

ASIA · CULTURE · SACRED SITES · ADVENTURE · HISTORY · OFF THE BEATEN PATH



Laos

Laos moves at Mekong pace. Saffron-robed monks file through Luang Prabang at dawn to collect alms, the turquoise pools of Kuang Si spill through the forest nearby, and slow boats still drift downriver from the Thai border. Add the karst country around Vang Vieng, the enigmatic Plain of Jars and the river islands of Si Phan Don.

 **The UK Foreign Office (FCDO) advises against all but essential travel to parts of Laos.**
Read the latest FCDO travel advice before planning a trip. Your travel insurance may be invalid if you travel against FCDO advice.
FCDO advice last updated 13 August 2026.

 CAPITAL Vientiane	 CURRENCY Lao kip (LAK) £1 ≈ LAK 29,798	 LANGUAGE Lao, Khmu Hmong	 BEST TIME Nov–Feb
 DAILY BUDGET £25–£140 £ Budget-friendly	 PLUGS Type A, B, C, E, F 230V · adapter needed	 FLIGHT FROM LONDON 16h via Bangkok ~£650–£1,150 return	 TIME ZONE UTC+7 standard time

Laos is a long, landlocked sliver following the Mekong, and most first trips run north to south, or the reverse, along it. Many travellers enter from Thailand on the two-day slow boat to Luang Prabang, the gilded former royal capital that is the country's highlight, then take the Laos–China Railway south through Vang Vieng's limestone karsts to the low-key capital, Vientiane. Off that line, the Plain of Jars sits on a high plateau to the east, the Thakhek motorbike loop and Kong Lor river cave lie in the centre, and the far south has the Khmer temple ruins of Wat Phou and the river islands of Si Phan Don.

Days here are unhurried: towns shut down early, buses run late and an afternoon in a hammock counts as an activity. Costs are low by European standards, although Luang Prabang has grown pricier, and the kip's weakness means carrying thick wads of notes. It suits slow travellers, cyclists, motorbikers and anyone who enjoyed northern Thailand but wants fewer crowds. Visitors are often struck by the gentleness of everyday life, by the baguettes and coffee left over from French rule, and by the legacy of the Indochina wars: Laos is the most heavily bombed country per person in history, and unexploded ordnance still affects rural areas.

Top 5 highlights

- 1

CULTURE

Luang Prabang

A UNESCO-listed peninsula town where more than 30 temples, including the sweeping-roofed Wat Xieng Thong, sit among French shophouses. Rise early to watch the monks' alms round in silence, then climb Mount Phousi at sunset.
- 2

NATURE

Kuang Si Falls

Tiered milky-turquoise pools cascade through forest about 30km south-west of Luang Prabang, with swimming spots below the main drop and a bear rescue centre near the entrance. Arrive early to beat the tour minivans.

3

ADVENTURE

Vang Vieng

Once notorious for riverside party bars, Vang Vieng now trades on its setting: jagged karsts above the Nam Song river, caves, swimming lagoons, kayaking, rock climbing and hot-air balloon flights at dawn.

4

NATURE

Si Phan Don

The 'Four Thousand Islands', where the Mekong braids into channels just above the Cambodian border. Laze on Don Det or Don Khon, cycle the old French railway, and see Khone Phapheng, one of Southeast Asia's mightiest waterfalls.

5

HISTORY

Plain of Jars

Thousands of Iron Age stone jars, some taller than a person, are scattered across the Xieng Khouang plateau around Phonsavan. The UNESCO-listed sites were cleared of bombs only along marked paths, so stay between the markers.

Biggest cities

LARGEST CITY

Vientiane

≈ 800,000 people

A relaxed riverside capital of gilded temples such as Pha That Luang, French-era villas and good cafés. Worth a day or two for the COPE visitor centre and Mekong sunsets.

