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Laos Pre-departure Guide

Vietnam | Cambodia | Laos | Myanmar



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Laos People's Democratic Republic (PDR)



Population: 6.5 million
Capital City: Vientiane (Pop: 750,000)
People: Over 48 ethnic groups
Language: Lao
Currency: Kip (KIP)
Time Zone: GMT +7 Hours
International Dialing Code: +856

Laos is a laid-back landlocked country of spectacular natural beauty and strong spiritual traditions. With roughly six million people, it is one of the least populated countries in the world. It is also the least developed and most enigmatic of the three former French Indochinese states. Dominated by majestic mountains, verdant valleys and broad snaking rivers, the country is perfect for nature lovers and those seeking adventure. Vientiane is probably the most relaxed capital city in the world, where travellers get a real insight into tranquil riverside life.



General Information



❖ Passport and visa

Passports should be valid for six months from the date of entry into Laos. We recommend you make a photocopy of your passport and keep it somewhere separate, or scan it and keep it in an accessible email account.

Visas valid for 30 days can be easily obtained on arrival. Cost depends on nationality (from US\$30 to US\$42). One passport-sized photograph is required.

❖ Money

The official currency in Laos is the Lao Kip, which is non-convertible so you will need to bring US dollars to exchange. US dollars is also widely used in bigger cities, particularly in restaurants. Please note that torn and old bank notes are not generally accepted. In areas located near the Thai border, the Thai currency, Baht, is commonly used. Visa and MasterCard are becoming more accepted in many of the bigger hotels and restaurants, especially in the larger cities. ATM's are available in larger cities and tourist spots.

❖ Post and telecommunications

Postal services are available in Laos. The

best way to receive any mail is to get it sent to a post office and collect it yourself.

Telephone connections to the rest of the world are widely available, however they aren't cheap.

Internet access is available in most major tourist places such as hotels, restaurants and cafes.

❖ Transportation

The transport network in Laos is slow, but comprehensive. Getting around takes time, sometimes longer than you may think, but this is all part of the fun of travelling in this laid-back country.

Taxis and tuk-tuks

This is by far the easiest way to get around towns and cities, and negotiating the price is the norm.

Motorbike taxis and rental: Travel by motorbike in Laos is not safe and under no circumstances is this sanctioned or recommended by Vietnam Great Tours. Please note that travel by motorbike is not usually covered by travel insurance. Please check the fine print of your travel insurance policy to be sure of your cover.



Health and Safety



❖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 is hottest in March and April when temperatures can reach as high as 38C/100F. The lowest temperature, usually in December, is around 15C/59F. The average temperature is between 25C/77F and 30C/84F.

 TEMPERATURE (°C)  RAINFALL VOLUME (mm)

CITY	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Vientiane	21 5	23 15	26 38	28 99	27 267	28 302	27 267	28 292	27 302	26 109	24 15	22 3
Luang Prabang	21 16	23 17	26 30	28 109	29 163	29 155	28 230	28 299	28 166	26 78	24 30	21 13

Please note: The weather can be unpredictable so it may be a good idea to carry an umbrella or raincoat with you. You can purchase these from most supermarkets and general stores.

❖Health and wellbeing

Please be aware that your health can be at risk in Laos due to **poor sanitation** and **lack of effective medical facilities**. Rural areas may not have pharmacies and hospitals so make sure you travel with a full supply of any prescribed medicine you take. Every traveller is responsible for his or her own health. First and foremost, make sure that you have travel insurance for your trip. You should also consult your doctor or local travel clinic for the latest information and advice on travelling to Laos before departure.

If you have a medical condition or allergy which requires particular attention, please carry a doctor's letter with you that describes the nature of the condition and treatment needed. We also recommend you pack a medical kit, including paracetamol and a diarrhoea remedy.

❖Vaccinations

There are many vaccinations needed when travelling to this part of the world. It is important you ensure you have adequate protection against disease. Book an appointment with your doctor or travel clinic, no less than two months before your departure.





❖ Travel insurance

Vietnam Great Tours does everything possible to ensure a safe and enjoyable trip. However, travel inevitably involves some risk and this should be recognised by holiday-makers. Travel insurance is a cost effective way of protecting yourself and your equipment should any problems occur such as cancelled trips, delays, medical emergencies, baggage loss or damage. It also gives you peace of mind. Please also ensure your travel insurance covers all activities planned on your trip.

❖ Etiquette and cultural differences

Experiencing different cultures is one of the joys of travelling, and it is important that these differences are respected. Knowing a few important customs of the Laotian people will help make your visit more enjoyable:

- **Try not** to get angry. Showing any frustrations or annoyances by shouting or becoming abusive is extremely impolite and unlikely to achieve a positive outcome.
- **Pointing** your finger is seen as offensive. Try to gesture using your whole hand instead.
- **Refrain** from public displays of affection, they are considered offensive. It is extremely rare to see couples holding hands.

- It is **offensive** to touch another person's head as it is considered the most sacred part of the body.

- It is polite to **remove** your shoes before entering a house – look for shoes at the front door as a clue.
- In Laos, people greet each other with a slight bow and a prayer-like gesture, known as the 'nop'. For foreigners and business, hand-shakes are becoming more acceptable.

