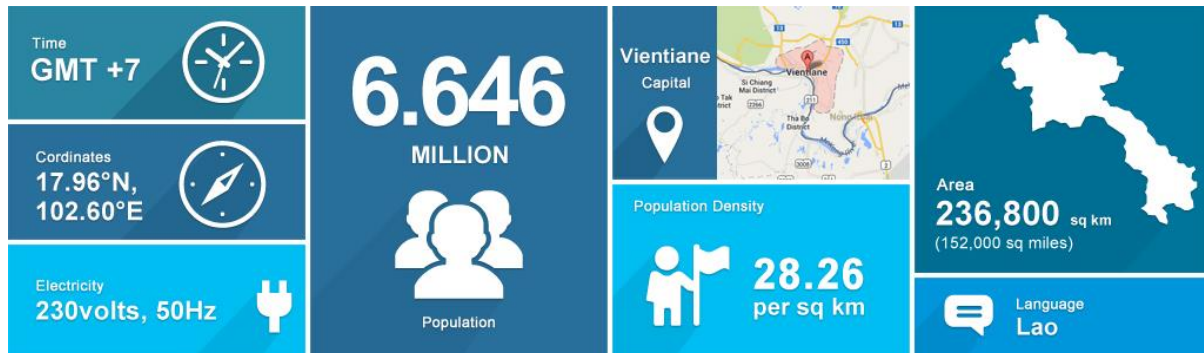


LAOS



LAOS - THE COUNTRY

FAST FACTS



If you're looking for an authentic destination to visit then experience Laos in all its majestic beauty. Natural in almost every aspect, Laos is one of Southeast Asia's least developed nations offering the adventurous tourist a land of many surprises. It is still a relatively undiscovered country that has escaped the dramatic industrial development of its neighboring countries.

Laos, also known as the Land of a Million Elephants, is a culturally rich, land-locked country with a population of just over 6 million. The Laotians are predominantly Buddhist and are very friendly and hospitable people. The official language is Lao, but English is widely spoken. The capital city, Vientiane, skirts the Mekong River, which forms the border between Laos and Thailand.

In Vientiane, you should pay a visit to the temples of Wat Phra Keo, Wat Si Saket and the splendid sight on top of the 'Arc de Triomphe' offering a superb view on of the surrounding natural area of Vientiane. One of nation's most important temples is the That Luang Stupa, which should not be missed. During the afternoon, if you have time, stop by the National Cultural Ethnic Park, the Friendship Bridge or the bizarre Buddha Park. In the morning, don't miss the market where you can buy anything from local handicrafts to MP3 players and traditional medicine.

The second destination of Laos is Luang Prabang, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that deserves to be seen. There, among other things, you can enjoy a walk to the top of the Wat Phousy overlooking the Mekong River, for splendid views of adjacent land. Later, you can discover the stunning and beautiful Wat Xieng Thong Temple. In former times the oldest temple of Luang Prabang played a major role during cremation ceremonies for the Laotian kings.

LAOS HIGHLIGHTS

If you're looking for an authentic destination to visit then experience Laos in all its majestic beauty. Natural in almost every aspect, Laos is one of Southeast Asia's least developed nations offering the adventurous tourist a land of many surprises....



LUANG PRABANG

the former capital of Laos, this UNESCO World Heritage City has to be one of the most charming places in all of Southeast Asia. A myriad of traditional Lao wooden houses and European architecture, with gold-roofed temples and ornate Buddhist decorations, set against a backdrop of verdant greenery and rugged mountains. It houses old monasteries, typically Indo-Chinese store houses and lots of artwork shops. The town is surrounded by various types of natural beauty, offering travellers a wealth of sites to visit.

As the first capital of Laos, Luang Prabang has somehow managed to remain unscathed by war and modernization. The city wakes up every day to the sound of bells, gongs and drums from the local temples which send the monks and novices on their rounds to collect rice for their daily meal. Luang Prabang is the main centre of Buddhism practices and is the perfect location for spiritual contemplation.

