

Vientiane & Around



The capital of Laos is booming. Driven by rising foreign investment, plenty of foreign aid workers and a more urbane youth, change is coming as quickly as in any city in Asia. However, even with all this dynamism you won't see words like 'hustle' and 'bustle' being used to describe Vientiane, which can still mount a strong argument for being the most relaxed capital city on earth.

Vientiane means 'Sandalwood City', and is actually pronounced Viang Chan (Viang means 'city' or 'place with walls' in Lao; Chan means sandalwood); the French are responsible for the modern transliteration. The combination of tree-lined boulevards and dozens of temples impart an atmosphere of timelessness, while the kaleidoscopic architectural styles reflect its historic influences, from classic Lao through Thai, Chinese, French, US and Soviet.

As Laos continues to open itself to the world, Vientiane is where the struggle between a communist past and inevitably more capitalist future is most dramatically played out. Lao bands sing lyrics censored by the government to dancing youths who'd look at home in any Western bar. The Lao National Museum still has displays glorifying the victory over capitalist foreign imperialists, but across the road another slick restaurant opens in what is becoming one of the best-value dining cities on earth. The contrasts are fascinating.

Of course, Vientiane is not only about witnessing change. The 6400 Buddhas at Wat Si Saket, the religious art of Haw Pha Kaeo, and the lotus-inspired lines of Laos's gilded national symbol, Pha That Luang, speak of the historical importance of the city. Patuxai and the surreal Xieng Khuan (Buddha Park) may have less artistic merit, but like the city itself, they're not short of appeal.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Gaze up at the tapered golden stupa of **Pha That Luang** (p91), the symbol of Lao nationhood
- Check out the concrete folly that is **Xieng Khuan** (p98), the bizarre park full of dozens of giant Buddhist and Hindu sculptures
- Treat yourself to a traditional herbal sauna and massage at Vientiane's **Wat Sok Pa Luang** (p96)
- Enjoy a night out, Lao-style, at **On the Rock Pub** (p111) and **Marina** (p111)
- Tube, climb, raft, kayak, cycle or walk through the rivers and imposing limestone karst terrain around **Vang Vieng** (p121)
- Catch a glimpse of wild elephants from the elephant observation tower at the **Phu Khao Khuay NPA** (p118)



VIENTIANE

ວຽງຈັນ

☎ 021 / pop 234,000

HISTORY

Set on a bend in the Mekong River, Vientiane was first settled around the 9th century AD and formed part of one of the early Lao valley *meuang* (city-states) that were consolidated around the 10th century. The Lao who settled here did so because the surrounding alluvial plains were so fertile and initially the Vientiane *meuang* prospered and enjoyed a fragile sovereignty.

In the ensuing 10 or so centuries of its history, Vientiane's fortunes have been mixed. At various times it has been a major regional centre, at other times, it has been controlled by the Vietnamese, Burmese and Siamese.

The height of Vientiane's success was probably in the years after it became the Lan Xang capital in the mid-16th century. (King Setthathirat moved the capital of the Lan Xang kingdom from the city now known as Luang Prabang.) Several of Vientiane's wats were built following this shift and the city became a major centre of Buddhist learning.

It didn't last. Periodic invasions by the Burmese, Siamese and Chinese, and the eventual division of the Lan Xang kingdom took their toll on the city.

It wasn't until the Siamese installed Chao Anou (a Lao prince who had been educated in Bangkok) on the throne in 1805 that the city received an overdue makeover. Chao Anou's public works included Wat Si Saket (p94), built in 1815.

Unfortunately, Chao Anou's attempts to assert Lao independence over the Siamese (see p31) resulted in the most violent and destructive episode in Vientiane's history.

In 1828 the Siamese defeated Chao Anou's armies and wasted no time in razing the city and carting off much of the population. Wat Si Saket was the only major building to survive, and the city was abandoned.

In 1867, French explorers arrived but it wasn't until late in the century, after Vientiane had been made capital of the French protectorate, that serious reconstruction began. A simple grid plan was laid out for the city and a sprinkling of colonial-style mansions and administrative buildings

emerged. However, Vientiane was always low in the French order of Indochinese priorities, as the modest building program testifies.

In 1928 the 'city' was home to just 9000 inhabitants – many of them Vietnamese administrators brought in by the French – and it wasn't until the end of WWII that Vientiane's population began to grow with any vigour. It was a growth fed primarily by Cold War dollars, with first French and later American advisors arriving in a variety of guises.

After a couple of coups d'état in the politically fluid 1960s, Vientiane had by the early '70s become a city where almost anything went. Its few bars were peopled by an almost surreal mix of spooks and correspondents, and the women who served them.

Not surprisingly, things changed with the arrival of the Pathet Lao (PL) in 1975. Nightclubs filled with spies were the first to go and Vientiane settled into a slumber punctuated by occasional unenthusiastic concessions to communism, including low level collectivisation and an initial crack-down on Buddhism. These days the most noticeable leftovers from the period are some less-than-inspired Soviet-style buildings. Things picked up in the 1990s and in recent years Vientiane has seen a relative explosion of construction, road redevelopment and vehicular traffic.

ORIENTATION

Vientiane curves along the Mekong River following a meandering northwest-southeast axis, with the central district of Muang Chanthabuli at the centre of the bend. Most of the government offices, hotels, restaurants and historic temples are located in Chanthabuli, near the river. Some old French colonial buildings and Vietnamese-Chinese shophouses remain, set alongside newer structures built according to the rather boxy social realist school of architecture.

Wattay International Airport (Map pp88–9) is around 4km northwest of the centre. The Northern Bus Station (Map pp88–9), where long-distance services to points north begin and end, is about 2km northwest of the centre. The Southern Bus Station deals with most services heading south and is 8km northeast of the centre on Rte 13. The border with Thailand at the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge (Map p117) is 19km southeast of the city.

Street signs are limited to major roads and the central, more touristy part of town. Where they do exist, the English and French designations vary (eg route, *rue*, road and avenue) but the Lao script always reads *thanôn* (Th). Therefore, when asking directions it's always best to just use *thanôn*.

The parallel Th Setthathirat (which is home to several famous temples) and Th Samsenthai are the main streets in central Vientiane. Heading northwest they both eventually lead to Th Luang Prabang and Rte 13 north. In the other direction they run perpendicular to and eventually cross Th Lan Xang, a major boulevard leading from the presidential palace past Talat Sao (Morning Market) to Patuxai (Victory Gate) and, after turning into Th Phon Kheng, to Rte 13 south and the Southern Bus Station.

The *meuang* of Vientiane are broken up into *bâan* (Ban), which are neighbourhoods or villages associated with local wats. Wattay International Airport, for example, is in Ban Wat Tai – the area in which Wat Tai is located.

Maps

After years in which Vientiane seemed to be the world centre of 'advertising maps' – at one stage there were nine different 3D-style maps, all with a relaxed approach to details like scale and perspective – the excellent *Hobo Maps Vientiane* (US\$2) has arrived. It's big and unwieldy but has all the main sights,

hotels and restaurants marked, though the north point is way off; get it at bookshops and Phimphone Markets (see p109).

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Vientiane has Monument Books selling pricey new books and several other shops that stock mainly secondhand novels in English and French, travel guides, maps and years-old reports by development organisations.

Kosila Bookshop 1 (Map p92; ☎ 020-2240964; Th Chanta Khumman; ☎ 9am-5pm)

Monument Books (Map p92; ☎ 243708; 124 Th Nokeo Khumman; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat & Sun) Big range of books on Asia, plus maps, magazines and postcards.

Vientiane Book Center (Map p92; ☎ 212031; laobook@hotmail.com; Th Pangkham; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4.30pm Sat)

Cultural Centres

Centre Culturel et de Coopération Linguistique (Map p92; ☎ 215764; www.ambafrance-laos.org; Th Lan Xang; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri & 9.30am-noon Sat) The French Centre, as it's known, has a busy schedule of movies, musical and theatrical performances, a library and French and Lao language classes.

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 195)

Fire (☎ 190)

Police (☎ 191)

Tourist Police (Map p92; ☎ 251128; Lan Xang Ave)

VIENTIANE IN...

