



Vientiane & Around

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Best Places to Eat

- ➔ La Signature (p158)
- ➔ Le Silapa (p156)
- ➔ Lao Kitchen (p156)
- ➔ Makphet (p154)

Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Mandala Boutique Hotel (p154)
- ➔ Hotel Khamvongsa (p150)
- ➔ Ansara Hôtel (p154)
- ➔ Settha Palace Hotel (p152)

Why Go?

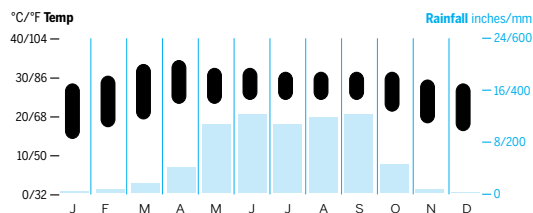
From its sleepy tuk-tuk drivers to its cafe society and affordable spas, this former French trading post is languid to say the least. Eminently walkable, the historic old quarter of Vientiane beguiles with tree-lined boulevards crowded with frangipani and tamarind, glittering temples, wandering Buddhist monks and lunging *naga* (dragon) statues.

For the well-heeled traveller and backpacker, the city acquits itself equally well, be it low-cost digs and street markets, or upscale, jaw-droppingly pretty boutique hotels and French restaurants with reputable Parisian chefs. There are even more cafes and bakeries here than in Luang Prabang, and such a global spectrum of cuisine. It may add another notch to your belt!

From lounging with a book in an old-fashioned bakery to shopping in silk shops, swigging Beerlao and drinking up the fiery sunset over the Mekong, you might find you'll miss this place more than you ever expected.

When to Go

Vientiane



Nov–Feb A great time to visit, with the magical Bun Pha That Luang (Full Moon Festival) in November.

Mar–May Heat and humidity climb, but hotel prices fall; many places have air-conditioning!

Jun–Nov Monsoon brings fresh air and a raft of river festivals like Bun Awk Phansa and Bun Nam.

VIENTIANE

021 / POP 254,500

History

Set on a bend in the Mekong River, Vientiane (ວຽງຈັນ) was first settled around the 9th century AD and formed part of one of the early Lao valley *meuang* (city-states) that were consolidated around the 10th century. The Lao who settled here did so because the surrounding alluvial plains were so fertile, and initially the Vientiane *meuang* prospered and enjoyed a fragile sovereignty.

In the ensuing 10 or so centuries of its history, Vientiane's fortunes have been mixed. At various times it has been a major regional centre; at other times it has been controlled by the Vietnamese, Burmese and Siamese.

The height of Vientiane's success was probably in the years after it became the Lan Xang capital in the mid-16th century. (King Setthathirat moved the capital of the Lan Xang kingdom from the city now known as Luang Prabang.) Several of Vientiane's wats were built following this shift and the city became a major centre of Buddhist learning.

It didn't last. Periodic invasions by the Burmese, Siamese and Chinese, and the eventual division of the Lan Xang kingdom, took their toll on the city.

It wasn't until the Siamese installed Chao Anou (a Lao prince who had been educated

in Bangkok) on the throne in 1805 that the city received an overdue makeover. Chao Anou's public works included Wat Si Saket, built between 1818 and 1824.

Unfortunately, Chao Anou's attempts to assert Lao independence over the Siamese resulted in the most violent and destructive episode in Vientiane's history.

In 1828 the Siamese defeated Chao Anou's armies and wasted no time in razing the city and carting off much of the population. Wat Si Saket was the only major building to survive, and the city was abandoned.

In 1867, French explorers arrived but it wasn't until late in the century, after Vientiane had been made capital of the French protectorate, that serious reconstruction began. A simple grid plan was laid out for the city and a sprinkling of colonial-style mansions and administrative buildings emerged. However, Vientiane was always low in the French order of Indochinese priorities, as the modest building program testifies.

In 1928 the 'city' was home to just 9000 inhabitants – many of them Vietnamese administrators brought in by the French – and it wasn't until the end of WWII that Vientiane's population began to grow with any vigour. It was a growth fed primarily by Cold War dollars, with first French and later American advisors arriving in a variety of guises.

VIENTIANE IN...

Two Days

Start with a coffee and croissant at **Le Banneton** bakery before embarking on the **Monument to Mekong cycling tour**. This will take you through most of Vientiane's main sights, including **Wat Si Saket**, **Haw Pha Kaeo** and **Talat Sao**. Top off your day with riverside cocktails at **Spirit House**. On day two consider getting some motorised wheels and leaving the city centre to check out the myriad concrete Buddhas and Hindu deities at **Xieng Khuan**. On the way back stop at **Pha That Luang** for great afternoon photos. Enjoy a fine French meal at **La Signature**.

Four Days

Depending on what time you crawl out of bed on day three, make **PVO**, arguably the home of Vientiane's best baguettes and fruit shakes, your lunch destination. From here it's just a short walk to the **COPE Visitor Centre**, where you could easily spend a couple of hours checking out excellent exhibits and watching the powerful documentaries. After a light Lao dinner at **Khambang Lao Food Restaurant**, head around the corner to the **Herbal Sauna** for a good healthy Lao-style sweat. Rehydrate with draught Beer-lao at **Bor Pennyang** before calling it a night. Day four can be spent studying in a Lao cooking course at **Villa Lao**, or shopping at the handicraft and textile shops of Th Nokèkokoummane, rummaging for communist wristwatches and glass Buddhas at **Indochina Handicrafts**, or sniffing and waxing lyrical about the handmade soaps and oils at **T'Shop Lai Gallery**.