The classic travellers' account of Laos is Norman Lewis' *A Dragon Apparent: Travels In Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam*, written after the author's 1952 trip through French Indochina. It contains this passage on Laos: 'Europeans who come here to live, soon acquire a certain recognisable manner. They develop quiet voices, and gentle, rapt expressions'.

*One Foot in Laos* (1999) by Dervla Murphy is the veteran Irish writer's account of her lone bicycle trip through off-the-beaten-track Laos, written with passion for the local people. It includes some stinging assessments of travellers and modern ways.

*Another Quiet American* (2003), Brett Dakin's account of two years working at the National Tourism Authority of Laos, reveals a lot about what drives (or not) people working in Laos, both local and *falang*.

Foodies will appreciate *Ant Egg Soup* (2004), Natacha Du Pont De Bie's culinary-based travelogue that also includes recipes and illustrations.

More recent is *In the Naga's Wake* (2006) by Mick O'Shea, the Lao-based adventurer who details his epic kayaking trip down the Mekong River from source to sea.

Several classic travel narratives by 19th-century French visitors to Laos have been translated into English, including Henri Mouhot's *Travels in Siam, Cambodia, and Laos*. The book covers the 1858 to 1860 trip which resulted in the explorer's death – he's buried near Luang Prabang (p170).

### Other Books

The vast majority of books on Laos are historical or political works and deal mainly with events of the last century or so.

For well-written, lucid histories it's hard to go past *A History of Laos* by Martin Stuart-Fox, who also wrote the history chapter in this book (p23), and *A Short History of Laos: The Land in Between* (2002) by Grant Evans. Both are wonderfully easy to read and don't require an in-depth foreknowledge of Laos. Evans's most recent title, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty: A*

### HOW MUCH?

A bowl of noodles in rural Laos 5000K

A French meal in Vientiane US\$15

Budget room with air-con US\$6-19

Homestay with Lao family 30,000K, plus 20,000K for meals

Internet access per hour 4000-18,000K

Bus from Vientiane to Luang Prabang 95,000-115,000K

Laos's internet country code is .la

### DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT ...

The range can be limited, but most of what you'll need while travelling can be found in Laos for less than you'd spend at home. There are, however, a few things you shouldn't forget, not least a deep well of patience, your sense of humour and a dose of perspective when a reality check is required. More tangible objects are:

- a sarong (for both women and men) to stay modest while bathing Lao style
- photos of family to show when language is a barrier
- a phrasebook to make that barrier more surmountable
- contraceptives and tampons if needed
- good sunscreen and mosquito repellent, and a small torch (flashlight) for caves and villages without electricity
- light wash-and-wear clothes
- slip-on shoes or sandals – cool to wear and easy to remove before entering a Lao home or temple
- a Leatherman (or similar) tool, sunglasses and a bandana if you're planning on motorbiking
- a sweater/pullover or light jacket for the cool season, mountainous provinces and overnight buses

*Documentary History* (2009), is a mixture of photos, letters, interviews and essays that detail one of the most obscure monarchies in modern history.

Those wishing to get their head around some of the more confusing aspects of Lao culture should pick up Robert Cooper's *Culture Shock! Laos* (2008). Cooper also started **Lao Insight Books** ([www.acvientiane.com/bookshops/lao-insight/](http://www.acvientiane.com/bookshops/lao-insight/)), the Lao-based publishing company with a number of titles exclusively concerning Laos. Lao Insight books can be found at Cooper's Vientiane bookshop, Book Cafe (p85).

Several books have been written about Laos's role in the Second Indochina War. *The Ravens: Pilots of the Secret War of Laos* (1987), by Christopher Robbins, is a fast-paced account of the American pilots hired by the CIA to fly in Laos, where they weren't allowed to wear uniforms because the war didn't officially exist. *Shooting at the Moon: The Story of America's Clandestine War in Laos* (1998), by Roger Warner, and *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (2000), by John Prados, are well-respected accounts of the war, the CIA and Hmong role in it, and the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

For a first-person account of this period, *I Little Slave* (2006), by Bounsang Khamkeo, describes the French-educated author's account of surviving *samana*, the notorious re-education camps of post-revolutionary Laos, before emigrating to the United States.

Journalist Christopher Kremmer has written two entertaining books detailing his pursuit of the truth behind the final demise of the Lao monarchy in the late 1970s: *Stalking the Elephant Kings: In Search of Laos* (1998) and *Bamboo Palace: Discovering the Lost Dynasty of Laos* (2003).

