

Central Laos



The area at the waist of the country, between the Mekong River and Thailand in the west and the Annamite range bordering Vietnam in the east, has traditionally been skipped over by most travellers. But improved roads and several sustainable tourism initiatives, which give you a full-flavoured taste of the 'real Laos', mean central Laos is more open to exploration than ever. And it's not overrun yet.

Exploration is the key word. You might not be the first person to trek into the mediaeval limestone karsts that emerge with a menacing beauty from the Phu Hin Bun National Protected Area (NPA), but it will probably feel like it and there won't be a banana pancake or happy shake for miles.

Instead, you'll find a diverse mix of ecology, environment and ethnicity that is very different to the north – and as much tough and memorable travel as you like. The Mekong River towns of Tha Khaek and Savannakhet, with their lowland Lao communities, slowly crumbling French histories and lethargic lifestyles, will be your bases. This part of the country claims the most forest cover and the highest concentrations of wildlife, including some species that have disappeared elsewhere in Southeast Asia, and these protected areas will be your main destinations.

To find them, you could do 'The Loop' through Khammuan and Bolikhamsai Provinces by motorbike, detouring via the incredible 7km-long cave Tham Kong Lo in the process. Or trek into far-off Dong Phu Vieng NPA in Savannakhet Province to sleep with the spirits in a Katang village. Branches of the Ho Chi Minh Trail await the most intrepid, or just go forth and create your own trail....

HIGHLIGHTS

- Trek amid the gothic limestone karsts, subterranean caves and meandering rivers of the **Phu Hin Bun NPA** (p230)
- Do **The Loop** (p240) and experience upcountry Laos; good roads, bad roads, stunning scenery, a big dam site and unexpected challenges
- Climb up the cliff to **Tham Pha Pa** (p239), the recently discovered cave of 229 bronze Buddha images
- Stay in the remote villages of **Dong Phu Vieng NPA** (p249) and experience life in the spirit forests
- Schlep out to **Tham Kong Lo** (p231) for a boat trip through this astonishing 7km-long limestone cave



Climate

The Mekong valley is always pretty warm and from March to May Savannakhet is positively steaming. It gets cooler as you head east toward the Annamite range and Lak Sao and the villages along Rte 8B can be close to freezing during winter nights. The southwestern monsoon brings bucket-loads of rain from June to October. Far-eastern areas around the Nakai Nam Theun NPA also receive rain from the South China Sea that lasts longer, thus supplying enough water to maintain the thicker vegetation.

National Protected Areas

Central Laos is the most protected part of the country with eight National Protected

Areas (NPAs) accounting for vast swathes of the region. Access to Hin Namno, Nakai Nam Theun and Se Ban Nuan NPAs is limited to those with decent Lao language skills and plenty of time and money, but others are easy to get to.

In Khammuan the labyrinth of limestone karsts, caves and rivers in Phu Hin Bun NPA (p230) is accessible either on your own or on a community-based trek. Similar treks lead to the sacred forests and animist villages of Dong Phu Vieng (p249) in Savannakhet Province.

The Nam Kading NPA (p229) in Bolikhamsai Province doesn't have any organised treks, but you can take a boat upriver to the World Conservation Society's research centre.



CENTRAL LAOS

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Getting There & Around

Gone are the days when travelling anywhere south of Vientiane involved inordinately large amounts of time and incredible fortitude. These days Rte 13 is sealed and, somewhat surprisingly after seven years, still pretty smooth; congratulations to the road maintenance teams. Other roads have graduated from 'bone-jarring nightmare' status to 'smooth as silk', including Rte 9 from Savannakhet to the Vietnamese border at Lao Bao, and Rte 8 between Rte 13 and the Vietnamese border at Nam Phao. The eastern half of Rte 12 between Tha Khaek and the Vietnamese border is brand new and in late 2006 work was well advanced on the final 50km or so into Tha Khaek.

Apart from on the Nam Kading and Nam Hin Bun, arranging boat transport is more difficult and you'll need a fat wad of persuasion if you want a boatman to take you more than an hour or two in any direction.

BOLIKHAMSAI & KHAMMUAN PROVINCES

Bolikhamsai and Khammuan straddle the narrow, central 'waist' of the country. Physically the land climbs steadily from the Mekong valley towards the north and east, eventually reaching the Annamite range bordering Vietnam, via an area of moderately high but often spectacular mountains. Laid-back and well-connected Tha Khaek (p234) is the logical base.

Lowland Lao, who speak a dialect peculiar to these two provinces, dominate the population and, with smaller groups of tribal Tais, are the people you're most likely to meet. In more remote areas the Mon-Khmer-speaking Makong people (commonly known as Bru) make up more than 10% of the population of Khammuan, while you might see Hmong, Kri, Katang, Maling, Atel, Phuan and The-marou in the markets and villages of the mountainous east.

It's worth keeping an eye out for *khanome parrn*, a desert of soybean and sweetened sticky rice flour usually served in hollowed bamboo; markets and bus stations are a good place to look.

Much of the region is relatively sparsely populated and five large tracts of forest have been declared National Protected Areas (p227). These areas have turned into a major battleground between those wishing to exploit Laos's largely untapped hydroelectricity capacity and those wishing to preserve some of the most pristine wilderness areas in Asia. For now, the developers are winning.

PAKSAN

ປາກຂັນ

☎ 054 / pop 39,000

Located at the confluence of the Nam San (San River) and the Mekong River, Paksan (Pakxan or Pakxanh) is the capital of Bolikhamsai Province. Its position on Rte 13 between Vientiane and the nearest border with Vietnam makes it an increasingly busy highway town. This coupled with money coming from vaguely legitimate logging and plantation projects have prompted something of a building boom; look for the spectacularly tasteful four-storey wedding cake.

The local population has a large number of Phuan, a tribal Thai group, many of whom are also Christian – a combination that has traditionally made them doubly suspicious in the eyes of Lao authorities.

We'd like to say there's not much to see in Paksan, but that would be overstating it. It's possible to cross into Thailand from Paksan, though hardly anyone ever does.

There's a **Lao Development Bank** just east of the market, which is also where buses stop. It's a short walk from here east to the bridge over the Nam San and the first two hotels listed here.

Sleeping

When we first visited Paksan in 2001 the only lodgings were a couple of seedy guesthouses where rooms were mainly rented by the hour. The town's rapid growth means there are now several decent options.

BK Guesthouse (☎ 212638, 020-5612348; r US\$5-8; 🏠) This is Paksan's best budget choice. Rooms are pokey, but they're spotless and the atmosphere is welcoming. Mr Syhavong is a good guy and speaks some English and French. Take the first right (south) east of the bridge and it's a few hundred metres along on the right.

Paksan Hotel (☎ 791333; fax 791222; Rte 13; r US\$10-15; 🏠) This new Vietnamese-run hotel

just east of the bridge is probably the closest you'll come to luxury, with the 32 rooms all kitted out the same but varying in price depending on size.

If the BK is full and you can't afford the Paksan Hotel, the **Vilaysack Hotel** (☎ 212311; Rte 4B; r US\$3-7; 🏠) and the **Hongxaykham Hotel** (☎ 212362; Rte 4B; r US\$3-7; 🏠) are several hundred metres west of the market and then 800m north on Rte 4B. Neither will have you writing home.

Eating

You won't have any trouble finding noodle and *fôe* (rice noodles soup) options around Talat Sao (Morning Market) and there are a couple of Lao restaurants near the junction of the Mekong and the Nam San that are great at sunset.

Our favourite place to eat, however, is the **local restaurant** (meals US\$1.40) about 50m along the street from the BK Guesthouse, which is known up and down Rte 13 for its top-notch Lao, Vietnamese and Thai food.

In town, the family-run **Saynamxan Restaurant** (☎ 212068; meals US\$2-3.50; 🕒 7am-9.30pm), at the northwest end of the bridge crossing the Nam San, serves decent fish dishes. Best to avoid the roast turtle.

Getting There & Away

For buses from Vientiane see p114. From Paksan, buses leave from Rte 13 outside the Talat Sao for Vientiane (US\$2.50, three to four hours, 143km) between 6.05am and 4.30pm, with most in the morning. *Sáwngthâew* (literally, 'two rows'; a passenger truck) also leave frequently from the market, or you could just hail anything going west.

If you're heading to Vietnam, *sáwngthâew* depart for Lak Sao (US\$5, five to six hours, 189km) at 5am, 5.30am and 6.30am, or when they fill. After this take a *sáwngthâew* to Vieng

Kham, usually known as Thang Beng (US\$2, 1½ to two hours), where Rte 13 joins Rte 8, then change for other transport along Rte 8 to Lak Sao (US\$3, 3½ to five hours, 122km). For Pak Kading take anything going south.

All buses heading south from Vientiane pass through Paksan about two hours after they leave the capital – wait outside the Talat Sao.

PAKSAN TO LAK SAO

If the hellish 24-hour bus journey between Vientiane and Hanoi doesn't appeal, take local transport instead and stop to enjoy some of central Laos along the way.

Nam Kading NPA

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Heading east along Rte 13 you'll come to the sleepy yet picturesque village of **Pak Kading**, 187km from Vientiane. Pak Kading sits just upstream from the junction of the Mekong River and the **Nam Kading**, one of the most pristine rivers in Laos – for now (see p65). Flowing through a forested valley surrounded by high hills and menacing-looking limestone formations, this broad, turquoise-tinted river winds its way into the **Nam Kading NPA**. The river is undoubtedly the best way into this wilderness, where confirmed animal rarities include the elephant, giant muntjac, pygmy slow loris, François' langur, Douc langur, gibbon, dhole, Asiatic black bear, tiger and many bird species. As usual in Laos you'll count yourself very lucky to catch anything more than a glimpse of any of these.

If you're interested, the **World Conservation Society** (WCS; www.wcs.org) has a research centre on the banks of the Nam Kading about 30 minutes upstream from Phonsi. It welcomes travellers, who can stay in the centre for the same price researchers pay. A stay is best combined with a trip to **Tat Wang Fong**, a small

CROSSING THE THAI BORDER AT PAKSAN & BEUNG KAN

This rarely used crossing of the Mekong between Paksan and Beung Kan could almost be described as 'family run'. The customs officers invited us to play cards with them while their wives breastfed babies and small children played in the dust. Still, if you turn up at the **immigration office** (🕒 8am-noon & 1.30-4.30pm) they should process the paperwork without too much fuss, though they do not issue visas on arrival. The boat (60B, 20 minutes) leaves when five people show up or you charter it (300B). To get there, go west along Rte 13 from Paksan for about 1.5km and turn south – look for the 'Port' sign.

In Thailand buses leave Beung Kan for Udon Thani and Bangkok (infrequently).

waterfall, in a wonderfully picturesque setting about 30 minutes upstream.

To get there, some travellers have reported chartering boats on the Pak Kading side of the Nam Kading, underneath the bridge. However, it's simpler to continue east about 15km to the village of Ban Phon Kham, just past **Phonsi**; follow a blue sign along a rough laterite road until you reach the river and ask for a boat to Tat Wang Fong. It should cost about US\$20 return, including waiting time while you swim and picnic at the falls – bring food and water as the falls are mercifully free of salespeople. Boats just to the research centre cost US\$7/15 one-way/return.

Falls or no falls, Pak Kading is a good place to stop for a meal at the **Bounxou Restaurant** (☎ 055-320046; Rte 13; meals US\$1-2.50; ☎ 8am-9pm), where the fish dishes are famous. If you have to stay there is one simple guesthouse.

