



# Northern Laos

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## Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Bamboozle Restaurant & Bar (p74)
- ➔ Bar How (p117)
- ➔ Coco Home Bar & Restaurant (p87)
- ➔ Forest Retreat Gourmet Cafe (p107)
- ➔ Riverside Restaurant (p89)

## Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Daauw Homestay (p115)
- ➔ Luang Say Lodge (p121)
- ➔ Muang La Resort (p103)
- ➔ Nong Kiau Riverside (p86)
- ➔ Phou lu III Guesthouse (p105)

## Why Go?

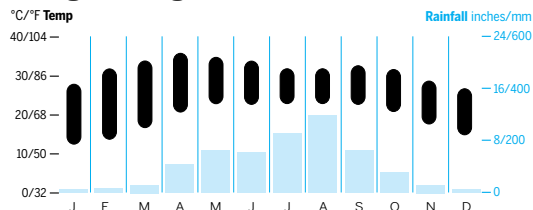
Whether it's trekking, cycling, kayaking, ziplining, riding an elephant or staying in a family homestay, a visit to northern Laos is for many the highlight of their trip. Dotted about are unfettered, dense forests still home to tigers, gibbons and a cornucopia of other wildlife, with a well-established ecotourism infrastructure to take you into their very heart.

Here the Land of a Million Elephants morphs into the land of a million hellish bends and travel is not for the faint-hearted, as the roads twist and turn endlessly through towering mountain ranges and serpentine river valleys. By contrast, most northern towns are functional places, rebuilt after wholesale bombing during the 20th-century Indochina wars.

But visitors aren't in northern Laos for the towns. It's all about the rural life. River trips also offer a wonderful way to discover the bucolic scenery as well as a practical alternative to tortuous bus rides.

## When to Go

### Luang Prabang



**Nov–Feb** The ideal season to visit, with little rain and clear skies; chilly at higher altitudes.

**Mar–May** This time of year is cooking at lower altitudes; lots of haze around from slash and burn.

**Jun–Oct** Wet season but not as wet as name suggests; good for greenery and cheaper rooms.

## Climate

The best time of year is November to February, when days typically range from warm to hot once the sun burns through the chilly morning mists. A decent jacket is useful to deal with colder night-time temperatures in higher mountainous areas, particularly Luang Namtha, Phongsali, Xieng Khuang and Hua Phan provinces. Wrap up warmly if travelling by boat or motorbike before 10am. As the dry season continues, river levels drop and by February some sections of the 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 visibil-

ity 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 during the Pi Mai festival, a time when transport gets particularly crowded. Rain is likely after Pi Mai in the far north, although the rainy season typically peaks between June and September. Rains are not constant, and in between showers the sky clears and the rice paddies glow emerald green. But unpaved roads can become impassably muddy, trekking paths can get slippery, leeches may appear in the grass and river fords become awkward to cross.

## 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 water routes remain possible thanks in significant part to tourist interest. In each case the journey is an attraction in itself.

### Mekong Slowboats

**Huay Xai–Pak Beng or Pak Beng–Luang Prabang** (one day; p118) 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 snacks and overpriced beer.

**Huay Xai–Luang Prabang** (two days; p118) Travel in relative luxury with Luang Say Cruise or Shompoo Cruise. Both run boats that are similar in size to other Mekong slowboats but carry a maximum of 40 passengers. The Luang Say Cruise is not for the budget traveller, but includes meals, sightseeing stops and excellent overnight accommodation at the Luang Say Lodge.

### Mekong Speedboats

**Huay Xai–Luang Prabang** (one day; p119) Scarily fast, potentially dangerous and excruciatingly uncomfortable if you're not small and supple.

**Xieng Kok–Muang Mom** (three hours; p120) There are 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 or Na Lae–Huay Xai longboat** (two days; p108) 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 be expensive or time-consuming.

**Hat Sa–Muang Khua, Muang Khua–Nong Khiaw and Nong Khiaw–Luang Prabang riverboats** (one day each; p92) 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 within 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).