*Mekong* (2000) by Milton Osborne is a more scholarly record of the role of the mighty Mekong River in regional history and modern politics. Anne Fadiman's award-winning *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (1997) looks at the tragic clash of cultures between a family of Hmong migrants and their American doctors.

There are very few novels set in Laos, the best of them probably being *The Honourable Schoolboy*, John Le Carré's Cold War thriller in which much of the action is set in surreal wartime Vientiane. More recently, Colin

# TOP 10



## FABULOUS FESTIVALS

Laos boasts a couple of festivals (p319) a month, year-round, not to mention public holidays. Here are the most impressive:

- 1 Makha Busa (Full Moon; national) February (p319)
- 2 Bun Wat Phu (Champasak) February (p281)
- 3 Elephant Festival (various locations in Sainyabuli Province) mid-February (p182)
- 4 Bun Pha Wet (national) March (p319)
- 5 Bun Pi Mai Lao (Lao New Year; Luang Prabang) April (p154)
- 6 Bun Bang Fai (Rocket Festival; national) May (p319)
- 7 Bun Khao Phansa (national) July (p319)
- 8 Bun Awk Phansa (national) October (p320)
- 9 Bun Nam (Boat Racing Festival; Vientiane, Savannakhet, Huay Xai) October (p100)
- 10 Bun Pha That Luang (Vientiane) October-November (p100)

## OUTDOOR THRILLS – INTO THE WILD

There's no better country in Asia to get outside and adventurous.

- 1 Mounting a week-long expedition to Nong Fa in the Dong Amphan NPA (p311)
- 2 Boating through the 7km-long Tham Kong Lo cave (p242)
- 3 Being among the first to go on deep-forest 'tiger treks' from Vieng Thong (p203)
- 4 Kayaking down one of the Nam Ou's most spectacular sections between Muang Ngoi Neua and Nong Khiaw (p222)
- 5 Rock-climbing the caves and karsts of Vang Vieng (p133)
- 6 Playing Tarzan for three days zipping through forests and sleeping in wilderness treehouses on the brilliant Gibbon Experience (p174)
- 7 Trekking into timeless Akha villages in fascinating Phongsali province (see p231)
- 8 Blazing a trail to the virtually unvisited caves at Tham Lot Se Bang Fai and Hin Namno NPA (p253)
- 9 Riding a motorbike around southern Laos for a week (p297)
- 10 Climbing Phu Asa by elephant (p283)

## LAO-STYLE MÚAN (FUN)

Just saying 'yes' to that weird-sounding dish, drink or experience is fun, Lao style.

- 1 Bumping along in the back of a *sáwngháew* with loads of Lao people, chickens and rice (p340)
- 2 Challenging the locals to a game of *petang* (p48)
- 3 Drinking delicious Beerlao with ice (p64)
- 4 Ditching the tourist restaurants for an authentic Lao market meal (p62)
- 5 Sharing *lào-lào* (whisky) or a jar of *lào-hái* (jar liquor; home-brewed rice wine; p64)
- 6 Shopping for coffee and woven silk in the villages of southern Laos
- 7 Smiling at everyone you see
- 8 Taking a wash in the Mekong at Don Daeng (p281)
- 9 Tucking in to sticky rice and *làoap* (meat salad) with your host family in a village homestay (p45)
- 10 Watching monks collect alms in early morning Luang Prabang (p155)

### MOBILE PHONE NUMBERS IN LAOS

In 2010, another digit was introduced to Lao mobile phone numbers. Confusingly for travellers, the digit added corresponds to the number's provider, which can be identified by the first digit of the phone number (after the 020-). Thus, if a number begins with 4, 5 or 6, a 5 is added to beginning of the number (ie the former 020-560 6549 becomes 020-5560 6549); if a number begins with 7, a 7 is added; and if a number begins with 8 or 9, a 9 is added. For now there's no extra digit added if a number begins with 2 or 3, but this may change. We have aimed to provide numbers that were correct at the time of research, but be aware that you may see incorrect numbers on tourist information and that there may be further changes.

Cotterill's seven (and counting) well-received Dr. Siri books intertwine mystery and mysticism in post-revolutionary Vientiane.

### INTERNET RESOURCES

Laos doesn't have a huge web presence, but it is improving. These are the best we've found this time around:

**Lao Bumpkin** (<http://laobumpkin.blogspot.com>) 'Travel, food and other things connected to Laos and the Lao people, or maybe not.'

**how lao, brown cow** (<http://howlabrowncow.com>) Written by an Oregonian teaching English in northern Laos, this is a blog about travel, expat life and education, heavy on the Bob Dylan quotes.

