

Southern Laos



An enticing blend of archetypal Mekong River life, ancient Khmer temples, the cooler climes of the Bolaven Plateau and three remote and little-visited eastern provinces make southern Laos a region of stark contrasts for the adventurous traveller. The whole area remains refreshingly raw, but as with other parts of Laos a series of community-based tourism projects have made it possible to experience an authentic Laos far from the beaten track.

The obvious, almost unavoidable staging point is Pakse, the Mekong riverside capital of Champasak Province with a relaxed ambience for a 'city'. From here the Mekong flows south past the ancient Khmer religious complex at Wat Phu Champasak and Don Daeng, before expanding its girth at Si Phan Don, the 'four thousand islands' that straddle the Cambodian border. Among this stunningly beautiful maze of waterways are the palm-lined Don Khong, Don Det and Don Khon, where you can soak up the million-dollar sunsets from your hammock.

Heading east from Pakse you climb to the cooler climes of the Bolaven Plateau, with its picturesque waterfalls and high-grade coffee. Keep going and you start getting well off the beaten track and into the little visited provinces of Salavan, Sekong and Attapeu where minority ethnic groups are still surprised to see *falang* visitors. The adventurous at heart can tackle the southern swing motorbike loop. So whether you're seeking an off-beat experience or are happy just lazing in a riverside hammock, prepare to stay longer in southern Laos than planned.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Soak up the rural lifestyle from the horizontal perspective of your hammock on the laidback Mekong islands of **Si Phan Don** (p285)
- Wake up early for a dramatic sunrise at the ancient Khmer temple complex at **Wat Phu Champasak** (p278)
- Walk and wade your way into the jungles and stay in a remote Lavae village in the **Se Pian NPA** (p285)
- Gaze in awe at 100m-high waterfalls and sip fair-trade coffee on the cool **Bolaven Plateau** (p298)
- Ride out to the wild east of **Attapeu** (p308) and back via **Nam Tok Katamtok** (p307) on **the Southern Swing** (p297)



National Protected Areas

Southern Laos has six National Protected Areas (NPAs), covering habitats as diverse as the riverine forest along the Mekong River in Phu Xieng Thong NPA to the remote mountains of Se Xap NPA. For now Phu Xieng Thong (p275) and Se Pian NPA (p285) are the easiest to get in to, with village-based treks the best way to do it. Dong Hua Sao NPA, at the edge of the Bolaven Plateau, and the wilderness of Dong Amphan NPA can also be accessed with more time, money and organisation.

Climate

The Mekong Valley is hot most of the year but becomes hellishly so between March and

May. Some relief comes from relatively soothing river breezes, but not much. The Bolaven Plateau, on the other hand, is relatively cool all year, and from November to February it's downright cold after dark. The plateau also has its own mini weather system, which brings rain right into December.

Getting There & Around

There are three border crossings into southern Laos – one each from Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. Once you're in the region, the main roads are smooth and well serviced by buses and *sawnthuew* (passenger trucks). The exceptions are Rte 18 between Attapeu and Thang Beng in Champasak Province, and all the roads running north

