

# Directory

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## ACCOMMODATION

The range and quality of accommodation in Laos is rapidly improving. That said, once you get off the beaten track (Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Pakse and Vang Vieng) the options are more modest, typically restricted to budget-priced guesthouses and hotels and the occasional midrange offering.

Paying in the requested currency is usually cheaper than letting the hotel or guesthouse convert the price into another currency using their unfavourable (to you, at least) exchange rates. If the price is quoted in kip, you'll do best to pay in kip; if priced in dollars, pay in dollars. Because the kip is a soft, unstable

## PRACTICALITIES

- The *Vientiane Times* ([www.vientianetimes.org.la](http://www.vientianetimes.org.la)), published Monday to Saturday, and the only English-language newspaper permitted in Laos, cleaves to the party line.
- Francophones can read *Le Renovateur*, a government mouthpiece similar to the *Vientiane Times*.
- The LPDR's single radio station, Lao National Radio (LNR), broadcasts sanitised English-language news twice daily.
- Short-wave radios can pick up BBC, VOA, Radio Australia and Radio France International. A good frequency for BBC in the morning is 15360.
- Lao National Television has two TV channels. Programming in Lao is limited so most people watch Thai TV and/or karaoke videos.
- The LPDR uses 220V AC circuitry; power outlets usually feature two-prong round or flat sockets.
- The metric system is used for measurements. Gold and silver are sometimes weighed in *bàt* (15g).

currency, room rates in this book are given in the US dollar equivalent of the kip rates, calculated at 10,000 kip to US\$1.

Accommodation prices listed in this book are high-season prices for rooms with attached bathroom, unless stated otherwise. An icon is included to indicate if air-con is available; otherwise, assume that a fan will be provided.

## Homestays

Staying in a village home is becoming increasingly popular. Homestays are invariably in rural areas, cheap at about US\$5 for your bed, dinner and breakfast, and provide a chance for travellers to experience life, Lao style. For an idea of what to expect, and what not to expect, see *Feeling The 'Real Laos'*, p48.

## Guesthouses

The distinction between 'guesthouse', 'hotel' and 'resort' often exists in name only, but legally speaking a guesthouse in Laos has fewer than 16 rooms. They typically occupy large, two-storey homes of recent vintage, but occasionally you'll find them in more historic and charismatic wooden homes. In places such as Don Det (p280) in southern Laos or Muang Ngoi Neua (p163) in northern Laos you'll come across guesthouses consisting of simple bamboo-thatch huts with shared facilities, going for as little as US\$1 a night.

Facilities are improving across the country, but the most inexpensive places might still have cold-water showers or simple Lao-style bathing, where you wash yourself using a plastic bowl to scoop cold water from large jars, tanks or even 44-gallon drums. Hot water is hardly a necessity in lowland Laos, but is very welcome in the mountains.

Simple rooms in most towns average between US\$3 and US\$5 a night with shared bathroom. For an attached bathroom and hot shower expect to pay about US\$6 to US\$8; anything above this will usually also have air-conditioning and a television, with cable TV in English if you're lucky. Some guest-

houses have stepped up the style and offer upscale rooms for between about US\$15 and US\$30.

## Hotels

Hotel rooms in Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Vang Vieng, Savannakhet and Pakse offer private bathrooms and fans as standard features for between US\$5 and US\$10 per night. There is then a vast range of rooms with air-con, hot water and television costing between about US\$8 and US\$50, differentiated by their location, the city and the levels of style and service.

Small and medium-size hotels oriented towards Asian business and leisure travellers and tour groups exist in the larger cities. In Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Pakse these may be housed in charming old French colonial mansions. Whether modern or historic, tariffs at hotels such as these run from about US\$25 to US\$60 for rooms with air-con, hot water, TV and refrigerator.

Then there are the few top-end hotels with better décor, more facilities and personalised service, often occupying more carefully-restored colonial villas or modern, purpose-built buildings. These typically cost between US\$50 and US\$150, occasionally even higher.

## ROOM RATES

In this guide all accommodation is listed by price order, starting at the cheapest, *not* in order of preference. We have divided accommodation by the price of a double room thus:

<b>Budget</b>	less than US\$15
<b>Midrange</b>	US\$16-50
<b>Top end</b>	more than US\$50.

The overall quality of rooms in Laos has improved substantially in recent years but prices remain remarkably reasonable. By Western standards, they're a bargain. It's worth remembering this if you're trying to bargain the price down, particularly at the budget end where competition is fierce and margins are small.

For example, the farmers flogging bamboo bungalows on Don Det aren't making any money on their US\$1.50 rooms, they're just hoping you'll buy some food and beer. And in Vang Vieng many rooms are actually cheaper than they were six years ago. Taking this into consideration, and understanding that international economic imperatives like inflation and the price of oil affect Laos as much as they do prices in your own country, room rates will probably go up compared with those listed in this book. When that happens please don't just assume you're being ripped off.

By all means try to get the best rate you can, that's part of travelling. But be aware of the cultural context. Generally speaking, the Lao avoid conflict as much as they possibly can and while they are happy to bargain a little, they don't usually buy into protracted negotiations/arguments over price. If the rate seems unfair to you (as opposed to being beyond your budget) by all means make a counter offer. This will usually be accepted, or not, straight away.

What is common among all hotels in Laos is that the rooms are great value compared with what you'd pay at home. Solid mid-range places, that would cost US\$80 or more at home, can be had for US\$15 or US\$20. And at the top-end boutique luxury, that would cost two or three times as much in Europe, North America or Australia, can be had for US\$80.

The trade-off, however, is in the service. Few hotels in Laos have managed to hone their service to Western standards, and English literacy is often frustratingly poor, even in the more expensive hotels. So prepare for lower standards of service than you're used to and you'll be more likely to have a good time.

## Resorts

The term 'resort' in the Lao context may be used for any accommodation situated outside towns or cities. It does not imply, as it usually does in many other countries, the availability of sports activities, spa and so on.

Lao resorts typically cost about the same as a mid-range hotel, ie from about US\$15 to US\$50 a night. A few, such as those outside Luang Prabang, come closer to the international idea of a resort, with prices to match.

## ACTIVITIES

### Boating

With public boats disappearing from Laos's many waterways, do-it-yourself boating is increasingly the way to see some of Asia's most stunning and untouched wilderness. Rafting, canoeing and kayaking trips are all available, with varying degrees of comfort and cost. Operators in Luang Nam Tha, Luang Prabang, Vang Vieng, Tha Khaek, Pakse and Don Det offer guided rafting and kayaking trips, complete with the necessary equipment, along waterways in those areas.

As with bicycles, you shouldn't have any special customs difficulties bringing your own small boat to Laos. Because of the difficulties of overland transport, however, the smaller and lighter your craft is, the better.

For trained paddlers almost any of the major waterways draining from the western slopes of the Annamite Mountains towards the Mekong valley can be interesting. In the north, the Nam Ou, Nam Tha, Nam Khan, Nam Ngum and of course the Mekong River are navigable year-round. In central and southern Laos the Nam Theun (though

not for long), Nam Kading, Nam Hin Bun and Se Kong as well as the Mekong are safe bets. The upstream areas of all these rivers can be accessed by road, so drop-offs and pick-ups are limited only by the availability of transport.

Several tributaries that feed into the Mekong between Vientiane and Tha Khaek are particularly recommended because they see so little boat traffic and run through spectacularly rugged limestone country. In particular the Nam Kading and Nam Hin Bun are wide and relatively clean rivers, though a proposed dam on the Nam Kading might change things there. Upstream put-in spots are limited but possible. If you'd prefer someone else looks after the logistics, both **Green Discovery** ([www.greendiscoverylaos.com](http://www.greendiscoverylaos.com)) and Thailand-based **North-by-Northeast Tours** ([www.north-by-north-east.com](http://www.north-by-north-east.com)) offer rafting and kayaking trips in this area.

Several companies and guesthouses on Don Det rent kayaks so it's possible to explore the islands of Si Phan Don this way – though we recommend starting upstream. Rafting is also possible here.

If you want to go local, small wooden canoes can be bought for between US\$60 and US\$140 without a motor; add from US\$50 to US\$90 for motors. Small Japanese and cheaper Chinese outboard motors of 5.5HP to 11HP can be purchased in any of the larger cities along the Mekong. These sorts of boats are suitable only for well-navigated waterways as their bulk prohibits portage around shallows or rapids.

### Cycling

The overall lack of vehicular traffic makes cycling an attractive proposition in Laos, although this is somewhat offset by the general absence of roads in the first place. Bikes can be hired in the larger towns but they're generally cheap Chinese affairs unsuited to much more than pedalling around town. For any serious out-of-town cycling you're better off bringing your own bike, one that's geared to rough road conditions.

In terms of road gradient and availability of food and accommodation, the easiest long-distance ride is along Rte 13, which extends the entire north-south length of the country from Boten on the Chinese-Lao border south to Voen Kham on the Cambodian border. In the dry season this road may become very

dusty even in the paved sections, and trucks – though nowhere near as overwhelming as in Vietnam or Thailand – can be a nuisance.

There are any number of other good cycling routes with less traffic. The various loops described in this book are (usually) just as good on a bicycle as they are on a motorbike, just slower. There's the Southern Swing over the Bolaven Plateau and beyond (p263); the shorter Spin Through Savannakhet (p248); and of course the original The Loop (p240) out of Tha Khaek. In northern Laos heading east along Rte 7 towards the Plain of Jars is a good trip. We wouldn't, however, recommend heading into the former Saisombun Special Zone north of Vientiane on a bicycle as the roads are punishingly steep, lodgings are few and camping is not encouraged at all.

Other cycling routes of interest – several of which remain unpaved – include: Luang Prabang to Muang Khua; Huay Xai to Luang Nam Tha; Thang Beng to Lak Sao; Muang Xai to Phonsavan; and Sam Neua to Phonsavan. The last two routes are quite remote and you might need to camp.

### Hiking & Trekking

Trekking through the mountains and forests of Laos is the best way to experience what is one of the most untouched environments in Southeast Asia. Indeed, trekking has become so popular it's almost a mandatory part of any visit to Laos. And thanks to several projects aimed at getting money into poor communities, there are now more than 10 areas you can choose from; for a full rundown, see *Where To Trek* (p70). Each organised trek is different, but most involve walking through a mix of forest and agricultural land and staying in homes or community guesthouses in remote villages. Prices, including all food, guides, transport, accommodation and park fees, start at about US\$20 a day. In most cases you can trek with as few as two people, with per person costs falling the larger the group.

While the cultural side of a trip is limited without some language skills, trekking alone is possible in most of the country. However, doing so in the northeastern provinces and the area formerly known as the Saisombun Special Zone (p129) might attract the attention of local authorities unused to seeing random *falang* wandering about

unguided. Walking off the track in most of eastern Laos can be dangerous given the amount of unexploded ordnance (p305) still lying around.

If you do go it alone and have some language skills or a phrasebook it's often possible to spend the night in a remote village, though do offer to pay for your food and bed.

Finally, you can set off on a day hike from just about any town or village in Laos. Take a hat, sunscreen and plenty of water.

### Rock Climbing

The limestone karsts of Laos are perfect for rock climbing and routes have been established at two main sites, near Vang Vieng (p125) and Luang Prabang. Vang Vieng has the most established scene, with dozens of climbs ranging from beginner to very tough indeed. Climbers have compared the routes and guides here favourably with the high-profile climbing at Krabi, in Thailand.

**Green Discovery** ([www.greendiscoverylaos.com](http://www.greendiscoverylaos.com)) is the main operator and has a good reputation; their website has more detail on equipment, prices and routes.

## BUSINESS HOURS

Government offices are typically open from 8am to 11.30am or noon and from 1pm to 5pm Monday to Friday. Some offices may open for a half day on Saturday but this

### RESTAURANT HOURS

Business hours for restaurants vary according to their clientele and the food they serve.

- Shops selling noodles and/or rice soup are typically open from 7am to 1pm.
- Lao restaurants with a larger menu of dishes served with rice are often open from 10am to 10pm.
- Tourist restaurants offering both Lao and *falang* (Western) food, and open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, usually open their doors around 7.30am and serve till 10pm.
- Tourist restaurants that don't open for breakfast generally serve from 11am to 11pm.

custom was generally abandoned in 1998 when the official two-hour lunch break introduced by the French was reduced to one hour. Does this mean you can expect to find Lao officials back in their offices promptly at 1pm? Probably not.

Shops and private businesses open and close a bit later and usually stay open during lunch. On Saturday some businesses are open all day, others only half a day. Most businesses, except restaurants, are closed on Sunday.

For a list of standard business hours see the inside front cover. If hours vary from these, they are stated in the review.

## CHILDREN

Like many places in Southeast Asia, travelling with children in Laos can be a lot of fun as long as you come prepared with the right attitudes, physical requirements and the usual parental patience. Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children* by Cathy Lanigan contains useful advice on how to cope with kids on the road and what to bring along to make things go more smoothly.

## Practicalities

Amenities geared towards children – such as high chairs in restaurants, child safety seats for vehicles, or nappy-changing facilities in public restrooms – are virtually unknown in Laos. Thus parents will have to be extra resourceful in seeking out substitutes or follow the example of Lao families (which means holding smaller children on their laps much of the time).

Outside of Vientiane day-care centres are likewise unknown, though this is rarely a problem. The Lao adore children and in many instances will shower attention on your offspring, who will readily find playmates among their Lao peers and a temporary nanny service at practically every stop.

Baby formula and nappies (diapers) are available at minimarkets in the larger towns and cities, but for rural areas you'll need to bring along a sufficient supply.

For the most part parents needn't worry too much about health concerns though it pays to lay down a few ground rules – such as regular hand-washing – to head off potential medical problems. All the usual health precautions apply; see p331 for details. Children should especially be warned not to play with animals

encountered along the way since rabies is disturbingly common in Laos.

## Sights & Activities

Younger children usually don't find the historic temples and French colonial architecture of Luang Prabang and Vientiane as inspiring as their parents do, but travelling with children does tend to give you a different perspective to what you might be used to. The chicken's-eye view of a three-year-old, for example, means they tend to notice all sorts of things at ground level their parents often miss. As long as they don't try to put any of them in their mouths, this is usually no problem.

If boredom does set in, the best cure in Laos is always the outdoors. In Luang Prabang the waterfalls at Tat Sae (p159) and Tat Kuang Si (p159) can amuse most kids for days. Boat trips are usually well-received too.

Most children also take to the unique Hindu-Buddhist sculpture garden of Xieng Khuang (p98) outside Vientiane. The capital also has a few more mainstream activities, such as swimming pools and ten-pin bowling alleys (p99).

Elsewhere, the Plain of Jars (p169) invites the kind of fantasy exploration most kids are prone to.

## CLIMATE CHARTS

The annual monsoon cycles that affect all of mainland Southeast Asia produce a 'dry and wet monsoon climate' with three basic seasons for most of Laos. The southwest monsoon arrives in Laos between May and July and lasts into November.

The monsoon is followed by a dry period (from November to May), beginning with lower relative temperatures and cool breezes created by Asia's northeast monsoon (which bypasses most of Laos), lasting until mid-February. Exceptions to this general pattern include Xieng Khuang, Hua Phan and Phongsali Provinces, which may receive rainfall coming from Vietnam and China during the months of April and May.

Rainfall varies substantially according to latitude and altitude, with the highlands of Vientiane, Bolikhamsai, Khammuan and eastern Champasak Provinces receiving the most.

Temperatures also vary according to altitude. In the humid, low-lying Mekong River valley, temperatures range from 15°C to 38°C, while the mountains of Xieng Khuang it can drop to 0°C at night. See p17 for comment on the best times to travel in Laos.

## COURSES Cooking

Lao cooking courses are available in Luang Prabang (p147) and Vientiane (p101).

## Language

Short-term courses in spoken and written Lao can be arranged in the following study centres in Vientiane. The courses are not regular so contacting the centres in advance is recommended.

**Centre Culturel et de Coopération Linguistique** (Map p92; ☎ 021-215764; www.ambafrance-laos.org; Th Lan Xang)

**Lao-American College** (☎ 021-900454; lacf@laotel.com; Th Phonkheng, Saysettha)

**Vientiane College** (☎ 021-414873; vtcollege@laopdr.com; Th That Luang) Opposite the WHO office.

## Meditation

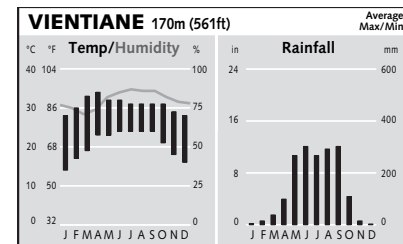
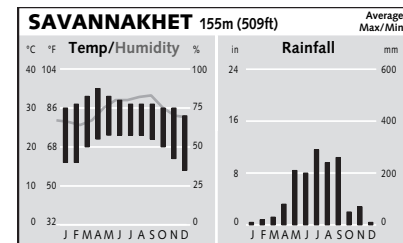
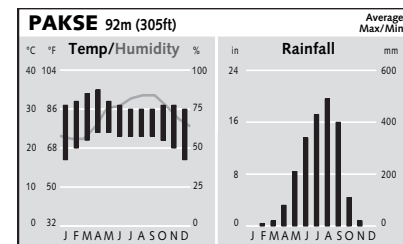
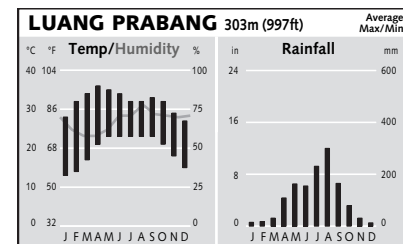
If you can speak Lao or Thai, or can arrange an interpreter, you may be able to study *vipassana* (insight meditation) at Wat Sok Pa Luang (p101) in Vientiane.

## CUSTOMS

Customs inspections at ports of entry are lax as long as you're not bringing in more than a moderate amount of luggage. You're not supposed to enter the country with more than 500 cigarettes or 1L of distilled spirits. All the usual prohibitions on drugs, weapons and pornography apply, otherwise you can bring in practically anything you want, including unlimited sums of Lao and foreign currency.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Over the last 15 years or so Laos has earned a reputation among visitors as a remarkably safe place to travel, with little crime reported and few of the scams so often found in more touristed places such as Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand. And while the vast majority of Laotians remain honest and welcoming, things aren't quite as idyllic as they once were. The main change has been in the rise



of petty crime, such as theft and low-level scams, which are more annoying than actually dangerous.