VANG VIENG

Still not much more than three streets and a bus station, the main attractions are the river, laid back countryside and cave-filled rock formations. There are also some beautiful, blue lagoons that make for stunning photos. Vang Vieng is truly an outdoor paradise with plenty of

outdoor activities available in the most beautiful of surroundings, such as kayaking, caving, rock climbing, etc.

VIENTIANE

situated along the Mekong River near the border with Thailand, Vientiane is the largest city in Laos, and the capital. This unusual city is surrounded by lush, green paddy fields and is still peaceful and quiet. It contains many temples and Buddhist monuments, including Pha That Luang, one of the most famous Buddhist stupas in Laos.

Vientiane is a typically old Indo-Chinese town with a mixture of Asian and French colonial architecture destined to charm you. Not only does the style of the buildings reflect Laos' historical ties with France, but the freshly baked baguettes are often served next to shops selling Lao noodle soup. This capital city is the centre of culture, commerce and administration in Laos.

PAKSE

the capital of the Champasak province of Southern Laos, Pakse is an ideal base with its relaxing atmosphere on the Mekong and Sedone Rivers, friendly locals, ubiquitous riverside restaurants and bars, and numerous massage clinics. Pakse is synonymous with Wat Phou like Siem Reap is to Angkor Wat. Wat Phou was built by the founder of the first Khmer empire, Jayavarman II. It is much smaller than Angkor, but still a rival to that ancient empire. It is the capital of Champasak Province and an unspoiled place for travellers. Southeast Asia's highest waterfall, Khong Phapend, and many interesting islands on the Mekong River can be found near Pakse.

HISTORY & GOVERNMENT

HISTORY

The first recorded history of the Lao begins with the unification of Laos in 1353 by King Fa Ngum. He established his capital at Luang Prabang and ruled a kingdom called Lane Xang, literally million elephants, which covered much of...

His successors helped establish Buddhism as the predominant religion of the country.

TIMELINE

- 18th Century
Conflicts with Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia
- 1907
Franco-Siamese treaty that defined the border between Laos and Thailand
- 1945
Formation of Independent government under Free Laos Banner
- 1947
France recognized the independence of Laos

- 1960
paratroop captain seized Vientiane in a coup
- 1972
Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) joined a new coalition government
- 1975
The King renounced his throne

In the 18th century Lane Xang entered a period of decline caused by dynastic struggle and conflicts with Burma Siam, now Thailand, Vietnam and the Khmer kingdom. In the 19th century the Siamese established hegemony over much of what is now Laos. The region was divided into principalities centered on Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Champassak. Late in the century the French supplanted the Siamese and integrated all of Laos into the French empire. The Franco-Siamese treaty of 1907 defined the present Lao boundary with Thailand. During World War II the Japanese occupied French Indochina including Laos. In September 1945 Vientiane and Champassak united with Luang Prabang to form an independent government under the Free Lao banner. In 1946 French troops reoccupied the country and conferred limited autonomy on Laos following elections for a constituent assembly.

France formally recognized the independence of Laos within the French Union in 1949 and Laos remained a member of the Union until 1953. Pro-Western governments held power after the 1954 Geneva peace conference until 1957 when the first coalition government led by Prince Souvanna Phouma was formed. The coalition government collapsed in 1958 amidst increased polarization of the political process. Rightist forces took over the government and a communist insurgency resumed in 1959.

In 1960 a paratroop captain seized Vientiane in a coup and demanded formation of a neutralist government to end the fighting. The neutralist government newly in place was driven from power later that same year by rightist forces. In response, the neutralists allied themselves with the communist insurgents and began to receive support from the Soviet Union. The rightist regime received support from the U.S.

A second Geneva conference was held in 1961-1962 and provided for the independence and neutrality of Laos. Soon after accord was reached the signatories accused each other of violating the terms of the agreement and with superpower support on both sides the civil war soon resumed.

In 1972 the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) joined a new coalition government after the Vientiane agreement of February 21, 1973 went into effect that same year. Nonetheless the political struggle between communist's neutralists and rightists continued. The collapse of Saigon and Phnom Penh in 1975 hastened the decline of the coalition. On December 1975 the king renounced his throne in the constitutional monarchy and entrusted his power to the Lao people but the LPRP dissolved the coalition cabinet and the communist Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) was established.

