

# Destination Laos

After years of war and isolation, Southeast Asia's most pristine environment, intact cultures and quite possibly the most chilled-out people on earth mean destination Laos is fast earning cult status among travellers.

Laos is developing quickly but still has much of the tradition that has disappeared in a frenzy of bulldozers, concrete and reality TV elsewhere in the region. Village life is refreshingly simple and even in Vientiane it's hard to believe this sort of languid riverfront life exists in a national capital. Then, of course, there is the historic royal city of Luang Prabang, where watching as hundreds of saffron-robed monks move silently among centuries-old monasteries is as romantic a scene as you'll experience anywhere in Asia.

Away from the cities, the rivers that wind dramatically down to the Mekong, the forested mountains of the north, the gothic limestone karsts of central Laos and the 4000 riverine islands of the deep south form one of the most intact ecosystems in Asia. Not surprisingly, this wilderness is drawing travellers looking for nature, adventure or both. Kayaking, rafting, rock-climbing and biking are all available, but it's the community-based trekking that is most popular because it combines spectacular natural attractions with the chance to experience the 'real Laos' with a village homestay – while spending your money where it's needed most.

There is undoubtedly a growing tourist trail in Laos, but that just means there's plenty of roads off Rte 13 where you can make your own trail. After all, half the fun of travelling here is in the travel itself – the people you meet, chickens you share seats with, wrong turns you take and *lào-lào* you drink with the smiling family at the end of the road less travelled.



JULIET COOMBE

# Getting Started

With 30-day visas now available to most travellers when they arrive (p315), your most pressing pre-departure concerns are finding good books (p18) to read up on Laos, working out which route to take (p21) and getting enough cash (p309) to last you through the trip. Laos is a low-maintenance destination and an easy place to travel that's most rewarding to those ready to embrace the laid-back Lao way of life. Don't expect everything to be on time; do pack a smile and prepare to slide down a few gears.

## WHEN TO GO

The best time for visiting most of Laos is between November and February, when it rains the least and is not too hot. It's also Laos's main season for both national and regional *bun* (festivals; see p19).

If you plan to focus on the mountainous northern provinces, the hot season (from March to May) and early rainy season (around June) is not bad either, as temperatures are moderate at higher elevations. Southern Laos, on the other hand, is best avoided from March to May, when day-time temperatures break into the 40s and nights aren't much cooler.

The rainy season is not as bad as you might think. While it will rain – very heavily – the downpours are often fairly brief and can be bracketed by long periods of sunshine. The rains also clear dust from the skies and land, making everything clearer and brighter. Of course, there are downsides; unsealed roads can become quagmires and extensive travel in remote areas like Salavan, Phongsali and Sainyabuli might be impossible. River travel can be a good alternative during these months. If you intend to travel extensively by river, November is the best; flooding has usually subsided yet river levels are still high enough for maximum navigability. Between January and June, low water can make navigating some rivers difficult.

December to February and August are the peak tourist times. January, in particular, is very busy and booking ahead is advisable.

## COSTS & MONEY

Laos is an inexpensive country to visit by almost any standards. Not including transport, a budget of US\$15 a day brings with it decent food and comfortable, but basic, accommodation (p298). When you add air-con, hot water and *falang* (Western) food, costs are around US\$20 to US\$25 per day if you economise, and around US\$75 for top-end hotels and food. Of course, you can spend even more if you stay in the best hotels and eat at the most expensive restaurants, although such a scenario exists only in Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

For those on a tight budget, in Vientiane or Luang Prabang you can squeeze by on about \$10 a day if you stay in the cheapest guesthouses and eat local food; in remote areas where everything's less expensive you can whittle this figure down to around US\$7 or US\$8 a day.

Add to these estimates the cost of transport, which varies considerably depending on how fast you're moving. Flying with Lao Airlines (p324) costs from US\$40 to US\$100 per leg. Most bus trips cost between US\$2 and US\$13; see p114 for a better idea of costs.

All these costs are paid in a mix of US dollars, Thai baht and Lao kip. Credit cards and other bank cards aren't widely accepted, so pack cash and travellers cheques.

See Climate Charts p303 for more information.

