



# Laos



THIS EDITION WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY

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## PLAN YOUR TRIP

Welcome to Laos .....	4
Laos Map .....	6
Laos' Top 10.....	8
Need to Know .....	16
If You Like.....	18
Month by Month.....	20
Itineraries .....	22
Outdoor Adventures....	26
Regions at a Glance.....	31

## ON THE ROAD

### LUANG PRABANG & AROUND..... 34

<b>Luang Prabang .....</b>	<b>35</b>
Sights .....	37
Activities .....	47
Courses .....	49
Tours .....	49
Festivals & Events .....	50
Sleeping .....	50
Eating .....	55
Drinking & Nightlife .....	58
Entertainment .....	59
Shopping .....	59
<b>Around Luang Prabang .....</b>	<b>63</b>
Pak Ou Caves .....	63
Tat Kuang Si .....	63
Tat Saë .....	65
Ban Phanom & Beyond.....	65

### NORTHERN LAOS ...66

<b>Xiang Khuang &amp; Hua Phan Provinces....</b>	<b>70</b>
Phonsavan .....	70
Around Phonsavan.....	75
Sam Neua (Xam Neua)....	78
Around Sam Neua .....	80
Sam Neua to Vietnam....	82
Sam Neua to Nong Khiaw	82
Vieng Thong (Muang Hiam) .....	83
<b>Muang Ngoi District. ...</b>	<b>84</b>
Nong Khiaw .....	84
Muang Ngoi Neua (Ban Ngoi Kao) .....	87
Around Muang Ngoi Neua .....	89
<b>Phongsali Province....</b>	<b>90</b>
Muang Khua .....	90
Phongsali .....	92

Around Phongsali.....	97
<b>Northwestern Laos....</b>	<b>98</b>
Udomxai (Oudomsay, Muang Xai) .....	98
Around Udomxai .....	101
Boten .....	103
Luang Namtha (Namtha) .....	104
Around Luang Namtha....	108
Muang Sing .....	109
Xieng Kok .....	112
<b>The Middle Mekong ...</b>	<b>113</b>
Huay Xai (Hoksay).....	113
Around Huay Xai.....	119
Pak Beng .....	120
Tha Suang.....	123
Hongsa .....	123
Muang Ngeun .....	124
Sainyabuli (Sayaboury) .....	124
Pak Lai .....	127

### VIENTIANE & AROUND..... 134

<b>Vientiane .....</b>	<b>135</b>
Sights .....	140
Activities .....	145
Courses .....	147
Tours .....	148
Festivals & Events .....	148
Sleeping .....	150
Eating .....	154
Drinking & Nightlife .....	158
Entertainment .....	159
Shopping .....	160
<b>Around Vientiane .....</b>	<b>169</b>
Phu Khao Khuay NPA .....	169
Vientiane to Vang Vieng..	171
Vang Vieng .....	172
Vang Vieng towards Luang Prabang.....	183



VIENTIANE P135



VANG VIENG P172

# Contents

## UNDERSTAND

Laos Today.....	260
History .....	262
People & Culture .....	277
Environment .....	292

## SURVIVAL GUIDE

Directory A–Z .....	304
Transport .....	314
Health.....	323
Language .....	329
Index.....	337
Map Legend.....	343



LUANG PRABANG P35

### CENTRAL LAOS ... 184

#### **Bolikhamsai & Khammuan Provinces ... 185**

Paksan .....	188
Paksan to Lak Sao .....	188
Lak Sao .....	193
Tha Khaek .....	194
Around Tha Khaek .....	200

#### **Savannakhet Province..... 202**

Savannakhet .....	202
Around Savannakhet.....	208
Dong Phu Vieng NPA .....	208
Phu Xang Hae NPA .....	209
Sepon (Xepon) & the Ho Chi Minh Trail .....	209

