

DOWN THE MEKONG, SLOWLY

Laos

The one country in the region that rewards going slow: river days, dawn alms, and a north you reach by boat.

p. 26 The route picker: river-first or loop, find yours in one look

p. 33 What a day really costs, printed as a till receipt

p. 41 The one safety story that is actually about Laos: UXO

49 PAGES

USD PRICES

E-VISA OR VISA ON ARRIVAL

EDITION 2026.06

Start here

the shape of a Laos trip, what it costs, what to sort first

THE MEKONG, BY SLOW BOAT



Laos is the country its neighbours pass through, which is exactly why it stays the way travellers wish the others still were. It runs roughly south down one river: the old royal town of Luang Prabang, the karst country around Vang Vieng, the low-key capital Vientiane, then the islands where the Mekong splits into four thousand of them. This guide is built around that line, north to south, what each stretch costs, and the handful of things to sort before you fly. All of it offline, in your pocket.

The shape of a trip

Most trips run the Mekong line: Luang Prabang for temples and food, the river north for the slow days, Vang Vieng for the karst, Vientiane to fly out. Add the deep south for coffee and islands if you have two weeks.

What a day costs

Backpacking runs about 20 USD a day, mid-range around 45, captured May 2026. The full receipt, bed to nightcap, is itemised on page 39.

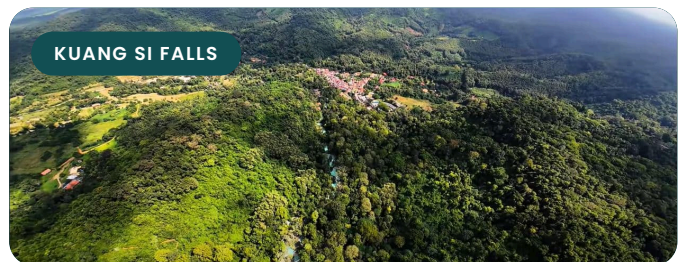
Sort before you fly

Laos is one of the few visa-on-arrival countries left, but the e-visa is smoother. Add travel insurance and an eSIM. Page 41 lists the four bookings worth doing early.

DAWN ALMS, LUANG PRABANG



KUANG SI FALLS



HOW THE LINKS WORK

Some booking links earn Pack Lightly a commission, at no extra cost to you. Full disclosure is on the last page.

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tap a line to jump straight there

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QUICK JUMPS

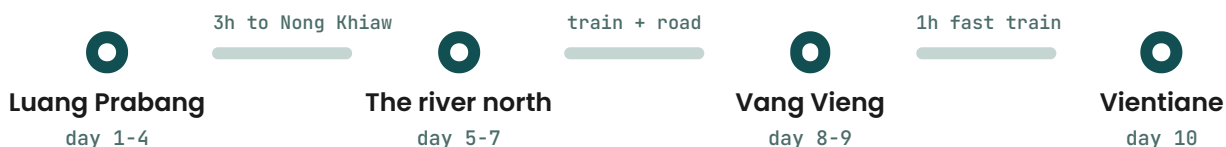
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Your trip on one page

10 to 14 days • 20 to 120 USD/day • best Nov to Mar

If you read nothing else, this page is the trip. The line runs south down the Mekong: Luang Prabang, the river north for the slow days, Vang Vieng, then Vientiane to fly home. Budget from the bars below, not from boutique rack rates. Book the three things at the bottom right before you fly; everything else is cheaper and easier to arrange on the ground.

THE ROUTE



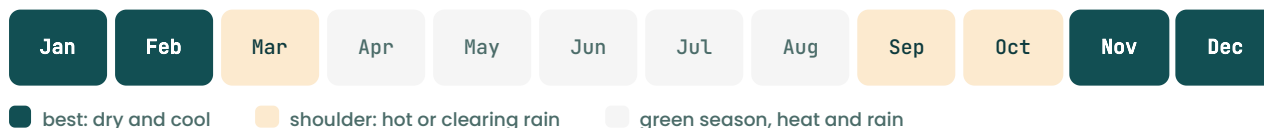
BUDGET PER DAY

Backpacker		20 USD
Standard		45 USD
Comfort		120 USD

BOOK FIRST

- 01 International flights, 6 to 8 weeks out **Aviasales**
- 02 The slow boat or the fast train, a few days out **12Go**
- 03 eSIM, install before departure **Saily**

BEST MONTHS



Laos at a glance

scores 0-100 · pack-lightly country-comparison data

SCORECARD

Budget friendly

90

Friendliness

85

Relaxed pace

85

Nature

80

Culture

80

Tourist infrastructure

40

Budget travel

20 USD/day

Mid-range

45 USD/day

Luxury

120 USD/day

SLOW TRAVEL

CULTURE

NATURE

RIVERS

ADVENTURE

source: country-comparison tool, 2026-06

SIX FRAMES OF THE TRIP



01

The country

What Laos is, what it is not, who goes, and the three stretches of the Mekong line you actually need to know before you pick dates.

IN THIS CHAPTER

One river, three stretches, four readers

07

What Laos is

7.5M people • landlocked • the slow heart of the region

A landlocked country of about 7.5 million people, wrapped by Thailand, Vietnam, China, Myanmar, and Cambodia, and threaded top to bottom by the Mekong. Vientiane is the capital and one of the quietest in Asia, a riverfront town more than a city. Laos has no coast, no metro, and until 2021 no fast train; what it has is time. The infrastructure is thin by design and by history, the pace is genuinely slower than Thailand or Vietnam, and the reward is a country that still feels unhurried. The flip side: distances are long, roads are mountain roads, and you plan around the season more than anywhere else in the region.

CAPITAL

Vientiane

~9M nationwide

POPULATION

7.5M

~65% Buddhist

CURRENCY

LAK

USD widely used

BEST MONTHS

Nov-Mar

cool and dry

THREE STRETCHES OF THE LINE



NONG KHIAW, NAM OU

North: Luang Prabang and the rivers

temples • mountains • cool Nov-Feb

The heart of the trip. The royal town plus the Nam Ou river villages of Nong Khiaw and Muang Ngoi. The slowest, prettiest part of the country.



VANG VIENG

Centre: Vang Vieng and Vientiane

karst • capital • the fast train

The middle of the line, now an hour apart on the China-Laos railway. Karst and balloons at Vang Vieng, riverfront calm in the capital.



BOLAVEN COFFEE

South: Bolaven and 4000 Islands

coffee • waterfalls • hammock islands

The deep south: the cool coffee plateau above Pakse, then Si Phan Don, where the Mekong braids into four thousand islands at the Cambodian border.



PLAIN OF JARS

East: Phonsavan and the loops

history • motorbike loops • few tourists

The detour for repeat visitors: the Plain of Jars in the east, the Thakhek loop in the centre. Empty roads, real history, no crowds.

WHO THIS GUIDE IS WRITTEN FOR

Slow first-timer

10 days, the Mekong line, river days over checklists.

SE-Asia backpacker

20 USD a day, the slow boat in, on to Thailand or Vietnam.

Couple or culture-led

2 weeks, boutique river lodges, temples and coffee.

Loop rider

Thakhek or Bolaven by motorbike, caves and waterfalls.

02

Where to go

Eight places down one river. Read the line top to bottom: the further south you go, the slower it gets and the fewer travellers you share it with.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Luang Prabang	09
Nong Khiaw and Muang Ngoi	10
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4000 Islands	13
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Luang Prabang

the north • 3-4 nights • best Nov-Feb



Luang Prabang is the reason most people come to Laos, and it earns it. A peninsula where the Nam Khan meets the Mekong, a whole UNESCO town of gilded temples and French shophouses, ringed by green hills and capped by Mount Phousi. It is small enough to walk end to end in twenty minutes, which is the point: you slow to its pace within a day. Mornings start with the alms procession before dawn, then coffee and the riverfront.

