

Laos


Laos ([ເມືອງລາວ](#) *mǔāng lāo* or [ປະເທດລາວ](#) *pa thēt lāo*) is the only landlocked nation in [Southeast Asia](#). Formerly a [French](#) colony, it is one of the few remaining communist states in the world, espousing Marxism–Leninism as its main political ideology.

The term "communist state" may have negative connotations in some parts of the world, but Laotian official ideology is closer to the Chinese one; many Laotians (60-70%) are practicing Buddhists, the Laotian government actively encourages foreign investment in Laos, your words and actions are not heavily regulated and monitored, and the government encourages and promotes tourism.


Rich in diversity and landscapes, the politically and culturally dominant Lao people make up 53.2% of the population. There are numerous hill tribes in Laos; many of them are found in the various foothills and mountains of the country and their settlements continue to remain untouched and protected. Almost 150 distinct ethnic groups call Laos home.

Although the country is not usually on most travellers' lists, tourism has been on the rise since the 1990s, and the country continues to attract millions of tourists each year. Laotians are known for their hospitality and relaxed attitude to life, and you can expect to be treated with immense respect as a visitor. The country has a lot to offer.


Regions



Northern Laos ([Ban Nalan Trail](#), [Houay Xai](#), [Luang Prabang](#), [Luang Namtha](#), [Muang Ngoi Neua](#), [Muang Long](#), [Muang Ngeun](#), [Muang Xay](#), [Nong Khiaw](#), [Pakbeng](#), [Vieng Phoukha](#))
Hilltribe villages, mountains, and the remarkably charming former capital



Central Laos ([Plain of Jars](#), [Paksan](#), [Phonsavan](#), [Tha Khaek](#), [Vang Vieng](#), [Vieng Xai](#), [Vientiane](#))
Southeast Asia's sleepest capital city and rural countryside



Southern Laos
([Champasak](#), [Pakse](#),

Savannakhet, Si Phan Don)
The Mekong flatlands, more mountains, and the area least-visited by tourists

Cities

- **1 Vientiane** — the increasingly busy capital on the banks of the Mekong River
- **2 Huay Xai** — in the north, on the Mekong and the border with Thailand
- **3 Luang Namtha** — capital of the north, known for its trekking
- **4 Luang Prabang** — a UNESCO World Heritage City known for its numerous temples, colonial era architecture, and vibrant night market
- **5 Muang Xay** — also known as Oudomxay, the capital of the multi-ethnic province of Oudomxay
- **6 Pakbeng** — halfway point on the overnight slow boat between Huay Xai and Luang Prabang
- **7 Pakse** — gateway to the Wat Phu ruins and the "four thousand islands" (Si Phan Don)
- **8 Savannakhet** — in the south on the Mekong, connected by bridge to Mukdahan in Thailand
- **9 Tha Khaek** — a popular base for exploring Phou Hin Boun National Park including the famous Konglor Cave



Map of Laos with regions colour-coded

Other destinations

- **1 Ban Nalan Trail** — a two-day ecotourism trek in the north of Laos
- **2 Bolaven Plateau** — highland with waterfalls, jungles and farmland
- **3 Champasak** — Wat Phu is a UNESCO World Heritage Site with Angkor-style Khmer temples
- **4 Nong Khiaw** — beautiful karst cliffs where you can discover hilltribe villages, kayak, bike ride or just hang out

- **5 Plain of Jars** — Iron Age cemetery sites near Phonsavan; also one of the main locations to learn about the "Secret War".
- **6 Si Phan Don** — the "four thousand islands" are nestled within the Mekong near the Cambodian border
- **7 Vang Vieng** — backpacker hangout for exploring limestone caves and tubing on the Nam Song river
- **8 Vieng Xai** — remote cultural oasis and symbolic cradle of Marxism; see the caves where the Pathet Lao leaders ran their operations in defiance of the West

Understand


The **Lao People's Democratic Republic** (ສາທາລະນະລັດ ປະຊາທິປະໄຕ ປະຊາຊົນລາວ) (**Lao PDR**) is the only landlocked country in Southeast Asia, and the most sparsely populated. Unlike most countries in Asia, the country has not undergone a major industrialisation and modernisation period; as a result, its lifestyle remains mostly rural and there are no large cities. An adjective often applied to Laos is "forgotten", but contrary to what advertised by travel agencies, it is hard to say this applies to tourism as well: Laos gets only 20% fewer international visitors than the Philippines, which has a population 15 times bigger than that of Laos.

Once the center of the powerful kingdom of Lan Xang, Laos was reduced to a vassal state of Siam (modern-day Thailand) by the end of the 18th century. It was freed from Siamese fiefdom in 1893 upon becoming a French protectorate and gained its independence in 1953 amidst the backdrop of the chaotic Indochina Wars. Since the end of the civil war in 1975, Laos is a one-party communist state under a presidential system. It offers a mix of tropical beauty and Buddhist traditional culture.

Travelers lured by the prospect of visiting an untouched "Shangri-la" are likely to be disappointed; in fact, cities like Luang Prabang, Nong Khiaw and Vang Vieng are very tourist-oriented. On the other hand, Laos can be extremely rewarding for those who are instead drawn by the laid-back lifestyle and the opportunity to knock back a few cold Beerlao while watching the sunsets on the Mekong. Perhaps one of the biggest attractions of Laos is the famous "Lao PDR" - *Lao-Please Don't Rush*.

History

See also: Indochina Wars

	
Capital	Vientiane
Currency	Lao kip (LAK)
Population	6.8 million (2017)
Electricity	230 volt / 50 hertz (NEMA 1-15, NEMA 5-15, Europlug, Type E, Schuko)
Country code	+856
Time zone	UTC+07:00, Asia/Vientiane
Emergencies	191 (police), +686-195 (emergency medical services), 190 (fire department)
Driving side	right
edit on Wikidata	

Lao or Laos?

The people call themselves Lao and the language is Lao, so where did that "s" come from? The answer seems to be a mistranslation from French: somebody read *royaume des Laos* ("kingdom of the Lao people") as *royaume de Laos* ("kingdom of Laos"), and the name stuck. The official name, however, is **Lao PDR** and, should you have any incoming mail, using it will increase the odds of it passing the censors.

Squeezed between vastly larger neighbors, the modern Lao state was created as an entity in 1353, when warlord Fa Ngum declared himself the king of **Lan Xang** ("Million Elephants"). Initially a Khmer vassal state, the kingdom emerged as one of the more powerful ones in Southeast Asia by the early 15th century after fending off a Vietnamese invasion and asserting control over a large part of the remnants of the declining Khmer Empire. After a succession dispute, the kingdom split in three in 1707, and was eventually devoured piece by piece by the Siamese, the last fragments agreeing to Siamese protection in 1885.

The area east of the Mekong, however, was soon wrenched back from Siam by the French in 1893, who wanted a buffer state to protect Vietnam. The three Laotian states were reunified as a single territory in 1907. In contrast to Vietnam, Laos remained a backwater of French Indochina and did not see much investment and Western influence with the exception of infrastructure projects mostly concentrated in Vientiane, schools in urban centers, and cuisine (especially baguettes and café culture). It was briefly occupied by Japan in 1945, and was then brought into a more or less continual three-decade-long conflict that first spilled over from North Vietnam when France moved in to reassert its colonial rule. After Laos was granted full independence in 1953, the war continued between a variety of factions, with the Communist and North Vietnam-allied **Pathet Lao** struggling to overthrow the French-aligned monarchy. During the Vietnam War (1964-1973), this alliance led the United States to dump 1.9 million tons of bombs on Laos, mostly in the northeast stronghold of the Pathet Lao: as a comparison 2.2 million tonnes were dropped on Europe by all sides during World War II.

In 1975, after the fall of Saigon, the Communist Pathet Lao took control of Vientiane and ended a six-century-old monarchy. The royal family was arrested and sent to reeducation camps, where most of them died by the 1980s, though some of the royals managed to escape to France and establish a government-in-exile, where they remain to this day. Closer ties to Vietnam and socialization were replaced with a gradual return to private enterprise, an easing of foreign investment laws and admission into ASEAN in 1997. Due to its landlocked location and difficult terrain, Laos has long been deeply impoverished due to the difficulty of building infrastructure. However, in the 21st century, Laos has developed a close relationship with China, who have invested substantially in infrastructure projects in the country. This improvement in infrastructure has led to tremendous economic growth, with more than 80% of the Lao people now living above the poverty line.

Despite being just one hour by air from the hustle and bustle of Bangkok, life in Laos has continued in much the same way it has for hundreds of years, although things are now slowly beginning to change. In the mid-1990s the government reversed its stance on tourism, and then declared 1998 "Visit Laos Year". Since then, tourism in Laos has been rising every year.

In 2021, Laos and China completed the construction of a semi-high-speed rail linking Kunming to Vientiane, with an extension to Bangkok already under construction, and talks of extending the line possibly all the way to Singapore. The rail connection is expected to have a dramatic impact on the country whenever cross-border travel resume; Kunming itself has a population 8 times bigger than Vientiane, and in fact, comparable to the entire population of Laos, while the province of Yunnan as a whole has a population about 7 times bigger than the population of Laos. It is likely that the face of tourism in the country will drastically change, and the word "forgotten" used to describe Laos will become a forgotten memory itself.