### SOUTHERN LAOS ... 212

#### **Pakse .....**

#### **Around Pakse .....**

Don Kho & Ban Saphai .....	222
Phou Xieng Thong NPA .....	223

#### **Champasak .....**

#### **Around Champasak ... 227**

Wat Phu Champasak .....	227
Uo Moung (Tomo Temple) .....	230
Kiet Ngong .....	230

#### Se Pian NPA .....

#### **Bolaven Plateau .....**

Paksong & Around .....	233
Tat Lo .....	235
Salavan .....	237
Around Salavan .....	238

#### Sekong (Muang Lamam) .....

Around Sekong .....	240
Attapeu (Samakhi Xai) ...	242
Around Attapeu .....	245

#### **Si Phan Don (Four Thousand Islands) .... 246**

Don Khong (Khong Island) .....	246
Don Det & Don Khon ...	250

## SPECIAL FEATURES

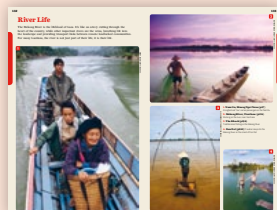
### Itineraries .....

### Outdoor Adventures ... 26

### River Life..... 132

### People & Culture .....

### Environment..... 292



# On the Road



# Laos

**Gibbon Experience**  
Whiz through the jungle on ziplines (p116)

**Trekking**  
Hike through forest to remote Akha villages (p94)

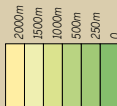
**Luang Prabang**  
Be charmed by the country's historic heart (p34)

**Vieng Xai Caves**  
Experience history in a wartime cave hideout (p81)

**River Trips**  
Cruise down the Mekong on a river boat (p67)

**Vang Vieng**  
Go on an adventure amid stunning scenery (p172)

## ELEVATION



### Vientiane

Wine and dine in the riverside capital (p134)

### Tham Kong Lo

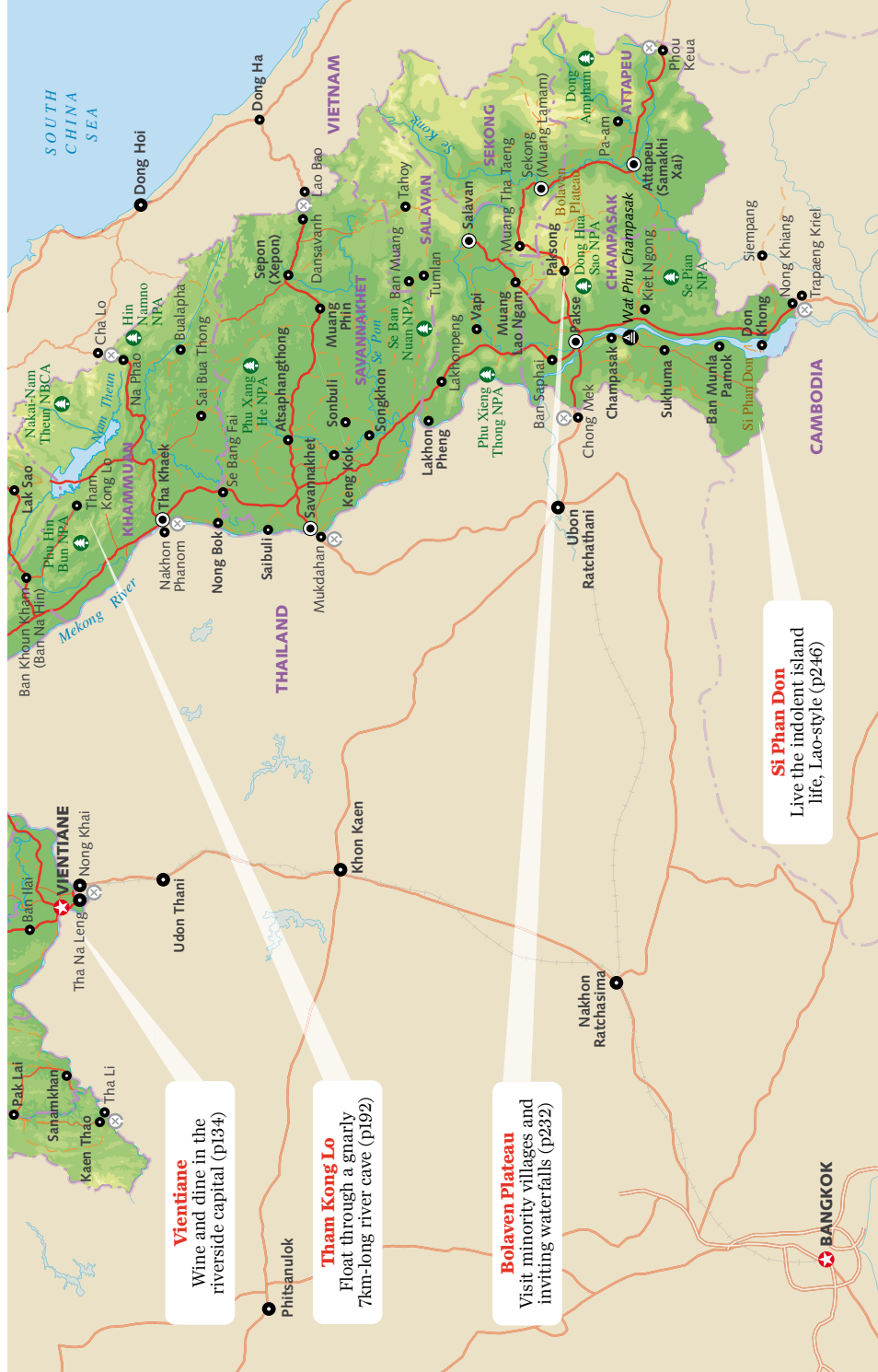
Float through a gnarly 7km-long river cave (p192)