Three nights is the floor, four is right. Day one is the temples on foot, Wat Xieng Thong first. Day two is the waterfall at Kuang Si, turquoise pools you can swim, with the bear sanctuary at the gate. Day three is the river: a sunset cruise, or the boat up to the Pak Ou caves lined with thousands of Buddha statues. Climb Phousi for the last light on your final evening.

Wat Xieng Thong
The 16th-century royal temple at the peninsula tip, gold on black, the finest in the country.

Kuang Si Falls
Tiered turquoise pools 30km out; swim the lower tiers, climb to the top.

Mount Phousi
328 steps over the town; sunset is the crowd, sunrise is yours alone.

Night market
Sisavangvong road after dark; Hmong textiles, no hard sell, and the 1.50 USD buffet alley.

GO DEEPER
The full [Luang Prabang guide](#) ranks the sights, the [Kuang Si page](#) has the timing, and the [Mount Phousi page](#) covers the climb.

Nong Khiaw and Muang Ngoi

the slow north • 2-3 nights • the best of the trip for many



Three hours north of Luang Prabang, the Nam Ou river cuts between limestone walls and the country drops a gear again. Nong Khiaw is a bridge, a road, and a row of riverside bungalows under cliffs that glow at dusk. The viewpoint climb above town is a steep sweaty hour for the single best panorama in Laos: the river bending away between karst towers. Most travellers who make it here wish they had given it longer.

Muang Ngoi is the next gear down: an hour upriver by boat, no through-road until recently, a single sandy lane of guesthouses and hammocks. There is nothing to do, which is the entire offer. Walk to the caves where villagers sheltered during the war, kayak back to Nong Khiaw, and let a day go by without a plan.

Nong Khiaw viewpoint
Pha Daeng Peak, the steep hour that pays back in one panorama.

The boat to Muang Ngoi
An hour upriver with no road alternative; the journey is the attraction.

Hundred Waterfalls
A guided scramble up a staircase of cascades; wet feet, half a day, worth it.


The Nong Khiaw viewpoint is a real climb: 1.5 hours up, slippery after rain, 20,000 kip entry. Start before 7am to beat the heat.


Boats to Muang Ngoi run morning and early afternoon only, roughly an hour, and fill in high season. Buy the ticket the day before.

READ ON
The town in the [Nong Khiaw write-up](#), the climb in the [viewpoint page](#), and the village upriver in the [Muang Ngoi breakdown](#).

Vang Vieng

the centre • 2 nights • karst, balloons, and a cleaned-up reputation



VANG VIENG, NAM SONG

Vang Vieng spent the 2000s as the byword for backpacker excess: tubing the Nam Song between riverside bars, with a real death toll. That era is over. The bars were shut, the town reinvented itself around the landscape it sits in, and what is left is one of the most striking karst valleys in Asia. The river is still the draw, now for kayaking and a gentler tube; the mornings are for hot-air balloons over the spires.

Two nights covers it. Rent a scooter for the loop of blue lagoons and caves west of town, climb the Nam Xay or Pha Ngern viewpoint for the photograph everyone comes for, and take the balloon or paramotor at sunrise if the budget stretches. The fast train put Vang Vieng an hour from both Luang Prabang and Vientiane, so it is an easy middle stop rather than a detour.



The blue lagoons charge a small entry and get packed by midday tour vans. Lagoon 3 or 5 over the famous Lagoon 1 for space.



Balloons fly at sunrise and sunset in dry season only, around 90 USD. Book the day before and check the weather call.

Nam Xay viewpoint

The motorbike-on-a-ledge photo over the valley; steep, early, worth the sweat.

Blue lagoons and caves

Scooter the loop; swim the cool pools, head-torch into Tham Phu Kham.

Kayak the Nam Song

The river the right way now: a half-day paddle, caves and karst, no bar crawl.

Sunrise balloon

The splurge that defines the trip for many; the valley fills with spires and mist.

MORE ON THE SITE The town in the [Vang Vieng guide](#), the climb in the [Nam Xay viewpoint page](#), and the cave swim in the [Tham Phu Kham page](#).

Vientiane

the capital • 1-2 nights • the quietest capital in Asia



Vientiane is a capital that feels like a large riverside town, and most travellers give it a night on the way in or out. That is about right, but it is not nothing. The golden stupa of Pha That Luang is the national symbol, Wat Sisaket holds thousands of small Buddha images in its cloister, and the Patuxai arch gives you the city from its top. The Mekong promenade at sunset, with Thailand on the far bank, is where the whole town goes to eat.

The one stop that should not be skipped is the COPE visitor centre, a small free museum about the unexploded bombs that still litter the country and the people who make prosthetics for survivors. It reframes the whole trip, and it is covered properly on page 45. Give the capital a slow afternoon and an evening; it is the soft landing before a flight, not a destination to rush.

 COPE is free and open daily. Allow an hour; it is the most important hour in the capital.

 The fast train station sits 10km out of town. Budget a 30-minute tuk-tuk or shuttle and do not cut it fine for departures.

Pha That Luang
The golden stupa on the national seal; best in late-afternoon light.

Wat Sisaket
The oldest temple still standing, its cloister walls lined with Buddhas.

COPE centre
Free, moving, essential; the UXO story told by the people living it.

Mekong promenade
The night market and food stalls along the river at sunset.

THE FULL PICTURE City picks in the [Vientiane guide](#), the stupa in the [Pha That Luang page](#), and the museum in the [COPE centre page](#).

Si Phan Don, the 4000 Islands

the deep south • 2-3 nights • where the trip stops entirely



DON DET, 4000 ISLANDS

At the Cambodian border the Mekong spreads four miles wide and breaks into a maze of channels and islets, four thousand of them in the wet season. Don Det and Don Khon are the two you stay on: hammock bungalows over the water, rusting French colonial railway relics, and a pace so slow it borders on a dare. There is no nightlife to speak of and that is the appeal. You cycle the dirt tracks between the two islands, swim off the rocks, and watch the river.

The two things to actually do: the Li Phi and Khone Phapheng falls, the largest waterfalls by volume in Southeast Asia, thunderous in the wet season, and the dawn boat trip to look for the last few Irrawaddy dolphins in the deep pools at the border. Si Phan Don is the natural full stop on a southern route, or the crossing point into Cambodia for the overland circuit.



Don Det runs on island time and cash. ATMs exist now but fail often; bring kip from Pakse to be safe.



The dolphin boat is a dawn trip and sightings are never guaranteed; fewer than a dozen animals remain. Manage the expectation.

Khone Phapheng Falls

The biggest falls by volume in the region; raw power in the wet season.

Cycle Don Det to Don Khon

Cross the old French railway bridge; a flat loop past paddies and the Li Phi rapids.

Dolphin dawn boat

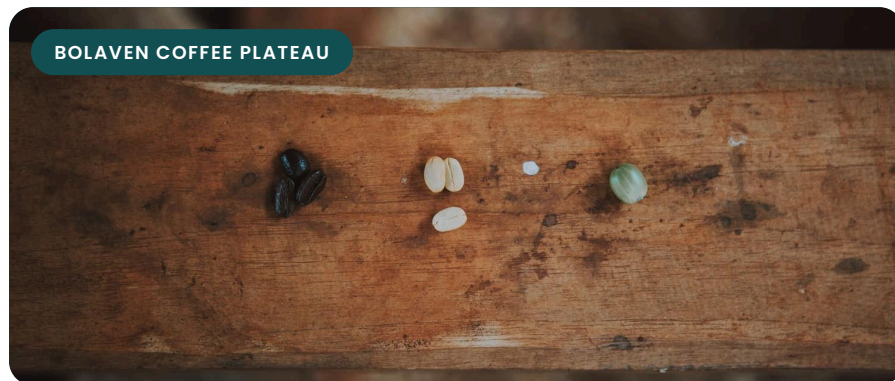
The border pools at first light, for a glimpse of the last Irrawaddy dolphins.

