



Laos

POP 6.9 MILLION / 856

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Best Places to Eat

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Best Places to Sleep

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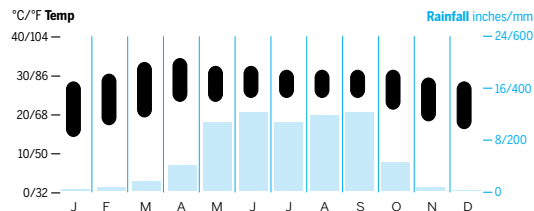
Why Go?

The 'Land of a Million Elephants' oozes magic the moment you spot a Hmong tribeswoman looming from the mist, trek through a glimmering rice paddy, or hear the sonorous call of one of the country's endangered gibbons. It's a place where it's easy to make a quick detour and find yourself well and truly off the traveller circuit: the snaking Mekong River runs through it all, alongside jagged limestone cliffs and brooding jungle. But it's also a place to luxuriate, pampering yourself like a French colonial in a spa, or chilling under a wood-blade fan in a top-notch Gallic restaurant. Old-world refinement is found in pockets right across the country, especially in languid Vientiane and legendary Luang Prabang.

Laos has also adapted itself well to green tourism, harnessing forests with excellent treks and tribal homestays. Be it flying along mountain ziplines, tubing, exploring subterranean caves or traversing the jungle via dirt-bike, Laos will indelibly burn itself into your memory.

When to Go

Vientiane



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

Oct Mercifully cool weather. Bun Awk Phansa sees candle-bearing boats floated down rivers.

Nov–Dec Cool weather; best time to visit. Book accommodation in advance.

VIENTIANE

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 (ວຽງຈັນ) 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.

Sights

The bulk of sights are concentrated in a small area in the centre of the city. With the exception of Xieng Khuan (Buddha Park), all sights are easily reached by bicycle and, in most cases, on foot. Most wats welcome visitors after the monks have collected alms in the morning until about 6pm.

Wat Si Saket

BUDDHIST TEMPLE

(ວັດສີສະເກດ; Map p296; cnr Th Lan Xang & Th Setthathirath; 5000K; ☉8am-noon & 1-4pm, closed public holidays) Built between 1819 and 1824 by Chao Anou, Wat Si Saket is believed to be Vientiane's oldest surviving wat. And it is starting to show, as this beautiful temple is in need of a facelift. Along the western side of the cloister is a pile of Buddhas that were damaged during the 1828 Siamese-Lao war.

★ COPE Visitor Centre

CULTURAL CENTRE

(ສູນພື້ນຖານວິທານແຫ່ງຊາດ; Map p292; ☎021-218427; www.copelaos.org; Th Khu Vieng; donations welcome; ☉9am-6pm) **FREE** COPE (Cooperative Orthotic & Prosthetic Enterprise) is the main source of artificial limbs, walking aids and wheelchairs in Laos. Its excellent Visitor Centre, part of the organisation's National Rehabilitation Centre, offers myriad interesting and informative multimedia exhibits about prosthetics and the unexploded ordnance (UXO) that make them necessary.

★ Patuxai

MONUMENT

(ປະຕູໄຊ, Victory Monument; Map p292; Th Lan Xang; 3000K; ☉8am-5pm) Vientiane's Arc de Triomphe replica is a slightly incongruous sight, dominating the commercial district around Th Lan Xang. Officially called 'Victory Monument' and commemorating the Lao who died in prerevolutionary wars, it was built in 1969 with cement donated by the USA intended for the construction of a new airport. Climb to the summit for panoramic views over Vientiane.

★ Pha That Luang

BUDDHIST STUPA

(ພະທາດຫລວງ, Great Sacred Reliquary, Great Stupa; Map p292; Th That Luang; 5000K, rental of long skirt to enter temple 5000K; ☉8am-noon & 1-4pm Tue-Sun) Svelte and golden Pha That Luang is the most important national monument in Laos; a symbol of Buddhist religion and Lao sovereignty. Legend has it that Ashokan missionaries from India erected a *tāht* (stupa) here to enclose a piece of Buddha's breastbone as early as the 3rd century BC. Pha That Luang is about 4km northeast of the city centre.

Xieng Khuan

MUSEUM

(ຂຽງຂວັນ, Suan Phut, Buddha Park; 5000K, camera 3000K; ☉8am-4.30pm) Located 25km south-east of central Vientiane, eccentric Xieng Khuan, aka Buddha Park, thrills with otherworldly Buddhist and Hindu sculptures, and was designed and built in 1958 by Luang Pu, a yogi-priest-shaman who merged Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, mythology and iconography into a cryptic whole. Bus 14 (8000K, one hour, 24km) leaves Talat Sao Bus Station every 15 minutes for Xieng Khuan. Alternatively, charter a tuk-tuk (200,000K return).

Wat Chanthabuli

BUDDHIST TEMPLE

(Map p296; Th Fa Ngoum) This beautiful riverside wat was built in the 16th century, destroyed during the Siamese invasion of 1828 and later fully restored to its present glory. It's notable for its enormous bronze seated Buddha.

Activities & Courses

Coffee

Sinouk Coffee Pavilion

COFFEE

(☎030-2000654; www.sinouk-cafe.com; Km 9, Th Tha Deua; ☉8am-5pm) Located at the headquarters of Sinouk Coffee, one of Laos' best-known coffee producers, this is an education in the bean. Learn more about the art of coffee production at the coffee gallery and