

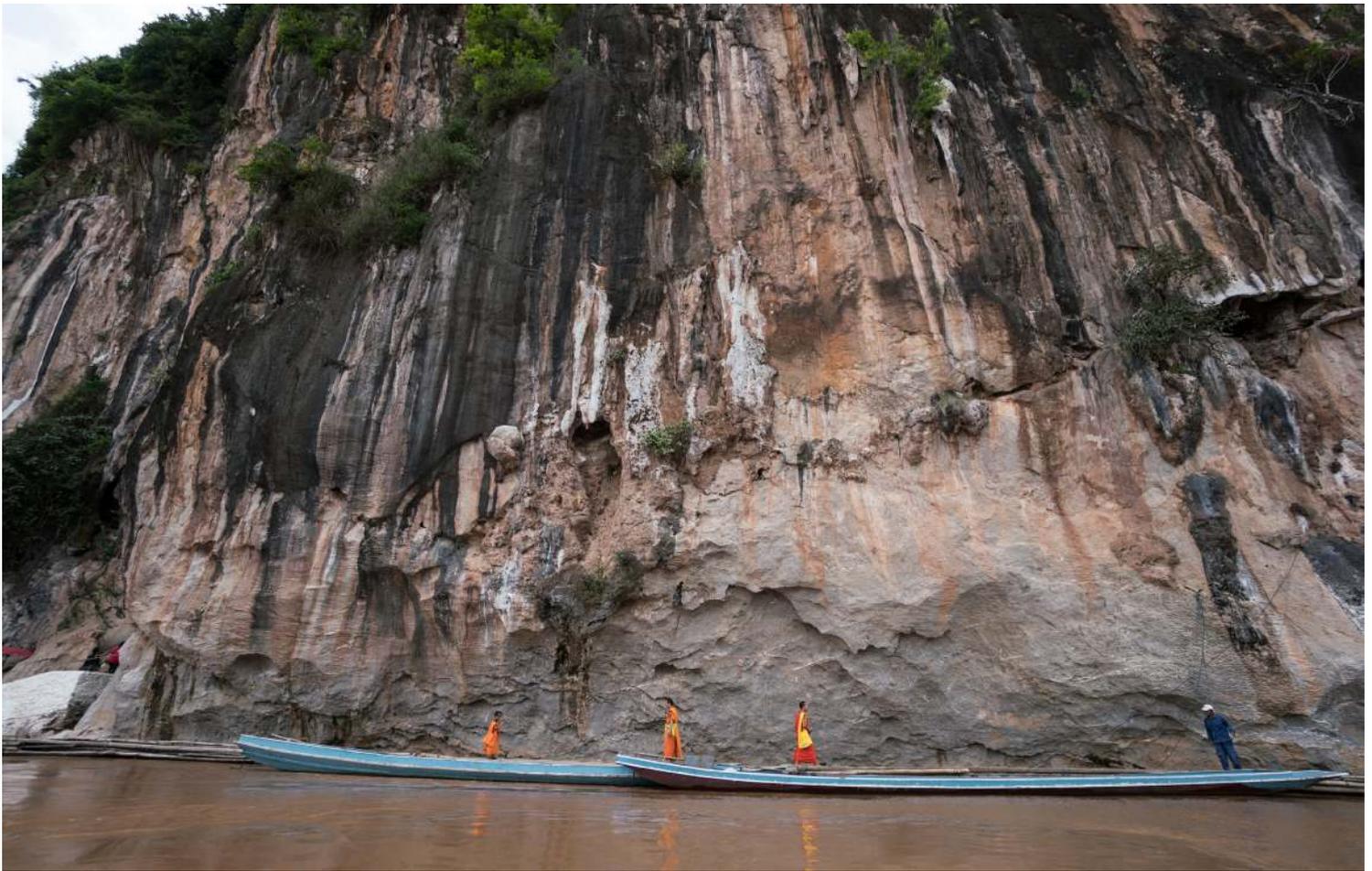


SABAIDEE

WELCOME TO LAOS!

Laos, officially known as Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), is an incredible destination rich in history, traditions, diverse landscapes and cultures, Laos captivates the inner explorer, urging them to journey further and deeper into the 'unknown'. From the rolling mountains of the north to the river islands of the south, the country embraces with its uniquely laidback lifestyle and the heartfelt generosity of its people. Cultural attractions such as temples can be found throughout the country, and amazing fauna, including elephants and the largest spider in the world, are in abundance. The people are genuine and welcoming, and although they don't hold a strong level of English, their continuous smiles are universally contagious. As the least visited country in Indochina, Laos offers a plethora of off-the-beaten-track adventures!