2ND LARGEST CITY

Savannakhet

≈ 125,000 people

Officially Kaysone Phomvihane, this Mekong border city facing Mukdahan in Thailand has a faded French colonial quarter and a dinosaur museum. A gateway to southern Laos rather than a destination.

3RD LARGEST CITY

Pakse

≈ 90,000 people

Southern Laos's transport hub at the Mekong and Xe Don confluence, and the base for the Bolaven Plateau's coffee farms and waterfalls, Wat Phou and onward trips to Si Phan Don.

Ranked by urban-area population where available. Figures are rounded estimates, and sources define city limits differently, so rankings of similar-sized cities can vary.

When to go to Laos

Best time: **Nov–Feb**.

Jan

Feb

Mar

Apr

May

Jun

Jul

Aug

Sep

Oct

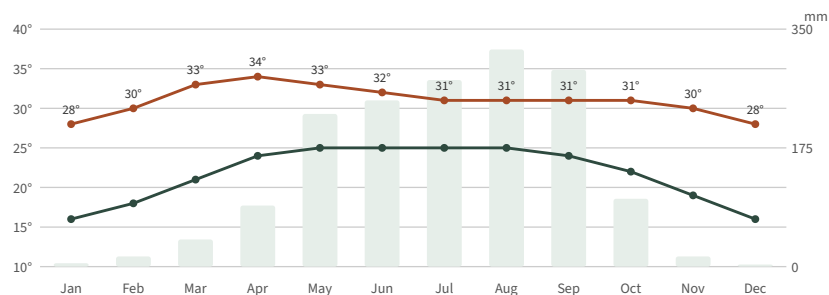
Nov

Dec

■ Best ■ Good ■ Mixed ■ Poor

Average climate in Vientiane

— High °C — Low °C ■ Rain (mm)



Festivals & events

Apr	Pi Mai Lao Lao New Year, around 14–16 April, brings days of water-throwing, sand stupas and Buddha-washing processions; Luang Prabang's celebrations are the most traditional, and the most crowded.
Oct	Boun Ok Phansa The full moon ending Buddhist Lent brings candlelit processions and illuminated boat floats, Luang Prabang's Lai Heua Fai, followed by dragon-boat races on the Mekong in Vientiane.
Nov	Boun That Luang Vientiane's great golden stupa hosts a temple fair around November's full moon, culminating in a dawn alms-giving by thousands of monks.

How much does Laos cost?

SHOESTRING £25 per person / day ≈ LAK 744,940 hostels, street food, buses	MID-RANGE £60 per person / day ≈ LAK 1,787,857 3-star hotels, restaurants, some taxis	COMFORTABLE £140 per person / day ≈ LAK 4,171,665 4-star+, guided trips, private transfers
--	--	---

Estimates per person per day, excluding flights. Prices vary by season and city.

Food to try

Larb

Laos's national dish: minced meat or fish tossed with lime, fish sauce, mint, chilli and toasted ground rice, eaten by hand with sticky rice.

Tam mak hoong

Pounded green papaya salad with chilli, lime, tomato and padaek, a pungent fermented fish sauce; ask for less chilli unless you mean it.

Khao piak sen

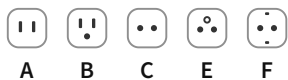
Comforting breakfast noodle soup of thick, slippery rice-and-tapioca noodles in chicken or pork broth, topped with crispy garlic and fresh herbs.

Getting around

The Laos–China Railway links Vientiane, Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang in a few hours, transforming travel in the north; tickets go on sale only days ahead and sell out, so buy through the LCR Ticket app or an agent. Elsewhere, buses, minivans and sorngthaews (converted pick-ups) are slow on winding roads. Slow boats take two days from Huay Xai to Luang Prabang. In Vientiane the LOCA app books cars; tuk-tuk fares need bargaining.

