



Vientiane, Vang Vieng & Around

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Best Places to Eat

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- ➔ Senglao Cafe (p150)

Best Places to Sleep

- ➔ Ansara Hôtel (p144)
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Why Go?

Vientiane is one of the smallest capital cities in Southeast Asia, but what it lacks in size it more than makes up for in character. Set on the banks of the mighty Mekong River, there is a palpable French influence, and it's the perfect place to recharge the batteries on an overland journey through Laos.

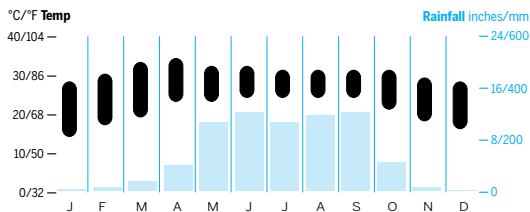
The urbane sophistication of Vientiane is a world away from the poetic beauty of the karst mountains of Vang Vieng and the dense jungles of Phu Khao Khuay National Protected Area (NPA).

Vang Vieng, one of Southeast Asia's leading adventure centres, is also one of the most beautiful spots in Laos. Rising up across the Nam Song (Song River), the limestone karst is a throwback to the Jurassic-era and is peppered with caves.

Throw in homestays and jungle treks around Phu Khao Khuay, the most accessible protected area in the country, and prepare to encounter some remarkable contrasts on your travels.

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 Temperatures and humidity levels climbs, but hotel prices fall.

Jun–Nov The monsoon brings fresh air and river festivals like Bun Awk Phansa and Bun Nam.

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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 glittering temples, lunging *naga* (river serpent) statues, wandering Buddhist monks, and boulevards lined with frangipani and tamarind.

Meanwhile, with most of its old French villas now stylishly reincarnated into restaurants and small hotels, Vientiane is achieving an unprecedented level of panache with a distinctly Gallic flavour. For the well-heeled traveller and backpacker the city acquits itself equally well, be it with low-cost digs and street markets, or upscale boutique accommodation and gastronomic eateries.

Whether you spend your time in Vientiane lounging over a novel in an old-fashioned bakery, shopping in silk shops or swigging Beerlao while drinking up the fiery sunset over the Mekong, once you leave you'll miss this place more than you expected.

History

Set on a bend in the Mekong River, Vientiane 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 under the control

of the Khmer empire. 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 following the decline of Angkor.

In the ensuing centuries, 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, after King Setthathirat moved the capital from 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 1819 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

VIENTIANE IN...

Two Days

Start with a coffee and croissant at **Le Banneton** (p146) before embarking on the Monument to **Mekong cycling tour** (p140), taking you through most of Vientiane's main sights, including **Wat Si Saket** (p130), **Haw Pha Kaeo** (p130) and **Talat Sao** (p153). Top off your day with riverside cocktails at **Spirit House** (p150). On day two consider getting some motorised wheels and leaving the city centre to visit the concrete Buddhas and Hindu deities at **Xieng Khuan** (p134). On the way back stop at **Pha That Luang** (p134) for great afternoon photos. Enjoy a fine French dinner at **Le Silapa** (p147).

Four Days

Depending on what time you crawl out of bed on day three, make **PVO** (p148) your lunch destination. It's then a short walk to the **COPE Visitor Centre** (p130), where you could easily spend a couple hours checking out the excellent exhibits and powerful documentaries. After a light Lao dinner at **Khambang Lao Food Restaurant** (p149), head to nearby **Herbal Sauna** (p137) for a healthy Lao-style sweat. Rehydrate with draught Beerlao at **Bor Pen Yang** (p150).

Day four can be spent at a Lao cooking course at **Villa Lao** (p138), handicraft and textile shopping along **Thanon Nokèokoummane**, rummaging for communist wristwatches and glass Buddhas at **Indochina Handicrafts** (p152), or sniffing and waxing lyrical about the handmade soaps and oils at **T'Shop Lai Gallery** (p152).