Ban Khoun Kham (Ban Na Hin)

The village of Ban Khoun Kham (also known as Ban Na Hin) on Rte 8, 41km east of Rte 13, sits at the northern tip of Khammuan Province in the lush Hin Boun valley. Surrounded by tall karst peaks, the village itself is notable for its position near the Theun Hin Boun dam, which is recognisable more by its blue-roofed Lao-European-style bungalows and golf course than any large dam wall.

Ban Khoun Kham is not without charm but its main role is as a base from which to visit the extraordinary **Tham Kong Lo** (opposite). The other main attraction is the impressive twin-cataract of **Tat Namsanam**, 3km north of town. The falls are in a striking location surrounded by karst and the upper tier is quite high. To get there from the market, cross Rte 8 and go through the archway and follow the signs. Vehicles will need to stop after about 1km, and the ensuing 2km walk gets rocky and slippery in the latter stages.

The Khammuan tourism office has built a **Tourist Information Centre** (Rte 8) just south of the Tat Namsanam entrance. While it wasn't manned when we passed, the plan is to run community-based treks from here into the Phu Hin Bun NPA.

As you approach Ban Khoun Kham from Rte 13, there is a **sala viewpoint** near Km 36. Do not, whatever you do, miss the spectacularly dramatic scenery here.

SLEEPING & EATING

Ban Khoun Kham has several sleeping options, with more expected to follow the new road to Tham Kong Lo.

The standout favourite, both for its rooms and meals, is **Mi Thuna Restaurant & Guesthouse** (☎ 020-2240182; Rte 8; r US\$5-9; ☎ ☎). The new rooms offer modern comforts such as hot water, air-con and cable TV and owners Ralph and Mon are a great source of local information (especially on getting to Tham Kong Lo) and Western and Lao food – the big English breakfast is the perfect way to start the long trip to Kong Lo. They also provide packed lunches. Other services include limited free (if slow) internet for guests; mountain-bike hire where the money goes to the local school (US\$1.50 per day); free laundry (a tip for the washer is appreciated); and a 25m-long swimming pool expected to be finished in 2008. Mi Thuna is about 800m south of the market on Rte 8, past the Shell station.

Opposite the market **Seng Chen Guesthouse** (☎ 051-214399; s/d US\$4/6) has three clean rooms with nets, fans and cold bathrooms. It's the second-best option.

If these are full, try the simple **Xok Xai** (☎ 051-233629; Rte 8; r US\$4-6) on Rte 8 at the southern edge of town or **SK Guesthouse** (☎ 051-250598; r US\$4-5), about 300m north of the market. For food, Mi Thuna Restaurant is recommended and the **DK Restaurant** (meals US\$0.75-1.50), opposite SK Guesthouse, serves tasty Lao food.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

All transport along Rte 8 stops at Ban Khoun Kham. Buses for Vientiane (US\$4) usually stop about 7am, 8.30am and 9.30am, and there are a couple that go all the way to Tha Khaek (US\$4, three hours, 143km) in the morning. Beyond these you'll need to take any of the semi regular *sāwngthāw* to Vieng Kham (Thang Beng) or Lak Sao and change. For transport to Tham Kong Lo see p232.

Phu Hin Bun NPA

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The Phu Hin Bun NPA is a huge (1580 sq km) wilderness area of turquoise streams, monsoon forests and striking karst topography across central Khammuan. It was made a protected area in 1993 and it's no overstatement to say this is some of the most breathtaking country in the region. Passing through on foot or by boat it's hard not to feel awestruck

by the very scale of the limestone cliffs that rise almost vertically for hundreds of metres into the sky. Flora clings to the cracks in the cliff face, at once wonderfully isolated and desperately exposed.

Although much of the NPA is inaccessible by road, local people have reduced the numbers of key forest-dependent species through hunting and logging. Despite this, the area remains home to the endangered Douc langur, François' langur and several other primate species, as well as elephants, tigers and a variety of rare species of deer.

A trip out to **Tham Kong Lo** (see p232) will give you a taste of what the protected area has to offer. But there are two better ways to really get into this area of almost mythical gothic peaks and snaking streams.

Khammuan Province and Dutch NGO SNV have established two and three-day community-based treks (see p70) into the NPA at reasonable rates. The treks start in either Tha Khaek or Ban Khoun Kham (Ban Na Hin). From Tha Khaek, the two-day trip (US\$86 for one person, US\$46 each for two or three, US\$33 for four or more) into the Phu Hin Bun is especially good. The route includes plenty of karst scenery, a walk through Tham Pa Chan, accommodation in a village and four different swimming locations, including the stunning **Khoun Kong Leng** (aka the Blue Lagoon; see p239).

There's also a three-day trek to and around Tham Kong Lo. This trek has a couple of variations, depending on where you start, the time of year and how keen you are to climb over a mountain (rather than boat through it). Including all food and transport, treks cost US\$88 per person for one, US\$77 for two or three and US\$65 for four or more, a bit less starting in Ban Khoun Kham. There's an extra charge of US\$50 per boat (maximum four people) between June and October. These treks were designed to bring tourist dollars into some of the poorest parts of Laos and they do; we highly recommend them. Bookings can be made through the Ecoguide Unit at the **Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 212512; Th Vientiane; 8am-4pm) in Tha Khaek (p236).

With a little more time and money **Green Discovery** (www.greencoverylaos.com) offers similar treks plus one very tempting four-day kayaking trip between spectacularly sheer cliffs, as the Nam Hin Boun follows a large anticlockwise arc towards the Mekong (US\$138 per

person, minimum four). Thai-based **North by North-East Tours** (www.thaitourism.com), also runs tours into the NPA. Alternatively, you might be able to arrange a similar trip yourself with a boatman, though it wouldn't be cheap.

Tham Kong Lo

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Imagine a river disappearing at the edge of a monolithic limestone mountain and running 7km through a pitch-black, winding cave and you'll start to get an idea of **Tham Kong Lo**, truly one of the natural wonders of Laos. Pronounced *tham kəwng ləw*, the cave-tunnel is quite awesome – up to 100m wide in some places and almost as high. It takes a motorised canoe nearly an hour to pass through.

Boat pilots hired for the journey can lead visitors to natural *thâat* (stupas) that are actually groups of glittering stalagmites in a dry cavern branching off the main tunnel. Be sure to bring a torch (flashlight) and wear rubber sandals; the gravel in the riverbed is sharp and it's usually necessary to disembark and wade at several shallow points.

Besides snaking through the tunnel, the Nam Hin Bun meanders through some spectacular scenery – Gothic mountains and cliffs of jagged black karst. Amazingly, a fair amount of hardy trees have managed to take root on the cliffs. Keep an eye out for sago palms that have attained rare heights of more than 2m; in more accessible places these slow-growing trees have been dug up and sold to landscape gardeners in Thailand.

At the north end of the tunnel lies a scenic valley that once served as a refuge for lowland Lao fleeing Haw harassment during the 19th century. Temple ruins believed to date from that period can be seen in the valley.

SLEEPING & EATING

It's possible to visit Tham Kong Lo as a day trip from Ban Khoun Kham, using the accommodation there (opposite), but until the road is complete it will remain a very long day. More fun are the options closer to the cave.

At the edge of Phon Nyaeng on the banks of the Nam Hin Bun about 12km from Tham Kong Lo is **Sala Hin Boun** (☎ 020-561 4016; www.sala.lao.com; r incl breakfast US\$18-23). The 12 comfortable Lao-style rooms have hot-water bathrooms and balconies, those with river views being the biggest and most expensive. Cheaper rooms

are s/d US\$13/18, and all are US\$5 cheaper in low season. Lounging in the wicker chairs overlooking the mountains and river is a great way to spend an afternoon. Lao and Western food is available for about US\$3 to US\$4 a meal, though you need to order in advance. Staff can arrange guided trips to Tham Kong Lo and other caves.

In Ban Tiou, about 6km closer to Ban Kong Lo, the same outfit runs the **Sala Kong Lor** (www.salalao.com; r US\$4-12), a much simpler Lao-style place aimed at those who can't afford the Sala Hin Boun. In Ban Thone Ngeng, nearer again, is the **Guesthouse Saynamngeng** (r US\$6-8) where the rooms are even simpler but have bathrooms; look for the yellow sign on the 'road' towards Ban Kong Lo.

For a real experience of Lao village life say the word '**homestay**' (US\$5 per person, incl dinner & breakfast) when you reach Ban Kong Lo, about 1km downstream from the cave mouth, and you'll be hooked up with a family somewhere in the charming, mazelike village. We met one guy here who speaks English well, so it might not necessarily be so hard to communicate. For more on homestays, see p48.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

A 50km road from Ban Khoun Kham to Ban Kong Lo is being built and is scheduled to be complete before the wet season in 2008. This road will make getting to Kong Lo an easy one-hour motorbike ride or *sáwngháew* (US\$3). In the meantime, however, there are two ways of getting to the cave; by land (note that we don't say 'road') or river.

As things are changing so quickly here, ask Ralph and Mon at Mi Thuna Guesthouse for the latest information.

By Land

When we rode it the first 30km of the new road was smoothly steamrolled laterite. Nice. It was so easy we were almost wishing it would get more interesting – until the road ended and was replaced by the track people have been using for decades.

Until the new road is finished, this track is only passable between about the end of October and June. It is, after all, just a bone-jarring series of rice paddies which have dried like concrete. And you know those buffalo you see lazing about in rivers and mud holes? During the dry season they are working in the fields and every hoof step leaves a big inden-

tation. Dried hard, these and the countless dikes you need to haul your rattling Chinese 100cc bike across are like riding a jackhammer. The whole trip took us more than two hours, though this will get shorter as every new kilometre of road is built. If you do find yourself shuddering across the earth, with your wrists acting as shock absorbers (it rattled the pins right out of our watchband), then take some comfort in the knowledge that Mi Thuna Guesthouse can call in a masseuse to loosen out the knots when you get back to Ban Khoun Kham.

By River

For now, the only way to reach Tham Kong Lo during the wet is by river. If you're not riding a bike, take a *sáwngháew* or jumbo (three-wheeled taxi) from near the market in Ban Khoun Kham to the village of Ban Na Phuak (US\$1 per person, 35 minutes, 14km); one service is guaranteed from Ban Na Phuak to Ban Khoun Kham at 9.30am, returning at 10.30am; after this you have to wait for it to fall.

From Ban Na Phuak boats follow the beautiful Nam Hin Bun for about 3½ hours to Ban Kong Lo, just downstream from the cave entrance. It's a stunning trip, with the walls of the valley slowly closing in as the river winds southward. It's also stunningly expensive at US\$50 a boat for the return trip, with a maximum of four people. This is the price the local boatmen have agreed upon and given that they use at least 18L of fuel each way and probably only make a trip on average every few days, it's not as outrageous as it sounds.

Whatever the season, pattering up the river is undoubtedly the most enjoyable way of reaching Tham Kong Lo. In the dry season the river drops and boats might not be able to take four people.

Through the Cave

So you've arrived, one way or another, in Ban Kong Lo. You're only here for one reason, so everyone (kids, grannies, stray dogs...) will point you toward the river and a boatman. It costs US\$10 per boat for the return trip (about 2½ hours, maximum four people) through the cave, including a short stop on the far side. Cave entrance costs US\$0.20 and there's a US\$0.50 motorbike parking fee.

