



Central Laos

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Best Places to Eat

- Savannakhet Plaza Food Market (p193)
- Sala Vann (p193)
- Khop Chai Deu (p187)
- Lin's Café (p193)

Best Places to Sleep

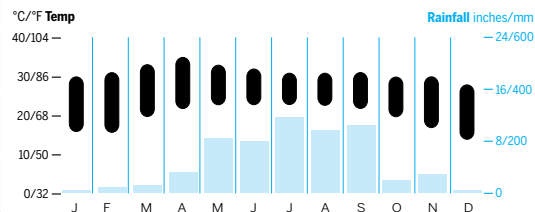
- Inthira Hotel (p186)
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Why Go?

Ever since Tha Khaek opened its French-colonial shutters to travellers and the dramatic 7km-long underworld of Tham Kong Lor became a must-see fixture on itineraries, central Laos has been enticing visitors. Thanks to its honeycomb of caves and dragon-green jungle, activities on offer run from world-class rock climbing to trekking in Dong Phu Vieng NPA where you can sleep with the spirits in a Katang village. Cave exploration is an obvious headline attraction, but kayaking trips are also a big draw thanks to the myriad rivers that course like veins around and, often, through the karst mountains.

This part of the country claims the most forest cover and highest concentrations of wildlife, including some species that have disappeared elsewhere in Southeast Asia. With its rugged, intrepid travel, and stylish pockets of comfort in Savannakhet and Tha Khaek, central Laos makes for a great place to combine your inner Indiana Jones with a Bloody Mary.

When to Go Savannakhet



Nov–Feb The best time to visit: temperatures are balmy, paddy fields green and roads passable.

Mar–May Leading up to the monsoon, fields are bone dry and the humidity ratchets up. Avoid the oven that is the south.

Jun–Nov Despite pockets of intense rain, sealed roads are still passable, the landscape vividly green and air cool.

Climate

The Mekong River valley is always pretty warm and from March to May Savannakhet is positively steaming. It gets cooler as you head east towards the Annamite Chain and Lak Sao, and the villages along Rte 8B can be close to freezing during winter nights. The southwestern monsoon brings bucketloads of rain from June to October. Far-eastern areas around the Nakai-Nam Theun National Biodiversity Conservation Area (NBCA) also receive rain from the South China Sea that lasts longer, thus supplying enough water to maintain the thicker vegetation.

National Protected Areas

Central Laos is the best-preserved part of the country with six National Protected Areas (NPAs) accounting for vast swaths of the region. Access to Nakai-Nam Theun NBCA, Hin Namno NPA and Se Ban Nuan NPA is limited to those with decent Lao language skills and plenty of time and money, but others are easy to get to.

In Khammuan Province the labyrinth of limestone karsts, caves and rivers in Phu Hin Bun NPA is accessible either on your own or on a community-based or commercial trek. Similar treks lead to the sacred forests and animist villages of Dong Phu Vieng in Savannakhet Province.

i Getting There & Away

Central Laos is well connected to the rest of the country by road and there are regular bus services connecting the region with towns and cities of the north. Flight connections are more limited via Savannakhet, but Nakhon Phanom Airport in Thailand offers some affordable budget flights to Bangkok and beyond.

Rte 13 is sealed, and thanks to its vital status as a Chinese trade route, it's particularly well maintained. Other decent roads include Rte 9 from Savannakhet to the Vietnamese border at Lao Bao; Rte 8 between Rte 13 and the Vietnamese border at Nam Phao; Rte 12 between Tha Khaek and the Vietnamese border; and the road to Tham Kong Lor.

BOLIKHAMSAI & KHAMMUAN PROVINCES

Bolikhamsai and Khammuan straddle the narrow, central 'waist' of the country. Physically the land climbs steadily from the Mekong River valley towards the north and east, eventually reaching the Annamite Chain

bordering Vietnam, via an area of moderately high but often spectacular mountains. Laid-back Tha Khaek is the logical base.

Lowland Lao dominate the population and, along with smaller groups of tribal Thais, are the people you'll mostly meet. In remoter areas the Mon-Khmer-speaking Makong people (commonly known as Bru) make up more than 10% of the population of Khammuan.

Much of the region is relatively sparsely populated and six large tracts of forest have been declared NPAs. These areas have become a major battleground between those wishing to exploit Laos' hydroelectricity capacity and those wishing to preserve some of the most pristine wilderness areas in Asia. For now, the developers have the upper hand.

i Getting There & Away

These twin provinces are well connected to the rest of Laos with bus links and good surfaced roads connecting Tha Khaek with Vientiane to the north; Savannakhet and Pakse to the south; Thailand (via the Mekong to the west); and Vietnam to the east.

Paksan

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POP 45,000 / 2054

Located at the confluence of the Nam San (San River) and the Mekong River, Paksan (Pakxan or Pakxanh) is the capital of Bolikhamsai Province. Although it's not the most exciting place in Laos, it has a few guesthouses and restaurants and is a possible stop if you're pedalling between Vientiane and Tha Khaek or Kong Lor. It's possible to cross into Thailand via the Mekong River, but hardly anyone travels this way.

🛏 Sleeping & Eating

BK Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(2) 054-212638; r 70,000-80,000K; 🚻🚰📶) Set in a leafy garden dripping in frangipani flowers, this house-proud guesthouse has eight rooms, all immaculately clean with en suites and fresh linen, and the friendly owner speaks English.

Paksan Hotel

HOTEL \$

(2) 054-791444; Rte 13; r 120,000-200,000K; 🚻🚰📶) This huge Vietnamese-run, temple-roofed colossus has 32 well-sized rooms with TV, fridge, verandah and armoire. 'VIP' rooms are available, but only if your idea of VIP is faux-leather sofas.