GEOGRAPHY

Laos is a landlocked country and shares borders with Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar (formerly Burma), Cambodia, and China. The majority of its western border is controlled by the Mekong river, which runs from the far north of the country, from China, along Myanmar and Thailand, and down into Cambodia in the south. From the mountainous north, to the plains of the south, there are numerous sites of natural beauty, coupled with cultural heritage that dates back to the 14th century. For travelers bound by time constraints, flights are available between all major destinations. For those with a bit more time, driving through the country offers many scenic views, and a shift in landscape, as the Mekong River widens towards the south.

PEOPLE

The ethnicities of Laos are split between the lowland, midland, and highland peoples. The Lao are some of the most genuine and authentic people one can meet in Asia. With an incredibly relaxed demeanor, they tend to take life as it comes, and enjoy discussing the culinary possibilities of the day. They also take great delight in celebrating weddings and other festivals, and will welcomingly invite any passers-by to join them with celebratory cheers of their local whiskey, Lao Lao.

Traveling through Laos, you are guaranteed to meet unpretentious people who view life and work from a very different perspective than we are used to in the West.

FAST FACTS

OFFICIAL NAME

Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR)

CAPITAL CITY

Vientiane

BOUNDARIES

Myanmar, Cambodia, China, Thailand and Vietnam

CURRENCY

Lao Kip (US Dollar and Thai Baht accepted)

OFFICIAL LANGUAGE

Laos

POPULATION

6.9 million

TOTAL AREA

236,800 km²

LAOS DESTINATIONS

It would be our pleasure to provide you with information that covered every corner of Laos, but we'd need to write a book! Therefore, here we have decided to cover the most important and developed destinations in the country; if you wish to receive details on one of the other beautiful destinations in Laos, please contact our office in Vientiane (the capital of Laos).



LUANG PRABANG

Luang Prabang is located in northern Laos and is quickly becoming a tourism and commercial center. Luang Prabang town is the ancient royal capital of Laos and is a beautiful, quiet city bordered by green hills. The town is surrounded by the Mekong and Khan rivers, and the famous Mount Phousi is located at its center, next to the old royal palace. Luang Prabang has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the wats (a type of Buddhist temple or Hindu temple), streets, and historical buildings in the town have been preserved and carefully upgraded over time.

The area also has a rich history. The first Lao Kingdom, Lane Xang, was consolidated in Luang Prabang in 1353 by the Khmer-supported conqueror Fa Ngum. At that time the city was known as Muang Sawa. In 1357 the name was changed to Muang Xieng Thong (Gold City District), but sometime after King Fa Ngum accepted a Sinhalese Buddha image called Pha Bang (large holy image) as a gift from the Khmer monarchy, the city-state became known as Luang (Great or Royal) Prabang.

Luang Prabang remained the capital of Lane Xang until King Phothisarath moved the administrative seat to Vientiane in 1545. However, throughout the Lane Xang period, Luang Prabang was still considered the main source of monarchical power. When the Kingdom of Lane Xang broke up following the death of King Sulinyavongsa in 1694, one

of Sulinya's grandsons set up an independent kingdom in Luang Prabang, which competed with kingdoms in Vientiane and Champasak. From then on, the Luang Prabang monarchy was so weak that it was forced to pay tribute at various times to the Siamese, Burmese and Vietnamese.

After a particularly destructive 1887 attack by the Black Flag (a splinter remnant of a bandit group known as the Chinese Haw, who fought against the invading French in northern Vietnam but returned to banditry after the army was disbanded in 1885), the Luang Prabang kingdom chose to accept French protection, and a French commissariat was established in the royal capital. The French allowed Laos to retain the Luang Prabang monarchy, and so did the fledgling independent governments that followed. It wasn't until the Pathet Lao took over in 1975 that the monarchy was finally dissolved.

The majority of the people living in the province are farmers, except for those involved in commercial activities in Luang Prabang town. Although the town had developed an insular, subsistence economy in the past, this has changed greatly with improved transportation and tourism growth in the area.

Since the tourism sector of Luang Prabang has grown a lot, there are now many hotels and guesthouses to choose from.



VIENTIANE

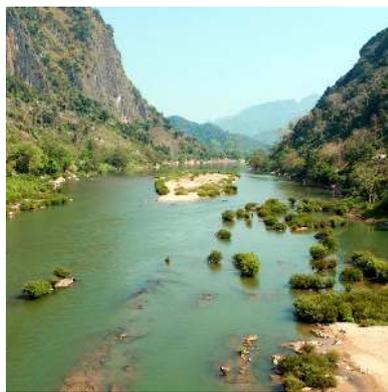
Vientiane is one of the oldest Lao cities, and was settled almost a thousand years ago. Although at times it was an independent kingdom, Vientiane has also been controlled by the Vietnamese, Thai, Burmese and Khmer at different times in its history. The city became the capital of the Lane Xang Kingdom in the mid-16th century, and has remained the capital ever since.