KEEP READING

The islands in the [Si Phan Don rundown](#), the falls in the [Khone Phapheng page](#), and the dolphin trip in the [Don Det page](#).

The Bolaven Plateau

the south • 2-3 day loop from Pakse • coffee and waterfalls



Above the southern town of Pakse the land lifts to a cool volcanic plateau, and the temperature drops with it. The Bolaven is Laos at its most rewarding for the effort: the coffee that supplies half the country grows here, the waterfalls are the tallest and least visited in the land, and the loop road that links them is one of the great motorbike rides in the region. You rent a semi-automatic in Pakse, sketch a two or three day circuit, and ride between falls and farms.

Tad Fane is the headline, a twin column dropping over 100 metres into a gorge, with a zipline across it for the brave. Tad Yuang and Tad Lo are the swimmable ones, Tad Lo with a village of guesthouses to break the loop overnight. Stop at a roadside farm for a cup pulled from beans grown in the field behind you. This is the corner of Laos most people skip and most who ride it rate highest.

Tad Fane

Twin 100m falls into a gorge; the viewpoint resort and the zipline across.

Tad Lo

The overnight stop; a low falls, a village, and the slowest evening on the loop.

Coffee farms

Roadside roasters and plantation tours; the cup is fresher than anything at home.



Rent the bike with a proper helmet and check the brakes; the plateau roads are good but the descents off them are steep.



The plateau is cool, even cold at night in December. Pack a layer; riders underdress for Laos and regret it up here.

MORE DETAIL

The ride in the [Bolaven loop page](#), the headline falls in the [Tad Fane breakdown](#), and the swim stop in the [Tad Yuang page](#).

The Plain of Jars

the east • Phonsavan, 1-2 nights • ancient stone and recent war



Scattered across the highland meadows around Phonsavan are thousands of carved stone jars, some two metres tall, made more than two thousand years ago for a purpose archaeologists still argue over: burial urns, most likely. It is a UNESCO site and one of the most enigmatic in Asia, and you will often walk a jar field nearly alone. Three sites are cleared and safe to visit, marked with painted stones that tell you where it is safe to step.

That detail is the second half of the story. This province was the most heavily bombed ground of the Secret War, and the jar fields sit among craters and live ordnance still being cleared. The same trip teaches you the ancient and the recent history of the country in a single afternoon. Phonsavan is a long detour east, for second trips and history readers, reached by a winding bus or a short domestic flight.



Stay between the MAG marker stones at the jar sites. The cleared paths are safe; the ground beside them is not always.



A morning flight from Vientiane saves a long mountain bus. Phonsavan is a detour worth a day, not a rush.

02

Site 1

The largest field, closest to town, with the biggest jars and a cave.

Sites 2 and 3

Hill and meadow fields, quieter, reached on a half-day loop by tuk-tuk or scooter.

MAG information

The mine-clearance office in town explains the marker system and the ongoing work.

GO DEEPER The jar fields in the [Plain of Jars rundown](#) and the town that anchors the trip in the [Phonsavan breakdown](#).

Thakhek and the Kong Lor cave

the centre • 3-4 day loop • the great Laos motorbike ride



KONG LOR CAVE

The Thakhek loop is the other great ride in Laos, a three or four day circuit from the riverside town of Thakhek through karst country, caves, and lonely reservoirs studded with drowned dead trees. Riders rate it above the Bolaven for variety: limestone tunnels, viewpoints, hot springs, and villages where the loop is the only reason a foreigner ever stops.

The reason the loop exists is Kong Lor, a river cave seven and a half kilometres long that you travel by longtail boat in the dark, the boatman's headtorch the only light, until you emerge into daylight on the far side of a mountain. It is one of the most extraordinary half-hours in Southeast Asia. You can ride the full loop or simply bus in and out to do the cave as a there-and-back; either way it belongs on a second trip or a longer first one.



The boat through Kong Lor takes life jackets and a dry bag seriously; the water level varies and the dark is total.



The loop needs a semi-auto and some confidence; the road is paved now but long, with fuel gaps. Carry a spare litre.

Kong Lor cave

7.5km by boat through a mountain, in the dark, into the light. The whole reason to come.

The loop viewpoints

Drowned forests, karst tunnels, and the Nakai reservoir; three or four days of empty road.

Thakhek town

The riverside start and end; rent here, ride out, sleep one night before the loop.

READ ON

The town and the ride in the [Thakhek rundown](#), the cave in the [Kong Lor cave page](#), and the village at its mouth in the [Ban Kong Lor page](#).

Where to base, mapped to what you want

one river, eight bases • read down the column you care about

Laos reads as one long line, so the question is rarely which region but how far down it you have time to go. The matrix below replaces three pages of prose: pick the column that matters to you, read down, and the strongest bases rise to the top. Nothing here needs sea or season-juggling the way the islands further south do; the real variable is how much road time you accept.

BASE	STRETCH	CULTURE	NATURE	SLOW	EASY
Luang Prabang	North	●●●	●●○	●●○	●●●
Nong Khiaw	North	●○○	●●●	●●●	●●○
Vang Vieng	Centre	●○○	●●●	●○○	●●●
Vientiane	Centre	●●○	●○○	●○○	●●●
Si Phan Don	South	●○○	●●○	●●●	●○○
Bolaven (Pakse)	South	●○○	●●●	●●○	●○○
Phonsavan	East	●●○	●○○	●●○	●○○
Thakhek	Centre	●○○	●●●	●●○	●○○

● filled dots = stronger fit (3 = built for it)

assessment: pack-lightly Laos cluster, 2026-06



Ten days or less: stay north, Luang Prabang and the rivers, with Vang Vieng and Vientiane on the way to the airport. The south needs its own week.



Doing both ends: fly Luang Prabang to Pakse rather than busing 24 hours. The flight costs less than two lost days.

ON THE WEBSITE The ranked towns in the [best places rundown](#) and the river islands in the [islands breakdown](#).

03

What to do

Laos does not ask much of your days, and that is the gift. The slow boat, the waterfalls, the dawn alms, and the food. Plus where to sleep and which tours are worth paying for.

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Dawn alms and monk culture	21
Food, the calibration dishes	22
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The slow boat, and learning to slow down

two days down the Mekong • the trip that sets the pace



THE MEKONG, BY SLOW BOAT

The classic way into Laos is the two-day slow boat from the Thai border at Huay Xai down to Luang Prabang, overnighing in Pak Beng. It is not fast and it is not luxurious: wooden benches, a cool box of Beerlao, and the river sliding past hill villages and water buffalo for eight hours a day. It is also the single best introduction to the country, because it forces the gear change that the whole trip runs on. You arrive having already slowed down.

Skip the one-day speedboat alternative. It saves a day, costs more, and has a genuine safety record of crashes and deaths; the helmets they hand out tell you everything. Once you are in the country the pattern repeats: river trips over road trips wherever the option exists, a viewpoint climb at dawn, a long lunch, and an afternoon that goes nowhere in particular. That is the offer, and the travellers who fight it have a worse time than the ones who give in.



The slow boat is two days with a forced overnight in Pak Beng. Bring a cushion, a book, snacks, and small kip for the guesthouse.



The one-day speedboat is the dangerous option, not the smart one. Riders wear motorcycle helmets for a reason; take the slow boat.

The two-day slow boat

Huay Xai to Luang Prabang via Pak Beng; the proper way in from Thailand.

