

# Vientiane & Around



The capital of Laos is booming. Driven by rising foreign investment, plenty of foreign aid workers and a more urbane youth, change is coming as quickly as in any city in Asia. However, even with all this dynamism you won't see words like 'hustle' and 'bustle' being used to describe Vientiane, which can still mount a strong argument for being the most relaxed capital city on earth.

Vientiane means 'Sandalwood City', and is actually pronounced Viang Chan (Viang means 'city' or 'place with walls' in Lao; Chan means sandalwood); the French are responsible for the modern transliteration. The combination of tree-lined boulevards and dozens of temples impart an atmosphere of timelessness, while the kaleidoscopic architectural styles reflect its historic influences, from classic Lao through Thai, Chinese, French, US and Soviet.

As Laos continues to open itself to the world, Vientiane is where the struggle between a communist past and inevitably more capitalist future is most dramatically played out. Lao bands sing lyrics censored by the government to dancing youths who'd look at home in any Western bar. The Lao National Museum still has displays glorifying the victory over capitalist foreign imperialists, but across the road another slick restaurant opens in what is becoming one of the best-value dining cities on earth. The contrasts are fascinating.

Of course, Vientiane is not only about witnessing change. The 6400 Buddhas at Wat Si Saket, the religious art of Haw Pha Kaeo, and the lotus-inspired lines of Laos's gilded national symbol, Pha That Luang, speak of the historical importance of the city. Patuxai and the surreal Xieng Khuan (Buddha Park) may have less artistic merit, but like the city itself, they're not short of appeal.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Gaze up at the tapered golden stupa of **Pha That Luang** (p91), the symbol of Lao nationhood
- Check out the concrete folly that is **Xieng Khuan** (p98), the bizarre park full of dozens of giant Buddhist and Hindu sculptures
- Treat yourself to a traditional herbal sauna and massage at Vientiane's **Wat Sok Pa Luang** (p96)
- Enjoy a night out, Lao-style, at **On the Rock Pub** (p111) and **Marina** (p111)
- Tube, climb, raft, kayak, cycle or walk through the rivers and imposing limestone karst terrain around **Vang Vieng** (p121)
- Catch a glimpse of wild elephants from the elephant observation tower at the **Phu Khao Khuay NPA** (p118)



# VIENTIANE

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☎ 021 / pop 234,000

## 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. 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.

In the ensuing 10 or so centuries of its history, 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. (King Setthathirat moved the capital of the Lan Xang kingdom from the city now known as 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 (p94), built in 1815.

Unfortunately, Chao Anou's attempts to assert Lao independence over the Siamese (see p31) resulted in the most violent and destructive episode in Vientiane's history.

In 1828 the Siamese defeated Chao Anou's armies and wasted no time in razing the city and carting off much of the population. Wat Si Saket was the only major building to survive, and the city was abandoned.

In 1867, French explorers arrived but it wasn't until late in the century, after Vientiane had been made capital of the French protectorate, that serious reconstruction began. A simple grid plan was laid out for the city and a sprinkling of colonial-style mansions and administrative buildings

emerged. However, Vientiane was always low in the French order of Indochinese priorities, as the modest building program testifies.

In 1928 the 'city' was home to just 9000 inhabitants – many of them Vietnamese administrators brought in by the French – and it wasn't until the end of WWII that Vientiane's population began to grow with any vigour. It was a growth fed primarily by Cold War dollars, with first French and later American advisors arriving in a variety of guises.

After a couple of coups d'état in the politically fluid 1960s, Vientiane had by the early '70s become a city where almost anything went. Its few bars were peopled by an almost surreal mix of spooks and correspondents, and the women who served them.

Not surprisingly, things changed with the arrival of the Pathet Lao (PL) in 1975. Nightclubs filled with spies were the first to go and Vientiane settled into a slumber punctuated by occasional unenthusiastic concessions to communism, including low level collectivisation and an initial crack-down on Buddhism. These days the most noticeable leftovers from the period are some less-than-inspired Soviet-style buildings. Things picked up in the 1990s and in recent years Vientiane has seen a relative explosion of construction, road redevelopment and vehicular traffic.

## ORIENTATION

Vientiane curves along the Mekong River following a meandering northwest-southeast axis, with the central district of Muang Chanthabuli at the centre of the bend. Most of the government offices, hotels, restaurants and historic temples are located in Chanthabuli, near the river. Some old French colonial buildings and Vietnamese-Chinese shophouses remain, set alongside newer structures built according to the rather boxy social realist school of architecture.

Wattay International Airport (Map pp88–9) is around 4km northwest of the centre. The Northern Bus Station (Map pp88–9), where long-distance services to points north begin and end, is about 2km northwest of the centre. The Southern Bus Station deals with most services heading south and is 8km northeast of the centre on Rte 13. The border with Thailand at the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge (Map p117) is 19km southeast of the city.