**BBC** ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/country\\_profiles/1154621.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/country_profiles/1154621.stm))

**Library of Congress** (<http://rs6.loc.gov/frd/cs/latoc.html>)

**Ecotourism Laos** ([www.ecotourismlaos.com](http://www.ecotourismlaos.com)) Simple but stylish website full of information about the Lao environs, focussing on trekking and other ecotourism activities. Recommended.

**lao\*miao\*** (<http://laomeow.blogspot.com>) Up to date transportation details, mostly regarding northern Laos, culled from a variety of sources.

**Lao National Tourism Administration** ([www.tourismlaos.org](http://www.tourismlaos.org)) Mostly up-to-date travel information from the government. Also has accurate exchange rates for the Lao kip and a good list of links.

**Lao News Agency** ([www.kplnet.net](http://www.kplnet.net)) Best source of current news on Laos.

**Library of Congress** ([www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov)) Probably the most complete online resource about Laos, with thorough and regularly updated accounts of history, culture and politics.

**Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) The Thorn Tree forum is the place to get the latest feedback from the road.

**Travelfish** ([www.travelfish.org](http://www.travelfish.org)) The most consistently updated website for independent travellers in Southeast Asia, including excellent coverage of Lao border crossings.

**Vientiane Times** ([www.vientianetimes.org.la](http://www.vientianetimes.org.la)) Website of the country's only English-language newspaper, and operated by the government.



# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### THE NORTH

#### One to Two Weeks/Huay Xai to Vientiane

The northern route has emerged as the standard Laos trip, but is still one of the best samplers for anyone who wants a good dose of the country in a relatively short time.

Enter Laos via ferry from Chiang Khong in Thailand to **Huay Xai** (p172) before boarding one of the slow boats that ply the Mekong to Luang Prabang. This two-day voyage requires an overnight stay in the small riverside village of **Pak Beng** (p179); the scenery along the Mekong River is a terrific mix of villages, limestone cliffs and intermittent forest.

Sightseeing in and around **Luang Prabang** (p143), Laos's atmospheric former royal capital, can easily occupy a week.

From here, continue southward along stunning Rte 13, stopping in **Vang Vieng** (p130), a modern-day travellers' centre surrounded by craggy, cave-studded limestone peaks. After a few days of river-tubing and cave hikes, head to **Vientiane** (p84), Laos's semibustling capital city.

Pass quiet village ports and rugged gorges boating along the Mekong to Luang Prabang, then follow Rte 13, which winds high into the mountains between Kasi and Vang Vieng toward Vientiane, to complete this 700km route.



## THE SOUTH

### One to Three Weeks/Vientiane to Si Phan Don

This classic route takes you through the heartland of Lowland Lao culture, a world of broad river plains planted with rice, and homemade looms shaded by wooden houses on stilts.

Start in **Vientiane** (p84), the country's capital, and soak up the food, shopping, historical sights and nightlife (it gets quieter from here). Head south to **Tha Khaek** (p244), the archetypal sleepy Mekong riverside town, and go east on Rte 12 to explore the caves of **Khammuan Limestone** (p251) or take **The Loop** (p252) all the way around, stopping at the incredible **Tham Kong Lo** (p242).

Continue south to **Savannakhet** (p254), where you'll get a taste of how postcolonial Vientiane looked before it received a makeover from the Lao PDR government and international aid.

Roll on southward to **Pakse** (p267) and, if you don't have enough time to go east, through to tranquil **Champasak** (p276). This town is the base for seeing Laos's most important archaeological site, **Wat Phu Champasak** (p278), Angkor-style temple ruins stepping up the slopes of sacred Phu Pasak.

Make a final short hop to **Si Phan Don** (Four Thousand Islands; p285), an archipelago of idyllic river islands where the farming and fishing life hasn't changed much for a century or more. Swing in a hammock and relax, before moving on to Cambodia or heading to Thailand via Chong Mek.



This route covers about 700km of river plains and rolling hills, bridging clear streams and tracing traditional Lao villages as Rte 13 follows the Mekong south. Expect to move by bus, *sāwngthāew*, motorbike and boat as you make your way south. Depending on time, take as many diversions east of Rte 13 as you can.

## ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

### NORTHERN WILDERNESS Two to Three Weeks/Udomxai to Vietnam or Phonsavan

This route explores the little-visited mountain villages, rivers and caves of the north. Don't forget your phrasebook. Start in underrated **Udomxai** (p209) with a visit to the vast **Chom Ong Caves** (p213) plus pretty **Muang La** (p213), home to a 'magical' Buddha image.

