



Laos

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Best Regional Specialities

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Best Places for Cultural Connections

- » Handicraft Night Market (p332)
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- » Luang Prabang's temples (p329)

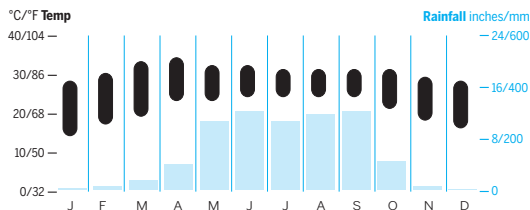
Why Go?

Beneath the tourist radar for decades, Laos has finally exfoliated her Marxist scales, repainted herself in ecogreen colours and opened her arms to the world. This is a country oozing authenticity, a destination that makes you feel you've really escaped: glimmering rice paddies, towering karsts, apricot-robed monks, Indochinese villas and a richly ethnic population...pure magic. For the traveller who wants shoe-string digs and organised adventure, Laos delivers. Ecotreks through 'Lost World' jungles, elephant rides and vertiginous zip-lines; homestays with ethnic tribes and creepy boat trips through subterranean rivers – your choices are myriad. And when your limbs are weary with adventure head to the travellers' legend that is Luang Prabang, for its affordable spas, Indochinese chic and fantastically eclectic range of cuisine.

China's high-speed train links from Beijing and Kunming (currently under construction) will shortly pass through Vientiane and Luang Prabang, perhaps changing them forever. Now really is the time to visit.

When to Go

Vientiane



Jan Cool-season breezes and even the infernal south is pleasant.

Oct Cool weather; locals celebrate the full moon and boat racing festivals.

Nov & Dec Carnivalsque celebrations for Bun Pha That in Nov. Cool weather but peak prices in Dec.

AT A GLANCE

Currency Kip

Language Lao

Money ATMs in major centres. Credit cards accepted in Luang Prabang and Vientiane.

Visas On arrival (30-day; US\$30–42 depending on which passport you hold).

Mobile phones Pre-pay SIMs available for as little as 10,000K. Decent connections.

Fast Facts

Area 236,000 sq km

Capital Vientiane

Country code 856

Emergency police 191

Exchange Rates

Australia	A\$1	8350K
Canada	C\$1	8050K
Japan	¥100	9550K
New Zealand	NZ\$1	6500K
UK	UK£1	12,650K
USA	US\$1	8000K

Set Your Budget

Budget hotel room US\$10

Evening meal US\$5

Museum entrance US\$2

Beer US\$1

Resources

- » Ecotourism Laos (www.ecotourismlaos.com)
- » Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com)
- » Lao Bumpkin (www.laobumpkin.blogspot.com)

Don't Miss

There's no better way to discover the real Laos than trying a homestay. Beyond the cities, 80% of the population lives in rural villages and now, with a minimal footprint, you can experience an evening with them. Given Laos' rich ethnicity and varied geography no two homestays will be the same, but you can rely on a few commonalities: you'll be woken by children and the local rooster, communally bathe and eat by the fire, and be guaranteed one of your most memorable nights in this country. Take a Lao phrasebook, photos of your family and, most of all, a sense of humour!

ITINERARIES

One Week

After spending a few days in riverside Vientiane sampling its Soviet-Franco architecture, sophisticated bars and Asian-fusion cuisine, travel north to the unforgettable ancient city of Luang Prabang (p329) to experience its temples, crumbling villas, pampering spas, elephant treks and Gallic cuisine.

Two Weeks

Fly to Vientiane, imbibe its cafes, bars and cuisine for a few days, then head north to Vang Vieng (p325) for climbing, kayaking and tubing in serene karst scenery. Move on to enchanting Luang Prabang (p329), so bedecked with bakeries, temples, boutiques and restaurants you may not want to leave. After a few days here take a two-day slowboat up the Mekong River to Huay Xai (p349), having already booked yourself in for the memorable Gibbon Experience (see the boxed text, p350), and their overnight stays in jungle treehouses. If you've got time, head up to Luang Nam Tha (p346) for an ecoconscious trek in the wild Nam Ha National Protected Area. From here you can fly back to Vientiane to catch your flight out.

Essential Outdoor Activities

- » Trek the dense forests of 20 national protected areas spread across Laos.
- » Tube Vang Vieng's Nam Song River, a Lao rite of passage.
- » Climb the spectacular limestone karsts in Vang Vieng.
- » Elephant ride through rivers in Luang Prabang.
- » Zip-line through the jungle canopy with The Gibbon Experience or Treetop Explorer.