That's not to say Laos is danger free. However, most dangers are easy enough to avoid.

## Queues

The Lao follow the usual Southeast Asian method of queuing for services, which is to

say they don't form a line at all but simply push en masse towards the point of distribution, whether at ticket counters, post-office windows or bus doors. It won't help to get angry and shout 'I was here first!' since first-come, first-served simply isn't the way things are done here. Rather it's 'first-seen, first-served'. Learn to play the game the Lao way, by pushing your money, passport, letters or whatever to the front of the crowd as best you can. Eventually you'll get through.

### Road Travel

Better roads, better vehicles and fewer insurgencies mean road travel in Laos is quite safe, if not always comfortable. It's not yet possible to totally rule out the threat from armed bandits or insurgents, though it is miniscule. And while the scarcity of traffic in Laos means there are far, far fewer accidents than the daily horror on Vietnam's roads, accidents are still the major risk to travellers.

### ARMED ATTACK

With the Hmong insurgency virtually finished, travel along Rtes 7 and 13, particularly in the vicinity of Muang Phu Khun and Kasi, is as safe as it has been for decades. There have been no reported attacks on traffic for more than two years. However, you might still have an armed soldier on your bus, just to make sure. If you're still nervous – and it's true that two Swiss cyclists were murdered during an ambush on Rte 13 in 2004 – ask around in Vientiane or Luang Prabang to make sure the situation remains secure before travelling along Rte 7 to Phonsavan or Rte 13 between Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang.

### ACCIDENTS

After speedboats, and assuming you'll not be walking through any minefields, the law of averages suggests travelling by road is probably the most dangerous activity in Laos. Having said that, there are relatively few reports of bus crashes and the like, and the lack of traffic and quality of roads makes collisions less likely too.

When riding in buses, you may be able to cut your risk of serious injuries if you choose an aisle seat towards the middle of the bus; these are generally more comfortable too. If you can't get an aisle seat, the right side is usually safer as it cuts down the risks in the event your conveyance is side-swiped by oncoming

traffic. It's worth carrying on your person the number of your embassy in Vientiane and the number of **Aek Udorn Hospital** (☎ 04234 2555) in Udorn Thani, Thailand, to call for help if necessary.

### MOTORBIKES

As motorbikes become increasingly popular among travellers so the number of accidents rises. Ambassadors in Vientiane were not aware of any fatalities when we passed, but it's only a matter of time. More likely is the chance of earning yourself a Lao version of the 'Thai tattoo' – that scar on the inner right calf caused by a run-in with a hot exhaust pipe. For tips on motorbiking, see p328.

### Speedboats

The speedboats that careen along the Mekong and Nam Ou rivers in northern Laos are as dangerous as they are fast. We recommend that you avoid all speedboat travel unless absolutely necessary. For details see p219.

### Theft

While Lao are generally trustworthy people and theft is much less common than elsewhere in Southeast Asia, it has risen in recent years. Most of the reports we've heard involve opportunistic acts that, if you are aware of them, are fairly easily avoided.

Money or goods going missing from hotel rooms is becoming more common, so don't leave cash or other tempting items (such as women's cosmetics) out on show. If you ride a crowded bus, watch your luggage and don't keep money in your trouser pockets. If you ride a bicycle or motorcycle in Vientiane, don't place anything of value in the basket – thieving duos on motorbikes have been known to ride by and snatch bags from baskets. Also in Vientiane, we've had several reports of (usually) women having daypacks stolen after they've changed money near the BCEL bank on the riverfront – be especially careful around here.

Other reports involve theft on buses between Vientiane and Luang Prabang, and on the slow boat between Huay Xai and Luang Prabang. Simple locks on your bags are usually enough to discourage the light-fingered.

### UXO

Large areas of eastern Laos are contaminated by unexploded ordnance (UXO) left behind by nearly 100 years of warfare. Despite heavy US bombing late in the Indochina War, the majority of UXO found today was left behind by ground battles and includes French, Chinese, American, Russian and Vietnamese materials, among them mortar shells, munitions, white phosphorus canisters, land mines and cluster bombs. US-made cluster bombs (known as *bombi* to the Lao) pose by far the greatest potential danger to people living in or travelling through these areas and account for most of the casualties. The Lao National UXO Programme (UXO Lao) reported 164 casualties in 2005, of which 54% were children and 36 people died. These statistics come only from the districts where UXO Lao is working; real figures are believed to be higher. Large bombs up to 500kg dropped by US aircraft also lie undetonated in some areas, but it's very rare that one of these is accidentally detonated.

According to surveys by UXO Lao and other non-government UXO clearance organisations, the provinces of Salavan, Savannakhet and Xieng Khuang fall into a category of most severely affected provinces, followed by Champasak, Hua Phan, Khammuan, Luang Prabang, Attapeu and Sekong.

Statistically speaking, the UXO risk for the average foreign visitor is low, but travellers should exercise caution when considering off-road wilderness travel in the aforementioned provinces. Put simply, if you walk where other people have walked you should be OK. Never touch an object that may be UXO, no matter how old and defunct it may appear.

### EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

#### Lao Embassies & Consulates

**Australia** Canberra (☎ 02-6286 4595; lao.embassy@interact.net.au; 1 Dalman Cres, O'Malley, Canberra, ACT 2606)

**Cambodia** Phnom Penh (☎ 023-982632; fax 720907; 15-17 Mao Tse Tung Blvd, Phnom Penh)

**China** Beijing (☎ 010-6532 1224; fax 6532 6748; 11 Dongsie Jie, Sanlitun, Chao Yang, Beijing 100600); Kunming (☎ 0871-317 6624; fax 317 8556; Rm 3226, Camelia Hotel, 154 E Dong Feng Rd, 650041, Kunming)

**France** Paris (☎ 01 45 53 02 98; www.laoparis.com; 74 Ave Raymond Poincaré, 75116 Paris)

### GOVERNMENT TRAVEL WARNINGS

Most governments have travel advisory services detailing potential pitfalls and areas to avoid, including:

**Australia** (www.smartraveller.gov.au)

**Canada** (www.voyage.gc.ca)

**New Zealand** (www.safetravel.govt.nz)

**UK** (www.fco.gov.uk)

**US** (www.travel.state.gov)

**Germany** Berlin (☎ 0 30 890 606 47; fax 890 606 48; Bismarckallee 2A; 14193 Berlin)

**Hong Kong** (☎ 0852 2544 1186; 14th floor, Arion Commercial Centre, 2-12 Queen's Road West, Sheung Wan)

**Japan** Tokyo (☎ 35 411 2291; 3-3-22 Nishi Azabe, Minato-Ku)

**Myanmar** Yangon (Burma; ☎ 01-222482; fax 227446; A1 Diplomatic Headquarters, Tawwin (Fraser) Rd, Yangon)

**Thailand** Bangkok (☎ 0 2539 6667; fax 0 2539 6678; www.bkklaembassy.com; 520, 502/1-3 Soi Ramkhamhaeng 39, Th Pracha Uthit, Wangthonglang, Bangkok 10310); Khon Kaen (☎ 043 223473; fax 223849; 19/1-3 Th Phothisan, Khon Kaen)

**USA** New York (☎ 212-832 2734; fax 750 0039; 317 E 51st St, New York, NY 10022); Washington, DC (☎ 202-332 6416; fax 332 4923; www.laoembassy.com; 2222 S St NW, Washington, DC 20008)

**Vietnam** Danang (☎ 051-821208; fax 822628; 12 Tran Quy-Cap, Danang); Hanoi (☎ 04-942 4576; fax 822 8414; 22 Tran Binh Trong, Hanoi); Ho Chi Minh City (☎ 08-829 7667; fax 829 9272; 181 Haiba Trung, Ho Chi Minh City)

### Embassies & Consulates in Laos

Of the 75 or so nations that have diplomatic relations with Laos, around 25 maintain embassies and consulates in Vientiane. Many of the remainder, for example Canada and the UK, are served by their embassies in Bangkok, Hanoi or Beijing. Opening hours for the embassies of neighbouring countries with valid border crossings are given here.

Principal consular offices in Vientiane (area code ☎ 021):

**Australia** (Map pp88-9; ☎ 413600; www.laos.embassy.gov.au; Th Nehru, Ban Phonxai) Also looks after nationals of Britain, Canada and New Zealand. The Australian embassy is set to move to Th Tha Deua, just past the Australian Club at Km 4, during the life of this book.

**Cambodia** (Map pp88-9; ☎ 314952; fax 314951; Km 3, Th Tha Deua, Ban That Khao; ☎ 7.30-11am & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) Issues visas for US\$20.

**China** (Map pp88-9; ☎ 315105; fax 315104; Th Wat Nak Nyai, Ban Wat Nak; 🕒 9-11.30am Mon-Fri) Issues visas in four working days.

**France** (Map p92; ☎ 215258, 215259; www.ambafrance-laos.org; Th Setthathirath, Ban Si Saket)

**Germany** (Map pp88-9; ☎ 312111, 312110; Th Sok Pa Luang)

**Myanmar** (Burma; Map pp88-9; ☎ 314910; Th Sok Pa Luang; 🕒 8.30am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Issues tourist visas in three days for US\$20.

**Thailand** Embassy (Map pp88-9; ☎ 900238; www.thaiembassy.org/vientiane; Th Phonkhang; 🕒 8.30am-noon & 1-3.30pm Mon-Fri) Consulate (Map pp88-9; Th That Luang; h8am-noon & 1-4.30pm) Come here for visa renewals, extensions etc.

**USA** (Map p92; ☎ 267000; http://vientiane/usembassy.gov; Th That Dam (Th Bartholomieu))

**Vietnam** (Map pp88-9; ☎ 413400; Th That Luang; 🕒 8-11.30am & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Issues tourist visas in three working days for US\$50, or in one day for US\$55.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Festivals in Laos are mostly linked to agricultural seasons or Buddhist holidays. The word for festival in Lao is *bun* (or *boun*). Most of festival dates change according to the lunar calendar, though even these are not set in stone and some festivals are celebrated at different times depending on where you are. All of this makes advance planning difficult. The government tourism website (www.tourismlaos.gov.la) has more details and lists the current year's dates for the larger celebrations.

### JANUARY

**International New Year** (1-3 January) Public holiday.  
**Bun Khun Khao** (mid-January) The annual harvest festival sees villagers perform ceremonies offering thanks to the land spirits for allowing their crops to flourish.

### FEBRUARY

**Makha Bua** (Magha Puja or Bun Khao Chi, Full Moon) This commemorates a speech given by the Buddha to 1250 enlightened monks who came to hear him without prior summons. Chanting and offerings mark the festival, culminating in candlelit circumambulation of wats throughout the country. Celebrations in Vientiane and at Wat Phu (p268) are most fervent.

**Vietnamese Tet & Chinese New Year** (Tut Jiin) Celebrated in Vientiane, Pakse and Savannakhet with parties, fireworks and visits to Vietnamese and Chinese temples. Chinese- and Vietnamese-run businesses usually close for three days.

### MARCH

**Bun Pha Wet** This is a temple-centred festival in which the Jataka or birth-tale of Prince Vessantara, the Buddha's penultimate life, is recited. This is also a favoured time (second to Khao Phansa) for Lao males to be ordained into the monkhood. Bun Pha Wet is celebrated on different days in different villages so relatives and friends from different villages can invite one another to their respective celebrations.

### APRIL

**Bun Pi Mai** (Lao New Year, 14-16 April) Practically the whole country celebrates the Lao new year. Houses are cleaned, people put on new clothes and Buddha images are washed with lustral water. In wats, you'll see fruit and flower offerings at altars and votive mounds of sand or stone in the courtyards. Later, people douse one another and sometimes random tourists with water, which is an appropriate activity as April is usually the hottest month of the year. This festival is particularly picturesque in Luang Prabang (see p141), where it includes elephant processions and lots of traditional costuming. The 14th, 15th and 16th of April are public holidays.

### MAY

**Visakha Bua** (Visakha Puja, Full Moon) This falls on the 15th day of the sixth lunar month, which is considered the day of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and *parinibbana* (passing away). Activities are centred on the wat, with much chanting, sermonising and, at night, beautiful candlelit processions.

**Bun Bang Fai** (Rocket Festival) This is a pre-Buddhist rain ceremony now celebrated alongside Visakha Bua in Laos and northeastern Thailand. It can be one of the wildest festivals in the whole country, with music, dance and folk theatre (especially the irreverent *maw lam* performances), processions and general merrymaking, all culminating in the firing of bamboo rockets into the sky. The firing of the rockets is supposed to prompt the heavens to initiate the rainy season and bring much-needed water to the rice fields. Dates vary from village to village.

### JULY

**Bun Khao Phansa** (Khao Watsa, Full Moon) This is the beginning of the traditional three-month 'rains retreat', during which Buddhist monks are expected to station themselves in a single monastery. At other times of year they are allowed to travel from wat to wat or simply to wander the countryside, but during the rainy season they forego the wandering so as not to damage fields of rice or other crops. This is also the traditional time of year for men to enter the monkhood temporarily, hence many ordinations take place.

### AUGUST/SEPTEMBER

**Haw Khao Padap Din** (Full Moon) This sombre festival sees the living pay respect to the dead. Many cremations take place – bones being exhumed for the purpose – and gifts are presented to the Buddhist order (Sangha) so monks will chant on behalf of the deceased.

### OCTOBER/NOVEMBER

**Bun Awk Phansa** (Ok Watsa, Full Moon) At the end of the three-month rains retreat, monks can leave the monasteries to travel and are presented with robes, alms-bowls and other requisites of the renunciate life. The eve of Awk Phansa is celebrated with parties and, near any river, with the release of small banana-leaf boats carrying candles and incense in a ceremony called Van Loi Heua Fai, similar to Loy Krathong in Thailand.

**Bun Nam** (*Bun suang héua*; Boat Racing Festival) In many river towns, including Vientiane and Luang Prabang, boat races are held the day after Awk Phansa. In smaller towns the races are often postponed until National Day (2 December) so residents aren't saddled with two costly festivals in two months.

### NOVEMBER

**Bun Pha That Luang** (That Luang Festival, Full Moon) Centred around Pha That Luang in Vientiane, this increasingly commercial celebration lasts a week and includes fireworks, music and drinking across the capital. There is also a procession between Pha That Luang and Wat Si Muang. Early on the first morning hundreds of monks receive alms and floral offerings. The festival ends with a fantastic candlelit procession circling That Luang.

### DECEMBER

**Lao National Day** (2 December) This public holiday celebrates the 1975 victory over the monarchy with parades, speeches etc. Lao national and Communist hammer-and-sickle flags are flown all over the country. Celebration is mandatory, hence many poorer communities postpone some of the traditional Awk Phansa activities until National Day, saving themselves considerable expense (much to the detriment of Awk Phansa).

## FOOD

Virtually all restaurants in Laos are inexpensive by international standards, hence we haven't divided them into Budget, Mid-Range and Top End categories.

See the Food & Drink chapter, p74 for thorough descriptions of the cuisine and the kinds of restaurants in Laos.

## GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

For the most part Lao culture is very tolerant of homosexuality, although lesbian-

ism is often either denied completely ('Lao women don't do that, why would they?' men have been heard to say) or misunderstood. The gay and lesbian scene is not nearly as prominent as in neighbouring Thailand, though it's progressively more open. Strictly speaking, homosexuality is illegal, though we haven't heard of police busting anyone in recent years. In any case, public displays of affection – whether heterosexual or homosexual – are frowned upon.

## HOLIDAYS

### Public Holidays

Schools and government offices are closed on these official holidays, and the organs of state move pretty slowly, if at all, during the festivals mentioned on opposite.

**International New Year** (1 January)

**Army Day** (20 January)

**International Women's Day** (8 March) For women only.

**Lao New Year** (14-16 April)

**International Labour Day** (1 May)

**International Children's Day** (1 June)

**Lao National Day** (2 December)

## INSURANCE

As always, a good travel insurance policy is a wise idea. Laos is generally considered a high-risk area, and with medical services so limited it's vital to have a policy that covers being evacuated (Medivaced), by air if necessary, to a hospital in Thailand. Read the small print in any policy to see if hazardous activities are covered; rock-climbing, rafting and motorcycling often are not.

If you undergo medical treatment in Laos or Thailand, be sure to collect all receipts and copies of the medical report, in English if possible, for your insurance company.

See p331 for recommendations on health insurance, and p329 for vehicle insurance.

## INTERNET ACCESS

The days in which most Lao people thought the internet was some sort of new-fangled fishing device are fast disappearing. Internet cafés are popping up fast, and you can get online in most, but not all, provincial capitals. Generally speaking, if tourists go there in numbers, someone will have established a connection.

In places where there's plenty of competition – such as Vientiane and Luang Prabang – rates are usually very low, about US\$0.50 to

US\$1 an hour. In towns where there are only one or two places offering such services, or where they need to call long-distance to reach the server, rates will be higher; between US\$3 and US\$6 an hour. Broadband is spreading across the country and speeds are usually pretty fast; though in the sticks they can be excruciatingly slow.

Computers in most internet cafés have messaging software such as Yahoo! and MSN Messenger loaded and increasingly Skype, though you might need to search around for a headset.

If you're travelling with a laptop, internet cafés usually allow you to plug into their bandwidth for the same cost as using a fixed computer. To get online in your hotel you'll probably need to be in a newer mid-range or top-end hotel. Some cafés in Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Vang Vieng have wi-fi. The other option is to buy a dial-up card from minimarts in Vientiane, or from some internet cafés in the provinces, and use it in your hotel room. The only problem with this is that outside of better midrange and top-end hotels, telephones in rooms are about as rare as rocking-horse shit.

## LEGAL MATTERS

Revolutionary Laos established its first national legal code in 1988, followed by a constitution two years later – the reverse order of how it's usually done. Although on paper certain rights are guaranteed, the reality is that you can be fined, detained or deported for any reason at any time, as has been demonstrated repeatedly in cases involving everything from a foreigner marrying a Lao national without government permission, to running a business that competes too efficiently with someone who has high government connections.