The new communist government imposed centralized economic decision-making and broad security measures including control of the media and the arrest and incarceration of many members of the previous government and military in "re-education camps". These draconian

policies and deteriorating economic conditions along with government efforts to enforce political control prompted an exodus of lowland Lao and ethnic Hmong from Laos. About 10% of the Lao population sought refugee status after 1975. Many have since been resettled in third countries including nearly 250,000 who have come to the United States. The situation of Lao refugees is now nearing its final chapter and many have resettled in their homeland.

GOVERNMENT

People's Republic since 1975. Gained independence in 1953.

GEOGRAPHY



Laos is a landlocked country bordered to the north by China, to the east by Vietnam, to the south by Cambodia, and to the west by Thailand and Myanmar. Apart from the Mekong River plains along the border of Thailand, the country is mountainous, particularly in the north and in places densely forested.

CULTURE

The Laotians are known to be friendly and smiling people who love liberties with no quarrels or oppressions. They hold great respect for the nation and most live with honour and respect for others.

A typical example illustrative of this well-known friendliness is the way in which inhabitants welcome strangers with a free meal.

	Population 6.646 million
	Time GMT + 7
	Coordinates 17.96°N, 102.60°E
	Population Density 28.26 per sq km
	Area 236,800 sq km

Friendship, love and peace sit in the hearts of Lao people. They hate conflicts or oppressors and their slogan is “united we survive and separated, we die.” They enjoy literature and arts, and the country’s ancient heritage arises from the national poetry that illustrates the Laotian way of life.

HINTS

1. The Lao Lum (lowlanders) who make up 70% of the population and predominantly live on Mekong River level.
2. The Lao Theung (uplands) who comprise 20% of the population and on the foothills with an elevation of less than 1,000 meters (3,280 feet).
3. The Lao Song (hill tribes) who constitute 10% of the population and live in the mountainous areas.

Theravada Buddhism has contributed greatly to the Lao culture. It is reflected throughout the country in its temples, the language, the arts, literature, performing arts and more. Laotian music is dominated by its national instrument, the khaen, a type of bamboo pipe.

Houses are built on stilts and have free space underneath the roofs with a triangle wind plates on each side. There are two types of houses; single and a double roofed. The number of steps depends on the height of the house, but traditionally they’ll have an uneven number.

The dress depends on gender and age. Lao women are dressed properly and seen traditionally as the mothers of the nation. Lao women wear silk skirts, blouses and scarves to attend important ceremonies. During significant events, Lao women wear scarves and coiled hair styles. Lao men wear salong, big large pants, or peasant pants, to attend important ceremonies.



Lao People share a rich ethnic diversity, comprising such groups Hmong, Khmu, Yao, Akha, Lu, etc. Most of them have kept their own customs, dialects and traditional dress; there are 47 different groups. These can be classified into three broad groups:

DOS & DON'TS

1. The Lao greeting for hello is “Sa Bai Dee,” usually said with a smile. Touching or showing affection in public will embarrass your hosts.

2. Lao people traditionally greet each other by pressing their palms together to “Nop,” although it is acceptable for men to shake hands.
3. In Laos your head is “high” and you feet “low.” Using your feet for anything other than walking or playing sport is generally considered rude.
4. Touching someone’s head is very, very impolite.
5. Being nude in public is impolite.
6. Remember to take off your shoes before entering a Lao person’s home.
7. Show respect and dress respectfully when visiting temples and when taking photos.
8. Monks are revered and respected in Laos, however women should not touch a monk or a monk’s robes.

RELIGION

Buddhism first appeared in Laos during the 18th century A.D. The unified Kingdom of Lane Xang, in the 14th century declared Buddhism as the state religion and urged the people to abandon animism or other beliefs such as the cult of spirits.

The policy was meant to develop the Laotian culture around one common faith, Theravada Buddhism.