Culture

Despite its small population, Laos has 49 ethnic groups, or tribes, from which Lao, Khmer, and Hmong constitute approximately three-quarters of the population. Most tribes are small, with some having just a few hundred members. The ethnic groups are divided into four linguistic branches: Lao-Tai language represented by 8 tribes, Mone-Khmer language with 32 tribes, Hmoung-Loumien language with 2 tribes, and Tibeto-Chinese language represented by 7 tribes.



Pha That Luang, Vientiane - the national symbol of Laos



Laos is officially Buddhist, and the national symbol, the gilded stupa of Pha That Luang, has replaced the hammer and sickle even on the state seal. Still, there is a good deal of animism mixed in, particularly in the **baci** (also *baasi*) ceremony conducted to bind the 32 guardian spirits to the participant's body before a long journey, after serious illness, the birth of a baby, or other significant events.

Lao custom dictates that women must wear the distinctive *phaa sin*, a long sarong available in many regional patterns; however, many ethnic minorities have their own clothing styles. The conical Vietnamese-style hat is also a common sight. These days men dress Western-style and only don the *phaa biang* sash on ceremonial occasions. Nowadays women often wear Western-style clothing, though the "phaa sin" is still the mandatory attire in government offices, not only for those who work there but also for Lao women who are visiting.

Climate

Laos has three distinct seasons. The **hot season** is from Mar-May, when temperatures can soar as high as 40°C and the humidity makes it feel like 50°C. The slightly cooler **wet season** is from May-Oct, when temperatures are around 30°C, tropical downpours are frequent (especially Jul-Aug), and some years the Mekong floods.

The **dry season** from Nov-Mar, which has low rainfall and temperatures as low as 15°C (or even to zero in the mountains at night), is "high season". However, towards the end of the dry season, the northern parts of Laos — basically everything north of Luang Prabang — can become very **hazy** due to farmers burning fields and fires in the forests.

Tourist information

- Laos Tourism (<https://www.tourismlaos.org/>) website

Talk

See also: Lao phrasebook

The official language of Laos is **Lao** (ພາສາລາວ *pháa-sǎa láo*), a tonal language closely related to Thai. The Thai dialect spoken in the northeastern Isaan region of Thailand, historically a part of greater Laos, is in fact very similar to Lao.

French, a legacy of the colonial days, is often used in government and commerce. It is taught in schools and is a working language in many professional sectors such as law and health. French is also often used to transliterate Lao words and is featured on a lot of public signage.



Lao script

English is gradually becoming popular, but proficiency in the language is generally poor. Try to speak slowly and carefully so that people can understand you. In some tourist areas, you can expect to come across school children who are eager to practice their English skills with you. They may, after a conversation, ask you to sign a form or pose for a photo with you as proof that this conversation took place.

Thai is widely understood by Laotians, largely because Thai media is popular in the country. If you are a speaker of Thai, you should have no problems getting around independently and picking up the language easily.

There are two main ways to turn the Lao script into the Latin alphabet: either **French-style** spellings like *Houeisay*, or **English-style** spellings like *Huay Xai*. While government documents seem to prefer the French style, the English spellings are becoming more common. The latter is used on Wikivoyage. Two quick pronunciation tips: Vientiane is actually pronounced "Wiang Chan", and the letter *x* is *always* read as an "s".

Hill tribes in the northern third of the country speak a plethora of local languages, the largest ethnic group being the Hmong who speak their own language unrelated to Lao.

Like in neighboring Thailand, local pronunciation of the English word "twenty" often causes confusion by sounding a lot like "seventy".

Get in



Visa restrictions:

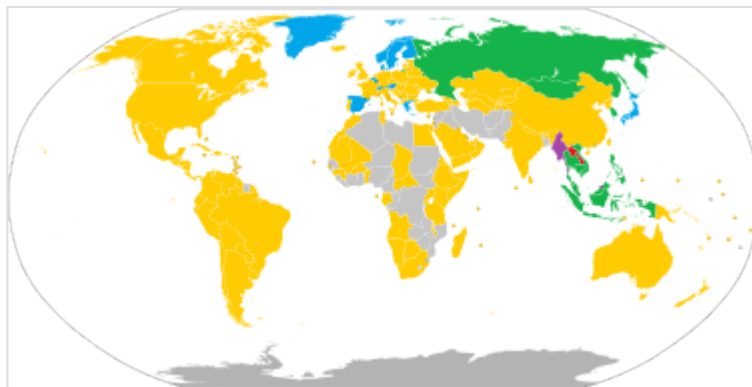
If you cannot prove that you have the funds to cover your stay in the country, or if you are thought to have "degraded" the country, you will be **denied entry** into the country.

Laos is one of the easiest countries in the world to visit — virtually everyone, save for citizens of a few countries, can enter the country visa-free or obtain a visa on arrival.

Visas

Citizens of the following countries may enter Laos without a visa for tourism provided they do not stay for longer than the following number of days:

- 14 days: Myanmar
- 15 days: Japan, Luxembourg, Switzerland
- 30 days: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, Philippines, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, Vietnam



A map showing the visa requirements of Laos, with countries in blue, green and purple having visa-free access; and countries in gold having visa on arrival

See the website of **Lao Immigration** (<https://immigration.gov.la/visa-exemption/>) for more details. Visitors of all other nationalities require a visa.

Visa on arrival

Laos immigration provides a [list of border checkpoints](https://immigration.gov.la/checkpoints/) (<https://immigration.gov.la/checkpoints/>) where a visa on arrival is available. A visa on arrival is available to most nationalities entering at the airports in Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Pakse and Savannakhet. Some (but not all) land border crossings also offer a visa on arrival, see below for listings. One passport photo is required although you may be able to pay a US\$1 fee for your passport photo to be scanned upon arrival.



Lao entry and exit stamps

As of Nov 2023, the price of a visa on arrival is US\$40 for all except the following nationalities (this excludes countries not eligible for visa on arrival and those with a visa exemption for 30 days):

- China, Vietnam: US\$20
- All other Nationals: US\$40

Paying in Thai baht (1,500 baht ~ US\$47 in Jan 2019) is possible too, but the mark-up means that travellers should try to bring U.S. dollars. While Lao kip are usually not accepted for the visa fee, border staff does make exceptions sometimes, however at a bad rate. A US\$1 "out of office hours/overtime" surcharge at the Friendship Bridge in Vientiane, and a small possibly 10 baht to US\$1 entry stamp fee might also be charged.

e-Visa

All visitors eligible for visa on arrival can alternatively apply for an **e-Visa** (<https://laoevisa.gov.la/>) in advance online. The eVisa website has its own list of border checkpoints that accept eVisas for entry into Laos. The website requires you to submit a scan of your passport and a passport photo, and processing time is 3 business days. However, e-Visas are around *US\$15 more expensive* than visa on arrival, and can only be used at a *limited number of border crossings* (as of 2023, only 8 border crossings accept eVisas,

including all 3 international airports). The only selling point is really convenience, since you can head straight to the special immigration counter set aside for those with eVisas, and you don't need to queue up, sort out passport photos and pay cash on arrival.

Visa from the embassy

Finally, visas can be obtained in advance from Lao embassies or consulates. The fee varies by nationality and by embassy; US\$40 is common, although can be as high as US\$63 (in Kuala Lumpur). Processing times also vary; 2-3 days is typical, though you may be able to pay an extra small amount (around US\$5) to receive the visa in as little as one hour. In Phnom Penh the travel agencies can arrange the visa the same day (but may charge as much as US\$58) while getting it from the embassy takes a few days. Getting a visa from the embassy in Bangkok costs around 1,400 baht for most nationalities, plus 200 baht more for "same day" processing. *It's cheaper and quicker to get a visa at the border*, but if you're not eligible for VOA, going via an embassy is the only option.

Visa extension

Entry permit extensions (sometimes referred to as "visa extensions") are available from the Immigration Department in Vientiane, Luang Prabang or Tha Khaek, the Police Station in Pakse, and possibly other cities. Extensions are not possible in Laos' second city, Savannakhet, although you can do a border run from there to Thailand to get a new 30-day visa. The cost is US\$2.50 per day plus a small "form fee" ranging between 5,000 kip (Pakse) to 30,000 kip (Vientiane). The process is very easy; turn up in the early morning with your passport and one photo; fill in a form (in Luang Prabang they do this for you) and come back in the afternoon to collect your passport with an extension stamp in it. If you do this in the late morning or later in the day, your passport will be ready the following day.



If you want to extend for longer than two weeks and are near the Thai border, it can be more cost effective to nip over the border (entry to Thailand is free for most Western nationalities) and return immediately to get a new 30-day Lao visa since *a 30-day visa extension costs US\$75*.

By plane

Direct flights to Laos are limited and often expensive.

- **1 Vientiane International Airport** (**VTE**^{IATA}).  
- **2 Luang Prabang International Airport** (**LPQ**^{IATA}).  

Those two international airports are served by national carrier Lao Airlines (<http://www.laoairlines.com>) and a few others, including Thai Airways (<https://www.thaiairways.com/>), Bangkok Airways (<http://www.bangkokair.com>) (Luang Prabang only) and Vietnam Airlines (<http://www.vietnamairlines.com>). Some seats on flights of Vietnam Airlines are reserved for Lao Airlines (codesharing/better price).