## HOW MUCH?

Restaurant meal US\$2-10  
Budget room with air-con US\$6-15  
Homestay with Lao family US\$2, plus US\$1.50 per meal  
Internet access per hour US\$0.60-\$3  
Bus Vientiane to Luang Prabang US\$9-11.50

**READING UP**

Relatively little has been written about Laos but there are enough books to keep you interested before you leave and while you're on the road.

**Travel Literature**

The classic travellers' account of Laos is Norman Lewis' *A Dragon Apparent: Travels In Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam*, written after the author's 1952 trip through French Indochina. It contains this passage on Laos: 'Europeans who come here to live, soon acquire a certain recognisable manner. They develop quiet voices, and gentle, rapt expressions'.

*One Foot in Laos* (1999) by Dervla Murphy is the veteran Irish writer's account of her lone bicycle trip through off-the-beaten-track Laos, written with passion for the local people and some stinging assessments of travellers and modern ways.

*Another Quiet American* (2003), Brett Dakin's account of two years working at the National Tourism Authority of Laos, reveals a lot about what drives (or not) people working in Laos, both local and *falang*.

More recent is *In the Naga's Wake* (2006) by Mick O'Shea, the Lao-based adventurer who details his epic kayaking trip down the Mekong River from source to sea.

Several classic travel narratives by 19th-century French visitors to Laos have been translated into English, including Henri Mouhot's *Travels in Siam, Cambodia, and Laos*. The book covers the 1858 to 1860 trip which resulted in the explorer's death – he's buried near Luang Prabang (p159).

**Other Books**

The vast majority of books on Laos are historical or political works and deal mainly with events of the last century or so.

For well-written, lucid histories it's hard to go past *A History of Laos* by Martin Stuart-Fox, who also wrote the history chapter in this book (p27), and *A Short History of Laos: The Land in Between* (2002) by Grant

**DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT ...**

The range can be limited, but most of what you'll need while travelling can be found in Laos for less than you'd spend at home. There are, however, a few things you shouldn't forget, not least a deep well of patience, your sense of humour and a dose of perspective when a reality check is required. More tangible objects include:

- a sarong (for both women and men) to stay modest while bathing Lao-style
- photos of family to show when language is a barrier
- a phrasebook to make that barrier more surmountable
- contraceptives and tampons if needed
- good sunscreen and mosquito repellent, and a small torch (flashlight) for caves and villages without electricity
- light wash-and-wear clothes
- slip-on shoes or sandals – cool to wear and easy to remove before entering a Lao home or temple
- a Leatherman (or similar) tool, sunglasses and a bandana if you're planning on motorbiking
- a sweater/pullover or light jacket for the cool season, mountainous provinces and overnight buses

**TOP 10****FABULOUS FESTIVALS**

Laos boasts a couple of festivals (p306) a month, year-round, not to mention public holidays. Here are the most impressive.

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|--|---|
| 1 Makha Bussa (Full Moon; national) February (p306)  | 6 Bun Bang Fai (Rocket Festival; national) May (p306)                             |
| 2 Bun Wat Phu (Champasak) February (p268)  | 7 Bun Khao Phansa (national) July (p306)  |
| 3 Vietnamese Tet & Chinese New Year (Vientiane, Pakse and Savannakhet) February–March (p306) | 8 Bun Awk Phansa (national) October (p307)  |
| 4 Bun Pha Wet (national) March (p306)  | 9 Bun Nam (Boat Racing Festival; Vientiane, Savannakhet, Huay Xai) October (p101) |
| 5 Bun Pi Mai Lao (Lao New Year; Luang Prabang) April (p306)                                  | 10 Bun Pha That Luang (Vientiane) October–November (p101)                         |

**OUTDOOR THRILLS – INTO THE WILD**

There's no better country in Asia to get outside and adventurous.