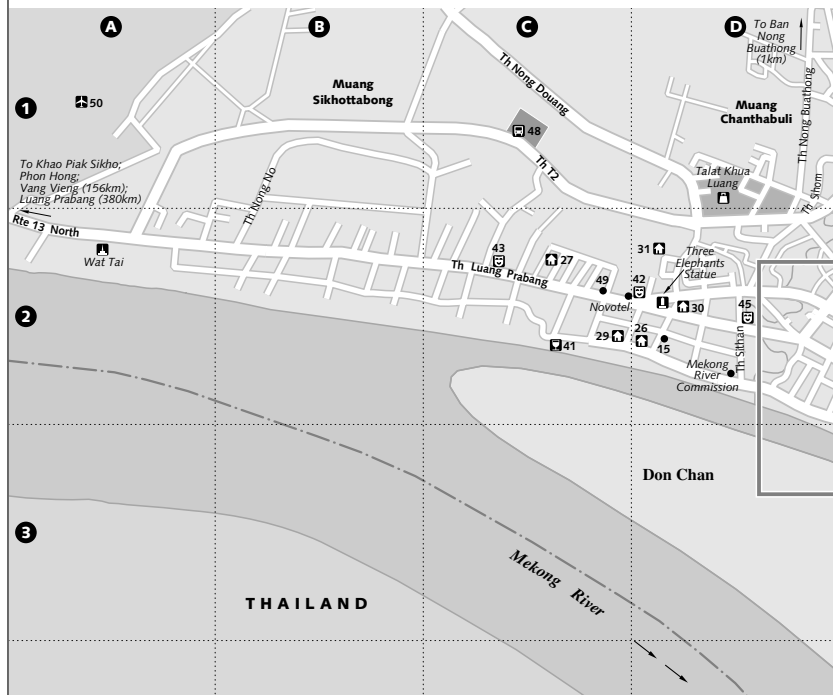
Two Days

Start with Lao coffee and the *Vientiane Times* before making your way to **Patuxai** (p97) to begin the **Monument to Mekong Walking Tour** (p100). This will take you through most of Vientiane's main sights, including **Wat Si Saket** (p94), **Haw Pha Kaeo p95** and **Talat Sao** (p113). On day two check out the myriad concrete Buddhas and Hindu deities at **Xieng Khuan** (p98). On the way back stop at **Pha That Luang** (p91) for great afternoon photos. Enjoy a fine French meal at **Le Côte D'Azur Restaurant** (p107) and finish it off with drinks at **Chicago** (p110) and/or the **Spirit House** (p110).

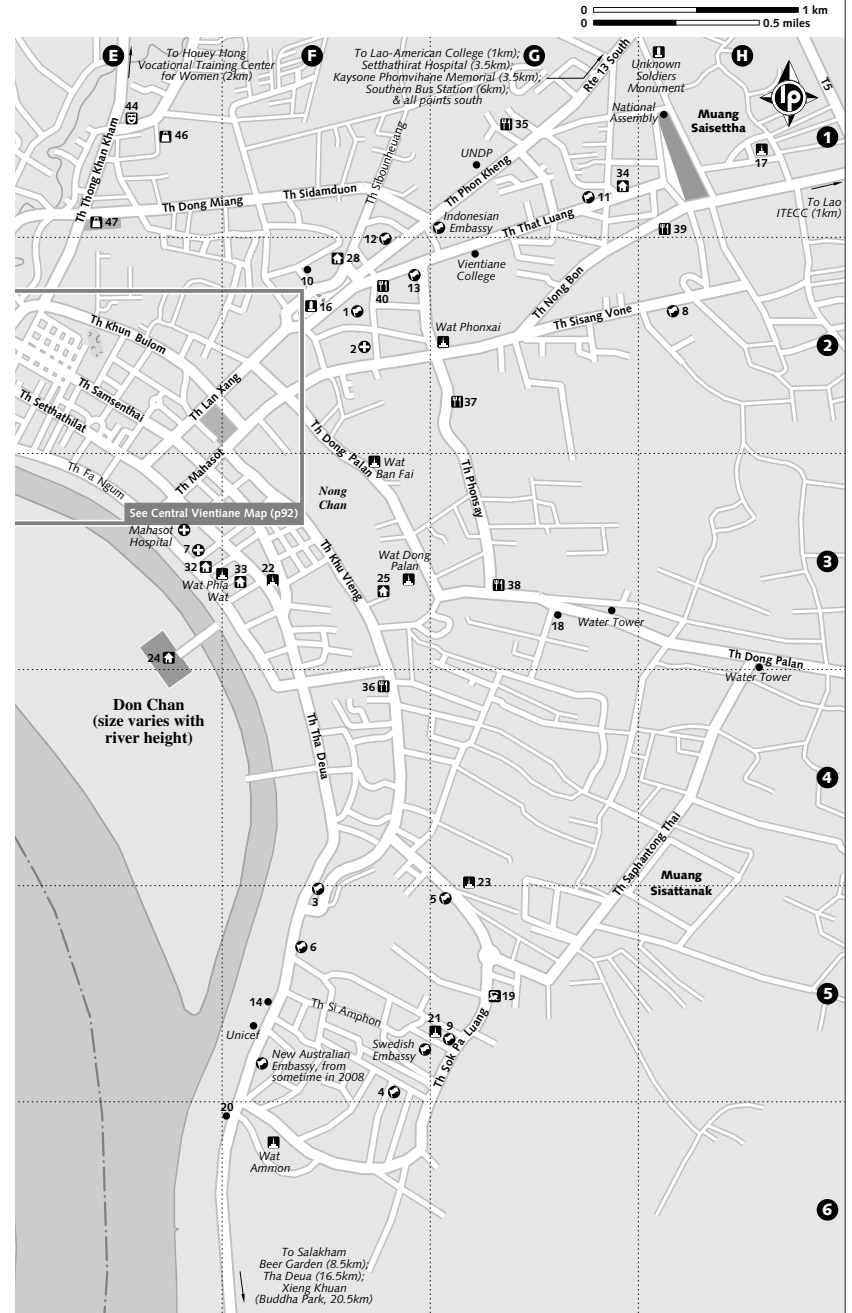
Four Days

Start day three at the **Lao National Museum** (p97) then hire a bike and pedal out to **Bunmala Restaurant** (p106) for an authentic Lao lunch. Keep on to **Wat Sok Pa Luang** (p96) for a herbal sauna and massage. Enjoy sunset at **Sala Sunset Khounta** (p110) before adjourning to **On The Rock Pub** (p111) for rock, Lao style. On day four just take it easy in the morning before unleashing yourself on the **handicraft and textile shops** (p112) of Th Nokeo Khumman.

VIENTIANE



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Internet Access

There are several places on Th Setthathirath between Nam Phu (Phu River) and Th Nokeo Khumman, and on Th Nokeo Khumman itself. Rates range from US\$0.60 to US\$1.20 an hour. Most have international telephone facilities for about US\$0.20 a minute.

A1 Computer (Map p92; Th Setthathirath; ☎ 8.30am-11.30pm)

PiaNet Online (Map p92; Th Setthathirath; ☎ 8.30am-11pm) Sells prepaid internet cards for dial-up access, US\$5/10/20.

Society Internet (Map p92; Th Samsenthai; ☎ 9am-9pm)

Star-Net Internet (Map p92; Th Nokeo Khumman; ☎ 7.30am-11pm)

Laundry

Most hotels and guesthouses offer laundry services. Otherwise, several laundries and dry-cleaners are on Th Samsenthai just east of Th Chao Anou. Typical rates are about US\$1 per kg.

Media

Laos's only English-language newspaper is the government-run *Vientiane Times* (US\$0.40), which carries the occasional critical piece in its six editions a week. The What's On page and bus-fare table are handy. French-speakers should look for *Le Renovateur*.

Medical Services

HOSPITALS

Vientiane's medical facilities can leave a lot to be desired, so for anything serious make a break for the border and the much more sophisticated hospitals in Thailand. **Aek Udon International Hospital** (☎ 0066-4234 2555; www.aekudon.com) can dispatch an ambulance to take you to Udon Thani. Less serious ailments can be dealt with in Vientiane.

In Vientiane, try:

Australian Embassy Clinic (Map pp88-9; ☎ 413603; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) For nationals of Australia, Britain, Canada, PNG and NZ only, this clinic's Australian doctor treats minor problems by appointment; it doesn't have emergency facilities.

International Clinic (Map pp88-9; ☎ 214021-2; Th Fa Ngum; ☎ 24hr) Part of the Mahasot Hospital, probably the best place for not-too-complex emergencies. Some English-speaking doctors.

Setthathirath Hospital (☎ 450197, 413720) A Japanese-funded overhaul means this hospital, located northeast of the city, is relatively well equipped.

PHARMACIES

Vientiane's better pharmacies are on Th Nong Bon near Talat Sao.

Pharmacie Kamsaat (Map p92; ☎ 212940; Th Nong Bon; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm) English and French spoken.

Pharmacie Sengthong Osoth (Map p92; ☎ 213732; Th Nong Bon; ☎ 8am-8pm) English, French, Chinese, Vietnamese and Thai spoken.

Money

For cash, licensed moneychanging booths can be found in Talat Sao and a few other locations around town. You can also change at various shops, hotels or markets for no commission but at poor rates. The unofficial moneychangers hanging out near Talat Sao have particularly good rates but count your money carefully. See p310 for more information.