Tha Bak

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About 18km east of Ban Khoun Kham, Tha Bak sits near the confluence of the Nam Kading and Nam Theun rivers. The town itself is pretty, and pretty quiet, and the only real reason to stop is to take photos of the river or actually get out on the incredible **bomb boats**. The name is slightly misleading, as the boats are actually made out of huge missile-shaped drop tanks that carried fuel for jets operating overhead during the 1960s and '70s. Empty tanks were sometimes dropped and those that weren't too badly damaged when they hit the deck have been turned into boats.

We're not exactly sure which planes carried these tanks, though that's not for want of trying. After enquiring with veterans we found ourselves in an acronym-filled email discussion that bounced around the world, from retired USAF generals to ex-Ravens (see p130) and pilots of various other aircraft flying over Laos during that period. The villagers themselves usually attribute the tanks to the giant B-52 bombers; however, the pilots who flew them say no, it wasn't them. More likely they were dropped by F-4 Phantoms or F-105 Thunderchiefs flying from bases in Thailand.

If you fancy a spin in a bomb boat just head down to the riverbank at the east end of the bridge and negotiate a price.

LAK SAO

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☎ 054 / pop 28,000

While the forest, mountain and karst scenery along the upper stretches of Rte 8 on the way to Lak Sao (Lak Xao; literally, Kilometre 20) is strikingly beautiful, the town itself is a disappointment. In the eastern reaches of Bolikhamsai Province near the Vietnam border, Lak Sao is a frontier boomtown that has grown rapidly as the headquarters for logging operations that continue to decimate surrounding forests. And while it's the nearest real town to the border, that border is still 32km away – raising some good questions about why it's called 'Kilometre 20'.

The wedding-cake-shaped market at Lak Sao was once known for its trade in wildlife and forest products, but these days there is little on offer, no doubt due to the destruction of nearby forests. Instead you'll find Vietnamese traders flogging basic consumer goods, some-

times to families of White Hmong and Striped Hmong who come in to trade for provisions. The only real sights in the vicinity are some **limestone caves** (the most accessible, Tham Mangkhon, is 17km northwest of town on Rte 8) and **hot springs** (a further 1km); neither is a must-see. The vast majority of people pass straight on through and it's hard to blame them. If you're travelling to Hanoi, however, it's a good place to stop.

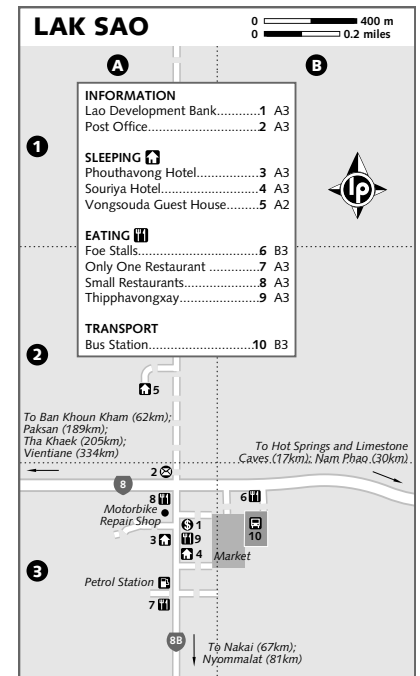
Information

Lao Development Bank (Rte 8B) (Changes Thai baht, dollars, UK pounds and Vietnamese dong.)

Post office (cnr Rte 8 & Rte 8B; 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

Sleeping & Eating

You don't need 20/20 vision to see where this town made its money and it's nowhere more obvious than in the sleeping and eating establishments. There's enough high-quality timber in these places to keep a carpenter busy for several lifetimes. The hotels mentioned here have recently promoted themselves from guesthouse status, but neither the price nor



the standards have changed much. Having said that, most are good value. These three have hot-water bathrooms, cable TV and air-con, though it's seldom hot enough to need it. All are a short walk to the market and bus station.

Souriya Hotel (☎ 341111; Rte 8B; r US\$5-8; ♿) Opposite the Phouthavong, this three-storey place has 30 clean twin and double rooms with cable TV; those at the front (US\$8) have expansive views of the town and mountain behind from the balcony. The friendly manager speaks some French and English; there's a good restaurant next door.

Phouthavong Hotel (☎ 341074; Rte 8B; r US\$5.50-6.60; ♿) The ever-expanding Phouthavong now has 49 clean, spacious rooms with cable TV to complement the timber. Very good value. Fan rooms (US\$5.50) are slightly smaller.

Vongsouda Guest House (☎ 341035, 020-5653251; r US\$6; ♿) About 300m north of Rte 8 along a dirt road, this family-run place has decent, relatively large rooms and a cosy communal area with a fireplace, though you'll be lucky if anyone else is around.

Thippavongxay (☎ 341038; Rte 8B; meals US\$1.50-3.50; ♿ 6am-11pm) Next door to the Souriya Guest House, Thippavongxay has a good range of *laap* (spicy meat salad) in its large menu of mostly Lao dishes. It's now the most reliable eating option in town. The manager speaks some English and is a good source of information.

Only One Restaurant (☎ 341034; Rte 8B; meals US\$1.50-3.50; ♿ 6am-10pm) The Lao and Vietnamese dishes here aren't bad and it's encouraging that the local endangered species are found on preservation posters rather than on the menu – apart from the stuffed civet staring out from the counter.

Several **small restaurants** (♿ 6am-8pm) and *fôe* stalls serve Lao and Vietnamese around the market.

Getting There & Away

Buses leave from east of the market for Vientiane (US\$6, six to eight hours, 334km) daily at 5am, 6am and 8am. For services from Vientiane see p114. These buses stop at Vieng Kham (Thang Beng; US\$3, 100km, 1½ to 2½ hours), where you can change for regular buses heading south, and Paksan (US\$5, five to six hours, 189km). Other buses and *săwngthăew* head along Rte 8 to Thang Beng (between 8.30am and 5pm) and one bus to Tha Khaek (US\$5, five to six hours, 202km) at 7.30am.

THA KHAEK

ທ່າຂາໂຂກ

☎ 051 / pop 70,000

Who'd have thought it? In a couple of years Tha Khaek, the archetypal somnolent Lao riverside town, has gone from a charming but relatively boring place to the base for an ever-growing range of adventure travel in central

CROSSING THE VIETNAM BORDER AT NAM PHAO & CAU TREO

The border at Nam Phao (Laos) and Cau Treo (Vietnam) through the Kao Neua Pass is 32km from Lak Sao and is open from 7am to 6pm, though lunch time often slows things down. *Săwngthăew* (US\$1.50, 45 minutes) leave every hour or so from Lak Sao market and drop you at the typically relaxed Lao border post. There is an exchange booth on the Lao side, though the rates aren't generous. You'll need to have your Vietnamese visa arranged in advance. Laos issues 30-day visas at the border.

Once into Vietnam you'll be welcomed by an assortment of piranhas masquerading as transport to Vinh. Contrary to their claims, a minibus to Vinh doesn't cost US\$20 per person – about US\$5 for a seat is more reasonable, though you'll do very well to get that price. Hook up with as many other people as possible to improve your bargaining position.

You can hopefully avoid these guys by taking a bus direct from Lak Sao to Vinh (100,000d, three to four hours; pay in Vietnamese dong, dollars or kip); there are usually four buses leaving between about noon and 2pm. Once in Vinh you can take a bus or a sleeper on the **Reunification Express** (www.vr.com.vn) straight to Hanoi.

Coming from Vinh, buses leave for Tay Son (10,000d, 70km) regularly between 6am and 2pm. From Tay Son take a motorbike or minibus (both about 50,000d) for the spectacular last 26km climb up to the frontier. Expect to be ripped off on this route (p323). Jumbos and *săwngthăew* to Lak Sao leave the border when full or cost about US\$10 to charter.

Laos. Idling attractively on the east bank of the Mekong River 332km south of Vientiane, Tha Khaek means 'guest landing', believed to be a reference to its earlier role as a boat landing for foreign traders. Appropriately, the capital of Khammuan Province is a place you can soon feel comfortable.

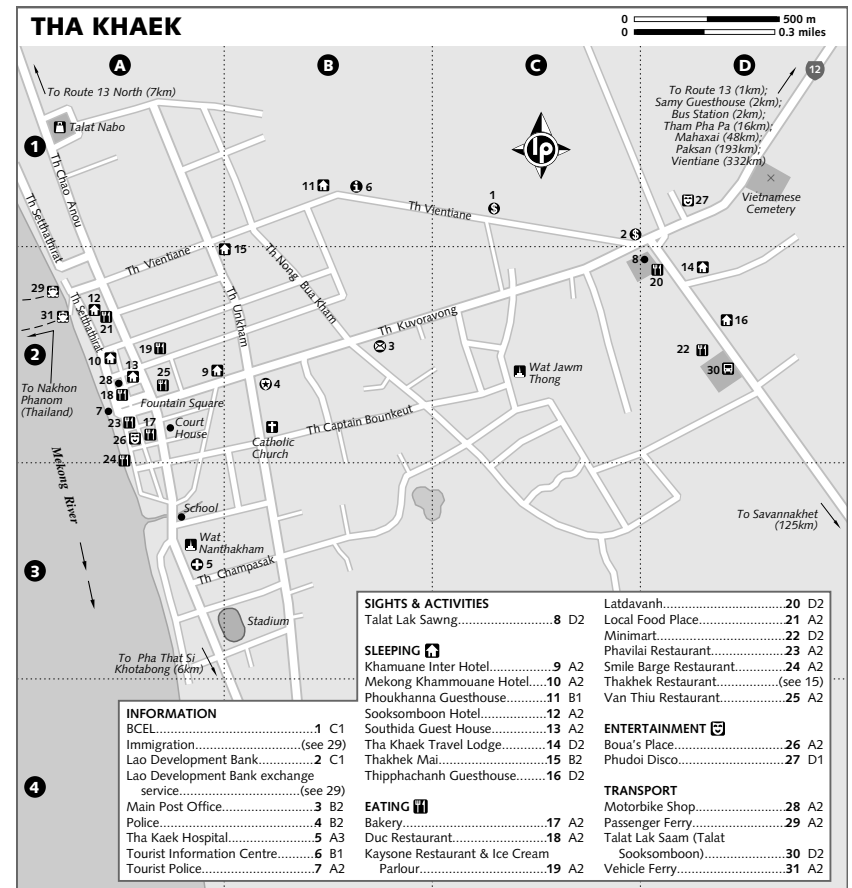
Particularly around the old town near the riverfront, the surviving Franco-Chinese architecture, mixed with newer structures, is similar to that found in Vientiane and Savannakhet, with tall trees shading quiet streets and no-one seeming in any particular hurry to do anything. The epicentre (if we can call it that) of the old town is the modest fountain square at the western end of Th Kuvoravong near the river. River-

side beer shops near here are a good place for sundowners.

It's busier around the markets, and traffic between Vietnam and Thailand is increasing. The population is mostly lowland Lao, Thai and Vietnamese.

History

Once an outpost of the Mon-Khmer Funan and Chenla empires, when it was known as Sri Gotapura (Sikhottabong in Lao) and was ruled by King Suryavarman (r AD 578–614), Tha Khaek traces its present-day roots to French colonial construction in 1911–12. Evidence of this period can be found in the slowly decaying buildings around Fountain Sq, few of which have so far been restored. The town



served as a port, border post and administrative centre during the French period, when a large number of Vietnamese were bought in to serve as administrators. More arrived during the 1950s and '60s fleeing the Viet Minh movement in North Vietnam, and by the late '60s Vietnamese made up about 85% of Tha Khaek's population. Their numbers dropped drastically in the late 1970s as many fled another Communist regime.

