

# History

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## PREHISTORY & TAI-LAO MIGRATION

The first modern humans (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) arrived in Southeast Asia around 50,000 years ago. Their stone-age technology remained little changed until a new Neolithic culture evolved about 10,000 years ago. This was the Hoabinhian, named after an archaeological site in northern Vietnam. Hoabinhian hunter-gatherers spread throughout much of Southeast Asia, including Laos. Their descendants produced the first pottery in the region, and later bronze metallurgy. In time they supplemented their hunting, fishing and gathering by horticulture and eventually rice cultivation, introduced down the Mekong River valley from southern China. These people were the ancestors of the present-day upland minorities, collectively known as the Lao Thoeng (Upland Lao), the largest group of which are the Khamu of northern Laos.

Other Lao Thoeng tribes live in southern Laos, including the Brao and the Katang. Like their northern cousins, they speak Austro-Asiatic languages, a group which includes Khmer. In fact southern Laos is believed to be the birthplace of the Cambodian people, from where they spread further south to establish the kingdom of Funan by the 2nd century CE. The earliest kingdom in southern Laos was identified in Chinese texts as Chenla, dating from the 5th century. Its capital was close to Champasak, near the later Khmer temple of Wat Phu. A little later Mon people (speaking another Austro-Asiatic language) established kingdoms on the middle Mekong – Sri Gotapura (Sikhottabong in Lao) with its capital near Tha Khaek, and Chanthaburi in the vicinity of Viang Chan (Vientiane).

Tai peoples probably began migrating out of southern China about the 8th century. They included the Tai-Lao of Laos, the Tai-Syam and Tai-Yuan of central and northern Thailand, and the Tai-Shan of northeast Burma. They are called Tai to distinguish them from the citizens (Thai) of modern Thailand, though the word is the same. All spoke closely related Tai languages, practised wet-rice cultivation along river valleys, and organised themselves into small principalities, known as *meuang*, each presided over by an hereditary ruler, or *chao meuang* (lord of the *meuang*). The Tai-Lao, or Lao for short, moved slowly down the rivers of northern Laos, like the Nam Ou and the Nam Khan, running roughly from northeast to southwest, until they arrived at the Mekong, the Great River. They worshipped the *ngeuk*, powerful snake deities believed to inhabit these rivers, which if not propitiated could so easily tip frail canoes and drown their occupants. Most Lao peasants still believe that *ngeuk* exist.

The early Lao text known as the *Nithan* (story of) *Khun Borom* recounts the myth of creation of the Lao peoples, their interaction, and the establishment of the first Lao kingdom in the vicinity of Luang Prabang. The creation myth tells how two great gourds grew at Meuang Thaeng (Dien Bien Phu, now in Vietnam) from inside which sounds could be heard. Divine rulers, known as khun, pierced one of the gourds with a hot poker, and out of the charred hole poured the dark-skinned Lao Thoeng. The khun used a knife to cut a hole in the other gourd, through which escaped the lighter-skinned

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The Lao believe most *ngeuk* have been converted to become serpent protectors of Buddhism, called *naga* (in Lao *nak*). They still require propitiation, however, and annual boat races are held for their amusement. Many Buddhist temples (*wat*) have protective *naga* balustrades.

## TIMELINE 1353

Fa Ngum establishes the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang

## 1479

The Vietnamese emperor La Thanh Tong invades Lan Xang

Tai-Lao (or Lao Loum, Lowland Lao). The gods then sent Khun Borom to rule over both Lao Loum and Lao Thoeng. He had seven sons, whom he sent out to found seven new kingdoms in the regions where Tai peoples settled (in the Tai highlands of Vietnam, the Xishuangbanna of southern China, Shan state in Burma, and in Thailand and Laos). While the youngest son founded the kingdom of Xieng Khuang on the Plain of Jars, the oldest son, Khun Lo, descended the Nam Ou, seized the principality of Meuang Sua from its Lao Thoeng ruler, and named it Xiang Dong Xiang Thong (later renamed Luang Prabang).

## THE KINGDOM OF LAN XANG

The first extended Lao kingdom dates from the mid-14th century. It was established in the context of a century of unprecedented political and social change in mainland Southeast Asia. At the beginning of the 13th century, the great Khmer king Jayavarman VII, who had re-established Cambodian power and built the city of Angkor Thom, sent his armies north to extend the Khmer empire to include all of the middle Mekong region and north-central Thailand. But the empire was overstretched, and by the mid-13th century the Khmer were in retreat. At the same time, the Mongol Yuan dynasty in China lost interest in further conquest in Southeast Asia.

This left a political vacuum in central Thailand, into which stepped Ramkhamhaeng, founder of the Tai-Syam kingdom of Sukhothai. To his north, his ally Mangray founded the Tai-Yuan kingdom of Lanna (meaning 'a million rice fields'), with his capital at Chiang Mai. Other smaller Tai kingdoms were established at Phayao and Xiang Dong Xiang Thong. In southern Laos and southern Thailand, however, the Khmer still held on to power.

We know that at this time Viang Chan was tributary to Sukhothai, and it may well be that Xiang Dong Xiang Thong was too. As the power of Sukhothai grew, it exerted more pressure on the Khmer. The Cambodian court looked around for an ally, and found one in the form of a young Lao prince, Fa Ngum, who was being educated at Angkor. Fa Ngum's princely father had been forced to flee Xiang Dong Xiang Thong after he seduced one of his own father's concubines. So Fa Ngum was in direct line for the throne.

The Khmer gave Fa Ngum a Khmer princess and an army, and sent him north to wrest the middle Mekong from the control of Sukhothai, and so divert and weaken the Tai-Syam kingdom. In this he was successful. Sikhottabong acknowledged Fa Ngum's suzerainty. So did Xieng Khuang and a number of other Lao *meuang*. Only Viang Chan held out. Fa Ngum was acclaimed king in Xiang Dong Xiang Thong, then brought Viang Chan into his empire. He named his new kingdom Lan Xang Hom Khao, meaning 'a million elephants and the white parasol'.

Fa Ngum built a fine capital at Xiang Dong Xiang Thong and set about organising his court and kingdom. He appointed his Khmer generals to positions of power, even though this antagonised the local aristocracy. Tributary rulers had to journey to the capital every three years to renew their vows of fealty and present tribute.

Fa Ngum performed sacrifices to the *phii* (traditional spirits) of the kingdom, and to the *ngeuk* of the Mekong. But he also acquiesced to his wife's request to introduce Khmer Theravada Buddhism to Lan Xang. Here, according to the Lao chronicles, he began to run into problems. The Cambodian

king despatched a large contingent of monks and craftsmen up the Mekong, but they only got as far as Viang Chan. There the image they were escorting, the famous Pha Bang, magically refused to move, and had to be left behind. Its reason for refusing to go on to the Lao capital was that it knew that Fa Ngum was not morally worthy. And it seems the Pha Bang was right. Fa Ngum began to seduce the wives and daughters of his court nobles, who decided to replace him. Fa Ngum was sent into exile in Nan (now in Thailand), where he died within five years. His legacy, however, stood the test of time. The Kingdom of Lan Xang remained a power in mainland Southeast Asia until early in the 18th century, able to match the power of Siam, Vietnam and Burma.

Fa Ngum was succeeded by his son Un Heuan, who took the throne name Samsenthai, meaning 300,000 Tai, the number of men, his census reported, who could be recruited to serve in the army. He married princesses from the principal Tai kingdoms (Lanna and Ayutthaya, which had replaced Sukhothai), consolidated the kingdom and developed trade. With his wealth he built temples and beautified his capital.

Following Samsenthai's long and stable reign of 42 years, Lan Xang was shaken by succession disputes, a problem faced by all Southeast Asian *mandala* (circles of power). A scheming queen, known only as Mahathevi (Great Queen), is said to have set on the throne, and then killed off, a succession of youthful kings before ruling herself. But she was overthrown by the nobility and sacrificed to the *ngeuk* (by being chained to a rock in the Mekong and drowned). The throne then passed to Samsenthai's youngest son, who took the throne name Xainya Chakkaphat (Universal Ruler). It was an arrogant claim, but he ruled wisely and well.

Tragedy struck at the end of his reign, when Lan Xang suffered its first major invasion. This was by Vietnam, whose emperor wanted revenge for a perceived insult. The story in the Lao chronicles is that a rare white elephant, a symbol of power and kingship throughout Southeast Asia, was captured and presented to Xainya Chakkaphat. Vietnamese emperor Le Thanh Tong asked for proof of its colour, so hairs were despatched in a fine box. Unfortunately, however, it was sent via Xieng Khuang, whose ruler wanted to thumb his nose at the Vietnamese. So he replaced the hairs with a small piece of dung.

Enraged, the Vietnamese emperor sent a large invasion force against the Lao. After a bitter battle (recounted at length in the Lao chronicles, which even give the names of the principal war elephants), the Vietnamese captured and sacked Xiang Dong Xiang Thong. Xainya Chakkaphat fled and the Lao mounted a guerrilla campaign. Eventually the Vietnamese were forced to withdraw, their forces decimated by malaria and vowing never to invade Lan Xang again.

## Consolidation of the Kingdom

The Lao kingdom recovered under one of its greatest rulers, who came to the throne in 1501. This was King Visoun, who had previously been governor of Viang Chan. There he had been an ardent worshipper of the Pha Bang Buddha image, which he brought with him to Xiang Dong Xiang Thong to become the palladium of the kingdom. For it he built the magnificent temple known as Wat Wisunarat (Wat Visoun), which though damaged and repaired over the years, still stands in Luang Prabang.

Southeast Asian kingdoms were not states in the modern sense, with fixed frontiers, but varied in extent depending on the power of the centre. Outlying *meuang* might transfer their allegiance elsewhere when the centre was weak. That is why scholars prefer the term *mandala*, a Sanskrit word meaning 'circle of power' (in Lao *monthon*).

By naming his kingdom Lan Xang Hom Khao, Fa Ngum was making a statement about power and kingship. Elephants were the battle tanks of Southeast Asian warfare, so to claim to be the kingdom of a million elephants was to issue a warning to surrounding kingdoms: 'Don't mess with the Lao! A white parasol was the traditional symbol of kingship.'

### 1501

King Visoun installs the Pha Bang Buddha image in Luang Prabang

### 1560

King Setthathirat moves the capital to Viang Chan

### 1641–1642

The first Europeans to write accounts of Lan Xang arrive in Viang Chan

### 1707–1713

Lan Xang is divided into three smaller and weaker kingdoms – Viang Chan, Luang Prabang, and Champasak

Visoun developed close relations with Chiang Mai, and enticed Lanna monks and craftsmen to his capital. He ordered a new version of the Lao chronicles composed, which he personally edited, and his reign marked a cultural renaissance for Lan Xang. Friendly relations with Lanna continued under Visoun's successor, his son Phothisarath. His grandson, Setthathirat, married a Lanna princess and briefly ruled over both kingdoms. But Lanna wanted its own king, and Setthathirat had trouble enough shoring up support in Lan Xang.

By then a new power had arisen in mainland Southeast Asia, the kingdom of Burma. It was the threat of Burma that in 1560 convinced Setthathirat to move his capital to Viang Chan. Before he did so, he built the most beautiful Buddhist temple surviving in Laos, Wat Xieng Thong. He also left behind the Pha Bang, and renamed Xiang Dong Xiang Thong Luang Prabang in its honour. With him he took what he believed to be an even more powerful Buddha image, the Pha Kaew, or Emerald Buddha, now in Bangkok. Other reasons for the move included population movements (both the Khorat Plateau and southern Laos were by then Lao) and to seek improved trade links.

Setthathirat was the greatest builder in Lao history. Not only did he construct or refurbish several monasteries in Luang Prabang, besides Wat Xieng Thong, but he also did the same in Viang Chan. His most important building projects, apart from a new palace on the banks of the Mekong, were the great That Luang stupa, a temple for the Emerald Buddha (Wat Pha Kaeo), and endowment of a number of royal temples in the vicinity of the palace. The city was surrounded by a substantial wall and moat, 8km long.

The Burmese threat persisted, however. When a Burmese army approached Viang Chan, Setthathirat abandoned the city to mount guerrilla attacks on Burmese supply lines. When the Burmese were forced to withdraw, he returned to celebrate his victory by building yet another temple (Wat Mixai). Burmese hostility disrupted Lao trade routes, so Setthathirat led an expedition down the Mekong to open a new route through Cambodia. But the Cambodians objected. In a great battle the Lao were defeated, and in their chaotic retreat Setthathirat disappeared.

It was over 60 years before another great Lao king came to the throne, a period of division, succession disputes and intermittent Burmese domination. In 1638 Suriya Vongsa was crowned king. He would rule for 57 years, the longest reign in Lao history and the 'golden age' of the kingdom of Lan Xang. During this time, Lan Xang was a powerful kingdom, and Viang Chan was a great centre of Buddhist learning, attracting monks from all over mainland Southeast Asia.

Suriya Vongsa had only been on the throne three years when there arrived in Viang Chan the first European to have left an account of the Lao kingdom. He was a merchant by the name of Gerrit van Wuysthoff, an employee of the Dutch East India Company, who, like Setthathirat, wanted to open a trade route down the Mekong. He and his small party were royally accommodated and entertained during their eight-week stay in the Lao capital.

Van Wuysthoff has more to say about the prices of trade goods than about Lao culture or religion, but he was followed a year later by a much more informative visitor. This was the Jesuit missionary, Giovanni-Maria Leria, who stayed in Viang Chan for five years. During that time he had singularly little success in converting anyone to Christianity, and eventu-

ally gave up in disgust. But he liked the Lao people (if not the monks), and has left a wonderful description of the royal palace and the houses of the nobility. He was also much impressed by the power of the king.

## THE KINGDOM DIVIDED

Suriya Vongsa must have been stern and unbending in his old age, because he refused to intervene when his son and heir was found guilty of adultery and condemned to death. As a result, when he died in 1695 another succession dispute wracked the kingdom. This time the result was division of Lan Xang. First the ruler of Luang Prabang declared independence from Viang Chan, followed a few years later by Champasak in the south.

The once great kingdom of Lan Xang was thus fatally weakened. In its place were three (four with Xieng Khuang) weak regional kingdoms, none of which was able to withstand the growing power of the Tai-Syam kingdom of Ayutthaya. The Siamese were distracted, however, over the next half century by renewed threats from Burma. In the end Ayutthaya was taken and sacked by a Burmese army. Chiang Mai was already tributary to Burma, and Luang Prabang also paid tribute.

It did not take the Siamese long to recover, however. The inspiring leadership of a young military commander called Taksin, son of a Chinese father and a Siamese mother, rallied the Siamese and drove the Burmese out not just of central Siam, but from the north too. Chiang Mai became tributary to Siam. After organising his kingdom and building a new capital, Taksin sought new fields of conquest. The Lao kingdoms were obvious targets. By 1779 all three had surrendered to Siamese armies and accepted the suzerainty of Siam. The Emerald Buddha was carried off by the Siamese.

His success went to his head, however, and three years later Taksin, suffering delusions of spiritual grandeur, was deposed by his leading general. The new king, founder of the current Thai Chakri dynasty, titled himself Rama I. He too built a new palace and capital at Bangkok, and quickly consolidated his power over tributary rulers. All Lao kings had to be endorsed by their Siamese overlord before they could assume their thrones, and all had to present regular tribute to Bangkok.

The Lao chafed under these conditions. When Chao Anou succeeded his two older brothers on the throne of Viang Chan, he determined to assert Lao independence. First he made merit by endowing Buddhist monasteries and building his own temple (Wat Si Saket). Then in 1826 he made his move, sending three armies down the Mekong and across the Khorat plateau. The Siamese were taken by surprise, but quickly rallied. Siamese armies drove the Lao back and seized Viang Chan. Chao Anou fled, but was captured when he tried to retake the city a year later. This time the Siamese were ruthless. Viang Chan was thoroughly sacked and its population resettled east of the Mekong. Only Wat Si Saket was spared. Chao Anou died a caged prisoner in Bangkok.

For the next 60 years the Lao *meuang*, from Champasak to Luang Prabang, were tributary to Siam. At first these two remaining small kingdoms retained a degree of independence, but increasingly they were brought under closer Siamese supervision. One reason for this was that Siam itself was threatened by a new power in the region and felt it had to consolidate

*Paths to Conflagration: Fifty Years of Diplomacy and Warfare in Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, 1778–1828* (1998) by Mayoury Ngaosyvathn and Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn provides the best account of the Lao revolt against Bangkok, from a Lao perspective.

**'Before Setthathirat moved his capital to Viang Chan, he built the most beautiful Buddhist temple surviving in Laos, Wat Xieng Thong'**

1826–1828

Chao Anou of Viang Chan wages war for Lao independence from Siam

1867

Members of the French Mekong expedition reach Luang Prabang

1893

France gains sovereignty over all Lao territories east of the Mekong

1907

The present borders of Laos are established by international treaty

its empire. The new power was France, which had declared a protectorate over most of Cambodia in 1863.

Four years later a French expedition sent to explore and map the Mekong River arrived in Luang Prabang, then the largest settlement upstream from Phnom Penh. In the 1880s the town became caught up in a struggle that pitted Siamese, French and roving bands of Chinese brigands (known as Haw) against each other. In 1887 Luang Prabang was looted and burned by a mixed force of Upland Tai and Haw. Only Wat Xieng Thong was spared. The king escaped downstream. With him was a French explorer named Auguste Pavie, who offered him the protection of France.

## FRENCH RULE

In the end French rule was imposed through gunboat diplomacy. In 1893 a French warship forced its way up the Menam River to Bangkok and trained its guns on the palace. Under duress, the Siamese agreed to transfer all territory east of the Mekong to France. So Laos became a French colony, with the kingdom of Luang Prabang as a protectorate and the rest of the country directly administered.

In 1900 Viang Chan (which the French spelled as Vientiane) was re-established as the administrative capital of Laos, though real power was exercised from Hanoi, the capital of French Indochina. In 1907 a further treaty was signed with Siam adding two territories west of the Mekong to Laos (Sainyabuli province, and part of Champasak). Siem Reap and Battambang provinces were regained by Cambodia at the same time.

French authorities in Saigon had hoped that their Lao territories would become the springboard for further expansion, to include all of what is today northeast Thailand. This whole area had been settled by Lao and ruled from Vientiane. By the early 20th century, however, French attention had shifted from Indochina to Europe, and from competition with Britain to friendship in the lead-up to WWI. This left up to 80% of all Lao still within the borders of Siam, while in French Laos, ethnic Lao comprised less than half the population. The rest were tribal minorities.

Over the next few years the French put into place the apparatus of colonial control. They built a mansion for the *résident-supérieur* (governor) on the site of the former royal palace, barracks for a small military detachment, a court house, a prison, and housing for interpreters and civil servants, most of whom were Vietnamese. Later came a hospital, covered market and schools. The sites of ancient monasteries were preserved, and in time new temples were constructed by the Lao population. Chinese shopkeepers and Vietnamese artisans arrived, along with a few French merchants. As they took up residence in the downtown area, near the Mekong, Lao villagers were pushed out. Even so, the town grew slowly, and by 1925 the population was still only around 8000.

In other parts of Laos the French presence was less obtrusive. In Luang Prabang, Savannakhet and Pakse town planning and services were slow to be introduced. In time spacious villas were constructed for senior French officials, and the Lao towns were graced by colonial French architecture. A heavily subsidised riverboat service linked the Lao Mekong towns to Phnom Penh and Saigon.

Nevertheless Laos remained a backwater. Despite French plans for economic exploitation, Laos was always a drain on the budget of Indochina. *Corvée* labour was introduced, particularly to build roads, and taxes were heavy, but the colony never paid its own way. Some timber was floated down the Mekong, and tin was discovered in central Laos, but returns were meagre. Coffee was grown in southern Laos, and opium in the north, most of it smuggled into China. The French tried hard to direct trade down the Mekong to Vietnam, but traditional trade routes across the Khorat Plateau to Bangkok were quicker and less costly.

The French introduced a three-tier system of administration into Laos. Ethnic minorities retained traditional links with local Lao leaders, who were supervised by Vietnamese civil servants, who were answerable to French officials. Taxes had traditionally been paid in the form of forest or agricultural products, but the French demanded cash. This introduced a market economy, but caused resentment. A series of anti-French rebellions broke out, first in the south and then in the north, led by traditional leaders who resented loss of authority. It took the French years of military campaigns to suppress them.

In the interwar years the French cast around for ways to make Laos economically productive. One plan was to connect the Lao Mekong towns to coastal Vietnam, by constructing a railway across the mountains separating the two colonies. The idea was to encourage the migration of industrious Vietnamese peasants into Laos to replace what the French saw as the indolent and easy-going Lao. Eventually Vietnamese would outnumber Lao and produce an economic surplus. The railway was surveyed and construction begun from the Vietnamese side, but the Great Depression intervened, money dried up, and the Vietnamisation of Laos never happened. Even so, in all the Mekong towns, with the exception of Luang Prabang, Vietnamese outnumbered Lao until most fled the country after WWII.

The French population in Laos was still only around 600 by 1940, more than half living in Vientiane. Most were officials for whom a posting in Laos was no more than a step on the ladder of promotion. For many their term of service was tedious, if undemanding. They 'kept up appearances', socialised and gossiped. A few succumbed to the charm of the country and made Laos their home.

Nationalism was slower to develop in Laos than in Vietnam. The French justified their colonial rule as protectors of the Lao from aggressive neighbours, particularly the Siamese. Most of the small Lao elite found this interpretation convincing, even though they resented the presence of so many Vietnamese. The Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), founded by Ho Chi Minh in 1930, managed to recruit its first two Lao members only in 1935. Most ICP members in Laos were Vietnamese civil servants or workers in the tin mines.

## WORLD WAR II & INDEPENDENCE

The outbreak of war in Europe weakened the French position in Indochina. A new aggressively nationalist government in Bangkok took advantage of this to try to regain territory 'lost' 50 years before. It renamed Siam Thailand, and opened hostilities. A Japanese-brokered peace agreement deprived Laos of its territories west of the Mekong, much to Lao anger.

'The Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), founded by Ho Chi Minh in 1930, recruited its first two Lao members in 1935'

The first Frenchman to arrive in Laos was Henri Mouhot, an explorer and naturalist who died of malaria in 1861 near Luang Prabang (where his tomb can still be seen).

1935

The first two Lao members join the Indochinese Communist Party

1945

The Japanese occupy Laos and force the king to declare independence

1946

The French reoccupy Laos, sending the Lao Issara government into exile

1949

France grants Laos partial independence within the Indochinese Federation

To counter pan-Tai propaganda from Bangkok, the French encouraged Lao nationalism. Under an agreement between Japan and the Vichy French administration in Indochina, French rule continued, though Japanese forces had freedom of movement. The Japanese were in place, therefore, when in early 1945 they began to suspect the French of shifting their allegiance to the allies. On 9 March they struck in a lightning coup de force, internment all French military and civilian personnel. Only in Laos did a few French soldiers manage to slip into the jungle to maintain some resistance, along with their Lao allies.