Banks listed here change cash and travellers cheques and issue cash advances against Visa and MasterCard. A couple also have ATMs that work with foreign cards, but it's often cheaper to get a cash advance manually; see p309 for the low-down. All are open 8.30am to 3.30pm Monday to Friday unless otherwise stated.

Bank of Ayudhya (Map p92; ☎ 214575; 79/6 Th Lan Xang)

Banque pour le Commerce Extérieur Lao (BCEL; Map p92; ☎ 213200; cnr Th Pangkham & Th Fa Ngum; ☎ 8.30am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 3pm Sat & Sun) Best rates. Longest hours. Exchange booth on Th Fa Ngum and ATM attached to the main building.

Joint Development Bank (Map p92; ☎ 213535; 75/1-5 Th Lan Xang) Usually charges the lowest commission on cash advances. Also has an ATM.

Lao-Viet Bank (Map p92; ☎ 214377; Th Lan Xang)

Siam Commercial Bank (Map p92; ☎ 227306; 117 Th Lan Xang)

Thai Military Bank (Map p92; ☎ 216486; cnr Th Samsenthai & Th Khun Bulom)

Post

Post, Telephone & Telegraph (PTT; Map p92; cnr Th Lan Xang & Th Khu Vieng; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat & Sun) Come here for post restante.

Telephone & Fax

International calls can be made from most internet cafés (see left). Local calls can be made from any hotel lobby, often for free.

Lao Telecom Numphu Centre (Map p92; ☎ 214470; Th Setthathirath; ☎ 9am-7pm) Has fax and international-call facilities. Competition from internet cafés has seen rates slashed to US\$0.20 a minute, or

US\$0.10 for domestic calls. When we went staff suggested the office might soon be closed on weekends due to lack of interest.

Tourist Information

Between Talat Sao and Patuxai, the ground-floor office of the **Lao National Tourism Administration** (LNTA; Map p92; ☎ 212251; www.tourismlaos.gov.la, www.ecotourismlaos.com; Th Lan Xang; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) has finally become a place that is really worth a visit. The disorganised chaos of the past has been replaced by an attractive, easy-to-use room with descriptions of each province and what you'll find there. When we visited staff spoke English and were able to answer most of our questions. You can pick up brochures and some regional maps (US\$1, though not always in stock), and staff can arrange trips to Phu Khao Khuay NPA for you (no charge).

Travel Agencies

For a list of reputable agencies able to organise tours, see p330. Central Vientiane has plenty of agencies that can book air tickets and in some cases Thai train tickets, including the following:

A-Rasa Tours (Map p92; ☎ 213633; www.laos-info.com; Th Setthathirath; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Sat) Happy to answer questions, runs some tours. Beside Lao Travelers Café.

Green Discovery (Map p92; ☎ 251564, 223022; www.greendiscoverylaos.com; Th Setthathirath) Large range of tours offered as well as normal travel agent services. Good reputation.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

By international standards Vientiane has a very low crime rate, but readers' reports and local anecdotes suggest there's an increasing risk of getting mugged. Be especially careful around the BCEL Bank on the riverfront where bag-snatchers, usually a two-man team with a motorbike, have been known to strike; common sense should be an adequate defence. Violent crime against visitors is extremely rare.

The repaving of most streets in the centre of town has improved the situation, but manhole covers seem to be given less importance here than you might be used to and at the time of writing there were still more than enough stormwater drains and open sewers big enough to swallow you – a thoroughly shitty end to any day.

All businesses in Vientiane are supposed to close by 11.30pm, though some stay open an

extra hour or so. It's not dangerous to be out beyond midnight but you could be annoyed by military types if you're away from central Vientiane in an area where *falang* (Westerners) are seldom seen. If you are somewhere you shouldn't be (around the airport, for example) you might be escorted back to your hotel.

SIGHTS

With urban sprawl a fairly recent phenomenon in Vientiane it's no surprise that the bulk of sights are concentrated in a small area in the centre of the city. Except for Xieng Khuang (Buddha Park), all sights are easily reached by bicycle and, in most cases, on foot. Most wats welcome visitors after the monks have collected alms in the morning until about 6pm.

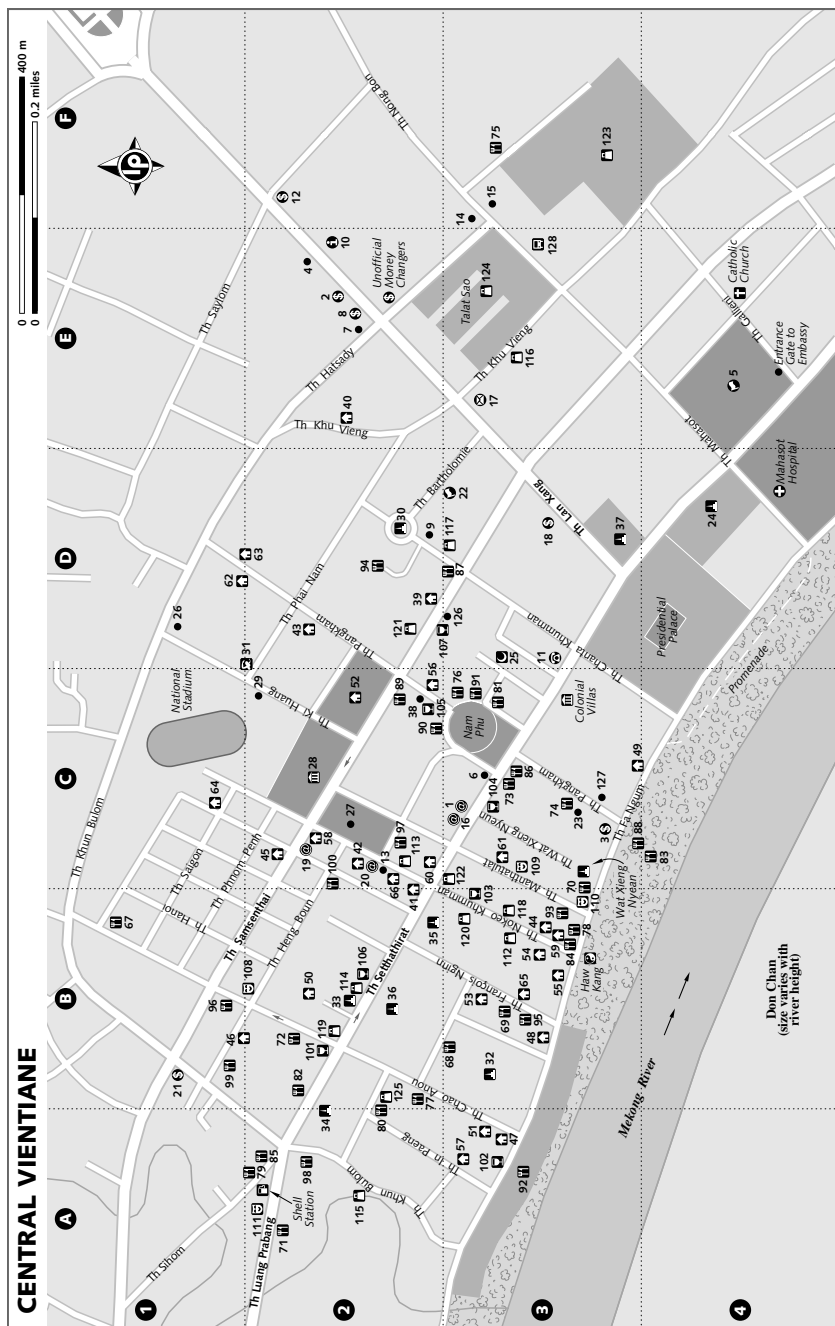
Pha That Luang

ພະທາດຫລວງ

The most important national monument in Laos, **Pha That Luang** (Great Sacred Reliquary or Great Stupa; Map pp88-9; admission US\$0.20; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Tue-Sun) is a symbol of both the Buddhist religion and Lao sovereignty. Its full official name, Pha Chedi Lokajulamani, means World-Precious Sacred Stupa, and an image of the main stupa appears on the national seal and in countless other places. Legend has it that Ashokan missionaries from India erected a *thât* or reliquary stupa here to enclose a piece of the Buddha's breastbone as early as the 3rd century BC. Excavations have found no trace of this, but did find suggestion of a Khmer monastery that might have been built near here between the 11th and 13th centuries AD.