Today, this form of Buddhism is now the professed religion for 90% of the Lao people. Buddhism is an inherent feature of daily life and casts a strong influence on the society. Lao woman can be seen each morning giving alms to monks, earning merit to lessen the number of their rebirth. Lao men are expected to become a monk for at least a short time in their lives. Traditionally, they spend three months during the rainy season in a Buddhist temple. But nowadays most men curtail their stay to one or two weeks.



CLIMATE

Laos enjoys a tropical climate with two distinct seasons, the rainy season from the beginning of May to the end of September and dry season from October through April.

The yearly average temperature is about 28 C (82F), rising to a maximum of 38 C (100F) in April and May.

In Vientiane minimum temperatures of 19 C (66F) can be felt in January. In mountainous areas, temperatures drop to 14-15 C (58F) during the winter months, and during cold nights easily reach the freezing point.

The average precipitation is highest in southern Laos, where the Annamite Mountains receive over 3000 mm (118 inches) annually.

In Vientiane rainfall is about 1500-2000 mm (59 to 79 inches), and in the Northern provinces only 1000-1500 (39 to 59 inches) mm.

PRACTIAL INFORMATION

Useful, practical information regarding money, credit cards, ATMs, health & safety, food & drink, transportation, communication, and much more...

MONEY

Currency

Lao Kip (LAK) = 100 cents. Notes are in denominations of LAK5000, 2000, 1000, 500 and 100.

Currency Exchange

Thai Baht, Euros and US Dollars are the easiest currencies to exchange. They are also widely accepted in shops, markets and hotels in Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

Credit / Debit Cards and ATMs:

Major credit cards are accepted in the more upmarket hotels and restaurants only. There are several ATMs in Vientiane where you can withdraw KIP. Locate ATMs accepting VISA cards here. Locate ATMs accepting MasterCard here.

Traveller's Cheques

Limited acceptance. To avoid additional exchange rate charges, travellers are advised to take traveller's cheques in US Dollars or Thai Baht.

Banking Hours

Mon-Fri 0800-1200 and 1330-1730. Some banks remain open during lunch.

Currency Restrictions

The import and export of local currency is prohibited. There are no restrictions on the import or export of foreign currency, but amounts greater than USD\$2,000 must be declared.

Exchange Rate Indicators (Feb 2014)

\$1.00 = LAK 8,022

€1.00 = LAK 11,120

£1.00 = LAK 13,343

For up-to-date exchange rates, please visit e.g. www.oanda.com

HEALTH & SAFETY

Health care

Health insurance, including emergency evacuation, is absolutely essential. Doctors and hospitals expect cash payments for any medical treatment. The cost of medical evacuation is high. It is suggested that any visitors bring adequate supplies of any essential personal medication, since that medication may not be available in Laos.

Vaccinations

A yellow fever vaccination certificate is required from travellers arriving from infected areas. Following WHO guidelines issued in 1973, a cholera vaccination certificate is not a condition of entry to Laos. However, cholera is a serious risk in this country and precautions are essential. Up-to-date advice should be sought before deciding whether these precautions should include vaccination, as medical opinion is divided over its effectiveness. Typhoid may occur. Polio virus transmission has been interrupted, but complete eradication is not yet certain. Malaria risk exists throughout the year in the whole country, except in Vientiane. The malignant falciparum form is prevalent and is reported to be highly resistant to chloroquine. The recommended prophylaxis is mefloquine.

Food and drink

All water should be regarded as being potentially contaminated. Water used for drinking, brushing teeth or making ice should have first been boiled or otherwise sterilised. Milk is unpasteurised and should be boiled. Powdered or tinned milk is available and is advised, but make sure that it is reconstituted with pure water. Avoid dairy products that are likely to have been made from unboiled milk. Only eat well cooked meat and fish, preferably served hot. Pork, salad and mayonnaise may carry increased risk. Vegetables should be cooked and fruit peeled.

Other Risks

Hepatitis A and E occur; hepatitis B is highly endemic. Dengue fever, diphtheria, tuberculosis and Japanese encephalitis occur. Some vaccinations may be advised. Liver fluke (opisthorchiasis) is present. Avoid swimming in fresh water (except well chlorinated swimming pools) as schistosomiasis and leptospirosis are present. Rabies is present. For those at high risk, vaccination before arrival should be considered. If you are bitten, seek medical advice without delay.


