



Laos



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PLAN YOUR TRIP

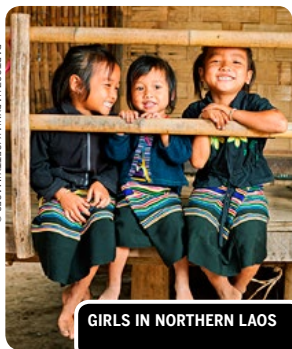
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WAT HO PHA BANG (P36),
LUANG PRABANG



GIRLS IN NORTHERN LAOS



BUDDHAS AT WAT SI SAKET
(P130), VIENTIANE

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Itineraries



1
WEEK

A Week in Laos

Start out your classic Laos adventure in **Vientiane**, the atmospheric Lao capital. There are few must-see sights beyond a handful of temples, but the Mekong riverside setting is dramatic and there are some excellent cafes, restaurants and bars to enjoy and some of the best shopping in the country.

Head north to **Vang Vieng**. Once a sort of backpacker Xanadu where anything goes, it has reinvented itself as the adventure centre of Laos with caving, rock climbing, ziplining, kayaking, mountain biking and trekking, not forgetting the infamous river tubing that put this place on the map.

Continue north on Rte 13, making a side trip to **Phonsavan**, gateway to the **Plain of Jars** and its mysterious vessels, one of the more popular destinations in Laos.

The highlight of this trip is **Luang Prabang**, the historic capital of Lan Xang and a worthy Unesco World Heritage Site. Plan a few days here to soak up the timeless atmosphere of the old town, including the *tak bat* (dawn call to alms) for the city's many monks. Save some time for outdoor adventures, with waterfalls, mountain-bike trails, kayaking trips and jungle treks all on offer.



Hit the North

Northern Laos is one of the most popular regions of the country for 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**, the base from which to see the impressive **Plain of Jars**. 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, head to the remote protected area of **Nam Et/Phou Louey National Protected Area (NPA)** for a night-time wildlife-watching safari. 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 **Muang 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 Gibbon Experience. 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 conveniently accessed 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.



Central & Southern Laos

This classic southern route takes you through the heartland of lowland Lao culture, a world of broad river plains planted with rice and home-made 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 town on the Mekong, and then east on Rte 12 to explore the caves of the Khammuan limestone area, where some of the best rock climbing in the country is on offer. Alternatively, go full tilt and explore the Loop by motorcycle all the way around, stopping at the incredible river cave of **Tham Kong Lor**.

Continue south to **Savannakhet** for a taste of how Vientiane looked before it received a makeover from the Lao government and international aid money. Explore the somnolent streets of old French architecture and surf the street stalls at the Savannakhet Plaza Food Market.

Roll on southward to **Pakse**, gateway to the southernmost province of Champasak. **Cham-pasak** 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 some impressive waterfalls, including Tat Fan. This is also the place to try the adrenaline-fuelled Treetop Explorer experience, a jungle zipline adventure. Pass through the coffee capital of **Paksong** 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.

Continuing south, consider stopping at the village of **Kiet Ngong** to visit the elevated archaeological site of Phu Asa or try bird-spotting in the nearby forest and wetlands. 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 have not 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.

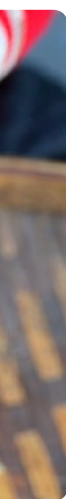
WUTTIKORN PANCHAKARN/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



OSCAR ESPINOSA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Top: Patuxai monument (p130), Vientiane
Bottom: Sun-dried coffee beans, Bolaven Plateau (p219)



Map Legend

Sights

- Beach
- Bird Sanctuary
- Buddhist
- Castle/Palace
- Christian
- Confucian
- Hindu
- Islamic
- Jain
- Jewish
- Monument
- Museum/Gallery/Historic Building
- Ruin
- Shinto
- Sikh
- Taoist
- Winery/Vineyard
- Zoo/Wildlife Sanctuary
- Other Sight

Activities, Courses & Tours

- Bodysurfing
- Diving
- Canoeing/Kayaking
- Course/Tour
- Sento Hot Baths/Onsen
- Skiing
- Snorkelling
- Surfing
- Swimming/Pool
- Walking
- Windsurfing
- Other Activity

Sleeping

- Sleeping
- Camping

Eating

- Eating

Drinking & Nightlife

- Drinking & Nightlife
- Cafe

Entertainment

- Entertainment

Shopping

- Shopping

Information

- Bank
- Embassy/Consulate
- Hospital/Medical
- Internet
- Police
- Post Office
- Telephone
- Toilet
- Tourist Information
- Other Information

Geographic

- Beach
- Gate
- Hut/Shelter
- Lighthouse
- Lookout
- Mountain/Volcano
- Oasis
- Park
- Pass
- Picnic Area
- Waterfall

Population

- Capital (National)
- Capital (State/Province)
- City/Large Town
- Town/Village

Transport

- Airport
- Border crossing
- Bus
- Cable car/Funicular
- Cycling
- Ferry
- Metro/MRT/MTR station
- Monorail
- Parking
- Petrol station
- Skytrain/Subway station
- Taxi
- Train station/Railway
- Tram
- Underground station
- Other Transport

Routes

- Tollway
- Freeway
- Primary
- Secondary
- Tertiary
- Lane
- Unsealed road
- Road under construction
- Plaza/Mall
- Steps
- Tunnel
- Pedestrian overpass
- Walking Tour
- Walking Tour detour
- Path/Walking Trail

Boundaries

- International
- State/Province
- Disputed
- Regional/Suburb
- Marine Park
- Cliff
- Wall

Hydrography

- River, Creek
- Intermittent River
- Canal
- Water
- Dry/Salt/Intermittent Lake
- Reef

Areas

- Airport/Runway
- Beach/Desert
- Cemetery (Christian)
- Cemetery (Other)
- Glacier
- Mudflat
- Park/Forest
- Sight (Building)
- Sportsground
- Swamp/Mangrove

Note: Not all symbols displayed above appear on the maps in this book



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 Franklin, London, Melbourne, Oakland, Dublin, Beijing 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



Kate Morgan

Having worked for Lonely Planet for over a decade now, Kate has been fortunate enough to cover plenty of ground working as a travel writer on destinations such as Shanghai, Japan, India, Zimbabwe, the Philippines and Phuket. She has done stints living in London, Paris and Osaka, but these days is based in one of her favourite regions in the world – Victoria, Australia. In between travelling the world and writing about it, Kate enjoys spending time at home

working as a freelance editor.



Tim Bewer Southern Laos

After university Tim worked as a legislative assistant before quitting capitol life to backpack around West Africa. It was during this trip that the idea of becoming a travel writer and photographer was hatched, and he's been at it ever since. He has visited over 80 countries, including most in Southeast Asia. His first journey to Laos was in 1997, before the highway from Vientiane to the south was paved,

and he's returned nearly a dozen times since. He lives in Khon Kaen, Thailand.



Nick Ray Vientiane, Vang Vieng & Around, Central 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* books, 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*. Laos is one of his favourite countries on earth and he was thrilled to finally ride the Loop and explore the caves of Tha Khaek.



Richard Waters Luang Prabang & Around, Northern Laos, Environment, People & Culture

Richard is based in the Cotswolds, close enough to get to London and, more importantly, only two hours from Devon's surf. For the last 12 years he's worked for Lonely Planet and *The Daily Telegraph*, *Sunday Times*, *Independent* and more as a travel writer and author. He sometimes shoots photos for his stories and is drawn toward wildlife and out of the way places.

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