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|--|---|
| 1 Mounting a week-long expedition to Nong Fa in the Dong Ampham NPA (p297) | 6 Scaling a cliff to reach Muang Sui's coffin cave (p181)                 |
| 2 Boating through the 7km-long Tham Kong Lo cave (p231)                    | 7 Trekking in the Nam Ha NPA and staying in local villages (see p198)     |
| 3 Rafting the rapids of the Nam Lik or Nam Ngum (p124)                     | 8 Trekking into limestone karsts and waterholes of Phu Hin Bun NPA (p230) |
| 4 Taking a slow boat up the Nam Ou from Nong Khiaw (p160)                  | 9 Riding a motorbike around southern Laos for a week (p263)               |
| 5 Rock-climbing the caves and karsts of Vang Vieng (p125)                  | 10 Climbing Phu Asa by elephant (p270)                                    |

**LAO-STYLE MÚAN (FUN)**

Just saying 'yes' to that weird-sounding dish, drink or experience is fun, Lao style.

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|---|--|
| 1 Bumping along in the back of a <i>sáwngháew</i> with loads of Lao people, chickens and rice (p326)  | 6 Shopping for coffee and woven silk in the villages of southern Laos (p253)                               |
| 2 Challenging the locals to a game of <i>petang</i> (p61)   | 7 Smiling at everyone you see  |
| 3 Drinking delicious Beerlao with ice (p77)   | 8 Taking a wash in the Mekong at Don Daeng (p268)  |
| 4 Eating a full-power <i>tam màak-hung</i> (green papaya salad) with your fingers (p75)               | 9 Tucking in to sticky rice and <i>làap</i> (meat salad) with your host family in a village homestay (p48) |
| 5 Sharing <i>lào-láo</i> (whisky) or a jar of <i>lào-hải</i> (jar liquor; home-brewed rice wine; p77) | 10 Watching monks collect alms in early morning Luang Prabang (p134)                                       |

Evans. Both are wonderfully easy to read and don't require an in-depth foreknowledge of Laos.

Several books have been written about Laos's role in the Second Indochina War. *The Ravens: Pilots of the Secret War of Laos* (1987), by Christopher Robbins, is a fast-paced account of the American pilots hired by the CIA to fly in Laos, where they weren't allowed to wear uniforms because the war didn't officially exist. *Shooting at the Moon: The Story of America's Clandestine War in Laos* (1998), by Roger Warner, and *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (2000), by John Prados, are well-respected accounts of the war, the CIA and Hmong role in it, and the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Journalist Christopher Kremmer has written two entertaining books detailing his pursuit of the truth behind the final demise of the Lao monarchy in the late 1970s: *Stalking the Elephant Kings: In Search of Laos* (1998) and *Bamboo Palace: Discovering the Lost Dynasty of Laos* (2003).

*Mekong* (2000) by Milton Osborne is a more scholarly record of the role of the mighty Mekong River in regional history and modern politics. Anne Fadiman's award-winning *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (1997) looks at the tragic clash of cultures between a family of Hmong migrants and their American doctors.

There are very few novels set in Laos, the best of them probably being *The Honourable Schoolboy*, John Le Carré's Cold War thriller in which much of the action is set in surreal wartime Vientiane.

## Internet Resources

Laos doesn't have a huge web presence, but it is improving. These are the best we've found this time around:

**Ecotourism Laos** ([www.ecotourismlaos.com](http://www.ecotourismlaos.com)) Simple but stylish website full of information about the Lao environs, focussing on trekking and other ecotourism activities. Recommended.

**Hmong Homepage** ([www.hmongnet.org](http://www.hmongnet.org)) Information about and links to all things Hmong.

**Lao National Tourism Authority** ([www.tourismlaos.gov.la](http://www.tourismlaos.gov.la)) Mostly up-to-date travel information from the government.

**Library of Congress** ([www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov)) Probably the most complete online resource about Laos, with thorough and regularly updated accounts of history, culture and politics.

**Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) The Thorn Tree forum is the place to get the latest feedback from the road.

**Travelfish** ([www.travelfish.org](http://www.travelfish.org)) The most consistently updated website for independent travelers in Southeast Asia, including excellent coverage of Lao border crossings.

**Vientiane Times** ([www.vientianetimes.org.la](http://www.vientianetimes.org.la)) Website of the country's only English-language newspaper, and operated by the government. In addition to news stories about Laos, it has accurate exchange rates for the Lao kip.

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### THE NORTH

#### One to Two Weeks/Huay Xai to Vientiane

Travellers have been following this route since before the 1975 revolution, and it's still one of the best samplers for anyone who wants a good dose of Laos in a relatively short time-span.