Your only consolation is that it's usually much worse for locals, and Lao officials generally don't come after foreigners for petty, concocted offences. In most cases you must truly have committed a crime to find yourself in trouble with the law. However, as documented by Amnesty International (and corroborated by local expats), you could easily find yourself railroaded through the system without any legal representation.

If you stay away from anything you know to be illegal, you should be fine. If not, things might get messy – and expensive. Drug possession (see p122) and using prostitutes are

the most common crimes for which travellers are caught, often with the dealer or consort being the one to inform the authorities (and later take a cut of any 'action' you might be forced to cough up).

If you are detained, ask to call your embassy or consulate in Laos, if there is one. A meeting or phone call between Lao officers and someone from your embassy/consulate can result in quicker adjudication and release, though unless you are genuinely innocent (as opposed to having been set up) the diplomats can do little and will probably advise you to just cough up the cash.

Police sometimes hint at bribes for traffic violations and other petty offences. In such cases the police typically offer a choice along the lines of 'Would you like to come down to the station to pay your fine, or would you like to take care of it here and now?' Presented with such a choice, it's up to you whether to expedite matters by paying a bribe, or fight corruption in Laos by doing things by the book.

The legal age for voting and driving in Laos is 18.

## Sexual Relationships

Sexual relationships between foreigners and Lao citizens who are not married are illegal. Permission for marriage or engagement to a Lao citizen must be submitted in a formal application to Lao authorities. Penalties for failing to register a relationship range from US\$500 to US\$5000, and possibly imprisonment or deportation. Catching men in the act, or just witnessing them leaving a bar with a working girl, is a favourite excuse of the authorities for deporting *falang* they don't like.

Otherwise, the age of consent for sexual relations in Laos is 15.

## MAPS

Good maps of Laos are difficult to find. The best all-purpose country map available is GT-Rider.com's *Laos*, a sturdy laminated affair with a scale of 1:1,400,000. It's available at bookshops in Thailand and at many guesthouses in Laos, as well as online at [www.gt-rider.com](http://www.gt-rider.com). At the time of research the latest edition was published in 2005. The **Reise Know-How** ([www.reise-know-how.com](http://www.reise-know-how.com)) map also gets very good reports, though it's almost impossible to find outside Germany.

The **National Geographic Service** (NGS; Map pp88-9; Kom Phaen Thi Haeng Saat in Lao, or Service Géographique National in French; ☎ 8-11.30am, 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri) has a series of adequate maps of Laos and certain provincial capitals. These can be purchased direct from the National Geographic Service, which is on a side street to the northwest of the Patuxai in Vientiane.

Detailed topographic sheet maps labelled in English and French and often seen on the walls of government offices are based on Soviet satellite photography from the early 1980s. The National Geographic Service has many of these maps and will usually sell them to foreigners even though they're marked *En Secret*. However, place names are often incorrect and roadways not up to date.

The NGS' 1:500,000-scale topographicals number 11 in all, although they're not all available. Other topographical maps in the series decrease in scale to as low as 1:10,000, but anything below the 1:100,000 scale maps (for which it takes 176 to cover the whole country) is overkill unless you plan to drill for oil. Furthermore the NGS usually won't sell maps of 1:100,000 or less to foreigners unless they bring a written request on company letterhead – or get a Lao friend to make the purchase for them. For all maps produced in Laos, including rare city maps, the lowest prices are available through the NGS.

Chiang Mai-based Hobo Maps has produced a series of good, if often excessively large, maps of Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Vang Vieng. These are available in book shops and some hotels in the relevant destinations. The Lao National Tourism Administration (LNTA) has also produced a few city maps in recent years, though actually finding one is only marginally more likely than winning the lottery.

Map collectors or war historians may find American military maps from 1965 – now rather rare though they may still be available from the Defense Mapping Agency in the US – of some interest. These maps seem fairly accurate for topographic detail but are woefully out of date with regard to road placement and village names. The same goes for the USA's highly touted Tactical Pilotage Charts, prepared specifically for air travel over Laos and virtually useless for modern ground navigation.

## MONEY

The official national currency in Laos is the Lao kip (LAK). Although only kip is legally negotiable in everyday transactions, in reality three currencies are used for commerce: kip, Thai baht (B) and US dollars (US\$). In larger cities and towns, baht and US dollars are readily acceptable at most businesses, including hotels, restaurants and shops.

In smaller towns and villages, kip is usually preferred. The rule of thumb is that for everyday small purchases, prices are quoted in kip. More expensive goods and services (eg long-distance boat hire) may be quoted in baht or dollars, while anything costing US\$100 or more (eg tours, long-term car hire) is quoted in US dollars.

Despite experiencing relative stability in recent years, the kip cannot yet call itself a stable currency. As such, prices in this guidebook are given in the US dollar equivalent.

The Lao kip is not convertible to any currency outside of the Lao PDR. Because of this, the only reliable sources of foreign exchange information are those inside the country.

See p17 for an idea of the costs involved in travelling in Laos.

## ATMs

Travellers on their last kip have been giving thanks that ATMs have made a tentative landing in Laos. But before you get overexcited, the ATMs are only in Vientiane and dispense a maximum of 700,000 kip (about US\$70) a time, with each withdrawal incurring a US\$2 fee from BCEL. If, like most of us, you also have to pay extortionate charges to your home bank on each overseas withdrawal, that doesn't work out so well. So taking your plastic into the bank itself might still work out cheaper; see right.

At the time of research ATMs dispensed cash – in Lao kip – to Visa and MasterCard accounts only, despite stickers promising access to Cirrus and Plus accounts. This might change, but don't count on it. We met one traveller who had to go to Thailand to access his cash – an expensive diversion when you consider he needed to get a new visa to come back.

## Banking

Foreign residents of Laos can open US dollar, baht or kip accounts at several banks in Vientiane, including branches of six Thai

banks. Unfortunately, if you already have an account at a Thailand-based branch of a Thai bank, you won't be permitted to withdraw any money in Laos; you must open a new account. Alternatively, expatriates living in Vientiane use Thai banks across the river in Nong Khai because interest rates are higher and more banking services are available.

### Black Market

There is no real black market in Laos and unless there's an economic crash that's unlikely to change. Unlicensed moneychangers can be found in larger towns, and sometimes offer marginally better rates, but it's hardly worth seeking them out unless you're changing enough cash to fill a wheelbarrow (admittedly, that's not as hard as it sounds in Laos).

### Cash

Laos relies heavily on the Thai baht and the US dollar for the domestic cash economy. An estimated one-third of all cash circulating in Vientiane, in fact, bears the portrait of the Thai king, while another third celebrates US presidents.

However, the vast majority of transactions will be carried out in kip, so it's always worth having a wad in your pocket. Kip notes come in denominations of 500, 1000, 2000, 5000, 10,000, 20,000 and the recently printed 50,000 kip. Small vendors, especially in rural areas, will struggle to change the 20,000 kip and 50,000 kip notes – some we met had never even seen a 50,000 kip note. Also, both of these larger notes are red, so watch you don't go handing out 50,000 kip notes thinking they're 20,000 kip.

For larger transactions the dollar and the baht are favoured. They also make carrying money less of a hassle; five 1000 baht notes – about US\$135 worth – are quite a bit easier to carry than 135 10,000-kip notes. If you plan on making frequent transactions of over US\$20, you can save luggage space by carrying most of your cash in baht and/or dollars, along with smaller amounts of kip.

Once you leave Laos no-one – except perhaps other travellers on their way into Laos – will want your kip, so spend it before you go.

### Credit Cards

A growing number of hotels, upmarket restaurants and gift shops in Vientiane and

Luang Prabang accept Visa and MasterCard, and to a much lesser extent Amex and JCB. Outside of these three towns, credit cards are virtually useless.

Banque pour le Commerce Extérieur Lao (BCEL; *thanaákháan káan khàa taang páthêht láo* in Lao) branches in Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Vang Vieng, Savannakhet and Pakse offer cash advances/withdrawals on Visa credit/debit cards for a 3% transaction fee. Other banks may have slightly different charges, so if you're in Vientiane (where there are options) it might be worth shopping around. Advances/withdrawals can be made in Lao kip only – it's not possible to withdraw US dollars or Thai baht.

### Exchanging Money

After years of volatility the kip has in recent times remained fairly stable at about 10,000 to the US dollar. Don't, however, count on this remaining the same.

Exchange rates are usually virtually the same whether you're changing at a bank or a moneychanger. Both are also likely to offer a marginally better rate for larger bills (US\$50 and US\$100) than smaller bills (US\$20 and less). Banks also tend to offer better rates for travellers cheques, though the whole process of exchange is much more protracted. Banks in Vientiane and Luang Prabang can change UK pounds, Euros, Canadian, US and Australian dollars, Thai baht and Japanese yen. Elsewhere most provincial banks change only US dollars or baht, though you might get lucky.

The best overall exchange rates are those offered at the BCEL. Lao Development Bank has similar rates.

Licensed moneychangers maintain booths around Vientiane (including at Talat Sao) and at some border crossings. Their rates are similar to the banks and they stay open longer.

It can sometimes be difficult to change travellers cheques because the bank won't have enough kip, especially in more remote provinces, so check that the bank can cover your cheques before you sign. Hence organising your stash of cash before you leave a big town is highly recommended. If you plan on carrying US dollars or baht, stock up before you arrive in Laos. If you want to buy these currencies in Laos head to a market in a larger town or city, ask around for a money changer and don't expect great rates.

Exchange rates at upcountry banks tend to be slightly lower than what you'd get in Vientiane, despite the fact that the national bank mandates a single daily rate for all government banks. For the latest rates from BCEL, check [www.bcellaos.com](http://www.bcellaos.com). For a list of exchange rates as we went to press see the inside front cover.

### Tipping

Tipping is not customary in Laos except in upmarket restaurants where 10% of the bill is appreciated – but only if a service charge hasn't already been added.

### Travellers Cheques

Travellers cheques can be cashed at most banks in Laos, but normally only in exchange for kip. Cheques in US dollars are the most readily acceptable, and in fact outside Vientiane they might be the only cheques accepted. Very few merchants accept travellers cheques.

## PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

Laos is a fantastic destination for photography and if you take the following into account there is no reason why you won't come away with some great shots – without upsetting anyone.

Digital photography is spreading fast and, particularly in popular tourist centres such as Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Vang Vieng and Pakse, the usual range of batteries, memory cards and even a limited range of cameras are available.

There are still plenty of old-school film cameras around, and Fuji and Kodak colour print films in ASA 100 or 200 are available in larger towns. A few of the better photo shops in Vientiane and Luang Prabang carry slide film, typically Ektachrome Elite or Fujichrome Sensia. For B&W film or other slide film stock up in Bangkok, where film is relatively cheap, before you come to Laos. Processing is inexpensive.

Most internet cafes have card readers and can write photos to either CD or DVD for about US\$1 or US\$2.

### Photographing People

In rural areas people are often not used to having their photos taken, so smile and ask permission before snapping away. In tribal areas *always* ask permission before

photographing people or religious totems; photography of people is taboo among several tribes. Breaking such taboos might not seem like a big deal to you, but it is to your subject. See *Sleeping with Spirits* (p249) for details.

Use discretion when photographing villagers anywhere in the country, and think before you shoot.

### Restrictions

Lao officials are sensitive about photography of airports and military installations; when in doubt, refrain, and if you get stopped be as apologetic and dumb-tourist as you can be.

### Technical Tips

As in other tropical countries, the best times of day for photography are early to mid-morning and late afternoon. A polarising filter is helpful for cutting glare and improving contrast, especially when photographing temple ruins or shooting over water.

Moisture is the biggest threat to your gear so during the rainy season (from June to October) pack some silica gel with your camera to prevent mould growing inside the lenses. Also always carry a plastic bag, at least, to keep your gear dry when the heavens open.

The wet season isn't all bad. The skies are clearer and the greens of the forest are much brighter, compared with the hot season (March to May) when you'll often find a layer of dust damping down the colours and adding glare to the skies.

Outside major cities and towns electricity is not always available. This is a problem if you need to recharge batteries, so be sure to pack enough and keep them charged. Standard camera batteries are readily available in big towns but you'll be lucky to find them out in the sticks, so carry all you'll need.

Lonely Planet's *Travel Photography* contains tips on how to get the most out of your camera.

### Video

Blank videotapes in popular formats, including DV, are readily available for sale in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, and to a lesser extent in Savannakhet, Pakse and a few other provincial capitals.

## POST

Sending post from Laos is not all that expensive and is fairly reliable, but people still tend to wait until they get to Thailand to send parcels. If you're heading to Cambodia, you're better off posting your parcels from Laos.

When posting any package you must leave it open for inspection by a postal officer. Incoming parcels might also need to be opened for inspection; there may be a small charge for this mandatory 'service'.

Waiting for mail to arrive, however, is not as certain, especially for packages. The main post office (p90) in Vientiane has a poste restante service. To send something here address it:

Person's Name  
Post Restante  
Vientiane  
Lao PDR

Note that there is no home mail-delivery service in Laos; you need to rent a post-office box. Throughout the country you can recognise post offices by the colour scheme: mustard yellow with white trim. See inside front cover for opening hours.

## SHOPPING

Shopping in Laos is improving fast. The growth in tourist numbers has been matched, if not exceeded, by the number of stores flogging fabrics, handicrafts and regional favourites from Vietnam and Thailand. Vientiane and Luang Prabang are the main shopping centres and in these cities it's easiest to compare quality and price. It is, however, always nice to buy direct from the producer, and in many villages that's possible.

There is a *total* ban on the export of antiques and Buddha images from Laos, though the enforcement of this ban is slack.

## Bargaining

Bargaining is a tradition introduced by early Arab and Indian traders, however, in most places in Laos it's not nearly as aggressive as in other parts of Southeast Asia. Good bargaining, which takes practice, is one way to cut costs. Most things bought in a market should be bargained for and it can't hurt to try in a shop, though increasingly prices are fixed.

In general the Lao are gentle and very scrupulous in their bargaining practices. A fair price is usually arrived at quickly with little attempt to gouge the buyer (tour op-

erators may be an exception to this rule). The amount they come down is usually less than what you see in neighbouring countries. Laos definitely has a 'two-tier pricing system' when it comes to quoting prices to foreigners, but it's nowhere near as evident as in Vietnam.

What is really important here is to remember that a good bargain is where both the buyer and the vendor end up happy. By all means try to get a fair price. But if you find yourself getting hot under the collar over 1000 kip (about US\$0.10) it's time to take a reality check. In this instance both you and the seller lose face and everyone ends up unhappy. In a country as cheap as Laos, it's just not worth it.

## Antiques

Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Savannakhet each have a sprinkling of antique shops. Anything that looks old could be up for sale in these shops, including Asian pottery (especially porcelain from the Ming dynasty of China), old jewellery, clothes, carved wood, musical instruments, coins and bronze statuettes. Because of the government's lax enforcement of the ban on the export of antiques, due to an overall lack of funds and personnel, you might be tempted to buy these objects. However, bear in mind not only that it is illegal to take them out of the country but that if you do so you will be robbing the country of its precious and limited heritage. For more on the fight against antiquity theft in Southeast Asia, see [www.heritagewatch.org](http://www.heritagewatch.org).

## Carvings

The Lao produce well-crafted carvings in wood, bone and stone. Subjects include anything from Hindu or Buddhist mythology to themes from everyday life. Authentic opium pipes can be found, especially in the north, and sometimes have intricately carved bone or bamboo shafts, along with engraved ceramic bowls. The selection, though, gets smaller every year.

To shop for carvings, look in antique or handicraft stores. Don't buy anything made from ivory; quite apart from the elephant slaughter caused by the ivory trade, many countries will confiscate any ivory items found in your luggage.

## Fabric (Textiles)

Textiles are among the most beautiful, most recognisable and easiest items to buy while you're in Laos. Together with a hanger that was once part of a loom, these can look great on a wall at home and, unlike many handicrafts that are ubiquitous throughout Indochina, these are unmistakably Lao.

Silk and cotton fabrics are woven in many different styles according to the geographic provenance and ethnicity of the weavers. Although Lao textiles do have similarities with other Southeast Asian textiles, Lao weaving techniques are unique in both loom design and weaving styles, generating fabrics that are very recognisably Lao.

Generally speaking, the fabrics of the north feature a mix of solid colours with complex geometric patterns – stripes, diamonds, zig-zags, animal and plant shapes – usually in the form of a *phào nung* or *sin* (a women's wrap-around skirt). Sometimes gold or silver thread is woven in along the borders. Another form the cloth takes is the *phào biang*, a narrow Lao-Thai shawl that men and women wear singly or in pairs over the shoulders during weddings and festivals.

The southern weaving styles are often marked by the *mat-mii* technique, which involves 'tie-dyeing' the threads before weaving. The result is a soft, spotted pattern similar to Indonesian ikat. *Mat-mii* cloth can be used for different types of clothing or for wall-hangings. Among Lao Thoeng and Mon-Khmer communities in the southern provinces there is a *mat-mii* weaving tradition which features pictographic story lines, sometimes with a few Khmer words, numerals or other non-representational symbols woven into the pattern. In Sekong and Attapeu Provinces some fabrics mix beadwork with weaving and embroidery.

Among the Hmong and Mien tribes, square pieces of cloth are embroidered and quilted to produce strikingly colourful fabrics in apparently abstract patterns that contain ritual meanings. In Hmong these are called *pan-dau* (flower cloth). Some larger quilts feature scenes that represent village life, including both animal and human figures.

Many tribes among the Lao Soung and Lao Thoeng groups produce woven shoulder bags in the Austro-Thai and Tibetan-Burmese traditions, like those seen all across the mountains of South Asia and Southeast Asia. In

Laos, these are called *nyaaam*. Among the most popular *nyaaam* nowadays are those made with older pieces of fabric from 'antique' *phào nung* or from pieces of hill-tribe clothing. Vientiane's Talat Sao (Morning Market; Map p92) is one of the best places to shop for this kind of accessory.