The Nam Ou boats

Shorter river hops up north, Nong Khiaw to Muang Ngoi, the best hour on the water.

A sunset cruise

The low-effort version from Luang Prabang; an hour with a Beerlao as the light goes.

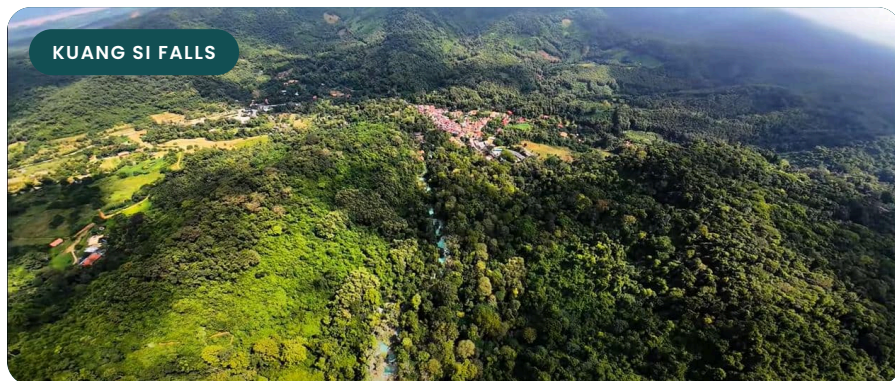
The fast train

When you do need speed: the 2021 railway links the main towns in an hour each.

KEEP READING The river trip in the [Mekong cruise page](#), the route options in the [getting-around breakdown](#), and the village hop in the [Muang Ngoi boat page](#).

Waterfalls, caves and the river

the natural headline acts • cool water in a hot country



Take the waterfalls seriously here; they are the best in the region and rarely crowded. Kuang Si near Luang Prabang is the famous one, a staircase of mineral-blue pools you swim between, with a moon-bear rescue sanctuary at the entrance. The Bolaven Plateau in the south holds the tallest, Tad Fane and Tad Yuang, fed by the plateau's rain. Each is a half-day with the cool swim as the reward in a country that runs hot most of the year.

The caves are the other natural act. Kong Lor is the headline, the river cave you travel by boat in total dark, but the limestone everywhere hides smaller ones: the swimming cave of Tham Phu Kham above Vang Vieng, the war-shelter caves around Muang Ngoi and Vieng Xai. Kayaking ties it together, a half-day on the Nam Song or the Nam Ou that costs little and shows you the karst from the water, the way the country is meant to be seen.



Kuang Si water is genuinely cold and bracing. Go on a hot afternoon, bring a towel, and skip the closed-off top tier.



Cave trips want a head-torch of your own; rental lamps fail. Always wear the life jacket on the river caves.

Kuang Si Falls

The blue-pool staircase near Luang Prabang; swim the lower tiers, meet the bears.

Tad Fane and Tad Yuang

The plateau giants in the south; the tallest and least busy in the country.

Tham Phu Kham

Vang Vieng's swimming cave; a blue lagoon below, a golden Buddha in the dark above.

Kayak the rivers

The Nam Song or Nam Ou by paddle; cheap, slow, and the best angle on the karst.

MORE DETAIL

Every cascade in the [waterfalls write-up](#), the famous pools in the [Kuang Si page](#), and the karst peaks in the [mountains breakdown](#).

Dawn alms and monk culture

the most photographed rite in Laos • and the most often done wrong



Before sunrise in Luang Prabang, hundreds of monks file barefoot through the streets and townspeople kneel to place sticky rice into their bowls. The tak bat is a daily act of merit-making that has run for centuries, and it is the heart of why this town feels the way it does. It is also, increasingly, a tourist scrum: tour groups crowding the monks, flash in their faces, rice bought from hustlers and handed over without a clue.

If you watch, watch from across the road, stay seated or stand well back, and turn the flash off. If you take part, sit, dress with shoulders and knees covered, buy the rice from a market the day before, and stay silent. Do not make eye contact or touch a monk. The same respect carries through every temple you enter: women never hand anything directly to a monk, shoes come off, and you keep your head lower than the Buddha images. Get this right and the country opens up to you.

Watch, do not stage

Across the street, seated, silent, flash off. The procession is a rite, not a show.

Temple manners

Shoes off, shoulders and knees covered, head below the Buddha, feet never pointed at it.

Talk to a novice

Some temples run monk-chat hours; novices practise English, you learn the faith. Both gain.



No flash, no close-ups, no stepping into the procession for a photo. A long lens from across the street is the only respectful frame.



If you give alms, buy the rice from a market the evening before, not from the sellers who target tourists at the roadside at dawn.

WORTH A READ

The full etiquette in the [culture write-up](#), the rite itself in the [alms-giving page](#), and the temple canon in the [religious landmarks breakdown](#).

Food: the four calibration dishes

sticky rice with everything • 1 to 5 USD a plate

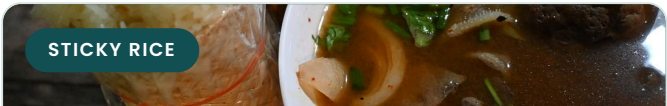
Lao food is the most underrated cuisine in Southeast Asia, partly because so much of it crossed the border and got rebranded as Thai. The base note is sticky rice, eaten with the hands, rolled into a ball and dipped, at nearly every meal. Around it sits a kitchen built on herbs, lime, chilli, and fermented fish, fresher and more bitter-edged than its neighbours. Eat where the locals do, at the markets and the riverside grills, and order these four early; they are your bar for everything after.



Larb laap

USD 2-4 • everywhere

The national dish: minced meat or fish tossed with herbs, lime, chilli, and toasted rice powder. The Lao original is sharper and more bitter than the Thai version. Eaten with a fistful of sticky rice.



Sticky rice khao niaw

USD 0.50-1.50 • every meal

The staple, served in a woven bamboo basket. Pull off a small ball, press a dimple, scoop. Lao people eat more of it per head than anyone on earth; leave the lid on to keep it warm.



Tam mak hoong green papaya salad

USD 1.50-3 • markets

The Lao papaya salad, pounded to order in a clay mortar with lime, chilli, and fermented crab or fish sauce. Hotter and funkier than the Thai som tam. Say "bor phet" if you want it tamed.



Mok pa steamed fish in banana leaf

USD 3-6 • riverside

River fish, herbs, and rice flour wrapped in a banana leaf and steamed to a soft custard. The gentlest dish on the table and the best argument for eating by the Mekong.



Beerlao is the national pride and genuinely good. The dark lager is worth seeking out; both cost about a dollar a bottle.



A French legacy worth keeping: the morning baguette, khao jee, split and filled with pate and herbs for under a dollar.

ON THE WEBSITE

The full dish-by-dish list with prices in the [food and drinks rundown](#), and the markets to find them in the [culture page](#).

Where to stay: Luang Prabang and the north

prices per night, double room • book the first nights, decide the rest there

Two rules cover most of Laos. First: book only your first two nights ahead and decide on the ground; walk-in rates beat online ones outside peak weeks. Second: in Luang Prabang the peninsula is the address you want, walkable to every temple and the night market, while Nong Khiaw is about the river view, so pay the small premium for a room facing the water.

Luang Prabang

hostel 7 USD mid 28 USD comfort 75 USD

Sleep on or just off the peninsula for temples and the night market on foot. Restored French villas run as boutique stays for the price of a chain hotel at home. [Check what a room costs around the peninsula](#) before you commit; the dorm crowd sleeps cheap through [Hostelworld](#).

Nong Khiaw

hostel 6 USD mid 22 USD comfort 55 USD

The whole point is the river, so book a bungalow on the water under the karst; the cheaper rooms back from the bank miss the view that brought you. Backpackers run the dorm scene on [Hostelworld](#); for a riverside room, [see what the bridge town is charging tonight](#).