- **3 Pakse International Airport** (**PKZ**^{IATA}). The third international airport, with flights from Siem Reap (Vientiane–Pakse–Siem Reap by Lao Airlines) and from Ho Chi Minh City.  
(updated Sep 2022)

Singapore Airlines's low-cost subsidiary Scoot has regular service from Singapore to Vientiane. There are also regular round trip flights from Vientiane to Kunming, China and Incheon, South Korea on Lao Airlines and other carriers. Low-cost carriers AirAsia (<http://www.airasia.com>) flies to Vientiane from

Kuala Lumpur three times a week, and offers daily flights from Bangkok to Luang Prabang. Another cheap option for getting to Vientiane is to fly to Udon Thani in Thailand with discount airlines Nok Air or Air Asia and connect to Nong Khai and the Friendship Bridge via shuttle service directly from the airport (40 minutes); from here, Vientiane is 17 km (11 mi) away.

By train

From China

A new railway line from Kunming, China to Vientiane opened in December 2021. Passing through Pu'er, Jinghong, Mengla and crossing the Chinese border at Mohan/Boten, the line serves Luang Namtha, Muang Xay, Muang Nga, Luang Prabang, Muang Kasi, Vang Vieng, Phonhong and Vientiane on the Laotian side.

Cross-border passenger services began operating in April 2023. The train runs at speeds of up to 160 km/h, covering the distance from Kunming to Vientiane in 10 hr 30 min, though you will have to get off the train at Mohan and Boten to complete Chinese and Lao border formalities respectively. Note that Boten railway station does *not* provide visas on arrival, though e-Visas are accepted for entry.

From Thailand

Direct train services from Bangkok's Krung Thep Aphiwat station to the Vientiane's new, more centrally located Khamsavath station started on July 19, 2024. The old station at Thanaleng no longer operates and the cross-border shuttles from Nong Khai have been terminated.

An extension of the aforementioned Kunming-Vientiane high-speed railway line onward to Bangkok is under construction, but completion is still years away.

By land

Most **border crossings open for foreigners**, with an indication where visas on arrival can be issued, are listed on the web site of the National Tourism Administration (<http://www.tourismlaos.org/>). This list is unfortunately incomplete.

Cambodia

Visa on arrival for Laos is available when entering from Cambodia overland, with an official "Visa on Arrival" office incorporated into the checkpoint. The nearest Cambodian town is Stung Treng, and the border is a 60- to 90-minute bus ride away. The border is lightly used, with almost no onward public transport available once you passed through immigration, therefore it may be wise to book transport all the way to Ban Nakasang or Pakse depending on your destination.

Scam alert

Operators for buses going from Cambodia to Southern Laos will "ask" passengers for an additional US\$5 (or more) on top of the visa-on-arrival fee to facilitate the border crossing. Not agreeing to the extra charge and attempting to obtain the visa independently may result in being abandoned

If you're buying a ticket from a destination in Cambodia to one in Laos (the most common being Siem Reap/Phnom Penh to Don Det) and you want the border crossing to be as trouble-free as possible, accept that you will have to additional bribes that usually add up to at least US\$5 on top of the visa-on-arrival fee applicable to your nationality, current as of 2019. Not including possible mark-ups for the visa, the charge consists of:

at the border. All bus companies seem to be involved in this scam. See below for more information.

- \$2 "stamp fee" on the Lao side
- \$2 "stamp fee" on the Cambodian side
- \$1 "assistance fee" for the facilitator as he gets the Lao visa and entry stamp for you

This is the best case scenario: the "assistance fee" may also be \$2 depending on the bus company used, and/or the facilitator will demand a higher total to account for the inflated visa price. While you can decline to use a facilitator, you will nevertheless be asked for the unofficial fees by the immigration officials, as the facilitator merely collects them on their behalf to "speed up the process".

It is possible to at least circumvent the unofficial fees on the Cambodian side – several reports suggest that the Cambodian officials are quick to give in if you refuse to pay the fee; it seems easiest if you can convince them that you simply don't have any dollars left.

Little public information exists for the Lao side. The officials may or may not try to overcharge you for the visa on arrival. For Canadians, this can oddly result in paying *less* than the official price of US\$42. One traveller reported that officials, at least on one occasion, seemed to use US\$30 (the official price for most eligible nationalities) as the baseline for passports from Western countries, but then asked a Canadian citizen for US\$35 instead. Whatever your nationality, do make sure you know what visa price applies to your passport before you hop on the bus to this border.

Furthermore, it is unknown whether one can refuse to pay the inflated visa fee (if applicable), the unofficial stamp fee, be successful *and* be still able to find onward transport to Ban Nakasang, although this definitely works the other way round (coming from Laos, going to Cambodia). Getting held up by not paying will likely see your bus leave without you.

For those who want to stand their ground and don't mind possibly having to wait for a few hours in order to beat corruption, there is an option worth trying: Book your transport with any operator to the border only, ideally from Stung Treng with a departure in the morning to have time on your side. Enquire with travel agencies or online to book your *separate* onward transport from the border going North, and make sure it only leaves two to three hours after your arrival at the border. Alternatively, if you're feeling the stars are aligned in your favour, you may be able to catch a minivan or tuk-tuk that some travellers use to get independently to the border from the Lao side; it's unlikely to happen after lunchtime though.

Another pitfall of the journey to the border is that you will often have four changes of bus (number depending on your origin – some vehicles are small minibuses where passengers have to sit on each other's laps), and hours spent driving to remote guesthouses to pick up backpackers. Asia Van Transfer (<https://www.asiavantransfer.com/>) (AVT) was set up by a foreign expat and has built a good reputation for not letting passengers wait unnecessarily, not letting them change vehicles and also not overbooking seats, but this means they're also a bit pricier; also, they cannot drive into Laos.

If your luggage has been sent in a bus you are not on, because of "lack of space", it will sometimes disappear. The "King of Bus Company" is known to do this.

China

The land crossing between Mengla (Yunnan) and Boten (Laos) is open to foreigners and visa on arrival is possible or you can get in advance at the Lao consulate in Kunming. In addition to the train (above), a daily bus service operates from Mengla to Luang Namtha and Udomxai. Buses from Mengla to Luang Namtha leave from the North bus station. The first bus leaves around 08:00 and costs about ¥40.

Generally speaking, it is not possible for independent travellers to cross from China to Laos via the Mekong River, not least because there's a chunk of Myanmar in the middle and the Lao checkpoint at Xieng Kok does not issue visas on arrival. Travel agents in China run irregular cruises from Jinghong (China) via Chiang Saen (Thailand) to Huay Xai (Laos), but schedules are erratic and prices expensive.

Myanmar

The Myanmar-Laos Friendship Bridge is the sole official border crossing between Myanmar and Laos. The bridge connects Shan State in Myanmar with Luang Namtha Province in Laos, in a very remote region for both countries, and information on when (or whether) the crossing is operating is hard to find. The official Laos immigration website indicates that a Laotian visa on arrival is available at the border, though Laotian eVisas are not accepted for entry.

Thailand

There are eight border crossings open to all between Thailand and Laos. From north to south:

- Huay Xai/Chiang Khong: Using the fourth Friendship Bridge is the usual overland route to Luang Prabang, easy bus connections to Chiang Rai and points beyond on the Thai side.
- Ban Pangmon/Ban Huak: Located on a remote mountainous road. If you want to travel overland from Chiang Mai to Hanoi overland via Laos, this is one possible route. **No visa on arrival.**
- Muang Ngeun/Huay Kon: At 152 km, the nearest to Nan, a worthwhile destination in Northern Thailand. Also, 40 km away from Pak Beng in Laos. Walking distance between checkpoints, and very friendly officers due apparently to very low tourist use.
- Nam Hueng/Tha Li: Easily reached via Loei on the Thai side, but 378 km of poorly sealed road away from Luang Prabang. **No visa on arrival.** The 'mandatory' tuktuk service, charging 30 baht for a several minutes' ride across the bridge, can be avoided with some assertiveness.
- Vientiane/Nong Khai: The first Friendship Bridge and the busiest of crossing of them all. Direct trains from Bangkok now available.
- Paksan/Bueng Kan: **No visa on arrival.**
- Tha Khaek/Nakhon Phanom: The third Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge.
- Savannakhet/Mukdahan: The second Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge.
- Vang Tao/Chong Mek: On the route from Pakse to Ubon Ratchathani.



The Second Thai–Lao Friendship Bridge

Note: if crossing from Thailand into Laos by motorcycle, it is necessary to hire a customs agent to expedite the process. Individuals or groups trying to cross the border with motorcycles will be refused entry by customs if they do not use an agent.

Vietnam

There are several border crossings that can be used by foreigners. These include:

- Donsavanh - Lao Bao - to Savannakhet
- Keo Nua Pass
- Lak Sao - to Khammouan Province
- Nam Can - to Plain of Jars
- Na Meo - to Sam Neua
- Pang Hok - Tay Trang (close to Dien Bien Phu, the site of a famous battle where the French were defeated by Vietnamese independence fighters)
- Bo Y (nearest town on Vietnamese side being Ngoc Hoi and on Lao side Attapeu)
- Nam Phao - Cau Treo

Travellers have reported a 10,000 kip "weekend fee" being charged by Lao border officials for crossing on the weekend. No receipt is given.

By motorbike from Vietnam

The border crossing on a Vietnamese motorbike at Tay Trang is very easy and straightforward. You arrive after going over some hills at the Vietnamese border where very friendly guys handle your case easily and with no hassle. You fill out the form for "temporary export of a vehicle", show them the Vietnamese registration card for the bike (which is usually in the owners name) and pay US\$10. Then you proceed to the police, show the papers to them and get the exit stamp.