The best place to buy fabric is in the weaving villages themselves, where you can watch how it's made and get 'wholesale' prices. Failing this, you can find a decent selection and reasonable prices at open markets in provincial towns, including Vientiane's Talat Sao. Tailor shops and handicraft stores generally charge more and quality is variable. In Vientiane and Luang Prabang several stores are dedicated to high-quality textiles, with high prices to match.

## Jewellery

Gold and silver jewellery are good buys in Laos, although you must search hard for well-made pieces. Some of the best silverwork is done by the hill tribes. Gems are also sometimes available, but you can get better prices in Thailand.

## SOLO TRAVELLERS

Travelling alone in Laos is very common among both men and women. Lone women should exercise the usual caution when in remote areas or out late at night (see p317).

## TELEPHONE & FAX

Laos has come a long way in a short time on the telephone front. While most Lao people are still not connected, the introduction of mobile phones and, in recent years, WIN phones has allowed some truly remote villages to get connected without the need for expensive landlines.

You can make international calls from Lao Telecom offices in most provincial capitals, or if there is no Lao Telecom office, from the post office, which is usually nearby. Operators cannot place collect calls or reverse phone charges – you must pay for the call in cash kip when it is completed. A faded list of rates is usually stuck on a wall near the phone. Where a separate phone office exists, hours typically run from 7.30am to 9.30pm or from 8am to 10pm.

International calls are also charged on a per-minute basis, with a minimum charge of three minutes. Calls to most countries cost between about US\$0.75 and US\$1.80 per minute.



It's almost always cheaper to use an internet café (most provide international call services), if there is one. In Vientiane the telephone office has responded to competition from the internet by slashing rates to about 20c a minute. Faxes can be sent from the same Lao Telecom or post offices.

### Mobile Phone

Laos has bought into mobile telephony big time. Lao Telecom and several private companies offer mobile phone services on the GSM system. Competition is fierce and you can buy a local SIM card for US\$5 from almost anywhere – we bought ours from an optometry shop. Calls are cheap and recharge cards are widely available for between 15,000 and 60,000 kip each.

Network coverage varies depending on the company and the region. In our experience, Lao Telecom and another government-affiliated company, Enterprise of Telecommunications Lao (ETL), have the widest coverage. These are more expensive than Tango Lao and M-Phone, but Tango's coverage is limited to larger cities and towns.

In some areas (such as Si Phan Don where M-Phone reigns supreme), one company is so dominant that it can be hard to find recharge cards for other companies. So if you really need to make that call, buy ahead. Note that international SMS messages from Lao SIM cards often don't work.

### Phone Codes

Until a few years ago most cities in Laos could only be reached through a Vientiane operator. These days you can direct-dial to and from most of the country using IDD technology.

The country code for calling Laos is ☎ 856. For long-distance calls within the country, dial ☎ 0 first, then the area code and number. For international calls dial ☎ 00 first, then the country code, area code and number.

All mobile phones have a ☎ 020 code at the beginning of the number. Similar to this are WIN phones, which begin with ☎ 030. See the inside front cover and under regional headings for area codes inside Laos.

### Phonecards

In theory, Tholakhm Lao (Lao Telecom), a private company, issues telephone cards (*bát thóhlasáp*) to be used in special card phone booths. In reality, they don't. These phones

have been superseded by mobile phones and no-one uses them anymore; we saw two that had been converted into greenhouses.

### TIME

Laos is seven hours ahead of GMT/UTC. Thus, noon in Vientiane is 10pm the previous day in San Francisco, 1am in New York, 5am in London, 1pm in Perth and 3pm in Sydney. There is no daylight saving (summer) time.

### TOILETS

While Western-style 'thrones' are now found in most mid-range and top-end accommodation, if you're a budget traveller expect the rather-less-royal 'squat toilet' to be the norm. Whether you consider squat toilets an inconvenience, anatomically healthy or part of 'the real Laos', there's really no cause for alarm – they're not that bad.

Instead of trying to approximate a chair or stool like a modern sit-down toilet, a traditional Asian toilet sits more or less flush with the surface of the floor, with two footpads on either side of the porcelain abyss. Next to the typical squat toilet is a bucket or cement reservoir from which water is scooped using a plastic bowl. Firstly, toilet-goers use the scoop and water to clean their nether regions while still squatting over the toilet. Secondly, a couple of extra scoops are poured into the toilet basin to flush the waste away. The more rustic toilets in rural areas may simply consist of a few planks over a hole in the ground.

Even in places where sit-down toilets are installed, the plumbing may not be designed to take toilet paper. In such cases there will usually be a rubbish bin for the used toilet paper.

Public toilets are uncommon outside hotel lobbies and airports. While you are on the road between towns and villages it's perfectly acceptable to go behind a tree or use the roadside.

### TOURIST INFORMATION

For years a visit to the Lao National Tourism Administration (LNTA) was little more than a waste of time, with a brochure or two to prove you wasted it. But things have changed. While it's still not up to the standards of map-crazy neighbours like Thailand, the LNTA now has offices in Vientiane and Luang Prabang that are well worth visiting, plus three very good websites that offer valuable pre-departure information:

**Central Laos Trekking** ([www.trekkingcentrallaos.com](http://www.trekkingcentrallaos.com))

**Lao Ecotourism** ([www.ecotourismlaos.com](http://www.ecotourismlaos.com))

**Lao National Tourism Administration**

([www.tourismlaos.gov.la](http://www.tourismlaos.gov.la))

Many offices are now well-stocked with brochures, maps (usually), house easily understood displays of their provincial attractions and employ English-speaking staff to answer your questions. Fantastic! The offices in Tha Khaek, Savannakhet, Pakse, Luang Nam Tha, Sainyabuli, Phongsali and Sam Neua are all excellent, with staff trained to promote treks and other activities in their provinces and able to hand out brochures and first-hand knowledge about them. They should also be able to help with local transport options and bookings.

However, change hasn't reached everywhere. All provincial capitals have an LNTA office but English is often rudimentary and the lack of information can be profound; in some cases visiting such an office might even be more hindrance than help. If you find the local LNTA officials to be unhelpful, you can usually get up-to-date information from a busy guesthouse (if there is one).

### TRAVELLERS WITH DISABILITIES

With its lack of paved roads or footpaths (sidewalks) – even when present the latter are often uneven – Laos presents many physical obstacles for people with mobility impairments. Rarely do public buildings feature ramps or other access points for wheelchairs, nor do most hotels make efforts to provide access for the physically disabled, the few exceptions being in the top end. Hence you're pretty much left to your own resources. Public transport is particularly crowded and difficult, even for the fully ambulatory.

For wheelchair users, any trip to Laos will require a good deal of advance planning. Fortunately a growing network of information sources can put you in touch with those who may have wheeled through Laos before. International organisations with information on travel for the mobility-impaired include:

**Access-Able Travel Source** ([www.access-able.com](http://www.access-able.com))

**Accessible Journeys** (☎ 610-521 0339; [www.disabilitytravel.com](http://www.disabilitytravel.com))

**Mobility International USA** (☎ 541-343 1284; [www.miusa.org](http://www.miusa.org))

**Society for the Accessible Travel & Hospitality** (☎ 212-447 7284; [www.sath.org](http://www.sath.org))

### VISAS

Getting into Laos is easier than ever and travellers from many countries can get 30-day tourist visas at most border points (see box p316).

### TOURIST VISA (VISA ON ARRIVAL)

Having finally realised that people will stay for longer if they get a longer visa to start with, the Lao government now issues 30-day tourist visas on arrival at several official international border crossings and at the international airports at Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Pakse.

The whole process is dead easy. You need between US\$30 and US\$42 cash or the equivalent in Thai baht (travellers cheques and other currencies, including Lao kip, are not accepted); one passport-size photo of yourself; and the name of a hotel you will be staying at (pick any one from this guidebook). In theory you need the name of a contact in Laos but it's OK to leave that section blank. For airport arrivals you're also supposed to possess a valid return air ticket, but we've never heard of anyone who's actually been asked to show it.

The fee varies depending on what passport you're carrying, with Canadians having to fork out the most (US\$42), and most others at US\$30 or US\$35. Moneychangers at these places are unlikely to be able to give you dollars in exchange for Thai baht or any other currency, so be sure to bring enough. We've seen several travellers get stuck in airport limbo because they arrived without cash to pay for their visas. In such cases the immigration officers may allow you to go into town and try to get dollars from another source. They will, however, keep your passport at the airport in the meantime. The 30-day visa is extendible, though not indefinitely (see below).

As easy as all this sounds it doesn't always go exactly to plan. We've met travellers who were only able to get a 15-day visa at a point where we'd been granted 30 days just a week before. All you can do is check that the visa is 30 days, and if not ask them why.

### VISITOR VISA

If you're coming from Cambodia you'll need (for now at least) to obtain your visa in advance. In this case, the Lao embassy in Phnom Penh issues 30-day visitor visas (B3) in 24 hours for the same cost as a visa on arrival.

This visa is also what you'll get at any other Lao embassy or consulate if you don't want to wait for a visa on arrival, or are not eligible for one. In Bangkok you can get your visa in a couple of hours for an additional 200B express fee. The visitor visa is extendible up to two months.

#### NONIMMIGRANT & BUSINESS VISAS

A person who has a short-term professional or volunteer assignment in Laos is generally issued a nonimmigrant visa good for 30 days and extendible for another 30 days. As with the visitor visa, the application fee is around US\$35.

Journalists can apply for the journalist visa, which has the same restrictions and validity as the nonimmigrant and visit visas except that the applicant must also fill in a biographical form.

Business visas, also good for 30 days, are relatively easy to obtain as long as you have a sponsoring agency in Laos. Many brokers in Vientiane (and a few in Thailand) can arrange such visas with one to two weeks notice. Business visas can be extended from month to month indefinitely, but you will need a visa broker or travel agency to handle the extensions. After the first month's extension, the business visa can be converted to multiple-

entry status. Six-month business visas are also available.

While nonimmigrant and business visas may be collected in one's home country, the Lao embassy in Bangkok is a better place to pick them up. Simply make sure that your sponsoring agency in Laos sends a confirmation fax to the Bangkok embassy; if you can present the fax date to the embassy it can find your fax and then issue your visa sooner.

#### VISA EXTENSIONS

Getting an extension on a tourist visa is easy. Go to the **Immigration Office** (Map p92; ☎ 212250; Th Hatsady; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri), in the Ministry of Public Security building opposite Talat Sao in Vientiane, fill out a form, supply your passport, a photo and pay US\$2 per day for the extra time you want. The whole process can be completed in one hour.

The downside is that you can only do it in Vientiane. Elsewhere, agencies and guesthouses can organise extensions, usually for about US\$3 to US\$4 per day. It will take a couple of days – the further you are from Vientiane, the longer it takes. You can't extend your visa indefinitely, and the Immigration office itself will suggest you cross to Thailand and come back with a new

visa if you try to extend longer than about 15 days.

Nonimmigrant visas, journalist visas and business visas have to be extended through the sponsoring person or organisation.

#### OVERSTAYING YOUR VISA

Overstaying your visa is not seen as a major crime but it is expensive. You'll have to pay a fine of US\$10 for each day you've overstayed at the immigration checkpoint when you leave. Simple as that.

#### VOLUNTEERING

Volunteers have been working in Laos for years, usually on one- or two-year contracts that include a minimal monthly allowance. The volunteer is often placed with a government agency and attempts to 'build capacity'. These sort of jobs can lead to non-volunteer work within the non-government organisation (NGO) community.

The alternative approach to volunteering, where you actually pay to be placed in a 'volunteer' role for a few weeks or months, has yet to arrive in Laos in any great capacity. A couple of groups in Luang Prabang (p146) and Nong Khaiw (p160) need volunteers occasionally.

Check out these agencies for more information:

**Australian Volunteers International** ([www.ozvol.org.au](http://www.ozvol.org.au)) Places qualified Australian residents on one- to two-year contracts.

**Earthwatch** ([www.earthwatch.org](http://www.earthwatch.org)) Places paying volunteers in short-term environmental projects around the globe.

**Global Volunteers** ([www.globalvolunteers.org](http://www.globalvolunteers.org)) Coordinates teams of volunteers on short-term humanitarian and economic development projects.

**United Nations Volunteers** ([www.unv.org](http://www.unv.org)) Places volunteers with qualifications and experience in a range of fields.

**Volunteer Service Abroad** ([www.vsa.org.nz](http://www.vsa.org.nz)) Organises professional contracts for New Zealanders.

**Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) UK** ([www.vso.org.uk](http://www.vso.org.uk)); **Canada** ([www.vsocanada.org](http://www.vsocanada.org)); **Netherlands** ([www.vso.nl](http://www.vso.nl)) Places qualified and experienced volunteers for up to two years.

#### WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Laos is an easy country for women travellers, though you still need to be sensitive to a set of cultural mores that hasn't been watered down as much as in many parts of Thailand. Laos is very safe (see p303) and violence against

women travellers is extremely rare. And while everyday incidents of sexual harassment are more common than they were a few years ago, they're still much less frequent than in virtually any other Asian country.

The relative lack of prostitution in Laos, as compared with Thailand, has benefits for women travellers. While a Thai woman who wants to preserve a 'proper' image often won't associate with foreign males for fear of being perceived as a prostitute, in Laos this is not the case. Hence a foreign woman seen drinking in a café or restaurant is not usually perceived as being 'loose' or available as she might be in Thailand. This in turn means that there are generally fewer problems with uninvited male solicitations.

That, however, is not an absolute. Lao women rarely travel alone, so a foreign female without company might be judged by Lao – male and female – as being a bit strange. And while this is less prevalent in the larger towns and cities where society is generally more permissive, in rural areas Lao men might see a woman travelling alone as a woman who wants company. Generally, though, if your bus or *sāwngthāew* has other women on board, you shouldn't have any problems.

The best way to avoid unwanted attention is to avoid overly revealing clothes. It's highly unusual for most women (even in more modern places like Vientiane and Vang Vieng where they're used to seeing tourists), to wear singlet tops or very short skirts or shorts. So when travellers do, people tend to stare. Being stared at isn't much fun for the traveller, but if you try putting yourself in their shoes it's easier to understand...relatively speaking, if a woman walked down Oxford St in London or Broadway in New York wearing nothing but a bikini, people would look.

Lao people will almost never confront you about what you're wearing, but that doesn't mean they don't care. As one woman in Vang Vieng told us: 'I wouldn't say anything, but I'd prefer it if they put on a sarong when they get out of the river. It's not our way to dress like that [a bikini only] and it's embarrassing to see it.' It's good advice – if you're planning on bathing in a village or river a sarong is essential.

Elsewhere, just keep your eyes open and dress in a way that's not too different from women around you. This doesn't mean you need to get wrapped up in a *sin*, but you'll

#### VISA ON ARRIVAL – PORTS OF ENTRY

At the time of writing, these were the ports of entry where tourist visas were available on arrival. You can cross the border in other places (such as Voeng Kham from Cambodia) but it's not yet possible to get a visa on arrival; see p321 for a full list of border posts.

##### Thailand

- Chiang Khong/Huay Xai (p218)
- Nong Khai/Vientiane (p115)
- Nakhon Phanom/Tha Khaek (p238)
- Mukdahan/Savannakhet (p247)
- Chong Mek/Vang Tao (p261)

##### Vietnam

- Nam Can/Nam Khan (p172)
- Cau Treo/Nam Phao (p234)
- Lao Bao/Dansavanh (p250)

##### China

- Mohan/Boten (p201)

notice that shirts with at least a tiny strip of sleeve are universally popular, as are shorts or skirts that come to somewhere near the knee. Show this small measure of respect for Lao culture, and it will be repaid in kind.

Traditionally women didn't sit on the roofs of riverboats, because this was believed to bring bad luck. These days most captains aren't so concerned, but if you are asked to get off the roof while men are not, this is why.

## WORK

With a large number of aid organisations and a fast-growing international business community, especially in energy and mining, the number of jobs available to foreigners is increasing, but still relatively small. The greatest number of positions are in Vientiane.

Possibilities include teaching English privately or at one of the several language

centres in Vientiane, work which pays about US\$5 to US\$10 an hour. Certificates or degrees in English teaching aren't absolutely necessary, but they do help.

If you have technical expertise or international volunteer experience, you might be able to find work with a UN-related programme or an NGO providing foreign aid or technical assistance to Laos. These jobs are difficult to find; your best bet is to visit the Vientiane offices of each organisation and inquire about personnel needs and vacancies, then start seeking out potential employers socially and buying them lots of Beerlao. For a list of NGOs operating in Laos, see the excellent [www.directoryofngos.org](http://www.directoryofngos.org).

Once you have a sponsoring employer to look after the paperwork, a working visa should be ready in a few days.

# Transport

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Transport infrastructure in Laos is barely recognisable considering what existed a few years ago. Huge, foreign-funded road construction projects have transformed the network of rough dirt tracks into relatively luxurious sealed affairs. The lack of potholes has ushered in a battalion of buses and scheduled services, and getting around Laos is easy and cheap, if sometimes very slow.

Many travellers are choosing to come and go via Laos's numerous land and river borders, something we've acknowledged in this book by giving detailed descriptions of all border crossings that were open to foreigners when we researched this edition. While there are many border options, flying into Laos is refreshing in that you don't need to shop around much – only a few airlines service Laos and prices don't vary much.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### ENTERING LAOS

It's possible to enter Laos by land or air from Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam or China. Land borders are often remote and the travelling can be tough either side, but the actual frontier crossing is usually pretty simple.

### Passport

The only real prerequisites for entering Laos are a passport with six months' validity and a visa if you are crossing at one of the few borders where you can't get a visa on

### THINGS CHANGE...

The information in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change. Check directly with the airline or a travel agent to make sure you understand how a fare (and the ticket you may buy) works and be aware of the security requirements for international travel. Shop carefully. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

arrival, such as the Cambodian border at Voen Kham.