When King Setthathirath moved the Lan Xang capital from Luang Prabang to Vientiane in the mid-16th century, he ordered the construction of Pha That Luang in its current form on the site of the Khmer temple. Construction began in AD 1566 and in succeeding years four wats were built around the stupa, one on each side. Only two remain today, **Wat That Luang Neua** to the north and **Wat That Luang Tai** to the south. Wat That Luang Neua is the residence of the Supreme Patriarch (Pha Sangkhalat) of Lao Buddhism. The main building is a reconstruction from the early 20th century.

The monument looks almost like a gilded missile cluster from a distance. Surrounding it is a high-walled cloister with tiny windows, added by King Anouvong in the early 19th century as a defence against invaders. Even more aggressive-looking than the thick walls



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are the pointed stupas themselves, which are built in three levels (see Viewing Pha That Luang, p94).

In 1641 Gerrit van Wuysthoff, an envoy of the Dutch East India Company, visited Vientiane and was received by King Suriya Vongsa in a reportedly magnificent ceremony at Pha That Luang. The Lan Xang kingdom was at its peak at this time and

van Wuysthoff was deeply impressed by the 'enormous pyramid, the top of which was covered with gold leaf weighing about a thousand pounds'.

Unfortunately, the glory of Lan Xang and Pha That Luang was only to last another 60 years or so. Repeated damaging assaults were carried out during the 18th century by invading Burmese and Siamese armies. Then, in

VIEWING PHA THAT LUANG

Each level of Pha That Luang has different architectural features in which Buddhist doctrine is encoded; visitors are supposed to contemplate the meaning of these features as they walk around. The first level is an approximately square base measuring 68m by 69m that supports 323 *siimáa* (ordination stones). It represents the material world, and also features four arched *hǎw wái* (prayer halls), one on each side, with short stairways leading to them and beyond to the second level.

The second level is 48m by 48m and is surrounded by 120 lotus petals. There are 288 *siimáa* on this level, as well as 30 small stupas symbolising the 30 Buddhist perfections (*páalamii sám-síp thát*), beginning with alms-giving and ending with equanimity.

Arched gates again lead to the next level, a 30m by 30m square. The tall central stupa, which has a brick core that has been stuccoed over, is supported here by a bowl-shaped base reminiscent of India's first Buddhist stupa at Sanchi. At the top of this mound the superstructure, surrounded by lotus petals, begins.

The curvilinear, four-sided spire resembles an elongated lotus bud and is said to symbolise the growth of a lotus from a seed in a muddy lake bottom to a bloom over the lake's surface, a metaphor for human advancement from ignorance to enlightenment in Buddhism. The entire *thát* was regilded in 1995 to celebrate the Lao PDR's 20th anniversary, and is crowned by a stylised banana flower and parasol. From ground to pinnacle, Pha That Luang is 45m tall.

1828, a Siamese invasion ransacked and depopulated Vientiane to such an extent that Pha That Luang remained abandoned, and eventually dismantled by treasure seekers, until it was (badly) restored by the French in 1900.

That restoration left the stupa looking a bit too chunky and none too attractive, at least that's what the locals thought. In a victory of town planning over history, the orientation was changed so that the main entrance faced south, rather than east. This meant the wide new Th That Luang ran straight up to the stupa, but didn't fit with traditional Buddhist doctrine, which has most temples and religious monuments facing east.

In fairness to the French, they did try to fix it. Changing the orientation back was clearly too hard, but between 1931 and 1935 a French university department dismantled the stupa and rebuilt it in the original Lao-style lotus-bud shape. For guidance they used the drawings of French explorer and architect Louis Delaporte, who had stumbled on the abandoned and overgrown Pha That Luang in 1867 and made a number of detailed sketches of the monument.

Pha That Luang is about 4km northeast of the centre of Vientiane at the end of Th That Luang. Facing the compound is a statue of King Setthathirath. The temple is the site of a major festival, held in early November (see p101).

Wat Si Saket

ວັດສີສະເກດ

Built between 1819 and 1824 by Chao Anou, **Wat Si Saket** (Wat Sisaketsata Sahatsaham; Map p92; cnr Th Lan Xang & Th Setthathirath; admission US\$0.50; ☞ 8am-noon & 1-4pm) is believed to be Vientiane's oldest surviving temple. And it shows; this beautiful temple-cum-national museum is in dire need of a face-lift.

Chao Anou, who was educated in the Bangkok court and was more or less a vassal of the Siamese state, had Wat Si Saket constructed in the early Bangkok style but surrounded it with a thick-walled cloister similar to – but much smaller than – the one that surrounds Pha That Luang (p91). The stylistic similarity to their own wats might have motivated the Siamese to spare this monastery when they crushed Chao Anou's rebellion (p31), even as they razed many others. The French restored the temple in 1924 and again in 1930.

In spite of the Siamese influence, Wat Si Saket has several unique features. The interior walls of the cloister are riddled with small niches that contain over 2000 silver and ceramic Buddha images. Over 300 seated and standing Buddhas of varying sizes and materials (wood, stone, silver and bronze) rest on long shelves below the niches, most of them sculpted or cast in the characteristic Lao style. Most of the images are from 16th- to 19th-century Vientiane but a few hail from 15th- to 16th-century Luang Prabang.

Along the western side of the cloister is a pile of Buddhas that were damaged during the 1828 Siamese-Lao war. And in the *sim* (ordination hall) a slightly damaged Khmer-style Naga Buddha – which depicts the Buddha seated on a coiled cobra deity (*naga*), sheltered by the *naga's* multiheaded hood – is also on display just in front of the main seated Buddha; it is believed to date from the 13th century and was brought from a nearby Khmer site.

The *sim* is surrounded by a colonnaded terrace in the Bangkok style and topped by a five-tiered roof. The interior walls bear hundreds of Buddha niches similar to those in the cloister, as well as beautiful – but decaying – Jataka murals depicting stories of the Buddha's past lives. Portions of the Bangkok-style murals are unrestored 1820s originals, while others are a 1913 restoration.

The flowered ceiling was inspired by Siamese temples in Ayuthaya, which were in turn inspired by floral designs from Versailles. At the rear interior of the *sim* is an altar with several more Buddha images, bringing the total number of Buddhas at Wat Si Saket to about 7000 – though we didn't count them ourselves. The standing Buddha to the left on the upper altar is said to have been cast to the same physical proportions as Chao Anou. The large, gilt wood candle stand in front of the altar is thought to be an original, carved in 1819.

On the veranda at the rear of the *sim* is a 5m-long wooden trough carved to resemble a *naga*. This is the *háang song nám pha* (image-watering rail), which is used during Lao New Year to pour water over Buddha images for ceremonial cleansing.

To the far left of the entrance to the cloister, facing Th Lan Xang, is a raised *hǎw tǎi* (Tripitaka library) with a Burmese-style roof. The scriptures once contained here are now in Bangkok.

Haw Pha Kao

ຫ້າພະແກ້ວ

Once a royal temple built specifically to house the famed Emerald Buddha, **Haw Pha Kao** (Map p92; Th Setthathirath; admission US\$0.50; ☞ 8am-noon & 1-4pm) is today a national museum of religious art. It is about 100m southeast of Wat Si Saket.

According to the Lao, the temple was originally built in 1565 by command of King Set-

thathirath, who on inheriting the Lan Xang throne moved the capital from Luang Prabang to Vientiane and brought with him the so-called Emerald Buddha (Pha Kao in Lao, which means 'Jewel Buddha Image' – the image is actually made of a type of jade). Wat Pha Kao also served as Setthathirath's personal place of worship. Following a skirmish with the Lao in 1779, the Siamese stole the Emerald Buddha and installed it in Bangkok's Wat Phra Kaew. Later, during the Siamese-Lao war of 1828, Vientiane's Wat Pha Kao was razed.

The temple was finally rebuilt with French help between 1936 and 1942, supposedly following the original plan exactly. However, the 'original' 16th-century plan looks nothing like its contemporaries, instead bearing an uncanny resemblance to 19th-century Bangkok-style *sim*. The floor and the main wooden door at the southern end – with its angels carved in high relief that are reminiscent of Angkorean apsarās – are notable survivors of the original remains.

These aside, today's Haw Pha Kao is impressive mainly for its size. The rococo ornamentation that runs up and down every door, window and base looks unfinished. But some of the best examples of Buddhist sculpture found in Laos are kept here, with a dozen or so prominent sculptures displayed along the surrounding terrace. These include Dvaravati-style stone Buddha from between the 6th and 9th centuries; several bronze standing and sitting Lao-style Buddhas – including the 'Calling for Rain' (standing with hands at his sides), 'Offering Protection' (palms stretched out in front) and 'Contemplating the Tree of Enlightenment' (hands crossed at the wrist in front) poses; and a collection of inscribed Lao and Mon stelae. Most of the Lao bronzes are missing their *usnisā* (flame finial).