You then have to drive for 6 km over the mountains to get to the Lao checkpoint. There some not-so-friendly border guards there who expect you to pay 5,000 kip for general fees and 25,000 kip for importing a vehicle. They fill out the form themselves.

Get around

Travel within Laos has historically been slow, often painful and sometimes dangerous, but the 2021 opening of a railway spanning the northern half of the country and the ongoing construction of a parallel expressway is set to shake things up. Nevertheless, if travelling off the beaten track, allow plenty of leeway in your schedule for the near-inevitable delays, cancellations and breakdowns.

By plane

State carrier Lao Airlines (<http://www.laoairlines.com>) has a near-monopoly on domestic flights. They managed a 13-year accident-free streak until an October 2013 crash near Pakse resulted in 49 fatalities, the country's deadliest air disaster. The fairly comprehensive network is by far the fastest and, relatively speaking, the safest way of reaching many parts of the country, although the new train line (see below) now offers some real competition.

As of 2013, the popular Vientiane-Luang Prabang route costs about US\$101 (one-way full fare for foreigners), but covers in 40 minutes what would take you at least ten hours by bus. However, the new high-speed train connects these two places for only US\$12, and takes 2 hours.

Flights to more remote destinations are flown on the Xian MA60, a Chinese copy of the Soviet An-24, and are frequently cancelled without warning if the weather is bad or not enough passengers show up.

Lao Airlines also flies 14-passenger Cessnas from Vientiane to Phongsali, Sam Neua and Sainyabuli (*Xayabouly*) several times a week. These airfields are all rudimentary and flights are cancelled at the drop of a hat if weather is less than perfect.



A Lao Airlines ATR 72 aircraft

By train

The first railway in Laos, the Chinese-built **Lao-China Railway** crossing the northern half of the country from the Chinese border at Mohan/Boten via Muang Xay, Luang Prabang and Vang Vieng to Vientiane opened in December 2021.

Both electric/high-speed (EMU) and ordinary trains operate, with the EMU services at up to 160 km/h per hour, making this by far the fastest and most comfortable way to travel in Laos. As of April 2023, there is one high-speed "C" train and one normal "K" train per daily running the length of the line, with one additional high-speed "C" service between Vientiane and Luang Prabang only, and two additional "C" trains running between Vientiane and Muang Xai only. The international "D" train between Vientiane and Kunming may also be ridden by domestic passengers, but skips the stop at Muang Xai. that Sample travel times and fares in kip as of October 2022:



EMU high-speed train at Vang Vieng station



First-class seating

From	To	Travel time	EMU 1st class	EMU 2nd class	Ordinary
Vientiane	Vang Vieng	1 hour	200,000 (\$12)	128,000 (\$7)	90,000 (\$5)
Vientiane	Luang Prabang	2 hours	381,000 (\$22)	241,000 (\$14)	170,000 (\$10)
Vientiane	Boten	3.5 hours	645,000 (\$38)	406,000 (\$24)	290,000 (\$17)

The railway is very popular, and demand always exceeds capacity. The easiest way to buy tickets is to go through a travel agency, who will handle all the paperwork for a service charge of around US\$4 per ticket. Discover Laos (<https://discoverlaos.today/promotion/train-ticketing>) has a good reputation and can

deliver tickets to your hotel in advance. [Baolau \(https://www.baolau.com/\)](https://www.baolau.com/) offers fully self-service online ticketing, but you will still have to pick up paper tickets in person. First class gets you wider seats (2+2 seating instead of 2+3) but very little else; however, it often has better availability than second class.

If you wish to try your luck, a new ticket office opened in Vientiane Center in February 2022, where you can purchase tickets for trains up to 3 days in advance. As of February 2022, only tickets to Boten, Muang Xai and Luang Prabang can be bought at the Vientiane Center office, while tickets for all other destinations can only be bought at the station. The Vientiane Center office also does not accept cash payments, and payments can only be made using a UnionPay credit card, Chinese mobile payment apps WeChat Pay or Alipay, or the OnePay mobile payment platform of Lao bank BCEL. You can use the Loca app to pay with OnePay, but will pay a large commission, or you can try using the LCR Tickets app which allegedly accepts Visa cards. Despite all this hassle, you may still end up empty-handed, as scalpers frequently buy up all the tickets. If you're in a pinch, try your luck at the train station, as unsold same day tickets may reappear in the inventory.

The trains operate on the same model as Chinese high-speed railways, with strict ID and security checks at the entrance to train stations. Baggage will be scanned and while liquids are OK, pressurized sprays or alcohol will be confiscated. Facilities at stations are minimal to non-existent, and so bring everything you'll need with you, including food and drink. Some trains have trolleys hawking banana chips and sandwiches, but you can't count on these either. More info [here \(https://hobomaps.com/Lao-ChinaRailwayInfo.html\)](https://hobomaps.com/Lao-ChinaRailwayInfo.html).

One final quirk: **be sure to hold onto your ticket**, as you'll need to show it again on leaving the station or risk getting fined the price of a new one!

By road

By public transport

The main routes connecting [Vientiane](#), [Vang Vieng](#), [Luang Prabang](#) and [Savannakhet](#) are sealed, and the transport options on these roads include bus, minibus, and converted truck. The first expressway in Laos now connects Vientiane to Vang Vieng and is slowly being extended north towards Luang Prabang, but the full length to the Chinese border will not be ready until the 2030s.

A good source of bus timetables, including some basic town maps, can be found at [hobomaps.com \(http://hobomaps.com/\)](http://hobomaps.com/)

Some common routes through Laos include:

- [Vientiane to Vang Vieng](#) – now connected by a direct 113 km expressway, less than 1.5 hours by direct VIP bus
- [Vang Vieng to Luang Prabang](#) – amazing scenery through the mountains, at the cost of a long 8-hour

VIP, minibus or car?

Minibuses are quicker and more expensive, however that doesn't mean they are necessarily better. A typical **VIP Bus** is just an old bus by Western standards (generally retired Chinese tour buses), and may be more prone to breakdowns, but they usually have more leg room which can make a long journey much more comfortable. VIP buses also include a bottle of water, a snack, and a stop for lunch/dinner. Both types are usually air conditioned (though it doesn't always work).

trip full of curves.

- Luang Prabang to Phonsavan - minibus: a cramped 7-hour trip, so arrive early to get good seats as near the front as possible; beautiful views so secure a window seat if possible. Bus is 8 hours.
- Phonsavan to Sam Neua - converted pickup truck: beautiful views but lots of hills and bends, hence possible nausea
- Sam Neua to Muang Ngoi - minivan: a 12-hour trip along a horrible road; good views and a necessary evil, but fun if you're prepared to get a few knocks and talk to some Lao people who are, after all, in the same boat
- Muang Ngoi to Luang Namtha - Minivan: 10-hour trip (Oudomxay); OK road, much travelled by backpackers
- Luang Namtha to Huay Xai - once a muddy nightmare, now rebuilt and one of the best roads in Laos, 3-4 hours
- Paksan to Phonsavan - there is a new road between Borikham and Tha Thom. In Tha Thom there is a guesthouse with 8 rooms. The forest between Borikham and Tha Thom is still in a very good condition, but it's a dirt road. Since most of the forest in Laos has gone this is one of the last roads surrounded by primary forest. There are substantial road works being undertaken by the Vietnamese between Paksan and Phonsavan and there can be some fairly long delays along the way. Even though the trip is only a couple of hundred kilometres it can take 16-20 hr to traverse this section.

Even more expensive, but certainly the most convenient, is a rented car with driver. A car with a driver will cost around US\$95 per day. Some can even drive over the border to Thailand, China, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The cars can be arranged at tour agencies, tourist hotels and car rental companies. The cars are new, so they're reliable. They have the bonus of your being able to stop the car at any time for photos, nosing around a village or just stretching your legs.

Local transport (less than 20 km) in Laos consists of tuk-tuks, jumbos, and sky labs, motorised three or four wheelers. A jumbo should cost no more than 20,000 kip for short journeys of 1-5 km.

You can now also travel the entire length of the country using a fully guided "hop on hop off" bus service provided by Stray Travel (<http://www.straytravel.asia/>). This is the only guided hop on hop off bus in Southeast Asia.



Jumbo in Vientiane



Women should be aware that often during lengthy bus or minibus trips there is no opportunity to go to the toilet during breaks, so it may be advisable to wear a wide skirt.

By ride-hailing

The main ride-hailing app in Laos is **LOCA** (<https://loca.la/>). You can pay by cash or use a credit card to pay through the Loca app. Well-known ride-hailing apps found elsewhere in Southeast Asia, such as Grab, **do not** operate in Laos.

By songthaew

A **songthaew** (ສອງແຖວ) is a truck-based vehicle with a pair of bench seats in the back, one on either side — hence the name, which means "two rows" in Thai. In English tourist literature, they're occasionally called "minibuses". By far the most common type is based on a pick-up truck and has a roof and open sides. Larger types start life as small lorries, and may have windows, and an additional central bench; smaller types are converted micro-vans, with a front bench facing backwards and a rear bench facing forwards.

Songthaews are operated extensively as local buses, and generally are the most economical way to travel shorter distances. There also as taxis; sometimes the same vehicle will be used for both. Be careful if asking a songthaew to take you to someplace if there is nobody in the back, the driver might charge you the taxi price. In this case, check the price before embarking.