Take the bumpy but scenic road to **Phongsali** (p231), a curious hill-town famous for its tea fields and top-quality green 'whisky'. Nowhere makes a better starting point for treks into timeless thatched-hut villages, many belonging to the Akha tribe, whose distinctive belief systems and photogenic costumes make any visit memorable. Return south on a one-day riverboat ride from **Hat Sa** (p233) to charming **Muang Khua** (p227). A new daily bus route links the town to Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam. Or you could continue another day down the beautiful Nam Ou (Ou River) to **Muang Ngoi Neua** (p207) and **Nong Khiaw** (p204). Both are traveller-friendly villages that share some of northern Laos' most stunning rural scenery. From Nong Khiaw, head east via 'tiger town' **Vieng Thong** (p203) to intriguing **Sam Neua** (p196). The main attraction there is an excursion to **Vieng Xai** (p200), where the communist Pathet Lao government spent nine years dodging US bombs by living in caves (from 1964 to 1973). The cave settings are gorgeous and the guided visits brilliant. From Sam Neua a daily bus to Vietnam takes a grand route past many more such caves. Or you could backtrack to **Phonsavan** (p189) and the mysterious **Plain of Jars** (p193).

Visit caverns, traditional villages and mysterious relics on this adventure that will take you along divergent paths leading to two of Laos's most remote and beautiful border crossings with Vietnam.



## BOLAVEN & BEYOND

10 to 14 days/Pakse to Pakse

This trip into the remote provinces of southern Laos can be done by private vehicle, including small motorbikes, or more slowly – but more socially – by public transport. It's best in the dry season.

After a day or two getting organised in **Pakse** (p267), head up onto the **Bolaven Plateau** (p298) and to Laos's most impressive waterfall at **Tat Fan** (p298). At the coffee capital of **Paksong** (p299), you could stop to buy some java before continuing on to **Sekong** (p306), passing through Laven, Katang and other villages en route. Sleepy **Attapeu** (p308) is an easy place to hang out; interrupt your sunsets by the Se Kong with a bumpy day trip out to the village of **Pa-am** (p310) on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and an overnight homestay in the **Se Pian NPA** (p311). Or undertake an overland adventure to the remote jungle-clad lake of **Nong Fa** (p311), formerly an R'n'R stop on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, now accessible by road.

Head back up Rte 16, through Sekong and turn north at Tha Taeng on a long, downhill laterite road to Beng. Check out **Salavan** (p303) for a day and, if the season is right, arrange transport along the rarely travelled road to **Tahoy** (p304), once an important marker on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and now a more peaceful but thoroughly remote home of the Ta-oy people.

Beautiful **Tat Lo** (p301) and its inevitable crowd of backpackers will be a shock after days with little, if any, contact with Westerners, and **Utayan Bajiang Champasak** (p276) makes an attractive lunch spot on the easy trip back to Pakse.



On this journey of roughly 650km you'll climb into the coffee-growing districts of the Bolaven Plateau, see spectacular waterfalls, and visit villages little changed since the end of the Second Indochina War.

## TAILORED TRIPS

### ACTION JACKSON TOUR

Laos has plenty on offer for those who like the outdoors. Start with a hike, kayak trip or bike ride in the **Nam Ha NPA** (p141) or zip through forests and sleep in treehouses at the **Gibbon Experience** (p174).



Head to **Vang Vieng** (p130), the activities capital of the country, where there are a myriad of rock-climbing, kayaking and biking options.

Go kayaking along the Nam Lik (Lik River), combining this with a spin on the **Nam Lik Jungle Fly** (p129) or a stay at the **Nam Lik Eco-Village** (p129). In **Vientiane** (p84), stop long enough for a massage at **Wat Sok Pa Luang** (p97) to work out some of the knots, before trekking into **Phu Khao Khuay NPA** (p118) in search of elephants.

Head south to Tha Khaek and get on a trek into the **Phu Hin Bun NPA** (p242), with its magical waterholes and incredible 7km-long boat ride through the **Tham Kong Lo** (p242) cave. If you fancy more tough trekking, head to **Pakse** (p267) and get yourself on a trek into the **Se Pian NPA** (p285), before rounding out your stay

in Laos with an elephant ride to the mysterious temple ruins of **Phu Asa** (p283) or a boat trip around the pretty islands of **Si Phan Don** (p285).

