



Central Laos

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Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Inthira Restaurant (p198)
- ➔ Chai Dee (p205)
- ➔ Dao Savanh (p206)

Best Places to Stay

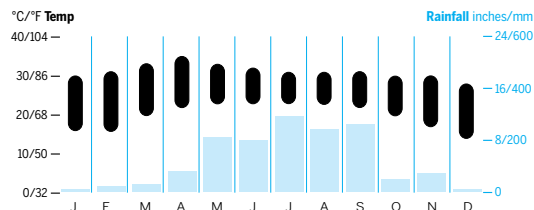
- ➔ Inthira Hotel (p197)
- ➔ Salsavan Guesthouse (p203)
- ➔ Thakhek Travel Lodge (p195)

Why Go?

Ever since Tha Khaek opened its French colonial petals to travellers a few years back and the dramatic 7km-long underworld of Tham Kong Lo became a must-see fixture on itineraries, central Laos with its honeycomb of caves and dragon-green jungle, has been enticing you to visit. Immersive treks in Dong Phu Vieng NPA allow you to sleep with the spirits in a Katang village, while caving and kayaking in Khammuan and Bolikhamxai Provinces can be organised in Tha Khaek.

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. With its rugged, intrepid travel, and stylish pockets of comfort in Savannakhet and Tha Khaek, central Laos makes for a great place to combine your inner Indiana Jones with a Bloody Mary.

When to Go Savannakhet



Nov–Feb The best time to visit: temperatures are balmy, paddy fields green and roads passable.

Mar–May Leading up to the monsoon, fields are dry and humidity up. Avoid the oven of the south.

Jun–Nov Pockets of intense rain, but sealed roads are passable, the landscape green and the air cool.

Climate

The Mekong River valley is always pretty warm and from March to May Savannakhet is positively steaming. It gets cooler as you head east towards the Annamite Chain and Lak Sao, and the villages along Rte 8B can be close to freezing during winter nights. The southwestern monsoon brings bucket loads of rain from June to October. Far-eastern areas around the Nakai-Nam Theun NBCA also receive rain from the South China Sea that lasts longer, thus supplying enough water to maintain the thicker vegetation.

National Protected Areas

Central Laos is the most protected part of the country with six national protected areas (NPAs) accounting for vast swathes of the region. Access to Nakai-Nam Theun NBCA, Hin Namno NPA and Se Ban Nuan NPA is limited to those with decent Lao language skills and plenty of time and money, but others are easy to get to.

In Khammuan Province the labyrinth of limestone karsts, caves and rivers in Phu Hin Bun NPA is accessible either on your own or on a community-based or commercial trek. Similar treks lead to the sacred forests and animist villages of Dong Phu Vieng in Savannakhet Province.

Getting There & Around

Rte 13 is sealed and thanks to its vital status as a Chinese trade route, it's particularly well maintained. Other decent roads include Rte 9 from Savannakhet to the Vietnamese border at Lao Bao, Rte 8 between Rte 13 and the Vietnamese border at Nam Phao, Rte 12 between Tha Khaek and the Vietnamese border, and the road to Tham Kong Lo.

BOLIKHAMSAI & KHAMMUAN PROVINCES

Bolikhamesai and Khammuan straddle the narrow, central 'waist' of the country. Physically the land climbs steadily from the Mekong River valley towards the north and east, eventually reaching the Annamite Chain bordering Vietnam, via an area of moderately high but often spectacular mountains. Laid-back Tha Khaek is the logical base.

Lowland Lao, who speak a dialect peculiar to these two provinces, dominate the population and, with smaller groups of tribal Thais, are the people you'll mostly meet. In remoter areas the Mon-Khmer-speaking Makong people (commonly known as Bru) make up more than 10% of the population

TREKKING IN CENTRAL LAOS

Underrated central Laos is a great place to combine a cultural and environmental experience. Most treks in central Laos are run by either the state-run eco-guide units in Tha Khaek and Savannakhet or the private company Green Discovery (p195), and range in cost from approximately US\$40 to US\$500 per person (prices drop significantly the greater the number of people in the group). Listed below are some particularly recommended trekking destinations in the region:

Phu Hin Bun NPA (p190) From Tha Khaek. For beauty, it's hard to beat these trekking and boating trips through the monolithic limestone karsts. Two- and three-day options are available at Tha Khaek's tourist information centre (p198), and four-day trips with Green Discovery.

Tham Lot Se Bang Fai/Hin Namno NPA (p201) From Tha Khaek. Although trekking here is still in its infancy and mostly revolves around the eponymous Nam Lot cave, it is also possible to combine a homestay with walks in the spectacular Hin Namno NPA. Enquire at Tha Khaek's tourist information centre or with Green Discovery.

Dong Natad (p208) From Savannakhet. One- and two-day trips to the provincial protected area near Savannakhet are cheap and popular for their homestays and explanations of how villagers use the sacred forest. Contact Savannakhet's eco-guide unit (p206) for details.

Dong Phu Vieng NPA (p208) From Savannakhet. This three-day trek (with a fair bit of road time at either end) takes you to two Katang villages where animist beliefs come with a host of taboos. It's a real head-bending cultural experience, but the transport makes prices a bit steep. Organised by Savannakhet's eco-guide unit.