The Japanese ruled Laos for just six months before the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki brought WWII to an end. During this time they forced King Sisavang Vong to declare Lao independence, and a nationalist resistance movement took shape, known as the Lao Issara (Free Lao). When the Japanese surrendered on 15 August, the Lao Issara formed an interim government, under the direction of Prince Phetsarat, a cousin of the king. For the first time since the early 18th century, the country was unified. The king, however, promptly repudiated his declaration of independence, in the belief that Laos still needed French protection. So tension quickly developed between Luang Prabang and Vientiane. The king dismissed Phetsarat as prime minister, so the provisional National Assembly of 45 prominent nationalists passed a motion deposing the king.

Behind these tensions were the French, who were determined to regain their Indochinese empire. After the war's end Chinese forces moved into Indochina north of the 16th parallel and British Indian troops to the south, to accept the surrender of the Japanese. The British soon handed over to the French, who thus were able to occupy southern Laos. In March 1946, while a truce held in Vietnam between the Viet Minh and the French, French forces struck north to seize control of the rest of Laos. The Lao Issara government was forced to flee to exile in Bangkok, leaving the French to sign a modus vivendi with the king reaffirming the unity of Laos and extending the king's rule from Luang Prabang to all of Laos. West bank territories seized by Thailand in 1940 were returned to Laos.

For the next three years the French worked to make up for their previous neglect. The country's first lycée (high school) was built and services improved. The Kingdom of Laos became a member state of the new Indochinese Federation, with its own government and National Assembly. But the French were still very much in control, and those Lao who collaborated were denounced by the Lao Issara in Bangkok, which continued to support armed resistance.

By 1949 something of a stalemate had developed between the French and the Viet Minh in the main theatre of war in Vietnam. In order to shore up their position in Laos, the French granted the Lao greater independence. This partial independence was enough for Laos to gain recognition from Britain and the United States. A promise of amnesty for Issara leaders attracted most back to take part in the political process in Laos. Among the returnees was Souvanna Phouma, a younger brother of Phetsarat, who remained in Thailand. Meanwhile Souphanouvong, a half-brother of the two princes, led his followers to join the Viet Minh and keep up the anticolonial struggle.

## RISE OF THE PATHET LAO

The decisions of the three princes to go their separate ways divided the Lao Issara. Those members who returned to Laos continued to work for complete Lao independence from France, but within the legal framework. Those who joined the Viet Minh did so in pursuit of an altogether different political goal – expulsion of the French and formation of a Marxist regime. Their movement became known as the Pathet Lao (Land of the Lao), after the title of the Resistance Government of Pathet Lao, set up with Viet Minh support in August 1950.

Cooperation between the Lao Issara and the Viet Minh went back to 1945, when, acting on Viet Minh instructions, Vietnamese in Laos backed the Lao Issara government. Joint Lao Issara–Viet Minh forces resisted the French reoccupation. Like the Lao Issara leaders, most Viet Minh in Laos fled the country, leaving the Mekong towns to be re-peopled by Lao looking for jobs in the new Lao bureaucracy.

The architect of the Lao Issara–Viet Minh alliance was Prince Souphanouvong. He returned to Laos from Vietnam in time to take part in both the Lao Issara government (as foreign minister, though he would have preferred defence) and in the anti-French resistance. It was Souphanouvong who organised guerrilla resistance from bases in Thailand. He broke with his Issara-in-exile comrades when his close ties with the Viet Minh began to be questioned.

In August 1950 Souphanouvong became the public face of the Resistance Government and president of the Free Laos Front (Nao Lao Issara), successor to the disbanded Lao Issara. Real power lay, however, with two other men, both of whom were members (as Souphanouvong then was not) of the Indochinese Communist Party. They were Kaysone Phomvihane, in charge of defence, and Nouhak Phoumsavan with the portfolio of economy and finance.

By that time the whole complexion of the First Indochina War had changed with the 1949 victory of communism in China. As Chinese weapons flowed to the Viet Minh, the war widened and the French were forced onto the defensive. In 1953 a Viet Minh force invaded northern Laos heading for Luang Prabang. The French flew in reinforcements, and the Viet Minh withdrew, turning over the whole region to the Pathet Lao. In order to protect Laos from another such invasion, the French established a substantial base in the remote mountain valley of Dien Bien Phu, close to the Lao border.

There was fought the deciding battle of the First Indochina War. The isolated French garrison was surrounded by Viet Minh forces, which pounded the base with artillery hidden in the hills. Supplied only from the air, the French held out for over two months before surrendering on 7 May. The following day a conference opened in Geneva that eventually brought the war to an end.

## DIVISION & UNITY

As France had already granted full independence to Cambodia and Laos (in October 1953), it was as representatives of a free and independent country that the Lao delegation attended the conference in Geneva. After months of discussion it was agreed to divide Vietnam into north and south, each with a separate administration, but with the instruction to hold free and fair

*Naga Cities of Mekong* (2006) by Martin Stuart-Fox provides a narrative account of the founding legends and history of Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Champasak, and a guide to their temples.

Kaysone Phomvihane was born in central Laos. As his father was Vietnamese and his mother Lao, he had a Vietnamese surname. He personally adopted the name Phomvihane, which is Lao for Brahmavihara, a series of four Buddhist heavens – an interesting choice for a committed Marxist.

1950

Lao communists (the Pathet Lao) form a 'Resistance Government'

1953

Franco-Lao Treaty of Amity and Association grants full independence to Laos

1955

Formation of the Lao People's Party (later Lao People's Revolutionary Party)

1957

Formation of the First Coalition Government of National Union

elections in both zones before the end of 1956. Cambodia was left undivided, but in Laos two northeastern provinces (Hua Phan and Phongsali) were set aside as regroupment areas for Pathet Lao forces. There the Pathet Lao consolidated their political and military organisation, while negotiating with the Royal Lao Government (RLG) to reintegrate the two provinces into a unified Lao state.

The first thing Pathet Lao leaders did was to establish a Lao Marxist political party. Previously Lao communists had been members of the Indochinese Communist Party, but in 1951 the ICP was disbanded and separate parties established for each state. Parties were founded immediately in Vietnam and Cambodia, but there were so few Lao members that it took time to recruit enough to constitute a party. Eventually the Lao People's Party was formed in 1955. (At its Second Congress in 1972 it was renamed the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, LPRP, which is today the ruling party of the Lao PDR.)

In good Marxist fashion, the LPP in 1956 established a broad political front, called the Lao Patriotic Front (LPF), behind which the Party could operate in secrecy. Souphanouvong was president of the Front, while Kaysone was secretary-general of the Party. Together with other members of the 'team' they led the Lao revolution throughout its '30-year struggle' (1945–1975) for power. Over this whole period no factionalism split the movement, which was one of its great strengths compared to the divisions among its opponents.

The first priority for the Royal Lao Government was to reunify the country. This required a political solution to which the Pathet Lao would agree. The tragedy for Laos was that when, after two centuries, an independent Lao state was reborn, it was conceived in the nationalism of WW II, nourished during the agony of the First Indochina War, and born into the Cold War. From its inception, the Lao state was torn by ideological division, which the Lao tried mightily to overcome, but which was continuously exacerbated by outside interference.

In its remote base areas, the Pathet Lao was entirely dependent for weapons and most other kinds of assistance on the North Vietnamese, whose own agenda was the reunification of Vietnam under communist rule. Meanwhile the Royal Lao Government became increasingly dependent on the United States, which soon took over from France as its principal aid donor. Thus Laos became the cockpit for Cold War enmity.

From the Lao perspective, neutrality was the only realistic path for the country. And the only way to restore national unity was to bring the Pathet Lao into some kind of coalition government. To this the US was strongly opposed, seeing it as the thin end of a wedge that would lead to a communist seizure of power.

The Lao politician with the task of finding a way through both ideological differences and foreign interference was Souvanna Phouma. As prime minister of the RLG he negotiated a deal with his half-brother Souphanouvong which saw two Pathet Lao ministers and two deputy ministers included in a coalition government. The Pathet Lao provinces were returned to the royal administration. Elections were held, in which the LPF did surprisingly well. And the US was furious.

Between 1955 and 1958, the US gave Laos US\$120 million, or four times what France had provided over the previous eight years. Laos was almost entirely dependent, therefore, on American largesse to survive. When that

aid was withheld, as it was in August 1958 in response to the inclusion of Pathet Lao ministers in the government, Laos was plunged into a financial and political crisis. As a result, the first coalition government collapsed. It had lasted eight months.

With US support a right-wing government was installed in its place, without Pathet Lao representation, and Souvanna Phouma's neutralism was abandoned. Attempts to integrate Pathet Lao units into the Royal Lao Army collapsed, and the civil war resumed. A threatened military coup brought military strongman General Phoumi Nosavan to the Defence Ministry as deputy prime minister, again with American backing. Meanwhile under Kaysone's direction the Pathet Lao began building up their forces, recruiting especially from the tribal minorities in the mountainous areas where the Pathet Lao held power.

As guerrilla warfare resumed over large areas, moral objections began to be raised against Lao killing Lao. On 9 August 1960, the diminutive commanding officer of the elite Second Paratroop Battalion of the Royal Lao Army seized power in Vientiane while almost the entire Lao government was in Luang Prabang making arrangements for the funeral of King Sisavang Vong. Captain Kong Le announced to the world that Laos was returning to a policy of neutrality, and demanded that Souvanna Phouma be reinstated as prime minister. King Sisavang Vatthana acquiesced, but General Phoumi refused to take part, and flew to central Laos where he fomented opposition to the new government.

In this, he had the support of the Thai government and the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which supplied him with cash and weapons. By December he was ready to march on Vientiane. The battle for the city was spirited, but lopsided. Kong Le withdrew to the Plain of Jars, until then garrisoned by the Royal Lao Army, where he joined forces with Pathet Lao units. The neutralist government still claimed to be the legitimate government of Laos, and as such received arms, via Vietnam, from the Soviet Union. Most of these found their way to the Pathet Lao, however. Throughout the country large areas fell under the control of communist forces. Offensives by the Royal Lao Army led to defeat and disaster. The US sent troops to Thailand, in case communist forces should attempt to cross the Mekong, and it looked for a while as if the major commitment of US troops in Southeast Asia would be to Laos rather than Vietnam.

## THE SECOND COALITION & THE SECOND INDOCHINA WAR

At this point the new US administration of President John F Kennedy had second thoughts about fighting a war in Laos. In an about-face it decided instead to back Lao neutrality. In May 1961 a new conference on Laos was convened in Geneva. Progress was slow, however, because the three Lao factions could not agree on a political compromise that would allow a second coalition government to be formed. The right under General Phoumi was particularly recalcitrant. It took temporary suspension of US aid and a military defeat in northern Laos to convince the right to cooperate.

Eventually the 'three princes' (Souvanna Phouma for the neutralists, Souphanouvong for the Pathet Lao, and Boun Oum, hereditary prince of Champasak and then leader of the right) agreed to the composition of a second coalition government that balanced equal Pathet Lao and rightist

During the Second Indochina War, Chinese military engineers built a network of roads into northern Laos. Though these roads assisted the Pathet Lao, they were never bombed by American aircraft, for fear that Chinese troops might join the war in northern Laos.

*Backfire: The CIA's Secret War in Laos and its Link to the War in Vietnam* (1995) by Roger Warner provides an informed account of the range of CIA activity in Laos.

1960

Neutralist coup d'état followed by the battle for Vientiane

1961

Orders given to the CIA to form a 'secret army' in northern Laos

1962

Geneva Agreement on Laos forms Second Coalition Government

1964

US begins air war against ground targets in Laos

### THE 'SECRET ARMY' & THE HMONG

After Laos gained independence in 1953, the United States trained and supplied the Royal Lao Army, as part of its strategy to combat communism in Southeast Asia. In 1961, CIA agents made contact with the Hmong minority living on and around the Plain of Jars. They spread a simple message: 'Beware of the Vietnamese; they will take your land', handed out weapons and gave basic training. There were also some vague promises of Hmong autonomy. At the time, the plain was in the hands of the neutralists and Pathet Lao, backed by North Vietnamese. To protect more vulnerable communities, several thousand Hmong decided to relocate to mountain bases to the south of the plain. Their leader was a young Hmong army officer named Vang Pao.

In October 1961 President John F Kennedy gave the order to recruit a force of 11,000 Hmong under the command of General Vang Pao. They were trained by several hundred US and Thai Special Forces advisors and parachuted arms and food supplies by Air America, all under the supervision of the CIA.

The Hmong were a tough and independent people, who had migrated into Laos in the early 19th century from China, where they had suffered persecution. They preferred to live at high altitudes, where they practised slash-and-burn agriculture and grew opium as a cash crop. In 1918 they rose in rebellion against the French administration, which took the French four years to suppress. In the late 1930s a division occurred within the Hmong leadership over who had the right to represent the community under the French. In the First Indochina War, because of this division, while a majority of Hmong sided with the French (and later the Royal Lao Government), a substantial minority joined the Pathet Lao. The Hmong who formed the 'secret army' were those who had previously fought for the French.

With the neutralisation of Laos and formation of the Second Coalition Government in 1962, US military personnel were officially withdrawn. Even as it signed the 1962 Geneva Agreements, however, the US maintained its covert operations, in particular the supply and training of the

representation (with four each), but left the neutralists with a deciding majority (with 11 positions). Delegates of the 14 participating countries reassembled in Geneva in July 1962 to sign the international agreement guaranteeing Lao neutrality and forbidding the presence of all foreign military personnel. In Laos the new coalition government took office buoyed by popular goodwill and hope.

Within months, however, cracks began to appear in the façade of the coalition. The problem was the war in Vietnam. Both the North Vietnamese and the Americans were jockeying for strategic advantage, and neither was going to let Lao neutrality get in the way. Despite the terms of the Geneva Agreements, both continued to provide their respective clients with arms and supplies. But no outside power did the same for the neutralists, who found themselves increasingly squeezed between left and right.

For the Vietnamese, Lao neutrality was designed to maintain existing de facto spheres of military control: the right in the Mekong lowlands; the Pathet Lao in the eastern highlands; with a few neutralist units loyal to Souvanna Phouma in between. Moreover, Hanoi expected the Lao government to turn a blind eye to its use of Lao territory to infiltrate personnel and supplies into South Vietnam along what became known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail – as Cambodia did. For the Americans, Lao neutrality was designed precisely to prevent such infiltration.

1964–1973

The Second Indochina War spills over into Laos

1974

Formation of the Third Coalition Government

'secret army' for guerrilla warfare. The CIA's secret headquarters was at Long Cheng, but the largest Hmong settlement, with a population of several thousand, was at Sam Thong.

Over the next 12 years the Hmong 'secret army' fought a continuous guerrilla campaign against heavily armed North Vietnamese regular army troops occupying the Plain of Jars. They were supported throughout by the United States, an operation kept secret from the American public until 1970. So while American forces fought in Vietnam a 'secret war' was being fought in Laos. The Hmong fought because of their distrust of the communists, and in the hope that the US would support Hmong autonomy, but they paid a high price. In September 1969 a 'secret army' offensive, with heavy US air support, recaptured the Plain of Jars. Within six months a communist counteroffensive drove them back into the mountains, with terrible casualties.

As the war dragged on, so many Hmong were killed that it became difficult to find recruits. Boys as young as 12 were sent to war. The 'secret army' was bolstered by recruits from other minority groups, including Yao (Mien) and Khamu, and by Thai volunteers. By the early 1970s it had grown to more than 30,000 men, about a third of them Thai.

Not until 1970 did heavily censored transcripts of 1969 Congressional Hearings reveal the existence of the 'secret army' to the American people. Though the war in northern Laos was from then on no longer secret, no-one then knew what the war had cost the Hmong. When a ceasefire was signed in 1973, prior to formation of the Third Coalition Government, the 'secret army' was officially disbanded. Thai volunteers returned home and Hmong units were absorbed into the Royal Lao Army. Hmong casualty figures have been put at 12,000 dead and 30,000 more wounded, but could well have been higher.

Years of warfare had bred deep distrust, however, and as many as 120,000 Hmong out of a population of some 300,000 fled Laos after 1975, rather than live under the Lao communist regime. Most were resettled in the United States. It should be noted that of those Hmong who sided with the Pathet Lao, several now hold senior positions in the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) and in government.

For both sides the most strategically important area was the Plain of Jars, and this quickly became the principal battleground. As control of the plain would enable the US to threaten North Vietnam, Hanoi moved to prevent this – first by driving out Kong Le's neutralists; then by turning their attention to the CIA-trained Hmong 'secret army' (see opposite) still supplied by the US in the mountains surrounding the plain.

By the end of 1963, as each side denounced the other for violating the Geneva Agreements, the Second Coalition Government had irrevocably broken down. Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma struggled to keep a façade intact, but Pathet Lao ministers had fled Vientiane, and neutralists had been covered by the assassination of their foreign minister. It was in the interests of all powers, however, to preserve the façade of Lao neutrality, and international diplomatic support was brought to bear for Souvanna Phouma to prevent rightist generals from seizing power in coups mounted in 1964 and 1965.

In 1964 the US began its air war over Laos, with strafing and bombing of communist positions on the Plain of Jars. As North Vietnamese infiltration picked up along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, bombing was extended the length of Laos. According to official figures, the US dropped 2,093,100 tons of bombs on 580,944 sorties. The total cost was US\$7.2 billion, or US\$2 million a day for nine years. No-one knows how many people died, but one-third of the population of 2.1 million became internal refugees.

*The Ravens: Pilots of the Secret War of Laos (1988) by Christopher Robbins tells the story of the volunteer American pilots based in Laos who supplied the 'secret army' and identified targets for US Air Force jets.*

1975

Communist seizure of power and declaration of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR)

1979

Agricultural cooperatives abandoned and first economic reforms introduced

### US AID-ING & ABETTING

The US had several hundred advisors in Laos, but no ground forces. Advisors were attached to the US embassy, the huge US Agency for International Development, or worked for Air America. Many more US military personnel supported the war from bases in Thailand. In Laos itself, civilians outnumbered the military, especially those working for USAID, which functioned as a parallel government. Their presence generated a demand for housing and other services, including entertainment. Bars and nightclubs sprang up, some renowned for their sexually explicit floor shows, and prostitution was rife.

The promise of employment or adventure attracted other foreigners to Vientiane, which had something of a frontier town feel to it. Drugs were freely available. Marijuana, used by the Lao for flavouring certain soups, could be bought in the markets, along with Lao tobacco. Opium, a traditional medicine, could also be purchased, or smoked in 'dens' across the city. One such was a disused theatre, with the best cubicles on the raised stage – until pressure from the US embassy brought about its closure.

In the Mekong towns, the war seemed far away and hardly intruded on everyday affairs. After all, fighting was not supposed to be happening in a country whose neutrality had been endorsed by international agreement. But war spending and the large American presence did bring some prosperity. New villas were built to rent to foreigners, motor traffic markedly increased and young Lao adopted the latest in American fashions, including flared jeans and long hair.

A substantial amount of American aid found its way into private Lao pockets, to be spent on parties, entertainment and travel abroad. Criticism of the lavish lifestyles of the wealthy was voiced especially by senior monks in the name of Buddhist morality, and was quickly seized upon by Pathet Lao propaganda, which warned that Lao culture and Lao youth were being corrupted by decadent American culture.

During the 1960s both the North Vietnamese and the US presence increased exponentially. By 1968 an estimated 40,000 North Vietnamese regular army troops were based in Laos to keep the Ho Chi Minh Trail open and support some 35,000 Pathet Lao forces. The Royal Lao Army then numbered 60,000 (entirely paid for and equipped by the US), Vang Pao's forces were half that number (still under the direction of the CIA), and Kong Le's neutralists numbered 10,000. Lao forces on both sides were entirely funded by their foreign backers. For five more years this proxy war dragged on, until the ceasefire of 1973.

The turning point for the war in Vietnam was the 1968 Tet Offensive, which brought home to the American people the realisation that the war was unwinnable by military means, and convinced them of the need for a political solution. The effect in Laos, however, was to intensify both the air war and fighting on the Plain of Jars. When bombing was suspended over North Vietnam, the US Air Force concentrated all its efforts on Laos. The Pathet Lao leadership was forced underground, in the caves of Vieng Xai. Though in much of Laos a 'tacit agreement' on spheres of control limited fighting between the two sides, on the Plain of Jars the ground war intensified. Instead of being used in guerrilla operations, units of the 'secret army' fought large-scale battles, in which they suffered heavy casualties.

But all the bombing was unable to staunch the flow of North Vietnamese forces down the Ho Chi Minh Trail (or trails). In January 1971 the one attempt by South Vietnamese forces to cut the Trail in southern Laos ended

in defeat. The Pathet Lao claimed victory, but North Vietnamese forces did the fighting. Thereafter more of southern Laos fell to the Pathet Lao. By mid-1972, when serious peace moves got underway, some four-fifths of the country was under communist control.

In peace as in war, what happened in Laos depended on what happened in Vietnam. Not until a ceasefire came into effect in Vietnam in January 1973 could the fighting end in Laos. Then the political wrangling began. Not until September was an agreement reached on the composition of the Third Coalition Government and how it would operate; and it took another six months before security arrangements were in place for it to take office. The government reflected the changed balance of political power. Souvanna Phouma as prime minister was the sole neutralist, with other ministries equally divided between left and right.

It soon became clear that the Pathet Lao was unified, coordinated and following a well-thought-out plan, formulated at the 1972 Second Congress of the Lao (LPRP). By contrast, the political right was fragmented and demoralised by the withdrawal of its US backer. This gave the communists the initiative, which they never lost.

### REVOLUTION & REFORM

In April 1975 first Phnom Penh and then Saigon fell to superior communist forces. Immediately the Pathet Lao brought political pressure to bear on the right in Laos. Escalating street demonstrations forced leading rightist politicians and generals to flee the country. USAID was also targeted and hundreds of Americans began leaving Laos. Throughout the country, town after town was peacefully 'liberated' by Pathet Lao forces, culminating with Vientiane in August.

Souvanna Phouma, who could see the writing on the wall, cooperated with the Pathet Lao in order to prevent further bloodshed. Hundreds of senior military officers and civil servants voluntarily flew off to remote camps for 'political re-education', in the belief that they would be there only months at most. But Pathet Lao leaders had lied, just as they lied in promising to keep the monarchy. Hundreds of these inmates remained in re-education camps for several years.

With the rightist leadership either imprisoned or in Thailand, the Pathet Lao moved to consolidate power. At all levels of government, people's committees took administrative control, at the direction of the LPRP. In November an extraordinary meeting of what was left of the Third Coalition Government bowed to the inevitable and demanded formation of a 'popular democratic regime'. Under pressure, the king agreed to abdicate, and on 2 December a National Congress of People's Representatives assembled by the Party proclaimed the end of the 650-year-old Lao monarchy and the establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR).

Unlike the military victories of communists in Cambodia and Vietnam, the Lao communists took power by 'quasi-legal' means. Their path to power had always used such means, by entering into coalition governments and demanding strict adherence to agreements, while continually strengthening their revolutionary forces. This strategy was the brainchild of Kaysone Phomvihane, who in addition to leading the LPRP became prime minister in the new Marxist-Leninist government. Souphanouvong was named state president.