Inside the *sim* are more Buddhist sculptures (including a wooden copy of the Pha Bang), some Khmer stelae, various wooden carvings, palm-leaf manuscripts and a bronze frog drum. A 17th-century bronze 'Calling for Rain' Buddha, tall and lithe, is particularly beautiful; also unique is a 17th-century Vientiane-style bronze Buddha in the 'European pose' – with the legs hanging down as if seated on a chair. Attendants will point you to the most interesting pieces.

The *sim* is surrounded by a landscaped garden, which is also home to a single stone jar from the Plain of Jars.

Wat Ong Teu Mahawihan

ວັດອົງຕົ້ມະຫາວິຫານ

This **temple** (Temple of the Heavy Buddha; Map p92; Th Setthathirat) is one of the most important in Laos. It was originally built in the mid-16th century by King Setthathirat and is believed to occupy a site first used for religious purposes as far back as the 3rd century. But like almost every other temple in Vientiane it was destroyed in later wars with the Siamese, then rebuilt in the early 20th century. The Hawng Sangkhalat (Deputy Patriarch) of the Lao monastic order has his official residence here and presides over the Buddhist Institute, a school for monks who come from all over the country to study *dhamma* (the Buddha's teachings).

The temple's namesake is a 16th-century bronze Buddha, measuring 5.8m tall and weighing several tonnes, that sits in the rear of the *sim*, flanked by two standing Buddhas. This *sim* is famous for the wooden façade over the front terrace, a masterpiece of Lao carving.

Wat Si Muang

ວັດສີເມືອງ

The most frequently used grounds in Vientiane are those of **Wat Si Muang** (Map p92; nr of Th Setthathirat, Th Samsenthai & Th Tha Deua; ☎ 6am-7pm daily, until 10pm on special days), the site of the *lák meuang* (city pillar/phallus), which is considered the home of the guardian spirit of Vientiane (see No Sacrifice Too Great, below).

The *sim* (destroyed in 1828 and rebuilt in 1915) was constructed around the *lák meuang*, which now forms the centre of the altar. The pillar itself is believed to date from the Khmer period, indicating the site

has been used for religious purposes for more than 1000 years. Today it is wrapped in sacred cloth, and in front of it is a carved wooden stele with a seated Buddha in relief.

Several other Buddha images surround the pillar, including one partially damaged image that sits on a cushion. This rather melted-looking seated stone Buddha survived the 1828 inferno and locals believe it has the power to grant wishes or answer troubling questions. The practice is to lift it off the pillow three times while mentally phrasing a question or request. If your request is granted, then you are supposed to return later with an offering of bananas, green coconuts, flowers, incense and candles (usually two of each). This is why so many platters of fruit, flowers and incense sit around the *sim*.

Behind the *sim* is a crumbling laterite *jehdii* (stupa), almost certainly of Khmer origin. Devotees deposit broken deity images and pottery around the stupa's base so the spirits of the stupa will 'heal' the bad luck created by the breaking of these items. In front of the *sim* is a little public park with a statue of King Sisavang Vong (1904-59).

Wat Sok Pa Luang

ວັດໂສກປາຫລວງ

In a shaded, almost semirural setting that is entirely in keeping with its name (*wat paa* means 'forest temple'), **Wat Sok Pa Luang** (Wat Mahaphutthawongsa Pa Luang Pa Yai; Map pp88-9; Th Sok Pa Luang) is famous for its herbal saunas and expert massage. The masseurs are usually lay people who reside at the temple. After a relaxing sauna, you can take herbal tea on the

veranda, then opt for a massage. You're not supposed to wash away your accumulated perspiration for two or three hours afterwards to allow the herbs to soak into your pores. A few women have commented that some masseurs may cover more territory than is comfortable. The sauna (US\$1) and massage (US\$2) operate from 1pm to 7pm daily. Nearby **Wat Si Amphon** (Map pp88-9; Th Si Amphon) also does herbal saunas.

Wat Sok Pa Luang is also known for its course of instruction in *vipassana* (Lao *vipassanāa*), a type of Buddhist meditation that involves careful mind-body analysis. See p101 for details.

Taxi, jumbo (motorcycle taxi) and tuk-tuk drivers all know how to get to Wat Sok Pa Luang. If you're travelling by car or bicycle, take Th Khu Vieng south past Talat Sao for about 2.5km until you come to a fairly major road on the left (this is Th Sok Pa Luang, but it's unmarked). Turn left here; the ornamented entrance to the wat is about 500m on the left. For Wat Si Amphon, go a few hundred metres further and turn right on Th Si Amphon.

Patuxai

ປະຕູໄຊ

Reminiscent of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, the **Patuxai** (Map pp88-9; Th Lan Xang; admission US\$0.30; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat-Sun) is Vientiane's most prominent monument. The name is approximately equivalent to Arch (*pátuu*, also translated as 'door' or 'gate') of Triumph (*xái*, from the Sanskrit *jaya* or 'victory'), but unlike its Parisian namesake the Patuxai boasts four, rather than two, archways. It was built in the 1960s with US-purchased cement that was supposed to have been used for the construction of a new airport. Hence it's sometimes called 'the vertical runway'.

From a distance, Patuxai looks much like its French source of inspiration. Up close, however, the Lao design is revealed. The bas-relief on the sides and the temple-like ornamentation along the top and cornices are typically Lao, though the execution is at times shoddy. Don't miss the painted description on the southwest corner, which in a few lines reflects both Laos's endearing honesty and naivety to 'First World' preoccupations like marketing. One sentence reads: 'From a closer distance, it appears even less impressive, like a monster of concrete'; talk about brutal honesty.

A stairway leads through two levels situated with souvenir T-shirts (seriously,

there are thousands) to the top levels, from where the views are grand. Photography is supposed to be banned from the top.

Patuxai is within walking distance of the town centre and work in recent years has transformed the surrounding field into the most popular park in Vientiane. It's a good place to soak up the atmosphere of modern Laos, with the Chinese-donated musical fountain a big hit in the late afternoon.

That Dam

ທາດດຳ

Sitting at the centre of a quiet roundabout near the centre of Vientiane, legend has it that the stupa now known as **That Dam** (Black Stupa; Map p92; Th Bartholomie) was once coated in a layer of gold. The gold is said to have been carted off by the Siamese during their pillaging of 1828, after which the stupa took the 'black' sobriquet in memory of the dastardly act. However, another myth is slightly at odds with this. It says That Dam is the abode of a dormant seven-headed dragon that came to life during the 1828 Siamese-Lao war and protected local citizens, though apparently not the stupa's gold...

Either way, the stupa appears to date from the Lanna or early Lan Xang period and is very similar to stupas in Chiang Saen, Thailand.

Lao National Museum

ພິພິດທະພັນປະຫວັດສາດແຫ່ງຊາດລາວ

With a limited collection of historical and revolutionary exhibits, the **Lao National Museum** (Map p92; ☎ 212461; Th Samsenthai; admission US\$1; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm) will never be confused with the Louvre. But it does serve to sum up the country's ongoing struggle to come to grips with its own identity, so it's worth a look.

The museum is housed in a large administrative building originally built as the colonial police commissioner's office in the 1920s. It became a museum in the 1990s and until recently it was known as the 'Lao Revolutionary Museum'. And while the museum is being slowly overhauled room by room, much of the collection retains an unmistakable revolutionary zeal. There are many artefacts and photos from the Pathet Lao's lengthy struggle for power, as well as enough historic weaponry to arm all the extras in a Rambo film. Among the more notable exhibits are a chest expander once used by the founding father of communist Laos, Kayson Phommvihane; mundane items like rice baskets, spoons and even dried

NO SACRIFICE TOO GREAT

Legend has it that a group of sages selected the site for Wat Si Muang in 1563, when King Setthathirat moved his capital to Vientiane. Once the spot was chosen, a large hole was dug to receive the heavy stone pillar (probably taken from an ancient Khmer site nearby) that would become the *lák meuang* (city pillar). When the pillar arrived it was suspended over the hole with ropes. Drums and gongs were used to summon the townspeople to the area and everyone waited for a volunteer to jump in the hole as a sacrifice to the spirit.

Depending on who's relating it, the legend has several conclusions. What is common to all of them is that a pregnant woman named Sao Si leaps in and the ropes are released, killing her and in the process establishing the town guardianship. Variations include her leaping in upon a horse, and/or with a diminutive monk.

However, Lao scholars think that if there is any truth to this story it is likely to have occurred much earlier than Setthathirat's time, in the pre-Buddhist Mon or Khmer periods when human sacrifice was ritually practised...and that Sao Si's legendary leap might not have been her choice at all.

herbs used by prominent revolutionaries during the resistance; and a modest collection of industrial items produced by Laos during the '90s, such as a few generic pharmaceuticals.