Enter Laos via ferry from Chiang Khong in Thailand to **Huay Xai** (p214) and get a taste of the country on a local trek. Heading south, board one of the slow boats that ply the Mekong between Huay Xai and Luang Prabang. This two-day voyage requires an overnight in the small riverside district of **Pak Beng** (p192); the scenery along the Mekong River is a terrific mix of villages, limestone cliffs and intermittent forest.

Boats may stop at **Pak Ou** (p158) so that passengers can visit Buddha-filled caves there. Sightseeing in and around **Luang Prabang** (p139), Laos's atmospheric former royal capital, can easily occupy a week.

From here, continue southward to Vientiane by bus or van along Rte 13, stopping in **Vang Vieng** (p121), a modern-day travellers centre surrounded by craggy, cave-studded limestone peaks. After a few days of river-tubing and cave hikes, head to **Vientiane** (p86), Laos's semibustling capital city.



Pass quiet village ports and rugged gorges on the Mekong to Luang Prabang, then follow Rte 13, which winds high into the mountains between Kasi and Vang Vieng toward Vientiane, to complete this 700km route.

## THE SOUTH

### One to Three Weeks/Vientiane to Si Phan Don

This classic route takes you through the heartland of lowland Lao culture, a world of broad river plains planted with rice and homemade looms shaded by wooden houses on stilts.

Start in **Vientiane** (p86), the country's capital, and soak up the food, shopping, historical sights and nightlife (it gets quieter from here). Head south to **Tha Khaek** (p234), the archetypal sleepy Mekong riverside town, and go east on Rte 12 to explore the caves of **Khammuan Limestone** (p239) or take The Loop (p240) all the way around, stopping at the incredible **Tham Kong Lo** (p231).

Continue south to **Savannakhet** (p242), where you'll get an architectural taste of how postcolonial Vientiane looked before it was gussied up by the Lao PDR government and international aid. Chowhounds can sniff around for the country's best *fôe* (rice noodles) and *sin sawân* (literally 'heavenly beef'; dried beef).

Roll on southward to **Pakse** (p255) and, if you don't have enough time to go east, through to tranquil **Champasak** (p262). This town is the base for seeing Laos's most important archaeological site, **Wat Phu Champasak** (p265), Angkor-style temple ruins stepping up the slopes of sacred Phu Pasak.

Make a final short hop to **Si Phan Don** (Four Thousand Islands; p272), an archipelago of idyllic river islands where the farming and fishing life hasn't changed much for a century or more. Swing in a hammock and relax, before moving on to Cambodia or heading to Thailand via Chong Mek.

This route covers about 700km of river plains and rolling hills, bridging clear streams and tracing traditional Lao villages as Rte 13 follows the Mekong south. Expect to move by bus, *săwngthăew*, motorbike and boat as you make your way south. Depending on time, take as many diversions east of Rte 13 as you can.



## ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

### NORTHERN WILDERNESS

### Two to Three Weeks/ Luang Nam Tha to Xieng Khuang

This route explores the mountains and plateaus of the north. Start in Luang Nam Tha Province with a trek into the **Nam Ha NPA** (p198) or through hill-tribe villages near **Muang Sing** (p203) and **Muang Long** (p209).

Head from **Luang Nam Tha** (p195) – via **Phongsali** (p210) if you have the time and adventurous spirit – to super-laid-back **Nong Khiaw** (p160), soaking up northern Lao life along the Nam Ou (Ou River) and taking hikes to limestone caves. Crossing the Nam Ou, climb higher into the Annamite Chain through Hmong villages till you reach remote **Sam Neua** (p183). Near here the communist Pathet Lao, with help from the North Vietnamese Army, took shelter in huge caverns in **Vieng Xai** (p187) and mounted a successful campaign to seize control of the country. Sam Neua is also known for intricately patterned hand-woven textiles.

South of Sam Neua, en route to **Nam Noen** (p188), stands **Suan Hin** (p186), where ancient megaliths are arranged in patterns that remain a total enigma to locals and scholars alike.