In the '60s and early '70s the city also drew a large number of Thais, though these were mostly visiting on decadent daytrips to gamble. The fun stopped when the North Vietnamese Army and Pathet Lao cut the road to Vientiane. These days there's the usual border-town talk of a new casino, but no-one has started building yet.

Information

EMERGENCY

Police (cnr Th Kuvoravong & Th Unkham)

Tourist Police (☎ 250610; Fountain Sq) Know how to write insurance reports if you can track down an officer.

Tha Khaek Hospital (cnr Th Chou Anou & Th Champasak) Fine for minor ailments or commonly seen problems such as malaria or dengue. Anything more serious, head to Thailand.

INTERNET

At the time of writing the only place to get online was the **Tha Khaek Travel Lodge** (☎ 030-530 0145; travell@laotel.com; per hr US\$3).

MONEY

BCEL (☎ 212686; Th Vientiane) Changes Thai baht, US dollars, euros, Vietnamese dong and travellers cheques. Cash advances made on Visa.

Lao Development Bank (☎ 212089; Th Kuvoravong) Changes cash, but doesn't offer cash advances. Another branch changes cash at the port immigration post.

POST & TELEPHONE

Main post office (Th Kuvoravong) Also offers pricey international phone calls.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The **Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 212512; Th Vientiane; 8am-4pm) is the place to get all the latest information on the various community-based trekking options, book yourself on a trip and meet your English-speaking guide. The centre has plenty of informative pamphlets and sells maps of the town and province (US\$1). As trek prices vary depending on group size, it's worth calling Mr Somkied (☎ 020-5711797)

to coordinate with other travellers. The office is beside the rusting old Ferris wheel and should be open seven days, though you'd be lucky to find it open on weekend afternoons.

Sights & Activities

Tha Khaek's more about being than seeing and there's not much in the way of sights. One place in town worth checking out is the large **Talat Lak Sawng** (Km 2 Market; Th Kuvoravong), which purveys hardware, clothes, fresh produce and just about everything else the people of Tha Khaek use in daily life. In addition to the usual gold shops there are a large number of vendors selling work in silver.

Sleeping

Perhaps surprisingly, given it is the nearest big town to the vast Nam Theun 2 dam site, Tha Khaek has a pretty small range of rooms.

ourpick **Tha Khaek Travel Lodge** (☎ 030-530 0145; travell@laotel.com; dm US\$2.50, r US\$5-11; ☎ ☑) It's not the cheapest place in town nor the nearest to the Mekong, but the Travel Lodge is the clear favourite with travellers for its easy atmosphere, decent food, 17 clean rooms and welcoming staff. Run by charming Pok, rooms range from a comfortable dormitory (US\$2.50), through fan rooms with or without bathroom to the attractive air-con rooms with private bathroom (US\$11). The internet, camp-style fire, decent food and coffee are other draws, topped off by the travellers' book, which has the latest feedback on The Loop (p240). They have a few motorbikes for hire (US\$10 to US\$15 per day).

Phoukhanna Guesthouse (☎ 212092; Th Vientiane; r US\$3.50-8; ☎) The English-speaking woman manager gives this place an easy-going atmosphere. Simple rooms without bathrooms are US\$3.50, but the pick are those in the newer building out back, which are bigger, quieter and generally better. The restaurant (meals US\$1.50 to \$3.50; open from 7.30am to 11pm) serves a mix of Western and Asian food and gets good reviews.

Khamuane Inter Hotel (☎ 212171; Th Kuvoravong; r US\$4-6; ☎) Located in the centre of town in an appealing French-era building with Deco hints, rooms here are some of the cheapest in town, which makes up for the lack of any atmosphere and the dubious plumbing.

Thakhek Mai (☎ 212551; Th Vientiane; r US\$8-10; ☎) Privatisation of public assets in Laos has opened this former government guesthouse

to everyone. If you like rooms with a strong green or blue influence, this might be a good thing. In fairness, the rooms are not bad and the attached restaurant is pretty good.

Southida Guest House (☎ 212568; Th Chao Anou; r US\$8-11; ☎) Not far from the riverfront and Fountain Sq, the family-run Southida has clean rooms with cable TV in a modern two-storey building. Most rooms have at least one balcony but size can vary considerably, so ask to see several. The downstairs restaurant (meals US\$1.50 to US\$4; open from 6.30am to 10pm) is reliable.

Sooksomboon Hotel (☎ 212225; Th Setthathirat; small/large rooms US\$8/12; ☎) In a colonial-era police station right on the Mekong, the exterior promises more than the slightly surreal faux-Art Deco interior delivers. Rooms in the main building are far superior and some have bathtubs to go with the peeling paint.

Mekong Khammuane Hotel (☎ 250777; Th Setthathirat; r US\$11; ☎) The bright blue exterior of this Vietnamese-run, four-storey hotel on the riverfront is impossible to miss. Staff wearing *ao dai* (Vietnamese national dress) and clean, well-equipped-if-a-bit-dim rooms will be familiar to anyone who's travelled in Vietnam. Fair value.

Other hotels include:

Samy Guesthouse (d US\$3.50) Simple place at the bus station.

Thippachanh Guesthouse (☎ 212762; r US\$5-12; ☎) Motel-style place with clean rooms and TV.

Eating

Most guesthouses and hotels also have restaurants, with the kitchens in the Southida Guest House and the Tha Khaek Travel Lodge both serving above average fare; the latter has a shrinking range of decent Western food and good Lao. Several *khào jji* (baguette) vendors can be found on Fountain Sq in the morning, and if you're looking to stock up before doing The Loop the **minimart** (☎ 7am-8pm) at Talak Lak Sääm is pretty well stocked.

Bakery (☎ 7am-5pm) For the best plain baguettes head for the Vietnamese bakery, a couple of blocks south of Fountain Sq.

Local food place (Th Chao Anou; meals about US\$1) Head to the busy local food place, a block back from the river, if you fancy tasty Lao favourites such as *ping kai* (grilled chicken), *làoap* and sticky rice for next to no money.

Latdavanh (föe US\$1; ☎ 6.30am-8pm) Nearer to the Tha Khaek Travel Lodge, Latdavanh

serves great *föe* and a few other basics; there's no English sign but it's the only place near that corner.

Phavilai Restaurant (Fountain Sq; meals US\$1-2; ☎ 6am-9pm) Serves standard Lao-Chinese rice and noodle dishes.

Van Thiu Restaurant (☎ 212138; Th Chao Anou; meals US\$1-3.50; ☎ lunch & dinner) This no-frills place, accessed through a shop, serves tasty Vietnamese dishes.

Duc Restaurant (meals US\$1.50; ☎ 6am-10pm) On the riverfront, this place does a delicious *föe häeng* (dry rice noodles served in a bowl with various herbs and seasonings but no broth).

Kaysone Restaurant & Ice Cream Parlour (☎ 212563; meals US\$1.50-4; ☎ 9.30am-11.30pm) With dining on the rooftop or indoors, this is a popular place serving mainly Lao fare with a strong emphasis on seafood; the ice cream is also pretty good.

Thakhek Restaurant (Th Vientiane; meals US\$1.50-4; ☎ 7.30am-10.30pm) Next door to the Thakhek Mai guesthouse, this big place has indoor and outdoor seating and a large menu of Lao and Thai dishes, fish being especially good.

Smile Barge Restaurant (☎ 212150; meals US\$3-4.50; ☎ noon-1am) One of several floating restaurants set up along the Mekong, the Smile Barge has been so successful it now has a landlubbing venue as well. It's hard to know whether the tasty food or the karaoke is more popular.

Entertainment

Tha Khaek is no London or New York, but there are a couple of options.

Boua's Place (Th Setthathirat; ☎ 3pm-10pm) On the river just south of Fountain Sq, wonderfully camp Boua used to cut hair by day and sell beer and good spirit by night. But the sun-downers became so popular that the cutting has stopped. There's no food, just beer and atmosphere at tables overlooking the river; snacks can be ordered from nearby restaurants. Look for the tables.

Phudoi Disco (☎ 8pm-midnight) Behind the Phudoi Guest House, this place can be a fun Lao night out if you fancy getting down to lots of Thai pop, a bit of Lao pop and some cheesy Western classics with the local youth.

Getting There & Away BUS

Tha Khaek's **bus station** (Rte 13) is about 3.5km from the centre of town and has a sizable market and basic guesthouses to complement

CROSSING THE THAI BORDER AT THA KHAEK & NAKHON PHANOM

Crossing the Mekong from Tha Khaek to Nakhon Phanom in Thailand is simple. The boat landing and **immigration office** (🕒 8am-6pm) are about 400m north of Fountain Sq and boats travel in both directions at least every hour; they usually leave when there are 10 people on board. From Laos, the ferry costs US\$1.50 or 60B, while from Nakhon Phanom it's 50B. On weekends boats might be less frequent and you'll be asked for an extra US\$1 on the Lao side, and an extra 10B in Thailand. After hours you can charter a boat for about 500B, but border formalities will be difficult.

In Tha Khaek, Lao immigration *usually* issues 30-day tourist visas on arrival and there's a **money exchange service** (🕒 8.30am-3pm) at the immigration office. In Thailand, it's a 30B share tuk-tuk ride to the bus station, from where buses leave Nakhon Phanom for Udon Thani (regular) and Bangkok (at 10am and in the evenings).

the regular services going north and south. For Vientiane (US\$4, six hours, 332km), buses originate in Tha Khaek at 4.30am, 5.30am, 7am and 8.30am. From 9am to midnight buses stop en route from Pakse and Savannakhet every hour or so. Any bus going north stops at Vieng Kham (Thang Beng; US\$2, 90 minutes, 102km), Pak Kading (US\$2.50, three hours, 149km), or Paksan (US\$3, three to four hours, 193km). For buses from Vientiane see p114.

Heading south, buses for Savannakhet (US\$2, two to three hours, 125km) and Pakse (US\$4.50, 368km, six to seven hours) are reasonably frequent between 10.30am and midnight. A 4pm bus goes all the way to Don Khong (US\$6, about 15 hours, 452km) and Voen Kham (US\$6, about 16 hours, 482km) on the Cambodian border, but you'd need to be in a hurry.

If you're heading to Vietnam, a bus for Hue (US\$8) leaves daily at 8am, while for Danang (US\$8) and Hanoi (US\$16, 17 hours) the bus goes at 8pm.

SÁWNGTHĀEW

Sáwngthāew depart when full from the **Talat Lak Sáam Terminal** (Sooksomboon Bus Terminal) into the Khammuan Province interior. Along Rte 12, *sáwngthāew* leave every hour or so between 7am and 3pm for Mahaxai (US\$1.50, 1½ to 2½ hours, 50km), Nyommalat (US\$2, two to three hours, 63km), Nakai (US\$2.50, 2½ to 3½ hours, 80km) and Na Phao for the Vietnam border (US\$3.50, five to seven hours, 142km). Rte 12 is being upgraded and the stretch between the Vietnam border and Nyommalat is finished. Depending on who you believe, the remainder will be completed in 2007 or 2010 (when the Nam Theun 2 dam is complete

and trucks will stop using this route). In the meantime prepare to chew plenty of dust on the unsealed sections.

There is allegedly a *sáwngthāew* to Ban Kong Lo (US\$4) every day at 7.30am, though this seems doubtful in the wet season when the village is not accessible by road.

Getting Around

It should cost about US\$1.50 to hire a jumbo to the bus terminal, though you'll need to negotiate. Rides around town cost about US\$0.50 per person or US\$1 for the whole thing.