During the Second Indochina War, Laos became (and remains) the most heavily bombed country per head of population in the history of warfare. Unexploded ordnance (UXO) still remains a problem along the old Ho Chi Minh Trail, and people, especially children, are still being killed and injured.

*The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos Since 1975* (1998) by Grant Evans provides a penetrating study of Lao political culture, including attitudes to Buddhism and the 'cult' of communist leader Kaysone.

1986

The 'New Economic Mechanism' opens the way for a market economy and foreign investment

1991

Promulgation of the constitution of the Lao PDR

1995

Luang Prabang is World Heritage listed

1997

Laos joins the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean)



The new regime was organised in accordance with Soviet and North Vietnamese models. The government and bureaucracy were under the strict direction of the Party and its seven-member Politburo. Immediately the Party moved to restrict liberal freedoms of speech and assembly, and to nationalise the economy. People were forced to attend interminable 'seminars' to be indoctrinated into the Pathet Lao view of the world. As inflation soared, price controls were introduced. In response, those members of the Chinese and Vietnamese communities who still remained crossed the Mekong to Thailand. Thousands of Lao did the same. Eventually around 10% of the population, including virtually all the educated class, fled as refugees, setting Lao development back at least a generation.

The government faced a daunting task. The economy of the rightist zone, particularly in the Mekong towns, had been entirely dependent on the injection of American aid. When this was terminated, the economy collapsed. The situation was aggravated by government policies and Thai closure of the border; and though Soviet, Eastern European and Vietnamese advisors poured in, levels of aid from the communist bloc were insufficient to replace American spending. A badly planned and executed attempt to cooperativise agriculture made things even worse.

The regime did not persecute Buddhism to anything like the extent the Khmer Rouge did in Cambodia, but it did curtail Buddhist religious life. Younger monks were encouraged to leave the Sangha (monastic order), while those who remained had to work for a living. The people were told not to waste their wealth on Buddhist festivals. Many monks fled to Thailand. The annual rocket festival, held to encourage a copious monsoon, was cancelled. That year there was a drought. People shrugged: the *naga* were annoyed. Subsequently the festival was reinstated.

Though thousands of members of the 'secret army' and their families fled Laos, those who remained still resisted communist control. The Hmong insurgency dragged on for another 30 years. In 1977, fearing the king might escape his virtual house arrest to lead resistance, the authorities arrested him and his family and sent them to Vieng Xai, the old Pathet Lao wartime HQ. There they were forced to labour in the fields. The king, queen and crown prince all eventually died, probably of malaria and malnutrition, though no official statement of their deaths has ever been made.

By 1979 it was clear that policies had to change. Kaysone announced that people could leave cooperatives and farm their own land, and that private enterprise would be permitted. That year Vietnam invaded Cambodia to dispose of the Khmer Rouge, and China invaded northern Vietnam to teach Hanoi a lesson. Laos sided with Vietnam, and relations with China deteriorated. They were no better with Thailand, which was supporting insurgency against the Vietnamese-installed regime in Cambodia.

Reforms were insufficient to improve the Lao economy. Over the next three years a struggle took place within the Party about what to do. The Soviet Union was getting tired of propping up the Lao regime, and was embarking on its own momentous reforms. Meanwhile Vietnam had Cambodia to worry about. Eventually Kaysone convinced the Party to do what the Chinese were doing: open the economy up to market forces, and the country to foreign aid and investment from the West, while retaining a

## RE-EDUCATION

Re-education camps were all in remote areas. Inmates laboured on road construction, helped local villagers, and grew their own vegetables. Food was nevertheless scarce, work hard, and medical attention inadequate or nonexistent. Except for a couple of high-security camps for top officials and army officers, inmates were allowed some freedom of contact with local villagers. Some even took local girls as partners. Escape was all but impossible, however, because of the remoteness of the camps. Only those showing a contrite attitude to past 'crimes' were released, some to work for the regime, but most to leave the country to join families overseas.

tight monopoly on political power. The economic reforms were known as the 'new economic mechanism', and were enacted in November 1986.

Economic improvement was slow in coming, partly because relations with Thailand remained strained. In August 1987 the two countries fought a brief border war over disputed territory. The following year relations were patched up, and with China too. The first elections for a National Assembly were held, and a constitution at last promulgated. Slowly a legal framework was put into place, and by the early 1990s foreign direct investment was picking up and the economy was on the mend.

In 1992 Kaysone Phomvihane died. He had been the leading figure in Lao communism for more than a quarter of a century. The Party managed the transition to a new leadership with smooth efficiency, much to the disappointment of expatriate Lao communities abroad. General Khamtay Siphandone became both president of the Party and prime minister. Later he relinquished the latter to become state president. His rise signalled control of the Party by the revolutionary generation of military leaders. When Khamtay stepped down in 2006, he was succeeded by his close comrade, General Chummalay Sayasone.

The economic prosperity of the mid-1990s rested on increased investment and foreign aid, on which Laos remained very dependent. The Lao PDR enjoyed friendly relations with all its neighbours. Relations with Vietnam remained particularly close, but were balanced by much improved relations with China. Relations with Bangkok were bumpy at times, but Thailand was a principal source of foreign direct investment. In 1997 Laos joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean).

The good times came to end with the Asian economic crisis of the late 1990s. The collapse of the Thai baht led to inflation of the Lao kip, to which it was largely tied through trading relations. The Lao regime took two lessons from this crisis: one was about the dangers of market capitalism; the other was that its real friends were China and Vietnam, both of which came to its aid with loans and advice.

The economic crisis sparked some political unrest. A small student demonstration calling for an end to the monopoly of political power by the LPRP was ruthlessly crushed and its leaders given long prison sentences. Lao dissidents in Thailand attacked a border customs post, provoking a swift Lao military response. A series of small bombings in Vientiane and southern Laos was also blamed on expatriate Lao dissidents, while Hmong 'brigands' attacked transport in the north. The government responded by increasing security, with good effect. By 2004 the Hmong insurgency had all but collapsed.

*The Economic of Transition in Laos: From Socialism to ASEAN Integration* (2000) by Yves Bourdet provides the best account of the 'new economic mechanism' and its results.

*Post-war Laos: The Politics of Culture, History and Identity* (2006) by Vatthana Pholsena expertly examines how ethnicity, history and identity intersect in Laos.

*Bamboo Palace: Discovering the Last Dynasty of Laos* (2003) by Christopher Kremmer builds on his personal travelogue told in *Stalking the Elephant Kings* (1997) to try to discover the fate of the Lao royal family.

## 1998–2000

The Asian economic crisis seriously impacts on the Lao economy

## 2000

Antigovernment Lao rebels attack a customs post on the Thai border. Five are killed.

## 2001

Ten-year development plan unveiled aiming to triple per capita income by 2010

## 2003

Amended constitution promulgated

## PROSPECTS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

The outlook for Laos as it moved into the 21st century was relatively positive. Despite dissatisfaction over lack of those freedoms (of expression, association, and the press) essential to the development of civil society and overmounting corruption, the LPRP faces minimal internal challenge to its authority. The Party seems set, therefore, to remain in power indefinitely – or at least for as long as it has the support of communist regimes in China and Vietnam.

The economic outlook has been helped by major investment projects in hydropower (the US\$1.1 billion Nam Theun II dam, plus several smaller dams) and mining (gold, copper and, in the future, bauxite) that will bring a steady income into government coffers. Light industry, including textiles, may face a more uncertain future as the Asean Free Trade Agreement (AFTA) comes into force and Laos joins the World Trade Organisation (WTO), slated for 2010. Forestry is another important resource, but is largely under the control of the military.

A rapidly growing industry is tourism. In 1995 Luang Prabang was placed on the Unesco World Heritage list, and Wat Phu, the ancient Khmer temple near Champasak, followed. Other parts of the country are opening up to ecotourism, including the Bolaven Plateau in the south, the Plain of Jars, and the far north. An added attraction is that many of the country's colourful minority tribes live in these regions. Laos now attracts over a million tourists a year (well over half of them Thai), and the figure is likely to rise.

Laos does not suffer severe population pressure, but there is a steady migration into the cities due to increasing disparities between urban and rural living standards. The government has shown little inclination to address this problem, or the abysmally low education standards, or poor health facilities for a rural population faced with endemic diseases such as malaria, and HIV/AIDS. Some NGOs and foreign aid programs are trying to help, but human resources remain poorly developed.

Feature film making resumed in 1997, after a break of several years when only documentaries were produced, with the release of *Than Heng Phongphai* (The Charming Forest) directed by Vithoun Sundara. This was followed in 2001 by *Falang Phon* (Clear Skies After Rain), and in 2004 by *Leum Teua* (Wrongfulness), both by the same director.

Corruption remains a major problem. Far too much of the country's limited resources finds its way into the pockets of a small political-economic elite, who pay little or no taxes. Smuggling of timber and wildlife threatens declared 'bio-diversity areas' (national parks where some people still live). Laws are flouted because the legal system is not independent, but under the control of the Party.

Reforms and new political will are thus both necessary for the country to prosper. The LPRP is now Marxist-Leninist in nothing but name. Rather it exercises a single-party dictatorship, and is becoming increasingly nationalistic. This may appeal to Lowland Lao, but less to the tribal minorities. Care will be needed to maintain social cohesion. It remains to be seen whether the Party has the resourcefulness to meet the challenges ahead.

### INTERNET RESOURCES

#### Official websites with Up-To-Date Information on Laos

**Asian Development Bank** ([www.adb.org/LaoPDR](http://www.adb.org/LaoPDR))

**CIA Factbook** (<https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/la.html>)

**International Monetary Fund** ([www.imf.org/external/country/LAO/index.htm](http://www.imf.org/external/country/LAO/index.htm))

**United Nations** ([www.un.int/lao](http://www.un.int/lao)) and ([www.undplao.org](http://www.undplao.org))

**World Bank** ([www.worldbank.org/la](http://www.worldbank.org/la))

#### Country Profiles

**BBC** ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/country\\_profiles/1154621.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/country_profiles/1154621.stm))

**Lao Permanent Mission to the UN** (<http://www.un.int/lao/>)

**Library of Congress** (<http://rs6.loc.gov/frd/cs/latoc.html>)

#### Other Useful Sites

**Lao News Agency** ([www.kplnet.net](http://www.kplnet.net))

**Lao PDR** ([www.laopdr.com](http://www.laopdr.com))

**Muong Lao** ([www.muonglao.com/](http://www.muonglao.com/))

**Vientiane Times** ([www.vientianetimes.com](http://www.vientianetimes.com))

## 2004

Laos hosts 10th Asean summit in Vientiane

## 2005

Ten-yearly census conducted putting population of Laos at 5,621,982

## 2005

Construction begins on the Nam Theun II hydropower dam

## 2006

Eighth Congress of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party and National Assembly elections endorse new political leadership

# The Culture

## THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

It's hard to think of any other country with a population as laid back as Laos. *Baw pen nyang* (no problem) could be the national motto. On the surface at least, nothing seems to faze the Lao and, especially if you're arriving from neighbouring China or Vietnam, the national psyche is both enchanting and beguiling. Of course, it's not as simple as 'people just smiling all the time because they're happy', as we heard one traveller describe it. The Lao national character is a complex combination of culture, environment and religion.

To a large degree 'Lao-ness' is defined by Buddhism, specifically Theravada Buddhism, which emphasises the cooling of the human passions. Thus strong emotions are a taboo in Lao society. *Kamma* (karma), more than devotion, prayer or hard work, is believed to determine one's lot in life, so the Lao tend not to get too worked up over the future. It's a trait often perceived by outsiders as a lack of ambition.

Lao commonly express the notion that 'too much work is bad for your brain' and they often say they feel sorry for people who 'think too much'. Education in general isn't highly valued, although this attitude is changing with modernisation and greater access to opportunities beyond Laos's borders. Avoiding any undue psychological stress, however, remains a cultural norm. From the typical Lao perspective, unless an activity – whether work or play – contains an element of *muan* (fun), it will probably lead to stress.

The contrast between the Lao and the Vietnamese is an example of how the Annamite Chain has served as a cultural fault line dividing Indic and Sinitic zones of influence. The French summed it up as: 'The Vietnamese plant rice, the Cambodians watch it grow and the Lao listen to it grow.' And while this saying wasn't meant as a compliment, a good number of French colonialists found the Lao way too seductive to resist, and stayed on.

The Lao have always been quite receptive to outside assistance and foreign investment, since it promotes a certain degree of economic development without demanding a corresponding increase in productivity. The Lao government wants all the trappings of modern technology – the skyscrapers seen on socialist propaganda billboards – without having to give up Lao traditions, including the *muan* philosophy. The challenge for Laos is to find a balance between cultural preservation and the development of new attitudes that will lead the country towards a measure of self-sufficiency.

## LIFESTYLE

Maybe it's because everything closes early, even in the capital, that just about everyone in Laos gets up before 6am. Their day might begin with a quick breakfast, at home or from a local noodle seller, before work. In Lao

Two slim books of *Lao Folktales*, collected by Steve Epstein, retell some of Laos's better-known folklore. They're great for kids and offer an interesting insight into Lao humour and values.

### DOS & DON'TS

- Always ask permission before taking photos.
- Don't prop your feet on chairs or tables while sitting.
- Never touch any part of someone else's body with your foot.
- Refrain from touching people on the head.
- Remove your shoes before entering homes or temple buildings.

Loum (lowland Lao, see p50) and other Buddhist areas, the morning also sees monks collecting alms, usually from women who hand out rice and vegetables outside their homes in return for a blessing.

School-age kids will walk to a packed classroom housed in a basic building with one or two teachers. Secondary students often board during the week because there are fewer secondary schools and it can be too far to commute. Almost any family who can afford it pays for their kids to learn English, which is seen as a near-guarantee of future employment.

Given that about 75% of people live in rural communities, work is usually some form of manual labour. Depending on the season, and the person's location and gender (women and men have clearly defined tasks when it comes to farming), work might be planting or harvesting rice or other crops. Unlike neighbouring Vietnam, the Lao usually only harvest one crop of rice each year, meaning there are a couple of busy periods followed by plenty of time when life can seem very laid back.

During these quiet periods, men will fish, hunt and repair the house, while women might gather flora and fauna from the forest, weave fabrics and collect firewood. At these times there's something wonderfully social and uncorrupted about arriving in a village mid-afternoon, sitting in the front of the local 'store' and sharing a *lào-lào* (whisky) or two with the locals, without feeling like you're stealing their time.

Where vices are concerned, *lào-lào* is the drug of choice for most Lao, particularly in rural areas where average incomes are so low that Beerlao is beyond most budgets. Opium is the most high-profile of the other drugs traditionally used – and tolerated – in Laos, though recent crop-clearing has made it less available. In cities, *yaba* (methamphetamine), in particular, is becoming popular among young people.

Because incomes are rock-bottom in Laos – US\$100 per month could be considered middle-class – the Lao typically socialise as families, pooling their resources to enjoy a *bun wat* (temple festival) or picnic at the local waterfall together. The Lao tend to live in extended families, with three or more generations sharing one house or compound, and dine together sitting on mats on the floor with rice and dishes shared by all.

Most Lao don some portion of the traditional garb during ceremonies and celebrations – the men a *phaa bjang* (shoulder sash), the women a similar sash, tight-fitting blouse and *phaa nung* (sarong). In everyday life men wear neat but unremarkable shirt-and-trousers combinations. However, it's still normal for women to wear the *phaa nung* or *sin* (sarong). Other ethnicities living in Laos – particularly Chinese and Vietnamese women – will wear the *phaa nung* when they visit a government office, or risk having any civic requests denied.

## POLITICS & THE ECONOMY

At first glance the politics and economy of Laos seem simple enough: a one-party system is controlled by ageing revolutionaries that themselves have become a new elite, who have the power to control the exploitation of the country's natural resources, can squash any dissent and cooperate enough with foreign donors to keep the aid dollars coming in. But this generalisation is just that – the reality is more complex.

Laos is indeed a single party socialist republic, with the only legal political entity being the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). President Chummaly Sayasone is both the head of state and the head of the LPRP; the head of government is Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh. Both were appointed to their five-year terms by the 115-member National Assembly in June 2006. The National Assembly itself was elected in April 2006 and

'there's something wonderfully social and uncorrupted about sitting in the front of the local 'store' and sharing a *lào-lào* with the locals'

### FEELING THE 'REAL LAOS'

A lot of travellers come looking for the 'real Laos', but few know exactly what that is. For about 80% of the population the 'real Laos' is village life, and the best way to really get a feel for how the Lao live is to spend a night or two in a homestay.

A homestay is, as the name suggests, staying with a family in their home, sleeping, eating and living just as they do. So what can you expect? The details vary from place to place, depending on ethnicity, geography and wealth, but the usual experience is described here.

Villages are small, dusty/muddy depending on the season, and full of kids. You'll be billeted with a family, usually with a maximum of two travellers per family. Toilets will be the squat variety, with scoop flush, in a dark hut at the corner of the block. You'll bathe before dinner, either in a nearby stream or river, or by using a scoop to pour water over yourself from a well, 44-gallon drum or concrete reservoir in your family's yard. Bathing is usually a public event, hence the sarong. Don't expect a mirror.

Food will be simple fare, usually two dishes and sticky rice. In our experience it's almost always been delicious, but prepare yourself for a sticky rice extravaganza – during a five-day circuit through homestays in southern Laos we ate sticky rice 14 meals out of 15. Even if the food doesn't appeal, you should eat something or your host will lose face. Dinner is usually served on mats on the floor, so prepare to sit lotus-style or with legs tucked under. Don't sit on cushions as that's bad form, and always take off your shoes before entering the house.

Sleeping will probably be under a mosquito net on a mattress on the floor, and might change to 'waking' once the cocks start crowing outside your window.

It might not be luxurious but homestay is very much the 'real Laos' and is a thoroughly worthwhile and enjoyable experience. Just remember that for most villagers, dealing with *falang* tourists is pretty new and they are sensitive to your reactions. Their enthusiasm will remain as long as their guests engage with them and accept them, and their lifestyle, without undue criticism. To get the most out of it take a phrasebook and photos of your family, and don't forget a torch, flip-flops, a sarong and toilet paper.

consists of 113 LPRP members and two non-partisan independents. There was, and remains, no legal opposition.

Change seems to come slowly in Laos, but when it does most policies and decisions come from a 10-member Politburo and a 52-member Central Committee – two powerful vestiges of the Soviet-style system adopted after the Pathet Lao takeover in 1975. Their decisions are rubber-stamped by the National Assembly.

Few outside the inner sanctum really understand the political scene, but it's accepted that the LPRP is loosely split between an older, more conservative guard and younger members pushing for limited reform. Cynics will tell you the infighting is mainly for the control of the lucrative kickbacks available to those who control the rights to Laos's rich natural resources. Others say the reformers' primary motivation is to alleviate poverty more quickly by speeding up development. The reality most likely lies somewhere between these two extremes.

Economically, Laos is in an interesting period. After the dark times of the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s the economy is growing at a robust 7% per year. However, other numbers don't look so hot. The World Bank rates Laos as one of the least developed countries in East Asia, with more than 75% of people living on less than US\$2 a day. More than three quarters of the population still live as subsistence farmers and gross domestic product was just US\$2.9 billion in 2005. Major exports are electricity, garments, timber products and coffee, in that order. In recent years tourism (see p72) has become one of the main earners of foreign income, much of which flows directly into the pockets of those who need it most.

Foreign aid remains a constant of the Laos economy, as it has been since the 1800s. First the French established a basic infrastructure, followed by massive wartime investment by the USA. Soviet and to a lesser extent Vietnamese assistance saw Laos into the 1990s, when the Japanese and Western governments and NGOs started picking up the development tab. Laos's reliance is unsurprising when you consider there is little effective taxation and the country is only now, for the first time, developing notable export capacity (in hydropower). Put simply, the money needed for building roads, bridges, schools, hospitals etc didn't exist at home, so someone else had to foot the bill, or allow Laos to continue languishing in poverty.

In recent years China has started spending some of its enormous surplus in Laos. Apart from the obvious investment in infrastructure such as roads, dams and plantations, this has two significant effects. First, Chinese aid comes with few strings attached, meaning for example that roads, plantations and dams are built by Chinese companies with little or no concern for local people or environments.

This is in contrast to the usual carrot and stick approach of Western donors, who supply aid in various forms that is dependent on the Lao government improving their systems and getting involved in the development, rather than just sitting back and waiting for the dollars to roll in. Of course, not all Western aid programmes are perfect – most are far from it – but most at least pay some attention to factors like governance and environmental impact.

Second, if one of your largest donors, biggest regional political power and enthusiastic investors is a one-party state just like you, it's not the sort of role model that will encourage political or economic reform. Not that significant reform appears to be on the Lao government's agenda anyway, but trying to imitate China won't help get it there.

The overexcited development of hydroelectric and mining operations is expected to reduce Laos's reliance on foreign aid to a certain extent. Mines, such as the gold and copper operation at Sepon, are beginning to contribute to the government coffers. Dams like Nam Theun 2 will do likewise. Just who benefits from these projects, and how many will feel their negative impacts, is debatable. What seems more certain is that while foreign companies extract sizeable profits from their operations in Laos, the taxes and concession fees they pay will take a long time to trickle down to your average Lao family, and most will stay poor for quite some time to come.

### POPULATION

Laos has one of the lowest population densities in Asia, but the total population has more than doubled in the last 30 years, and continues to grow quickly. A third of Laos's 5,622,000 inhabitants live in cities in the Mekong River valley, chiefly Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Savannakhet and Pakse. Another third live along other major rivers.

This rapid population growth comes despite the fact that almost one in 10 Lao fled the country after the 1975 communist takeover. Vientiane and Luang Prabang lost the most inhabitants, with approximately a quarter of the population of Luang Prabang going abroad. During the last 10 to 15 years this emigration trend has been reversed so that the influx of immigrants – mostly repatriated Lao, but also Chinese, Vietnamese and other nationalities – now exceeds the number of émigrés.

Most expatriate Westerners living in Laos are temporary employees of multilateral and bilateral aid organisations. A smaller number are employed by foreign companies involved in mining, petroleum and hydropower.

*Laos: Culture and Society* (2000), by Grant Evans (ed), brings together a dozen essays on Lao culture, among them a profile of a self-exiled Lao family that eventually returned to Laos, and two well-researched studies of the modernisation and politicalisation of the Lao language.

## ETHNIC GROUPS

Laos is often described as less a nation state than a conglomeration of tribes and languages. And depending on who you talk with, that conglomeration consists of between 49 and 134 different ethnic groups. (The lower figure is that now used by the government.)

While the tribal groups are many and varied, the Lao traditionally divide themselves into four categories – Lao Loum, Lao Thai, Lao Thoeng and Lao Soung. These classifications loosely reflect the altitudes at which the groups live, and, by implication (not always accurate), their cultural proclivities. To address some of these inaccuracies, the Lao government recently reclassified ethnic groups into three major language families – Austro-Tai, Austro-Asiatic and Sino-Tibetan. However, many people you meet won't know which language family they come from, so we'll stick here with the more commonly understood breakdown.