From Sam Neua a lengthy road trip southwest leads to **Phonsavan** (p165), the fast-growing capital of Xieng Khuang Province. Here one of the main attractions is a large plateau scattered with hundreds of monumental and mysterious lidded stone jars, known as the **Plain of Jars** (p169).



Visit caverns, traditional villages and mysterious relics on this adventure which takes you along 588km of high, winding road and across many rivers and streams. Add 92km for the detour to Sam Neua.

**BOLAVEN & BEYOND****10 to 14 days/Pakse to Pakse**

This trip into the remote provinces of southern Laos can be done by private vehicle, including small motorbikes, or more slowly – but more socially – by public transport. It's best in the dry season.

After a day or two getting organised in **Pakse** (p255), head up onto the **Bolaven Plateau** (p282) and to Laos's most impressive waterfall at **Tat Fan** (p283). At the coffee capital of **Paksong** (p284), you could stop to buy some Java before continuing on to **Sekong** (p290), passing through Laven, Katang and other villages en route. If the river is full enough, head down the **Se Kong** (see Down the Se Kong by Longtail Boat, p292) in a boat for an unforgettable trip into **Attapeu Province** (p293). Sleepy **Attapeu** (p293) is an easy place to hang out; interrupt your sunsets-by-the-Se Kong with a bumpy day trip out to the Ho Chi Minh Trail (p251) village of **Pa-am** (p296), and an overnight homestay in the **Se Pian NPA** (p296).

Head back up Rte 16, through Sekong and turn north at Tha Taeng on a long, downhill laterite road to Beng. Check out **Salavan** (p288) for a day and, if the season is right, arrange transport along the rarely travelled road to **Tahoy** (p289), once an important marker on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and now a more peaceful but thoroughly remote home of the Ta-oy (Tahoy) people.

Beautiful **Tat Lo** (p286) and its inevitable backpackers will be a shock after days with little, if any, contact with Westerners, and **Utayan Bajiang Champasak** (p285) makes an attractive lunch spot on the easy trip back to Pakse.

On this journey of roughly 650km you'll climb into the coffee-growing districts of the Bolaven Plateau, see spectacular waterfalls, and visit villages little changed since the end of the Second Indochina War.

**TAILORED TRIPS****ACTION JACKSON TOUR**

Laos has plenty on offer for those who like the outdoors. Start with the classic northern trek in the **Nam Ha NPA** (p198), before heading to Luang Prabang and cycling out to **Tat Sae** (p159) or **Tat Kuang Si** (p159) waterfalls. Sit atop a slow bus south to **Vang Vieng** (p121), the activities capital of the country where there are myriad rock-climbing, kayaking and spelunking options and professional guides.

Forget the bus to Vientiane and instead go rafting along the grade five rapids of the Nam Ngum (Ngum River), or kayaking along the Nam Lik (Lik River), part of the way, and complete the trip by minibus. In **Vientiane** (p86) stop long enough for a massage at **Wat Sok Pa Luang** (p96) to work out some of the knots, before trekking into **Phu Khao Khuay NPA** (p118) in search of elephants.

Head south to Tha Khaek by bus or bike and get on a trek into the **Phu Hin Bun NPA** (p230), with its magical waterholes and incredible 7km-long boat ride through the **Tham Kong Lo** (p231) cave. If you fancy more tough trekking, head south to **Pakse** (p255) and get yourself on a trek into the **Se Pian NPA** (p271), before rounding out your stay in Laos with a boat trip around **Si Phan Don** (p272) and a rafting trip from **Don Det** (p283) over the falls to the Cambodian border.

**GRAND TEMPLE TOUR**

Start in Luang Prabang and head first to the city's showcase temple, **Wat Xieng Thong** (p141), a collection of Buddhist chapels delicately decorated with the best gold stencil work in the country. Virtually every other wat in the old temple district is also worth stopping by, as each is unique, but don't miss the massive bronze seated Buddha image at **Wat Manolom** (p143), the unique watermelon-shaped stupa and faux-lathed windows at **Wat Wisunarat** (p142) and the Buddhist art school at **Wat Xieng Muan** (p144).