The Tha Khaek Travel Lodge (p236) rents Chinese 110cc bikes for US\$10 per day for nearby attractions and US\$15 for The Loop; and a small riverfront **motorbike shop** (Th Setthathirat) rents similar bikes for similar prices. The Tourist Information Centre (p236) can arrange bicycle hire.

AROUND THA KHAEK Pha That Sikhottabong

About 6km south of town is the much-venerated **Pha That Sikhottabong** (Pha That Muang Ka; admission US\$0.30; 🕒 8am-6pm) stupa which stands in the grounds of a 19th-century monastery of the same name. According to local lore the stupa was erected on the site of a 6th- to 10th-century *thàat* (Buddhist stupa or reliquary) built by King Nanthasen during a time when Tha Khaek was part of a principality called Si Khotabun. Considered one of the most important *thàat* in Laos, Sikhottabong was first renovated by King Setthathirat in the 16th century, when it assumed its current general form. It was again restored in the 1950s and later augmented in the 1970s. It's the site of a major festival each February.

A *wihāan* (hall) on the temple grounds contains a large seated Buddha, constructed by the order of King Anouvong (Chao Anou).

Tham Pha Pa (Buddha Cave)

When Mr Bun Nong used a vine to scramble 15m up a sheer 200m-high cliff in April 2004, he was hoping to make a dinner of the bats he'd seen flying out of the rock face. Instead he discovered a narrow cave mouth and, stepping into the cavern beyond, was greeted by 229 bronze Buddha images. The Buddhas, ranging from 15cm to about 1m tall, were sitting as they had been for centuries facing the entrance of a cave of impressive limestone formations. It took him a week but Mr Bun Nong eventually told friends in the nearby village of Ban Na Kan Sarng and the cave was named **Tham Pha Pa** (Buddha Cave; entry US\$0.20; 🕒 8am-noon & 1-4pm).

It's hard to say exactly how long the Buddha images have been there, but experts think they are more than 600 years old. Whatever their age, the cave has become a pilgrimage site for Buddhists from around Laos and Thailand.

Mr Bun Nong has become a hero in Ban Na Kan Sarng because the village is now living fat off the fruits of his discovery. Electricity has arrived and a market selling food, drinks and forest products to visitors is bringing much-needed income. And perhaps best of all the new laterite road linking the cave site to Rte 12 has made going anywhere that much easier for the locals. Tourism, it would seem, is a force for good in the case of Ban Na Kan Sarng...mostly. The concrete staircase leading to the cave is undoubtedly practical, but it's hideous too.

Tham Pha Pa is about 18km from Tha Khaek. The new road runs north from Rte 12 about 4km after you cross Rte 13; look for a blue sign pointing to Ban Tha Khe. After about 500m the road turns east along the old railway bed and after a few more kilometres bends north. Take the left fork and the cave is at the end of the road. The **railway line**, a French scheme aimed at connecting Thailand and Vietnam, was abandoned when money ran out in the early 1920s. On the Vietnamese side the line runs right to the border, but here only a couple of concrete bridges remain.

If you don't have your own transport, tuk-tuks will do the trip return for about US\$12 to US\$15 depending on your bargaining skills. Alternatively, you might be able to get on a

sáwngthāew from Talat Lak Sáam. The Buddha Cave day trek through Tha Khaek's Tourism Information Centre (US\$30 for one, US\$17 each for two or three people, US\$13 for four to eight) also stops at a beautiful swimming cave, reached via a wet swampy walk.

Khoun Kong Leng

ຂຸນກອງເລງ

Nestled amid the limestone karsts of the southern reaches of the Phu Hin Bun NPA is the stunningly beautiful 'Evening Gong Lake'. The luminescent green waters spring from a subterranean river that filters through the limestone, making the water crystal clear. The lake is reputed to be 70m deep.

Khoun Kong Leng is named after a legend that describes a gong sounding on the full moon each month. Villagers from nearby Ban Na Kheu believe the lake is sacred and ask visitors to follow a few rules. First, you must ask at the village before swimming in the lake. Once you get the approval, only swim in the stream that flows from the lake, near the wooden footbridge, and not in the lake itself. Fishing is banned.

Khoun Kong Leng is only about 30km northeast of Tha Khaek as the crow flies, but given you're not a crow and the road is terrible, it's going to be quite a trip. Head north along Rte 13 and turn right (east) at Km 25 onto a dirt road. After 2km, turn right (south) again, and bump up over hills and through villages for 16km until you reach Ban Na Kheu. Once you've got approval for swimming, it's another 1km to the lake.

Khoun Kong Leng is one of the stops on the two-day trek run by the Tourism Information Centre (p236) into the Phu Hin Bun NPA; see p230.

East on Rte 12

Whether as a day trip or as part of The Loop (p240), the first 22km of Rte 12 east of Tha Khaek is an area with several caves, an abandoned railway line and a couple of swimming spots that are worth a look. This is part of the vast Khammuan Limestone area, which stretches roughly between Rtes 12 and 8 and east towards Rte 8B. There are thousands of caves, sheer cliffs and jagged karst peaks. Remember to check your odometer when you cross Rte 13 and record the number (write it on the back of your hand); with no kilometre stones and few signs, this will be useful when

THE LOOP

The Loop is an off-the-beaten-track circuit through some of the more remote parts of Khammuan and Bolikhamsai Provinces. The trip is possible by bicycle, but is best done on a motorbike. Fuel is available in most villages along the way. Give yourself at least three days, though four is better if you want to see Tham Kong Lo and have time to find yourself after being lost. Ultimately though, it's up to you...we met one guy who took five days; another did it in 24 hours.

As we discovered on The Loop this time, this part of central Laos is changing fast as the massive Nam Theun 2 dam (p65) project swings into high gear. By mid-2007 more than 11,000 people will be working on the site, and when the area is flooded in 2010 parts of the road will likely disappear and be replaced by new roads. For the latest information we recommend the travellers' book in the Tha Khaek Travel Lodge (p236).

Once you've got your wheels, spend day one heading **East on Rte 12** from Tha Khaek for visiting the caves and swimming spots on the way. It's possible to stay in pretty **Mahaxai** (about 45km), but the guesthouse (rooms US\$6) isn't up to much. It's better to continue north through the dust/mud and endless annoying trucks along Rte 8B. After 16km you'll pass the sealed Rte 12 turn-off to Vietnam and the expansive **NT2 main camp** before coming to **Nyommalat** 5km further. The 10km stretch north of Nyommalat is as busy as an LA freeway, but when the dust settles you'll be passing the site of the **Nam Theun 2 power house** and heading up 6km of steep, winding and jarring road: this is no smooth ride. At the top of the hill the road splits at a busy village called **Ban Oudomsouk**; keep straight for 3km to **Nakai**, where there is a basic guesthouse (rooms US\$3), and fuel. But travellers report the best place to stop is at **Ban Tha Long**, 17km further north, where the road crosses the Nam Theun via a new bridge. There's a small but attractive bamboo guesthouse (US\$4) in a nice spot overlooking the river. From Mahaxai to Ban Tha Long took us about three hours.

After crossing the bridge at Ban Tha Long it's 50km to **Lak Sao** (p233) along a road that's pretty rocky in places. This stretch is stunning as you drive through the corridor between the Nakai Nam Theun and Phu Hin Bun NPAs. After 17km keep straight at the junction (the left fork will take you to the Nam Theun 2 dam site). In the dry season the 50km took us about two hours.

When you finally hit the tarmac at Lak Sao you (and your butt) will offer up thanks to whichever god you're into. This otherwise unremarkable town is also a good place if you need bike repairs (eg two new shocks and labour, US\$10). Riding the 62km of smooth Rte 8 between Lak Sao and Ban Khoun Kham (Ban Na Hin) is like stepping into a video game – the road runs between walls of impregnable karst on one side, into winding hills of deep forest, and crosses the wide Nam Theun at **Tha Bak** (p233), where it's worth stopping for a look at the bomb boats.

Ban Khoun Kham (p230) is the base for trips into **Tham Kong Lo** – see p231 for all the teeth-chattering details. From Ban Khoun Kham it's about 145km back to Tha Khaek. Good luck!

looking for the various turnoffs. Of course, if you get lost just ask a local.

All these places can be reached by tuk-tuk, bicycle or hired motorcycle.

THAM XANG (THAM PHA BAN THAM)

ຖ້ຳຂ້າງ (ຖ້ຳພະ ບ້າຖ້ຳ)

The first cave is **Tham Xang** (Elephant Cave) also known as Tham Pha Ban Tham after the nearby village of Ban Tham. It's famous for its stalagmite 'elephant head', which is found along a small passage behind the large golden Buddha; take a torch (flashlight). This cave has an unusually lively recent history. Before 1956 it was home to a limestone formation believed to resemble an evil monster's head.

Various taboos were observed to avoid upsetting the monster's spirit, but when a wave of sickness hit the village in that year the locals decided the evil head had to go and promptly blew it to smithereens with dynamite. Soon after this the elephant's head miraculously appeared and village health improved. It's been revered ever since.

To find it, take the right fork about 2.5km east of the Rte 13 junction. You'll see the large cave mouth in the distance – just keep following the road. In the wet season you might need to cross a river by foot, or it might be too flooded to cross at all. In this case, try continuing along Rte 12 and turn right (south) onto a dirt road shortly after a bridge.

Back on Rte 12 you can continue east or turn north to the **old railway** and **Tham Pha Pa** (p239).

THA FALANG

ທ່າຝາລັງ

At Km 13 (about 9km from Rte 13) a rough trail leads 2km north to the water-sculpted rocks at **Tha Falang** (French Landing) on the scenic Nam Don. Tha Falang features a wooded area on a stream where colonials used to picnic and, during the wet season, is a nice enough place for a swim. Tha Falang is much more easily accessed than Khoun Kong Leng (see p239) but is not nearly as attractive, especially in the dry season. In the wet season you'll probably need to hire a small boat from near the Xieng Liap bridge to get there.

THAM XIENG LIAP

ຖ້ຳຂຽງລຽບ

A track heading south for about 400m at Km 14, near the bridge over the Huay Xieng Liap and the village of Ban Songkhone (about 10.5km from Rte 13) leads to the stunning limestone cave **Tham Xieng Liap**, the entrance of which is at the base of a dramatic 300m-high cliff. It's named for a legendary former novice monk (*xieng*) who was sneaking around (*liap*) in the cave looking for the beautiful daughter of a local hermit; he eventually tracked her down at Tham Nang Aen. The cave is about 200m long and, in the dry season, you can walk/wade through and swim in the picturesque valley on the far side. *Paa faa* (soft-shelled turtles) live in the cave, while the cliffs outside are said to be home to the recently discovered *ghan you* (Laotian rock rat).

THAM SA PHA IN (THAM PHANYA INH)

ຖ້ຳສະພາອິນ (ຖ້ຳພະຍາອິນ)

With high cliffs either side, Rte 12 continues through a narrow pass (about 11.5km from Rte 13) and immediately beyond a track leads north to **Tham Sa Pha In** (Tham Phanya Inh). This rarely visited Buddhist holy cave is said to have magical healing powers; swimming is not allowed.

THAM NANG AEN

ຖ້ຳນາງແອນ

The last cave along this stretch of Rte 12 is the touristy **Tham Nang Aen** (admission US\$0.50), about 18km from Tha Khaek. Much concrete has been added to the limestone here though thankfully the large wooden *sala* (hall) that obstructed views of the front of the cave has recently been torn down. You certainly won't feel like you're the first person here, but at least you'll be able to see inside as it's pretty well lit.