Mid-range and up across the north, with free cancellation while your plans are still moving.

[Find Stays on Booking.com](#)

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

**Prabang Plates food tour,
15+ tastings**

from 45 USD

5.0 (30 reviews)

4 hours

**Evening bamboo weaving
and Lao cooking class**

from 47 USD

5.0 (17 reviews)

4 hours

**Vang Vieng kayak, zipline
and cave tubing day**

from 50 USD

4.2 (16 reviews)

8 hours

Live Viator tours, prices captured June 2026, ratings from verified bookings. Tap a card to book.

Where to stay: Vang Vieng and Vientiane

prices per night, double room • the view costs extra, and is worth it

Vang Vieng splits into the old backpacker grid and the newer riverside, and the riverside wins: same prices, but you wake to the karst over the Nam Song. In Vientiane the question is the river too, with the night-market promenade a short walk from anywhere central. Both towns sit on the fast train, so a room near the river beats one near the distant station; you will tuk-tuk out regardless.

Vang Vieng

hostel **6 USD** mid **24 USD** comfort **60 USD**

Book the riverside strip for the karst view at breakfast, not the old central grid. Rates swing with the balloon season, so [pull up live Nam Song prices](#) before you lock in. Dorms cluster on [Hostelworld](#).

Vientiane

hostel **8 USD** mid **30 USD** comfort **70 USD**

Stay central, within walking distance of the Mekong promenade and the night market; the city is small enough that nothing else matters. Still need a bed? [The live map around the centre](#) and [Hostelworld](#) fill the gaps.

Hotels and guesthouses across the centre and the capital, cancellable until a few days before check-in.

[Find Stays on Booking.com](#)

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

**The Hungry Tuk Tuk,
Vientiane food and culture**

from 59 USD

4.7 (60 reviews)

3 hours

**Vientiane half-day city
tour**

from 89 USD

4.6 (23 reviews)

4 hours

**Luang Prabang aroma
candle making in a
heritage home**

from 35 USD

5.0 (29 reviews)

2 hours

Live Viator tours, prices captured June 2026, ratings from verified bookings. Tap a card to book.

04

Routes

Eight ways down the line, the ten-day route worth flying for, and the Mekong drawn as a map. Plus how Laos slots into a longer SE-Asia trip.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Pick your trip, 8 paths	26
10 days, day by day	27
The line as a river map	29
Combining Laos with its neighbours	30

Pick your trip

three dimensions, eight paths · find yours, jump to the matching itinerary

Who you travel with, how long you have, and how far down the line you go decide the route before any list of sights does. Find your row below; the ten-day line on the next spread covers the first three paths in full.

SOLO · 7D · BACKPACKER

The northern core

USD 320 · guesthouses + slow boat

- Slow boat in from Thailand
- Luang Prabang 3n
- Vang Vieng 2 · Vientiane 1

SOLO · 10D · BACKPACKER

The river north added

USD 470 · the full Mekong line

- Luang Prabang 3 · Nong Khiaw 2
- Muang Ngoi 1
- Vang Vieng 2 · Vientiane 1

COUPLE · 10D · MID

River lodges and temples

USD 1,600 for 2 · boutique stays

- Luang Prabang 4: villas + Kuang Si
- Nong Khiaw 3: riverside lodge
- Vang Vieng 2 · fly out

COUPLE · 14D · MID

North and deep south

USD 2,300 for 2 · one internal flight

- North as above, 8 nights
- Fly to Pakse
- Bolaven 3 · 4000 Islands 3

FAMILY · 10D · MID

Gentle north, no rough roads

USD 2,600 · family of 4

- Luang Prabang 4: falls + bears
- Vang Vieng 3: lagoons + balloon
- Vientiane 2 · fast train between

RIDER · 7D · MID

The Thakhek loop

USD 600 · motorbike + guesthouses

- Vientiane 1 · train to Thakhek
- Loop 4 days: Kong Lor cave
- Back to Vientiane to fly

RIDER · 7D · MID

The Bolaven loop, south

USD 650 · coffee and waterfalls

- Fly into Pakse
- Bolaven loop 3 days
- 4000 Islands 2 to finish

NOMAD · 21D · MID

Slow base in the north

USD 1,100 for the month, food and room

- Luang Prabang base, 14 nights
- Weekend to Nong Khiaw
- Visa run or e-visa extension

WORTH A READ

Full day-by-day versions online: the [7-day route](#), the [14-day route](#), and the [21-day route](#).

10 days, the line worth flying for

days 1-5 • Luang Prabang and the river north

The Mekong line, refined. Built for first-timers, valid for repeat visitors. Book the slow boat or the fast-train legs through [12Go](#) a few days ahead in high season; everything else can be decided on the day.

- 1

Arrive Luang Prabang
LPQ • day zero

Land or step off the slow boat. Settle on the peninsula, walk to the night market, eat at the buffet alley. Sleep early for the alms.
- 2

Alms and temples
dawn start

Watch the tak bat from across the street. Coffee, then Wat Xieng Thong and the peninsula temples on foot. Climb Phousi for sunset.
- 3

Kuang Si Falls
half-day out

Tuk-tuk to the falls early, swim the blue pools, meet the rescue bears. Afternoon free for the river or the craft villages.
- 4

North to Nong Khiaw
3h by road

Minivan up the Nam Ou. Check into a riverside bungalow, settle in for the cliffs at dusk, eat by the water.
- 5

Viewpoint and the river
early climb

Up Pha Daeng peak before the heat. Afternoon boat to Muang Ngoi or a kayak back down; nothing else on the list.



If you arrive by slow boat, days 1 and 2 merge; you land mid-afternoon already in the right gear. Build in the spare day up north.



Nong Khiaw is where people wish they had two more nights. If your dates flex, steal them from Vientiane, not from here.

10 days, the southern half of the north

days 6-10 • back down the line to Vientiane

The second half turns back south and picks up speed on the fast train. The pace lifts a little; that is by design, so the slow river days at the start stay the memory. Book the [train seats](#) a day or two ahead, they sell out.

6 Back to Luang Prabang 3h road + train	Return down the Nam Ou, then the fast train south. A last coffee on the peninsula before the platform.
7 Train to Vang Vieng 1h fast train	An hour through the mountains to the karst valley. Check in riverside, scooter to a lagoon, sunset over the Nam Song.
8 Vang Vieng outdoors balloon or kayak	Sunrise balloon if the budget allows, otherwise the Nam Xay viewpoint. Kayak or the blue-lagoon loop by afternoon.
9 Train to Vientiane 1h fast train	Down to the capital by lunch. COPE in the afternoon, the stupa at golden hour, the river promenade for dinner.
10 Vientiane and out flight day	Wat Sisaket and a slow morning. Allow time for the airport run; the train station is well out of town.



Have two more weeks? Fly Vientiane to Pakse on day 10 instead and add the Bolaven loop and the 4000 Islands to the south.



The fast train books out days ahead in high season. Lock your two legs the moment your dates are fixed; walk-up is a gamble.

The line as a river map

north to south down the Mekong · the ten-day route in one picture

The whole trip is one line down one river. The map below traces it: the slow boat in from the Thai border, the royal town, the river villages north, then the fast-train hops back down through the karst to the capital, with the deep-south extension dropping off the bottom.



geography: Natural Earth 50m · route legs on true coordinates

Combining Laos with its neighbours

the overland country • where the line connects, and which way to ride it

Laos is the connective tissue of mainland Southeast Asia, and many people see it as one leg of a longer trip rather than a destination on its own. The borders are easy and the logic is geographic: do Laos in the middle, when you already want to slow down, not at the start when you are still in a hurry.