About half the population are ethnic Lao or Lao Loum, and these are clearly the most dominant group. Of the rest, 10% to 20% are tribal Tai, 20% to 30% are Lao Thoeng ('Upland Lao' or lower-mountain dwellers, mostly of proto-Malay or Mon-Khmer descent) and 10% to 20% are Lao Soung ('Highland Lao', mainly Hmong or Mien tribes who live higher up).

The Lao government has an alternative three-way split, in which the Lao Thai are condensed into the Lao Loum group. This triumvirate is represented on the back of every 1000 kip bill, in national costume, from left to right: Lao Soung, Lao Loum and Lao Thoeng.

Small Tibeto-Burman hill-tribe groups in Laos include the Lisu, Lahu, Lolo, Akha and Phu Noi. They are sometimes classified as Lao Thoeng, but like the Lao Soung they live in the mountains of northern Laos.

### Lao Loum

The dominant ethnic group is the Lao Loum (Lowland Lao), who through superior numbers and living conditions – in the fertile plains of the Mekong River valley or lower tributaries of the Mekong – have for centuries dominated the smaller ethnic groups living in Laos. Their language is the national language; their religion, Buddhism, is the national religion; and many of their customs – including the eating of sticky rice and the *bqasii* ceremony (see p55) – are interpreted as those of the Lao nation, even though they play no part in the lives of many other ethnic groups.

Lao Loum culture has traditionally consisted of a sedentary, subsistence lifestyle based on wet-rice cultivation. They live in raised homes and, like all Austro-Thais, are Theravada Buddhists who retain strong elements of animist spirit worship.

The distinction between 'Lao' and 'Thai' is a rather recent historical phenomenon, especially considering that 80% of all those who speak a language recognised as 'Lao' reside in northeastern Thailand. Even Lao living in Laos refer idiomatically to different Lao Loum groups as 'Thai', for example, Thai Luang Phabang (Lao from Luang Prabang). See also Lifestyle (p46).

### Lao Thai

Although they're closely related to the Lao, these Thai subgroups have resisted absorption into mainstream Lao culture and tend to subdivide themselves according to smaller tribal distinctions. Like the Lao Loum, they live along river valleys, but the Lao Thai have chosen to reside in upland valleys rather than in the lowlands of the Mekong floodplains.

Depending on their location, they cultivate dry or mountain rice as well as wet, or irrigated, rice. The Lao Thai also mix Theravada Buddhism and

animism, but tend to place more importance on spirit worship than do the Lao Loum.

Generally speaking, the various Lao Thai groups are distinguished from one another by the predominant colour of their clothing, or by general area of habitation; for example, Thai Dam (Black Thai), Thai Khao (White Thai), Thai Pa (Forest Thai), Thai Neua (Northern Thai) and so on.

### Lao Thoeng

The Lao Thoeng (Upland Lao) are a loose affiliation of mostly Austro-Asiatic peoples who live on mid-altitude mountain slopes in northern and southern Laos. The largest group is the Khamu, followed by the Htin, Lamet and smaller numbers of Laven, Katu, Katang, Alak and other Mon-Khmer groups in the south. The Lao Thoeng are also known by the pejorative term *khàa*, which means 'slave' or 'servant'. This is because they were used as indentured labour by migrating Austro-Thai peoples in earlier centuries and more recently by the Lao monarchy. They still often work as labourers for the Lao Soung.

The Lao Thoeng have a much lower standard of living than any of the three other groups described here. Most trade between the Lao Thoeng and other Lao is carried out by barter.

The Htin (also called Lawa) and Khamu languages are closely related, and both groups are thought to have been in Laos long before the arrival of the lowland Lao, tribal Thai or Lao Soung. During the Lao New Year celebrations in Luang Prabang the lowland Lao offer a symbolic tribute to the Khamu as their historical predecessors and as 'guardians of the land'.

### Lao Soung

The Lao Soung (High Lao) include the hill tribes who live at the highest altitudes. Of all the peoples of Laos, they are the most recent immigrants, having come from Myanmar, Tibet and southern China within the last 150 years.

The largest group is the Hmong, also called Miao or Meo, who number more than 300,000 in four main subgroups, the White Hmong, Striped Hmong, Red Hmong and Black Hmong (the colours refer to certain clothing details). They are found in the nine provinces of the north plus Bolikhamsai in central Laos.

The agricultural staples of the Hmong are dry rice and corn raised by the slash-and-burn method. They also breed cattle, pigs, water buffalo and chickens, traditionally for barter rather than sale. For years the Hmong's only cash crop was opium and they grew and manufactured more than any other group in Laos. However, an aggressive eradication programme run by the government (with support from the USA), has eliminated most of the crop. The resulting loss of a tradeable commodity has hit many Hmong communities very hard. The Hmong are most numerous in Hua Phan, Xieng Khuang, Luang Prabang and northern Vientiane provinces.

The second-largest group are the Mien (also called Iu Mien, Yao and Man), who live mainly in Luang Nam Tha, Luang Prabang, Bokeo, Udomxai and Phongsali. The Mien, like the Hmong, have traditionally cultivated opium poppies. Replacement crops, including coffee, are taking time to bed in and generate income.

The Mien and Hmong have many ethnic and linguistic similarities, and both groups are predominantly animist. The Hmong are considered more aggressive and warlike than the Mien, however, and as such were perfect for the CIA-trained special Royal Lao Government forces in the 1960s and early 1970s. Large numbers of Hmong-Mien left Laos and fled abroad after 1975.

Foreign ethnographers who have carried out field research in Laos have identified anywhere from 94 to 134 different ethnic groups.

Due to Laos's ethnic diversity, 'Lao culture' only exists among the lowland Lao or Lao Loum, who represent about half the population. Lao Loum culture predominates in the cities, towns and villages of the Mekong River valley.

*Ethnic Groups of Laos, Vols 1-3* (2003) by Joachim Schliesinger is a well-respected modern ethnography of Laos. Schliesinger's scheme enumerates and describes 94 ethnicities in detail.

### Other Asians

As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the Chinese have been migrating to Laos for centuries to work as merchants and traders. Most come direct from Yunnan but more recently many have also arrived from Vietnam. Estimates of their presence vary from 2% to 5% of the total population. At least half of all permanent Chinese residents in Laos are said to live in Vientiane and Savannakhet. There are also thousands of Chinese migrant workers in the far north.

Substantial numbers of Vietnamese live in all the provinces bordering Vietnam and in the cities of Vientiane, Savannakhet and Pakse. For the most part, Vietnamese residents in Laos work as traders and own small businesses, although there continues to be a small Vietnamese military presence in Xieng Khuang and Hua Phan Provinces. Small numbers of Cambodians live in southern Laos.

### WOMEN IN LAOS

For the women of Laos roles and status vary significantly depending on their ethnicity, but it's fair to say that whatever group they come from they are seen as secondary to men. As you travel around Laos the evidence is overwhelming. While men's work is undoubtedly hard, women always seem to be working harder, for longer, with far less time for relaxing and socialising.

Lao Loum women gain limited benefits from bilateral inheritance patterns, whereby both women and men can inherit land and business ownership. This derives from a matrilineal tradition, where a husband joins the wife's family on marriage. Often the youngest daughter and her husband will live with and care for her parents until they die, when they inherit at least some of their land and business. However, even if a Lao Loum woman inherits her father's farmland, she will have only limited control over how it is used. Instead, her husband will have the final say on most major decisions, while she will be responsible for saving enough money to see the family through any crisis.

This fits with the cultural beliefs associated with Lao Buddhism, which commonly teaches that women must be reborn as men before they can attain nirvana, hence a woman's spiritual status is generally less than that of a man. Still, Lao Loum women enjoy a higher status than women from other ethnic groups, who become part of their husband's clan on marriage and rarely inherit anything.

Women in Laos face several other hurdles: fewer girls go to school than boys; women are relatively poorly represented in government and other senior positions; and although they make up more than half the workforce, pay is often lower than male equivalents. If a Lao woman divorces, no matter how fair her reasons, it's very difficult for her to find another husband unless he is older or foreign.

In the cities, however, things are changing as fast as wealth, education and exposure to foreign ideas allows, and in general women in cities are more confident and willing to engage with foreigners than their rural counterparts. Women are pushing into more responsible positions, particularly in foreign-controlled companies.

### RELIGION Buddhism

About 60% of the people of Laos – mostly lowland Lao, with a sprinkling of tribal Thais – are Theravada Buddhists. Theravada Buddhism was apparently introduced to Luang Prabang (then known as Muang Sawa) in the late 13th or early 14th centuries, though there may have been contact with Mahayana Buddhism during the 8th to 10th centuries and with Tantric Buddhism even earlier.

King Visoun – a successor of the first monarch of Lan Xang, King Fa Ngum – declared Buddhism the state religion after accepting the Pha Bang Buddha image from his Khmer sponsors. Today the Pha Bang is kept at Wat Manolom (p143) in Luang Prabang. Buddhism was fairly slow to spread throughout Laos, even among the lowland peoples, who were reluctant to accept the faith instead of, or even alongside, *phii* (earth spirit) worship.

Theravada Buddhism is an earlier and, according to its followers, less corrupted school of Buddhism than the Mahayana schools found in east Asia and the Himalayas. It's sometimes referred to as the 'Southern' school since it took the southern route from India through Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.

Theravada doctrine stresses the three principal aspects of existence: *dukkha* (suffering, unsatisfactoriness, disease), *anicca* (impermanence, transience of all things) and *anatta* (nonsubstantiality or nonessentiality of reality – no permanent 'soul'). Comprehension of *anicca* reveals that no experience, no state of mind, no physical object lasts. Trying to hold onto experience, states of mind, and objects that are constantly changing creates *dukkha*. *Anatta* is the understanding that there is no part of the changing world we can point to and say 'This is me' or 'This is God' or 'This is the soul'.

The ultimate goal of Theravada Buddhism is *nibbana* (Sanskrit: *nirvana*), which literally means the 'blowing-out' or 'extinction' of all causes of *dukkha*. Effectively it means an end to all corporeal or even heavenly existence, which is forever subject to suffering and which is conditioned from moment to moment by *kamma* (action). In reality, most Lao Buddhists aim for rebirth in a 'better' existence rather than the supra-mundane goal of *nibbana*. By feeding monks, giving donations to temples and performing regular worship at the local wat, Lao Buddhists acquire enough 'merit' (Pali *puñña*; Lao *bun*) for their future lives. And it's in the pursuit of merit that you're most likely to see Lao Buddhism 'in action'. Watching monks walking their neighbourhoods at dawn, collect offerings of food from people kneeling in front of their homes, is a memorable experience.

Lao Buddhists visit the wat on no set day. Most often they'll visit on *wán pha* (literally 'excellent days'), which occur with every full, new and quarter moon, ie roughly every seven days. On such a visit typical activities include the offering of lotus buds, incense and candles at various altars and bone reliquaries, offering food to the monks, meditating, and attending a *thét* (*Dhamma* talk) by the abbot.

### MONKS & NUNS

Unlike other religions in which priests, nuns, rabbis, imams etc make a lifelong commitment to their religious vocation, being a Buddhist monk or nun can be a much more transient experience. Socially, every Lao Buddhist male is expected to become a *khúu-bqa* (monk) for at least a short period in his life, optimally between the time he finishes school and starts a career or marries. Men or boys under 20 years of age may enter the Sangha (monastic order) as *néhn* (novices) and this is not unusual since a family earns merit when one of its sons takes robe and bowl. Traditionally the length of time spent in the wat is three months, during the *phansáa* (Buddhist lent), which coincides with the rainy season. However, nowadays men may spend as little as a week or 15 days to accrue merit as monks or novices. There are, of course, some monks who do devote all or most of their lives to the wat.

There is no similar hermetic order for nuns, but women may reside in temples as *náang sīi* (lay nuns), with shaved heads and white robes.

*Lao Buddha: The Image & Its History* (2000), by Somkiart Lopetcharat, is a large coffee-table book containing a wealth of information on the Lao interpretation of the Buddha figure.

'About 60% of the people of Laos – mostly lowland Lao, with a sprinkling of tribal Thais – are Theravada Buddhists'

## POST-REVOLUTION BUDDHISM

During the 1964–73 war years, both sides sought to use Buddhism to legitimise their cause. By the early 1970s, the Lao Patriotic Front (LPF) was winning this propaganda war as more and more monks threw their support behind the communists.

Despite this, major changes were in store for the Sangha (monastic order) following the 1975 takeover. Initially, Buddhism was banned as a primary school subject and people were forbidden to make merit by giving food to monks. Monks were also forced to till the land and raise animals in direct violation of their monastic vows.

Mass dissatisfaction among the faithful prompted the government to rescind the ban on the feeding of monks in 1976. By the end of that year, the government was not only allowing traditional alms-giving, it was offering a daily ration of rice directly to the Sangha.

In 1992, in what was perhaps its biggest endorsement of Buddhism since the Revolution, the government replaced the hammer-and-sickle emblem that crowned Laos's national seal with a drawing of Pha That Luang, the country's holiest Buddhist symbol.

Today the Department of Religious Affairs (DRA) controls the Sangha and ensures that Buddhism is taught in accordance with Marxist principles. All monks must undergo political indoctrination as part of their monastic training, and all canonical and extracanonial Buddhist texts have been subject to 'editing' by the DRA. Monks are also forbidden to promote *phii* (spirit) worship, which has been officially banned in Laos along with *sāinyasqat* (magic). The cult of *khwān* (the 32 guardian spirits attached to mental/physical functions), however, has not been tampered with.

One major change in Lao Buddhism was the abolition of the Thammayut sect. Formerly, the Sangha in Laos was divided into two sects, the Mahanikai and the Thammayut (as in Thailand). The Thammayut is a minority sect that was begun by Thailand's King Mongkut. The Pathet Lao saw it as a tool of the Thai monarchy (and hence US imperialism) for infiltrating Lao political culture.

For several years all Buddhist literature written in Thai was also banned, severely curtailing the teaching of Buddhism in Laos. This ban has since been lifted and Lao monks are even allowed to study at Buddhist universities throughout Thailand. However, the Thammayut ban remains and has resulted in a much weaker emphasis on meditation, considered the spiritual heart of Buddhist practice in most Theravada countries. Overall, monastic discipline in Laos is far more relaxed than it was before 1975.

## Spirit Cults

No matter where you are in Laos the practice of *phii* (spirit) worship – sometimes called animism – won't be far away. *Phii* worship pre-dates Buddhism and despite being officially banned it remains the dominant non-Buddhist belief system. But for most Lao it is not a matter of Buddhism *or* spirit worship. Instead established Buddhist beliefs coexist peacefully with respect for the *phii* that are believed to inhabit natural objects.

An obvious example of this coexistence is the 'spirit house', which you'll see in or outside almost every home. Spirit houses are often ornately decorated miniature temples, built as a home for the local spirit. Residents must share their space with the spirit and go to great lengths to keep it happy, offering enough incense and food that the spirit won't make trouble for them.

In Vientiane you can see Buddhism and spirit worship side-by-side at Wat Si Muang (p96). The central image at the temple is not a Buddha figure but the *lāk méuang* (city pillar), in which the guardian spirit for the city is believed to reside. Many local residents make daily offerings before the pillar, while at the same time praying to a Buddha figure. A form of *phii* worship you might actually partake in is the *bqasii* ceremony; see opposite.

Outside the Mekong River valley, the *phii* cult is particularly strong among the tribal Thai, especially the Thai Dam, who pay special attention to a class of *phii* called *then*. The *then* are earth spirits that preside not only over the plants and soil, but over entire districts as well. The Thai Dam also believe

Traditional Khamu houses often have the skulls of domestic animals hanging on a wall with an altar beneath. The skulls are from animals the family has sacrificed to their ancestors, and it is strictly taboo to touch them.

in the 32 *khwān* (guardian spirits). *Māw* (master/shaman), who are specially trained in the propitiation and exorcism of spirits, preside at important Thai Dam festivals and ceremonies. It is possible to see some of the spiritual beliefs and taboos in action by staying in a Katang village during a trek into the forests of Dong Phu Vieng NPA (p249).

The Hmong-Mien tribes also practise animism, plus ancestral worship. Some Hmong groups recognise a pre-eminent spirit that presides over all earth spirits; others do not. The Akha, Lisu and other Tibeto-Burman groups mix animism and ancestor cults.

## Other Religions

A small number of Lao – mostly those of the remaining French-educated elite – are Christians. An even smaller number of Muslims live in Vientiane, mostly Arab and Indian merchants whose ancestry as Laos residents dates as far back as the 17th century. Vientiane also harbours a small community of Chams, Cambodian Muslims who fled Pol Pot's Kampuchea in the 1970s. In Northern Laos there are pockets of Muslim Yunnanese, known among the Lao as *jiin háw*.

## ARTS

The focus of most traditional art in Lao culture has been religious, specifically Buddhist. Yet, unlike the visual arts of Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia, Lao art never encompassed a broad range of styles and periods, mainly because Laos has a much more modest history in terms of power and because it has only existed as a political entity for a short period. Furthermore, since Laos was intermittently dominated by its neighbours, much of the art that was produced was either destroyed or, as in the case of the Emerald Buddha (p95), carted off by conquering armies.

Article 9 of the current Lao constitution forbids all religious proselytising, and the distribution of religious materials outside churches, temples or mosques, is illegal. Foreigners caught distributing religious materials may be arrested and expelled from the country.

## BQASII (BACI)

The *bqasii* ceremony is a peculiarly Lao ritual in which guardian spirits are bound to the guest of honour by white or orange strings tied around the wrists. Among Lao it's more commonly called *su khwān*, meaning 'calling of the soul'.

Lao believe everyone has 32 spirits, known as *khwān*, each of which acts as a guardian over a specific organ or faculty – mental and physical. *Khwān* occasionally wander away from their owner, which is really only a problem when that person is about to embark on a new project or journey away from home, or when they're very ill. Then it's best to perform the *bqasii* to ensure that all the *khwān* are present, thus restoring the equilibrium. In practice, *bqasii* are also performed at festivals, weddings, and when special guests arrive – hence villagers often hold a *bqasii* when trekkers arrive during a community-based trek.

The *bqasii* ceremony is performed seated around a *pha khwān*, a conical shaped arrangement of banana leaves, flowers and fruit from which hang cotton threads. A village elder, known as the *māw phon*, calls in the wandering *khwān* during a long Buddhist mantra while he, and the honoured guests, lean in to touch the *pha khwān*. When the chanting is finished villagers take the thread from the *pha khwān* and begin tying it around the wrists of the guests.

At this point the ceremony becomes a lot of fun. Villagers move around the room, stopping at guests to tie thread around their wrists. They'll often start by waving the thread across your hand, three times outwards accompanied by 'out with the bad, out with the bad, out with the bad', or something similar, and three times in with 'in with the good.' As they tie they'll also wish you a safe journey and good health, with the more comedic calling for beautiful wives, many children etc.

After the ceremony everyone shares a meal. You're supposed to keep the threads on your wrists for three days and then untie, not cut, them.

Laos's relatively small and poor population, combined with a turbulent recent history, also goes some way toward explaining the absence of any strong tradition of contemporary art. This is slowly changing, and in Vientiane and Luang Prabang modern art in a variety of media is finding its way into galleries and stores.

Weaving (p58) is the one art form that is found almost everywhere and has distinct styles that vary by place and tribal group. It's also the single most accessible art the traveller can buy, often from the artist herself – weavers are almost always women.

### Architecture

As with all other artistic endeavour, for centuries the best architects in the land have focussed their attention on Buddhist temples (see Temple Architecture, opposite). The results are most impressive in Luang Prabang.

However, it's not only in temples that Laos has its own peculiar architectural traditions. The *that* (stupa) found in Laos are different to those found anywhere else in the Buddhist world. Stupas are essentially monuments built on top of a reliquary which itself was built to hold a relic of the Buddha – commonly a hair or fragment of bone. Across Asia they come in varying shapes and sizes, ranging from the multi-level tapered pagodas found in Vietnam to the buxom brick monoliths of Sri Lanka. Laos has its own unique style combining hard edges and comely curves. The most famous of all Lao stupas is the golden Pha That Luang (p91) in Vientiane, the national symbol.

Traditional housing in Laos, whether in the river valleys or in the mountains, consists of simple wooden or bamboo-thatch structures with leaf or grass roofing. Among lowland Lao, houses are raised on stilts to avoid flooding during the monsoons and allow room to store rice underneath, while the highlanders typically build directly on the ground. The most attractive lowland Lao houses often have a starburst pattern in the architraves, though these are increasingly difficult to find.

Colonial architecture in urban Laos combined the classic French provincial style – thick-walled buildings with shuttered windows and pitched tile roofs – with balconies and ventilation to promote air circulation in the stifling Southeast Asian climate. Although many of these structures were torn down or allowed to decay following independence from France, today they are much in demand, especially by foreigners. Luang Prabang and Vientiane both boast several lovingly restored buildings from this era. By contrast, in the Mekong River towns of Tha Khaek, Savannakhet and Pakse French-era buildings are decaying at a disturbing rate.

Buildings erected in post-Revolution Laos followed the socialist realism school that was enforced in the Soviet Union, Vietnam and China. Straight lines, sharp angles and an almost total lack of ornamentation were the norm. More recently, a trend towards integrating classic Lao architectural motifs with modern functions has taken hold. Prime examples of this include Vientiane's National Assembly and the Luang Prabang airport, both of which were designed by Havana- and Moscow-trained architect Hongkad Souvannavong. Other design characteristics, such as those represented by the Siam Commercial Bank on Th Lan Xang in Vientiane, seek to gracefully reincorporate French colonial features ignored for the last half-century.

### Sculpture

Of all the traditional Lao arts, perhaps most impressive is the Buddhist sculpture of the period from the 16th to 18th centuries, the heyday of the kingdom of Lan Xang. Sculptural media usually included bronze, stone or wood and the subject was invariably the Lord Buddha or figures associated

The Laos Cultural Profile (www.culturalprofiles.net/Laos) is a new website established by Visiting Arts and the Ministry of Information and Culture of Laos covering a broad range of cultural aspects, from architecture to music. It's an easy entry point to Lao culture.

*L'Art du Laos* (1954), by Henri Parmentier, is a thick, hard-to-find folio containing rare photographs of early Lao architecture and sculpture.

### TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE: A TALE OF THREE CITIES

The *uposatha* (Lao *sim*; ordination hall) is always the most important structure in any Theravada Buddhist wat. The high-peaked roofs are layered to represent several levels (usually three, five, seven or occasionally nine), which correspond to various Buddhist doctrines. The edges of the roofs almost always feature a repeated flame motif, with long, fingerlike hooks at the corners called *chaw fâa* (sky clusters). Umbrella-like spires along the central roof-ridge of a *sim*, called *nyâwt chaw fâa* or 'topmost *chaw fâa*', sometimes bear small pavilions (*nagas* – mythical water serpents) in a double-stepped arrangement representation of Mt Meru, the mythical centre of the Hindu-Buddhist cosmos.

There are basically three architectural styles for such buildings – the Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Xieng Khuang styles.