For a capital city, Vientiane is remarkably quiet and laid-back compared to other Southeast Asian cities, and only becomes crowded during festivals. The city's downtown area is located near the Mekong River. The architecture in Vientiane is a mix of Lao, Chinese and western-style buildings, and there are many wats scattered throughout the town. The main streets in the downtown district are Samsenthai road, which is the prominent shopping area; Setthathirath road, where several temples are located; and Fa Ngum road, which runs along the river and is lined with eucalyptus, pipal and teak trees. Branching off to the northeast, out of Muang

Chanthabuli and into Muang Saisettha, is Lane Xang road, Vientiane's widest street. Thadeua road leads to the Friendship Bridge and the Thai border.

Key landmarks in Vientiane are Paduxay, the triumphal arch, and Pha That Luang, which translates to "great golden stupa" (a stupa being a dome-shaped Buddhist shrine). Although there are no major parks in the city, there are several sports fields (including the national stadium) and many of the streets are lined with large trees. All government ministries are located in Vientiane, as are UN country offices, embassies, and over eighty international NGO (non-government organization) offices.

A wide variety of services and amenities are available in Vientiane, including numerous restaurants, hotels and guesthouses, bars and nightclubs. There are several large markets in town, including the Morning Market, Khua Din Market, Tong Khan Kham Market and the night market or walking street next to the banks of the Mekong River.



CHAMPASAK

Champasak Province is one of the main political, cultural and economic centers of southern Laos. This province boasts many historical sites, some from the pre-Angkor period (that is, pre AD 802). The capital of this province is Pakse, located at the confluence of the Mekong and Xe Don rivers. Pakse is developing fast economically; to an extent this is thanks to close connections and trade with Thailand and Vietnam. There are beautiful mountains, forests and waterfalls in Champasak, some of which are easy to access from Pakse. Boat trips, trekking, cycling and fishing are common leisure activities; it's a great location for those who love outdoor adventures!

Champasak Province has four main destinations: Pakse, Champasak Town (or Meaung Champasak), the Bolaven Plateau and the 4000 Islands (or Si Phan Don). Pakse is considered the gateway to Southern Laos as it is the main transportation hub. The city has many quality hotel and restaurant options. Champasak Town is a 45-minute drive South from Pakse and is most famous for Vat Phou, a UNESCO world heritage site that of Khmer origin that predates Angkor Wat. The town boasts the best luxury

accommodations in the South. The Bolaven Plateau is a 1-hour drive East from Pakse and is famous for spectacular waterfalls, trekking and world-class coffee plantations.

The 4000 islands are a 3-hour drive South from Pakse near the Cambodian border. The 4000 Islands are a unique river archipelago where the Mekong River spreads to its widest breadth, over 16 km wide. An estimated 4000 islands protrude from the Mekong River before the rainy season, about half of which submerge over the course of the summer months, while the river is in flood. Don Khong, Don Det, and Don Khon are the main islands to visit. One can travel by boat to the mighty Lphi waterfalls, which is also known as the Devil's Corridor. Visitors can also kayak down to the border of Cambodia and if you're lucky, spot the endangered Irrawaddy freshwater dolphins. There are numerous French colonial sights to behold, such as the railway, as well as ancient Khmer ruins. For a local experience, the villagers are very accommodating and enjoy sharing a good drink and food.

SARAVANE DISTRICT

Saravane is located in southern Laos and is home to part of the fertile Bolavens Plateau. The area has a strong agricultural base, supporting coffee, tea, cardamom and rubber plantations.

The Xe Xet River features several waterfalls that are popular leisure destinations. Several Mon-Khmer groups live in Saravane, including the Tahoy, Lavai, Katang, Alak, Laven, Ngai, Tong, Pako, Kanay, Katu and Kado. Saravane boasts an impressive 51% natural forest cover and the Phu Xieng Thong National Biodiversity Conservation Area covers 995

km² adjacent to the Mekong River in the western part of the province. The opposite bank is protected by Thailand's Pha Taem National Park; both sides are characterized by exposed sandstone ridges and outcroppings, some of which contain rock shelters with prehistoric paintings. These ridges are interspersed with scrub and mixed monsoon deciduous forest. Rare animals thought to inhabit this area include elephant, gaur (Indian bison), banteng (species of wild cattle), douc langur (primate), gibbon (primate), Asiatic black bear, clouded leopard, tiger and Siamese crocodile.