Head south to Vientiane for this not-to-be-missed trio: **Pha That Luang** (p91) for its spiky stupa, where Buddhist doctrine is numerologically encoded; **Wat Si Saket** (p94) for the thousands of niches holding tiny Buddhas; and **Haw Pha Kao** (p95) for the best collection of Lao Buddhist art in the country.

Saving the most ancient and venerated for last, fly south to the small, unassuming town of **Champasak** (p262). Just 4km outside of town at **Muang Kao** (p267) lie the ruined city walls of Kuruksetra, where the oldest surviving Sanskrit inscription in Southeast Asia was recently found. This defunct kingdom was almost certainly linked to nearby **Wat Phu Champasak** (p265), an Angkor-style temple ruin and the grandest archaeological site in Laos. If you can visit in time for the **Wat Phu Festival** (p268) in February, you'll be treated to one of the country's most visually impressive and spiritually significant festivals.



# Snapshot

For centuries Laos was a buffer state, wedged between a pair of bigger neighbours, Thailand and Vietnam, and busy paying tribute to one, the other or both. Forty years ago this balancing act came undone in spectacular fashion when, split down the middle in its role as a Cold War proxy for both American and communist forces, Laos became the most bombed country in history (see p37).

But three decades after the end of the Second Indochina War, Laos is finally growing out of its role as buffer state and becoming a crossroads in an increasingly globalised region.

Western governments, financial institutions such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, and NGOs still contribute a large proportion of the money spent on development in this country where poverty is the norm for a huge number of people. For better or worse, however, these contributors are increasingly being replaced by private enterprise and the world's newest superdonor – the People's Republic of China.

The physical signs are increasingly apparent. Just over a decade ago Laos's colonial-era network of roads was a sorry collection of potholed dirt tracks. Today almost all major roads are sealed, and the Chinese are busy finishing off a new highway linking Yunnan with Thailand. Laos will make some incidental money from the traffic on these roads, but the greater effect is in making its long-ignored natural resources more accessible, and thus more open to development, most notably by the mining and energy sectors. If all goes to plan the money expected from a dizzying number of hydroelectric dams (see p65) will allow Laos to help relieve poverty by itself and break the reliance on foreign aid.

The Lao government has recognised that tourism, particularly ecotourism (p72), has grown into a primary source of income and helps channel money to some of the poorest parts of society. And many small-scale projects, such as the Jhai fair-trade coffee cooperative on the Bolaven Plateau (see p285), are improving the deal for the rural poor.

There are, however, a lot of real and potential downsides to this 'progress'. Having China as a major source of funding and as a political role model is unlikely to encourage the Lao government, which is already fearful of the effect opening up to the world will have on its culture and control, to adopt democratic reforms. In short, don't expect basic freedoms like speech, assembly or even uncensored song lyrics (p60) any time soon.

The environment faces alarming threats. Unplanned or illegal logging has been a serious problem for years. But it's the dozens of hydroelectric dams due to be built in the next decade, many by companies with poor reputations for looking after the environment or local communities, that have the potential to change ecosystems dramatically, rapidly and permanently.

The Second Indochina War continues to take its toll. Unexploded ordnance (UXO, see p167) claims scores of lives every year. And many Hmong, who have been fighting with or, more often, running from the Lao military since their American sponsors fled three decades ago, continue to be persecuted. The 'insurgency' (p181) appears to finally be petering out, though reports of atrocities committed by the Lao military continue to emerge.

The challenge for Laos is to balance all these competing interests, to make the most of its opportunities as a conduit of trade without being overwhelmed by the interests of others. For a country with much experience of being squeezed by outsiders, but little in the way of successful outcomes, it won't be an easy road.

## FAST FACTS

Area: 236,800 sq km

Border countries:  
Cambodia, China,  
Myanmar, Thailand,  
Vietnam

Population: 5.6 million

Official language: Lao

Literacy: 66.4%

GDP per capita  
(purchasing power  
parity): US\$2280

Inflation: 6.8%

Original name: Lan  
Xang Hom Khao (Million  
Elephants, White Parasol)

Number of elephants in  
Laos today: around 2000

Laos's share of the  
Mekong River: 1865km



# The Authors



## ANDREW BURKE

**Coordinating Author, Vientiane & Around, Central Laos, Southern Laos, Culture, Environment, Food & Drink**

Andrew has lived in Asia since 2001 and in that time he's spent more than six months travelling around Laos. It's the laid-back, simple approach to life that repeatedly draws him back, but he finds the thousands of kilometres of roads less travelled and fascinating photographic subjects just as appealing. This is Andrew's 10th book for Lonely Planet, titles that include *The Asia Book*, *China* and *Hong Kong Citiescape*. When he's not travelling, Andrew works as a journalist and photographer and calls Bangkok home.