The front of a *sim* in the Vientiane style usually features a large veranda with heavy columns which support an ornamented, overhanging roof. Some will also have a less-ornamented rear veranda, while those that have a surrounding terrace are Bangkok-influenced.

In Luang Prabang, the temple style is akin to that of the northern Siamese or Lanna style, hardly surprising as for several centuries Laos and northern Thailand were part of the same kingdoms. Luang Prabang temple roofs sweep very low, almost reaching the ground in some instances. The overall effect is quite dramatic, as if the *sim* were about to take flight. The Lao are fond of saying that the roof line resembles the wings of a mother hen guarding her chicks.

Little remains of the Xieng Khuang style of *sim* architecture because the province was so heavily bombed during the Second Indochina War. Pretty much the only surviving examples are in Luang Prabang and to look at them you see aspects of both Vientiane and Luang Prabang style. The *sim* raised on a multilevel platform is reminiscent of Vientiane temples, while wide sweeping roofs that reach especially low are similar to the Luang Prabang style, though they're not usually tiered. Cantilevered roof supports play a much more prominent role in the building's overall aesthetics, giving the *sim's* front profile a pentagonal shape. The pediment is curved, adding a grace beyond that of the typical Luang Prabang and Vientiane pediments.

A fourth, less common style of temple architecture in Laos has been supplied by the Thai Lü, whose temples are typified by thick, whitewashed stucco walls with small windows, two- or three-tiered roofs, curved pediments and *naga* lintels over the doors and steps. Although there are examples of Thai Lü influence in a few Luang Prabang and Muang Sing temples, their main location is in Sainyabuli Province.

with the Jataka (*sâa-dôk*; stories of the Buddha's past lives). Like other Buddhist sculptors, the Lao artisans emphasised the features thought to be peculiar to the historical Buddha, including a beaklike nose, extended earlobes and tightly curled hair.

Two types of standing Buddha image are distinctive to Laos. The first is the 'Calling for Rain' posture, which depicts the Buddha standing with hands held rigidly at his side, fingers pointing towards the ground. This posture is rarely seen in other Southeast Asian Buddhist art traditions. The slightly rounded, 'boneless' look of the image recalls Thailand's Sukhothai style, and the way the lower robe is sculpted over the hips looks vaguely Khmer. But the flat, slablike earlobes, arched eyebrows and aquiline nose are uniquely Lao. The bottom of the figure's robe curls upward on both sides in a perfectly symmetrical fashion that is also unique and innovative.

The other original Lao image type is the 'Contemplating the Bodhi Tree' Buddha. The Bodhi tree ('Tree of Enlightenment'), refers to the large banyan tree that the historical Buddha purportedly was sitting beneath when he attained enlightenment in Bodhgaya, India, in the 6th century BC. In this image the Buddha is standing in much the same way as in the 'Calling for Rain' pose, except that his hands are crossed at the wrists in front of his body.



## TEXTILES

Laos boasts over a dozen weaving styles across four regions. Southern weavers, who often use foot looms rather than frame looms, are known for the best silk weaving and for intricate *mat-mii* (*ikat* or tie-dye) designs that include Khmer-influenced temple and elephant motifs. In these provinces, beadwork is sometimes added to the embroidery. One-piece *phàa nung* (sarongs) are more common than those sewn from separate pieces.

In northeastern Laos, tribal Thai produce weft brocade (*yiap kɔ*) using raw silk, cotton yarn and natural dyes, sometimes with the addition of *mat-mii* techniques. Large diamond patterns are common.

In central Laos, typical weavings include indigo-dyed cotton *mat-mii* and minimal weft brocade (*jók* and *khit*), along with mixed techniques brought by migrants to Vientiane.

Gold and silver brocade is typical of traditional Luang Prabang patterns, along with intricate patterns and imported Thai Lü designs. Northerners generally use frame looms; the waist, body and narrow *sín* (bottom border) of a *phàa nung* are often sewn together from separately woven pieces.

Natural sources for Lao dyes include ebony (both seeds and wood), tamarind (seeds and wood), red lacquer extracted from the *Coccus iacca* (a tree-boring insect), turmeric (from a root) and indigo. A basic palette of five natural colours – black, orange, red, yellow and blue – can be combined to create an endless variety of other colours. Other unblended, but more subtle, hues include khaki (from the bark of the Indian trumpet tree), pink (sappanwood) and gold (jackfruit and breadfruit woods).

The finest examples of Lao sculpture are found in Vientiane's Haw Pha Kaeo (p95) and Wat Si Saket (p94), and in Luang Prabang's Royal Palace Museum (p139).

## Handicrafts

Mats and baskets woven of various kinds of straw, rattan and reed are common and are becoming a small but important export. You'll still see minority groups actually wearing some of these baskets, affirming that until recently most Lao handicrafts were useful as well as ornamental. In villages it's possible to buy direct from the weaver, though you might need to commission your basket in advance and allow at least a day for the job to be finished. Or you could weave it yourself, under instruction from the experts for a small fee. Among the best baskets and mats are those woven by the Htin (Lao Thoeng).

Among the Hmong and Mien hill tribes, silversmithing plays an important role in 'portable wealth' and inheritances. In years past the main source of silver was French coins, which were either melted down or fitted straight into the jewellery of choice. In northern villages it's not unusual to see newer coins worn in elaborate head dress.

The lowland Lao also have a long tradition of silversmithing and goldsmithing. While these arts have been in decline for quite a while now, you can still see plenty of jewellers working over flames in markets around the country. If you're after something special head to Luang Prabang, where Thithpeng Maniphone (p155) has gone from crafting silverware for Luang Prabang royalty to filling commissions for the Thai royal family.

Paper handcrafted from *sáa* (the bark of a mulberry tree) is common in northwestern Laos, and is available in Vientiane and Luang Prabang. Environmentally friendly *sáa* is a renewable paper resource that needs little processing compared with wood pulp.

See Shopping p312 for more on handicrafts in Laos.

*Lao Textiles and Traditions* (1997), by Mary F Connors, is useful to visitors interested in Lao weaving; it's the best overall introduction to the subject.

In Sekong and Attapeu, handwoven textiles often contain cryptic-looking symbols, including helicopter and aeroplane motifs that suggest the beginnings of a possible postwar cargo cult.

## Music & Dance

Lao classical music was originally developed as court music for royal ceremonies and classical dance-drama during the 19th-century reign of Vientiane's Chao Anou, who had been educated in the Siamese court in Bangkok. The standard ensemble for this genre is the *sep nyai* and consists of *kháwng wóng* (a set of tuned gongs), the *ranyáat* (a xylophone-like instrument), the *khui* (bamboo flute) and the *pii* (a double-reed wind instrument similar to the oboe).

The practice of classical Lao music and drama has been in decline for some time – 40 years of intermittent war and revolution has simply made this kind of entertainment a low priority among most Lao. Generally, the only time you'll hear this type of music is during the occasional public performance of the *Pha Lak Pha Lam*, a dance-drama based on the Hindu Ramayana epic (see Literature, below).

Not so with Lao folk and pop, which have always stayed close to the people. The principal instrument in folk, and to a lesser extent in pop, is the *kháen* (common French spelling: *khene*), a wind instrument that is devised of a double row of bamboo-like reeds fitted into a hardwood soundbox and made air-tight with beeswax. The rows can be as few as four or as many as eight courses (for a total of 16 pipes), and the instrument can vary in length from around 80cm to about 2m. An adept player can produce a churning, calliope-like dance music.

When the *kháen* is playing you'll often see people dancing the *lám wóng* (circle performance), easily the most popular folk dance in Laos. Put simply, in the *lám wóng* couples dance circles around one another until there are three circles in all: a circle danced by the individual, a circle danced by the couple, and one danced by the whole crowd. Watch for a few minutes and you'll soon get the hang of it.

## MĀW LĀM

The Lao folk idiom also has its own musical theatre, based on the *māw lám* tradition. *Māw lám* is difficult to translate but roughly means 'master of verse'. Led by one or more vocalists, performances always feature a witty, topical combination of talking and singing that ranges across themes as diverse as politics and sex. Very colloquial, even bawdy, language is employed. This is one art form that has always bypassed government censors and it continues to provide an important outlet for grass-roots expression.

Diverse other instruments, including electric guitar, electric bass and drums, may supplement the basic *kháen*/vocalist ensemble. Versions that appear on Lao national television are usually much watered down to suit 'national development'.

There are several different types of *māw lám*, depending on the number of singers and the region the style hails from. *Māw lám khuu* (couple *māw lám*), for example, features a man and woman who engage in flirtation and verbal repartee. *Māw lám jót* (duelling *māw lám*) has two performers of the same gender who 'duel' by answering questions or finishing an incomplete story issued as a challenge – not unlike free-style rap.

Northern Lao *kháen*-based folk music is usually referred to as *kháp* rather than *lám*. Authentic live *māw lám* can be heard at temple fairs and on Lao radio. CDs can be purchased in larger towns and cities.

## Literature

Of all classical Lao literature, *Pha Lak Pha Lam*, the Lao version of the Indian epic the Ramayana, is the most pervasive and influential in the culture. The Indian source first came to Laos with the Hindu Khmer as

North Illinois University has pages of information on Lao culture, language, history, folklore and music at [www.seasite.niu.edu/laol/](http://www.seasite.niu.edu/laol/) including recordings of the *kháen*.

## LAO POP

Up until 2003 performing 'modern' music was virtually outlawed in Laos. The government had decided it just wasn't the Lao thing, and bands such as local heavy metal outfit Sapphire who chose to play anyway were effectively shut down. Instead the youth listened to pirated Thai and Western music, while Lao-language pop was limited to the *lâuk thung*, syrupy arrangements combining cha-cha and bolero rhythms with Lao-Thai melodies.

Then the government decided that if Lao youth were going to listen to modern pop, it might as well be home-grown. The first 'star' was Thidavanh Bounxouay, a Lao-Bulgarian singer more popularly known as Alexandra. Her brand of pop wasn't exactly radical, but it was decidedly upbeat compared with what went before. In the last couple of years other groups have followed: the three guys and girl in Overdance wear matching outfits and produce expectedly poppy tunes. Girl-band Princess and pop-rock group Awake are also popular, while Aluna is evolving from a Kylie Minogue model to something less poppy. Pushing the boundaries a bit more is hard rock band Cells, which has a hardcore following of moshing teen boys. They perform mostly original songs and their singer also writes for other local artists.

But it's rap group L.O.G. which has been most successful, including a chart-topping hit in Thailand in 2006. Ironically, L.O.G. is one of the bands for whom success has been much more rewarding in Thailand, where they've played big and relatively lucrative gigs in Bangkok, than Laos, where they're encouraged in competition with Thai music.

This is an exciting new era for Lao music, but it's not as revolutionary as it might seem. Original, non-pirated CDs sell for just US\$1.50 to US\$2, so most musicians must work a day job. Indeed, Aluna might be a celebrity in Laos, but you'll still find her working behind reception in her family's Vang Vieng guesthouse. And the government's stance could best be described as pragmatic. Before recording all songs must be vetted by government censors, who can and do change both lyrics and video clips. Even after an album has been passed, some songs might not be approved for broadcast on radio. Needless to say, controversial social comment is at a premium.

These bands sometimes play venues in Vientiane (see p111), though you're more likely to see them at outdoor gigs to celebrate major holidays.

stone reliefs at Wat Phu Champasak and other Angkor-period temples. Oral and written versions may also have been available; eventually, though, the Lao developed their own version of the epic, which differs greatly both from the original and from Thailand's *Ramakian*.

Of the 547 Jataka tales in the *Pali Tipitaka* (tripartite Buddhist canon) – each chronicling a different past life of the Buddha – most appear in Laos almost word-for-word as they were first written down in Sri Lanka. A group of 50 'extra' or apocryphal stories – based on Lao-Thai folk tales of the time – were added by Pali scholars in Luang Prabang between 300 and 400 years ago. Laos's most popular Jataka is an old Pali original known as the Mahajati or Mahavessandara (Lao: Pha Wet), the story of the Buddha's penultimate life. Interior murals in the *sim* of many Lao wat typically depict this Jataka as well as others.

Contemporary literature has been hampered by decades of war and communist rule. Only in 1999 was the first collection of contemporary Lao fiction, Ounthine Bounyavong's *Mother's Beloved: Stories from Laos*, published in a bilingual Lao and English edition.

## SPORT

Like most poor countries, you won't read much about Laos when the Olympic circus sets up its tent. Laos has never won an Olympic medal, or much else in the international sporting arena, but that doesn't mean it's a complete sporting black hole.

*Traditional Music of the Lao* (1985), by Terry Miller, although mainly focused on northeast Thailand, is the only book-length work yet to appear on Lao music, and is very informative.

Laos has a few traditional sports and these are as often an excuse for betting as they are a means of exercise. *Kâtaw* and *múay láo* (Lao boxing, p62) certainly do involve exercise – and these are taken increasingly seriously as international competition raises their profiles. Cockfighting, however, does not. Cockfights follow the usual rules except that in Laos the cocks are not fitted with blades so often survive the bout. If you want to watch (or not), keep your eyes and ears open, particularly on Sundays and public holidays.

In ethnic Thai areas you might find the more off-beat 'sport' of beetle fighting. These bouts involve notoriously fractious rhinoceros beetles squaring off while a crowd, usually more vociferous after liberal helpings of *lào-lào*, bets on the result. The beetles hiss and attack, lifting each other with their horns, until one decides it no longer wants to be part of this 'entertainment' and runs. If you bet on the runner, you lose. Beetle bouts are limited to the wet season.

Kids in Laos are likely to be seen chasing around a football (or at least something that resembles a football). Opportunities for pursuing football professionally are few, limited by an almost complete lack of quality coaching, pitches, and youth leagues where players can get experience of proper competition. Laos does, however, compete in various regional tournaments, and on occasion you can see inter-provincial matches at the National Stadium in Vientiane or in modest stadia in provincial capitals.

## Kâtaw

*Kâtaw*, a contest in which a woven rattan or plastic ball about 12cm in diameter is kicked around, is almost as popular in Laos as it is in Thailand and Malaysia.

Traditional *kâtaw* involved players standing in a circle (the size of the circle depending on the number of players) and trying to keep the ball airborne by kicking it soccer-style. Points were scored for style, difficulty and variety of kicking manoeuvres.

A modern variation on *kâtaw* – the one used in local or international competitions – is played with a volleyball net, using all the same rules as in volleyball except that only the feet and head are permitted to touch the ball. It's amazing to see the players perform aerial pirouettes, spiking the ball over the net with their feet. You're most likely to see *kâtaw* in school yards, wats and public spaces, usually in the afternoon.

## PETANG

While you'll see plenty of *kâtaw* and football, the sport you'll most likely be able to actually play is *petang*. Introduced by the French, *petang* is obviously a local corruption of pétanque. All over Laos you'll see small courts made of packed dirt or gravel. There's usually a certain level of improvisation with the 'playing arena'; the backboard might be a length of coconut trunk, and the throwing circle is usually a bike tyre.

While it's been around for decades, on this trip we noticed many more courts than in previous years. It turns out that Lao involvement in international competition – presumably televised – has sparked a renewed interest in the game. In the 2005 Southeast Asian Games Laos won gold in the mens singles and silver in the mens doubles, quite an achievement for success-starved Laos.

As you travel around you'll see games are usually played in the afternoon and the players are usually men. If the game doesn't look like a life-and-death battle it's fine to ask to join in. The aim of the game is to get your *boule* (steel ball) as close to the *cochonnet* (piglet) as possible. *Petang* is supposed to be played between teams of two or three, though in practice it depends on how many *boules* and bodies are available. For technique, just watch and learn – and be careful not to injure any passing child or chicken.

In early 2007 Laos was ranked 151st by FIFA, above neighbours Cambodia and Vietnam.

### **Múay Láo (Lao Boxing)**

The Lao seem to have an almost insatiable appetite for televised kickboxing, whether the pictures are coming from Thailand (*múay Thai*) or are of a local fight, known as *múay láo* (Lao kickboxing). *Múay láo* is not nearly as developed a sport in Laos as its counterpart in Thailand, and is mostly confined to amateur fights at upcountry festivals, but on most weekends you'll see the bigger fights broadcast on television.

All surfaces of the body are considered fair targets and any part of the body except the head may be used to strike an opponent. Common blows include high kicks to the neck, elbow thrusts to the face and head, knee hooks to the ribs and low crescent kicks to the calf. A contestant may even grasp an opponent's head between his hands and pull it down to meet an upward knee thrust.

International boxing (*múay sǎakɔ̀n*) is gaining popularity in Laos and is encouraged by the government in spite of the obvious Lao preference for the bang-up Southeast Asian version.

# Environment

In a part of the world where trees haven't done too well in recent decades, Laos is notable for its remarkably intact biodiversity. It's an aspect of the country that is being recognised by some as a potentially lucrative natural resource. In 2006, tourism was one of the Lao PDR's largest foreign income earners, and estimates suggest that about half of that money is from visitors who came in large part to experience this natural beauty (see *Ecotourism in Laos*, p72).

However, it's not all sweetness and light. The environment in Laos has long benefited from the country's small population, which has exerted relatively little pressure on the ecosystem. But with a growing population of poor, for whom wildlife equates to protein, those pressures are rising quickly. Add to that the ongoing problems of illegal logging and a renewed desire to sell its rivers to foreign hydropower developers, and Laos might yet miss the rare opportunity it has with such an intact environment. We can only hope not.

## THE LAND

Covering an area slightly larger than Great Britain, landlocked Laos shares borders with China, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. Rivers and mountains dominate, folding the country into a series of often-spectacular ridges and valleys, rivers and mountain passes, extending westward from the Lao-Vietnamese border.

Mountains and plateaus cover well over 70% of the country. Running about half the length of Laos, parallel to the course of the Mekong River, is the Annamite Chain, a rugged mountain range with peaks averaging between 1500m and 2500m in height. Roughly in the centre of the range is the Khammuan Plateau, a world of dramatic limestone grottoes and gorges where vertical walls rise hundreds of metres from jungle-clad valleys (see p230). At the southern end of the Annamite Chain, covering 10,000 sq km, the Bolaven Plateau (see p282) is an important area for the cultivation of high-yield mountain rice, coffee, tea and other crops that flourish in the cooler climes found at these higher altitudes.

The larger, northern half of Laos is made up almost entirely of broken, steep-sloped mountain ranges. The highest mountains are found in Xieng Khuang Province (p164), including Phu Bia, the country's highest peak at 2820m, though this remains off-limits to travellers for now. Just north of Phu Bia stands the Xieng Khuang plateau, the country's largest mountain plateau, which rises 1200m above sea level. The most famous part of the plateau is the Plain of Jars (p169), an area somewhat reminiscent of the rolling hills of Ireland – except for the thousands of bomb craters. It's named for the huge prehistoric stone jars that dot the area, as if the local giants have pub-crawled across this neighbourhood and left their empty beer mugs behind.

Much of the rest of Laos is covered by forest (see *Plants*, below), most of which is mixed deciduous forest. This forest enjoys a complex relationship with the Mekong and its tributaries, acting as a sponge for the monsoon rains and then slowly releasing the water into both streams and the atmosphere during the long dry season.

## THE MEKONG & OTHER RIVERS

Springing forth over 4000km from the sea, high up on the Tibetan Plateau, the Mekong River so dominates Lao topography that, to a large extent, the entire country parallels its course. Although half of the Mekong's length

## ROCK STARS

Odd-shaped rocks are venerated across Laos. Even in what appears to be the middle of nowhere, you'll see saffron robes draped over rocks that look vaguely like turtles, fishing baskets, stupas etc. Local legends explain how the rocks came to be or what they were used for, and some are famous around the country.

The Mekong River is known as Lancang Jiang (Turbulent River) in China; Mae Nam Khong in Thailand, Myanmar and Laos; Tonle Thom (Great Water) in Cambodia and Cuu Long (Nine Dragons) in Vietnam.

Marco Polo was probably the first European to cross the Mekong, in the 13th century, and was followed by a group of Portuguese emissaries in the 16th century. Dutch merchant Gerrit van Wuysthoff arrived by boat in the 17th century. In 1893 the French and Siamese signed the Treaty of Bangkok, designating the Mekong as the border between Siam and French Indochina.

*The Mekong: Turbulent Past, Uncertain Future* (2000), by Milton Osborne, is a fascinating cultural history of the Mekong that spans 2000 years of exploration, mapping and war.

runs through China, more of the river courses through Laos than through any other Southeast Asian country. At its widest, near Si Phan Don in the south, the river can expand to 14km across during the rainy season; spreading around thousands of islands and islets on its inevitable course south.

The Mekong's middle reach is navigable year-round, from Heuan Hin (north of the Khemmarat Rapids in Savannakhet Province) to Kok Phong in Luang Prabang. However these rapids, and the brutal falls at Khon Phapeng (p282) in Si Phan Don, have prevented the Mekong from becoming the sort of regional highway other great rivers have.

The fertile Mekong River flood plain, running from Sainyabuli to Cham-pasak, forms the flattest and most tropical part of Laos. Virtually all of the domestic rice consumed in Laos is grown here, and if our experience seeing rice packaged up as 'Produce of Thailand' is any indication, then a fair bit is exported via Thailand, too. Most other large-scale farming takes place here as well. The Mekong and, just as importantly, its tributaries are also an important source of fish, a vital part of the diet for most people living in Laos. The Mekong valley is at its largest around Vientiane and Savannakhet, which, not surprisingly, are two of the major population centres.

Major tributaries of the great river include the Nam Ou (Ou River) and the Nam Tha (Tha River), both of which flow through deep, narrow limestone valleys from the north, and the Nam Ngum (Ngum River), which flows into the Mekong across a broad plain in Vientiane Province. The Nam Ngum is the site of one of Laos's oldest hydroelectric plants, which provides power for Vientiane area towns and Thailand. The Se Kong (Kong River) flows through much of southern Laos before eventually reaching the Mekong in Cambodia, and the rivers Nam Kading (Kading River) and Nam Theun (Theun River) are equally important in central Laos.

All the rivers and tributaries west of the Annamite Chain drain into the Mekong, while waterways east of the Annamites (in Hua Phan and Xieng Khuang Provinces only) flow into the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of Vietnam.

## WILDLIFE

Laos boasts one of the least disturbed ecosystems in Asia due to its overall lack of development and low population density. Least disturbed, however, does not mean undisturbed, and for many species the future remains uncertain.

### Animals

The mountains, forests and river networks of Laos are home to a range of animals both endemic to the country and shared with its Southeast Asian neighbours. Nearly half of the animal species native to Thailand are shared by Laos, with the higher forest cover and fewer hunters meaning that numbers are often greater in Laos. Almost all wild animals however are threatened to some extent by hunting and habitat loss; see Environmental Issues, p69.

In spite of this Laos has seen several new species discovered in recent years, while others thought to be extinct have turned up in remote forests. Given their rarity, these newly discovered species are on the endangered list (see p66).

As in Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar and much of Thailand, most of the fauna in Laos belong to the Indochinese zoogeographic realm (as opposed to the Sundaic domain found south of the Isthmus of Kra in southern Thailand and the Palaearctic to the north in China).