The cave's name is also related to the legend of the sneaky novice monk of Tham Xieng Liap. He is believed to have tracked down his beautiful girl at the entrance to this cave before sitting (*nang*) with her and flirting (*aen kan*) – thus it's the Cave of Sitting and Flirting. When we visited there were plenty of people sitting and eating, but we didn't notice much flirting.

It's easy enough to find; look for two big signs in Lao pointing right (south) as you come around a left-hand bend 16km from the junction with Rte 13. The 700m-long track should be passable at all but the wettest times, when you'll need to park and wade across the stream. The pitiful 'zoo' near the entrance will appeal to people who don't like animals.

CROSSING THE VIETNAM BORDER AT NA PHAO & CHA LO

Despite the road from Nyommalat to Na Phao now being almost perfect, for *falang* (Westerners) this remains one of the least-used of all Laos's borders (open from 7am to 5pm). This is partly because transport on both sides is infrequent, though it's definitely possible to find some *sǎwngthǎew* (literally, two rows: passenger truck) from Tha Khaek (US\$3.50, five to seven hours, 142km) leave at least daily. The other problem is you can't get a Laos visa at the border, even though they are supposed to be issued there. This might change when the road from Tha Khaek to Nyommalat is completed, but check first. Leave early as there's no accommodation and you'll probably have to wait a while for transport.

On the Vietnam side the nearest sizable city is Dong Hoi. A bus does run directly between Tha Khaek and Dong Hoi (US\$13, 10 to 14 hours), leaving Tha Khaek at 7am on Wednesdays and Sundays and returning from Dong Hoi at 6am on Mondays and Fridays.

FOREIGN CONSULATES

Thai consulate (☎ 212373; Th Kuvoravong; 📄 drop-off 8.30am-noon & collection 3-3.30pm Mon-Fri) Tourist and non-immigrant visas issued the same day.

Vietnamese consulate (☎ 212418; Th Sisavangvong; 📄 7.30-11am & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Fri) One-month tourist visa costs US\$45; bring one photo and allow three working days.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet places are scattered around town and charge about US\$0.60 per hour. Particularly good is **SPS Furniture Shop** (Th Khanthabuli; per hr US\$0.60; 📄 10am-10pm) which burns CDs and DVDs and has plenty of fast machines.

MONEY

Both these banks change cash for a range of currencies and make cash advances on Visa or MasterCard. There's also a small exchange office at the river immigration post.

BCEL Bank (☎ 212261; Th Ratsavongseuk)

Lao Development Bank (☎ 212272; Th Udomsin)

POST & TELEPHONE

Post office (☎ 212205; Th Khanthabuli) For calls, use an internet café instead.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The **Provincial Tourism Office** (☎ 214203; Th Ratsaphanith; 📄 8am-11.30pm & 1.30pm-4.30pm) is one of the best-organised tourism offices in the country. Several English-speaking staff provide information ranging from bookings for treks to Dong Natad (p247) and Dong Phu Vieng (p249) NPAs through their Eco-Guide Unit, to bus times and where to hire a motorbike. Look for the bright blue doors on the corner.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Savanbanhao Tourism Co (☎ /fax 212944; Th Saenna) In the Savanbanhao Hotel, these guys can arrange tours to Sepon and the Ho Chi Minh Trail and Heuan Hin, and sell bus tickets to Vietnam.

Sights

Much of the charm of Savannakhet is in just wandering through the quiet streets in the centre of town, between the new and old buildings, the laughing children and, along Th Phetsalat near Wat Sainyaphum, among the slow-moving, *petang*-playing old men.

SAVANNAKHET PROVINCIAL MUSEUM

ພິພິດທະພັນແຂວງສະຫວັນນະເຂດ

In a French-era mansion on expansive grounds is the mildly interesting **Savannakhet Provincial Museum** (admission US\$0.50; 📄 8-11.30am & 1-4pm Mon-Fri). In the front yard are a few rusting artillery pieces aimed at Thailand and the barely recognisable remains of an American-built T-28, the main combat aircraft of the Royal Lao Army. Inside is more rusting ordnance, but otherwise this is a shrine to Kaysone Phomvihane, who was born nearby. There are hundreds of photos, most with basic English captions, and if you're interested in Kaysone or in the beatification of socialist heroes, then it's fascinating. The curator is rarely there at 8am so come later.

The American-built tank that sat in the grounds of the nearby School of Medicine has been replaced by a new building for trainee nurses.

DINOSAUR MUSEUM

ຫໍພິພິດທະພັນໄດໂນໂສເສົາ

It might come as some surprise to learn Savannakhet Province is an exciting place for palaeontologists. In a colonial-era building, this small but well-presented **museum** (☎ 212597; Th Khanthabuli; admission US\$0.50; 📄 8am-noon & 1-4pm) displays some of the finds from the five sites where dinosaur bones or footprints have been found. The curators' unflinching enthusiasm is infectious and they're willing to use their limited English or French on you. It's good Lao-style fun.

WAT SAINYAPHUM

ວັດໄຊຍະພູມ

The oldest and largest monastery in Savan, with more than 100 novices and monks in residence, **Wat Sainyaphum** (Th Tha He) is thought to have first been built in 1542, though most of what you see today dates from the 20th century. It's a pleasant place to wander, and the monks may be willing to show you around and practise their English in the process. Look for the workshop near the river entrance – it's a veritable golden-Buddha production line.

WAT RATTANALANGSI

ວັດລັດຕະນະລັງສີ

Nearly as large as Wat Sainyaphum, **Wat Rattanalangsi** (Th Phangnapui) was built in 1951 and houses a monks' primary school. The *sim* (ordination hall) is unique in that it

has glass windows (most windows in Lao temples are unglazed). Other structures include a rather gaudy Brahma shrine, a modern *sāalāa lóng thām* (sermon hall) and a shelter containing a 15m reclining Buddha backed by Jataka (stories of the Buddha's past lives) paintings.

Sleeping

Savannakhet has a reasonable range of budget options but little to excite if you're looking for luxury. Most guesthouses are located in the attractive old town, and there are also a couple of basic guesthouses at the bus station.

BUDGET

Saisouk Guesthouse (☎ 212207; Th Phetsalat; r US\$2.50-5; 📄) Just south of the centre of town, the atmosphere in this airy wooden house is almost invariably warm and welcoming. Rooms come in several shapes and sizes but are clean and some are quite big; ask to see a few. The husband-and-wife owners speak English. Recommended.

Phonevilay Hotel (☎ 212284; 172/173 Th Phetsalat; r US\$3.50-7.50; 📄) In several buildings around a garden in the south of town, Phonevilay's air-con rooms with TV and fridge (US\$5 rooms are best value) are decent enough, but the dingy US\$3.50 fan rooms with cold water are not. Cleanliness could be better and some staff are totally indifferent.

Leena Guesthouse (☎ 212404 or 020-564 0697; Th Chaokeen; r US\$4-8; 📄) While it's a little further from the river, the 26 smallish rooms here are clean and good value. All have attached bathroom, with hot water in the US\$7 and US\$8 rooms. This place also hires out bicycles (US\$1.50 per day) and motorbikes (US\$8 per day).

Savanbanhao Hotel (☎ 212202; sbtour@laotel.com; Th Saenna; r US\$4.50-9.50; 📄) In four buildings set around a soulless concrete courtyard, rooms here aren't bad but there's not much on the atmosphere front. All rooms have hot water, air-con and English-language TV but differ by size and the age of the fittings; the cheapest ones have the noisiest air-con and aren't great. This is also the headquarters for Savanbanhao Tourism Co (opposite).

Sayamungkhun Guest House (☎ 212426; Th Ratsavongseuk; r US\$5-8; 📄) The super-friendly Sayamungkhun has spacious, spotlessly clean rooms (some with fridge) and an inviting atmosphere in an appealing colonial-era

building on the main road, which means front rooms are a bit noisy.

Nong Soda Guest House (☎ 212522; Th Tha He; r US\$8; 📄) About 200m north of Wat Sainyaphum, this modernish house on the river's edge has great views from the elevated bar but not the rooms, which are comfortable if a bit dark. The owner hires out motorbikes for US\$8 per day.

Other guesthouses include the following: **Savan Phattana Guesthouse** (☎ 213955; Th Saenna; r US\$3.50-7.50; 📄) Good value rooms if you don't mind peeling paint. VIP rooms are big, with three beds.

Suannavong Guesthouse (☎ 212600; Th Saenna; r US\$4-8) In an old house, the four rooms are simple but clean, but a little overpriced. The manager may let you play his electric guitar. Hires out motorbikes for US\$7 per day.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

There aren't a lot of midrange options in Savannakhet, and only one room worthy of being called 'top end'.

Nanhai Hotel (☎ 212371; fax 212380; Th Santisouk; s/d/ste with breakfast US\$16/25/44; 📄) The ugly, six-storey Nanhai has semi-luxurious rooms with decent views, but has all the character of a Chinese business hotel – not much. The restaurant (meals US\$2.50 to US\$6; open from 10am to 2pm and 5pm to 10pm) serves good Chinese and fair Thai and French dishes. Sadly, the pool remains (years on) closed.

Hoongtip Hotel (☎ 212262; hoongthip@hotmail.com; cnr Th Phetsalat & Th Udomsin; r with breakfast US\$18-25; 📄) Rooms in the Hoongtip's two buildings have TV (English channels in the best rooms) and minibar but aren't as good as they could be. Those in the old building (US\$18) are overpriced; and while those in the new building (US\$25) are better, several have no window.

Phonepaseut Hotel (☎ 212158; fax 212916; Th Santisouk; r US\$25-100; 📄) The Phonepaseut is a bit far from the Mekong but is easily the best hotel in town for rooms and service. Rooms are spotlessly clean and have English TV, minibar and (in some) bathtubs, while the 'luxury suite' (US\$100) is a huge, wood-pannelled affair with a flat-screen TV the size of a small cinema screen. Discounts might be possible in low season.

Eating

Savannakhet's culinary scene is slowly improving but couldn't yet be described as inspirational even if finding decent Lao, Thai and Vietnamese food is easy enough. Local

specialties include *siin sawăn* (a slightly sweet, dried, roasted beef) and *jqew pqa-dàek* (a thick sauce of mashed chilli, onion, fish sauce and lotus bulb). There's also a handy small supermarket on Th Phagnaphui.

North of town are several floating restaurants popular with Lao and notable for their *khào pún* (DIY rolls of spaghetti-style noodles with fish, lemongrass and herbs wrapped in lettuce and dipped in peanut sauce). You'll need a tuk-tuk to get there; ask for the *héuan pháe* (raft house).

Hay Thien (☎ 212754; Th Si Muang; all dishes US\$1.50; ☎ 10am-8pm) This modest-looking restaurant in the centre of town specialises in freshly prepared, delicious and cheap Chinese dishes.

Xokxay (☎ 213122; meals US\$1-2) A couple of doors up from Hay Thien, this place serves a similar menu.

Lao-Paris Restaurant (☎ 212792; Th Si Muang; meals US\$1.50-4; ☎ 7am-10pm) In an old Chinese shophouse near the river the mostly reliable Lao, Vietnamese and French offerings here make this a travellers' favourite. Service is rarely enthusiastic, but the portions are big and prices reasonable.

Au Rendez-Vous Restaurant (☎ 213181; 179 Th Ratsavongseuk; meals US\$1-3) A couple of blocks north of the Sayamungkhun Guest House, this small and clean restaurant serves a few decent Western dishes with its predominantly Asian menu, and has a good reputation for Western breakfasts.