By tuk-tuk/jumbo

The names **tuk-tuk** and **jumbo** are used to describe a wide variety of small/lightweight vehicles. The vast majority have three wheels; some are entirely purpose-built, others are partially based on motorcycle components. A tuk-tuk organisation in Vientiane controls the prices that tourists are expected to pay for point to point destinations. The rates are negotiable, and you should agree on the price prior to getting on the tuk tuk.

By motorbike

Motorbike travel in Laos is not without risks but the rewards of truly independent travel are great. There are several rental shops in Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Pakse and Tha Khaek, but bike rentals in other parts of the country may be scarce. The quality of machines varies from shop to shop so you need to fully inspect it before you head out on the road. There are many good roads and many paved ones and touring Laos is done easily.

There are a variety of bikes available in Laos, depending on which town and rental shop you go to. Some available include the Honda Baja or XR 250 dual-purpose bikes, Ko Lao 110 cc and the usual Honda Win/Dream 110 cc. Helmets are not only mandatory in the country but a valuable item in a place where traffic rules are made up by the minute. Police have been cracking down on people who do not have a motorcycle licence, so expect to pay a fine if caught without one.

Petrol costs 9,000 kip/L (diesel 8,000 kip/L) as of Mar 2020.

By bicycle

Cycling is a great option with quiet roads. Laos offers wonderful remote areas to discover, little traveled roads, friendly people and even some companies providing cycling tours with the help of professional guides all over the country. The more time people seem to spend in Laos the more they seem to like the quiet travel mood and the opportunity to actually be in contact with the people along the way. Good maps are available about the roads in Laos and all major routes are with good roads. In normal distances you find simple guest houses and in all major towns better choices and restaurant. Food is not a problem as long as you remember to carry some stuff with you. Tropical fruits and noodle soup are the standards.

There are a number of local operators running a wide selection of guided mountain biking tours through Laos.

If you travel on your own, there are very few proper bike shops outside of Vientiane. but also for bikes with 28-inch wheels you might have a hard time. Bring your equipment with you and make sure you get contact details from a supplier, perhaps in Thailand.

By boat

Boats along the Mekong and its tributaries are useful shortcuts for the horrible roads, although as the road network improves river services are slowly drying up, and many of the remaining services only run in the wet season, when the Mekong floods and becomes more navigable. Huay Xai on the border with Thailand to Luang Prabang and travel south of Pakse are the main routes still in use.

There are so-called *slow boats* and **speedboats** - the latter being tiny lightweight craft equipped with powerful motors that literally skid across the water at high speeds.

By slow boat

Many people go from Chiang Khong in Thailand via the border town of Houai Xai down the Mekong to the marvelous city of Luang Prabang. The ride takes two days and is very scenic. Apart from that, it is a floating backpacker ghetto with no (good) food sold, cramped, and hot. By the second day, the novelty has worn off. Recommended to bring a good (long) read, something soft for the wooden benches and patience.


Slow boats generally stop in the village of Pakbeng for the night. Some boat packages will include accommodation, although this is usually at an inflated rate. By arranging a hotel in the town, it is easy to get a lower price. Most shops in Pakbeng shut down at about 22:00, so expect to get a good sleep before the second day's boat ride. This is also a good place to stock up on supplies.

The boats have considerably improved. They now have soft used car seats, and serve pre-fab food, which is not great, but certainly sufficient.

By speedboat

An attractive choice for some, with a 6-hour ride from Huay Xai to Luang Prabang, as compared to the two-day trip on the slow boat, but not for the faint of heart. Expect to be crammed into a modified canoe made for 4, with 10 other people, along with all the luggage somehow packed in. Expect to sit on the floor of the canoe, as there are no seats, with your knees against your chin for the full 6 hours. Expect an incredibly loud engine inches behind your head. Expect the engine to break a few times, and stops for delays to fix it. That being said, when this ride finally ends, if you make it with no trouble, you will never be happier to get to Luang Prabang. Stories of small, overloaded speedboats sinking or hitting driftwood are common, but if you are a good swimmer, take comfort in the fact that you can see both shores throughout the entire trip. So, as you see, choosing between the slow boat and the speedboat is a hard call, based mostly upon your comfort level; would you



Speedboat barreling down the Nam Ou river 

prefer a slow unpleasant trip, or a much faster, but more dangerous unpleasant trip. Either way, the scenery along the way is gorgeous and unexploited, and Luang Prabang is an incredible city, worth a thousand of these journeys.

Though helpful in saving time, speedboats are not without danger: built to carry 8 passengers, they are often overloaded; the engine noise is well above a healthy level, which could be a serious hazard to your ears, especially if you are on the boat for a long time. It also causes considerable noise pollution, scaring wildlife and spoiling the peaceful river life. Fatalities resulting from capsizing due to incautious maneuvering, or hitting floating logs or hidden rocks, have been reported but some claim and are exaggerated by competing slow boat owners. However, the vast majority of speedboat users have no serious problems. If you are taller than the average Laotian are a bit claustrophobic and/or have inflexible leg muscles you are guaranteed an extremely uncomfortable experience for several endless hours.

Suggestions for those who decide to take the risk:

- get one of the front seats as they allow you to stretch your legs and are far from the noisy motor
- wear helmets and life jackets; reconsider your journey if these are not provided
- bring a coat in the cold season, the strong wind can make you feel cold even at temperatures of 25 °C.
- bring earplugs
- protect water-sensitive equipment as you might get wet.

By car

Road accidents are common. The main causes are poor vehicle maintenance and careless driving. Road conditions vary and some roads are in very poor condition. A large proportion of road accident victims were travelling on a tuk-tuk, motorcycle or scooter. Driving at night is particularly dangerous because of the lack of street lights, high speeds and disregard for traffic rules. Heavy traffic at night can lead to dangerous situations.

Be vigilant when travelling on motorways because of the occasional robbery of vehicles.

Find out in advance your driving licence and the driving licence requirements for the different vehicles.

When hiring a vehicle, remember that they are rarely insured. Check the condition of the vehicle at the time of rental with the rental company. The hirer is responsible for any damage caused to the vehicle. Damage claims in the event of an accident are often high. Do not leave your passport as a deposit, but a copy of your passport.

See

Unlike neighboring Thailand or Vietnam, Laos never underwent a massive economic development, neither during colonisation nor even after the liberalisation of the Communist economy. As result, one key attraction of Laos is that most of the country, including the capital Vientiane, retains a relaxed, laid

back feel with minimal presence of modern architecture or international brands and food chains. How much longer this will last is open to much speculation, but meanwhile, it makes it a truly special and unique country to visit.

Natural attractions

The term wilderness is much misused, but it can truly be applied to much of Laos. The mighty Mekong river and its tributaries together create perhaps the single most important geographic feature of the country. Its meandering path in the North has created some of the most stunning limestone karsts anywhere on earth. The backpacker-central town of Vang Vieng is a commonly used base for exploring the karsts. Further north, the terrain becomes more hilly, and the jungle less explored. Luang Namtha is the far-northern town which makes the best base for those visitors who really want to see the truly remote Lao wilderness, and directly experience the lifestyles of the various hill tribes in this region.



The mountains of Oudomxay Province in Northern Laos

In direct contrast to Northern Laos, the Mekong delta lowlands in the South are perfectly flat. Si Phan Don (*four thousand islands*) is a great base for experiencing what is surely the most chilled and relaxed region anywhere in Asia. Experiencing local village life, taking it all in and doing absolutely nothing should be the aim here. There are though some wonderful river-based sights, including the largest falls anywhere in Southeast Asia. If you are lucky you might get a close-up view of a Mekong pink dolphin.

Cultural attractions

In this most Buddhist of nations, it is no surprise that temples are a key attraction. In the capital city of Vientiane, the three-layered gilded stupa of Pha That Luang is the national symbol and most important religious monument in the country, dating from the 16th century. There are numerous other beautiful temples which on their own make a stay in the capital city vital for any visitor to Laos.

The *whole* of the ancient capital of Luang Prabang is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Befitting that status, it is a unique city. Beautifully preserved gilded temples with their attendant orange-robed monks mold almost seamlessly with traditional wooden Lao houses and grand properties from the French colonial era. Spotlessly clean streets with a thriving café culture on the banks of the Mekong and the Nam Khan, complete the picture of a city which is almost too pleasant to be true.



Wat Sen at Luang Prabang

The Plain of Jars is a megalithic archaeological landscape dating from the Iron Age. Thousands of stone jars are scattered over a large area of the low foothills near Phonsavan. The main archaeological theory is that the jars formed part of Iron Age burial rituals in the area, but this is by no means proven, and a great deal of mystery remains. The area suffered tragic damage from American bombing during the Secret War of the 1960s, and much UXO remains uncleared. When that process is complete it is very likely this will be declared a UNESCO World Heritage site.



The Plain of Jars near Phonsavan



Wat Phu is a ruined Hindu Khmer temple complex in Champasak province. It dates from the 12th century and visitors who have been to Angkor Wat will notice the similarities.