Notable mammals endemic to Laos include the lesser panda, raccoon dog, Lao marmoset rat, Owston's civet and the pygmy slow loris. Other important exotic species found elsewhere in the region include the Malayan and Chinese pangolins, 10 species of civet, marbled cat, Javan and crab-eating

### DEVELOPING THE MEKONG: RELIEVING POVERTY OR DAM CRAZY?

For millennia the Mekong River has been the lifeblood of Laos. As the region's primary artery, about 50 million people depend on resources from the river and its tributaries. The Mekong is the world's 12th-longest river and 10th-largest in terms of volume. But unlike other major rivers, a series of rapids have prevented it from developing into a major transport and cargo thoroughfare, or as a base for large industrial cities.

Except in China, the Mekong itself is not dammed. However the greater river system has long been seen as a potentially lucrative source of hydroelectricity. And with the regional demand for power rising rapidly, plans to turn Laos into the 'battery of Southeast Asia' have been revived after a decade of stagnation.

For a country as poor as Laos there are definite benefits. Selling electricity to Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and China will bring much-needed foreign exchange to the economy. In theory, this windfall can be spent on developing the country while at the same time reducing its reliance on foreign aid and loans. It's an attractive proposition, and one that the Laos government and several international agencies seem happy to pursue.

The first, and biggest, cab off the rank will be the Nam Theun 2 dam in Khammuan Province, due to be finished in 2010. This controversial hydropower project was 10 years in the planning, and as such is probably one of the most studied dam projects in history. Dozens of research projects were carried out because the dam needed World Bank approval before investors would commit, and the World Bank was under sustained pressure to reduce the negative impacts as much as possible.

However, not all projects are as big or get as much publicity as Nam Theun 2. When the World Bank finally approved the project in 2005, it was the equivalent of opening hydropower's Pandora's Box. In the ensuing period a flurry of agreements have been signed between the Laos government and private developers, all looking for a slice of the hydropower pie. At the time of writing more than 20 hydropower projects were either being built or were in the advanced stages of planning in Laos, raising the question of whether the government has gone 'dam' crazy.

For critics, including the International Rivers Network (IRN), the answer is a resounding yes. They claim that these lower profile dams have potentially far greater environmental and social impacts because there is no transparency and they are much harder to monitor. Although the government requires full environmental impact assessments for all hydropower schemes, if they have been carried out, few have been released to the public.

The negative impacts associated with dams include both the obvious and more difficult to see. Obvious effects include displacement of local communities, flooding upstream areas, reduced sediment flows and increased erosion downstream with resulting issues for fish stocks and the fisherman who work the rivers. Less immediately visible, but with a potentially much greater influence in the long term, are the changes these dams will have on the Mekong's flood pulse, which is critical to the fish spawning cycle, and thus the food source of millions of people.

All up this is a hugely complex issue. For more information, visit these websites:

**Asian Development Bank** ([www.adb.org](http://www.adb.org))

**International Rivers Network** ([www.irn.org](http://www.irn.org))

**Laos Energy lobby** ([www.poweringprogress.org](http://www.poweringprogress.org))

**Mekong River Commission** ([www.mrc.org](http://www.mrc.org))

**WWF** ([www.panda.org](http://www.panda.org))

mongoose, the serow (sometimes called Asian mountain goat) and goral (another type of goat-antelope), and cat species including the leopard cat and Asian golden cat.

Among the most notable of Laos's wildlife are the primates. Several smaller species are known, including the Phayre's leaf monkey, François' langur, Douc langur and several macaques. Two other primates that are endemic to Laos are the concolour gibbon and snub-nosed langur. But it's the five species of gibbon that attract most attention. Sadly, the black-cheeked crested

gibbon is endangered, being hunted both for its meat and to be sold as pets in Thailand. Several projects, including one treetop affair that would rather keep a low profile, are working to educate local communities to set aside safe areas for the gibbons.

### ELEPHANTS

Laos might once have been known as the land of a million elephants, but these days only about 2000 remain. For an animal as threatened as the Asiatic elephant, this population is one of the largest in the region. Exact figures are hard to come by, but it's generally believed that there are about 800 wild elephants, roaming in open-canopy forest areas predominantly in Sainyabuli Province west of Vientiane, Bolikhamsai Province in the Phu Khao Khuay NPA (p118), and along the Nakai Plateau in central eastern Laos.

Hunting and habitat loss are their main threats. In areas such as the Nakai Plateau, Vietnamese poachers kill elephants for their meat and hides, while the Nam Theun 2 hydropower project will soon swallow up a large chunk of habitat. The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) has an ongoing project in this area, with a long-term aim of establishing a 'demonstration site that will serve as a model for reducing human-elephant conflict nationwide.'

Working or domesticated elephants are also found in most provinces, totalling between 1100 and 1350 countrywide. They have traditionally been used for the heavy labour involved in logging and agriculture, but modern machinery is rapidly putting them out of work. As a result, the mahouts (elephant keepers and/or drivers) in some elephant villages are working with NGOs to find alternative income through tourism. Projects in Kiet Ngong (p270) in Champasak Province, and Hongsa (p224) in Sainyabuli Province offer elephant trekking, and the elephant *bqasii* (p224) is growing in popularity as a tourist event. Working elephants are most visible in Sainyabuli, Udomxai, Champasak and Attapeu Provinces.

Despite these problems, Laos is in the rare position of having the raw materials – enough elephants and habitat – to ensure the jumbos have a long and healthy future. What is missing is money and, perhaps, sufficient political will.

### ENDANGERED SPECIES

To a certain extent, all wild animals in Laos are endangered due to widespread hunting and gradual but persistent habitat loss. Laos ratified the UN Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (Cites) in 2004, which, combined with other legal measures, has made it easier to prosecute people trading species endangered as a direct result of international trade. But in reality you won't need 20/20 vision to pick out the endangered species – both dead and alive – on sale in markets around the country. Border markets, in particular, tend to attract the most valuable species, with Thais buying species such as gibbons as pets, and Vietnamese shopping for exotic food and medicines.

Of the hundreds of species of mammals known in Laos, several dozen are endangered according to the IUCN's Redlist ([www.iucnredlist.org](http://www.iucnredlist.org)). These range from bears, including the Asiatic black bear and Malayan sun bear, through the less glamorous wild cattle such as the gaur and banteng, to high-profile cats like the tiger, leopard and clouded leopard. Exactly how endangered they are is difficult to say. Camera-trapping projects (setting up cameras in the forest to take photos of anything that goes past) are being carried out by various NGOs and, in the case of the Nakai Nam Theun NPA, by the Nam Theun 2 dam operators themselves.

The Nakai Nam Theun research is part of a deal brokered by the World Bank that ensures US\$1 million a year is set aside for environmental study and protection in the dam's catchment area. Results of camera trapping in the Nakai Nam Theun NPA have been both encouraging and depressing. The cameras returned photos of limited numbers of several species, but also a hunter posing proudly with his kill – not quite the shots they were hoping for.

The WCS is focussing its conservation activities on species including the Asian elephant (see p66), Siamese crocodile, tiger, western black crested gibbon and Eld's deer, one of several endangered deer species including barking deer and sambar. For more details, see [www.wcs.org](http://www.wcs.org).

Some endangered species are so rare they were unknown until very recently. Among these is the spindlehorn (*Pseudoryx nghethingensis*; known as the *saola* in Vietnam, *nyang* in Laos), a horned mammal found in the Annamite Chain along the Lao-Vietnamese border in 1992. The spindlehorn, which was described in 14th-century Chinese journals, was long thought not to exist, and when discovered it became one of only three land mammals to earn its own genus in the 20th century. Unfortunately, horns taken from spindlehorn are a favoured trophy among certain groups on both sides of the Lao-Vietnamese border.

In 2005 WCS scientists visiting a local market in Khammuan Province discovered a 'Laotian rock rat' laid out for sale. But, what was being sold as meat turned out to be a genetically distinct species named the *Laonastes aenigmamus*. Further research revealed it to be the sole survivor of a prehistoric group of rodents that died out about 11 million years ago. If you're very lucky you might see one on the cliffs near the caves off Rte 12 in Khammuan Province.

Among the most seriously endangered of all mammals is the Irrawaddy dolphin (see the boxed text, Dolphins Endangered, p279).

### Birds

Those new to Laos often ask: 'Why can't I hear more birds?' The short answer is 'cheap protein' (p73). If you can get far enough away from people, you'll find the forests and mountains of Laos do in fact harbour a rich selection of resident and migrating bird species. Surveys carried out by a British team of ornithologists in the 1990s recorded 437 species, including eight globally threatened and 21 globally near-threatened species. Some other counts rise as high as 650 species.

Notable among these are the Siamese fireback pheasant, green peafowl, red-collared woodpecker, brown hornbill, tawny fish-owl, Sarus crane, giant ibis and the Asian golden weaver. Hunting keeps urban bird populations noticeably thin. Up until a few years ago, it wasn't uncommon to see men pointing long-barrelled muskets at upper tree branches in cities as large as Savannakhet and Vientiane. Those days are now gone, but around almost every village you'll hear hunters doing their business most afternoons.

### Plants

According to the IUCN, natural unmanaged vegetation covers more than 75% of Laos and about half the country bears natural forest cover. Of these woodlands about half can be classified as primary forest – a very high proportion in this day and age – while another 30% or so represents secondary growth. Laos ranks 11th worldwide in terms of natural forest cover and in Southeast Asia only Cambodia boasts more, though rampant illegal logging there could soon reverse those positions.

### SPECIES DECEASES

The World Conservation Union ([www.iucn.org](http://www.iucn.org)) believes wildlife in Laos has a much better chance of surviving than in neighbouring Vietnam. Lending weight to this is the Vietnam warty pig (*Sus bucculentus*), a species found in Laos but last recorded in Vietnam in 1892 and until recently considered extinct.

The giant Mekong catfish may grow up to 3m long and weigh as much as 300kg. Due to Chinese blasting of shoals in the Upper Mekong, it now faces extinction in the wild.

### RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL IN LAOS – WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

Throughout your travels in Laos the opportunity to buy or consume wildlife is likely to come about. In the interests of wildlife conservation, the Wildlife Conservation Society – Lao PDR strongly urges you not to partake in the wildlife trade. While it's true that subsistence hunting is permitted by the Government of Lao PDR for local rural villagers, the sale and purchase of *any* wildlife is illegal in Laos. The wildlife trade is damaging to biodiversity and to local livelihoods.

While strolling through rural and city markets you'll come across wild animals for sale as meat or live pets. In a misguided attempt to do the right thing travellers have been known to buy these live animals in order to release them. While it might feel like this is a positive step towards thwarting the wildlife trade it actually has the opposite effect with vendors, unaware of the buyer's motivation, interpreting the sale as increased demand.

Be prepared for some bizarre and disturbing items on restaurant menus and in food markets in Laos. While it may be tempting to experience the unusual it's strongly recommended that the following animals be avoided: soft shelled turtles, rat snakes, mouse deer, sambar deer, squirrel, bamboo rat, muntjac deer, and pangolins. Many of these species are endangered or are a source of prey for endangered species.

Thinking of purchasing a stuffed wild animal? A bag or wallet made from animal skin? Or perhaps an insect in a framed box? Think again. The money made in the sale of these peculiar trinkets goes directly towards supporting the illegal wildlife trade. Also to be avoided are the rings and necklaces made from animal teeth (sellers may tell you that this is buffalo bone, but it's just as likely that it's bear or wild pig bone) and the bottles of alcohol with snakes, birds, or insects inside. Though widely sold, this trade is illegal in Laos, and you'll most likely find your new libido-enhancing snake oil confiscated by customs in your home country anyway. Keep an eye out for products with a CITES-certified label, these are legal to buy in Laos and take home.

For many species of wildlife in Laos populations are at critically low levels. The WCS Lao PDR programme (<http://www.wcs.org/international/Asia/laos>) is collaborating with the Vientiane Capital City government to monitor and control wildlife trade. If you observe wildlife trading please contact the local authorities.

*By the Wildlife Conservation Society, Lao PDR ([www.wcs.org/international/Asia/laos](http://www.wcs.org/international/Asia/laos))*

Most indigenous vegetation in Laos is associated with monsoon forests, a common trait in areas of tropical mainland Southeast Asia that experience dry seasons lasting three months or longer. In such mixed deciduous forests many trees shed their leaves during the dry season to conserve water. Rainforests – which are typically evergreen – don't exist in Laos, although nonindigenous rainforest species such as the coconut palm are commonly seen in the lower Mekong River valley. There are undoubtedly some big trees in Laos, but don't expect the sort of towering forests found in some other parts of Southeast Asia – the conditions do not, and never have, allowed these sort of giants to grow here.

Instead the monsoon forests of Laos typically grow in three canopies. Dipterocarps – tall, pale-barked, single-trunked trees that can grow beyond 30m high – dominate the top canopy of the forest, while a middle canopy consists of an ever-dwindling population of prized hardwoods, including teak, padauk (sometimes called 'Asian rosewood') and mahogany. Underneath there's a variety of smaller trees, shrubs, grasses and – along river habitats – bamboo. In certain plateau areas of the south, there are dry dipterocarp forests in which the forest canopies are more open, with less of a middle layer and more of a grass-and-bamboo undergrowth. Parts of the Annamite Chain that receive rain from both the southwestern monsoon as well as the South China Sea are covered by tropical montane evergreen forest, while tropical pine forests can be found on the Nakai Plateau and Sekong area to the south.

While opium has been cultivated and used in Laos for centuries, the country didn't become a major producer until the passing of the 1971 Anti-Narcotics Law, a move that helped drive up regional prices steeply.

In addition to the glamour hardwoods, the country's flora includes a toothsome array of fruit trees, bamboo (more species than any country outside Thailand and China) and an abundance of flowering species such as the orchid. However, in some parts of the country orchids are being stripped out of forests (often in protected areas) for sale to Thai tourists; look for the markets near the waterfalls of the Bolaven Plateau (see p283) to see them. In the high plateaus of the Annamite Chain, extensive grasslands or savanna are common.

### NATIONAL PROTECTED AREAS (NPAS)

Laos boasts one of the youngest and most comprehensive protected area systems in the world. In 1993 the government set up 18 National Biodiversity Conservation Areas, comprising a total of 24,600 sq km, or just over 10% of the country's land mass. Most significantly, it did this following sound scientific consultation rather than creating areas on an ad hoc basis (as most other countries have done). Two more were added in 1995, for a total of 20 protected areas covering 14% of Laos. A further 4% of Laos is reserved as Provincial Protected Areas, making Laos one of the most protected countries on earth.

The areas were renamed National Protected Areas (NPAs) a few years ago. And while the naming semantics might seem trivial, they do reflect some important differences. The main one is that an NPA has local communities living within its boundaries, unlike a national park, where only rangers and those working in the park are allowed to live and where traditional activities such as hunting and logging are banned. Indeed, forests in NPAs are divided into production forests for timber, protection forests for watershed and conservation forests for pure conservation.

The largest protected areas are in southern Laos, which, contrary to popular myth, bears a higher percentage of natural forest cover than the north. The largest of the NPAs, Nakai-Nam Theun, covers 3710 sq km and is home to the recently discovered spindlehorn (see p66) as well as several other species unknown to the scientific world a decade ago.

While several NPAs remain difficult to access without mounting a full-scale expedition, several others have become much easier to reach in recent years. The best way in is usually by foot; for a list of the trekking possibilities see the boxed text, Where to Trek, p70.

The wildlife in these areas – from rare birds to wild elephants – is relatively abundant. The best time to view wildlife in most of the country is just after the monsoon in November. However, even at these times you'll be lucky to see very much. There are several reasons for this, the most important of which is that ongoing hunting mean numbers of wild animals are reduced and those living are instinctively scared of humans. It's also difficult to see animals in forest cover at the best of times, and many animals are nocturnal.

### ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Flying over Laos it's easy to think that the great majority of the country is blanketed with vast tracts of untouched wilderness. And while Laos does indeed have one of the most pristine ecologies in Asia, first impressions can be deceiving. What that lumpy carpet of green conceals is an environment facing several interrelated threats.

For the most part they're issues of the bottom line. Hunting endangers all sorts of creatures of the forest but it persists because the hunters can't afford to buy meat from the market. Forests are logged at unsustainable rates because the timber found in Laos is valuable and loggers see more profit in cutting than not. And hydropower projects affect river systems

For fuller descriptions of all Laos's National Protected Areas, see the comprehensive website [www.ecotourismlaos.com](http://www.ecotourismlaos.com)

## WHERE TO TREK

The best way to get into the wilderness is on a trek into one of Laos's National Protected Areas (NPAs). Most treks have both a cultural and environmental focus, with trekkers sleeping in village homestays (p48) and your money going directly into some of the poorest communities in the country.

These treks are mostly run by provincial tourism authorities and have English-speaking guides. They can be organised once you arrive or in advance by phone, and are the cheapest trekking options available. Some companies, most notably Green Discovery ([www.greendiscoverylaos.com](http://www.greendiscoverylaos.com)), offer more elaborate trekking, often combining walking with mountain biking, kayaking and/or rafting. Guides will likely be more experienced but the trips are also more expensive.

To help you get an idea of the options, we've listed the areas where organised trekking is possible, from north to south. Each of these areas is covered in detail in this book. For more information, see p301 and the boxed text, Responsible Trekking on p204.

**Phongsali** (p210) From Phongsali. One to five-day treks in remote hills, overnighing in Akha and Up Noi villages. Treks are moderately easy and the emphasis is on culture.

**Nam Ha NPA** (p198) From Luang Nam Tha. One to four-day treks into this wild and wonderful area. Over 10 treks offered, the most popular including homestays in hilltop Akha villages. This is a true eco-experience.

**Muang Sing** (p203) From Muang Sing. One to three-day treks exploring the diverse ethnic villages in the area. There are seven different treks and each includes authentic homestays. Some delve slightly into Nam Ha NPA.

**Vieng Phoukha** (p202) From Vieng Phoukha. One to three-day treks in some of Northern Laos' most spectacular and culturally-rich landscape. Most encompass homestays in Akha, Khamu and Lahu villages and explore the south of Nam Ha NPA.

**Phu Khao Khuay NPA** (p118) From Vientiane. Two and three-day treks, the most popular of which include a stay in an elephant tower and a rare chance (not a guarantee) at seeing wild Asian elephants.

**Phu Hin Bun NPA** (p230) From Tha Khaek or Ban Khoun Kham (Ban Na Hin). For beauty, it's hard to beat these trekking and boating trips through the monolithic limestone karsts. Two and three-day options available, or four days with Green Discovery.

**Dong Natad Provincial Protected Area (PPA)** (p247) From Savannakhet. One and two-day trips to the provincial protected area near Savannakhet are cheap and popular for their homestay and explanations of how villagers use the sacred forest.

**Dong Phu Vieng NPA** (p249) From Savannakhet. This three-day trek (with a fair bit of road time at either end) takes you to two Katang villages where animist beliefs come with a host of taboos. It's a real head-bending cultural experience, but the transport makes prices a bit steep.

**Phu Xieng Thong NPA** (p261) From Pakse. A three-day trek and river trip along the Mekong. The village homestay isn't the most exciting, but visiting the hermit nun in the NPA is fascinating.

**Se Pian NPA** (p271) From Pakse or Attapeu. Taking in the elephants of Kiet Ngong (p270), this trek through forest, stream and rice field brings you to the remote Laven village of Ta Ong before returning by boat or over a hill with stunning views of the protected area. Two and three-day treks available.

**Dong Ampham NPA** (p297) From Attapeu. As far as we know fewer than five groups have ever done this trek into the most distant and well-preserved reaches of the country. The goal of the five day trip is the beautiful crater lake of Nong Fa – one of the holy grails of adventure travel in Laos. Not cheap.

and their dependent ecologies – including the forests – because Laos needs the money hydroelectricity can bring, and it's relatively cheap and easy for energy companies to develop in Laos.

Laws do exist to protect wildlife and, as mentioned, plenty of Laos is protected as NPAs. But most Laotians are completely unaware of world conservation issues and there is little will and less money to pay for conservation projects, such as organised park rangers, or to prosecute offenders. Lack of communication between national and local governments and poor definitions of authority in conservation areas just add to the issues.

One of the biggest obstacles facing environmental protection in Laos is corruption among those in charge of enforcing conservation regulations.

Illegal timber felling, poaching and the smuggling of exotic wildlife species would decrease sharply if corruption among officials was properly tackled.

However, there is some good news. With the support of several dedicated individuals and NGOs, ecotourism (see Ecotourism in Laos, p72) is growing to the point where some local communities are beginning to understand – and buying into – the idea that an intact environment can be worth money. Added to that, the government has mainly avoided giving contracts to companies wanting to develop large-scale resorts; though the same can't be said for many non-tourism projects. Air pollution and carbon emissions are about as low as you'll find anywhere in the region because most Lao still live at or just above a subsistence level and there is little heavy industry. Laos has one of the lowest per capita energy-consumption rates in the world.

One long-standing environmental problem has been the unexploded ordnance (UXO) contaminating parts of eastern Laos where the Ho Chi Minh Trail ran during the Second Indochina War. Bombs are being found and defused at a painstakingly slow rate, but progress is being made.

Thus the major challenges facing Laos's environment are the internal pressures of economic growth and external pressures from the country's more populated and affluent neighbours – particularly China, Vietnam and Thailand – who would like to exploit Laos's abundant resources as much as possible.

## Hydropower Projects

At the time of writing the electricity industry lobby in Laos was proudly reporting on its website ([www.poweringprogress.org](http://www.poweringprogress.org)) that since 2000 four hydroelectric dams had begun operation and construction was proceeding on four more. The Lao government was also at varying stages of contracting to award construction rights to foreign companies for a further 34 hydropower schemes. And, to top it all off, another 19 sites were being studied, and only six – including four huge proposals to dam the Mekong itself – had been declared 'not open to development'.

Hydropower is a relatively clean source of energy and to a certain extent dams in Laos are inevitable (see Developing the Mekong: Relieving Poverty or Dam Crazy, p65). But these are truly staggering numbers, with a potentially serious impact on the ecology of almost every major river system in the country.

Aside from displacing tens of thousands of people, dam projects inundate large swathes of forest (rarely agricultural land), permanently change the water flows, block or change fish migrations, thus affecting the fisheries local people have been relying on for centuries, and alter the ecosystems that support forests and the species that live in them. These forests are also the source of myriad non-timber products that contribute to local livelihoods, and the effects on these are often severe.

Like solar and wind power, hydropower is a potential source of sustainable and renewable energy when coupled with responsible land/resource planning and development. The question is, does Laos – and the companies looking to cash in on the resource – have the latter?