### LAO CULTURE TOUR

Start in **Vientiane**, probably the best place to dip your toe in the pool of Lao culture, and take a course in Lao cooking, weaving or language. With your newfound knowledge in hand, board a bus following the flow of the Mekong south to **Savannakhet** (p254), a bastion of Lao Loum (Lowland Lao) culture. Hire a motorcycle and explore the villages and temples of **Champhone** (p261) or do a homestay and gather forest products with locals in the sacred forest of **Dong Natad** (p260).

Head north to **Luang Prabang** (p143) to visit the city's numerous temples, where you can also join pious locals in making a ceremonial offering to the

saffron-robed monks during their *tak bat* dawn procession. From Luang Prabang, there are several fascinating options for exploring the ethnic diversity of northern Laos. Depending on the tribe you stay with, you might discover the power of names to the Hmong in **Ban Phakeo** (p195) observe Lenten papermaking in **Ban Nam Di** (p217), drink Boi K'Dang through long straws with the Khamu people near the **Chom Ong Caves** (p213), visit centuries-old tea slopes in **Ban Komaen** (p233) encounter Thai Lü elephant handlers around **Hongsa** (p181), or smoke giant bamboo bongs outside **Muang Sing** (p223) with the most visually distinctive of all Laotian peoples, the Akha.



# The Authors



## **AUSTIN BUSH** Coordinating Author, *Vientiane & Around, Central Laos*

After graduating from the University of Oregon, Austin Bush received a scholarship to study Thai at Chiang Mai University and has remained in Thailand ever since. Several years of working at a stable job were encouragement enough to make the questionable decision to pursue a career as a freelance photographer/writer. This choice has since taken him as far as northern Pakistan and as near as Bangkok's Or Tor Kor Market. Examples of his work can be seen at [www.austinbushphotography.com](http://www.austinbushphotography.com).



## **MARK ELLIOTT**

### **Northern Laos**

Mark Elliott's career path has proved as crooked as any cross-Laos highway. A trained chemistry teacher, he spent three years entertaining bemused Japanese villagers, danced rain dances in Gambia and has crossed the world's deepest lake – in a truck. He has been visiting Laos since 1995 and previously covered the country for numerous travel publishers. He lives in Belgium with an understanding wife who found him at a Turkmenistan camel market. The camel would have been cheaper.



## **NICK RAY**

### **Southern Laos**

A Londoner of sorts, Nick comes from Watford, the sort of town that makes you want to travel. He first travelled to Laos in 1995, spending a few days on a cargo barge from Luang Prabang to Vientiane. Nick jumped at the chance to tackle southern Laos and spent time exploring the hinterland by motorbike. Nick lives in Phnom Penh with his wife Kulikar and his young children Julian and Belle. When not writing, he is often out exploring the remote parts of Indochina as a location scout and manager for the world of TV and film and has worked on productions such as the movies *Tomb Raider* and *Two Brothers*.

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## CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

**Martin Stuart-Fox** wrote the History chapter. Martin is Professor Emeritus in the School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics at the University of Queensland, Australia. He first worked in Laos from 1963 to 1965 as a journalist, before covering the Vietnam War for two years. On his return to Australia, Martin joined the University of Queensland. He retired in 2005 after five years as Head of History. He has written dozens of articles and seven books on Laos, including *A History of Laos* (1997), *The Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang* (1998) and *Buddhist Kingdom, Marxist State* (2nd ed, 2002). His latest books are *Naga Cities of the Mekong* (2006), narrating the histories of Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Champasak, and *Festivals of Laos* (with Somsanouk Mixay).

**Steven Schipani** wrote the Ecotourism in Laos boxed text (p73). Steven was born in New York City and raised on the Atlantic coast of Long Island, New York. He first went to Asia as a United States Peace Corps volunteer, serving in Thailand from 1994 to 1996. He has worked as a professional guide, fisherman, Thai and Lao language interpreter, and has travelled extensively in Southeast Asia. Since 1999 Steven has been employed by Unesco, the Asian Development Bank, and a number of other international organisations advising on sustainable ecotourism development and heritage management in Laos. His interests include fishing, forest trekking, indigenous knowledge and Lao food. He has one son named Michael.

**Dr Trish Batchelor** wrote the Health chapter (p345). Trish is a general practitioner and travel medicine specialist who works at the CIWEC Clinic in Kathmandu, Nepal, as well as being a Medical Advisor to the Travel Doctor New Zealand clinics. Trish teaches travel medicine through the University of Otago, and is interested in underwater and high-altitude medicine, and in the impact of tourism on host countries. She has travelled extensively through Southeast and East Asia and particularly loves high-altitude trekking in the Himalayas.

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