KHAMMOUANE

Khammouane Province is located in central Laos, in an area of moderately high mountains sloping down to the Mekong valley. The fertile land here is well suited to plantations of rice, cabbage, sugar cane, and bananas. The population is diverse and consists of Lao, Chinese, Vietnamese, Phuan, Tahoy, Kri, Katang, Maling and Hmong people.

Thakhek, the capital city, is a well-preserved small town, and Nakhon Phanom in Thailand is just across the Mekong from Thakhek.

The province is home to Khammouane Limestone National Biodiversity Conservation Area (NBCA), a huge wilderness area (1580 km²) of turquoise streams, monsoon forests and striking karst topography (stone formations created from the dissolution of soluble rocks such as limestone, dolomite, and gypsum). Although much of the NBCA is inaccessible by road, the local people have nonetheless managed to reduce key forest-dependent species to very small numbers through hunting, mining and logging. The area is home to the endangered douc langur, François's langur and several other primate species.

Forest – including extensive stands of wet and dry evergreen, old growth pine, cypress and riverside forest – covers an estimated 93% of the area, making it an incredibly important habitat for the country's wildlife heritage. Over a dozen threatened species live in the area, including elephants (one of the country's largest herds), giant muntjacs (a type of small deer), gaurs, bantengs, Asiatic black bears, Malayan sun bears, clouded leopards, tigers and the saola (Vu Quang ox), a type of antelope unknown to scientists before its discovery in 1992 in Vietnam's neighboring Vu Quang Nature Reserve. The saola has since also been sighted on Laos' Nakai plateau.



OUDOMXAY

This rugged province is wedged between Luang Prabang to the east, Phongsaly to the northeast, Luang Namtha to the northwest and Sayaboury to the south, with a small northern section that shares a border with China's Yunnan Province. Most of the provincial population of 212,015 is a mixture of some twenty-three ethnic minorities; mainly Hmong, Akha, Mien, Phu Thai, Thai Dam, Thai Khao, Thai Lu, Thai Neua, Phuan, Khamu, Lamet, Lao Huay and Yunnanese Chinese (Haw). The Yunnanese presence has intensified with the influx of Chinese skilled laborers working in construction, as well as trades people from Kunming, the capital of Yunnan.

Because Oudomxay has a reasonably good road system, and because there is a constant flow of tourists traveling from Yunnan through Oudomxay to Thailand and Laos, the province has been opening up and developing rapidly. However, some rural villages are extremely remote and remain inaccessible by road.

The capital of Oudomxay is most commonly called Muang Xai, though some maps label it Oudomxay. Located in a valley at the base of the surrounding mountain range, Muang Xai has been growing steadily, and modern guesthouses now dot the main street. The large market in the center of town attracts people from all around the province, and a wide variety of Chinese and Vietnamese products are sold there.



XIENG KHOUANG

Xieng Khouang is situated in northeastern Laos, bordered by Houaphanh to the north, Bolikhamsay to the south, Vietnam to the east and Luang Prabang to the west. The province features high, green mountains, rugged karst formations, and fertile valleys. However, Xieng Khouang is one of the northern provinces that was most devastated by the Vietnam/American war. Virtually every town and village in the province was bombed at some point between 1964 and 1973. It has also been the site of numerous ground battles fought over the last 150 years.

The province's population is mostly comprised of people of lowland Lao, Vietnamese, Thai Dam, Hmong and Phuan ethnicity. The original capital, Xieng Khouang, was almost totally bombed, so the capital was moved to Phonsavanh after 1975. Near Phonsavanh is the Plain of Jars. The high altitude in central Xieng Khouang, including Phonsavanh and the Plain of Jars, means the province has a temperate climate – not too hot in the hot season, not too cold in the cool season and not too wet in the rainy season. Phonsavanh, Xieng Khouang's new capital, grew tremendously in the 1990s; there are now several paved streets lined with shops, a sprinkling of new concrete structures, two markets, a few government buildings, a bank and several modest hotels and guesthouses.

Traditionally, the area surrounding Phonsavanh and the former capital of Xieng Khouang has been a center of Phuan language and culture (part of the Thai-Kadai family, like Lao, Siamese and Thai languages). The local Vietnamese (and to a lesser extent, Chinese) presence continues to increase.



INSIDER'S PICK

"In Laos, clients can travel around in comfortable and luxurious tuk tuks that were designed by Khiri. The tuk tuks are being used for city tours and airport transfers in Luang Prabang, and for city tours to Angkor Wat and around Siem Reap. Small lanes in town and around temples can be traveled, and clients can quickly get off and on the tuk tuks to snap pictures or take part in any event along the way. Riding a well-appointed tuk tuk through exotic surroundings is one of the simple pleasures of a holiday in the Mekong area. It's not just about getting from 'A' to 'B'; it's about enjoying your holiday in vintage style!"



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