### AIR Airports & Airlines

There are only three international airports in Laos. **Wattay International Airport** (VTE; ☎ 021-512165) in Vientiane; **Luang Prabang International Airport** (LPQ; ☎ 071-212856) and **Pakse International Airport** (PKZ; ☎ 031-212844). Lao Airlines is the national carrier and monopolises the majority of flights in and out of the country, though many code-share with some of the following:

**Bangkok Airways** (☎ 071-253334; www.bangkokair.com; hub Bangkok, Thailand) Code PG.

**China Eastern Airlines** (☎ 021-212300; www.chinaeastern.com; hub Kunming, China) Code MU.

**Lao Airlines** (☎ 021-212051-4; www.laoairlines.com; hub Vientiane) Code QV.

**Thai Airways International** (THAI; ☎ 021-222527; www.thaiair.com; hub Bangkok, Thailand) Code TG.

**Vietnam Airlines** (☎ 021-217562; www.vietnamairlines.com; hub Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam) Code VN.

### Tickets

Unless you're in a country bordering Laos, your first mission is to find a flight to Bangkok. Luckily there are plenty of flights to the Thai capital, but fares fluctuate sharply. Generally, you'll pay less but it will take longer if you fly to Bangkok with a stop on the way. For example, if you're flying from the UK you'll probably get a better deal with airlines such as Gulf Air, Emirates, Singapore Airlines, Garuda or, for those on

the breadline, Biman Bangladesh – all of which involve a stop in the airline's home city – than you would on a direct flight with British Airways or Thai International Airways (THAI). Once you're in Bangkok, there are trains, planes and buses heading to Laos.

## Asia

Almost any travel agency in Asia can book you a flight to Laos. STA Travel is always a safe bet, and has branches in **Bangkok** (☎ 02-236 0262; www.sta-travel.co.th), **Singapore** (☎ 6737 7188; www.statravel.com.sg) and **Japan** (☎ 03 5391 2922; www.statravel.co.jp) among others. In Hong Kong try **Concorde Travel** (☎ 2375 2232; www.concorde-travel.com).

The only flights directly into Laos come from the following four countries – all prices listed are for one-way flights.

## CAMBODIA

### Phnom Penh

Between Phnom Penh and Vientiane (US\$145, 1½ hours) there are two flights a week with Lao Airlines (stopping in Pakse) and a daily direct flight with Vietnam Airlines.

### Siem Reap

Lao Airlines flies between Siem Reap and Vientiane (US\$110, 2½ hours) five times a week, stopping at Pakse (US\$70, 50 minutes). From November to March there are two more flights between Siem Reap and Pakse that continue to Luang Prabang (US\$135). Bangkok Airways should also be flying between Pakse and Siem Reap by the time you read this.

## CHINA

### Kunming

Lao Airlines shares three services a week between Kunming and Vientiane (US\$120, 2½ hours) with China Eastern Airlines.

## THAILAND

### Bangkok

THAI has one flight daily between Bangkok and Vientiane (about 5000B, 70 minutes), while Lao Airlines has two flights in each direction (US\$99); discounts are available on THAI.

Some people save money by flying from Bangkok to Udon Thani in Thailand and then

## DEPARTURE TAX

The international departure tax is US\$15, payable in kip, baht or US dollars.

carrying on by road to Nong Khai, over the Friendship Bridge to Vientiane (p115). Udon Thani is 55km south of Nong Khai and Bangkok-Udon tickets on Thai Air Asia (www.airasia.com) start at about 1300B.

Bangkok Airways flies daily between Bangkok and Luang Prabang (5000B, 1¼ hours), and Lao Airlines has three flights a week for US\$120.

Bangkok Airways should be flying between Bangkok and Pakse by the time you read this.

## Chiang Mai

Lao Airlines has five flights a week between Vientiane and Chiang Mai (US\$111, 2½ hours), via Luang Prabang (US\$85, one hour).

## VIETNAM

### Hanoi

There are 10 flights a week between Vientiane and Hanoi – three on Lao Airlines (US\$115, one hour) and the rest on Vietnam Airlines for slightly more. Lao Airlines also flies between Hanoi and Luang Prabang (US\$112, one hour).

### Ho Chi Minh City

Vietnam Airlines flies from Ho Chi Minh City to Vientiane (US\$140, three hours) daily, via Phnom Penh.

## Australia

Qantas, THAI, British Airways and several other airlines fly to Bangkok from Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, with discount fares starting at about A\$900 return (once you've added in all the taxes). For online bookings also check www.travel.com.au.

**Flight Centre** (☎ 133 133; www.flightcentre.com.au)

**STA Travel** (☎ 1300 733 035; www.statravel.com.au)

## Canada

Fares from Canada are similar to those from the US. **Travel Cuts** (☎ 866-246 9762; www.travelcuts.com) is Canada's national student travel agency. Also try **Travelocity** (www.travelocity.ca).

## Continental Europe

Europeans can pick up discounted seats from about €550. Middle Eastern airlines are usually cheapest. The following agents are worth a look:

**Lastminute** (www.lastminute.com) Click through to various national sites.

**Nouvelles Frontières** (☎ 0825-000 747; www.nouvelles-frontieres.fr)

**OTU Voyages** (☎ 01-5582 3232; www.otu.fr)

Specialising in student and youth travellers.

**STA Travel** (☎ 01805-456 422; www.statravel.de)

**Voyages Wasteels** (www.wasteels.fr)

## New Zealand

Both **Flight Centre** (☎ 0800-243 544; www.flightcentre.co.nz) and **STA Travel** (☎ 0800-474 400; www.statravel.co.nz) have branches throughout the country. Low season fares start at NZ\$1250.

## The UK

It's not hard to find a bargain from London to Bangkok, with discount prices starting at about £350. Gulf Air, Emirates, KLM and Lufthansa are worth looking at. Check the weekend broadsheet newspapers, *Time Out*, the *Evening Standard* and *TNT* magazine for offers.

Recommended agencies:

**North-South Travel** (☎ 01245-608 291; www.northsouthtravel.co.uk) Donates some profit to projects in the developing world.

**STA Travel** (☎ 0871-230 0040; www.statravel.co.uk)

**Trailfinders** (☎ 0845-058 5858; www.trailfinders.co.uk)

**Travel Bag** (☎ 0870-814 4441, toll free 0800 082 5000; www.travelbag.co.uk)

## The USA

Fares from New York to Bangkok range widely, with the cheapest (via places like Moscow) starting at about US\$850 return in the low season. From Los Angeles it's cheaper, and more direct, with airlines like Philippine Airlines, China Airlines, Eva Air and American Airlines. Nondiscounted fares are several hundred dollars more. The following are good for online comparisons and bookings:

**Cheapflights.com** (www.cheapflights.com)

**Cheap Tickets** (www.cheaptickets.com)

**Expedia** (www.expedia.com)

**Orbitz** (www.orbitz.com)

**STA Travel** (www.sta.com)

**Travelocity** (www.travelocity.com)

## BORDER CROSSINGS

Laos shares land and/or river borders with Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, China and Vietnam; see the colour map at the start of this guide for their locations.

In this book we give detailed instructions for every crossing open to foreigners. These details appear as boxed texts in the relevant chapters – the information in this chapter outlines these possibilities and points you to the boxes. Border details change regularly, so ask around or check the **Thorn tree** (http://thorn-tree.lonelyplanet.com/) before setting off.

Most crossings involve changing transport at the border, even when you've paid for a 'direct' bus. Five of the crossings on the western border with Thailand involve quick boat trips across the Mekong.

It's possible to bring your own vehicle into Laos from Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia with the right paperwork (see p323) and Lao customs don't object to visitors bringing bicycles into the country.

In Thailand, trains (www.railway.co.th/english) run to the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge (see p115) and to Ubon Ratchathani, two to three hours from the Lao border (see p261).

Unless stated otherwise, Laos issues 30-day tourist visas (see p315) at crossings that are open to foreigners.

## Cambodia

The border with Cambodia at Voeng Kham is open and while it's possible to get a Cambodian visa on arrival, for now you need to get your Laos visa in advance. There are two border points, one for road crossings and the other for boats to Stung Treng. See p283 for more information.

## China

You can cross between Yunnan Province in China and Luang Nam Tha Province in Laos at Boten. From Mohan on the Chinese side it's a two- to three-hour minibus ride to Mengla, the nearest large town. See p201 for more information.

## Myanmar

Foreigners are not allowed to cross between Laos and Myanmar. However, with a valid visa you could try to cross at Xieng Kok, on the Mekong north of Huay Xai, though success is far from guaranteed.

## Thailand

There are seven crossings to Thailand open to foreigners. Several involve taking a boat across the Mekong, or crossing the river on one of the Friendship bridges. Borders here are listed from north to south.

### HUAY XAI & CHIANG KHONG

Crossing to or from northern Thailand at Huay Xai on the Laos side of the Mekong and Chiang Khong on the Thai side (p218) is popular with travellers coming from northern Thailand. This is the starting point for two-day boat trips to Luang Prabang.

### THE FRIENDSHIP BRIDGE AT NONG KHAI (FOR VIENTIANE)

The Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge (p115) is 22km east of Vientiane. There are direct buses between downtown Vientiane and Nong Khai, and regular runs between Nong Khai and Bangkok.

Rapid and express trains from Bangkok's Hualamphong train station run daily to Nong Khai (11 to 14 hours). Overnight trains have sleeper carriages and make a convenient, comfortable and cheap way to get to the border while saving on a hotel room. Berths cost from 488B to 1217B; costs are higher when booked through an agent in Laos.

Plans to extend the rail line over the Friendship Bridge and 3km into Laos have been approved, so it might be possible to catch the train from the Laos side sometime in 2008.

### PAKSAN & BEUNG KAN

This river crossing (p229) between Beung Kan in Thailand and Paksan in Laos, about 120km from Vientiane, is rarely used by travellers.

### THA KHAEK & NAKHON PHANOM

Another river crossing (p238) takes you from Nakhon Phanom in Thailand to Tha Khaek in Laos. Travellers who use this border are often crossing directly between Thailand and Vietnam.

### SAVANNAKHET & MUKDAHAN

This is the southernmost river crossing (p247) between Thailand and Laos. A bridge across the Mekong River near Savannakhet was opened in late 2006, giving travellers the option of a road or river crossing.

### VANG TAO & CHONG MEK

This border (p261) 44km west of Pakse is a popular and easy entry into southern Laos. Rapid and express trains from Bangkok's Hualamphong train station run three or four times per day to Ubon Ratchathani (sleeping berths 471B to 1180B, 12 hours, 575km), from where it's three or four hours to Pakse by local transport, or faster on the Thai-Lao International Bus.

## Vietnam

At the time of writing foreigners could cross between Laos and Vietnam at six different border posts. Laos issues 30-day tourist visas at most of these, but you'll need to get your Vietnamese visa in advance (see p306). The border at Sop Hun in Phongsali Province, just across from Tay Trang (32km west of Dien Bien Phu), has been going to open for years but is still firmly shut. Keep your eyes on the Thorn Tree for the latest. These borders are listed from north to south.

### NA MAEW & NAM XOI

For now, the northernmost crossing is on Rte 6A between Na Maew in Hua Phan Province, Laos, and Nam Xoi in Thanh Hoa Province, Vietnam. This crossing (p188) can be difficult on both sides, especially given how expensive the infrequent transport on the Vietnam side is. It is, however, the nearest border to Hanoi and the north, so if you're adventurous and want to avoid backtracking, it's worth a shot. Na Maew is a relatively short bus ride to/from Sam Neua, where there are buses and planes to other points in Laos. No visas are issued here.

### NAM CAN & NAM KHAN

This border (p172) east of Phonsavan in Xieng Khuang Province sounds better than it actually is. Even though you're a long way north of the Kaew Neua Pass crossing, the road on the Vietnam side runs so far south (almost to Vinh) before joining north-south Hwy 1 that this border is totally inconvenient.

### NAM PHAO & CAU TREO

The spectacular crossing (p234) through the Kaew Neua Pass, via the low-key border posts of Nam Phao on the Lao side, and Cau Treo in Vietnam, leads to Vinh and all points north, including Hanoi. Direct buses

## VIETNAM BORDER WOES

If we had a Beerlao for every email we've received from travellers who've been scammed while crossing the border between Vietnam and Laos, we'd be able to have a very big party. There are several different scams you might encounter, and plenty of lies you'll be told that won't necessarily cost you money but will most certainly piss you off.

Among the most common is the '12-hour' bus between Vientiane and Hanoi, which is in fact a 20- to 24-hour trip including several hours spent waiting for the border to open. Once across the border (mainly at Nam Phao/Cau Treo but also Dansavanh/Lao Bao) another common scam involves the suddenly rising price. You'll know this one when your bus stops and demands an extra, say, US\$20 each to continue. This one also applies to local transport from the border further into Vietnam, be it by motorbike, public bus, truck or – the worst – tourist-oriented minibuses.

The nastiest part about these scams is you can't do much to avoid them, no matter how many questions you ask or assurances you seek. The best thing to do is just go with the flow and hope your crossing is trouble free, as many are. If you do come across a problem, try to keep a smile on your face (yes, we know it's hard) and get the best result – usually paying a lower amount. As attractive as it might sound, venting your frustrations through your fists makes matters much worse.

Alternatively you could tell the scammers where to go and hope for the best. And as we discovered years ago (these scams have been running forever), sometimes it will pay off. For us, it happened on Rte 8 coming from Vinh to Cau Treo. Our minibus stopped halfway up the Annamite range and the driver demanded more money. We refused, got out and the driver left. No sooner had we asked ourselves 'What now?' than a truck loaded up with bags of cement lumbered over the hill and stopped. 'To the border?' I asked. 'Yes, yes, no problem,' came the smiling reply even after I'd shown him we only had 1300d between us. Sitting atop the truck as we wound our way slowly up through the cloud forests was fantastic and almost as good as the gesture itself, which had restored some of our faith in humanity. We had the last laugh as well, when we found our greedy driver at the border trying to rip off a Canadian couple. We enjoyed telling them: 'Don't, whatever you do, go with that guy.'

between Vientiane and Hanoi take this route, but it's a long, tortuously slow and uncomfortable trip. If you can take the pain, buses leave Vientiane's Northern Bus Station (p113) every day for Vinh (US\$16, 16 hours) and Hanoi (US\$20, 24 hours), and occasionally for Hue (US\$17, at least 24 hours), Danang (US\$20, at least 24 hours) and even Ho Chi Minh City (US\$45, up to 48 hours).

### NA PHAO & CHA LO

Even though this remote border (p241) has a nice new highway on the Laos side, we've still never met anyone who's actually crossed here. Transport runs all the way across this border from Tha Khaek to Dong Hoi in Vietnam, and back. However, no visas are available here yet.

### DANSAVANH & LAO BAO

Good roads and plentiful transport make the border at Dansavanh (Laos) and Lao

Bao, 255km east of Savannakhet, probably the easiest of all crossings to/from Vietnam (p250). If you're heading to/from Hué, Hoi An or anywhere in central Vietnam, it's recommended. The downside, however, is that if you want to see all of Vietnam you're in for a fair bit of backtracking.

### ATTAPEU & QUY NHON

The newest crossing (p296) to Vietnam's central highlands is at Bo Y between remote Attapeu Province and Quy Nhon, though it doesn't really fit any existing travelling routes. Visas on arrival are not guaranteed.

## GETTING AROUND

### AIR Airlines in Laos

Lao Airlines is the only airline in Laos. It handles all domestic flights, with Vientiane as the main hub. The Laos Air Fares map

(p324) gives you an idea of all Laos's scheduled air routes and prices, both domestic and international; for the latest fares check Lao Airlines' website ([www.laoairlines.com](http://www.laoairlines.com)).

Prices have been fairly steady in recent years and are reasonable value. Except at Lao Airlines' offices in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, where credit cards are accepted for both international and domestic tickets, you must pay cash in US dollars.

Lao Airlines schedules are increasingly reliable but flights still get cancelled semi-regularly. During the holiday season it's best to book ahead as flights can fill fast. At other times, when flights are more likely to be cancelled, confirm the flight is still going a day or two before.

In its previous incarnation as Lao Aviation, Lao Airlines had a bad reputation and travellers still ask whether it's safe. The answer is 'pretty much'. Almost everything about the airline – the planes, maintenance and pilots – has improved and there haven't been any serious incidents for several years. French ATR-72 planes operate most international routes and many domestic flights, though some of the domestic flights use older and less-reliable Chinese or Russian planes.

## BICYCLE

The stunning roads and light, relatively slow traffic in most towns and on most highways make Laos arguably the best country for cycling in Southeast Asia. Several tour agencies

and guesthouses offer mountain biking tours, ranging in duration from a few hours to several weeks (see p330).

## Hire

Simple single-speed bicycles with names like Hare, Crocodile and Rabbit can be hired in most places that see a decent number of tourists, usually costing between US\$0.50 and US\$1.50 per day. Mountain bikes can be hired in a few places, including Luang Nam Tha, Vientiane, Vang Vieng and even Khoun Kham, for between US\$1.50 and US\$5 per day.

These mostly Thai- or Chinese-made bikes come in varying degrees of usability, so be sure to inspect them thoroughly before hiring. Common problems include loose seats or handlebars and broken bells. Ask and you can usually get the seat adjusted to suit your height.

## Purchase

You can buy a new bicycle for between US\$40 and US\$100. The Chinese bikes are sturdier, the Thai bikes more comfortable. Low-quality Chinese or Taiwanese mountain bikes cost more.

## BOAT

More than 4600km of navigable rivers are the highways and byways of traditional Laos, the main thoroughfares being the Mekong, Nam Ou, Nam Khan, Nam Tha, Nam Ngum and Se Kong. The Mekong is the longest and most important route and is, in theory if no longer in practice, navigable year-round between Luang Prabang in the north and Savannakhet in the south (about 70% of its length in Laos). Smaller rivers accommodate a range of smaller boats, from dugout canoes to 'bomb boats' made from junk dropped from the skies during the Second Indochina War.

Sealed roads and buses, however, mean that the days of mass river transport are as good as finished. Every time a new road is opened more boatmen go out of business, unable to compete with the price and pace of those modern conveyors of the masses – buses and *sāwngthāew*. This aspect of progress means local people have access to faster and cheaper travel, and it's not our place to begrudge them that. However, from a travellers' point of view, the gradual death of river transport is a great shame. There were few things more romantic than sitting on a slow boat, tacking from one

riverside village to another as the boat worked its way along the river, picking up people, produce and animals on the way.