SAFETY

Laos is a relatively safe country to visit. As a global rule, we recommend you never leave your belongings unattended and always maintain eye contact or a firm grip on cameras and shoulder bags. Valuables should be stored in the safety box in your room, if available, or at the reception. Avoid mopeds late at night. In rural areas, always seek local advice and don't stray from that.



TRANSPORTATION

Travelling in Laos

<h4>BY AIR</h4>  <p>Vientiane airport is 3KM from the city. Up to 20minutes</p>	<h4>BY ROAD</h4>  <p>Bus services link all major towns and cities.</p>	<h4>BY WATER</h4>  <p>slow ferries and exciting but noisy and hazardous speedboats</p>
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Getting around by air

Oudomxai, Sam Neua and Sayabouti in the north and Pakse and Savanakhet in the south.

Domestic airports

Vientiane (VTE) (Wattay) is 3km (2mi) from the city (travel time – 20 minutes). To/from the airport: Taxis cost US\$4, on average. Facilities: Bank/bureaux de change, bars, post office, restaurants and car hire.

Getting around by water

The Mekong and other rivers are a vital part of the country's transport system. The choice is between irregular (and very basic) slow ferries and exciting but noisy and hazardous speedboats. Both services run from Vientiane to Luang Prabang and Luang Prabang to Huay Xai. Ferries often depart early in the mornings and can take several days, speedboats run more regularly and take approximately eight hours for each leg of the journey. Times and prices alter according to demand. Boats can also be hired privately.

Getting around by road

Traffic drives on the right. Many of the roads have been paved in recent years, including the main highway from the Thai border at Savannakhet to the Vietnamese border. However, few main roads are suitable for all-weather driving. In the north of the country, there is a road link between Vientiane and Luang Prabang, and from Vientiane to Nam Dong and Tran Ninh. Bus services link all major towns and cities. Buses can vary from the more traditional type to the converted pick-up truck. It is not recommended to hire cars in Laos as driving standards are low. However, it is possible to hire a car with a driver through hotels or tourist agencies. An International Driving Permit is recommended, although it is not legally required.

Getting around in the City

There is a mixture of old and metered taxis in Vientiane that can usually be located at Wattay Airport, the Friendship Bridge and the Morning Market. Taxis can also be hired for approximately USD\$20 per day. Converted motorcycles, known as tuk-tuks or jumbos, are available in all major towns and cities and are perfect for shorter journeys around town. Bargaining is expected. Motorcycles and bicycles can be hired for the day in Vientiane and Luang Prabang.



FOOD & DRINK



Lao cuisine has many regional variations, due in part to the fresh foods local to each region. You can enjoy an authentic Lao meal (khao niew or sticky rice is a staple) in many of the restaurants or spend a morning participating in a cooking class; learn about the ingredients and the cooking styles, before enjoying the delicious meal for your lunch.

Lao food is traditionally eaten with sticky rice using the fingers. In the countryside, people all eat as family style, sitting on the floor, sharing a few dishes. Lao traditional food is dry, spicy and very delicious based on fish, buffalo meat, pork, poultry and especially herbs. Food in Laos is always freshly prepared, and rarely stored or preserved. Other than sticky rice, which can be eaten either sweet, sour, or fermented, Laotian food is very rich in vegetables and is often browned in coconut oil.

Drinks

HINTS

1. Meat and fish are usually grilled or steamed
2. Lao food is traditionally eaten with sticky rice using the fingers.
3. Lao traditional food is dry, spicy and very delicious based on fish, buffalo meat, pork, poultry and especially herbs.
4. Lao coffee is often called Pakxong coffee

Lao coffee is often called Pakxong coffee (cafe pakxong in Lao), which is grown on the Bolovens Plateau around the town of Pakxong. This area is sometimes said to be the best place in Southeast Asia for coffee cultivation. Both Robusta and Arabica are grown in Laos, and if you ask for Arabica, there is a very good chance the proprietor will know what you are talking about. Most of the Arabica in Laos is consumed locally and most of the Robusta is exported to Thailand, where it goes into Nescafé. The custom in Laos is to drink coffee in glasses, with condensed milk in the bottom, followed by a chaser of green tea. The highly regarded tea is also grown on the Bolovens Plateau.

