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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.

Greg Bloom
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 www.mytripjournal.com/bloomblogs.

Richard Waters
Vientiane & Around, Central Laos
Richard is an award-winning journalist and photographer and regularly works for The Independent, Sunday Times, Wanderlust and National Geographic Traveller. He lives with his fiancée and two kids in the Cotswolds. He has just published his Lao-set travel thriller Black Buddha on Kindle.

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

Professor Martin Stuart-Fox wrote the History chapter. He is Emeritus Professor at University of Queensland and has written extensively about Laos’ history and politics.
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
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.
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.