Recent history

The town of Vieng Xai provides a striking insight in the recent history of not only Laos, but the whole of Indochina. In 1964, the US began intensive bombing of the Lao communist movement – Pathet Lao – bases in Xieng Khouang. Under much bombardment, the Pathet Lao moved east to Vieng Xai and established their headquarters in the limestone karst cave networks around the town. A whole 'Hidden City' was established which supported around 20,000 people. During nine years of almost constant American bombing, the Pathet Lao sheltered in these caves, and lived in a largely subterranean environment. Schools, hospitals and markets as well as government ministries, a radio station, a theatre and military barracks were all hidden in the caves. After the 1973 ceasefire, Vieng Xai briefly became the capital of Laos, before that function was moved to Vientiane in 1975. There are formal daily tours of the caves, as well as other evidence of that era in the town.



Wat Phu, Champasak



Do

- **Herbal Sauna.** One Laotian experience definitely worth trying is the herbal sauna. Often run by temples, these are simple-looking affairs, often just a rickety bamboo shack with a stove and a pipe of water on one side, usually open only in the evenings. The procedure for a visit is usually:
Enter and pay first. The going rate is around 10,000 kip, plus around 40,000 kip if you want a massage afterward.
Go to the changing room, take off your clothes and wrap yourself up in a sarong which is usually provided.
Keeping yourself modestly sarong-clad, head over to the shower or water bucket in one corner and wash up.
Plunge into the sauna room itself. It will be dark, hot and steamy inside, with intense herbal scents of lemongrass and whatever the sauna master is cooking up that day, and you will

soon start to sweat profusely.

When you've had your fill, head outside, sip on a little weak tea and marvel at how the tropical heat of the day now feels cool and refreshing.

Repeat at will. (updated Nov 2016)

- **Hiking.** Hiking in mountainous Northern Laos is popular, and this often includes homestays in minority tribe villages. The main hub for this is Luang Namtha where the two day Ban Nalan Trail is especially notable. The route goes through the Nam Ha National Protected Area, and involves staying in Khmu villages. Other hiking hubs include Oudomxay, south of Luang Namtha, and Pakse in southern Laos.
- **Kayaking.** Can be arranged in a wide number of locations. The ambitious traveller could kayak the Mekong between Luang Prabang and Vientiane.
- **Rock Climbing.** The limestone karst formations in Northern Laos are ideal for rock climbing. Vang Vieng is the main rock-climbing centre but climbs are also possible further north at Nong Khiaw and Mung Ngoi.
- **Tubing.** Floating down the river on a large inflatable tube is one of the attractions of the SE Asia backpacker circuit. The hugely popular stretch of the Nam Song at Vang Vieng is lined with bars that lure you and your tube in with ziplines, water slides, loud music, buckets of terrible local whiskey, and unlimited Beerlao. After numerous tourist deaths, crackdowns on Vang Vieng tubing were announced in Aug 2012. Since then, many river bars have been closed down along with their flying foxes and rope swings. Tubing is still possible, but it's now a lot quieter. Whether this is a long or short-term result is still to be seen. Tubing can also be found in other locations around Laos including Si Phan Don, Nong Khiaw and Mung Ngoi.

Buy

Money



Note: As of 2023, Laos is enduring a **currency crisis**, with strong inflation causing the value of the kip to halve in a year. Expect any prices in kip listed online to be out of date.

The Lao currency is the **kip** (ກີບ), officially denoted by the symbol "₭" (ISO code: **LAK**). Wikivoyage articles use *kip* to denote the currency.

The largest note is 100,000 kip (around US\$5). Other notes in common circulation are 1,000, 2,000, 5,000, 10,000, 20,000 and 50,000 kip. Withdrawing the maximum of 2,500,000 kip from an ATM could result in 25 100,000-kip notes. This makes carrying large quantities of kip quite inconvenient. In speech, it's common to drop the final three zeroes, so "20" means 20,000.

The Lao kip is a **non-convertible** currency, meaning that outside border towns, it's very hard to exchange kip in other countries, and rates can be poor even in Laos itself. It's best to exchange any excess kip before leaving the country. There

Exchange rates for Lao kip

As of August 2024:

- US\$1 ≈ 22,000 kip
- €1 ≈ 24,000 kip
- UK£1 ≈ 28,000 kip
- Japanese ¥100 ≈ 15,000 kip
- Chinese ¥1 ≈ 3000 kip
- Thai ฿10 ≈ 6,200 kip
- Vietnamese ₫10,000 ≈ 8,300 kip

Exchange rates fluctuate. Current rates for these and other currencies are available

are currency exchange counters at both Vientiane airport and the Nong Khai-Vientiane land border (straight and right of the Visa on Arrival desk).

from XE.com (<https://www.xe.com/currency/lak-lao-or-laotian-kip>)

Foreign currencies

The only official currency of Laos is the kip, but rampant inflation post-COVID has made hard currencies attractive again. Some hotels and tour agencies are now requesting payment in U.S. dollars, and many touristy shops will also happily accept Thai baht (near the border) and even the euro as well. If you use a credit card, payment will often be in USD. In remote places, only kip is accepted and no ATMs will be available, so plan ahead.



100,000 kip note

ATMs

There are ATMs in Vientiane and other major cities including Luang Prabang, Vang Vieng, Savannakhet, Tha Khaek, Pakse and Luang Namtha. BCEL (<http://www.bcellaos.com/>), the largest bank, accepts Visa/Cirrus and MasterCard/Maestro, but surcharges of 20,000 kip (Mar 2020) often apply. Most banks have a limit of only 1 million kip, but BCEL ATMs allow you to withdraw up to 2.5 million kip at once.

In the following the ATM fees charged by several banks (as of Jan 2023):

- BCEL – withdrawal fee 20,000 kip
- Phonsavan Bank – withdrawal fee 20,000 kip, maximum limit 1,000,000 kip
- LDB – withdrawal fee 30,000 kip
- Indochina Bank – withdrawal fee 20,000 kip, maximum limit 3,000,000 kip
- Laoviet Bank – withdrawal fee 20,000 kip, maximum limit 1,000,000 kip

Expats living in Vientiane routinely get cash from ATMs in Nong Khai or Udon Thani in Thailand, where the maximum per transaction is mostly 20,000 baht, or ten times what you'll get in Laos.

Conversion rate at ATMs is usually about 5-7% worse than the market rate. So, it may make sense to exchange cash instead considering that at some border crossings from Thailand you get Lao kip at the market rate.

Cash advance

Many banks, travel agents and guest houses will allow you to take out cash from a credit card as a cash advance. This usually occurs by withdrawing the money in US dollars from the card as a cash advance; the card issuer will usually charge a fee (about 3%), the Lao bank involved will charge about 3%, and then the agent providing the cash advance might or might not charge another 3%, and then the amount is converted from US dollars to kip at an unfavourable rate, costing another 5% or so. Thus, these transactions are much more expensive than the typical charge for withdrawing cash from ATMs in other countries. Getting a cash advance in US dollars and changing it to kip might save money compared to bringing euros with you to Laos.

Cash

The use of ATMs and credit cards in banks is subject to computer operation, staff computer skills, power cuts, telephone network breakdowns, holidays, etc. A few visitors have been forced out of the country prematurely as they couldn't withdraw funds to continue their travels. Always bring some cash. Changing money can be next to impossible outside major towns.

Money exchange

Banks give good rates, and private exchange booths are common in the major tourist areas. The U.S. dollar is by far the best currency to exchange, with tight spreads and competitive rates. Thai baht and other hard currencies like euros are accepted, but the rates will be worse.

Try to bring the newest and shiniest notes you can, since money changers will reject bills that have even small marks and tears.

Shopping hours

Many shops start an hour's lunch break at noon, and some maintain the (now abolished) official French two-hour break. Nearly everything is closed on Sundays, except restaurants and many shops.

Costs

Prices tend to be lower in Laos than in neighboring countries, though standards might be lower as well. Prices are lower in smaller towns and villages than in tourist centers like Luang Prabang and Vientiane.

A budget of US\$40 a day is a good rule of thumb, though it's possible to get by on far less. Excluding transport costs, living on US\$15/day isn't difficult.

A basic room with shared bath can be as little as US\$6 in Vang Vieng or as much as US\$10-15 in Vientiane or Luang Prabang. Meals are usually under US\$5 for even the most elaborate Lao, Thai or Vietnamese dishes (Western food is more expensive), and plain local dishes cost US\$2-3. A local bus from Vientiane to Vang Vieng costs US\$5; a VIP bus from Vientiane to Luang Prabang costs US\$20; the slow boat from Luang Prabang to Huay Xai costs US\$25.

Unlike in Thailand, access to temples in Luang Prabang is not free, but typically costs US\$1-2. In Vientiane only the more famous temples charge an entry fee.

Outside of tourist centres, rooms can be found for US\$2.50, and even at Si Phan Don for US\$5/night. Large noodle soups are around US\$2, and a typical price for large bottles of Beerlao is US\$1.

For some products Laos is more expensive than Thailand and Cambodia as most goods, petrol, and food is imported from Thailand and Vietnam.

What to buy

Typical Lao dresses in cheap machine-made fabric can be made to order. Expect to pay around US\$5 for the fabric and US\$2 for labour. Handmade Lao silk is one of the most attractive things to buy. The talat sao (Morning Market) in Vientiane has dozens of small shops selling 100% handmade silk scarves or wall hangings from US\$5 upwards depending on quality, intricacy of design and size. Beware cheap synthetic

fabrics sold as silk imported from China and Vietnam. Be skeptical when shopping for items made from "antique silk". They are usually fake, but still attractive, but don't pay more than US\$30-50. In markets, bargaining is always expected. Do not lose your cool: just keep smiling.