While these things might not have you panting with expectation – and let's face it, individually they are as unexciting as they sound – the real value in visiting the museum is to compare these older rooms to those upgraded more recently. These emphasise cultural influences, traditional musical instruments, Khmer sandstone sculptures that illustrate the Khmer influence on Laos, and rooms that deal with other historical periods that have nothing to do with the communist victory. Whether consciously or not, it appears to reflect a slow move away from the hardline socialist ideals that the Pathet Lao fought for, and which dominated domestic policy in the 15 to 20 years after 1975, towards a more broad-based, nationalist view of history and national identity. Most exhibits are labelled with at least some English.

Lao National Culture Hall

ຫ້ວັດທະນະທຳແຫ່ງຊາດ

Opposite the Lao National Museum, and dwarfing it, is the monumentally proportioned **Lao National Culture Hall** (Map p92; Th Samsenthai). The outsized and ugly hall was built by the Chinese government in the late 1990s as a 'gift to the people of Laos'. It hosts occasional cultural events as varied as French cinema, Lao classical dance and even beauty pageants, but with no publicly available schedule of events you'll need to keep a close eye on the *Vientiane Times* for an announcement.

Kaysone Phomvihane Memorial

ຫໍພິພິດທະພັນແລະອະນຸສາວະລີໂກສອນພົມວິຫານ

Opened in 1995 to celebrate the late president's 75th birthday, the **Kaysone Phomvihane Memorial** (☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Tue-Sun), near Km 6 on Rte 13 south, serves as a tribute to Indochina's most pragmatic communist leader. The memorial is actually two jarringly different sites. Kaysone's old house is a model of modesty suggesting he might have lived in less luxury than any other world leader. In contrast the museum is a vast Vietnamese-style celebration of the cult of Kaysone, a cult he never encouraged. Visit the house first.

The relatively modest, American-built single-storey ranch house where Kaysone lived after the revolution is fascinating both because

of its history and that it remains virtually untouched since the great man died in 1992. The house is inside the former USAID/CIA compound, a self-contained headquarters known as 'Six Klicks City' because of its location 6km from central Vientiane. It once featured bars, restaurants, tennis courts, swimming pools, a commissary and assorted offices from where the Secret War (p38) was orchestrated. During the 1975 takeover of Vientiane, Pathet Lao forces ejected the Americans and occupied the compound. Kaysone lived here until his death.

A Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) guide will show you through the house, with Kaysone's half-empty bottles of Scotch, tacky souvenirs from the Eastern Bloc, white running shoes, notepads and original Kelvinator air-conditioners. Even the winter coats he wore on visits to Moscow remain neatly hanging in the wardrobe.

While the house is hard to find, the museum is impossible to miss, with its mega-sized bronze statue of Kaysone out front flanked by large sculptures in the Heroes of Socialism style, complete with members of various ethnic groups and a sportsman looking like a super-serious Superman. The building is a stark contrast, too, and is filled with a remarkably complete collection of memorabilia of both Kaysone and the Party. These include a mock-up of Kaysone's childhood home in Savannakhet, his desk from the French school he attended at Ban Tai and a model of a portion of 'Kaysone Cave' in Hua Phan Province, complete with revolver, binoculars, radio and other personal effects.

It's easy to cycle here or take any transport on Rte 13 south. For Kaysone's house, turn left just before the museum on Rte 13, turn left again just before the military entrance and follow the road another 800m or so, bending right, and stopping at a boom gate on the right. A shared tuk-tuk (US\$0.25) from Talat Sao will drop you outside the main memorial.

Xieng Khuan (Buddha Park)

ນະຄຸງຂຽວ

In a field by the Mekong River about 24km south of central Vientiane, **Xieng Khuan** (Buddha Park or Suan Phut; admission person US\$0.50, camera US\$0.50; ☎ 8am-4.30pm, sometimes longer) is a park full of Buddhist and Hindu sculpture that is a monument to one eccentric man's quite bizarre ambition.

Xieng Khuan was designed and built in 1958 by Luang Pu (Venerable Grandfather) Bunleua Sulilat, a yogi-priest-shaman who merged Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, mythology and iconography into a cryptic whole. Originally, Bunleua is supposed to have studied under a Hindu *rishi* (sage) who lived in Vietnam. Legend has it that their meeting was fortunate, to say the least, as while Bunleua was walking in the mountains he fell through a sinkhole and landed in the *rishi's* lap. As you do. Bunleua developed a large following in Laos and northeastern Thailand, and moved to Thailand around the time of the 1975 Revolution. In 1978 he established the similarly inspired Wat Khaek in Nong Khai, Thailand. He died in 1996.

The concrete sculptures at Xieng Khuan (which means 'Spirit City') are bizarre but compelling in their naive confidence. They include statues of Shiva, Vishnu, Arjuna, Avalokiteshvara, Buddha and numerous other deities, all supposedly cast by untrained artists under Luang Pu's direction.

The large pumpkin-shaped concrete monument in the grounds has three levels joined by interior stairways. The levels are said to represent hell, earth and heaven, and lead to the roof and panoramic views of the park.

A few food vendors offer fresh coconuts, soft drinks, beer, *ping kai* (grilled chicken) and *tam maak-hung* (spicy green papaya salad).

Xieng Khuan is a definite favourite among kids.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Bus 14 (US\$0.40, 24km, one hour) leaves the Talat Sao terminal every 15 or 20 minutes throughout the day and goes all the way to Xieng Khuan. Alternatively, charter a tuk-tuk (about US\$10 return, depending on your bargaining skills) or hop on a shared jumbo (US\$0.30) as far as the old ferry pier at Tha Deua and walk or take a *sāam-lāaw* (three-wheeled taxi) the final 4km to the park. Going by motorbike is popular.

ACTIVITIES Bowling

Vientiane's bowling alleys are a fun diversion popular among travellers and locals alike. Watching some of the local form is certainly entertaining, but we've also heard an evening's bowling rationalised as a chance to drink plenty of Beerlao while 'working it

off with a bit of exercise'. 'Exercise'? You be the judge.

Lao Bowling Centre (Map p92; ☎ 218661; Th Khun Bulom; per frame US\$17.20 before/after 7pm; ☎ 9am-midnight) A short stroll from town. Book ahead on weekends.

Vientiane Bowling Centre (Map pp88-9; ☎ 313823; 58/1 Th Tha Deua; per frame US\$0.40/0.60 before/after 8pm; ☎ 1-11pm)

Gyms & Aerobics

There is a free aerobics session on the riverfront just east of Haw Kang most weekend afternoons at about 5pm. Failing that, try: **Sengdara Fitness** (Map pp88-9; ☎ 414061; 5/77 Th Dong Palan; ☎ 6am-10pm) Vientiane's first Western-style mega-gym, with stacks of machines, sauna, pool, massage, aerobics and yoga classes, and a juice bar and restaurant. Visitors can buy a US\$6 day pass, which includes use of everything plus a one-hour massage – a very good deal. **Tai-Pan Hotel** (Map p92; ☎ 216906; 22/3 Th François Nginn; per visit US\$4) Small fitness room and sauna; central location.

Hash House Harriers

The **Vientiane Hash House Harriers** (www.laohash.com) welcome runners to their two weekly hashes. The Saturday hash is the more challenging run and starts at 3.45pm from Nam Phu. It's followed by food and no shortage of Beerlao. Monday's easier run starts at 5pm from varying locations – look for maps at the Scandinavian Bakery (p105) or Asia Vehicle Rentals (p328), where owner **Joe Rumble** (☎ 020-5511293) is more than happy to help out.

Massage/Sauna

Good massage comes cheap in this town. **Papaya Spa** (Map pp88-9; ☎ 216550; www.papayaspa.com; ☎ 9am-9pm) In an old French villa west of town (follow the many signs), this is one of the classiest massage operations in town. Services include Lao massage (US\$6), Swedish oil massage (US\$12), facials, waxing, body scrubs, reflexology and sauna.

Wat Sok Pa Luang (Th Sok Pa Luang) The traditional Lao experience; see p96.

White Lotus Massage & Beauty (Map p92; ☎ 217492; Th Pangkham; ☎ 10am-10pm) Just north of Nam Phu; foot massage (US\$4), aromatherapy body massage (US\$10).

Shooting

At the southeast corner of the National Stadium a nondescript door leads into a **shooting**

range (Map p92; Th Ki Huang; ☎ 9am-5pm), where you can take aim at a paper target with a range of handguns and rifles. Prices start at US\$1.20 for five rounds with a 0.22 calibre handgun.