Savan Restaurant (☎ 214488; Th Mak Havena; meals from US\$2; ☎ 6-10pm) In an oddly romantic outdoor setting with private compartments, this place is all about *siin daat* (Korean-style barbecue). There's no English menu but it's easy enough to just point and shoot.

Moonlight Ranch (☎ 030-531 5718; Th Ratsavongseuk; meals US\$2-8; ☎ 10am-11pm) Run by a quirky Lao-Danish couple, this place has become popular with travellers and expats seeking comfort food. The hamburgers, in particular, aren't bad.

Several **baguette vendors** (cnr Th Ratsavongseuk & Th Phagnaphui) along this strip sell *khào jji páa-tê* (baguette sandwiches) all day and *khào jji sai khai* (breakfast baguettes filled with scrambled eggs).

Opposite the Wat Sainyaphum the **riverside snack and drink vendors** (☎ afternoons & evenings) are great for sundowners. Beerlao and ice is the most common purchase but fresh *tam màak-hung* (green papaya salad) and a range

of grilled meats are usually on hand. Look for the friendly family of **long-haired ladies** who run one of these places; one who speaks English apologised to us this time for cutting her hair from calf-length to merely waist-length. *Baw pen nyàng*, we say, it's still pretty impressive.

Drinking & Entertainment

Savannakhet is no party town but there are now a few more Western style places to drink, if not dance; they tend to come and go quickly so ask around. When we hit the town **Dragon** (Th Ratsavongseuk; 7-11pm) was the place of choice for young Savannakhet hipsters, though the deafeningly loud karaoke might not be so appealing to Western tastes. Just down the road the **Rose Bar** (Th Ratsavongseuk; ☎ 6-11pm) has occasional live music and a more spacious feel. You're unlikely to find Roman Abramovich partying at the **Chelsea FC Club** (Th Saenna; ☎ 6-11pm). On quiet nights it closes early.

Getting There & Away

Savannakhet's **bus terminal** (☎ 212143), usually called the *khiv lot*, is near the Talat Savan Xai at the northern edge of town. Buses leave here for Vientiane (US\$5.50, eight to 11 hours, 457km) every half-hour from 6am to 10am, then about every hour until 10pm. They stop at Tha Khaek (US\$2.50, 2½ to four hours, 125km). A VIP bus (US\$7, six to seven hours) to Vientiane leaves at 9.30pm, or you could try to pick up a seat on one of the VIP buses coming through from Pakse. For buses from Vientiane, see p114.

Nine buses to Pakse (US\$3, five to six hours, 230km) originate here, the first at 7.30am and the last one at 1.30am. Otherwise jump on one of the regular buses passing through from Vientiane.

Buses leave for Lao Bao (US\$3, five to seven hours, 236km) at 6.30am, 9.30am and noon, stopping at Sepon (US\$3, four to six hours). *Sàwngthàew* leave more frequently.

There are no longer any commercial flights to or from Savannakhet.

Getting Around

Savannakhet is just big enough that you might occasionally need a jumbo – or the Savannakhet equivalent, a *sakai-làep* ('Skylab'). Apparently someone thought a jumbo looked like the famed space station that fell to earth, though we suspect that whoever drew such a conclusion was probably on drugs at the time.

CROSSING THE THAI BORDER AT SAVANNAKHET/MUKDAHAN

The new Friendship Bridge linking Savannakhet and Mukdahan in Thailand means the days of regular ferries might be numbered. As in Vientiane and Pakse, a Thai-Lao International Bus is expected to connect the towns; check at the tourism office for details. Ferries will continue at a reduced level, at least for the short term.

On the Lao side, the boat pier is near the centre of town. Ferries (US\$1.30 or 50B, 30 minutes) cross the Mekong at 9.10am, 10am, 11.10am, 1.30pm, 2.30pm and 4pm from Monday to Friday; on Saturday at 9.30am, 11.10am, 12.30pm and 4.30pm; and on Sunday at 9.30am, 11.10am and 3pm. For some reason, Lao boats only carry passengers from Laos, returning empty. The reverse is true of Thai boats, which run about every hour from 9am to 4.30pm Monday to Friday but less frequently on weekends.

When you're arriving in Laos, English-speaking immigration officers issue 30-day visas (p315). From Mukdahan, VIP (nine hours) and public (at least 11 hours) buses run to Bangkok, at 8am, 7pm and 9.30pm; just ask a tuk-tuk for the 'Bangkok bus'.

Sakai-làep tend to loiter outside the passenger ferry pier. Trips cost from US\$0.50 for shorter trips to US\$1 to the bus station, for the whole vehicle. Prices double after dark.

Several guesthouses and the Lao-Paris Restaurant hire out bicycles (between US\$1 and US\$2 per day) and motorcycles (US\$7 to US\$10 per day). When we passed, most were only willing to hire out motorbikes a day at a time, the Lao-Paris being the exception.

AROUND SAVANNAKHET

That Ing Hang

ທາດອົງອັງ

Thought to have been built in the mid-16th century, this well-proportioned, 9m-high *thàat* is the second holiest religious edifice in southern Laos after Wat Phu Champasak. Built on or near the spot where Chao Fa Ngum's forces were based during the takeover of Muang Sawa in the mid-14th century, **That Ing Hang** (admission US\$0.50; ☎ 7am-6pm) may occupy an earlier site sacred to the Si Khotabun kingdom. The Buddha is believed to have stopped here when he was sick during his wanderings back in ancient times. He rested by leaning (*ing*) on a hang tree (thus Ing Hang). A relic of the Buddha's spine is reputed to be kept inside the *thàat*.

Not including the Mon-inspired cubical base, That Ing Hang was substantially rebuilt during the reign of King Setthathirat (1548-71) and now features three terraced bases topped by a traditional Lao stupa and a gold umbrella weighing 40 *bah*t (450g). A hollow chamber in the lower section contains a fairly undistinguished collection of Buddha images; by religious custom, women are not

permitted to enter the chamber. The French restored That Ing Hang in 1930.

The That In Hang Festival is held on the full moon of the first lunar month.

That Ing Hang is about 11.5km northeast of Savannakhet via Rte 9, then 3km east; the turn-off is clearly signed. Any northbound bus can stop here, or you could haggle with a *sakai-làep* driver and will do well to knock him down below US\$8 return. Going by hired bicycle or motorbike makes more sense.

Dong Natad

ດົງນາທາດ

Dong Natad is a sacred, semievergreen forest within a provincial protected area 15km from Savannakhet. It's home to two villages that have been coexisting with the forest for about 400 years, gathering forest products such as mushrooms (in the rainy season), fruit, oils, honey (from March to May), resins and insects. If you visit, there's a good chance you'll encounter villagers collecting red ants, cicadas or some other critter, depending on the season; all are important parts of their diet and economy.

It's possible to visit Dong Natad on your own, by bicycle, motorbike or in a tuk-tuk (US\$4 charter, one way; bargain hard) from Savannakhet. However, it will be something of a 'forest-lite' experience. It's better to engage one of Savannakhet's English-speaking guides through the Eco-Guide Unit at the **Provincial Tourism Office** (☎ 214203), for a day trip (US\$20 per person for two or three people, US\$15 each four to seven, and US\$12 each eight or more) or an overnight stay (US\$45/35/30 for the same numbers), sleeping in the village.

SPIN THROUGH SAVANNAKHET

Muang Champhone (Champhone District) southeast of Savannakhet city is home to several sites that might not be fascinating individually, but together make a fun motorcycle day-trip through this archetypal Lao Loum area of scattered villages and rice paddies. This trip is only possible between about November and May; there are few signs and no kilometre stones. Before you set out, read *Motorcycle Diaries* (p328).

After checking the odometer (if it's working), head south from Savannakhet to Ban Lak 35, where you turn left (east) on the decent sealed road towards Keng Kok. After 8km turn left (north) onto a laterite road at Ban Khoum; look for a blue and white sign saying 'The tourism place of entry'. About 3km along turn right (east) at Ban Don Dok Mai; the turn is just before a wat. The first 'sight' is the **Sui Reservoir**, which you'll skirt for 3km until you'll come to an irrigation levee.

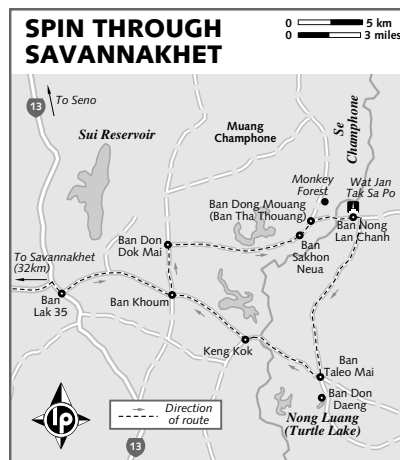
Beyond the levee (dry season only) follow the roller-coaster road a few kilometres and turn left (north) at a T-junction in Ban Sakhon Neua, then immediately right (east). Soon you'll be in Ban Dong Mouang (Ban Tha Thouang) where you turn left (north). About 400m along here you'll come to the **Monkey Forest**, in a shaded area opposite a bunch of small white *thâat* (stupas). If you've picked up some bananas along the way, get them out and start feeding. The hundreds of 'sacred' monkeys are quite used to being fed.

After monkeying around, go back about 50m and turn left along a trail winding into the beautiful sacred forest. Before long you'll be at the Se Champhone for the most challenging part of this ride. After walking across the river to check its depth (or following the tyre trails to see where the locals go), put the bike in first and hit the gas. If you stall, you'll have to get off and push. Alternatively, you could wait for the occasional *dok dok* (mini tractor) that crosses here.

Once across, follow the road about 2km to Ban Nong Lan Chanh where you take the left fork to **Wat Jan Tak Sa Po**. The wat is famous for its library, which is said to be more than 200 years old (though recent renovations make it look about two years old). Until recently, palm-leaf texts documenting centuries of district events and other tales were kept here. These manuscripts are one of the few records of Lao life not burnt in the 19th century Siamese invasion, and some now-common Lao folk songs are said to have survived thanks to these writings. The other wat buildings are also interesting; the wooden prayer hall actually does look 200 years old, and the old monks' quarters (the one on a decided lean) has some interesting wooden 'bells' hanging underneath.

From Ban Lan Chanh continue east about 1km and turn right (south). Follow this good laterite road about 30km to the four-way junction at Ban Taleo Mai (a good place for lunch) and 4km further to Ban Don Daeng. In the centre of the village is **Nong Luang** (Turtle Lake; admission US\$0.30), where dozens of soft-shelled turtles have been living as long as anyone can remember. The oldest turtle (imaginatively known as 'Big One') is about 1m long and is thought to be more than 60 years old. These sacred turtles are quite a tourist attraction and local custom is to feed them unhealthy, radioactive-looking fried snacks. A healthier alternative (as recommended by the Wildlife Conservation Society) is to feed them small dried fish; buy them in the market in Savannakhet before you leave.

To get back to Savannakhet, ride back to Ban Taleo Mai and turn left (west). This road leads about 11km to Keng Kok, from where it is 19km of sealed road back to Ban Lak 35, and on to Savannakhet.



These community-based treks (see p70) have had plenty of positive feedback and the combination of English-speaking guide and village guide proves a great source of information about how the local people live. However, prices are relatively high compared with trekking elsewhere in Laos. Arrange trips at least a day ahead.

Heuan Hin

(ເຮືອນຫີນ)

On the Mekong River south of Savannakhet is this set of Cham or Khmer ruins (the name means Stone House), built between AD 553 and 700. Apart from a few walls, most of the stones of this pre-Angkorian site now lie in piles of laterite rubble. No carvings remain, the only known lintel having been carted off to Paris.