Eat

Lao food is one of the underappreciated cuisines of the world and can be a **real highlight** of your trip. It's very similar to the Isaan food of northeastern Thailand: very spicy, more often bitter than sweet, and using lots of fresh herbs and raw vegetables. These cool your mouth when the chilli gets too intense.

Rice is the staple carbohydrate. The standard kind is **sticky rice** (ເຂົ້າໝູ່ວ *khao niaow*), eaten by hand from small baskets called *tip khao*. Using your right hand, never your left, pinch off a bit, roll into flat disk, dip or wrap and munch away. Sticky rice is so important culturally that it's the standard offering to monks and the Lao even call themselves "children of sticky rice" (*luk khao niaow*).



Clockwise from top right: *Tam maak hung* papaya salad, sticky rice in a *tip khao* basket and fresh lettuce leaves

The national dish is **laap** (ລາບ, also *larb*), a "salad" of minced meat or fish mixed with herbs, spices, lime juice and, more often than not, blistering amounts of chili. Unlike Thai *larb*, the Lao version can use raw meat (*dip*) instead of cooked meat (*suk*), and if prepared with seafood makes a tasty, if spicy, carpaccio.

Another Lao invention is **tam maak hung** (ຕຳໜາກຫຸ່ງ), the spicy green papaya salad known as *som tam* in Thailand, but which the Lao like to dress with fermented crab (ປູດອງ *pudem*) and a chunky, intense fish sauce called **pa daek** (ປາແດກ), resulting in a stronger flavour than the milder, sweeter Thai style. Other popular dishes include *ping kai*, spicy grilled chicken, and *mok pa*, fish steamed in a banana leaf.

Sausages are very popular in Laos. The most common is *sai oua* (ໄສ້ອູ້ວ), a grilled sausage made from pork, sticky rice and herbs, which pairs beautifully with the local beer and is a fixture at drinking holes. More challenging to the Western palate are *sai gork* (ໄສ້ກອກ) and *naem* (ແໜມ), both prepared by fermenting raw pork and thus quite sour in taste.

Laos also boasts a range of local desserts. **Kanom kok** is a small, spherical pudding made from coconut milk, tapioca and ground rice. **Sang kaya mayru** is a pumpkin filled with a sweet custard and then steamed. The pumpkin itself is also sweet, and the resulting mixture can be quite delicious. Sticky rice with mango or durian is also a popular snack.

In addition to purely Lao food, culinary imports from other countries are common. *Khao chī pate* (ເຂົ້າຈີ່ປາຕ໌), French baguettes stuffed with pâté, and *foe* (pho) noodles from China are both ubiquitous snacks particularly popular at breakfast. *Foe* can refer to both thin rice noodles (Vietnamese pho), and to the wide flat noodles that would be called *guay tiow* in Thailand.



Lao-style *tam mak hung* green papaya salad



Minty, chilli-laden goodness: *laap neua* beef salad



Grilled *sai oua* sausage with a chilli-garlic-fish sauce dip



Khao chi pâté (Lao-style banh mi) with a spicy sauce on the side

Where to eat

Vientiane and Luang Prabang have many Western-style restaurants serving up classy versions of Lao food and international favorites. **French food** is well represented, with bakeries particularly common. The influx of Chinese investment has also brought along many authentic **Chinese restaurants**, although navigating the menus in these can be a challenge if you speak neither Chinese nor Lao.

Any Lao town of size has a **night market** (ຕະຫຼາດກາງຄືນ *talat kangkhun*) operating from sunset until 10 PM or so, serving up cheap and easy meals, with lots of barbecued stuff on a stick and beer. Much of this food is prepared and kept in less than hygienic conditions though, so use some caution when choosing what to eat. **Morning markets** (ຕະຫຼາດເຊົ້າ *talat sao*) have lighter fare, with noodles and stuffed baguettes particularly common.



Colorful buffet at the Luang Prabang night market

Dietary restrictions

Laos is a **tough place** if you have any sort of dietary restrictions. Outside a few dedicated vegan places in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, fish and shrimp based sauces are ubiquitous and even Buddhist monks typically eat meat. Dairy is easily avoided though, since it's never used in traditional Lao cooking.

Drink

The national drink of Laos is the ubiquitous and tasty **Beerlao**, made with Laotian jasmine rice and one of the few Lao exports. It maintains an almost mythical status among travellers and beer aficionados. The yellow logo with its tiger-head silhouette can be seen everywhere, and a large 640 ml bottle shouldn't cost more than US\$1-2 in restaurants. In addition to the original, it's now available in a constellation of flavors: light, dark, white (wheat), even an IPA!



Sunset and Beerlao by the Mekong, [Vientiane](#)

Rice spirit, known as **lao-lao**, is everywhere and at less than US\$0.30 per 750 ml bottle is the cheapest way to get drunk. Beware, as quality and distilling standards vary wildly.

Lao **coffee** (*kaafeh*) is recognised to be of very high quality. It's grown on the Bolaven Plateau in the south; the best brand is *Lao Mountain Coffee*. Unlike Thai coffees, Lao coffee is not flavoured with ground tamarind seed. To make sure you aren't fed overpriced Nescafé instead, be sure to ask for *kaafeh thung*. By default in lower end establishments, *kaafeh lao* comes with sugar and condensed milk; black coffee is *kaafeh dam*, coffee with milk (but often non-dairy creamer) is *kaafeh nom*.

Fresh **coconut juice** is delicious, and **soymilk** at convenience stores is surprisingly tasty, nutritious, and inexpensive.

There is not much nightlife outside of Vientiane and Vang Vieng, although nearly all restaurants serve beer. Some places may be so laid-back that they will expect you to keep track of what you have drunk, with the odd guest house asking how much you have drunk during your stay upon check out.

Sleep

Accommodation options outside the Mekong Valley's main tourist spots are limited to basic hotels and guesthouses, but there are many budget and mid-priced hotels and guesthouses and quite a few fancy hotels in Vientiane and Luang Prabang. Pakse has the Champasak Palace. Rooms usually start from 60,000 kip (Jan 2023).

Work



WARNING: Overseas job scams are rampant in Laos. People are lured in by offers of a high-paid job with little to no experience or work visa needed, then held hostage under threats of violence and forced to work in call centers, online gambling, etc. See [Human trafficking](#) for details. **Chinese speakers** are most frequently targeted, but others have been trapped as well. If you or somebody you know have been caught in this scam, contact your country's [diplomatic mission](#).

Government travel advisories

Hong Kong (<https://www.sb.gov.hk/eng/ota/info-overseasjobscam.html>)

Lao work permits are difficult to obtain, unless you can secure employment with one of the numerous NGOs. English teaching is possible but poorly paid (US\$5-8/hour).

One of the most interesting ways to get to know a country, and which has become increasingly popular, is to **volunteer**.

Stay safe

Laos in general is a safe country, in part because violent crime is punished to a significant extent by the government. This said, petty crime remains a concern.

In accordance with the law, you are required to have an identification document on you at all times, and the police have the legal right to ask you for it. What this means: a copy of your national identity card or your passport. If they ask you for it, just give it to them. Failing to produce an identity document on request will result in a fine.

Corruption

See also: [Corruption and bribery](#)

Laos is one of the most corrupt countries in the world. Bribery, cronyism, and nepotism are not unheard of and have become accepted practices.

Crime

See also: [Travel in developing countries](#)

Laos is considered a low-crime country.

If you are the victim of a crime in Laos, do not expect to be taken seriously; the Laotian justice system is inefficient, lacks accountability, corrupt, and is susceptible to political interference. Government officials, high-profile individuals (VIPs), and those with political connections generally enjoy impunity in Laos.

Do not expect any kind of reliable assistance from Laotian law enforcement authorities and do not expect them to solve your problems; their response to crimes is severely limited by bureaucracy, inadequate training, corruption, low salaries, and a lack of accountability. In addition, expect little to no help if you're not fluent in Lao.

As obvious as it may sound, always behave respectfully to law enforcement authorities, even if they happen to be rude or corrupt. Rudeness will only be responded to with rudeness.

Relationships

Foreigners are not allowed to stay in the homes of Laotian nationals or family members based in Laos without prior permission from the government.

Adultery is punishable by up to a year of imprisonment and a fine. If you've been accused of adultery, you and your partner will be prosecuted.

It is illegal to invite someone of the opposite sex to your hotel room. Hotel staff may call the police on you if you attempt to break this law. That said, you may notice foreigners with Lao partners while in Laos. If you find yourself in the same position, be discreet.

Relationships between Laotian nationals and foreigners are not illegal, however, if you happen to find romance in Laos (which is highly unlikely for most people) you are supposed to submit a formal application to the authorities. Not doing so can result in legal penalties. Foreigners married to Laotians are required to have their marriage certificate authenticated at a Laotian embassy before travelling to Laos.

LGBT travellers

Homosexuality is legal in Laos. Public displays of affection between same-sex couples may be tolerated in large cities like Vientiane, but in smaller towns, homosexuality remains taboo, especially among the Hmong people.

Illegal substances

Laos is at the center of the illegal drug trade; therefore, the country has a **huge problem** with illegal substances. At some point during the 1990s, it was believed the country was the largest opium producer in the world. Although the government has done a lot to stamp out the illegal drug trade, the country's remote geography, struggling and weak economy, and high level of corruption mean that the issue is very difficult to keep under control.