Swimming

There are several places in Vientiane where you can work on your strokes or simply take a cooling dip. The **Vientiane Swimming Pool** (Map p92; ☎ 020-5521002; Th Ki Huang; admission US\$1; ☎ 8am-7pm) is central and usually fine for swimming laps. Further afield, the 25m-long **Sokpaluang Swimming Pool** (Map pp88-9; ☎ 350491; Th Sok Pa Luang; adult/child US\$0.90/\$0.60; ☎ 8am-8pm Tue-Sun) in southeastern Vientiane also has a children's pool and changing rooms; while the pool at the **Australian Embassy Recreation Club** (AERC; Map pp88-9; ☎ 314921; Km 3 Th Tha Deua; ☎ 9am-8pm) is probably the best in town. Several hotels welcome nonguests, including the **Settha Palace Hotel** (Map p92; ☎ 217581; Th Pangkham; US\$6) with its decadent pool and surrounding bar.

MONUMENT TO MEKONG WALKING TOUR

This walking tour can be done on foot or bicycle. It covers about 6km and will take between four and six hours, depending on how often you stop, eat, drink and shop. When deciding how long to spend in Talat Sao, and where to stop, remember Wat Si Saket and Haw Pha Kaeo close between noon and 1pm.

To start, take a jumbo to **Patuxai** (1; p97) and climb this concrete edifice for unbeatable views of the city. From here, head back into

town along Th Lan Xang, a street sometimes (very) generously described as the 'Champs Elysées of the East'. Use this chance to stop in the **Lao National Tourism Administration (LNTA) office** (2; p91), pick up maps, brochures and perhaps even book a walk in the Phu Khao Khuay National Protected Area (NPA), before continuing to Vientiane's biggest market, **Talat Sao** (3; p113). Wander among textiles, TVs and pirated Thai pop to the **goldsmiths** (4), who craft their precious metal over a long line of fiery work benches at the southeast edge of the market. You could eat here at the fringes of the market, or head across to **Khoudin Vegetarian** (5; p109), on the northern side of the labyrinthine **Talat Khua Din** (6; p113), for some cheap but tasty fare before cutting through the market back to Th Khu Vieng.

Cross Th Lan Xang and walk past the high walls of the **US Embassy** (7; p306) to **That Dam** (8; p97), one of Vientiane's oldest Buddhist stupas. If you manage to pass here without being swallowed by the giant *naga* that lurks beneath, turn left (southwest) on Th Chanta Khumman and head for the Mekong. Turn left (east) down shaded Th Setthathirat and walk past the **Presidential Palace** (9), a vast beaux-arts-style chateau originally built to house the French colonial governor. After independence King Sisavang Vong (and later his son Sisavang Vatthana) of Luang Prabang used it as a residence when visiting Vientiane; these days it is used mainly on ceremonial occasions.

Diagonally opposite the palace is the ochre-painted **Wat Si Saket** (10; p94), with its

thousands of Buddha figures, and across the street is the striking **Haw Pha Kaeo** (11; p95), the national museum for religious objects.

Turn down Th Mahasot and cross Th Fa Ngum to reach a modest, brick-paved riverside promenade that has benches for the weary or the romantic and, during the rainy season, views of the river. As you head northwest you'll pass under more than 25 tall, wide-girthed teak trees, each of them at least 200 years old, and two very old banyan trees. As the riverfront opens out you'll come across **PVO** (12; p106), famous for serving Vientiane's best *khào jji páa-tê* (French baguette stuffed with Lao-style pâté, vegetables and dressings); and with a better riverfront view the **Mekong Riverside Restaurant** (13; p106), which serves decent Lao food and cold beer.

You could finish up here but if time permits kick on along Th Fa Ngum, passing several other eateries on the way, and turn up Th Nokeo Khumman, one of Vientiane's best shopping streets. Step left into **Wat Mixai** (14), with its Bangkok-style *sim* and heavy gates, flanked by two *nyak* (guardian giants). Walk through the wat and further along Th Setthathirat to **Wat Ong Teu Mahawihan** (15; p96). On the opposite side of the road is **Wat Hai Sok** (16) and its impressive five-tiered roof (nine if you count the lower terrace roofs), which is topped by an elaborate set of *nyáwt saw fáa* (roof-ridge spires).

Finally, Vientiane's temple district closes out with **Wat In Paeng** (17), which is famed for the artistry displayed in the *sim*'s stucco relief. Finish the day by heading down Th Khun Bulom to the Mekong, find a seat at one of the **riverside food and drink vendors** (18; p106) and watch the sun set with as much Beerlao and *ping kai* as you dare.

COURSES

Language Courses

For details on Vientiane language schools that teach Lao see p303.

Cooking

As well as being a good place to stay (p102), **Thongbay Guesthouse** (Map pp88-9; ☎ /fax 242292; www.thongbay-guesthouses.com; US\$10) offers cooking courses at 10am by appointment, involving a trip to the market, kitchen work and sampling your creation.

Weaving & Dyeing

You can learn how to dye textiles using natural pigments and then weave them on a traditional loom at the **Houey Hong Vocational Training Center for Women** (☎ 560006; hhtw@laotel.com; Ban Houey Hong; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat). The NGO group, run by a Lao-Japanese woman, established this centre north of Vientiane to train disadvantaged rural women in the dying art of natural dyeing and traditional silk-weaving practices. Visitors can look for free or partake in the dyeing process (US\$12, two hours, two stoles) or weaving (US\$15, whole day). You keep the fruits of your labour. One American woman spent a whole month learning to weave.

To get there, you can take the 33 bus from Talat Sao, getting off at the first gasoline stand past the Houey Hong market, then following a small road 200m west. Much simpler is calling the centre, which will collect and return you for US\$1. The centre's store in Vientiane is **True Colour** (Map p92; ☎ 214410; Th Setthathirat).

Vipassana Meditation

Every Saturday from 4pm to 5.30pm monks lead a session of sitting and walking meditation at **Wat Sok Pa Luang** (Th Sok Pa Luang); see p96. Both Lao and foreigners are welcome and there's no charge. There's usually a translator for the question period held after the meditation.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

You can rest assured that whatever the festival, celebrations in Vientiane will be as vigorous as anywhere in the country.

Bun Pha That Luang (That Luang Festival), usually in early November, is the largest temple fair in Laos. Apart from the religious fervour, the festival features a trade show and a number of carnival games. The festivities begin with a *wien thien* (circumambulation) around Wat Si Muang, followed by a procession to Pha That Luang, which is illuminated all night for a week. The festival climaxes on the morning of the full moon with the *ták bát* ceremony, in which several thousand monks from across the country receive alms food. That evening there's a final *wien thien* around Pha That Luang, with devotees carrying *paasàat* (miniature temples made from banana stems and decorated with flowers and other offerings).



Fireworks cap off the evening and everyone makes merit or merry until dawn.

Another huge annual event is **Bun Nam** (River Festival) at the end of *phansa* (the Buddhist rains retreat) in October, during which boat races are held on the Mekong River. Rowing teams from all over the country, as well as from Thailand, China and Myanmar, compete, and the riverbank is lined with food stalls, temporary discos, carnival games and beer gardens for three days and nights. Vientiane is jam-packed during Bun Nam, and given how far away the boat racing is and how difficult it is to find a vantage point, we think smaller towns like Vang Vieng and Muang Khong are better bets, though Muang Khong doesn't usually hold its festival until early December, around National Day.

SLEEPING

Vientiane's dozens of guesthouses and hotels range from US\$3-a-night cells to opulent colonial-era affairs where no luxury is spared. Most rooms, particularly those at the cheaper end, suffer from capital-city syndrome – meaning they cost more than they would elsewhere.

Most accommodation is walking distance to the centre of town and comparing options is easy enough on foot. Some midrange and top-end places are a little further away, but it's usually only a couple of kilometres. Accommodation is listed by price, from cheapest up, and divided into budget (up to US\$15), midrange (US\$16 to US\$50) and top end (more than US\$50).

Budget

Mixay Guesthouse (Map p92; ☎ 262210; 39 Th Nokeo Khumman; dm US\$2, r US\$3-5) This is one of Vientiane's cheapest guesthouses. The rooms are clean, but very basic, and the atmosphere is very laid-back. It's popular with backpackers, particularly Japanese. Some rooms have hot-water bathrooms (US\$5), many others have no windows – check a few.

RD Guesthouse (Map p92; ☎ 262112) This place, next door to Mixay, was being renovated when we passed but should be open when you read this. Expect a range of clean rooms at budget prices, and a good dorm.

Joe Guest House (Map p92; ☎ /fax 241936; 112 Th Fa Ngum; r US\$5-13) In a prime position on the riverfront, this place has simple but clean rooms, some with shared bathrooms, on top of an

open-fronted coffee shop. It's comfortable enough but the atmosphere can be a bit flat.

Soukchaleun Guest House (Map p92; ☎ 218723; soukchaleun_gh@yahoo.com; 121 Th Setthathirath; r US\$5-13; ☎) Popular Soukchaleun has simple, clean rooms with TV and fan or air-con. The atmosphere is pretty friendly, and the location great – front rooms have views over Wat Mixai.