Practical information

PLUGS & VOLTAGE



230V — bring a UK-to-A/B/C/E/F adapter

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

Fire: **1190**

Police: **1191**

Alternative numbers for police stations: **241162**, **241163**, **241164**, and **212703**

Tourist police in Vientiane: **021 251 128**

Ambulance: **1195** or **030 525 7239**

Source: FCDO “Getting help”

DIALLING CODE

+856

TIME ZONE

UTC+7 (standard time)

TAP WATER

Not safe — drink bottled or treated water

DRIVING

On the right

TIPPING

Not traditionally expected; rounding up or leaving small change is appreciated, and tip trekking guides and drivers if the service was good.

ETIQUETTE

Cover shoulders and knees and remove shoes at temples. Never touch anyone's head or point your feet at people or Buddha images, and women should not touch monks or hand them things directly.

MAIN AIRPORTS

Wattay International Airport (VTE), Vientiane; Luang Prabang International Airport (LPQ), Luang Prabang; Pakse International Airport (PKZ), Pakse

Visas & entry for Laos

Shown for a British passport.

Visa required — apply before you go

You must have a visa to visit Laos.

To work, study and travel for business or other reasons, you must meet the Lao immigration department's entry requirements.

From the UK government's FCDO entry requirements for British passport holders — read the full page for passport validity, permits and exceptions.

Health & vaccinations



See a travel health nurse, GP or travel clinic **6–8 weeks before you go**. Make sure routine UK vaccinations (such as MMR and diphtheria-tetanus-polio) are up to date.

RECOMMENDED FOR MOST TRAVELLERS

Hepatitis A

Tetanus

Typhoid

SOMETIMES ADVISED — DEPENDS ON YOUR TRIP, ACTIVITIES AND HEALTH

- Chikungunya
- Dengue
- Hepatitis B
- Japanese encephalitis
- Measles
- Polio
- Rabies
- Tuberculosis

YELLOW FEVER CERTIFICATE

A yellow fever certificate is only required if you arrive from (or transit through) a country with yellow fever risk — not if you fly direct from the UK.

MALARIA

Low risk of malaria

- There is a low risk of malaria in Laos: awareness of risk and bite avoidance recommended.

Source: TravelHealthPro (National Travel Health Network and Centre), checked 21 October 2026. This is a summary, not medical advice.

Public holidays in Laos

The next 12 months. Banks, offices and some sights may close, and transport and hotels get busy around these dates.

Wed 2 Dec 2026	Lao National Day
Fri 1 Jan 2027	New Year's Day
Mon 8 Mar 2027	International Women's Rights Day
Wed 14 Apr 2027	Lao New Year's Day
Thu 15 Apr 2027	Lao New Year's Day
Fri 16 Apr 2027	Lao New Year's Day
Sat 1 May 2027	International Labour Day
Mon 3 May 2027	International Labour Day (in lieu)

National holidays only. Dates based on lunar calendars can move by a day or two depending on official announcements.

Useful phrases in Lao

ENGLISH	LAO	SAY IT
Hello	ສະບາຍດີ	sah-bai-DEE
Thank you	ຂອບໃຈ	kop-JAI
Please	ກະລຸນາ	gah-loo-NAH
Excuse me	ຂໍໂທດ	kor-TOHT
How much is this?	ອັນນີ້ເທົ່າໃດ?	an-nee tao-DAI

Know before you go

- Kip cannot be exchanged outside Laos, so spend or change it before leaving. ATMs charge fees and dispense modest amounts; Thai baht and US dollars are often accepted in tourist areas.
- Unexploded bombs still contaminate much of the countryside, especially in the east; stay on marked paths and well-used trails, and visit the COPE centre in Vientiane to understand why.

Watch Luang Prabang's alms round respectfully from across the street, without flash, and only take part if you intend to do it properly, not with rice bought from hawkers.

Visa, health and safety rules change. Before you book or travel, check the FCDO travel advice (gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice) and TravelHealthPro (travelhealthpro.org.uk). Costs are estimates. © 2026 Pick My Trip.