❖ Temple visit etiquette

Foreigners are always welcome in temples. However, it is important that a few simple rules of etiquette are followed:

- **Dress appropriately** and act with the utmost respect when visiting temples and other religious sites.
- **Do not wear shorts** or tank tops and make sure your shoulders and knees are covered.
- Remove your shoes and hat.
- If you sit down in front of the dais (the platform on which the Buddha's are placed), sit with your feet to the side rather than in the lotus position.



Culture & Customs



- **Never point** your finger or the soles of your feet towards a person or a figure of the Buddha.
- A woman may accept something from a monk but should **never touch** a monk.
- **Show Respect and turn off mobile phones**, remove headphones, lower your voice and avoid inappropriate conversation.

❖ Food and drink

Traditional Laotian cooking involves a lot of game, wild boar and river fish. The freshness of ingredients is very important to Lao people who like to prepare everything from scratch. Herbs such as galangal and lemongrass are favourites and padaek (Lao fish sauce) is found on every table.

A national dish is called **Lap**, which is a spicy mixture of marinated meat and/or fish that is sometimes served raw. Like its neighbour countries, rice is a staple food in Laos. However, sticky rice is preferred, which is crushed into a ball with fingers and used to soak up sauces.

❖ Useful food terms

Khao Nie (sticky rice)

Tamarkhong (papaya salad)

Markphet (chili)

Western food is available in most main cities and tourist spots.

It is not advisable to drink tap water. Bottled water is recommended but do check the expiry date before opening. Ice is widely used and is produced with treated water.

❖ Public holidays

Laos New Year is the main public holiday, which is celebrated on the **14th, 15th and 16th April**. Not unlike Songkran, the Laos Pee Mai celebration mixes religious tradition with water. Here, water is used more for bathing Buddha images in temples than for dousing foreign tourists. However, water fights are catching on, so be aware when travelling during this period.





❖ Donations and gift giving

Although there is poverty in certain areas of Laos, please read the following points about donations and gift giving.

- **Do not** give money to people begging, especially children. This reinforces the belief that begging is an acceptable way to make a living. If children make money from begging, their parents are less likely to send them to school. Children working on the streets are also vulnerable to abuse.
- However in many places, it is considered acceptable to give to money to the elderly or disabled people.
- **Giving** money and goods to beggars can accentuate an unequal relationship between locals and visitors, with tourists being seen as purely money givers.
- **Do not** give sweets to children in villages that we visit.

• **Do not** feel that you necessarily have to give material things. Sometimes, giving your friendship, time and interest to locals can be the best gift of all.

- For more information go to www.thinkchildsafe.org

❖ Tipping

Tipping is a personal matter and travellers are encouraged to tip any amount they feel is appropriate. For your convenience, we have included a suggested tipping guide below:

Bellboy: \$1

Chambermaid: \$1 per day

Guides: \$10-\$15 per day for guides (depending on group size and performance)

Drivers: \$5-\$10 per day, per person

Restaurants: In smart establishments, you may find that the tip is already included in the bill. In local restaurants, tips are not expected but you may wish to leave loose change on the table.



Helpful tips



❖Price guide

Laos is generally an inexpensive country to travel around, however, some goods are more expensive than neighbouring countries if they have to be imported.

Street food:

- Noodle soup: 20,000KIP
- Noodle with pork/chicken/vegetable: 20,000KIP
- Baguette: 15,000 KIP

Restaurants:

- Western food: from 45,000 KIP
- Lao set menu: 60,000 KIP

Drinks:

- Soft drinks: 7,000 KIP
- Beer Lao/bottle: 12,000 KIP

Other:

- Souvenirs (bags/t-shirts): between 30,000-150,000 KIP
- Mobile Phone: 200,000 – 250,000 KIP
- SIM card: between 10,000- 30,000 KIP
- Oversea call: 2,000 KIP/minutes
- Bicycle rental: city bikes 20,000KIP, Trek bikes 15USD
- DVD: 5,000 KIP

❖Useful words

Hello: Sa bai dee

Thank You: Khob Jai

Thank You Very Much: Khob Jai lai Lai

How are you? Sa bai dee bor?

Go: Pai

Yes: Chao

No: Bor

Not Spicy: Bor Phet

Excuse me: Khor thod

Bye: La gone

My name is: Suer khong khoi man.....,

Nice to meet you: Yin dee thi dai hor juck jao

❖Useful websites

The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade travel information:

<http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/laos/index.html>

The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office travel information: <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/travel-advice-by-country/asia-oceania/laos>

The official tourism website:

<http://www.tourismlaos.org/web/index.php>



Pre-departure checklist



- ☐ Travel insurance
- ☐ Passport with at least six months validity from date of entry
- ☐ Photocopy of passport
- ☐ Passport-sized photo and \$USD for visa on arrival
- ☐ Vaccinations
- ☐ Foreign currency (US\$) and/or ATM card
- ☐ All relevant tickets
- ☐ Reconfirmed flights
- ☐ Light weight clothing
- ☐ Long sleeved shirts and trousers (November-February evenings)
- ☐ Depending on the season, your activities and the region you will be visiting (e.g. mountainous areas) it may be advisable for you to bring a jacket with you.
- ☐ Electrical adaptor: 220V, 50Hz; 2 pin plugs
- ☐ A small bag/backpack for day and overnight trips
- ☐ Appropriate shoes for trekking, cycling and walking
- ☐ Insect repellent
- ☐ Sunscreen
- ☐ Medication/first aid kit

Please note: Domestic airlines do impose restrictions on baggage at approx 20kg maximum, so travel lightly where possible.

Our very best wishes for your journey.

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