### Bolaven Plateau

Visit minority villages and inviting waterfalls (p232)

### Si Phan Don

Live the indolent island life, Lao-style (p246)





## OUR STORY

A beat-up old car, a few dollars in the pocket and a sense of adventure. In 1972 that's all Tony and Maureen Wheeler needed for the trip of a lifetime – across Europe and Asia overland to Australia. It took several months, and at the end – broke but inspired – they sat at their kitchen table writing and stapling together their first travel guide, *Across Asia on the Cheap*. Within a week they'd sold 1500 copies. Lonely Planet was born.

Today, Lonely Planet has offices in Melbourne, London, Oakland and Delhi, with more than 600 staff and writers. We share Tony's belief that 'a great guidebook should do three things: inform, educate and amuse'.

## OUR WRITERS



### Nick Ray

**Coordinating Author, Luang Prabang & Around, Northern Laos** A Londoner of sorts, Nick comes from Watford, the sort of town that makes you want to travel. He currently lives in Phnom Penh and has written for countless guidebooks on the Mekong region, including Lonely Planet's *Cambodia* and *Vietnam*, as well as *Southeast Asia on a Shoestring*. When not writing, he is often out exploring the remote parts of the region as a location scout or line producer for the world of

television and film, including anything from *Top Gear Vietnam* to *Tomb Raider*. Luang Prabang is one of his favourite places on earth and he was thrilled to finally explore the fabled Vieng Xai Caves that once sheltered the Pathet Lao.



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**Southern Laos** Greg first visited Laos as a backpacker in 1997, journeying from Vientiane to Muang Sing via the lonely backwaters of Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang. Finally returning 15 years later he is happy to report that, while thoroughly discovered, the country has lost none of its indolent charm. These days Greg lives in Cambodia. He has written close to 20 books for Lonely Planet, mostly about Southeast Asia and the former Soviet Union. Read about his trips at

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### Published by Lonely Planet Publications Pty Ltd

ABN 36 005 607 983

8th edition – February 2014

ISBN 978 1 74179 954 5

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in China

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# Plan Your Trip

# Itineraries



21  
DAYS

## Hit the North

Northern Laos is one of the most popular regions of the country for adrenalin and adventure activities, coupled with an authentic dose of ethnic minority lifestyles. Right at the heart of the region lies Luang Prabang, the perfect place to start or finish a road trip through the remote north.