It's a long haul by public transport and you'd need to be a truly dedicated temple enthusiast to make the trip. *Săwnghăew* (US\$2, two to three hours, 78km) leave Talat Savan Xai when full, usually in the midmorning. With your own transport, head south along Rte 13 and turn west at Ban

Nong Nokhian, near Km 490, from where it's a dusty 17km to the site. Guided tours are also available from Savannakhet.

DONG PHU VIENG NPA

(ປ່າສະຫງວນແຫ່ງຊາດດົງພູວຽງ)

One of the most fascinating treks in Laos is to Dong Phu Vieng NPA, which offers a rare chance to step into a rapidly disappearing world. The park, south of Muang Phin in the centre of Savannakhet Province, is home to a number of Katang villages, where you can stay if you behave yourself (see the boxed text below).

The trek involves a fair bit of walking through a mix of forests ranging from dense woodlands to bamboo forests and rocky areas with little cover. There's a boat trip on the third day. All food is included and eating local forest specialities is a highlight. A village guide leads trekkers through a sacred forest where you'll see *Lak La'puep* – clan posts placed in the jungle by village families. Animals regularly seen include the rare silver Langur leaf monkey and hornbill.

SLEEPING WITH SPIRITS

The Katang villagers of Dong Phu Vieng live in a starkly different world to the Lao Loum of the Mekong River valley. They are not Buddhist, but instead believe strongly in the myriad spirits that surround them in the forest. One of the most important is the house spirit, one of which is believed to live in the home of every village family. Over the centuries a series of taboos have been developed in an effort to avoid disturbing this spirit and as a visitor it is vitally important you don't break the taboos. If the house spirit is seriously disturbed the village is obliged to call a meeting to work out how the spirit can be mollified. Usually a sacrifice must be made – ranging from a chicken all the way to a buffalo for the most serious indiscretions. As the villagers have little money, the unnecessary loss of a pig or buffalo can have a dire impact both socially and economically.

So, when you're in a Katang house:

- never enter the owner's bedroom or touch the spirit place
- do not sleep beside a person of the opposite sex, even if that person is your spouse: if you really can't be separated tell the Eco-Guide Unit and they can bring a tent for you
- sleep with your head pointed toward the nearest outside wall; never point your feet at the outside wall or, spirits forbid, another person's head
- do not bang on the walls of the house.

While clapping without first checking with the house spirit is also a no-no, the villagers decided this was no fun so they now clear it with the spirit as a matter of course before any trekking group arrives. It goes without saying that these villages are extremely sensitive to outside influence, which is why you can only visit them as part of the organised trek through the Eco-Guide Unit in Savannakhet. Guides have been trained, and the trek was established after extensive consultation with the villagers themselves.

The three-day trek uses local transport for the 180km to and from the NPA, and it's the long trip that goes some way towards explaining the high prices (US\$150 each for two or three, US\$110 for four to seven, and US\$65 for eight to 10). Clearly getting a bigger group together makes sense, and if you're interested it pays to go straight to the **Provincial Tourism Office** (☎214203) and put your name on a list as soon as you arrive in Savannakhet. Better still, call ahead to see when a trip is departing.

Phu Xang Hae NPA

Named after Wild Elephant Mountain, Phu Xang Hae NPA is a long expanse of forest stretching east–west across the remote north of Savannakhet Province, and its hills are the source of several smaller rivers. The Phu Thai people who live here, like the Katang of Dong Phu Vieng NPA, observe a series of taboos (see p249).

Unfortunately, the diabolical state of the roads means getting into Phu Xang Hae is very difficult. In theory the Eco-Guide Unit (p244) in Savannakhet runs a five-day community-based trek staying in villages and in the jungle. However, when we passed no-one had done the trek for close to two years, due also to the high cost (US\$300 per person for two or three people, less for more people) – it's just too expensive.

SEPON (XEAPON) & THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL

ເຂົ້າໂປນ/ເສັ້ນທາງໄຮຈີມິນ

☎041 / pop 35,600

Like so many other towns that needed to be rebuilt following the Second Indochina War, Sepon (often spelt 'Xepon') today is fairly unremarkable. The main reason for coming here is to see parts of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and what's left of the old district capital, Sepon Kao, 5km to the east.

A trip to **Sepon Kao** (Old Sepon) is a sobering experience. On the banks of the Se Pon, Sepon Kao was bombed almost into the Stone Age during the war. All that remains is the bomb-scarred façade of the wat, inside which a new temple has been built; a large pile of bricks around a safe, which was once the bank; and broken bricks scattered everywhere. If you're on foot or bike, take the first right turn heading east from Sepon, then go another 2km on a bad road. On four wheels, take the second right, just after the 199km stone.

Ban Dong, 20km east of Sepon, was on one of the major thoroughfares of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and is the easiest place to see what little materiel is left from the war. Two American-built tanks used during Operation Lam Son 719 – a disastrous ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) assault on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in February 1971 – rust in the undergrowth a short walk from town. Despite support from US combat aircraft, the ARVN troops retreated across the border at

CROSSING THE VIETNAM BORDER AT DANSAVANH & LAO BAO

Crossing the border (open from 7am to 11am and from 1pm to 6pm, though you can usually cross during lunch for a fee) at Dansavanh (Laos) and Lao Bao (Vietnam) is a relative pleasure. From Savannakhet, buses (US\$3, five to seven hours) leave at 6.30am, 9.30am and noon for the border. Alternatively, take a *sāwngthāw* to Sepon (US\$3, five to six hours, 190km), and another from there to the border (US\$1.40, one hour, 45km). If you're passing this way it's worth breaking the journey for a night in Sepon as a base for seeing the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

It's a 500m walk between the border posts and formalities don't take long, assuming you've arranged your Vietnam visa in advance. Laos issues 30-day visas on arrival.

Once through, take a motorbike (10,000d) 2km to the Lao Bao bus terminal and transport to Dong Ha (20,000d, two hours, 80km) on Vietnam's main north–south highway and railway. Entering Laos, *sāwngthāw* to Sepon leave fairly regularly. Simple accommodation is available on both sides of the border.

An alternative is to take the daily 10pm bus from Savannakhet to Dong Ha (US\$12, about eight hours, 329km), Hué (US\$11, 409km, about 12 hours) or Danang (US\$14, 508km, about 14 hours). Savanbanhao Travel (see p244) also has a bus running to Dong Ha (US\$12) on even dates and returning on odd dates. Note that no matter what you are told, you *will* have to change buses at the border.

HO CHI MINH TRAIL

The infamous Ho Chi Minh Trail is actually a complex network of dirt paths and gravel roads running parallel to the Laos–Vietnam border from Khammuan Province in the north to Cambodia in the south.

Although mostly associated with the 1963–74 Second Indochina War, the road network was originally used by the Viet Minh against the French in the 1950s as an infiltration route to the south. The trail's heaviest use occurred between 1966 and 1971 when more than 600,000 North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops – along with masses of provisions and 500,000 tonnes of trucks, tanks, weapons and ordnance – passed along the route in direct violation of the 1962 Geneva accords (see p37). At any one time around 30,000 NVA troops guarded the trail, which was honey-combed with underground barracks, fuel and vehicle repair depots, hospitals and rest camps as well as ever more sophisticated anti-aircraft emplacements.

The North Vietnamese denied the existence of the trail throughout most of the war. The USA denied bombing it. In spite of 1.1 million tonnes of saturation bombing (begun in 1965 and reaching up to 900 sorties per day by 1969, including outings by B-52 behemoths), traffic along the route was never interrupted for more than a few days. Like a column of ants parted with a stick, the Vietnamese soldiers and supplies poured southward with only an estimated 15% to 20% of the cargo affected by the bombardment. One estimate says 300 bombs were dropped for every NVA casualty. The Yanks even tried bombing the trail with canned Budweiser beer (incapacitation through intoxication!), Calgonite dishwasher detergent (to make the trail too slippery for travel), and massive quantities of defoliants and herbicides.

Contrary to popular understanding, the trail was neither a single route nor a tiny footpath. Several NVA engineering battalions worked on building roads, bridges and defence installations and methods to hide the trails from the air were simple but ingenious. Bridges were built just below the water level and branches were tied together to hide what had become wide roads. As the war went on the various trails stretched deeper into Laos, and virtually all roads running north–south in the southeast of Laos were once part of the trail.

Today the most accessible points are at Ban Dong (opposite), east of Sepon, and the village of Pa-am (p296) in Attapeu Province, which sits almost right on the main thoroughfare. South of here the trail enters Cambodia, where (until March 1970 when a coup toppled Prince Sihanouk in Phnom Penh) it met up with the Sihanouk Trail, another Communist supply route running up from the Gulf of Thailand.

Seeing evidence of the trail, however, isn't easy. Except in the most remote and inaccessible areas, scrap-metal hunters have removed almost all of what was once a huge amount of war scrap. In Ban-Dong and Pa-am, a couple of tanks and a surface-to-air missile remain, protected by government order. Elsewhere you'll need to get way out into the sticks and get locals to guide you.

In eastern Savannakhet Province, Salavan, Sekong and Attapeu, joint Lao-American teams are still searching for the remains of American soldiers missing in action. Eighty percent of American servicemen still missing in Laos are thought to have gone down somewhere along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Lao Bao after being routed by seasoned North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops at Ban Dong. The two tanks are all that is left of what locals say was once a graveyard of destroyed and abandoned equipment. The village headman has been instructed to prevent scrap collectors from dismantling these last two reminders of the NVA/Pathet Lao victory. To see them, head 200m south from Rte 9 on the road out of Ban Dong. One of the tanks is a 50m-walk off to the left (east). It's best to seek guid-

ance from the local children, who will also take you a few hundred metres west to the second tank.

This north–south road was in fact one of the main branches of the **Ho Chi Minh Trail**. It is still used, and if you head another couple of kilometres south you'll come to a swing bridge built by the Vietnamese after the war ended.

Much unexploded ordinance (UXO) remains and the slow work to find and remove it continues, four decades on. During one

visit here we met a team from UXO Lao that was detonating two American 1000-pound bombs found near a village. Once the villagers had been moved, the team took cover and triggered the explosion. Even at more than 800m away, the earth shook and the sound reverberated up the valley like some sort of awesome, deadly thunder. If you multiply that by a full bomb cargo in a B-52, you can imagine something of what it was like to live along the trail.

In **Muang Phin**, 155km east of Savannakhet and 34km west of Sepon, stands an imposing Vietnamese-built monument to Lao-Vietnamese cooperation during the Indochina wars. Done in the stark 'Heroes of Socialism' style, the monument depicts NVA and PL soldiers waving an AK-47 and Lao flag aloft.

Sleeping & Eating

Nang Toon Guest House (Rte 9; r US\$3-5; 🏠) Located about 1.5km east of Sepon, the US\$5

air-con rooms at the Nang Toon Guest House are small but clean, and the fan rooms with hot-water bathroom are the best value in town.

Vieng Xay Guesthouse (📞 214895; Rte 9; r US\$3-5; 🏠) In the centre of town, just past the market on the south side of Rte 9, has rooms with paper-thin walls with bathrooms (US\$5) and without (US\$3). Look for the ordnance in the front fence.

Pa Bouaphan (🕒 6am-8pm) The Lao food and breakfasts are recommended at this modest eatery at the west edge of the market.

Getting There & Away

A couple of buses leave from outside the market for Savannakhet (US\$3, four to six hours, 196km) between about 7am and 10am. For Ban Dong (US\$0.80) and the border at Dansavanh (US\$1.40, one to two hours) take a *sáwngháew*.