While there are barely any regular local boats on the Mekong anymore, there are still a few places left where you can do this, if you're prepared to get right off the beaten river and seek out the adventure...and you can be certain it will be a memorable trip, one way or another. So whether it's on a tourist boat from Huay Xai to Luang Prabang or on a local boat you've rustled up in some remote corner of the country, it's still worth doing at least one river excursion while in Laos.

## River Ferry (Slow Boat)

The most popular river trip in Laos – the slow boat between Huay Xai and Luang Prabang – is still a daily event and relatively cheap at about US\$15 per person for the two-day journey. From Huay Xai, boats are often packed, sometimes overloaded, while from Luang Prabang there should be plenty of room; see p218 for suggestions on avoiding an overloaded boat. Boats on the Mekong see very few passengers south of Luang Prabang, but with enterprise and patience you might find a boat running south through Sainyabuli Province all the way to Vientiane. The slow boat between Pakse and Si Phan Don via Champasak has stopped.

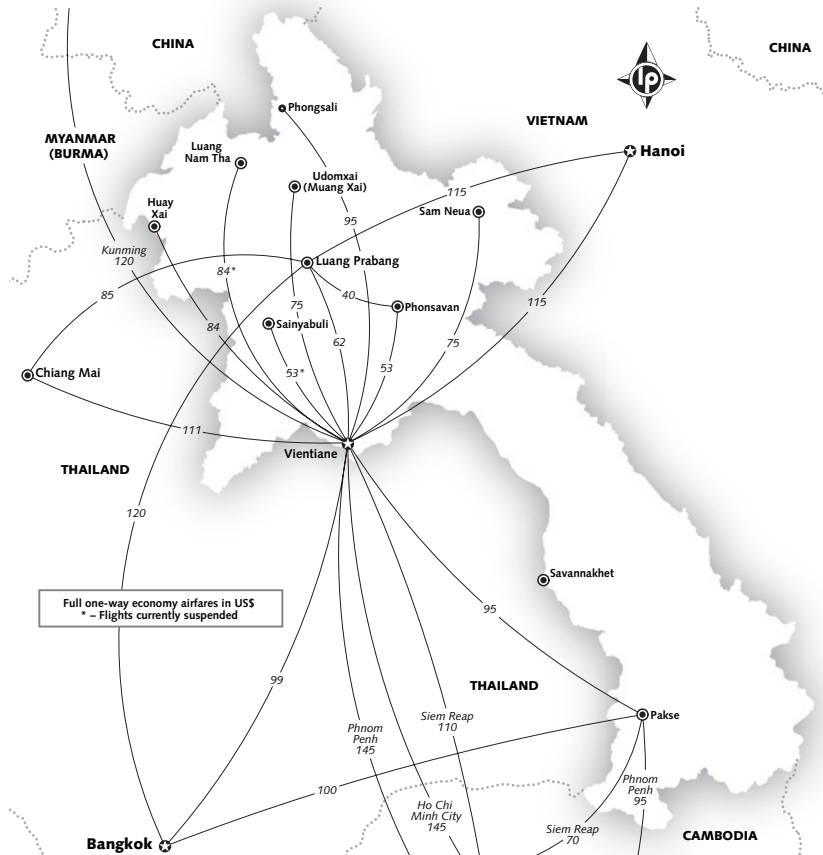
Every river in the country has some boat traffic and chartering a boat is easy enough. Aside from the journey from Huay Xai to Luang Prabang, two of the most beautiful routes are Luang Nam Tha to Pak Tha (US\$170, one to two days) and Nong Khiaw to Luang Prabang (US\$120, five hours). Prices here are for whole boat charters, shared by up to 10 people.

If you get lucky enough to find a public boat, or charter one yourself, note that standards of luxury fall far short of the *Queen Mary*. Most riverboats were designed for cargo transport and facilities range from nonexistent to ultra-basic. Passengers sit, eat and sleep on the wooden decks. The toilet (if there is one) is an enclosed hole in the deck at the back of the boat.

## River Taxi

For shorter river trips, such as Luang Prabang to the Pak Ou Caves, it's usually best to hire a

## LAOS AIR FARES



**KNOW YOUR BOAT**

Following are some of the *héua* (boats) that you may encounter in your adventures along Laos's many waterways:

- *héua sáa* (double-deck boats) – big, old boats; almost extinct
- *héua duan* (express boat) – roofed cargo boats, common on the Huay Xai to Luang Prabang route; they're slow, but called 'express' because they're faster than double-deck boats
- *héua wái* (speedboat) – these resemble a surfboard with a car engine strapped to the back; very fast, exhilarating, deafeningly loud, uncomfortable and dangerous (see p219)
- *héua hang nyáo* (longtail boat) – boats (usually roofed but not always) with engine gimbal-mounted on the stern; found all over Laos
- *héua pháí* (rowboat) – essentially a pirogue; common in Si Phan Don.

river taxi. The *héua hang nyáo* (longtail boats) are the most typical, though for a really short trip (eg crossing a river) a *héua pháí* (rowboat) or one of the small improvised ferries can be hired. The *héua hang nyáo* are around US\$5 an hour for a boat with an eight- to 10-person capacity. Larger boats that carry up to 20 passengers are sometimes available for about US\$8 per hour, although higher tourist prices are often applied, and prices go up with fuel consumption if you're heading up-river when the river is at full flood.

Along the upper Mekong River between Huay Xai and Vientiane, and on the Nam Ou between Luang Prabang and Hat Sa (Phongsali), Thai-built *héua wái* (speedboats) are common. They can cover a distance in six hours that might take a ferry two days or more. Charters cost at least US\$20 per hour, but some ply regular routes so the cost can be shared among passengers. They are, however, dangerous; see p219.

**Tours**

With public boats hard to find, tour companies are increasingly offering kayaking and rafting trips on some of the more scenic stretches of river. The best places to organise these are Luang Nam Tha, Luang Prabang, Vang Vieng, Tha Khaek and Pakse.

**BUS, SĂWNGTHĂEW & LOT DOI SAAN**

Long-distance public transport in Laos is either by bus or *săwngthăew* (literally 'two rows'), which are converted pick-ups or trucks with benches down either side. Buses are more frequent and go further than ever before in Laos, and destinations that were all but inaccessible a few years ago now see regular

services. Private operators have established services on some busier routes – particularly along Rte 13 and on international routes – offering faster and more-luxurious air-con buses, known as VIP buses, which are also pretty good value at about US\$2 per 100km – about 1.5 times the normal bus price.

That's not to say local buses have disappeared completely. Far from it. You can still do the main routes by local bus, and on most journeys off Rte 13 you won't have any option.

If you can't live without your air-con, it's worth booking ahead. You'll usually have to go to the bus station to do this, though increasingly guesthouses can book tickets for a small fee. For an idea of prices, see the boxed text Leaving Vientiane By Bus (p114).

*Săwngthăew* usually service shorter routes within a given province. Most decent-sized villages have at least one *săwngthăew*, which will run to the provincial capital and back most days. Like local buses, they stop wherever you want but are generally slower given that the roads they ply are usually unpaved. And, given that everyone is sitting on-top-of/facing each other, they're even more social than the bus.

The final type of transport is the *lot doi saan* (wooden bus). These big, rumbling trucks with wooden cabins built on the back with forward facing seats were once the mainstay of Lao transport. They can handle the worst road conditions and these days that's where you'll find them – on routes that are unpassable to anything else.

**CAR & MOTORCYCLE**

Driving in Laos is easier than you might think. Sure, the road infrastructure is pretty

basic, but outside of the large centres there are so few vehicles that it's a doddle compared to Vietnam, China or Thailand.

Motorcyclists planning to ride through Laos should check out the wealth of information at **Golden Triangle Rider** ([www.GT-Rider.com](http://www.GT-Rider.com)). Doing some sort of motorbike loop is becoming increasingly popular among travellers. For some tips see p328.

**Bring Your Own Vehicle**

Bringing a vehicle into Laos is easy enough if you have a *carnet de passage*. You simply get the *carnet* stamped at any international border (p321) – there is no extra charge or permit required.

If you don't have a *carnet* – likely the case if you bought your vehicle in Thailand, which doesn't recognise the *carnet* system – you'll need a temporary importation permit. Travel agencies on the Thai side can arrange the necessary permit for between 7000B and 8000B. If it's a Thai-registered vehicle you'll also need to fill out an Information of Conveyance form to allow for temporary export.

On the Lao side you need to arrange a temporary export permit (usually referred to by the French term *laisser-passer*) and Lao vehicle insurance. For both sides you'll need photocopies of your driver's licence, passport information page and vehicle registration papers.

**ON THE BUSES**

The buses of Laos probably won't be what you're used to, so what should you expect? For starters, it will almost certainly take longer than the advertised time. The ride itself depends on how lucky you are on a given day. It could be relatively smooth, moving at something approaching 60kph on an ageing but relatively modern bus, with two seats to yourself and no karaoke. Or it might not....

The bus itself might be a relic that's so bad it makes an otherwise flat road feel like a pot-holed monster. In the course of researching this book we had several flat tires, a bus without windows driving through a storm, a bus that stopped beside Rte 13 and picked up more than 100 50kg sacks of rice from a local mill (each labelled 'Produce of Thailand') and laid them in the aisle, under the seats, and anywhere else they would fit. Funnily enough, the bus seemed to go better after that. The music might be as loud as it is bad, and you might be sharing the bus with a menagerie of farmyard animals. Things break, too. As Justine found on a remote road in Phongsali Province, attempted fixes might be as imaginative, and useless, as putting a condom into the motor.

Our advice is don't look at your watch too much and just soak it up. These sort of trips are actually more fun than they sound. They're inevitably social events and make much better stories than a few uneventful hours on a VIP bus where the only chicken to be seen has already been barbecued.

When you cross into Laos, be sure to stop at Lao customs and get your temporary import papers stamped or you might be fined when you exit the country. Police in Laos occasionally stop foreign-registered vehicles and ask to see their *laisser-passer*.

Exiting into Thailand or Cambodia is fairly hassle free if your papers are in order. Vietnam is a different story. As friends of ours reported (read their account on [www.landcruising.nl](http://www.landcruising.nl)), some borders just don't have the necessary papers. They crossed at Na Maew but had to leave their vehicle at the border while they went 200km to Thanh Hoa to sort out the permit with the police, which took two days and copies of their *carnet*, license, registration and insurance papers. Vietnam usually won't issue permits to right-hand drive vehicles.

If you're heading to China it's virtually impossible to drive a vehicle larger than a bicycle across the border without huge cost and hassle.

**Driving Licence**

To drive in Laos you need a valid International Driving Permit, which you must get in your home country.

**Fuel & Spare Parts**

At the time of research fuel cost about US\$0.80 a litre for petrol, slightly less for diesel. Fuel for motorcycles is available from



drums in villages across the country, though prices are almost always higher than at service stations; usually about US\$1 to US\$1.20 a litre. Diesel is available in most towns. It's best to fuel up in bigger towns at big-brand service stations because the quality of fuel can be poor in remote areas.

Spare parts for four-wheeled vehicles are expensive and difficult to find, even in Vientiane.

## Hire

Chinese- and Japanese-made 100 and 110cc step-through motorbikes can be hired for between US\$5 and US\$15 per day in most large centres. No licence is required. Try to get a Japanese bike (the ominously named Suzuki Smash, perhaps) if you're travelling any distance out of town. In Vientiane, Pakse and Vang Vieng 250cc dirt bikes are available for about US\$20 per day.

## MOTORCYCLE DIARIES

There are few more liberating travel experiences than renting a motorbike and setting off; stopping where you want, when you want. The lack of traffic and stunningly beautiful roads make Laos about the best place in the region to do it. There are, however, a few things worth knowing before you hand over your passport as collateral on a rent bike.

- The bike – Price and availability mean that the vast majority of travellers rent Chinese 110cc bikes. No 110cc bike was designed to be used like a dirt bike, but Japanese bikes deal with it better and are worth the extra couple of dollars a day.
- The odometer – Given that many roads have no kilometre stones and turnoffs are often unmarked, it's worth getting a bike with a working odometer. That's easier said than done. The good news is that almost any bike shop can fix an odometer in about 10 minutes for about US\$3 or US\$4. Money well spent, we think, as long as you remember to note the distance when you start.
- The gear – Don't leave home without sunscreen, a hat, plastic raincoat or poncho, bandana and sunglasses. Even the sealed roads in Laos get annoyingly dusty so these last two are vital. At dusk your headlight will act as a magnet for all manner of suicidal bugs, but unfortunately their aim isn't so good and more often than not they end up smacking into your face. This soon gets tedious and you might find yourself doing a Corey Hart and wearing your sunglasses at night. Helmets are a good idea (ask for one if they don't offer), as is wearing pants and shoes, lest you wind up with the ubiquitous burnt leg.
- The problems – Unless you're very lucky, something will go wrong – budget some time for it. However, short of a head-on with a *sáwngtháew* it shouldn't be the end of the world. On this research trip we had several problems of varying magnitude. A puncture cost us US\$0.60 and half an hour to fix – just push your bike to the nearest puncture repair shop, most villages have one. On The Loop (p240) both rear shock absorbers broke. That meant an alarmingly uncomfortable 70km or so to Lak Sao, but once there two new shocks and labour cost US\$10 and were fixed in 30 minutes. And then there was the throttle cable breaking in the middle of nowhere on the Bolaven Plateau, which is a reflection of how helpful people will be when you're in trouble. Within 10 minutes five men appeared out of nowhere and set about fixing it. An hour later they'd disconnected the front brake, wrapped the throttle cable around the brake lever (my new throttle!), refused any money and wished me well. Great stuff.
- The responsibility – You can ride a motorbike in Laos without a licence, a helmet or any safety gear whatsoever, but for all this freedom you must take all the responsibility. If you have a crash there won't be an ambulance to pick you up, and even when you get to the hospital facilities will be basic. Carrying a basic medical kit and phone numbers for hospitals in Thailand and your travel insurance provider is a good idea. The same goes for the bike. If it really dies you can't just call the company and get a replacement. Laos doesn't work like that, so you'll need to load it onto the next pick-up or *sáwngtháew* and take it somewhere they can fix it. Do not abandon it by the road, or you'll have to pay for another one.

It's possible to hire a self-drive vehicle, but when you consider that a driver usually costs no more, takes responsibility for damage and knows where he's going, it seems pointless. Informal charters can be arranged almost anywhere, with small Japanese pickups going for between US\$40 and US\$100 per day, depending on where you're going; the rougher the road, the higher the price.

The following Vientiane-based companies have good reputations:

**Asia Vehicle Rental** (AVR; Map p92; ☎ /fax 021-217493; www.avr.laopdr.com; 354-356 Th Samsenthai, Vientiane) Undoubtedly the most reliable place to hire vehicles, with or without drivers. Offers 4WDs, vans, sedans. Recommended.

**LaoWheels** (☎ 021-223663, 020-550 4604; laowheels@yahoo.co.uk) One engaging man and his van. Christophe Kittirath speaks fluent French, good English, knows the country inside out and is a good driver. Highly recommended.

Elsewhere, larger hotels usually have a van for rent or can find one, or ask at the local tourism office.

## Insurance

Car-hire companies will provide insurance, but be sure to check exactly what is covered. Note that most travel insurance policies don't cover use of motorcycles.

## Road Conditions

While the overall condition of roads is poor, work over the last decade has made most of the main roads – originally laid out by the French as part of a network that covered Indochina – quite comfortable. Some, however, remain challenging, particularly in the wet season. These include Rte 3 between Huay Xai and Luang Nam Tha, which is being rebuilt by the Chinese, a section of Rte 1C between Vieng Thong and Phu Lao junction, and pretty much all of Rte 18, which cuts across the far south to Vietnam.

Elsewhere, unsurfaced roads are the rule. Laos has about 23,000km of classified roads and less than a quarter are sealed. Unsurfaced roads are particularly tricky in the wet season when many routes are impassable to all but 4WD vehicles and motorbikes. Wet or dry, Laos is so mountainous that relatively short road trips can take forever; a typical 200km upcountry trip could take more than 10 hours.

## Road Hazards

Try to avoid driving at dusk and after dark; cows, buffaloes, chickens and dogs, not to mention thousands of people, head for home on the unlit roads, turning them into a dangerous obstacle course. Unsigned roadwork – often a huge hole in the road – is also a challenge in fading light.

## Road Rules

The single most important rule is to expect the unexpected; Western-style 'tunnel vision driving' just doesn't work here. Driving is on the right side, but it's not unusual to see Lao drivers go the wrong way down the left lane before crossing to the right – a potentially dangerous situation if you're not ready for it. At intersections it's normal to turn right without looking left, and while changing lanes people almost never look behind because the person behind is responsible for avoiding whatever happens in front of them.

## HITCHING

Hitching is possible in Laos, if not common, though it's never entirely safe and not recommended for women as the act of standing beside a road and waving at cars might be misinterpreted. If you are hitching, cars with red-on-yellow (private vehicle) or blue-on-white (international organisations and embassies) number plates might be the best ones to target. Long-distance cargo trucks are also a good bet.

## LOCAL TRANSPORT

Apart from in Vientiane and, to a lesser extent, in Savannakhet and Pakse, you'll seldom need local transport because towns and cities are small enough to walk and cycle around.

## Bus

Vientiane is the only city with a network of local buses (p115), though they're not much good to travellers.

## Jumbo, Sáam-láaw, Sakai-làep, Tuk-tuk

The various three-wheeled taxis found in Vientiane and provincial capitals have different names depending on where you are. Larger ones are called *jambōh* (jumbo) and can hold four to six passengers on two facing seats. In Vientiane they are sometimes called tuk-tuk as in Thailand (though traditionally in Laos this refers to a slightly larger vehicle than

the jumbo), while in the south (eg Pakse and Savannakhet) they may be called *sakai-làep* (Skylab) because someone, probably on opium at the time, once thought they looked like the famous space station that crashed to earth. But wait, there's more... these three-wheeled conveyances are also labelled simply *thaek-sii* (taxi) or, usually for motorcycle sidecar-style vehicles, *sàam-lâaw* (samlor or three-wheels). Whatever you call it people will usually know what you're after. The old-style bicycle *sàam-lâaw* (pedicab), known as a *cyclo* elsewhere in Indochina, is an endangered species in Laos. If you can find a *sàam-lâaw*, fares are about the same as for motorcycle taxis.