## Habitat Loss

Deforestation is another major environmental issue in Laos. Although the official export of timber is tightly controlled, no-one really knows how much teak and other hardwoods are being smuggled into Vietnam, Thailand and especially China. The policy in northern Laos has been to allow the Chinese to take as much timber as they want in return for building roads. The Lao army is still removing huge chunks of forest in Khammuan

Several non-government organisations are working in Laos to help preserve, promote and protect the environment. See what they're doing at:

Elefant Asia  
([www.elefantasia.org](http://www.elefantasia.org))

Traffic East Asia  
([www.traffic.org](http://www.traffic.org))

Wildlife Conservation Society  
([www.wcs.org](http://www.wcs.org))

World Conservation Union  
(IUCN; [www.iucnlaos.org](http://www.iucnlaos.org))

World Wildlife Fund  
([www.wwf.org](http://www.wwf.org) or [www.panda.org](http://www.panda.org))



**ECOTOURISM IN LAOS** *Steven Schipani*

With forests covering about half of the country, 20 National Protected Areas, 49 ethnic groups, over 650 bird species and hundreds of mammals, it's no mystery why Laos is known as having Southeast Asia's healthiest ecosystems and is a haven for travellers looking to get off the beaten path. Nowadays there are many tour companies and local tour guides offering forest trekking, cave exploration, village homestays and special river journeys to where the roads don't go. These types of activities are very popular in Laos and their availability has exploded over the past five years. Following the success of the Nam Ha Ecotourism Project in Luang Nam Tha Province, which began in 1999, the ecotourism industry has grown from the bottom up and today the Lao Government is actively promoting ecotourism as one way to help reduce poverty and support the protection of the environment and local culture. It is estimated that culture and nature based tourism generates more than half of the country's US\$150 million in annual tourism revenue.

The Lao National Tourism Administration defines ecotourism as: 'Tourism activity in rural and protected areas that minimizes negative impacts and is directed towards the conservation of natural and cultural resources, rural socio-economic development and visitor understanding of, and appreciation for, the places they are visiting.' A few Lao tour operators and guesthouses have taken this definition to heart and operate their businesses in a way that uphold the principles of Lao ecotourism.

In Luang Nam Tha in the north the Boatlanding Guesthouse ([www.theboatlanding.com](http://www.theboatlanding.com)) is Laos's first eco-lodge and winner of several international awards. Visit one of the National Protected Areas (NPAs) with Green Discovery Laos ([www.greendiscoverylaos.com](http://www.greendiscoverylaos.com)), which has offices in Luang Nam Tha, Tha Khaek, Vientiane, Pakse and Vang Vieng. In Luang Prabang, Tiger Trails Resort ([www.laos-adventures.com](http://www.laos-adventures.com)) has partnered with local communities to offer treks, elephant rides and boat trips in the Nam Khan Valley. In the south, high quality eco-accommodation can be found in Champasak Province's Kingfisher Eco-Lodge ([www.kingfishercolodge.com](http://www.kingfishercolodge.com)), nestled inside the Se Pian NPA. For a chance to see wild elephants, don't miss the village-operated Elephant Tower at Ban Na ([www.trekkingcentrallaos.com](http://www.trekkingcentrallaos.com)), about an hour from Vientiane. There are also locally run eco-guide services attached to the Provincial Tourist Information Centres in Luang Nam Tha, Luang Prabang, Savannakhet and Champasak Provinces offering one to four day trips at fair prices. These can be booked on a walk-in basis – see *Where to Trek* (p70) and [www.ecotourismlaos.com](http://www.ecotourismlaos.com) for details.

Unfortunately, some uninformed companies label everything as "ecotourism" therefore it is important to determine who is actually upholding the principles of Lao ecotourism, and who is simply greening their pockets. Some questions to ask to ensure you are on the right track are:

- Does my trip financially benefit local people, help to protect biodiversity and support the continuation of traditional culture?
- What will I learn on this trip, and what opportunities will local people have to learn from me?
- Are facilities designed in local style, use local, natural construction materials, and conserve energy and water? Is there local food on the menu?
- Will I be led by a local guide who is from the area visited?
- Is there a permit, entrance fee or other fee included in the price of the trip that is directed towards conservation activities?
- Are there sensible limits in place concerning group size and frequency of departures to minimize negative impacts?

Supporting businesses that can give clear, positive and believable answers to these questions will most likely result in an enjoyable, educational experience, where you make more than a few local friends along the way. It also raises the profile of sustainable business operators, hopefully encouraging others to follow their example.

[www.ecotourismlaos.com](http://www.ecotourismlaos.com)

Province and from remote areas in the country's far south, near the Se Pian and Dong Hua Sao NPAs, much of it going to Vietnam. The national electricity-generating company also profits from the timber sales each time it links a Lao town or village with the national power grid, clear-cutting a wider-than-necessary swathe along Lao highways.

Essentially, the Lao authorities express a seemingly sincere desire to conserve the nation's forests – but not at the cost of rural livelihoods. In most rural areas 70% of non-rice foods come from the forest. Thus forest destruction, whether as a result of logging or dam-building, will lead to increased poverty and reduced local livelihoods.

Other pressures on the forest cover come from swidden (slash-and-burn) methods of cultivation, in which small plots of forest are cleared, burnt for nitrogenation of the soil, and farmed intensively for two or three years, after which they are infertile and unfarmable for between eight and 10 years. Considering the sparse population, swidden cultivation is probably not as great an environmental threat as logging. But neither is it an efficient use of resources.

Forestry per se is not all bad, and effective management could maintain Laos's forests as a source of income for a long time to come. Creating NPAs has been a good start, but examples of forest regeneration and even planting high-value trees for future harvest are rare. All too often the name of the game is short-term gain.

**Hunting & Overfishing**

The majority of Lao citizens derive most of their protein from food culled from nature, not from farms or ranches. How threatening traditional hunting habits are to species survival in Laos is debatable given the nation's extremely sparse population. But, combined with habitat loss, hunting for food is placing increasing pressure on wildlife numbers.

The cross-border trade in wildlife is also potentially serious. Much of the poaching that takes place in Laos's NPAs is allegedly carried out by Vietnamese hunters who have crossed into central Laos illegally to round up species such as pangolins, civets, barking deer, goral and raccoon dogs to sell back home. These animals are highly valued for both food and medicinal purposes in Vietnam, Thailand and China, and as the demand in those countries grows in line with increasing wealth, so too do the prices buyers are prepared to pay.

Foreign NGOs run grass roots education campaigns across Laos in an effort to raise awareness of endangered species and the effects of hunting on local ecosystems. But as usual, money is the key to breaking the cycle. And while hunters remain dirt poor, the problem seems here to stay.

In more densely populated areas such as Savannakhet and Champasak provinces, the overfishing of lakes and rivers poses a danger to certain fish species. Projects to educate fishermen about exactly where their catch comes from, and how to protect that source, have been successful in changing some unsustainable practices. One area given particular attention is fishing using explosives. This practice, whereby fishermen throw explosives into the water and wait for the dead fish to float to the surface, is incredibly destructive. Most fishermen don't realise that for every dead fish they collect from the surface, another two or three lie dead on the river bed. The practice is illegal in Laos, and anecdotal evidence suggests education and the law have reduced the problem.

Around 85% of Laos is mountainous terrain, and less than 4% is considered arable.

*Wildlife Trade in Laos: The End of the Game* (2001), by Hanneke Nooren & Gordon Claridge, is a frightening description of animal poaching in Laos.

# Food & Drink

Lao food doesn't have the variety and depth of the more famous cuisines of neighbouring China, Thailand and Vietnam, but you can eat well in Laos if you take the time to learn a little about the cuisine while you're there. While few people travel to this country with food as their prime objective, a little experimentation can take you a long way towards appreciating the cuisine and can be very rewarding.

It's little surprise that Lao food is similar to Thai cuisine, given the long interwoven history the two countries share. But while dishes such as *làoap* (meat salad) and *təm māk-hung* (som tam; papaya salad) will be familiar to anyone with even a basic knowledge of Thai food, there are some aspects of Lao cuisine that are unmistakably Lao. The most obvious of these is *khào nīaw* (sticky rice), which is classed by scholars as being one of the main identifiers of Lao culture.

In the Mekong River valley areas, where Lao culture is strongest, sticky rice is ever-present. During five days of trekking through villages in Champasak Province we ate sticky rice with every meal. That might sound a bit repetitive, but the *khào nīaw* was only part of these meals, and each one was complemented with at least two different and tasty Lao dishes.

Sticky rice isn't so popular in mountainous areas – the Hmong don't eat it at all – and the culinary variety can be pretty limited, too. The limits come from a lack of money and difficult growing conditions.

## STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Travellers already hip to Thai cuisine will experience *déjà vu* in the Lao emphasis on simple, fresh ingredients coarsely blended into rustic dishes. Herbs like basil, mint, coriander and lemongrass lend bright tones to the mix, balanced by the spicy bitterness of roots and rhizomes (the thick, underground stem of certain plants), the tang of lime juice and Kaffir lime leaves, the pungent salt of fish sauce or shrimp paste and the fire of fresh chillies.

Staple ingredients include locally raised *phák* (vegetables), *pqa* (fish), *kai* (chicken), *pét* (duck), *mūu* (pork) and *siin ngúa* (beef) or *siin khwái* (water buffalo). Because of Laos's distance from the sea, freshwater fish is more common than saltwater fish or shellfish. When meats are used, Lao cooks prefer to emphasise savoury tones imparted by grilling, roasting or mixing with cooked ingredients that are inherently savoury, such as roasted rice.

To salt the food, various fermented fish concoctions are used, most commonly *nām pqa*, which is a thin sauce of fermented anchovies, and *pqa dàek*, a coarser, native Lao preparation that includes chunks of fermented freshwater fish, rice husks and rice 'dust'. *Nām pqa dàek* is the sauce poured from *pqa dàek*. See the Health chapter (p336) for warnings on eating *pqa dàek*. *Phông sūu lot – ajinomoto* (MSG) – is also a common seasoning, and in Laos you may even see it served as a table condiment in noodle restaurants.

Fresh *nām māk náo* (lime juice), *sīi-khái* (lemongrass), *bqī sálanae* (mint leaf) and *phák hāwm* (coriander leaf) are added to give the food its characteristic tang. Other common seasonings include *khāa* (galingale), *māk phét* (hot chillies), *nām māk khāam* (tamarind juice), *khing* (ginger) and *nām māk pháo* or *nām káthi* (coconut milk). Chillies are sometimes served on the side in hot pepper sauces called *jqew*. In Luang Prabang, *nāng khwái hāeng* (dried skin of water buffalo) is quite a popular ingredient.

One of the most common Lao dishes is *làoap*, which is a Lao-style salad of minced meat, fowl or fish tossed with lime juice, garlic, *khào khúa* (roasted,

## STREET FOOD

Laos is blessed with a rich variety of food cooked, served and eaten on the street. Among the most common is *təm māk-hung* (generally known as *təm sóm* in Vientiane), a spicy, tangy salad made by pounding shredded green papaya, lime juice, chillies, garlic, *pqa dàek*, *nām phák-kàat* (a paste of boiled, fermented lettuce leaves) and various other ingredients together in a large mortar. This is a favourite market and street-vendor food – customers typically inspect the array of possible *təm māk-hung* ingredients the vendor has spread out next to the mortar, then order a custom mix. For something different, ask the pounder to throw in a few *māk kàwk*, a sour, olive-shaped fruit.

The Lao love a good *pīng* (grill), and you'll find all manner of meats and offals grilling over makeshift barbecues. *Pīng kai* (grilled chicken) is a favourite, and involves the cook taking chickens (whole or dissected) and rubbing them with a marinade of garlic, coriander root, black pepper and salt or fish sauce before cooking them slowly over hot coals. But our favourite is definitely *pīng pqa* (grilled fish). *Pīng pqa* is prepared by scaling a fish, rubbing it with a thick layer of salt and stuffing a handful of lemongrass stems down its throat before slowly grilling it. Other ingredients can be added, but it's the lemongrass and the fact the fish retains most of its moisture that we love. Delicious.

powdered sticky rice), green onions, mint leaves and chillies. It can be very hot or rather mild, depending on the cook. Meats mixed into *làoap* are sometimes raw (*díp*) rather than cooked (*súk*). *Làoap* is typically served with a large plate of lettuce, mint, steamed mango leaves and various other fresh herbs depending on season and availability. Using your fingers you wrap a little *làoap* in the lettuce and herbs and eat it with balls of sticky rice which you roll by hand.

Many Lao dishes are quite spicy because of the Lao penchant for *māk phét*. But the Lao also eat a lot of Chinese and Vietnamese food, which is generally less spicy. *Fōe* (rice noodle soup) is popular as a snack and for breakfast, and is almost always served with a plate of fresh lettuce, mint, basil, coriander, mung bean sprouts and lime wedges to add to the soup as desired. Especially in the south, people mix their own *fōe* sauce of lime, crushed fresh chilli, *kápí* (shrimp paste) and sugar at the table using a little saucer provided for the purpose. In Luang Prabang, some *fōe* shops may add *jqew ngúa*, a sesame paste.

Another common noodle dish, especially in the morning, is *khào pjak sèn*, a soft, round rice noodle served in a broth with pieces of chicken or occasionally pork, and often eaten with crushed fresh ginger. Many *khào pjak sèn* vendors also sell *khào-nòm khuu*, small deep-fried, doughnut-like Chinese pastries. Some vendors even leave a pair of scissors on each table so that you can cut the pastries up and mix them into your soup. It may sound strange, but it's very tasty.

*Khào pún*, flour noodles topped with a sweet and spicy *nām káthi* (coconut sauce), is another popular noodle dish. These noodles are also eaten cold with various Vietnamese foods popular in urban Laos, particularly *nām néuang* (barbecued pork meatballs) and *yáw* (spring rolls).

Rice is the foundation for all Lao meals (as opposed to snacks), as with elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Although the Lao generally eat *khào nīaw* (sticky or glutinous rice), *khào jào* (ordinary white rice) is also common in the major towns.

In Vientiane, Savannakhet, Pakse and Luang Prabang, French bread (*khào jji*) is popular for breakfast. Sometimes it's eaten plain with *kqa-féh nóm hāwn* (hot milk coffee), sometimes it's eaten with *khai* (eggs) or in a baguette sandwich that contains Lao-style pâté, and vegetables. Or you can order them *sai*

*Ant Egg Soup* (2004), by Natacha du Pont de Bie, is a well-written account of the author's encounters with food while travelling through Laos, garnished with recipes and line drawings.

## TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS

You haven't really been to Laos if you haven't dabbled in:

- Beerlao – the national beverage
- *khai phụn* – dried, seasoned river moss, a Luang Prabang speciality
- *lạp pạ* – finely minced fish blended with herbs, dried chilli flakes and roasted ground sticky rice
- *lào hời* – fermented rice wine served in a large clay jar with long reed straws
- *nặm khô* – balls of cooked rice mixed with sour pork sausage and fried whole, then broken into a saladlike dish eaten with fresh leaves and herbs; a Vientiane speciality
- *siin sawăn* – thin sheets of dried, spiced beef
- *tạm kúay* – green bananas pounded whole – skin and all – with chillies, lime juice, fish sauce and more.

*nặm nôm*: sliced in half lengthwise and drizzled with sweetened condensed milk. Fresh Lao baguettes can be superb. Croissants and other French-style pastries are also available in the bakeries of Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

## DRINKS

### Nonalcoholic Drinks

#### WATER

Water purified for drinking purposes is simply called *nâm deum* (drinking water), whether it is boiled or filtered. All water offered to customers in restaurants or hotels will be purified, so don't fret about the safety of taking a sip. In restaurants you can ask for *nâm pao* (plain water, which is always either boiled or taken from a purified source) served by the glass at no charge, or order plain or carbonated water by the bottle. In remote villages you'll often be served water with a distinct colour – usually yellow or red – and a smoky taste. This water is safe to drink and the colour comes from a root which is boiled with the water, the specific root differing depending on where you are.

#### COFFEE & TEA

Lao-grown coffee is regarded as among the world's best (see *Kqa-fêh Lào*, p285). Traditionally, pure Lao coffee is roasted by wholesalers, ground by vendors and filtered through a sock-like cloth bag just before serving. The result is thick, black, strong and delicious. Increasingly, however, restaurants and hotels in particular are serving Nescafé or similar instant coffee to foreigners. To make sure you get real Lao coffee ask for *kqa-fêh láo* (Lao coffee) or *kqa-fêh bọh-láan* (old-fashioned coffee).

Brewed coffee is usually served in small glasses and mixed with sugar and a startling amount of sweetened condensed milk. Once you've mixed it all up it's delicious, but if you don't want either be sure to specify *kqa-fêh đăm* (black coffee) followed with *baw sai nâm-tạn* (without sugar). An almost addictive variation is *òh-liang* (iced coffee with condensed milk and sugar). Only in better hotels and restaurants will you find real milk.

In central and southern Laos coffee is almost always served with a chaser of hot *nâm sáa* (weak and often lukewarm Chinese tea), while in the north it's typically served with a glass of plain hot water.

Both Indian-style (black) and Chinese-style (green or semicured) teas are served in Laos, some of the latter now being grown on the Bolaven Plateau and elsewhere. An order of *sáa hawn* (hot tea) usually results in a cup (or

glass) of black tea with sugar and condensed milk. As with coffee you must specify beforehand if you want black tea without milk and/or sugar. Ask for *sáa hawn* followed by *baw sai nôm* (without milk) and/or *baw sai nâm-tạn* (without sugar). Chinese tea is traditionally served in restaurants for free. For stronger fresh Chinese tea, request *sáa jjin*.

## Alcoholic Drinks

### BEER

It's hard to overestimate how important Beerlao is to the people of Laos – and not just as a means of getting drunk. In a country with so few exports and virtually zero in the way of international recognition, the constant approval of their national brew is a source of great pride. The success of the Lao Brewery Co (LBC), the government-controlled brewer based in Vientiane, is widely reported in official media. And when Carlsberg increased its stake to 50% of the business in 2006 it was yet further proof that Laos is doing something very right.

Until recently Beerlao had 99% of the domestic beer market. The distinctive yellow crates can be seen in all but the most remote parts of the country and despite competition from Carlsberg, Heineken and Tiger (all of which cost more), most people still opt for the local brew.

Beerlao comes in the ubiquitous 630ml bottles (US\$1 in most bars) but is also available in 330ml cans. A draught version (*bja sót*: fresh beer) is tastier yet, but it has a limited distribution. Beerlao contains 5% alcohol. Bottles of Beerlao Dark (a dark ale with 6.5% alcohol) and Beerlao Light (2.9% alcohol) can also be found in larger cities and towns.

### DISTILLED SPIRITS

Beerlao might be the source of much national pride but rice whisky, known as *lào-láo*, is responsible for many more sore heads. This is partly because it's so much cheaper than beer and partly because the lowland Lao, in particular, just like it. Chances are you'll be invited to partake in festivities with a neat shot of *lào-láo* at some point; see the Spirit of Spirits (below) for more on drinking customs.

The best *lào-láo* is said to come from Phongsali and Don Khong, the northern and southern extremes of the country, but it's available virtually everywhere, usually for between US\$0.20 and US\$0.50 per 750ml bottle.

Tourist hotel bars in the larger cities carry the standard variety of liquors.

### WINE

Decent French and Italian wines are abundantly available in Vientiane at restaurants, shops specialising in imported foods and in some shops which sell nothing but wine. Some restaurants and hotels in Luang Prabang, Savannakhet and Pakse also stock wine. New World wines are more scarce, though we saw quite a few Australian wines around. Whatever the origin, wine is

The teapots commonly seen on tables in Chinese and Vietnamese restaurants are filled with *nâm sáa* (weak Chinese tea); ask for a *jáwk pao* (glass) and you can drink as much as you'd like at no charge.

*Fish and Fish Dishes of Laos* (2003), by Alan Davidson, is a thorough description of Laos's diverse freshwater fish cookery. The late Davidson was British ambassador to Laos in the 1970s and author of the esteemed *Oxford Companion to Food*.

### THE SPIRIT OF SPIRITS

In a Lao home the pouring and drinking of *lào-láo* at the evening meal takes on ritual characteristics. Usually towards the end of the meal, but occasionally beforehand, the hosts bring out a bottle of the stuff to treat their guests. The usual procedure is for the host to pour one jigger of *lào-láo* onto the floor or a used dinner plate first, to appease the house spirits. The host then pours another jigger and downs it in one gulp. Jiggers for each guest are poured in turn; guests must take at least one offered drink or risk offending the house spirits.

much cheaper than it is in Thailand because the import tax is lower, so it's worth stocking up if you're heading across the border.

Luang Prabang is famous for a type of light rice wine called *khào kam*, a red-tinted, somewhat sweet beverage made from sticky rice. It can be quite tasty when properly prepared and stored, but rather mouldy-tasting if not.

In rural provinces, a rice wine known as *lào-hải* (jar liquor) is fermented by households or villages. *Lào-hải* is usually drunk from a communal jar using long reed straws.

## CELEBRATIONS

Temple festivals (*bun wat*) make good opportunities to taste real home-cooked Lao food as temple regulars often bring dishes from home to share with other temple visitors. Chances are vendors will also set up food-stalls offering everything from *khùa fõe* (fried rice noodles) to *ping kai* (grilled chicken).

The annual boat races (p307) usually held in October in towns along the Mekong River, is another great chance to graze at long lines of vendor booths; *nặm khào* is particularly popular at these events.

During *tut jiiin* (Chinese New Year), also known by its Vietnamese name Tet, Laos's Chinese population celebrates with a week of house-cleaning, lion dances, fireworks and feasting. The most impressive festivities take place in Vientiane's Chinatown (at the north end of Th Chao Anou) and 'mooncakes' – thick, circular pastries filled with sweet bean paste or salted pork – are on sale all over town.

## WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Aside from eating on the street (see Street Food, p75), the cheapest most dependable places to eat are *hàan fõe* (noodle shops) and *talàat sào* (morning markets). Most towns and villages have at least one morning market (which often lasts all day despite the name) and several *hàan fõe*. The next step up is the Lao-style café (*hàan kheuang deum*; drink shop) or *hàan kìn deum* (eat-drink shop), where a more varied selection of dishes is usually served. Most expensive is the *hàan qahhàn* (food shop), where the menu is usually posted on the wall or on a blackboard (in Lao).

Many *hàan qahhàn* serve mostly Chinese or Vietnamese food. The ones serving real Lao food usually have a large pan of water on a stool – or a modern lavatory – somewhere near the entrance for washing the hands before eating (Lao food is traditionally eaten with the hands).

Many restaurants or food stalls, especially outside Vientiane, don't have menus and fewer still have menus in English. In these parts it's worth memorising the names of a few standard dishes. Most provinces also have their own local specialities and if you have an adventurous palate it's well worth asking for *qahhàn phisèht* (special food), allowing the proprietors to choose for you.

Especially in the larger cities along the Mekong River, the number of Western-style restaurants is growing fast. Vientiane and Luang Prabang, in particular, boast dozens of restaurants serving a wide variety of cuisine, from Japanese and North Korean to fine French fare, all at very reasonable prices.

## VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Almost all Lao dishes contain animal products of one kind or another. Two principal seasonings, for example, are fish sauce and shrimp paste. Some dishes also contain lard or pork fat.

Mon-Khmer tribal villages on the Bolaven Plateau periodically hold special ceremonies where water buffalo are sacrificed to appease local spirits. Once the rituals have been performed, the villagers share the buffalo meat, washed down with copious moonshine.

You'll see turkeys free-ranging their way around most villages in Laos, but you'll rarely see them on the table, as they are reserved for ceremonial occasions such as weddings. They were introduced in the early 1960s by US-government aid organisation USAID, to bring much-needed protein to rural communities.

