

# LAOS

## PRACTICAL INFORMATION

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Laos, officially known as Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), is a 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 travelers with its uniquely laidback lifestyle and the heartfelt generosity of its people. We are pleased to offer you herewith some useful tips on traveling in Laos!

## FAST FACTS

### OFFICIAL NAME

Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR)

### CAPITAL CITY

Vientiane

### TOTAL AREA

236,800 km<sup>2</sup>

### BOUNDARIES

China, Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam and Cambodia

### LANGUAGE

Lao

### POPULATION

6.9 million

### PEOPLE

Lao (55%), Khmou (11%), Hmong (8%) and Other (there are over 49 minor ethnic groups) (26%)

### RELIGION

Buddhism (66%), Laotian Folk Religion (30.7%), Christianity (1.5%) and Other (1.8%)

### TIME ZONE

GMT +7

### INTERNATIONAL DIALING CODE

+856

### ELECTRICITY

220V AC 50 Hz

### DRIVING

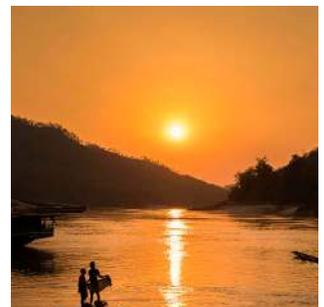
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## PASSPORTS & VISAS

We strongly advise you to make copies of all your important documents (visa, passport, credit cards, air-tickets, etc.) If they are lost, it will make organizing replacements much easier! When getting your Laos visa, your passport should be valid for six months after your planned date of departure from the country. You can either get your visa in advance at any Lao embassy (which will be valid for 30 days), otherwise you can obtain your visa at the border (Visa on Arrival). Such a visa will be valid for 30 days and the cost depends on your nationality (from \$30-42 USD). One passport-sized photograph is also required; if you don't have a photo you will be charged \$1 USD. It is also possible to extend your Visa on Arrival for another 30 days at a cost of about \$2 USD per day. If you fail to organize this in advance, you will be charged \$10 USD per day by border authorities when you leave the country. Citizens of Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand and Cambodia can travel visa-free in Laos for 30 days.

## TRAVEL INSURANCE

Khiri Travel will do everything possible to ensure travelers a safe and enjoyable trip. However, with traveling comes possible risks – and these risks should be recognized by participants. Thus, we highly recommend the purchase of short-term travel insurance for our adventures. Travel insurance is a cost effective way to protect yourself and your equipment in the event of problems due to canceled trips, delays, medical problems, and baggage loss or damage.



# BORDER CROSSINGS

Apart from its main international airports in Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Pakse (Champasak) and Savannakhet, Laos is accessible by land or water from many border crossing points. Laos shares borders with Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and China, and most land border crossing points can issue a Visa on Arrival (rather than having to organize one prior).

## VIETNAM

### Tay Trang – Sobboun

This crossing connects Laichau, Vietnam, to the Pongsaly Province in Laos.

### Nameo – Banteui

This border crossing leads you from Thanh Hua to Huaphanh Province.

### Namkan – NamCan

Nge An is connected here to Xiengkhuang Province.

### Keoneua – Namphao

Here you can travel from Hatinh to Bolikhamxai Province.

### Chalo – Napao

This border crossing connects Guangbinh to Khammoun Province. Visa on Arrival is not issued here; if you wish to cross this border, make sure you have obtained a visa prior to your arrival.

### Lao Bao – Dansavanh

This crossing leads you from Quang Tri Province to Savannakhet Province.

### Bo Y – Phukeua

You can travel from Kon Tum Province to Attapu Province here.

## THAILAND

### Chiang Khong – Houy Xai

This border crossing leads you from the Chang Rai province to Bokeo Province.

### Nakaxeng – Kaenthao

This crossing leads you from Loei Province to Sayabouly Province.

### Nong Khai – Vientiane

If you cross the border here, you will cross the First Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge (this is one of four bridges that span the Mekong River, connecting Thailand and Laos).

### Bungkan – Pakxan

This border crossing leads you from Nong Khai Province to Bolikhamxai Province. Make sure you have obtained your visa before you cross this border.

### Nakon Phanom – Thakhaek

This crossing connects Nakon Phanom Province to Khammouane Province.

### Mukdaharn – Savannakhet

This crossing will lead you from Mukdaharn Province to Savannakhet Province via the Second Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge.

### Chong Mek – Vangtao

This crossing is between Ubon Rathchathani Province and Champassak Province.

## CAMBODIA

### Dong Kralor – Veun Kham

Just a few hundred meters from the previous crossing point is this road crossing, and Visa on Arrival is available here.

## CHINA

### Mohan – Boten

This is the border you'll cross when you travel from Yunnan to Luang Namtha Province by road.

### Xiengkok river port

This crossing on the Mekong River to Luang Namtha Province does not issue Visa on Arrival. Make sure you have obtained your visa before you cross this border.