Fares vary according to the city and your bargaining skills. Locals generally pay about US\$0.25 per kilometre on trips no longer than about 20km. However, in Vientiane and other towns that see plenty of tourists, serious bargaining is required.

### Taxi

Vientiane has a handful of car taxis that are used by foreign businesspeople and the occasional tourist, though in other cities a taxi of sorts can be arranged. They can be hired by the trip, by the hour or by the day. Typical all-day hire within a town or city costs between US\$35 and US\$45 depending on the vehicle and your negotiating powers. By the trip, you shouldn't pay more than about US\$0.50 per kilometre, but will often be asked to.

### TOURS

A growing number of tour operators run trips in Laos and it's cheaper to book directly with them rather than through a foreign-based agency. A common two-week tour might take in Vientiane, Luang Prabang, the Xieng Khuang (Plain of Jars), Savannakhet and Champasak; the better

operators can customise itineraries. More specialised tours are also becoming popular, with rafting, kayaking, cycling, trekking, motorcycling and even photographic tours all available.

The following are worth investigating:

**Asian Trails** ([www.asiantrails.com](http://www.asiantrails.com))

**Asian Motorcycling Adventures** ([www.asianbiketour.com](http://www.asianbiketour.com)) Some regular and customised off-road trips, including the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

**Carpe Diem Travel** ([www.carpe-diem-travel.com](http://www.carpe-diem-travel.com))

Environmentally and socially responsible tours, focussing on pro-poor tourism and feeding some money back through sponsorship projects.

**Exotissimo** ([www.exotissimo.com](http://www.exotissimo.com)) Large company with a mix of pure sightseeing and adventure tours.

**Gecko Travel** ([www.geckotravel.com](http://www.geckotravel.com)) Mix of small group tours for newbies and those seeking more adventure, plus a photographic tour. Not the cheapest but good feedback.

**Green Discovery** ([www.greendiscoverylaos.com](http://www.greendiscoverylaos.com)) Biggest adventure tourism operator in Laos. Well-organised kayaking, trekking, cycling, rock climbing and rafting trips. Easy to book locally and fair value.

**Inter-Lao Tourisme** ([www.interlao.com](http://www.interlao.com)) Vientiane-based agency that subcontracts to several larger international tour operators.

**Lane Xang Travel** (XPlore Asia; [www.xplore-asia.com](http://www.xplore-asia.com)) Popular with backpackers for their cheap adventure tours, especially from Pakse and Si Phan Don.

**Lao Youth Travel** ([www.laoyouthtravel.com](http://www.laoyouthtravel.com)) Multi-day tours between Vientiane, Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang, plus trips to minority villages further north.

**Paddle Asia** ([www.paddleasia.com](http://www.paddleasia.com)) Kayaking and rafting on a host of rivers.

**Spiceroads** ([www.spiceroads.com](http://www.spiceroads.com)) Specialises in cycling tours.

**Tiger Trail** ([www.tigertrail-laos.com](http://www.tigertrail-laos.com)) Established Luang Prabang-based company with big range of tours, including trekking, rafting and kayaking. No tigers, though.

# Health

Dr Trish Batchelor

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Health issues and the quality of medical facilities vary enormously depending on where and how you travel in Laos. Travellers tend to worry about contracting infectious diseases when in the tropics, but infections are a rare cause of serious illness or death in travellers. Pre-existing medical conditions such as heart disease and accidental injury (especially traffic accidents), account for most life-threatening problems. Becoming ill in some way, however, is relatively common. Fortunately, most common illnesses can either be prevented with common-sense behaviour or be treated easily with a well-stocked traveller's medical kit.

The following advice is a general guide only and does not replace the advice of a doctor trained in travel medicine.

## BEFORE YOU GO

Pack medications in their original, clearly labelled, containers. A signed and dated letter from your physician describing your medical conditions and medications, including generic names, is also a good idea. If carrying syringes or needles, be sure to have a physician's letter documenting their medical necessity. If you have a heart condition bring a copy of your ECG taken just prior to travelling.

If you happen to take any regular medication, bring double your needs in case of loss

or theft. In Laos it can be difficult to find some of the newer drugs, particularly the latest antidepressant drugs, blood pressure medications and contraceptive pills.

## INSURANCE

Even if you are fit and healthy, don't travel without health insurance – accidents do happen. Declare any existing medical conditions you have – the insurance company *will* check if your problem is pre-existing and will not cover you if it is undeclared. You may require extra cover for adventure activities such as rock climbing. If your health insurance doesn't cover you for medical expenses abroad, consider getting extra insurance – check [lonelyplanet.com](http://lonelyplanet.com) for more information. If you're uninsured, emergency evacuation is expensive; bills of over US\$100,000 are not uncommon.

Find out in advance if your insurance plan will make payments directly to providers or reimburse you later for overseas health expenditures. (In many countries doctors expect payment in cash.) Some policies offer lower and higher medical-expense options; the higher ones are chiefly for countries that have extremely high medical costs, such as the USA. You may prefer a policy that pays doctors or hospitals directly rather than you having to pay on the spot and claim later. If you have to claim later, keep all the documentation. Some policies ask you to call back (reverse charges) to a centre in your home country where an immediate assessment of your problem is made.

## VACCINATIONS

The only vaccine required by international regulations is yellow fever. Proof of vaccination will only be required if you have visited a country in the yellow-fever zone within the six days prior to entering Southeast Asia. If you are travelling to Southeast Asia from Africa or South America you should check to see if you require proof of vaccination.

Specialised travel-medicine clinics are your best source of information; they stock all available vaccines and will be able to give specific recommendations for you and your

## RECOMMENDED VACCINATIONS

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends the following vaccinations for travellers to Southeast Asia:

- Adult diphtheria and tetanus – Single booster recommended if you've had none in the previous 10 years. Side effects include a sore arm and fever.
- Hepatitis A – Provides almost 100% protection for up to a year; a booster after 12 months provides at least another 20 years' protection. Mild side effects such as headache and a sore arm occur for between 5% and 10% of people.
- Hepatitis B – Now considered routine for most travellers. Given as three shots over six months. A rapid schedule is also available, as is a combined vaccination with Hepatitis A. Side effects are mild and uncommon, usually a headache and sore arm. Lifetime protection occurs in 95% of people.
- Measles, mumps and rubella – Two doses of MMR required unless you have had the diseases. Occasionally a rash and flulike illness can develop a week after receiving the vaccine. Many young adults require a booster.
- Polio – In 2002, no countries in Southeast Asia reported cases of polio. Only one booster is required as an adult for lifetime protection. Inactivated polio vaccine is safe during pregnancy.
- Typhoid – Recommended unless your trip is less than a week and only to developed cities. The vaccine offers around 70% protection, lasts for two to three years and comes as a single shot. Tablets are also available; however, the injection is usually recommended as it has fewer side effects. Sore arm and fever may occur.
- Varicella – If you haven't had chickenpox, discuss this vaccination with your doctor.

## Long-term travellers

These vaccinations are recommended for people travelling for more than one month, or those at special risk:

- Japanese B Encephalitis – Three injections in all. Booster recommended after two years. A sore arm and headache are the most common side effects. Rarely, an allergic reaction comprising hives and swelling can occur up to 10 days after any of the three doses.
- Meningitis – Single injection. There are two types of vaccination: the quadrivalent vaccine gives two to three years protection; meningitis group C vaccine gives around 10 years protection. Recommended for long-term backpackers aged under 25.
- Rabies – Three injections in all. A booster after one year will provide 10 years protection. Side effects are rare – occasionally a headache and sore arm.
- Tuberculosis – Adult long-term travellers are usually recommended to have a TB skin test before and after travel, rather than vaccination. Only one vaccine is given in a lifetime.

trip. The doctors will take into account factors such as past vaccination history, the length of your trip, activities you may be undertaking, and underlying medical conditions, such as pregnancy.

Most vaccines don't produce immunity until at least two weeks after they're given, so visit a doctor four to eight weeks before departure. Ask your doctor for an International Certificate of Vaccination (otherwise known as the yellow booklet), which will list all the vaccinations you've received. In the US, the yellow booklet is no longer issued,

but it is highly unlikely the Lao authorities will ask for proof of vaccinations (unless you have recently been in a yellow-fever affected country). See Recommended Vaccinations (above) for possible vaccinations.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

There is a wealth of travel health advice on the internet. For further information, **lonelyplanet.com** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) is a good place to start. The **World Health Organization** (WHO; [www.who.int/ith/](http://www.who.int/ith/)) publishes a superb book called *International Travel & Health*, which is re-

vised annually and is available online at no cost. Another website of general interest is **MD Travel Health** ([www.mdtravelhealth.com](http://www.mdtravelhealth.com)), which provides complete travel health recommendations for every country and is updated daily. The **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** (CDC; [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)) website also has good general information.

## FURTHER READING

Lonely Planet's *Healthy Travel – Asia & India* is a handy pocket-size book that is packed with useful information including pretrip planning, emergency first aid, immunisation and disease information and what to do if you get sick on the road. Other recommended references include *Traveller's Health* by Dr Richard Dawood and *Travelling Well* by Dr Deborah Mills – check out the website ([www.travellingwell.com.au](http://www.travellingwell.com.au)).

## IN TRANSIT

### DEEP VEIN THROMBOSIS (DVT)

Deep vein thrombosis (DVT) occurs when blood clots form in the legs during plane flights, chiefly because of prolonged immobility. The longer the flight, the greater the risk. Though most blood clots are reabsorbed uneventfully, some may break off and travel through the blood vessels to the lungs, where they may cause life-threatening complications.

The chief symptom of DVT is swelling or pain of the foot, ankle, or calf, usually on just one side. When a blood clot travels to the lungs, it may cause chest pain and difficulty in breathing. Travellers with any of these symptoms should immediately seek medical attention.

To prevent the development of DVT on long flights you should walk about the cabin, perform isometric compressions of the leg muscles (ie contract the leg muscles while sitting), drink plenty of fluids, and avoid alcohol and tobacco.

### JET LAG & MOTION SICKNESS

Jet lag is common when crossing more than five time zones; it results in insomnia, fatigue, malaise or nausea. To avoid jet lag try drinking plenty of fluids (nonalcoholic) and eating light meals. Upon arrival, seek exposure to natural sunlight and readjust

your schedule (for meals, sleep etc) as soon as possible.

The winding mountain roads in Laos can be beautiful, but they're also a problem if you suffer from motion sickness. The section of Rte 13 between Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang is particularly bad, and we heard from one guy who was ill for three days after that making this trip. Antihistamines such as dimenhydrinate (Dramamine) and meclizine (Antivert, Bonine) are usually the first choice for treating motion sickness. Their main side effect is drowsiness. A herbal alternative is ginger, which works like a charm for some people.

## IN LAOS

### AVAILABILITY OF HEALTHCARE

Laos has no facilities for major medical emergencies. The state-run hospitals and clinics are among the worst in Southeast Asia in terms of the standards of hygiene, staff training, supplies and equipment, and the availability of medicines.

For minor to moderate conditions, including malaria, **Mahasot International Clinic** (☎ 021-214022) in Vientiane has a decent reputation.

For any serious conditions, you're better off going to Thailand. If a medical problem can wait until you're in Bangkok, then all the better, as there are excellent hospitals there.

For medical emergencies that can't be delayed before reaching Bangkok, you can call ambulances from nearby Nong Khai or Udon Thani in Thailand. **Nong Khai Wattana General Hospital** (☎ 0066 4246 5201; fax 4246 5210) in Nong Khai is the closest. The better **Aek Udorn Hospital** (☎ 0066 4234 2555; [www.aekudon.com](http://www.aekudon.com)) in Udon Thani is an hour further from the border by road. **Lao Westcoast Helicopter** (☎ 021-512023;

### HEALTH ADVISORIES

It's usually a good idea to consult your government's travel-health website before departure, if one is available:

**Australia** ([www.dfat.gov.au/travel](http://www.dfat.gov.au/travel))

**Canada** ([www.travelhealth.gc.ca](http://www.travelhealth.gc.ca))

**New Zealand** ([www.mfat.govt.nz/travel](http://www.mfat.govt.nz/travel))

**UK** ([www.doh.gov.uk/traveladvice](http://www.doh.gov.uk/traveladvice))

**US** ([www.cdc.gov/travel](http://www.cdc.gov/travel))

## MEDICAL CHECKLIST

Recommended items for a personal medical kit:

- antifungal cream, eg Clotrimazole
- antibacterial cream, eg Muciprocin
- antibiotics for skin infections, eg Amoxicillin/Clavulanate or Cephalexin
- antibiotics for diarrhoea, eg Norfloxacin or Ciprofloxacin; Azithromycin for bacterial diarrhoea; and Tinidazole for giardiasis or amoebic dysentery
- antihistamines for allergies, eg Cetirizine for daytime and Promethazine for night
- anti-inflammatories, eg Ibuprofen
- anti-nausea medication, eg Prochlorperazine
- antiseptic for cuts and scrapes, eg Betadine
- antispasmodic for stomach cramps, eg Buscopa
- contraceptives
- decongestant for colds and flu, eg Pseudoephedrine
- DEET-based insect repellent
- diarrhoea 'stopper', eg Loperamide
- first-aid items such as scissors, plasters (Band Aids), bandages, gauze, thermometer (electronic, not mercury), sterile needles and syringes, and tweezers
- indigestion medication, eg Quick Eze or Mylanta
- iodine tablets (unless you are pregnant or have a thyroid problem) to purify water
- laxative, eg Coloxyl
- migraine medication (your personal brand), if a migraine sufferer
- oral-rehydration solution for diarrhoea, eg Gastrolyte
- paracetamol for pain
- permethrin (to impregnate clothing and mosquito nets) for repelling insects
- steroid cream for allergic/itchy rashes, eg 1% to 2% hydrocortisone
- sunscreen and hat
- throat lozenges
- thrush (vaginal yeast infection) treatment, eg Clotrimazole pessaries or Diflucan tablet
- urine alkalisation agent, eg Ural, if you're prone to urinary tract infections.

laowestcoast.laopdr.com; Hangar 703, Wattay International Airport), will fly emergency patients to Udon Thani for about US\$1500, subject to aircraft availability and government permission. **Si Nakharin Hospital** (☎ 0066 4323 7602/6) is further away in Khon Kaen but is supposed to be the best medical facility in northeastern Thailand. From any of these hospitals, patients can be transferred to Bangkok if necessary.

Self-treatment may be appropriate if your problem is minor (eg traveller's diarrhoea), you are carrying the appropriate medication and you cannot attend a recommended clinic. If you think you may have a serious disease, especially

malaria, do not waste time – travel to the nearest quality facility. It is always better to be assessed by a doctor than to rely on self-treatment.

Buying medication over the counter is not recommended, as fake medications and poorly stored or out-of-date drugs are common in Laos.

## INFECTIOUS DISEASES

### Dengue Fever

This mosquito-borne disease is becoming increasingly problematic throughout Laos, especially in the cities. As there is no vaccine it can only be prevented by avoiding mos-

quito bites. The mosquito that carries dengue bites day and night, so use insect avoidance measures at all times. Symptoms include high fever, severe headache and body ache (dengue was once known as 'breakbone fever'). Some people develop a rash and diarrhoea. There's no specific treatment, just rest and paracetamol – do not take aspirin as it increases the likelihood of haemorrhaging. See a doctor to be diagnosed and monitored.

### Filariasis

This is a mosquito-borne disease that is very common in the local population, yet very rare in travellers. Mosquito-avoidance measures are the best way to prevent it.

### Hepatitis A

A problem throughout the region, this food- and water-borne virus infects the liver, causing jaundice (yellow skin and eyes), nausea and lethargy. There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A, you just need to allow time for the liver to heal. All travellers to Southeast Asia should be vaccinated against hepatitis A.

### Hepatitis B

The only sexually transmitted disease that can be prevented by vaccination, hepatitis B is spread by body fluids, including sexual contact. In some parts of Southeast Asia, up to 20% of the population are carriers of hepatitis B, and usually are unaware of this. The long-term consequences can include liver cancer and cirrhosis.

### Hepatitis E

Hepatitis E is transmitted through contaminated food and water and has similar symptoms to hepatitis A, but is far less common. It is a severe problem in pregnant women and can result in the death of both mother and baby. There is currently no vaccine; prevention is by following safe eating and drinking guidelines.

### HIV

According to Unaid and WHO, Laos remains a 'low HIV prevalence country'; Unaid reported a range of between 1000 and 1800 as of 2001. However, it's estimated that only about one fifth of all HIV cases in Laos are actually reported. Heterosexual sex is the main method of transmission in Laos.

The use of condoms greatly decreases but does not eliminate the risk of HIV infection. The Lao phrase for 'condom' is *thæng andāmái*. Condoms can be purchased at most *hàan khái yáa* (pharmacies), but it is worth bringing your own condoms from home.

### Influenza

Present year-round in the tropics, influenza (flu) symptoms include high fever, muscle aches, runny nose, cough and sore throat. It can be very severe in people over the age of 65 or in those with underlying medical conditions such as heart disease or diabetes; vaccination is recommended for these individuals. There is no specific treatment, just rest and paracetamol.

### Japanese B Encephalitis

While a rare disease in travellers, at least 50,000 locals are infected with Japanese B Encephalitis each year in Southeast Asia. This viral disease is transmitted by mosquitoes. Most cases occur in rural areas and vaccination is recommended for travellers spending more than one month outside of cities. There is no treatment, and a third of infected people will die while another third will suffer permanent brain damage.

### Malaria

For such a serious and potentially deadly disease, there is an enormous amount of misinformation concerning malaria. You must get expert advice as to whether your trip actually puts you at risk. Many parts of Laos, particularly populated areas, have minimal to no risk of malaria, and the risk of side effects from the antimalaria medication may outweigh the risk of getting the disease. For some rural areas, however, the risk of contracting the disease far outweighs the risk of any tablet side effects. Remember that malaria can be fatal. Before you travel, seek medical advice on the right medication and dosage for you.

Malaria is caused by a parasite transmitted by the bite of an infected mosquito. The most important symptom of malaria is fever, but general symptoms such as headache, diarrhoea, cough, or chills may also occur. Diagnosis can only be made by taking a blood sample.