### A TASTE FOR THE WILD *Andrew Burke*

Driving through southern Laos with a Lao friend a few years ago we came across a snake slowly slithering its way across the road. We stopped for a look and a moment later a group of villagers walked over the hill about 150m in front of us, and a man on a bike pedalled over the crest about 200m behind us. Then they saw the snake...

Immediately several members of the group dropped what they were carrying and started bolting towards the snake. But this race was always going to be won by the guy pedalling frantically down the slope. A few seconds later he glided past and ran over the snake before calmly dismounting and strolling up to the stunned serpent. He grabbed it by the tail and swung it into the road, and a second later it was dead. The family ahead stopped running with a groan of disappointment and the guy stood holding up the snake, grinning with self-satisfaction. 'This is very special food,' he said, before heading home to grill it for lunch with his cousin.

Back in the car my friend, who was a little disappointed it wasn't him heading off to the grill, explained that most snakes were delicious (you guessed it, they taste a bit like chicken). 'Yes, and there are lots of wild animals in these forests that the villagers like to eat,' he added. While the number of rural people who can afford to buy domestically raised meat is rising, many still depend on wildlife they catch themselves for protein. And when you get off the main routes you'll see people selling and eating deer, wild pigs, squirrels, civets, monitor lizards, jungle fowl/ pheasants, dhole (wild dogs), rats and just about any bird they can bring down with a slingshot or catch in a net.

In part this practice is due to the expense involved in animal husbandry, and partly due to the Lao preference for the taste of wild game. Either way, the eating of endangered species causes much consternation among wildlife conservationists (see p68) – and anyone who's walked through a virtually silent forest and wondered what happened to all the game.

Vegetarian or vegan restaurants are virtually nonexistent, but menus at tourist-oriented restaurants in larger towns and cities will often have vegetarian dishes available.

Outside of tourist areas, vegetarians and vegans will have to make an effort to speak enough Lao to convey their culinary needs. The best all-around phrase to memorise is 'I eat only vegetables' (*khàwv kìn tae phákh*). If you eat eggs you can add *sai khai dái* (it's OK to add egg) to your food vocabulary. Dairy products such as cheese won't be much of a concern since they're rarely served in Lao restaurants.

## HABITS & CUSTOMS

Eating in Laos is nearly always a social event and the Lao avoid eating alone whenever possible. Except for the 'rice plates' and the noodle dishes, Lao meals are typically ordered 'family style', which is to say that two or more people order together, sharing different dishes. Traditionally, the party orders one of each kind of dish, for example, one chicken, one fish, one soup. One dish is generally large enough for two people.

Most Lao consider eating alone to be rather unusual; but then as a *falang* (Westerner) you are an exception anyway. In Chinese or Thai restaurants a cheaper alternative is to order dishes *lào khào* (over rice).

Most Lao dishes are eaten with *khào nïaw* (glutinous or sticky rice). *Khào nïaw* is served up in lidded baskets called *típ khào* and eaten with the hands. The general practice is to grab a small fistful of rice from the *típ khào*, then roll it into a rough ball that you then use to dip into the various dishes. As always, watching others is the best way to learn.

If *khào jào* (normal steamed rice) is served with the meal, then it is eaten with a fork and spoon. The spoon, held in the right hand, is used to scoop up the rice and accompanying dishes and placing it in the mouth. The fork, held in the left hand, is merely used to prod food onto the spoon.

Chopsticks (*mãi thuu*) are reserved for dining in Chinese restaurants (where rice is served in small Chinese bowls rather than flat plates) or for eating Chinese noodle dishes. Noodle soups are eaten with a spoon in the left hand (for spooning up the broth) and chopsticks in the right (for grasping the noodles and other solid ingredients).

Dishes are typically served all at once rather than in courses. If the host or restaurant staff can't bring them all to the table because of a shortage of help or because the food is being cooked sequentially from the same set of pots and pans, then the diners typically wait until all the platters are on the table before digging in.

The Lao don't concern themselves with whether dishes are served piping hot, so no one minds if the dishes sit in the kitchen or on the table for 15 minutes or so before anyone digs in. Furthermore it's considered somewhat impolite to take a spoonful of food that's steaming hot as it implies you're so ravenous or uncivilised that you can't wait to gorge yourself.

## COOKING COURSES

Cooking courses are available in both Luang Prabang (p147) and Vientiane (p101).

## EAT YOUR WORDS

Want to know *lâap* from *lào-láo*? *Khào kam* from *khào niaw*? Get behind the cuisine by getting to know the language. For pronunciation guidelines see p345.

## Useful Phrases

|   |                                    |                      |
|---|------------------------------------|----------------------|
| <b>What do you have that's special?</b> | <i>mii nyàng phi-sèt baw</i>       | ມີຫຍັງພິເສດບໍ່       |
| <b>Do you have ...?</b>                 | <i>mii ... baw</i>                 | ມີ ... ບໍ່           |
| <b>I didn't order this.</b>             | <i>khàwv baw dái sang nàew nii</i> | ຂ້ອຍບໍ່ໄດ້ສັ່ງແນວນີ້ |
| <b>I eat only vegetables.</b>           | <i>khàwv kìn tae phá</i>           | ຂ້ອຍກິນແຕ່ຜັກ        |
| <b>(I) don't like it hot and spicy.</b> | <i>baw mak phét</i>                | ບໍ່ມັກເຜັດ           |
| <b>(I) like it hot and spicy.</b>       | <i>mak phét</i>                    | ມັກເຜັດ              |
| <b>I'd like to try that.</b>            | <i>khàwv yàak lánwng kìn boeng</i> | ຂ້ອຍຢາກລອງກິນເບິ່ງ   |

|                             |                       |              |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|--------------|
| <b>Please bring (a) ...</b> | <i>khǎw ... dae</i>   | ຂໍ ... ແດ່   |
| <b>menu</b>                 | <i>lái-kān qa-hǎn</i> | ລາຍການ ອາຫານ |
| <b>plate</b>                | <i>jqa</i>            | ຈານ          |
| <b>bowl</b>                 | <i>thùay</i>          | ຖ້ວຍ         |
| <b>glass</b>                | <i>jàwk</i>           | ຈອກ          |
| <b>spoon</b>                | <i>buang</i>          | ປ່ວງ         |
| <b>fork</b>                 | <i>sáwm</i>           | ສອມ          |
| <b>chopsticks</b>           | <i>mãi thuu</i>       | ໄມ້ທູ້       |
| <b>knife</b>                | <i>mít</i>            | ມີດ          |
| <b>bill</b>                 | <i>saek</i>           | ແຂ້ກ         |

After eating *khào niaw* (sticky rice) don't forget to replace the lid on top of the *típ khào*, the small basket the sticky rice is served in. Not doing this is considered both rude to your host and bad luck.

*Simple Laotian Cooking* (2003), by Penn Hongthong, is a collection of nearly 200 recipes along with straightforward expositions on the tools and techniques required to closely approximate Lao cuisine.

## THE RIGHT TOOL FOR THE JOB

If you're not offered chopsticks, don't ask for them. When *falang* (Westerners) ask for chopsticks to eat Lao food, it only puzzles the restaurant proprietors. An even more embarrassing act is trying to eat sticky rice with chopsticks. Use your right hand instead. For ordinary white rice, use the fork and spoon provided (fork in the left hand, spoon in the right, or the reverse for left-handers).

## Menu Decoder

### DRINKS

|  |                         |             |
|--|-------------------------|-------------|
| <b>water</b>                                 | <i>nām</i>              | ນ້ຳ         |
| <b>drinking water</b>                        | <i>nām deum</i>         | ນ້ຳດື່ມ     |
| <b>boiled water</b>                          | <i>nām tòm</i>          | ນ້ຳຕົ້ມ     |
| <b>hot water</b>                             | <i>nām hǎwn</i>         | ນ້ຳຮ້ອນ     |
| <b>cold water</b>                            | <i>nām yén</i>          | ນ້ຳເຢັນ     |
| <b>soda water</b>                            | <i>nām sǎh-dqa</i>      | ນ້ຳໂສດາ     |
| <b>orange juice/soda</b>                     | <i>nām màak kīang</i>   | ນ້ຳໝາກກຶ່ງ  |
| <b>plain milk</b>                            | <i>nām nóm</i>          | ນ້ຳນົມ      |
| <b>ice</b>                                   | <i>nām kǎwn</i>         | ນ້ຳກ້ອນ     |
| <b>glass</b>                                 | <i>jàwk</i>             | ຈອກ         |
| <b>bottle</b>                                | <i>kǎew</i>             | ແກ້ວ        |
| <b>hot Lao coffee with milk &amp; sugar</b>  | <i>kqa-féh nóm hǎwn</i> | ກາເຟນົມຮ້ອນ |
| <b>hot Lao coffee with sugar, no milk</b>    | <i>kqa-féh dām</i>      | ກາເຟດຳ      |
| <b>iced Lao coffee with sugar, no milk</b>   | <i>kqa-féh nóm yén</i>  | ກາເຟນົມເຢັນ |
| <b>iced Lao coffee with milk &amp; sugar</b> | <i>òh-liang</i>         | ໂອລັ່ງ      |
| <b>hot tea with sugar</b>                    | <i>sáa hǎwn</i>         | ຊາຮ້ອນ      |
| <b>hot tea with milk &amp; sugar</b>         | <i>sáa nóm hǎwn</i>     | ຊານົມຮ້ອນ   |
| <b>iced tea with sugar</b>                   | <i>sáa wǎn yén</i>      | ຊາຫວານເຢັນ  |
| <b>iced tea with milk &amp; sugar</b>        | <i>sáa nóm yén</i>      | ຊານົມເຢັນ   |
| <b>Ovaltine</b>                              | <i>oh-wantin</i>        | ໂອວັນຕິນ    |

|                     |                |           |
|---------------------|----------------|-----------|
| <b>beer</b>         | <i>bja</i>     | ເບຍ       |
| <b>draught beer</b> | <i>bja sót</i> | ເບຍສົດ    |
| <b>rice whisky</b>  | <i>lào lǎo</i> | ເຫຼົ້າລາວ |

### EGG DISHES

|                        |                  |         |
|------------------------|------------------|---------|
| <b>fried egg</b>       | <i>khai dāo</i>  | ໄຂ່ດາວ  |
| <b>hard-boiled egg</b> | <i>khai tòm</i>  | ໄຂ່ຕົ້ມ |
| <b>plain omelette</b>  | <i>jəun khai</i> | ຈິນໄຂ່  |
| <b>scrambled egg</b>   | <i>khai khua</i> | ໄຂ່ຂົ້ວ |

### FISH & SEAFOOD

|                         |                  |          |
|-------------------------|------------------|----------|
| <b>crisp-fried fish</b> | <i>jəun pqa</i>  | ຈິນປາ    |
| <b>fried prawns</b>     | <i>jəun kúng</i> | ຈິນກຸ້ງ  |
| <b>grilled prawns</b>   | <i>pīng kúng</i> | ປິ້ງກຸ້ງ |

|  |                                  |                          |
|--|----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>steamed fish</b>  | <i>nèung pqa</i>                 | ໝັ່ງປາ                   |
| <b>grilled fish</b>  | <i>piing pqa</i>                 | ປັ້ງປາ                   |
| <b>sweet &amp; sour fish</b>                                     | <i>pqa sòm-wǎan</i>              | ປາສົ້ມຫວານ               |
| <b>catfish</b>   | <i>pqa dúk</i>                   | ປາດຸກ                    |
| <b>MEAT SALADS (LÀAP)</b>  |                                  |                          |
| <b>beef laap</b>   | <i>làap siin</i>                 | ລາບຊັ້ນ                  |
| <b>chicken laap</b>  | <i>làap kai</i>                  | ລາບໄກ່                   |
| <b>fish laap</b>   | <i>làap pqa</i>                  | ລາບປາ                    |
| <b>pork laap</b>   | <i>làap múu</i>                  | ລາບໝູ                    |
| <b>RICE DISHES</b>   |                                  |                          |
| <b>steamed white rice</b>  | <i>khào nèung</i>                | ເຂົ້າໝັ່ງ                |
| <b>sticky rice</b>   | <i>khào niaw</i>                 | ເຂົ້າໜຽວ                 |
| <b>curry over rice</b>   | <i>khào làat kqeng</i>           | ເຂົ້າລາດແກງ              |
| <b>'red' pork (char siu) with rice</b>                           | <i>khào múu dqeng</i>            | ເຂົ້າໝູແດງ               |
| <b>roast duck over rice</b>                                      | <i>khào nàa pèt</i>              | ເຂົ້າໜ້າເປັດ             |
| <b>fried rice with ...</b>                                       | <i>khào phát (khào khùa) ...</i> | ເຂົ້າຜັດ (ເຂົ້າຂົ້ວ) ... |
| <b>chicken</b>   | <i>kai</i>                       | ໄກ່                      |
| <b>pork</b>  | <i>múu</i>                       | ໝູ                       |
| <b>shrimp/prawns</b>   | <i>kúng</i>                      | ກຸ້ງ                     |
| <b>crab</b>  | <i>pqu</i>                       | ປູ                       |
| <b>SNACKS</b>  |                                  |                          |
| <b>fried peanuts</b>   | <i>thua dḥn jəun</i>             | ຖົ່ວດິນຈີນ               |
| <b>fried potatoes</b>  | <i>mán fa-lang jəun</i>          | ມັນຝລັ່ງຈີນ              |
| <b>fresh spring rolls</b>  | <i>yáw díp</i>                   | ຍໍດິບ                    |
| <b>fried spring rolls</b>  | <i>yáw jəun</i>                  | ຍໍຈີນ                    |
| <b>grilled chicken</b>   | <i>piing kai</i>                 | ປັ້ງໄກ່                  |
| <b>shrimp chips</b>  | <i>khào khiap kúng</i>           | ເຂົ້າຂຽບກຸ້ງ             |
| <b>spicy green papaya salad</b>                                  | <i>tqm màak-hung</i>             | ຕຳໝາກຫຸ້ງ                |
| <b>NOODLE DISHES</b>   |                                  |                          |
| <b>rice noodle soup with vegetables &amp; meat</b>               | <i>fōe</i>                       | ເຝີ                      |
| <b>rice noodles with vegetables &amp; meat, no broth</b>         | <i>fōe hàeng</i>                 | ເຝີແຫ້ງ                  |
| <b>rice noodles with gravy</b>                                   | <i>làat nàa</i>                  | ລາດໜ້າ                   |
| <b>fried rice noodles with meat &amp; vegetables</b>             | <i>fōe khùa</i>                  | ເຝີຂົ້ວ                  |
| <b>fried rice noodles with soy sauce</b>                         | <i>phát sá-yíu</i>               | ຜັດສະອັ້ວ                |
| <b>yellow wheat noodles in broth, with vegetables &amp; meat</b> | <i>mii nám</i>                   | ໝີ່ນ້ຳ                   |
| <b>yellow wheat noodles with vegetables &amp; meat</b>           | <i>mii hàeng</i>                 | ໝີ່ແຫ້ງ                  |
| <b>white flour noodles served with sweet-spicy sauce</b>         | <i>khào pún</i>                  | ເຂົ້າປຸ້ນ                |

**SOUP**

|  |                           |               |
|--|---------------------------|---------------|
| <b>mild soup with vegetables &amp; pork</b>            | <i>kqeng jèut</i>         | ແກງຈິດ        |
| <b>mild soup with vegetables, pork &amp; bean curd</b> | <i>kqeng jèut tào-húu</i> | ແກງຈິດເຕົາຮູ້ |
| <b>fish &amp; lemongrass soup with mushrooms</b>       | <i>tóm yám pqa</i>        | ຕົ້ມຍຳປາ      |

|                           |                      |              |
|---------------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| <b>rice soup with ...</b> | <i>khào piak ...</i> | ເຂົ້າປຽກ ... |
| <b>chicken</b>            | <i>kai</i>           | ໄກ່          |
| <b>fish</b>               | <i>pqa</i>           | ປາ           |
| <b>pork</b>               | <i>múu</i>           | ໝູ           |

**STIR-FRIED DISHES**

|                                    |                               |                 |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| <b>chicken with ginger</b>         | <i>kai phát khiing</i>        | ໄກ່ຜັດຂີງ       |
| <b>sweet &amp; sour pork</b>       | <i>múu sòm-wǎan</i>           | ໝູສົ້ມຫວານ      |
| <b>beef in oyster sauce</b>        | <i>ngúa phát nám-mán hǎwý</i> | ງົວຜັດນ້ຳມັນຫອຍ |
| <b>stir-fried mixed vegetables</b> | <i>phát phák</i>              | ຜັດຜັກ          |

**Food Glossary****BREAD & PASTRIES**

|                               |                        |               |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|---------------|
| <b>plain bread</b>            | <i>khào jji</i>        | ເຂົ້າຈີ່      |
| <b>(usually French-style)</b> |                        |               |
| <b>baguette sandwich</b>      | <i>khào jji páa-tě</i> | ເຂົ້າຈີ່ປາເຕ  |
| <b>croissants</b>             | <i>khúa-sawng</i>      | ຄົວຊ່ອງ       |
| <b>'Chinese doughnuts'</b>    | <i>pá-thawng-kó</i>    | ປະຖ່ອງໂກະ     |
| <b>(youtiao in Mandarin)</b>  | <i>(khào-nóm khuu)</i> | (ເຂົ້າໜົມຄູ່) |

**CONDIMENTS, HERBS & SPICES**

|                       |                        |           |
|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------|
| <b>chilli</b>         | <i>màak phét</i>       | ໝາກເຜັດ   |
| <b>dipping sauces</b> | <i>jaew</i>            | ແຈ່ວ      |
| <b>fish sauce</b>     | <i>nám pqa</i>         | ນ້ຳປາ     |
| <b>ginger</b>         | <i>khǐing</i>          | ຂີງ       |
| <b>lemongrass</b>     | <i>húa sǐng khái</i>   | ຫົວສິງໄຄ  |
| <b>lime juice</b>     | <i>nám màak náo</i>    | ນ້ຳໝາກນາວ |
| <b>salt</b>           | <i>kəua</i>            | ເກືອ      |
| <b>soy sauce</b>      | <i>nám sá-íu</i>       | ນ້ຳສະອັ້ວ |
| <b>sugar</b>          | <i>nám-tqan</i>        | ນ້ຳຕານ    |
| <b>sweet basil</b>    | <i>bqí hǎh-la-pháa</i> | ໃບໂຫລະໝາ  |
| <b>tamarind</b>       | <i>màak khám</i>       | ໝາກຂາມ    |
| <b>vinegar</b>        | <i>nám sòm</i>         | ນ້ຳສົ້ມ   |

**FOOD TYPES**

|                |                  |         |
|----------------|------------------|---------|
| <b>beef</b>    | <i>sǐin ngúa</i> | ຊີ້ນງົວ |
| <b>butter</b>  | <i>bəe</i>       | ເບີ     |
| <b>chicken</b> | <i>kai</i>       | ໄກ່     |
| <b>egg</b>     | <i>khai</i>      | ໄຂ່     |

|                                  |                        |             |
|----------------------------------|------------------------|-------------|
| <b>fish</b>                      | <i>pqa</i>             | ປາ          |
| <b>pork</b>                      | <i>siin mǔu</i>        | ຊີ້ນໝູ      |
| <b>rice</b>                      | <i>khào</i>            | ເຂົ້າ       |
| <b>seafood</b>                   | <i>qa-hǎan tha-léh</i> | ອາຫານທະເລ   |
| <b>shrimp/prawns</b>             | <i>kúng</i>            | ກຸ້ງ        |
| <b>vegetables</b>                | <i>phak</i>            | ຜັກ         |
| <b>yogurt</b>                    | <i>nóm sòm</i>         | ນົມສົ້ມ     |
| <b>FRUITS</b>                    |                        |             |
| <b>banana</b>                    | <i>màak kúay</i>       | ໝາກກ້ວຍ     |
| <b>coconut</b>                   | <i>màak pháo</i>       | ໝາກພ້າວ     |
| <b>guava (year-round)</b>        | <i>màak sǐi-dqa</i>    | ໝາກສີດາ     |
| <b>jackfruit</b>                 | <i>màak mǐi</i>        | ໝາກມີ້      |
| <b>lime</b>                      | <i>màak náo</i>        | ໝາກນາວ      |
| <b>longan (dragon's eyes)</b>    | <i>màak nyám nyái</i>  | ໝາກຍຳໄຍ     |
| <b>lychee</b>                    | <i>màak lǐn-ji</i>     | ໝາກລິ້ນຈີ້  |
| <b>mandarin orange</b>           | <i>màak kíang</i>      | ໝາກກຽງ      |
| <b>mango</b>                     | <i>màak muang</i>      | ໝາກມ່ວງ     |
| <b>pineapple</b>                 | <i>màak nat</i>        | ໝາກນັດ      |
| <b>papaya</b>                    | <i>màak hung</i>       | ໝາກຫຼ່ຽງ    |
| <b>rambutan</b>                  | <i>màak ngaw</i>       | ໝາກເງາະ     |
| <b>sugarcane</b>                 | <i>áwy</i>             | ອ້ອຍ        |
| <b>watermelon</b>                | <i>màak móm</i>        | ໝາກໂມ       |
| <b>VEGETABLES</b>                |                        |             |
| <b>bamboo shoots</b>             | <i>naw mǎi</i>         | ໜໍ່ໄມ້      |
| <b>beans</b>                     | <i>thua</i>            | ຖົ່ວ        |
| <b>bean sprouts</b>              | <i>thua ngǎwk</i>      | ຖົ່ວງອກ     |
| <b>cabbage</b>                   | <i>ká-lam pji</i>      | ກະລຳປີ      |
| <b>cauliflower</b>               | <i>ká-lam pji dǎwk</i> | ກະລຳປິດອກ   |
| <b>Chinese radish (daikon)</b>   | <i>phák kàat hǔa</i>   | ຜັກກາດຫົວ   |
| <b>cucumber</b>                  | <i>màak tqeng</i>      | ໝາກແຕງ      |
| <b>eggplant</b>                  | <i>màak khǎua</i>      | ໝາກເຂືອ     |
| <b>garlic</b>                    | <i>hǔa phák thiam</i>  | ຫົວຜັກທຽມ   |
| <b>lettuce</b>                   | <i>phák sá-lat</i>     | ຜັກສະລັດ    |
| <b>long green beans</b>          | <i>thua nyáo</i>       | ຖົ່ວຍາວ     |
| <b>onion (bulb)</b>              | <i>hǔa phák bua</i>    | ຫົວຜັກບົ່ວ  |
| <b>onion (green 'scallions')</b> | <i>tón phák bua</i>    | ຕົ້ນຜັກບົ່ວ |
| <b>peanuts (groundnuts)</b>      | <i>màak thua dǐn</i>   | ໝາກຖົ່ວດິນ  |
| <b>potato</b>                    | <i>mán fá-lang</i>     | ມັນຝລັ່ງ    |
| <b>tomato</b>                    | <i>màak len</i>        | ໝາກເລັ່ນ    |

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