NORTH, FROM THAILAND

Chiang Mai to Luang Prabang

The classic entry: bus to Chiang Khong, cross at Huay Xai, two days down the slow boat. Do Laos after northern Thailand, the geography lines up.

EAST, TO VIETNAM

Vientiane or the north to Hanoi

Sleeper buses cross to Vietnam, or fly Luang Prabang to Hanoi in an hour. Pair the slow Laos north with the buzz of the Vietnamese capital.

SOUTH, TO CAMBODIA

4000 Islands to Siem Reap

The natural overland exit: cross from Si Phan Don, bus on toward Angkor. End Laos in the deep south and roll straight into Cambodia.



Two-week SE-Asia loop: northern Thailand, the slow boat, the Laos north, then fly to Hanoi. It is the most-walked backpacker line in the region for good reason.



The fast train now runs north into China at Boten, so Luang Prabang to Kunming is a single scenic day if your visa allows.

ON THE WEBSITE Border crossings and overland legs in the [getting-around breakdown](#), and the off-route detours in the [off the beaten path rundown](#).

05

When to go

One dry season, one green one, and a calendar of festivals worth planning around. Plus what a day really costs, printed as a receipt.

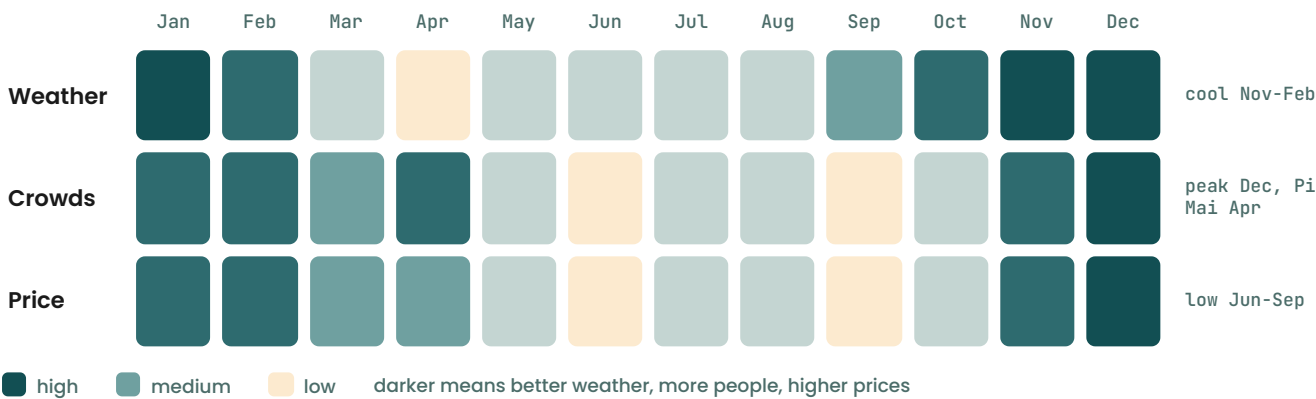
IN THIS CHAPTER

Weather, crowds, price	32
What a day really costs	33
Festivals worth timing a trip around	34

Weather, crowds, price

12-month calendar · the cool dry window is short

Laos has a sharp dry season from November to March and a green wet season from May to October. The sweet spot is narrow: November and December are cool, clear, and the rivers are still high enough to run. By March the burning season hazes the north as farmers clear fields, and April brings the year's fiercest heat before the rains break it. The green season is humid and the back roads turn to mud, but the waterfalls thunder and the country empties of travellers.



climate: 10-year averages, captured 2026-05-17 · crowd and price: pack-lightly estimate

WHAT THINGS COST: QUOTED VS PAID

SAMPLE DATA

Tuk-tuk across Luang Prabang		5 USD quoted 2 USD shared
Papaya salad, one plate		4 USD tourist cafe 1.50 USD market
Slow boat, Huay Xai to Luang Prabang		50 USD agency combo 25 USD at the pier
Guesthouse double, river view		40 USD online peak 22 USD walk-in

What a day really costs

bed to nightcap, three ways · itemised, with a capture date

The headline numbers, made concrete. Three days in Laos, priced line by line at the level most travellers actually spend. Laos runs a touch cheaper than Thailand on rooms and food, a touch dearer on transport because the distances are long and the slow boat is its own cost. Captured May 2026; the budget calculator keeps the live version.

A DAY IN LAOS * backpacker * guesthouse dorm6.00 baguette breakfast1.50 noodle lunch2.00 market dinner + rice3.00 shared tuk-tuk2.00 waterfall entry2.50 two Beerlao2.00 water + snacks1.00 TOTAL / DAY~20 USD budget-calculator estimate · 2026-05-17	A DAY IN LAOS * standard * guesthouse double, half14.00 cafe breakfast4.00 riverside lunch5.00 dinner with drinks9.00 tuk-tuk + day boat, split7.00 kayak or cave trip6.00 TOTAL / DAY~45 USD budget-calculator estimate · 2026-05-17	A DAY IN LAOS * comfort * boutique villa, half55.00 hotel breakfastincl. restaurant lunch10.00 dinner, good table18.00 private driver, half day20.00 guided tour orincl. cruiseabove sundowners x27.00 TOTAL / DAY~110 USD budget-calculator estimate · 2026-05-17
--	---	--

Festivals worth timing a trip around

the Buddhist calendar runs the year • one festival can make or break dates



Laos runs on the lunar Buddhist calendar, so festival dates shift each year; check before you book. The biggest is Pi Mai, the Lao New Year in mid-April, three days of water-throwing and temple visits that double as the hottest week of the year. It is joyous and soaking, but transport and rooms strain, so decide if you want to be in it or around it.

The other dates worth planning around: the boat races at the end of Buddhist Lent in autumn, and the That Luang festival in Vientiane each November, when candle processions circle the golden stupa. None of these need to anchor a trip, but landing on one turns an ordinary week into the trip people talk about.

MID-APRIL

Pi Mai, Lao New Year

Three days of water, temple offerings, and the year's biggest party. Hot, soaking, and joyful; Luang Prabang does it best.

OCTOBER

Boun Ok Phansa

The end of Buddhist Lent: candle-lit boats float down the Mekong, and longboat races fill the river the next day.

NOVEMBER

That Luang festival

A week of candle processions around the golden stupa in Vientiane; the spiritual high point of the national calendar.



During Pi Mai, expect to get soaked anywhere in public. Waterproof your phone and embrace it, or stay off the streets at midday.



Festival dates move with the moon each year. Confirm the exact days before you book flights into mid-April or November.

SEE ALSO The month-by-month breakdown in the [best travel time page](#), and the festival context in the [culture rundown](#).

06

Practical

The four things to book before you fly, how money and the long distances actually work, and the short list that keeps a Laos trip simple.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Book in this order	36
Money and transport	37
Bed, bag, signal	38
Health basics	39

Book in this order

four things before you fly • everything else on the ground

Laos punishes over-planning even more than its neighbours: guesthouses, boats and buses are cheaper and easier arranged in the country. Only four things genuinely reward booking ahead, and they have a natural order. The visa is the one real piece of paperwork, and the e-visa makes it a ten-minute job before you leave.

8 wk
before

International flights

Laos has limited long-haul, so most arrivals connect through Bangkok, Hanoi or Singapore. Fares to Luang Prabang or Vientiane settle six to eight weeks out; a Bangkok hop is often the cheapest last leg.

**Compare fares
on Aviasales**

4 wk
before

Insurance + visa

Buy travel insurance with strong medical cover and, if you will ride, motorbike cover; clinics are basic and a serious case means evacuation to Thailand. Then sort the visa: the official e-visa is 50 USD for most nationalities, or a visa on arrival at major entry points for a little less.