### My Favourite Trip

Choosing a favourite trip in Laos isn't easy, but during this two months of research I found visiting various villages in the south hugely enjoyable at a cultural level. You could start in Pakse (p255), head north to idyllic Don Kho (p260) for a village homestay and, if you're with enough people, experience the *bqasii* ceremony. Take a boat all the way south to Champasak (p262), and base yourself in an island village on Don Daeng (p268). Cycle out to Wat Phu Champasak (p265) at dawn, then hitch down to Kiet Ngong (p270) and treat yourself to a little comfort in the Kingfisher Eco-Lodge (p271). From here, embark on the sometimes difficult and often very wet trek into the Se Pian NPA (p271), and stay in one of the most remote villages in the south, Ta Ong.



## JUSTINE VAISUTIS

**Northern Laos**

Justine fell in love with Asia during a year-long stint in South Korea as a tiny tacker. Regular jaunts to the Southeast cemented her yen for all things hot, steamy, spicy and more than a little pungent. Hot on the heels of working on Lonely Planet's *Indonesia* guide, she leapt at the chance to explore Northern Laos for this book. After cycling, trekking, bussing, flying, swimming, sailing and generally losing her way as much as possible, she fell madly in love with the country and its people and plans to return often. This is the 10th Lonely Planet guide Justine has worked on.

### My Favourite Trip

Well, one of my favourite trips in Laos would go something like this. Take a few days in Luang Prabang (p134) to acclimatise, indulge in a massage or three and go wat-hopping. Then boat up the Nam Ou, stopping in Nong Khiaw (p160) en route to as north as Laos gets – Phongsali (p210). I'd spend a few days in the surrounding villages for a cultural injection and then catch the ever-lengthening but ever-entertaining bus south to Luang Nam Tha (p195) for several days of ecotrekking in Nam Ha NPA (p198). Then I'd backtrack (a bus fan from way back) to the most beautiful province of all – Hua Phan (p182), and re-acquaint myself with the magical landscape and utterly benevolent people.



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## CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

**Martin Stuart-Fox** wrote the History chapter. Martin is Professor Emeritus in the School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics at the University of Queensland, Australia. He first worked in Laos from 1963 to 1965 as a journalist, before covering the Vietnam War for two years. On his return to Australia, Martin joined the University of Queensland. He retired in 2005 after five years as Head of History. He has written six books and dozens of articles on Laos, including *A History of Laos* (1997), *The Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang* (1998) and *Buddhist Kingdom, Marxist State* (2nd ed, 2002). His latest book is *Naga Cities of the Mekong* (2006), narrating the histories of Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Champasak.

**Steven Schipani** wrote the Ecotourism in Laos boxed text (p72). Steven was born in New York City and raised on the Atlantic coast of Long Island, New York. He first went to Asia as a United States Peace Corps volunteer, serving in Thailand from 1994 to 1996. He has worked as a professional guide, fisherman, Thai and Lao language interpreter, and has travelled extensively in Southeast Asia. Since 1999 Steven has been employed by Unesco, the Asian Development Bank, and a number of other international organisations advising on sustainable ecotourism development and heritage management in Laos. His interests include fishing, forest trekking, indigenous knowledge and Lao food. He has one son named Michael.

**Dr Trish Batchelor** is a general practitioner and travel medicine specialist who works at the CIWEC Clinic in Kathmandu, Nepal, as well as being a Medical Advisor to the Travel Doctor New Zealand clinics. Trish teaches travel medicine through the University of Otago, and is interested in underwater and high-altitude medicine, and in the impact of tourism on host countries. She has travelled extensively through Southeast and East Asia and particularly loves high-altitude trekking in the Himalayas.

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