Lovely **Luang Prabang** is a destination in itself. Spend your time exploring the old town and its myriad temples, traditional buildings and galleries, cafes and shops.

Head southeast from Luang Prabang to **Phonsavan**, gateway to the **Plain of Jars** and its mysterious vessels, one of the most popular destinations in Laos. It is then time to leave the tourist trail and head to the **Vieng Xai Caves**. The setting is spectacular amid the karst caves and the historic audio tour is one of the most compelling experiences in Laos.

Swinging west, it is possible to try a tiger trek in the remote protected area of **Nam Et/Phou Louey NPA**, although a tiger sighting is unlikely. Continue to **Nong Khiaw**, a beautiful village on the banks of





Muang Khua, Phongsali Province (p90)

the Nam Ou (Ou River) with striking limestone crags looming all around. This is the embarkation point for an adventurous boat trip to Phongsali Province via the small villages of **Muong Ngoi Neua** and **Muang Khua, Phongsali** is considered the most authentic trekking destination in Laos and it is possible to experience homestays with Akha villagers.

Head on to **Luang Namtha**, a friendly base for some northwesterly adventures. Trek into the **Nam Ha NPA** or try a cycling or kayaking trip in the countryside beyond.

From Luang Namtha head down to **Huay Xai**, a Mekong River border town and gateway to the Golden Triangle. If time is tight, bail out here, but it is better to continue the loop back to Luang Prabang by river. The two-day boat trip from Huay Xai to Luang Prabang via **Pak Beng** is one of the most accessible river trips in the country.

Or take just a one-day boat trip to Pak Beng and then leave the river behind to head to **Sainyabuli** and the superb Elephant Conservation Center on the Nam Tien lake. This can also be visited out of Luang Prabang.

14  
DAYS

## Central and Southern Laos

PLAN YOUR TRIP ITINERARIES

This classic southern 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**, the country's capital, and soak up the sights, shopping, cuisine and nightlife, as things get quieter from here. Make a side trip to the backpacker mecca of **Vang Vieng**, surrounded by craggy, cave-studded limestone peaks.

Head south to **Tha Khaek**, the archetypal sleepy Mekong riverside town, and go east on Rte 12 to explore the caves of the Khammuan Limestone area or take **the Loop** all the way around, stopping at the incredible cave of **Tham Kong Lo**.

Continue south to **Savannakhet** for a taste of how Vientiane looked before it received a makeover from the Lao PDR government and international aid money.

Roll on southward to **Pakse**, gateway to the southernmost province of Champasak. **Champasak** town is a more relaxed alternative to Pakse and is the base for seeing Laos' most important archaeological site, Wat Phu Champasak, an Angkor-style temple ruin spread across the slopes of sacred Phu Pasak.

A rewarding side trip takes you up onto the **Bolaven Plateau** and to Laos' most impressive waterfall at Tat Fan. This is also the place to try the impressive Treetop Explorer experience, a jungle zipline adventure that is the south's answer to the Gibbon Experience. At the coffee capital of **Paksong**, stop to buy some java before heading to beautiful Tat Lo. This is a great place to hang out and swim in the falls, undertaking gentle treks through local villages or even an elephant ride.

Another option for an elephant ride is from the village of **Kiet Ngong** to the elevated archaeological site of Phu Asa. This is a logical stop on the route south to **Si Phan Don** (Four Thousand Islands), 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.

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MATTHEW MICH/GETTY IMAGES ©



Top: Wat Phu Champasak (p227)  
Bottom: Mekong River, Si Phan Don (p246)



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