COMMUNICATION

Telephone

Restricted is IDD available. The country code is 856. The General Post Office (GPO) offers public telephones for national and international calls. There are also many phone card booths available. Roaming agreements exist with a few international mobile phone companies. Check with your service provider. Coverage is sporadic and mainly, though not exclusively, situated around Vientiane.

Most good hotels now have IDD phones in rooms and it is possible to send faxes from hotels and post offices. Be aware that most hotels charge considerable amounts for these services; please check with the hotel prior to arrival. It may not always be possible to make international calls in remote areas.

Internet

Internet cafes are located in cities and large towns. Major hotels have business centers with PCs connected to the Internet. Some of them have wireless broadband access in rooms or public areas. Cyber cafes are becoming popular and are easily found in major towns and cities. Prices are reasonable, usually below US\$1 per hour. In many internet cafes, you can buy pre-paid phone cards to dial from a computer to a landline or mobile phone worldwide.

Mail

The General Post Office (GPO) is beside the Morning Market in Vientiane. Normal postal service is inexpensive and generally reliable. A courier service is recommended for urgent or valuable mail. Airmail to Europe takes at least a week and longer to the USA.

EVENTS

JANUARY

The Bun Pha Wet is a temple-centered festival in which the jataka or birth-tale of Prince Vessantara, the Buddha's penultimate life, is recited. This is also a favoured time for Lao males to be ordained into monkhood. The scheduling of Bun Pha Wet is staggered so that it is held on different days in different villages. This is so that relatives and friends living in different villages can invite one another to their respective celebrations.

The Boun Khoun Khao Festival celebrates harvest in most villages and thanks are given to the spirit of the land.

FEBRUARY

The Magha Puja Festival commemorates a speech given by the Buddha to 1,250 enlightened monks. In the talk, the Buddha laid down the first monastic regulations and predicted his own death. Chanting and offerings mark the festival, culminating in the candlelit circumambulation of wats (temples) throughout the country. It is celebrated most fervently in Vientiane and at the Khmer ruins of Wat Phu, near Champasak.

The Vietnamese Tet & Chinese New Year is celebrated in Vientiane, Pakse and Savannakhet with parties, deafening non-stop fireworks and visits to Vietnamese and Chinese temples. Chinese and Vietnamese-run businesses usually close for three days.

The Wat Phu Festival held in Champasak happens on the grounds of the enchanting pre-Angkorian Wat Phut site. Festivities include elephant racing, buffalo fighting, cock fighting and performances of Lao traditional music and dance. The trade fair also showcases products from the southern province of Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. Make sure you don't forget your wallet and your camera.

MARCH

The Boun Pha Vet is a ceremony of donations when one's future is read from a piece of paper drawn during the three-day, three-night festival.

APRIL

The Boun Pi Mai Festival celebrates New Year and is a public holiday that typically lasts for three days. The Lao New Year is particular in the sense that it is delayed to April when the days are longer and there is more time to party. The festival also serves to invite the rains. Statues of the Buddha in the "calling for rain" posture are ceremonially doused in water, which is poured along an intricately decorated trench. The small stupas of sand, decorated with streamers, in Wat compounds are symbolic requests for health and happiness over the next year. It is celebrated with traditional Lao folk singing and the circle dance. Similar festivals are celebrated in Thailand, Cambodia and Burma.

MAY

The Visakha Puja celebrates the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha and is celebrated in local Wats.

The Bun Bang Fai Festival (Rocket festival) is a Buddhist rain-making festival. The festival lasts two days and is a worthwhile experience for you to enjoy. This is one of the wildest festivals in the country, with plenty of music and dance, processions and general merrymaking, culminating in the firing of bamboo rockets into the sky. In some places male participants blacken their bodies with lamp soot, while women wear sunglasses and carry carved wooden phalli to imitate men. The firing of the rockets is supposed to prompt the heavens to initiate the rainy season and bring much-needed water to the rice fields.