**Check entry
rules per
passport**

1 wk
before

The slow boat or train legs

Book the two-day slow boat or the fast-train seats a few days out in high season; both fill. First two nights of accommodation too. The rest of the beds can wait until you are there.

**Book transport
on 12Go**

few days
before

eSIM

Install before departure, activate on arrival. Coverage is solid in towns and patchy on the river and the loops; download offline maps before you leave the wifi. 5 to 10 GB covers two weeks.

**Set up a Saily
eSIM**



Passport rule: six months validity beyond arrival, and the e-visa wants a clear blank page. Check both now.



Carry clean US dollars for the visa fee and emergencies; Lao kip cannot be bought abroad and ATMs cap low.

Money and transport

cash country · the fast train changed everything north to south

Laos runs on cash. The kip comes in big numbers, US dollars and Thai baht are widely accepted, and cards work only at upper-end hotels. ATMs exist in every town now but cap withdrawals low, around 1 to 2 million kip, and charge a flat fee each time, so pull the maximum and carry dollars as backup. Budget for a slightly higher daily transport cost than Thailand; the distances are real.

ITEM	BACKPACKER	MID	COMFORT
Guesthouse dorm / private double	USD 6	USD 24	USD 60
Market meal / restaurant	USD 2	USD 8	USD 22
Beerlao	USD 1	USD 2	USD 4
Fast train, one leg	USD 8	USD 12	USD 20
Tuk-tuk across town	USD 2	USD 3	USD 5

verified 2026-05-14 · pack-lightly Laos estimate · per-category numbers in the budget guide

TRANSPORT: WHAT BEATS WHAT

The 2021 China-Laos railway rewrote travel here. The fast train links Vientiane, Vang Vieng, Luang Prabang and the Chinese border in hours instead of the old all-day mountain buses, and tickets are cheap; book them ahead through [12Go](#) because they sell out. For the river, take the slow boat over road wherever it runs; it is the experience, not just the transfer. Domestic flights link the far ends, Luang Prabang to Pakse, when busing would eat two days. In the towns, tuk-tuks and shared songthaews cover everything; agree the price before you climb in. For the loops, rent a semi-automatic and carry spare fuel.



The fast-train station sits well outside each town. Add 30 minutes and a tuk-tuk fare each way; do not cut departures fine.



Airlines and bus firms are named without links here where no partner relation exists; book them direct at the station or counter.

THE FULL PICTURE

Exchange and ATM notes in the [currency rundown](#), and the internal routes in the [getting-around breakdown](#).

Bed, bag, signal

hotels · packing · eSIM, the three solved problems

BED

For mid-range and up, [Booking.com](#) wins on free cancellation and inventory in the main towns. For dorms and social guesthouses, [Hostelworld](#) has the deeper review pool. In the river villages and on the loops, much of the best accommodation is not online at all; turn up and walk the lane, and message boutique villas directly for a better rate.

BAG: THE COOL-SEASON CARRY-ON LIST

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Two quick-dry tops, one long-sleeve for temples and cool evenings | ☐ 30% DEET and SPF 50 |
| ☐ A real fleece or layer for the plateau and the boat at dawn | ☐ Type A/B/C plug adapter |
| ☐ Sandals plus one closed shoe for the viewpoints | ☐ 20,000 mAh power bank for off-grid nights |
| ☐ Starter med-kit: loperamide, paracetamol, rehydration salts | ☐ A head-torch for caves and power cuts |
| | ☐ Dry bag for the slow boat and the river caves |
| | ☐ Scarf or sarong for temple dress codes |

Signal. Buy the eSIM before you fly and activate on arrival. Coverage is good in towns, thin on the rivers and the loops, so download offline maps first. A 5 GB plan covers a week (~8 USD); 10 GB covers two. Stays over a month are cheaper on a local Unitel or Laotel SIM from any phone shop (bring your passport).

[Set up a Saily eSIM](#)

GO DEEPER

The season-by-season list in the [packing list](#), and data plans compared in the [eSIM write-up](#).

Health basics

six weeks out • thinner medical cover than its neighbours

Laos needs a little more health care than Thailand or Vietnam because the medical infrastructure is thinner: serious cases are evacuated across the border to Thailand, which is exactly what good insurance is for. The everyday risks are the regional ones, and most of the list below is preparation rather than worry. Sort it six weeks ahead.

THE SIX-STEP LIST

- ☐ **Six weeks before:** travel-clinic visit. Confirm routine vaccines (MMR, DPT, tetanus) are current.
- ☐ **Recommended:** Hepatitis A and typhoid for a country of street food and river water. Hep A is a two-shot series; start early.
- ☐ **Risk-based:** Japanese Encephalitis for long rural stays, rabies pre-exposure if you will be far from a clinic on the loops.
- ☐ **Malaria:** low risk in the towns, real in remote rural border areas. Ask a travel doctor about your exact route.
- ☐ **Pack:** the med-kit from page 38. Pharmacies are basic outside the capital; bring what you rely on.
- ☐ **Insurance:** strong medical cover with emergency evacuation to Bangkok is the single most important item on this page.

IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG

For anything serious, the plan is Thailand: the best hospitals are across the border in Udon Thani or Bangkok, and insurers evacuate there as routine. In Vientiane the French-run Mahosot and the Alliance International clinic handle the everyday. On the loops and the rivers you are genuinely remote, so ride within your limits and carry a basic kit. Tap water is not safe anywhere; stick to bottled or filtered.



Evacuation cover to Thailand is the line on your insurance that matters most here. Confirm it before you ride a loop.



Dengue exists in the wet season. DEET at dusk is the protocol; there is no pill to take instead.

READ ON Route-by-route risk in the [safety breakdown](#), and the wildlife you may meet on the trails in the [animals page](#).

07

Safe and smart

Laos is one of the safest countries in the region for travellers, with one real hazard that is genuinely its own. Plus the etiquette that is load-bearing and the language minimum that changes how people respond.

IN THIS CHAPTER

The one safety story that matters: UXO	41
Etiquette: the short list	42
Emergency numbers and eight phrases	43

The one safety story that matters: UXO

the most bombed country per head on earth • and how that touches a traveller

Petty crime against travellers in Laos is rare and violent crime rarer still; this is one of the safest countries in the region to move through. The real safety story is a different and heavier one. Between 1964 and 1973 the United States dropped more than two million tonnes of ordnance on Laos, more than on Germany and Japan in all of the Second World War, and an estimated third of it never exploded. Sixty years on, that unexploded ordnance still kills and maims, mostly farmers and children, and roughly a quarter of villages remain contaminated.

RISK 01

Unexploded ordnance off the path

In the bombed provinces, mostly the east and the Plain of Jars, live ordnance still sits in fields and forest. Cleared sites are marked; the ground beside them may not be.

What to do: stay on marked paths at jar sites and on rural trails, never pick up metal scrap, and visit COPE in Vientiane to understand it.

RISK 02

The one-day speedboat

The fast boat between Huay Xai and Luang Prabang has a genuine record of fatal crashes; the motorcycle helmets they issue are not decoration.

What to do: take the two-day slow boat instead. It is cheaper, safer, and the better experience by a distance.

RISK 03

River and loop accidents

Tubing, kayaking and the motorbike loops cause most traveller injuries. The river runs fast in the wet season and the loop roads are remote, with thin medical cover.

What to do: wear the life jacket, skip the river bars, ride within your skill, and confirm your insurance covers both.

RISK 04

The "happy" menu

In a few backpacker towns, bars still offer drug-laced shakes and pizzas. Quality is unknown, the law is harsh, and spiked drinks have hospitalised travellers.

What to do: avoid them. Penalties are severe and the medical backup is hours away.