Two strategies should be combined to prevent malaria – mosquito avoidance, and

antimalarial medications. Most people who catch malaria are taking inadequate or no antimalarial medication.

Travellers are advised to prevent mosquito bites by taking these steps:

- Choose accommodation with screens and fans (if not air-conditioned).
- Impregnate clothing with Permethrin in high-risk areas.
- Sleep under a mosquito net impregnated with Permethrin.
- Spray your room with insect repellent before going out for your evening meal.
- Use a DEET-containing insect repellent on exposed skin. Wash this off at night, as long as you are sleeping under a mosquito net. Natural repellents such as citronella can be effective, but must be applied more frequently than products containing DEET.
- Use mosquito coils.
- Wear long sleeves and trousers in light colours.

#### MALARIA MEDICATION

There are a variety of medications available. The effectiveness of the Chloroquine and Paludrine combination is now limited in most of Southeast Asia. Common side effects include nausea (40% of people) and mouth ulcers. It is generally not recommended.

Lariam (Mefloquine) has received much bad press, some of it justified, some not. This weekly tablet suits many people. Serious side effects are rare but include depression, anxiety, psychosis and seizures. Anyone with a history of depression, anxiety, other psychological disorder, or epilepsy should not take Lariam. It is considered safe in the second and third trimesters of pregnancy. It is around 90% effective in most parts of Southeast Asia, but there is significant resistance in parts of northern Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. Tablets must be taken for four weeks after leaving the risk area.

Doxycycline, taken as a daily tablet, is a broad-spectrum antibiotic that has the added benefit of helping to prevent a variety of tropical diseases, including leptospirosis, tick-borne disease, typhus and melioidosis. The potential side effects include photosensitivity (a tendency to sunburn), thrush in women, indigestion, heartburn, nausea and interference with the contraceptive pill. More serious side effects include ulceration of the

oesophagus – you can help prevent this by taking your tablet with a meal and a large glass of water, and never lying down within half an hour of taking it. It must be taken for four weeks after leaving the risk area.

Malarone is a new drug combining Atovaquone and Proguanil. Side effects are uncommon and mild, most commonly nausea and headaches. It is the best tablet for scuba divers and for those on short trips to high-risk areas. It must be taken for one week after leaving the risk area.

Derivatives of Artesunate are not suitable as a preventive medication. They are useful treatments under medical supervision.

A final option is to take no preventive medication but to have a supply of emergency medication should you develop the symptoms of malaria. This is less than ideal, and you'll need to get to a good medical facility within 24 hours of developing a fever. If you choose this option the most effective and safest treatment is Malarone (four tablets once daily for three days). Other options include Mefloquine and Quinine but the side effects of these drugs at treatment doses make them less desirable. Fansidar is no longer recommended.

#### Measles

Measles remains a problem in some parts of Southeast Asia. This highly contagious bacterial infection is spread via coughing and sneezing. Most people born before 1966 are immune as they had the disease in childhood. Measles starts with a high fever and rash and can be complicated by pneumonia and brain disease. There is no specific treatment.

#### Melioidosis

This infection is contracted by skin contact with soil. It is rare in travellers. The symptoms are very similar to those experienced by tuberculosis sufferers. There is no vaccine but it can be treated with medication.

#### Opisthorchiasis (Liver Flukes)

These are tiny worms that are occasionally present in freshwater fish in Laos. The main risk comes from eating raw or undercooked fish. Travellers should in particular avoid eating uncooked *pqa dæk* (an unpasteurised fermented fish used as an accompaniment for many Lao foods) when travelling in rural Laos. The *pqa dæk* in Vientiane and Luang Prabang is said to be safe (or safer) simply be-

cause it is usually produced from noninfected fish, while the risk of infestation is greatest in the southern provinces.

A rarer way to contract liver flukes is by swimming in the Mekong River or its tributaries around Don Khong (Khong Island) in the far south of Laos.

At low levels, there are virtually no symptoms at all; at higher levels, an overall fatigue, a low-grade fever and swollen or tender liver (or general abdominal pain) are the usual symptoms, along with worms or worm eggs in the faeces. Opisthorchiasis is easily treated with medication. Untreated, patients may develop serious liver infections several years after contact.

#### Rabies

This uniformly fatal disease is spread by the bite or lick of an infected animal – most commonly a dog or monkey. You should seek medical advice immediately after any animal bite and commence post-exposure treatment. Having a pretravel vaccination means the postbite treatment is greatly simplified. If an animal bites you, gently wash the wound with soap and water, and apply iodine based antiseptic. If you are not vaccinated you will need to receive rabies immunoglobulin as soon as possible.

#### Schistosomiasis

Schistosomiasis (also called bilharzia) is a tiny parasite that enters your skin when swimming in contaminated water – travellers usually only get a light, symptomless infection. If you are concerned, you can be tested three months after exposure. On rare occasions, travellers may develop 'Katayama fever'. It can occur some weeks after exposure, as the parasite passes through the lungs and causes an allergic reaction – symptoms are coughing and fever. Schistosomiasis is easily treated with medications.

#### STDs

Sexually transmitted diseases most common in Laos include herpes, warts, syphilis, gonorrhoea and chlamydia. People carrying these diseases often have no signs of infection. Condoms will prevent gonorrhoea and chlamydia but not warts or herpes. If after a sexual encounter you develop any rash, lumps, discharge or pain when passing urine seek immediate medical attention. If you have

been sexually active during your travels have an STD check on your return home.

#### Strongyloides

This parasite, also transmitted by skin contact with soil, rarely affects travellers. It is characterised by an unusual skin rash called larva currens – a linear rash on the trunk which comes and goes. Most people don't have other symptoms until their immune system becomes severely suppressed, when the parasite can cause an overwhelming infection. It can be treated with medication.

#### Tuberculosis

Tuberculosis (TB) is very rare in short-term travellers. Medical and aid workers, and long-term travellers who have significant contact with the local population should take precautions, however. Vaccination is usually only given to children under the age of five, but adults at risk are recommended pre- and post-travel TB testing. The main symptoms are fever, cough, weight loss, night sweats and tiredness.

#### Typhoid

This serious bacterial infection is also spread via food and water. It gives a high, slowly progressive fever and headache, and may be accompanied by a dry cough and stomach pain. It is diagnosed by blood tests and treated with antibiotics. Vaccination is recommended for all travellers spending more than a week in Southeast Asia, or travelling outside of the major cities. Be aware that vaccination is not 100% effective so you must still be careful with what you eat and drink.

#### Typhus

Murine typhus is spread by the bite of a flea whereas scrub typhus is spread via a mite. These diseases are rare in travellers. Symptoms include fever, muscle pains and a rash. You can avoid these diseases by following general insect-avoidance measures. Doxycycline will also prevent them.

#### TRAVELLER'S DIARRHOEA

Traveller's diarrhoea is by far the most common problem affecting travellers – between 30% and 50% of people will suffer from it within two weeks of starting their trip. In over 80% of cases, traveller's diarrhoea is caused by a bacteria (there are numerous potential

culprits), and therefore responds promptly to treatment with antibiotics. Treatment with antibiotics will depend on your situation – how sick you are, how quickly you need to get better, where you are etc.

Traveller's diarrhoea is defined as the passage of more than three watery bowel-actions within 24 hours, plus at least one other symptom such as fever, cramps, nausea, vomiting or feeling generally unwell.

Treatment consists of staying well hydrated. Rehydration solutions like Gastrolyte are the best for this. Antibiotics such as Norfloxacin, Ciprofloxacin or Azithromycin will kill the bacteria quickly.

Loperamide is just a 'stopper' and doesn't get to the cause of the problem. It can be helpful, for example if you have to go on a long bus ride. Don't take Loperamide if you have a fever, or blood in your stools. Seek medical attention quickly if you do not respond to an appropriate antibiotic.

### Amoebic Dysentery

Amoebic dysentery is very rare in travellers but is often misdiagnosed by poor-quality labs in Southeast Asia. Symptoms are similar to bacterial diarrhoea, ie fever, bloody diarrhoea and generally feeling unwell. You should always seek reliable medical care if you have blood in your diarrhoea. Treatment involves two drugs; Tinidazole or Metronidazole to kill the parasite in your gut and then a second drug to kill the cysts. If left untreated complications such as liver or gut abscesses can occur.

### Giardiasis

*Giardia lamblia* is a parasite that is relatively common in travellers. Symptoms include nausea, bloating, excess gas, fatigue and intermittent diarrhoea. 'Eggy' burps are often attributed solely to giardiasis, but work in Nepal has shown that they are not specific to this infection. The parasite will eventually go away if left untreated but this can take months. The treatment of choice is Tinidazole, with Metronidazole being a second line option.

## ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

### Food

Eating in restaurants is the biggest risk factor for contracting traveller's diarrhoea. Ways to avoid it include eating only freshly cooked food, and avoiding shellfish and food that has

### DRINKING WATER

- Never drink tap water.
- Bottled water is generally safe – check the seal is intact at purchase.
- Avoid fresh juices – they may have been watered down.
- Boiling water is the most efficient method of purifying it.
- The best chemical purifier is iodine. It should not be used by pregnant women or those people who suffer with thyroid problems.
- Water filters should filter out viruses. Ensure your filter has a chemical barrier such as iodine and a small pore size, ie less than four microns.

been sitting around in buffets. Peel all fruit, cook vegetables, and soak salads in iodine water for at least 20 minutes. Eat in busy restaurants with a high turnover of customers.

### Heat

Many parts of Southeast Asia are hot and humid throughout the year. For most people it takes most people at least two weeks to adapt to the climate. Swelling of the feet and ankles is common, as are muscle cramps caused by excessive sweating. Prevent these by avoiding dehydration and excessive activity in the heat. Take it easy when you first arrive. Don't eat salt tablets (they aggravate the gut) but do drink rehydration solution and eat salty food. Treat cramps by resting, rehydrating with double-strength rehydration solution and gently stretching.

Dehydration is the main contributor to heat exhaustion. Symptoms include feeling weak, headache, irritability, nausea or vomiting, sweaty skin, a fast, weak pulse and a normal or slightly elevated body temperature. Treatment involves getting out of the heat and/or sun, fanning the victim and applying cool wet cloths to the skin, laying the victim flat with their legs raised and rehydrating with water containing a quarter of a teaspoon of salt per litre. Recovery is usually rapid, though it is common to feel weak for some days afterwards.

Heatstroke is a serious medical emergency. Symptoms come on suddenly and include

weakness, nausea, a hot dry body with a body temperature of over 41°C, dizziness, confusion, loss of coordination, seizures and eventually collapse and loss of consciousness. Seek medical help and commence cooling by getting the person out of the heat, removing their clothes, fanning them and applying cool wet cloths or ice to their body, especially to the groin and armpits.

Prickly heat is a common skin rash in the tropics, caused by sweat being trapped under the skin. The result is an itchy rash of tiny lumps. Treat by moving out of the heat and into an air-conditioned area for a few hours and by having cool showers. Creams and ointments clog the skin so they should be avoided. Locally bought prickly heat powder can be helpful.

Tropical fatigue is common in long-term expats based in the tropics. It's rarely due to disease and is caused by the climate, inadequate mental rest, excessive alcohol intake and the demands of daily work in a different culture.

### Insect Bites & Stings

Bedbugs don't carry disease but their bites are very itchy. They live in the cracks of furniture and walls and then migrate to the bed at night to feed on you. You can treat the itch with an antihistamine. Lice inhabit various parts of your body but most commonly your head and pubic area. Transmission is via close contact with an infected person, although body lice can come from contaminated bedclothes. They can be difficult to treat and you may need numerous applications of an anti-lice shampoo such as Permethrin, or in the case of body lice, with medicated creams or ointments. Pubic lice are usually contracted from sexual contact.

Ticks are contracted during walks in rural areas. They are commonly found behind the ears, on the belly and in armpits. If you have had a tick bite and experience symptoms such as a rash (at the site of the bite or elsewhere), fever or muscle aches you should see a doctor. Doxycycline prevents tick-borne diseases.

Leeches are found in humid forest areas. They do not transmit any disease but their bites are often intensely itchy for weeks afterwards and can easily become infected. Apply an iodine-based antiseptic to any leech bite to help prevent infection.

Bee and wasp stings mainly cause problems for people who are allergic to them. Anyone with a serious bee or wasp allergy should carry an injection of adrenaline (eg an EpiPen) for emergency treatment. For others pain is the main problem – apply ice to the sting and take painkillers.

### Parasites

Numerous parasites are common in local populations in Southeast Asia; however, most of these are rare in travellers. The two rules to follow if you wish to avoid parasitic infections are to wear shoes and to avoid eating raw food, especially fish, pork and vegetables. A number of parasites can be transmitted via the skin by walking barefoot including strongyloides, hookworm and cutaneous larva migrans.

### Skin Problems

Fungal rashes are common in humid climates. There are two common fungal rashes that affect travellers. The first occurs in moist areas that get less air, such as the groin, armpits and between the toes. It starts as a red patch that slowly spreads and is usually itchy. Treatment involves keeping the skin dry, avoiding chafing and using an antifungal cream such as Clotrimazole or Lamisil. *Tinea versicolor* is also common – this fungus causes small, light-coloured patches, most commonly on the back, chest and shoulders. Consult a doctor for treatment.

Cuts and scratches become easily infected in humid climates. Take meticulous care of any cuts and scratches to prevent complications such as abscesses. Immediately wash all wounds in clean water and apply antiseptic. If you develop signs of infection (increasing pain and redness) see a doctor. Divers and surfers should be particularly careful with coral cuts as they become easily infected.

### Snakes

Southeast Asia is home to many species of both poisonous and harmless snakes. Assume all snakes are poisonous and never try to catch one. Always wear boots and long pants if walking in an area that may have snakes. First-aid in the event of a snakebite involves pressure immobilisation via an elastic bandage firmly wrapped around the affected limb, starting at the bite site and working up towards the chest. The bandage should not be so tight that the circulation is cut off, and

**AVIAN INFLUENZA (BIRD FLU)**

In 2004, Laos, along with a number of other Southeast Asian countries, reported an outbreak of Avian influenza (bird flu). The strain in question, known as 'Influenza A H5N1' or simply 'the H5N1 virus', was a highly contagious form of Avian influenza that has since spread as far as Turkey to the west. Throughout the region, government officials scrambled to contain the spread of the disease, which wreaks havoc with domesticated bird populations.

While the Avian influenza virus usually poses little risk to humans, there have been several recorded cases of the H5N1 virus spreading from birds to humans. Since 1997, there have been about 250 reported cases of human infection, with a fatality rate of about 30%. The main risk is to people who directly handle infected birds or come into contact with contaminated bird faeces or carcasses. Because heat kills the virus, there is no risk of infection from properly cooked poultry. In February 2007 Laos reported its first human case of the H5N1 virus, no other human cases have been reported since this book went to print.

There is no clear evidence that the H5N1 virus can be transmitted between humans. However, the main fear is that this highly adaptable virus may mutate and be passed between humans, perhaps leading to a worldwide influenza pandemic.

Thus far, however, infection rates are limited and the risk to travellers is low. Travellers to Laos should avoid contact with any birds and should ensure that any poultry is thoroughly cooked before consumption.

the fingers or toes should be kept free so the circulation can be checked. Immobilise the limb with a splint and carry the victim to medical attention. Do not use tourniquets or try to suck the venom out. Antivenom is available for most species.

**Sunburn**

Even on a cloudy day sunburn can occur rapidly. Always use a strong sunscreen (at least factor 30), making sure to reapply after a swim, and always wear a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses outdoors. Avoid lying in the sun during the hottest part of the day (from 10am to 2pm). If you are sunburnt stay out of the sun until you have recovered, apply cool compresses and take painkillers for the discomfort. One percent hydrocortisone cream applied twice daily is also helpful.

**WOMEN'S HEALTH**

Pregnant women should receive specialised advice before travelling. The ideal time to travel is in the second trimester (between 16 and 28 weeks), when the risk of pregnancy-related problems are lowest and pregnant women generally feel at their best. During the first trimester there is a risk of miscarriage and in the third trimester complications such as premature labour and high blood pressure are possible. It's wise to travel with a companion. Always carry a

list of quality medical facilities available at your destination and ensure you continue your standard antenatal care at these facilities. Avoid travel in rural areas with poor transportation and medical facilities. Most of all, ensure travel insurance covers all pregnancy-related possibilities, including premature labour.

Malaria is a high-risk disease during pregnancy. WHO recommends that pregnant women do *not* travel to areas with Chloroquine-resistant malaria. None of the more effective antimalarial drugs are completely safe in pregnancy.

Traveller's diarrhoea can quickly lead to dehydration and result in inadequate blood flow to the placenta. Many of the drugs used to treat various diarrhoea bugs are not recommended in pregnancy. Azithromycin is considered safe.

In the urban areas of Southeast Asia, supplies of sanitary products are readily available. Birth control options may be limited though so bring adequate supplies of your own form of contraception. Heat, humidity and antibiotics can all contribute to thrush. Treatment is with antifungal creams and pessaries such as Clotrimazole. A practical alternative is a single tablet of Fluconazole (Diflucan). Urinary tract infections can be precipitated by dehydration or long bus journeys without toilet stops; bring suitable antibiotics.

**TRADITIONAL MEDICINE**

Throughout Southeast Asia, traditional medical systems are widely practised. There is a big difference between these traditional healing systems and 'folk' medicine. Folk remedies should be avoided, as they often involve rather dubious procedures with potential complications. In comparison, traditional healing systems such as traditional Chinese medicine are well respected, and aspects of them are being increasingly utilised by Western medical practitioners.

All traditional Asian medical systems identify a vital life force, and see blockage or imbalance as causing disease. Techniques such

as herbal medicines, massage, and acupuncture are utilised to bring this vital force back into balance, or to maintain balance. These therapies are best used for treating chronic disease such as chronic fatigue, arthritis, irritable bowel syndrome and some chronic skin conditions. Traditional medicines should be avoided for treating serious acute infections such as malaria.

Be aware that 'natural' doesn't always mean 'safe', and there can be drug interactions between herbal medicines and Western medicines. If you are utilising both systems ensure you inform both practitioners what the other has prescribed.

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