



Laos

856 / POP 6.7 MILLION

Includes ➔

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Best for Regional Specialities

- ➔ Makphet (p321)
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Best Places for Cultural Connections

- ➔ Handicraft Night Market (p337)
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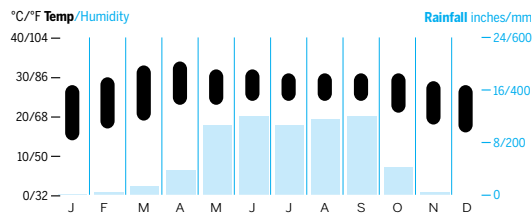
Why Go?

It's no accident that Laos appears as a favourite in many Southeast Asian odysseys, for this landlocked country lays claim to incredibly genuine people and the chance for your inner adventurer to let rip. The 'Land of a Million Elephants' oozes magic from the moment you spot a Hmong tribeswoman looming through the mist; trek through a glimmering rice paddy; or hear the sonorous call of one of the country's endangered gibbons. But it's also a place to luxuriate, whether by pampering yourself like a French colonial in a spa, or chilling under a wood-blade fan in a delicious Gallic restaurant. 'Old World' refinement is found in pockets across the country, especially in languid Vientiane and legendary Luang Prabang.

The country has also acquitted herself to green tourism, harnessing her forests with excellent treks and tribal homestays operated by eco-responsible outfits. Be it flying along jungle ziplines, elephant riding, exploring creepy subterranean river caves or motocross adventures, Laos will burn herself into your memory.

When to Go

Vientiane



Jan Cool-season breezes and even the normally sweltering south is pleasantly bearable.

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

Nov & Dec Celebrations for Pha That in November. Cool weather but peak prices during December.

AT A GLANCE

- ➔ **Currency** Kip
- ➔ **Language** Lao
- ➔ **Money** ATMs in major centres. Credit cards accepted in Luang Prabang and Vientiane.
- ➔ **Visas** On arrival (valid for 30 days; US\$30–42 depending on which passport you hold).
- ➔ **Mobile phones** Prepaid SIMs available for as little as 10,000K. Decent connections.

Fast Facts

- ➔ **Area** 236,000 sq km
- ➔ **Capital** Vientiane
- ➔ **Emergency** Police ☎ 191

Exchange Rates

Australia	A\$1	7250K
Cambodia	1000r	2020K
Euro Zone	€1	11,020K
Thailand	10B	2470K
UK	£1	113,365K
US	US\$1	8025K
Vietnam	10,000d	3805K

Set Your Budget

- ➔ **Budget hotel room** US\$10
- ➔ **Evening meal** US\$5
- ➔ **Museum entrance** US\$2
- ➔ **Beer** US\$1

Entering the Country

There are more than a dozen border crossings into Laos from Cambodia, China, Thailand and Vietnam. There are also frequent flights connecting Laos with neighbouring countries.

Don't Miss

There's no better way to discover the real Laos than by trying a homestay. Beyond the cities, 80% of the population lives in rural villages and, with minimal impact on the community and the environment, 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.

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 to experience its temples, crumbling villas, pampering spas, elephant treks and Gallic cuisine.

Two Weeks

Fly to Vientiane, taking in its cafes, bars and cuisine for a few days, then head north to Vang Vieng for climbing, kayaking and tubing in serene karst scenery. Move on to enchanting Luang Prabang, bedecked with bakeries, temples, boutiques and restaurants. After a few days here take a two-day slowboat up the Mekong River to Huay Xai, having already booked yourself in for the memorable Gibbon Experience and the overnight stays in jungle treehouses.

If you've got time, head up to Luang Namtha 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

- ➔ **National Protected Areas** Trek the dense forests of 20 national protected areas spread across Laos.
- ➔ **Vang Vieng** Tube Vang Vieng's Nam Song River, a Lao rite of passage.
- ➔ **The Loop** Hire a decent motocross bike and tackle 'The Loop'.
- ➔ **Luang Prabang** Elephant ride through rivers in Luang Prabang.
- ➔ **Gibbon Experience** Zipline through the jungle canopy with the Gibbon Experience or Treetop Explorer.