MORE ON THE SITE

The full safety picture in the [safety breakdown](#), and the museum that tells the UXO story in the [COPE centre page](#).

Etiquette: the short list

first four are load-bearing • last four keep you welcome

Eight things that matter. The first four cause real offence if you ignore them; the last four are the difference between a polite guest and an awkward one. Laos is gentle and forgiving, but the social grain runs deep.

DO

Keep your cool, always

Saving face is everything. Anger or raised voices lose every exchange; a smile wins it.

DO

Return the nóp, dress covered at temples

Palms together, slight bow, for the greeting. Shoulders and knees covered, shoes off inside.

DO

Watch the dawn alms with respect

Across the street, seated, silent, no flash. Only take part if you understand the etiquette.

DO

Learn a little Lao

Sabaidee and khop chai go a long way; few travellers try, and it changes the welcome.

DO NOT

Touch a monk, or hand a monk anything (women)

Women place offerings on a cloth, never directly into a monk's hands. Nobody touches a monk.

DO NOT

Point feet at a Buddha or a person

Feet are the lowest part of the body. Tuck them under in temples, and never touch a head.

DO NOT

Discuss politics loosely

Laos is a one-party state. Locals avoid the subject in public; follow their lead and let it lie.

DO NOT

Rush people

"Bor pen nyang", no worries, is the national mood. Hurrying a transaction reads as rude.



Public affection between couples is frowned on, especially in the villages. Keep it low-key and you will not put a foot wrong.



Tipping is not expected but is warmly received; rounding up at a guesthouse or for a guide goes a long way here.

KEEP READING

Religion, traditions and the full etiquette context in the [culture write-up](#), and the temple canon in the [religious landmarks page](#).

Emergency numbers and eight phrases

save the numbers now • the phrases change how locals respond

POLICE

191

Lao-first line

AMBULANCE (VIENTIANE)

1195

capital only

FIRE

190

nationwide

TOURIST POLICE (VTE)

+856 21 251 128

English, daytime

US EMBASSY VIENTIANE

+856 21 487 000

citizen services

ALLIANCE CLINIC VTE

+856 21 513 095

expat clinic

EIGHT PHRASES THAT CHANGE HOW LOCALS RESPOND		
ENGLISH	LAO (PHONETIC)	NOTES
Hello	sabaidee	the all-purpose greeting
Thank you	khop chai (lai lai)	add "lai lai" for very much
Yes / No	men / bor	"bor" is the universal no
How much?	tao dai?	essential for markets and tuk-tuks
No spice please	bor phet	say it twice if you mean it
No worries / it's fine	bor pen nyang	the national catchphrase
Delicious	saep	say it about the food, win the cook
Help!	suay dae!	emergencies only



Save your guesthouse name in Lao script and the embassy number before the first night out; English is thin outside the towns.



These same phrases print as a wallet card on page 47; cut it out and keep it with your room key.

08

Tools and reference

The live tools this guide was built from, the cut-out cards for your wallet, and the sources behind every number.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Take the live tools with you	45
Print cards: cut, fold, take	46
Sources and methodology	47
A note on the links	49

Take the live tools with you

scan to open · data updates after this PDF was printed

This guide is a snapshot; the tools behind it keep updating. Scan a code or type the short URL. Each one is preloaded with the same Laos data this guide was built from.



Trip Budget Calculator

Laos: 20 USD/day backpacker, 120 USD/day comfort.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/budget-calculator/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/budget-calculator/)



Country Map

Laos spots mapped, from Luang Prabang to the 4000 Islands.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/country-map/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/country-map/)



Best Time to Travel

Best: Nov-Feb. Month-by-month weather for 140+ countries.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/)



Visa Checker

Laos: e-visa or visa on arrival. Check your passport's rule.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/visa-checker/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/visa-checker/)

Print cards: cut, fold, take

print at 100% scale • credit-card size, 85 x 54 mm

Print this page on A4 or US Letter at 100 percent (no fit-to-page), cut along the dashed lines, and the two cards live in your wallet for the trip. The form fields are interactive in Acrobat and iOS Preview if you would rather type than write.

LAO • ESSENTIALS

Hello	sabaidee
Thank you	khop chai
Yes / No	men / bor
How much?	tao dai?
No spice please	bor phet
No worries	bor pen nyang
Delicious	saep
Help!	suay dae!

pack-lightly.com

EMERGENCY • LAOS

Police	191
Ambulance (VTE)	1195
Fire	190
US Embassy (VTE)	+856 21 487 000
Alliance Clinic	+856 21 513 095

My guesthouse: _____

Address: _____

Insurance #: _____

Left card front, right card back: print double-sided on the short edge and they fold into one.

Lost the guide, kept the card? The QR opens the live Laos hub with every page this guide links to, plus updates published after this edition went to print.

pack-lightly.com/laos/



Photograph both cards before you cut. A phone copy of the emergency card still works when the wallet is back at the guesthouse.



Ask reception to write your guesthouse name and address in Lao script on the back; tuk-tuk drivers read it in one glance.

Sources and methodology

every number traces to a dated source



WRITTEN BY

Wouter van Kemenade

Founder of Pack Lightly. Twenty-plus countries on the ground, with mainland Southeast Asia a long-running beat. Performance-marketing background, data-led travel writing. Every number in this guide is verified against a source listed below; Laos has fewer benchmark datasets than its neighbours, so where a figure is an estimate it says so on the page.

SOURCES USED IN THIS EDITION

1. Guesthouse and hotel pricing: Booking and Hostelworld snapshot 2026-05-14, main-town sample.
2. Country scores: pack-lightly country-comparison dataset, re-scored 2026-02.
3. Visa policy: the official Lao e-visa portal (laoevisa.gov.la), retrieved 2026-05-15.
4. UXO data: Lao National Regulatory Authority and the COPE centre, retrieved 2026-05.
5. Travel advisories: FCDO and US State Department, last update 2026-04-30.
6. Climate: Open-Meteo 10-year averages, captured 2026-05-17.
7. Pack Lightly Laos cluster pages, retrieved 2026-06-15: [visa](#) · [safety](#) · [best travel time](#) · [currency](#)

Methodology. Pack Lightly's country scores aggregate eleven dimensions into the 0-100 scorecard on page 5, re-scored every six months; the last full re-score ran February 2026. Where the live budget and climate datasets did not yet hold Laos values, the daily costs and the calendar are pack-lightly field estimates, marked as such on the page and stamped with a capture date.

What changed in edition 2026.06: first Laos release on the v2 design standard. Next planned update: December 2026. Not covered in depth here: the far northwest (Luang Namtha treks) and the deep eastern provinces, which get their own pages online.

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Image credits

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Tour data and prices: Viator Partner API, captured June 2026. Author portrait and brand marks: Pack Lightly.

A note on the links in this guide

disclosure · why this guide is free

This guide is free because some of the booking links inside it are affiliate links. When a reader books a stay, a transport leg, or an eSIM through one of those links, the merchant pays Pack Lightly. The reader pays the same price either way.

The pick comes before the partner. A town to base in or a way to travel is chosen for the trip it makes, and where a partner link exists for it that link is used; where none does, the plain link still points there. The speedboat is still called the dangerous option, and the slow boat keeps the slot because it is the better one. The commission funds the guide, it does not choose for it.

Questions, corrections, or a place you tested that belongs in the next edition: write to hello@pack-lightly.com.

Partners linked in this edition: **Aviasales · Booking.com · 12Go Asia · Saily · Hostelworld · Stay22 · Viator · via Travelepayouts**



Links can outlive a print run. If one stops working, the live version of every page in this guide sits under pack-lightly.com/laos.



This file is versioned; the edition is on the cover. The next planned update lands December 2026 and replaces this file at the same download.