

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 People's Democratic Republic (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

Laos sits on one of the world's major geo-political crossroads, where Southeast Asia meets China, and this is a huge challenge for such a small country. Hemmed in by the Asian tigers of China, Vietnam and Thailand, Laos often looks like vulnerable prey. Traditionally, Vietnam has held political sway, China wields financial clout and Thailand has a dominant cultural influence. While the government tries to parry these competing influences, the Lao people are ever more plugged into a global world and this contributes to domestic tension.

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.

Bomb Harvest (2007) Powerful documentary about the impact of unexploded ordnance (UXO) on communities in Laos today and the work the Mines Advisory Group (MAG) is doing to clear the legacy of war. For some, the war goes on.

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. The first instalment in a 10-part Siri 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).

One Foot in Laos (Dervla Murphy; 2001) Renowned Irish travel writer explores Laos back in the early days of the 1990s and discovers a country undergoing profound change.

Political Snapshot

Officially Laos remains a one-party communist state controlled by the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). However, the 'communist' government long ago ditched the Marxist baggage in favour of capitalist couture. The LPRP is not the unified monolith it might appear and contains several factions. Trying to keep all these elements happy is a challenge. New President Bounnhang Vorachith and Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith both came to power in 2016 and early populist moves included a total ban on logging in Laos. But it remains to be seen if there is actually the political will to enforce this on the ground.

Economy & Infrastructure

The Lao economy has seen 7% to 8% growth from 2010 to 2015, one of the best performances in the world. However, the World Bank still 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.

Major exports are timber products, garments, electricity and coffee. In recent years, tourism has become one of the main generators of foreign income, much of which flows directly into the pockets of those who need it most.

Foreign aid remains a crutch for the Laos economy, with Western governments and their NGOs picking up much of the development tab. China is a political role model as well as a major source of funding, and Chinese spending comes without reform targets, unlike assistance from the West.

Infrastructure is the buzz word in Laos, as aid and investment is channelled towards hydroelectricity, roads and bridges. China is funding a new high-speed railway that will eventually connect Kunming with Bangkok via Luang Prabang and Vientiane. Other mega-projects include the Xayaburi Dam on the lower Mekong, which is