JUNE

The Khao Phansaa marks the beginning of the three-month Buddhist Lent, which commences at the full moon in June or July and continues until the full moon in October. This is considered a particularly auspicious time for Lao men to enter the monkhood and is marked by numerous ordination ceremonies.

JULY

The Khao Phansaa is the beginning of the traditional three month “rains retreat” during which Buddhist monks are expected to station themselves in a single monastery. This is also the traditional time of year for men to enter the monkhood temporarily, hence many ordinations take place.

AUGUST

The Haw Khao Padap Din is a sombre festival in which the living pay respect to the dead. Many cremations take place, with bones being exhumed for the purpose, during this time. Gifts are presented to the Sangha so that monks will chant on behalf of the deceased.

SEPTEMBER

The Boun Ok Phansaa is the end of Buddhist Lent and the faithful take offerings to the temple. It is held during the ninth lunar month in Luang Prabang and the eleventh lunar month in Vientiane and marks the end of the rainy season. Boat races take place on the Mekong River with crews of 50 or more men and women. On the night before the race small decorated rafts are set afloat on the river.

The Kammouan Festival is held in Sebangfai District. It includes exciting boat races on the Sebangfai River, a trade fair of agricultural products and local handicrafts. The festival includes traditional Lao music and dance performances, and citizens make offerings to the dead to share merit with them.

The Luang Prabang Festival includes boat races on the Mekong River and a trade fair in Luang Prabang City; during this festival, citizens visit local temples to make offerings to the dead to share merit with them.

The Champassak is held in association with Ok Pansa, which marks the end of the monks’ three-month fast and retreat during the rainy season; a long-boat racing competition is held in order to worship the river spirits.

The water festival held in Vientiane during Ok Pansa is spectacular. On the first day at dawn, donations and offerings are made at temples around the city; in the evening, candlelight processions are held around the temples and hundreds of colourful floats decorated with flowers, incense and candles are set adrift down the Mekong River in thanksgiving to the river spirits. The next day, a popular and exciting boat racing competition is held on the Mekong.

The Khammouan is a boat race held on the Sebangfai River as well as a trade fair of agricultural products, local handicrafts, traditional Lao music and dance performances. During the festival citizens donate offerings to the dead to share merit.

OCTOBER

The Awk Phansaa celebrates the end of the three-month-rains retreat. Monks are allowed to leave the monasteries to travel and are presented with robes, alms bowls and other requisites of life. On the eve of Awk Phansaa many people fashion small banana-leaf boats carrying

candles, incense and other offerings, and float them in rivers, a custom know as Lai Hua Fai, similar to Loy Krathong in Thailand.

The Bun Nam Water Festival is a second festival held in association with Awk Phansaa. Boat races are commonly held in towns located on rivers, such as Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Savannakhet; in smaller towns these races are often postponed until National Day so that residents aren't saddled with two costly festivals in two months.

The That Luang Festival & Trade Fair takes place in Vientiane. This religious festival is held in and around That Luang Stupa, the national symbol of Laos, where hundreds of monks gather to accept alms and floral arrangements from the people; the festival includes a grand fireworks display at night, and a trade fair showcasing Lao products takes place during the day.

NOVEMBER

The Boun That Luang is celebrated in all Laos' Thats (stupas) although most enthusiastically and colorfully in Vientiane. As well as religious rituals, most celebrations include local fairs, processions, beauty pageants and other festivities worth seeing.

The That Luang Festival takes place in Vientiane. Hundreds of monks assemble to receive alms and floral votives early in the morning on the first day. There is a colourful procession between Wat Si Muang and Pha That Luang. The celebration lasts a week and includes fireworks and music, culminating in a candlelit circumnavigation of That Luang.





