

Understand Laos

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A communist state in name, Laos can look and feel like a free-wheeling capitalist entity to the average visitor.

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Professor Martin Stuart-Fox traces Laos' history from the kingdom of Lan Xang to the modern-day Lao PDR, which occupies a strategic crossroads in Southeast Asia.

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Laos is home to an incredible patchwork of peoples, with unique religious beliefs, arts and crafts.

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Laos' environment is among the best protected in the region, but hydropower development and vast mineral deposits make for a delicate balancing act.

Laos Today

Much of the change in Laos is relatively recent, following the liberalisation policies of the 1990s. Laos continues to rely on foreign aid, but the traditional donors in the shape of Western governments and NGOs are now overshadowed by private enterprise and the world's newest superdonor, the People's Republic of China. And despite dissatisfaction over a lack of freedoms and rising levels of corruption, the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) faces minimal internal challenge to its authority.

Best on Film

The Rocket (2013) The story of a young Lao boy blamed for bringing bad luck to his family. To win back the trust of the family he builds a giant firework to enter the annual Rocket Festival. Set against a backdrop of war, this film has won awards at the Tribeca and Berlin Film Festivals. Shot on location in Laos, it was written and directed by Kim Mordaunt and stars former street kid Sitthiphon Disamoe as Ahlo.

Best in Print

The Coroner's Lunch (Colin Cotterill; 2004) Delve into the delightful world of Dr Siri, full-time national coroner in the 1970s and part-time super sleuth. Try this first instalment and then seek out the other seven titles in the series. **Ant Egg Soup** (Natacha Du Pont de Bie; 2004) Subtitled *The Adventures of a Food Tourist in Laos*; the author samples some local delicacies (including some that aren't suitable for a delicate stomach) and includes both recipes and sketches to punctuate the story.

Political System

At first glance the politics of Laos seem simple enough: a one-party system is controlled by ageing revolutionaries who themselves have become a new elite, who have the power to control the exploitation of the country's natural resources, can squash any dissent and cooperate enough with foreign donors to keep the aid dollars coming in. But this generalisation is just that and the reality is more complex.

Laos is indeed a single-party socialist republic, with the only legal political entity being the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). Few outside the inner sanctum really understand the political scene, but it's accepted that the LPRP is loosely split between an older, more conservative guard and younger members pushing for limited reform. Cynics will tell you the infighting is mainly for the control of the lucrative kick-backs available to those who command the rights to Laos' rich natural resources. Others say the reformers' primary motivation is to alleviate poverty more quickly by speeding up development. The reality most likely lies somewhere between the two.

Economy

Economically, Laos is in a dynamic period. After the dark days of the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s, the economy reported 8% growth in 2011, one of the best performances in Asia. However, other numbers don't look so hot. The World Bank rates Laos as one of the least developed countries in East Asia, with more than 75% of people living on less than US\$2 a day. More than three-quarters of the population still live as subsistence farmers and gross domestic product was just an estimated US\$8.3 billion in 2011.

Major exports are timber products, garments, electricity and coffee, in that order. In recent years tourism