The following tips will come in handy:

- **Never leave your food or drinks unattended**, and always be careful when someone gives you food or a drink.
- **Be wary of "special" or "happy items" in restaurants**; such dishes may contain opiates.
- **Be aware of your surroundings at all times**; do not allow anyone to reach for your pockets or belongings.
- **Never leave your belongings unattended**, and always pay close attention.

Traffic conditions

Although Laotian traffic laws are strict (at least on paper), driving by the majority of Laotians is *wild and reckless*.

Speeding, reckless passing, and failure to obey traffic laws are common, as is driving under the influence. In the event you end up in a car accident, do not attempt to flee the scene. It is punishable by up to **three years** in prison and a **fine up to 10,000,000 Kip**.

Miscellaneous

- **Landmines and unexploded ordnance** left over from the Vietnam War maim or kills hundreds of people every year as Laos is the most bombed country in history. Almost all of these occur in the eastern and northern parts of the country, especially near the border with Vietnam; there is no unexploded ordnance along the Mekong Valley tourist trail. Never enter

areas marked as minefields and travel only on paved roads and well-worn paths. If you are unsure of which areas are safe, ask the locals.

- **Fake products** are very common. Laos is one place where Chinese or Thai companies dump sub-standard products. Similar to Myanmar, there are few if any laws preventing such trade.
- **Vaping is illegal** in Laos, so do not bring any e-cigarettes with you.

Stay healthy

Laos is on track to hit its goal of eliminating **malaria** by 2030, but there are still occasional outbreaks, particularly in the south (Savannakhet and beyond). Anti-malarials are recommended if visiting those areas for an extended period, but check with health professionals: there is also a high incidence of drug-resistant parasites in Laos. Other mosquito-borne diseases, such as **dengue**, can be life-threatening, so make sure you bring at least 25% DEET insect repellent and ensure that you sleep with mosquito protection like nets or at least a fan. Vientiane seems to be malaria-free but not dengue-free. The mosquitoes that are active during the day carry dengue and those that are active in the evening carry malaria. 25% DEET insect repellents are almost impossible to find in Laos, so bring some from your home country.

The usual precautions regarding food and water are needed. **Tap water** is not drinkable anywhere in Laos, but bottled water is cheap and widely available. In Laos, most bottled water is simply treated tap water, but quality can vary between brands. Tiger Head is recommended, which is made by the Laos Brewing Company (of Beerlao fame), and costing 5,000-6,000 kip. Roadside water kiosks that let you cheaply fill your own bottle with filtered water are not present in Laos.

Vientiane has several medical clinics associated with European embassies, and there are several private hospitals in Vientiane that are run to Western standards. Otherwise, you probably have to go to Thailand for better treatment of serious injuries and illnesses. Udon Thani and Chiang Mai are generally recommended; they're only a few hours away, depending on your location in Laos. Ubon Ratchathani and Chiang Rai might have suitable clinics, as well, and there's Bangkok, of course. Expatriates in Laos probably have the best information; the more upscale hotels can be good resources, as well.

Travel insurance that includes cover for medical evacuation is strongly recommended. Remember: if you can't afford travel insurance, then you can't afford to travel.

HIV

Laos had a population HIV rate of 0.3% in 2020.

Respect

Dress respectfully (long trousers, sleeved shirts) when visiting temples and take your shoes off before entering temple buildings and private houses.

As with other Buddhist countries, showing the soles of your feet is very poor manners. Never touch any person on the head. Despite the prevalence of cheap alcohol, public drunkenness is considered disrespectful and a loss of face.

Things in Laos happen slowly and rarely as scheduled. Keep your cool, as Lao people will find humour in any tourist showing anger. They will remain calm, and venting your anger will make everybody involved lose face and is certainly not going to expedite things, particularly if dealing with government bureaucracy.

Swastikas are commonly seen at Buddhist temples. They are regarded as a sacred symbol, and have no connection to Nazism or anti-Semitism whatsoever.

Religion

Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion in Laos, and it plays an important role in Laotian society. Laotian men are generally expected to spend a certain amount of time living as a monk at least once in their lifetime.

Try not to show any form of disrespect to Buddhism—inappropriately presenting Buddha or inappropriately behaving in a Buddhist temple is no laughing matter and will offend many.

Buddhist monks are accorded a great deal of respect in Laos, so behave accordingly when you come face to face with a monk.

When interacting with monks, keep the following rules in mind:

- Do not touch a monk if you are a woman. Monks are forbidden from touching women.
- Offer your seat to monks on public transport. Not doing so is considered extremely disrespectful.
- Do not offer a monk money; it is considered disrespectful. Monks are not allowed to accept, or even touch money. You should only offer food to a monk, and only in the morning, as monks are not allowed to eat after noon. If you want to donate money, go to a temple and put it into the donation box. "Monks" that accept money are fakes.
- Do not take a photograph of a monk unless they've permitted you.
- If you are a woman, do not pass anything directly to a monk. Put down what you want to give to a monk to let him pick it up, or give it to a man to pass to the monk on your behalf.



Wat Sainyaphum temple,
Savannakhet

Naming conventions

Similar to neighbouring Thailand, most Lao people follow the Western naming convention of a given name followed by a family name. However, unlike in most Western countries, Lao people almost never address each other using their last names, the default form of address is to use a title plus one's given name, even in the most formal situations. The most common titles in Lao are *Thao* or *Nai* for men, and *Nang* or *Sao* for women. As such, the current prime minister of Laos, Phankham Viphavanh would be addressed as *Thao Phankham* or *Nai Phankham* in Lao, and "Mr. Phankham" in English.

- Do not sit above a monk. Sit below them or kneel before them.

Politics

Do not criticise, insult, or show any kind of disrespect to the government; this is punishable by up to **five years in prison** and a **very hefty fine**. Also, you should know that if the authorities feel you have "disgraced" (<https://immigration.gov.la/prohibition/>) the country, you will **not be allowed** to leave. Being a foreigner will not exempt you from this law; in 2012, a Swiss NGO director was banished from the country after she openly criticised the government.

Connect

Laos phone numbers have the format +856 20 654 321 where "856" is the country code for Laos. Numbers starting with 20 are mobile numbers, while all others are landlines.

- Laos Country Code is "+856".
- International Call Prefix is "00".
- Laos Call Prefix is "0".
- Laos articles here use the convention "+856 xx xxxxxx" except for emergency numbers which use local format with leading zero, "0xx xxxxxx"

Internet cafés can be found in larger towns, however access speeds are usually painfully slow and cafe staffs have less knowledge. The most reliable connections are in Vientiane, and usually cost around 100 kip/minute, with the cheapest offering 4,000 kip/hour. However, Internet security is not guaranteed and computer viruses are abundant.

In most cases, **Wi-Fi** is the best option. Most Western-style cafés offer free Wi-Fi-access for customers. Most accommodations, even budget places in Vientiane, offer free Wi-Fi.

Mobile phone usage in Laos has mushroomed, with four competing GSM operators. Two of these offer roaming services. Calling people on the same network is always cheaper than calling another network, but there is no clear market leader. Tourist and expats tend to prefer TPlus or M-phone (Laotel), while locals use any of the four networks.

- **Lao Telecom (<http://www.laotel.com/>)** has agreements with some 30 international networks. See [roaming with Lao Telecom \(http://www.gsmworld.com/roaming/gsminfo/roa_1ash.shtml\)](http://www.gsmworld.com/roaming/gsminfo/roa_1ash.shtml).
- **TPlus (formerly known as Beeline) (<https://tplus.la/>)** has agreements with over 100 International phone networks. Another popular choice, they also have low-cost international rate of 2,000 kip/minute to many countries, if you buy their SIM card and dial "177" instead of "+".
- **ETL Mobile (<http://www.etlao.com/>)** is known to have better coverage in rural and remote parts of Laos. However, in Laos "better" certainly does not mean "everywhere".
- **Unitel** is also available. It offers 5GB/30&day plans for 50,000 kip plus 30,000 kip for the SIM card (Mar 2020).

Local prepaid SIM cards can be purchased in various shops and stores, including at the airport in Vientiane (walk through to the Domestic Terminal to find a shop selling snacks and Unitel SIMs), without any paperwork.

- **Tourist SIM:** Since 2022, travellers can order a Laos tourist SIM (<https://shop.internetlaos.com/>) card prior to their trip and get it delivered to their hotel or Airbnb in Vientiane using Internet in Laos online platform.

As another option, there is Thai coverage close to the Thai border (including a significant part of Vientiane), and Thai SIM cards and top-up cards can be bought in Laos; in addition, DeeDial International Call Cards are available. Thus, if you already have a Thai number, you can use the generally cheaper Thai network and/or avoid buying one more SIM. In addition, with the advent of cheap "neighboring country" roaming packages from the "big three" carriers in Thailand (AIS, dtac, and True all have 99 baht/2GB data roaming packages for Laos valid for varying periods) means that Thai SIMs are cheap to use even away from the Thai coverage area and can be helpful in other ways (for example, a True SIM will roam on Unitel, TPlus, and Lao Telecom, while a dtac SIM will roam on *all four* Lao networks, which given the lower roaming pricing these days, can be worth the premium over a local SIM limited to one network).

Postal service in Laos is slow, but generally reliable. Other paid options such as FedEx, DHL, and EMS exist in various locations. Though these services are much more expensive, they are more reliable.

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