PUBLIC HOLIDAYS IN INDONESIA

1. **January 1**
New Year's Day
2. **January 20**
Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Birthday
3. **February 17**
Presidents' Day
4. **March 10**
International Women's Day
5. **April 14, 15, 16**
Lao New Year
6. **May 1**
International Labor Day
7. **May 26**
Memorial Day
8. **July 4**
Independence Day
9. **September 1**
Labor Day
10. **October 9**
Boat Racing Festival
11. **October 13**
Columbus Day
12. **November 6**
That Luang Festival
13. **November 11**
Veteran's Day
14. **November 27**
Thanksgiving Day
15. **December 2**
Lao National Day

16. **December 25**
Christmas Day

SHOPPING

Hill tribe silk, arts, crafts, home-furnishings, jewelry and couture-quality textiles are all readily available within the city.

Handicrafts, textiles, basketry, silver, woodcarvings and hand-made paper are some of the most popular handicrafts in Laos. Lao weavers are known for producing intricate fabrics in home-spun silk and cotton, most notably, complex mutmee (ikot) patterns based on folklore and natural themes. Some of the best weavers come from the Tai ethnic groups in Houaphan Province. If you are planning a visit to Luang Prabang and are interested in weaving, don't miss Ban Phanom or the night market in the centre of town.



TIPS FOR SMART AND SAVVY SHOPPING

1. **Check everything** you can check before handing over your money
2. Always **ask around to get an idea of basic prices** for common necessities. For more important purchases, try and get a local friend to go along with you, or better still, let them do the buying without you
3. **Don't feel awkward or rude about bargaining**, everyone bargains in Cambodia and you'll look like a green tourist if you don't
4. Don't look happy or resigned about paying what you're asked; always **begin by showing your gentle disapproval**
5. **Walk away if you cannot agree on a price**: either they'll come after you or you'll find the same thing on sale somewhere else

TRAVEL TO AND FROM LAOS

Travelling to and from Laos



Getting in or out by Air

The national airline is Laos Airlines which serves international routes from Vientiane to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam), Bangkok and Chiang Mai (Thailand), Phnom Penh (Cambodia) and Kunming (China). Thai Airways International from Bangkok; Vietnam Airlines from Hanoi. There are no direct flights from the US or Europe; flights are mainly via Bangkok, China or Cambodia.

Getting there by train

There are no railways in Laos, but the Thai system stretches from Bangkok via Nakhon Ratchasima to Nong Khai on the Laos/Thailand border. A ferry and a bridge link from the Lao side of the Mekong, 19km (12mi) east of Vientiane.

Getting There by Road

It is possible to enter Laos from Thailand at Nong Khai over the Friendship Bridge. Other border crossings include Chiang Kong (Thailand)–Houei Xay (Laos) in the north; Mukdahan (Thailand)–Savannakhet (Laos); Chong Mek (between Pakse and Ubon Ratchathani); Nakorn Phanom (Thailand)–Tha Kek (Laos) and Jouay Kone (Thailand)–Xaingnabouri (Laos). It is possible to enter Laos by road from Vietnam either at Quangtri or at the border post of Lak Xao near Vinh. Laos can also be entered from China, from Mengla in Yunnan province to Luang Nam Tha. Overland travel to Cambodia and Myanmar is not feasible due to security risks. Internally, the road link between Vientiane and Luang Prabang to the north has been upgraded.

Departure tax

USD\$10; children under two years of age and transit passengers are exempt.

VISA INFORMATION

All nationalities with exception of some Asian countries, Switzerland and Luxembourg must have a tourist visa to enter Laos.

You may apply for a visa through a Laotian embassy or consulate in your country. You are required to submit an application form with 2 passport-size photos, your passport and fee to process the visa. If you do not want to send off your passport or need your passport for your current travel, you can obtain a visa on arrival at international airports/borders.**

**There are several countries in Africa and Middle East who cannot obtain Visa on Arrival. Also, Turkish nationals cannot obtain Visa on Arrival.

The visas fee for most nationalities is US\$ 36 per person for visa on arrival (though some countries such as Canada are as high as \$42). Allow an extra US\$1 for arrivals after 6PM. Bring payment in US dollars and two passport photos. Please be aware that sometimes there can be long queues at the airport when obtaining a visa on arrival.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

1. Please make sure your passport is valid more than 6 months from the date of departure of each country you are visiting. Also, make sure you have enough blank pages – you may need up to 1.5 pages for each country you visit in Southeast Asia.