### Sobhun checkpoint

This checkpoint connects Yunnan to Phongsaly Province, but does not issue Visa on Arrival.

## MYANMAR

### Tonpheung – Muang mom

This crossing is between Bokeo provinces, this border do not issue Visa on Arrival and is not possible to pass.

### Tonpheung – Samliemkham

This border crossing leads you from Chang Rai Province to Bokeo Province.

### Shan State - Luang Namtha

The bridge links Xienglab Township in Thachilek district of Myanmar's Shan State with Xiengkok village in Long district, Luang Namtha province, northern Laos. However, crossing here is still not possible.

# MONEY

The Lao kip is the official currency of Laos. US dollars are also widely accepted in bigger cities, particularly in restaurants. It's a good idea to arrive in Laos with some US dollars, as the Lao kip cannot be exchanged outside the country and thus you won't be able to buy any in advance of your arrival. Note that torn and old US dollar notes are not generally accepted in Laos. In areas located near the Thai border, the Thai currency, Baht, is also accepted.

Travelers' checks (in USD or Euro) can be cashed at banks. Credit cards (Visa, MasterCard and Amex) are accepted in major hotels and in a very limited number of upscale shopping places. Please note that there is usually a levy of 5% charged on credit card purchases. In Vientiane and Luang Prabang you'll find several ATM machines, which dispense Lao kip only. Heading to the countryside it is recommended that you carry kip with you, as banks are not always available.

Carry your money in a way that you feel most comfortable with, e.g. money belt, wallet etc. You may want to carry a combination of travelers' checks, credit/debit cards, cash or all three. It's always a good precaution to split your money and carry some on your body (e.g. a money belt) and some in your wallet.

Make sure you keep some cash in small denominations for last minute purchases, as well as airport taxes. Most hotels offer safe-keeping for your valuables if you so wish.

Allow \$5-20 USD per meal for additional meals not included in the trip price. You may also want to have some cash for shopping in markets etc. Budget according to your taste!

# HEALTH

Before traveling to Laos it is important to ensure that you have adequate protection against disease. About two months before departure you should consult with your tropical medicines doctor, who will advise you as to the type of vaccinations that you will need. These will vary depending on the regions that you plan on visiting. Bear in mind that there is a malaria risk in very rural parts of Laos. There is also a risk of Dengue Fever throughout Laos, especially in the rainy season (May-October). Consult your tropical medicines doctor for the latest information and medications available.

In general, most visitors to Laos will require the following vaccinations:

- Hepatitis A and B
- Tetanus
- Typhoid
- Polio
- Diphtheria

# CLIMATE

Laos has a tropical monsoon climate with two distinct seasons: May to October is the rainy season and November to April is the dry season. It gets hottest in March and April when temperatures can reach as high as 38C/100F. The lowest temperatures, usually in December, are around 15C/59F. The average temperature is between 25C/77F and 30C/84F.



# FOOD & DRINK

Lao food offers delightful national staple dishes like sticky rice (Khao Niau), Laap (a meal of minced meat or fish with lime juice, garlic, onions, mint leaves and chillies) or Tam Maak Hu (a spicy salad made of green papaya). Vegetarian food is widely available, in no small part due to the strong Buddhist influence. Bottled mineral water, soft drinks, tea and coffee are readily available. Beer is the main alcoholic drink and is usually a light lager style.

As a general rule, travelers should avoid tap water, ice made from tap water, peeled fruit and vegetables, uncooked food, shellfish and street vendor offerings. Traveler's diarrhea is common, but easily treated; choose a remedy that works best for you (Imodium, Pepto-Bismol, etc.). For more serious intestinal complaints, antibiotic solutions are also available.

Bottled water can be purchased almost everywhere at local convenience stores, hotels, restaurants, supermarkets, etc. Please consider the environment and limit the consumption of water from plastic bottles. If camping on one of our trips, you are not required to buy water, as boiled/treated water for filling water bottles will be provided every evening after dinner. If you wish to add water purification tablets to the water, you should bring those with you.

## SPECIAL DIETARY REQUESTS

If you are a vegetarian, vegan, allergic to any foods or adhere to a special diet, please advise us prior to your booking so we can comply with your dietary requirements. We can accommodate any diet.



## TIPPING & TAXES

Tipping is a personal matter, and tourists are encouraged to tip an amount they find appropriate. For your convenience, we've included a tipping guide below for your travels in Laos. Please note however that these amounts are only suggestions; we encourage our passengers to reward guides based on their performance.

- Meals (restaurants): \$1-5 USD for good service.
- Guides: \$5 USD per half day or \$10 USD per full day tour, per person.
- Drivers: \$2 USD for half day or \$5 USD per full day, per person.

- Cruise ships and all-inclusive lodges: Tips for the staff are generally pooled. This means there is one "pot" for the staff excluding guides – \$10 USD per day.
- Bellboys: The average amount is \$1 USD per bag or luggage.
- Chambermaids: The average amount is \$1 USD per day.

Airport departure tax is included in tickets booked via Khiri.

