

Northern Laos



If a careless god grabbed a giant sheet of green paper and crumpled it into a ball, the contours would resemble northern Laos. At every turn, convoluted rivers curl through layers of mountain ridges. Hidden amid these lush folds, the former royal capital of Luang Prabang is by far Laos' most magical city and the region's tourist magnet. By contrast, other northern towns are functional places, rebuilt after wholesale bombing during the 20th-century Indochina wars. During that terrible period, much of the population hid for years in caves around lovely Vieng Xai and majestic Nong Khiaw. Add to this the Lao predilection for rebuilding rather than restoring the few old temples that did survive, and you'll understand why there are so few historic buildings to be found. But that's not why you come to northern Laos. What appeals here is the rural life. Thatch, bamboo and timber houses abound, giving virtually any village a timeless, photogenic quality. The relatively sparse population forms an intriguing melting pot of cultures, best explored while trekking. River trips also offer a wonderful way to discover the bucolic scenery as well as a practical alternative to tortuous bus rides.

This chapter starts with Luang Prabang, loops anticlockwise from Huay Xai around to Muang Sing, then finishes with relatively isolated Phongsali Province.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Go wat-hopping and market-shopping in regal **Luang Prabang** (p143)
- Zip-line high above forested valleys and into rustic tree-houses on the **Gibbon Experience** (p174) near Huay Xai
- Take a boat ride or kayak down the Nam Ou between **Muang Ngoi Neua** (p207) and **Nong Khiaw** (p204)
- Play amateur anthropologist in homestays with some of Laos' last traditionally costumed tribal families on treks out of **Phongsali** (p231)
- See for yourself what it meant to spend nine years hiding from aerial bombardment at the haunting **Vieng Xai caves** (p200)
- Amble through Xieng Khuang's **Plain of Jars** (p193)
- Drive to Vang Vieng along scenic **Rte 13** (p171)
- Trek into the forests of **Nam Ha NPA** (p218)



Climate

The ideal season to visit northern Laos is roughly November to mid-February when there's little rain and skies are reasonably clear. Days typically range from warm to hot once the sun burns through the chilly morning mists, but you'll often need a decent jacket to deal with colder night-time temperatures in higher mountainous areas (particularly Luang Namtha, Phongsali, Xieng Khuang and Hua Phan provinces).

Wrap yourself up warmly if motorcycling before 10am. As the dry season continues, river levels drop and by February some sections of the Mekong and Nam Tha might be too low for navigation. March is a bad time to visit the whole region as the air becomes choked with smoke and visibility is severely reduced thanks to the widespread fires of slash-and-burn agriculture. In April the searing heat of the Mekong Valley is tempered by a week of good-humoured water throwing

WHICH RIVER TRIP?

Until the 1990s, riverboats were an essential form of inter-city passenger transport in Laos. Today villagers in roadless hamlets still travel by river, while several longer distance routes remain possible thanks in significant part to tourist interest. In each case the journey is an attraction in itself.

Mekong Longboats

- **Luang Prabang–Pak Ou** (four hours return; p169) The typical tourist taster for those with no time for anything longer.

Mekong Slowboats

- **Huay Xai–Pak Beng** or **Pak Beng–Luang Prabang** (one day; p176) Both sectors are very pleasant one-day rides. Boats are designed for 70 passengers but are sometimes seriously overcrowded. The seats are usually very hard, but you can get up and walk around. There's a toilet on board and usually a stall selling biscuits and overpriced beer.
- **Huay Xai–Luang Prabang** (two days; p177) Take the *Luang Say*, and travel in relative luxury on a boat that is a similar size to the Mekong slowboats but carries only 40 passengers. Packages are pricey but include meals, sightseeing stops and excellent overnight accommodation in Pak Beng.
- **Pak Lai–Vientiane** (one day; p187) Completely untouristy, but only runs once or twice a week.

Mekong Speedboats

- **Huay Xai–Luang Prabang** (one day; p177) Scarily fast, potentially dangerous and excruciatingly uncomfortable if you're not both small and supple.
- **Xieng Kok–Muang Mom** (three hours; p178) There's similar speedboat dangers and problems but it's virtually the only way to see this attractive stretch of the Mekong.

Nam Tha Boats

- **Luang Namtha–Huay Xai longboat** or **Na Lae–Huay Xai longboat** (two days; p222) Escape the tourist trail on an open boat with a maximum capacity of around six. One night is spent in the boatman's village. Scenery is attractive but only gets at all dramatic for a one-hour section around Ban Phaeng. When the river levels are low there's lots of rapids-shooting. Trying to organise this one can get pricey or time-consuming.
- **Hat Sat–Muang Khua, Muang Khua–Nong Khiaw, Nong Khiaw–Luang Prabang riverboats** (one day each; Muang Khua p229, Nong Khiaw p206) A traveller favourite; covered boats usually depart daily on each sector. Boats typically hold up to 20 people in sometimes cramped conditions. Bring your own snacks. Arguably the most scenically dramatic sections of any navigable river in Laos are an hour or two's ride in either direction from Nong Khiaw. Much of that you can see from the twice-daily boat between Nong Khiaw and Muang Ngoi Neua (90 minutes upstream, 70 minutes downstream).