



Northern Laos

Includes →

Phonsavan	68
Nong Khiaw	82
Muang Khua	89
Phongsali	91
Luang Namtha	103
Muang Sing	109
Huay Xai	112
Pak Beng	118
Pak Lai	125

Best Places to Eat

- Lao Falang Restaurant (p71)
- Coco Home Bar & Restaurant (p84)
- Bamboo Lounge (p106)
- Riverside Restaurant (p87)
- Souphailin Restaurant (p99)

Best Places to Sleep

- Mandala Ou Resort (p84)
- Luang Say Lodge (p119)
- Zuela Guesthouse (p105)
- Nong Kiau Riverside (p84)
- Phou lu III Guesthouse (p106)

Why Go?

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

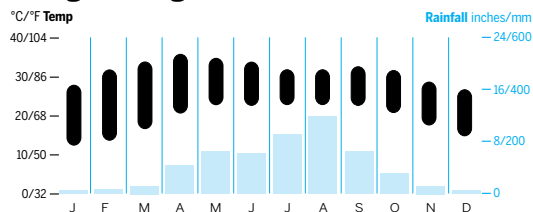
In the north you will also find a tapestry of vividly attired ethnic tribes unlike anywhere else in Laos.

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 roads endlessly twist and turn 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 are a wonderful way to discover the bucolic scenery at a more languid pace.

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 cultivation.

Jun–Oct The wet season; accommodation is cheap but humidity is high.

i Getting There & Away


The state of roads linking the north to the rest of Laos is steadily improving. By far the easiest, most popular and most spectacular is Rte 13 from Luang Prabang to Vang Vieng. The alternative, via Sainyabuli and Pak Lai, is now paved but less scenic. A third possibility, Rte 10 from Muang Khoun to Paksan, is now in good shape, but there are still some lingering security concerns along certain remote stretches. Finally, the hellish ordeal on what was an ulcerous and dangerously slippery road from Udomxai to Phongsali is now completely sealed, but sadly just as serpentine!

i Getting Around

Road journeys in northern Laos are slow and exhausting. Only the key major routes are asphalted and even these are generally so narrow and winding that it's rare to average more than 30km/h, though many bus drivers push their weary steeds quicker than they are safely able to go. On unpaved roads progress is further hampered by mud in wet conditions, while in the dry season, traffic creates vast dust clouds making travel extremely unpleasant by bike or *sǒrngtǎaou* (pick-up trucks fitted with benches in the back for passengers). Follow the local example and wear a face mask. Or consider engaging a private chauffeured minivan (roughly US\$100 per day, available in major towns). Fortunately for adventure motorcyclists with decent trail bikes, many secondary roads have virtually no traffic.

A delightful, if often even slower, alternative to road travel is to use riverboats. Think twice before opting for a 'speedboat' – a surfboard with a strap-on car engine might be safer.

XIENG KHUANG & HUA PHAN PROVINCES

Long and winding roads run in seemingly endless ribbons across these green, sparsely populated northeastern provinces towards the mysterious Plain of Jars and the fascinating Vieng Xai Caves. Both are truly intriguing places to visit if you're en route to or from Vietnam. Those with the time can add stops in Nong Khiaw and Vieng Thong. The latter is a gateway to the Nam Et/Phou Louey National Protected Area (NPA) and its 'tiger treks'. All of the above feature on [Stray's](http://www.straytravel.asia) (www.straytravel.asia)  pricey *Long Thaang* bus loop. Almost anywhere else in either province is completely off the tourist radar.

The altitude, averaging more than 1000m, ensures a climate that's neither too hot in the hot season, nor too cold in the cool season. In

December and January, a sweater or jacket is appropriate at night and early morning when seas of cloud fill the populated valleys and form other-worldly scenes for those looking down from passes or peaks.

History

Xieng Khuang's world-famous giant 'jars' along with Hintang's mysterious megaliths indicate a well-developed iron-age culture of which historical knowledge is astonishingly hazy. Whoever carved those enigmatic monuments had long since disappeared by the 13th century when Xieng Khuang emerged as a Buddhist, Tai Phuan principality with a capital at today's Muang Khoun. Both provinces spent subsequent centuries as either independent kingdoms or part of Vietnamese vassal states known as Ai Lao and Tran Ninh. In 1832 the Vietnamese captured the Phuan king of Xieng Khuang, publicly executed him in Hué and made the kingdom a prefecture of Annam, forcing people to adopt Vietnamese dress and customs. Chinese Haw gangs ravaged the region in the late 19th century, pushing both provinces to accept Siamese and French protection.

Major skirmishes between the Free Lao and the Viet Minh took place from 1945 to 1946, and as soon as the French left Indochina the North Vietnamese started a build-up of troops to protect Hanoi's rear flank. By the end of the 1960s the area had become a major battlefield. With saturation bombing by American planes obliterating virtually every town and village, much of the population had to live for their protection in caves, only emerging in 1973. At Vieng Xai, the most important of these caves also sheltered the Pathet Lao's anti-royalist government.

North Vietnamese troops did their share of damage on the ground as well, destroying once-magnificent Muang Sui and much of royalist-held western Xieng Khuang Province. After the conflict, infamous *samana* re-education camps appeared, notably in eastern Hua Phan, to 'rehabilitate' and punish former royalists with a mixture of hard labour and political indoctrination. Many continued into the 1980s and the possibility that a *samana* still remains near Sop Hao has never been officially confirmed nor denied. Meanwhile, decades after the conflict, unexploded ordnance (UXO) remains very widespread, especially in central and eastern Xieng Khuang, threatening local lives for generations to come.