# DONATIONS & GIFT-GIVING

Do not give to begging children as it reinforces the notion that begging is an acceptable way to make a living. However in many places, it is considered acceptable to give to the elderly and disabled, as there is no social security or other way these people can earn money.

Giving money and goods away at random to individuals can result in the local communities acting like beggars. It accentuates an unequal relationship between locals and visitors, with tourists being seen as purely 'money givers'. We also need to be careful not to pay for acts of kindness in

monetary terms; for example, paying for photographs. We do not want to encourage the development of a society that equates every human action as a potential money making scheme.

Do not to give sweets to children in villages that we visit. Local people do not have access to dentists (nor can they afford them) and again there is the issue of turning children into beggars. Pens, toothbrushes, clothing or other useful items are best distributed via a local charity, schoolteacher, or community leader.

## COMMUNICATION

Depending on your (foreign) telecommunications provider, some mobile phones will receive a signal in major towns such as Vientiane. However, you can also easily purchase a local SIM card and services for making international phone calls are widely available.

Email is the cheapest and fastest way to communicate while traveling. Most hotels and restaurants in popular tourist destinations have complimentary Wi-Fi available for customers.

## CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Experiencing cultural diversity is one of the great joys of traveling, and it is important that these differences are encouraged and respected. Things are done differently in Asia, which is why we love it! At a basic level, we need to respect the cultural rules in the areas we travel to. Please remember to accept these differences; don't try and change them for the benefit of your own comfort.

Keeping calm, cheerful and friendly is the key to an enjoyable trip; patience and courtesy are virtues that open many doors. Demanding tourists are less likely to get smiles, service or respect.

Please bear in mind that in Laos, the feet are considered to be the lowest part of the human body, so please take off your shoes before entering temples or a house. Similarly, never pat a person on the head, even a child, as the head is the most sacred part of the body.

## ATTIRE

Asian people generally dress modestly, and modest clothing is required in Laos. To respect the Laotian culture it is advisable to wear pants and skirts that fall below knee-length. Bare shoulders are not really appreciated.

Modest clothing goes a long way towards making a good impression with the local people. As previously mentioned, more formal dress codes apply for temples or any other religious sites you may visit. To prevent the wrath of the gods – as well as the locals – these should be closely followed! In general, when visiting religious sites one should have covered shoulders and legs, while shoes and hats should be removed.

# SWIMMING

While Laos is landlocked (boarded by other countries and therefore no ocean borders) you may have opportunities to swim in waterfalls. Remember that there are no areas in Asia where nude sunbathing or swimming is acceptable. In most places Lao people will swim wearing all their clothes, which is a reminder of the level of modesty that exists in this country. If you are staying in a small village you will probably be bathing in a stream, river or waterfall, and women should wash in a sarong; if in doubt, observe and follow how the local women do it.

# SAVING FACE

It is inappropriate to express anger in a raised voice. Becoming angry is embarrassing to the local people with whom you are dealing; they will not be embarrassed for themselves, but for you making a fool of yourself. "Saving face" – that subtle but important quality of personal dignity – is important! In fact, personal candor in Asia is largely a matter of sensibility and face.

# GENERAL POINTS OF ETIQUETTE

There are a few general codes of behavior that apply in Laos:

- Crooking your finger to call somebody is considered impolite. Asian people generally use a subtle downward waving motion to summon someone.
- Public displays of affection is not common in Laos. To the contrary it is quite common to see friends of the same sex holding hands.
- It is polite to remove your shoes before entering a house. Look for shoes at the front door as a clue and follow suit.
- Criticism should only be used when put among praise.
- Smile. Regardless of the situation, smiling will help you in most situations.

# SAFETY

In general, Laos is quite a safe country for traveling. However, you should always take some precautions to protect your belongings and also yourself when you're traveling. Watch out for pickpockets and bag snatchers, especially in crowded tourist areas.



# LANGUAGE

The official language is Lao and there are many dialects throughout the country, particularly in tribal areas. The language is very close to Thai. The most widely spoken foreign languages are English and French, however some Lao people also speak German, Russian, and Vietnamese. During the communist regime, some Lao people received university training in Eastern Europe, while some elderly Lao people may speak French as a result of the country being a former French colony.

If you have any further questions about traveling through Laos, don't hesitate to ask – Khiri Travel can provide you with any additional information you may need!

## RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you really want to get to know the country, reading some of the following books can really open your eyes to the culture and history of Laos:

- *One Foot in Laos* by Dervla Murphy
- *A Short History of Laos: The Land in Between* by Grant Evans
- *Laos: Culture and Society* by Grant Evans
- *Ant Egg Soup: The Adventures of a Food Tourist in Laos* by Natacha Du Pont De Bie
- *The Mekong: Turbulent Past, Uncertain Future* by Milton Osborne
- *Across the Mekong River* by Elaine Russell
- *Another Quiet American* by Brett Dakin
- *The Ravens - Secret War of Laos* by Christopher Robbins



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