Saysouly Guest House (Map p92; ☎ 218384; saysouly@hotmail.com; 23 Th Manthatalat; r US\$5-15; ☎) Two minutes' walk from Nam Phu, this three-storey place offers spacious, clean and quiet rooms with bathrooms (single/double US\$10/12) and fan rooms with shared bathrooms (US\$5/7). The atmosphere is relaxed and the balconies can be a good place to meet other travellers.

Syri 1 Guest House (Map p92; ☎ 212682; Th Saigon; r US\$6-10; ☎) The vintage Mercedes limo that has been parked in the garage for years somehow captures the essence of this laid-back, welcoming guesthouse in a quiet old house near the National Stadium – ageing comfort that's seen better days. Rooms range from an enormous studio to compact doubles, some without windows or bathroom. Don't confuse it with the Syri 2.

Chanta Guest House (Map p92; ☎ 243204; Th Setthathirath; r US\$6-15; ☎) The friendly Chanta has eight rooms, all different, in a converted French-era shophouse. The pick are the two with bathrooms and balconies (US\$8) overlooking Wat Mixai, though these can be frightfully noisy in the mornings. All rooms have satellite TV and are cleaned daily.

Soukxana Guesthouse (Map p92; ☎ 264114; soukxana_guest_house@yahoo.com; 13 Th Pangkham; r US\$8-15; ☎) Mr Si Mon has overhauled this place, a five-minute walk north of the centre, and given it a relaxed character. Rooms are clean and prices depend on the number of people in the room and whether rooms have air-con or an overhead fan. Recommended.

Orchid Guesthouse (Map p92; ☎ 252825; Th Fa Ngum; r US\$10-15; ☎) In the heart of the action along the riverfront, the Orchid's rooms are simple and clean but those without bathroom or air-conditioning (tw US\$10) are a bit pricey. It's welcoming.

Thongbay Guesthouse (Map pp88-9; ☎ /fax 242292; www.thongbay-guesthouses.com; r US\$10-15; ☎) About 1.5km west of town, the Thongbay is a large traditional house on a quiet, leafy block. The large, cool rooms have low beds and modern bathrooms. Fan-rooms and rooms without

bathrooms are also available. The English-speaking owners are passionate about Lao food and can organise cooking classes. Bikes and motorbikes can be hired.

Phonepaseuth Guest House (Map p92; ☎ 212263; www.phonepaseuth-gh.com; Th Pangkham; r US\$10-16; ☎) Centrally located near Nam Phu, this guesthouse has a range of rooms, some windowless, so look at several (Room 841 is the best at US\$16). The staff are a bit variable but its location keeps it popular. Rooms US\$15 and over come with breakfast for two.

Vayakorn Guest House (Map p92; ☎ 241911; vayakone@laotel.com; 91 Th Nokeo Khumman; s/d US\$12/15; ☎) Two blocks west of Nam Phu, Vayakorn's stylish and spacious rooms are a bargain. All have polished floors, satellite television and spotless bathrooms, though the singles are pretty small. Service is friendly and professional, and rooms are cleaned daily.

Douang Deuane Hotel (Map p92; ☎ 222301; DD_hotel@hotmail.com; Th Nokeo Khumman; s/tw/tr incl breakfast US\$12/15/23; ☎) The Douang Deuane is a soulless four-storey place but the combination of location, price, and simple but clean, medium-sized rooms with fridge, phone and satellite TV make it good value.

Also recommended:

Phornthip Guesthouse (Map p92; ☎ 217239; Th In Paeng; r US\$8-12; ☎) Quiet, family-run place with range of rooms – look at a few.

Praseuth Guest House (Map p92; ☎ 217932; 312 Th Samsenthai; r US\$5-6; ☎) Beside Xayoh Café, rooms are ultrabasic but clean and the management helpful. Upstairs shared bathroom is best.

Sabaidy Guest House (Map p92; ☎ 213929; sabaidy_gh@hotmail.com; Th Setthathirath; dm/d US\$2/4), and

Mixok Guest House (Map p92; ☎ 251606; Th Setthathirath; s/d/tr US\$3.50/4.50/5.40) are nearby and the cheapest places in town, though the price is the only reason you'd stay. **Mimi Guesthouse** (Map p92; ☎ 250773; 9 Th François Nginin; r US\$3-7) is another cheap but bearable option, and has a better atmosphere.

Midrange

Many midrange hotels accept Visa and MasterCard, but guesthouses probably won't.

GUESTHOUSES

Our pick Mali Namphu Guest House (Map p92; ☎ 215093; 114 Th Pangkham; r incl breakfast US\$11-17; ☎) A few metres north of Nam Phu, this attractive 40-room place is built around a pleasant

courtyard. The rooms vary in size and are not huge, but they are spotless, and the staff are both efficient and eager to please.

Dragon Lodge (Map p92; ☎ 250112; dragon lodge2002@yahoo.com; Th Samsenthai; r US\$12-30; ☎) Rooms here are spotless, comfortable and well kitted out, if a bit dark. Readers have written with mixed reviews, usually saying the chilled-out bar downstairs (which also has handy travel information) creates a fun atmosphere. However, others have reported nocturnal activities can get a bit noisy.

Vienthong Guest House (Map pp88-9; ☎ 212095; vienthongguesthouse@hotmail.com; 8 Th Fa Ngum; s/tw US\$13/16; ☎) In a quiet *soi* (street) along the northwest side of Wat Phia Wat, the Vienthong mixes laid-back service (ie slow but smiling) with good-value rooms, a quiet location and some trippy wat-style murals. The rooms in the newer building are actually mini-suites and are excellent value at US\$16.

Villa That Luang (Map pp88-9; ☎ 413370; ecolodge@laotel.com; 307 Th That Luang; s/d incl breakfast US\$15/18; ☎) Not far from Pha That Luang, the attractive and well-equipped rooms in this clean, comfortable guesthouse give it a real homely feel. The staff are wonderfully obliging and speak English, French and Japanese. Huge discounts are available for long stays and there's a free daily laundry service.

Nalinthone Guesthouse (Map pp88-9; ☎ 243659, 020-7720220; namrinntv@yahoo.com; r US\$15-20; ☎) This family-run, modern place on the river lacks a little in atmosphere but the clean and comfortable rooms are great value considering the position – the doubles with river views (US\$15) are the pick.

Lani I Guest House (Map p92; ☎ 214919; www.lanigh.laotel.com; 281 Th Setthathirath; s/d US\$25/35; ☎) Down a quiet lane just north of Wat Hai Sok in the centre of town, this colonial-era mansion has a tranquil, historic feel. High ceilings, antiques, Lao handicrafts and no TVs in the 12 rooms all contribute to the atmosphere. And it's that – the ambience – you're paying for here, not luxury; you can get much better equipped rooms for less elsewhere.

Villa Manoly (Map pp88-9; ☎ /fax 218907; manoly20@hotmail.com; r US\$25-40; ☎) In a quiet street off Th Fa Ngum between Wat Si Muang and the Mekong, the Manoly is a large French-era villa (plus a newer building) fronted by a large garden with a pool. The house is all hardwood and terrazzo floors, high ceilings and tasteful furnishings (look for the collection of antique

typewriters). Renovations at the time of writing should add to the polish of the place.

HOTELS

Riverside Hotel (Map p92; ☎ 244390; Th Nokeo Khumman; r US\$15-16; 🍷) At the cheap end of midrange, this new place offers a good location and well-equipped rooms, even if it's not going to win prizes for its charisma. Rooms here do vary a bit – some are quite dark – so ask to see a few, starting with the even numbered rooms on the 4th and 5th floors, which have Mekong views. VIP rooms are well worth the extra dollar if you're prepared to walk up all those stairs.

Asian Pavilion Hotel (Map p92; ☎ 213430; asianlao@loxinfo.co.th; 379 Th Samsenthai; s/d/ste US\$25/27/35; 🍷) While its claim to 'boutique' status might be overblown, the Asian Pavilion's ageing but comfortable rooms with satellite TV and minibar are decent value, especially when the routine hefty discount is thrown in. However, the history is more of a draw than the rooms. In its pre-Revolutionary incarnation, this was the Hotel Constellation (immortalised in John Le Carré's *The Honourable Schoolboy*) and was frequented by all sorts of secret-agent types during the '60s and '70s.

Day Inn Hotel (Map p92; ☎ 222985; dayinn@laopdr.com; 59/3 Th Pangkham; s/d/tw/tr incl breakfast US\$27/32/37/42; 🍷) The centrally located Day Inn is two renovated buildings with large, airy rooms with attractive rattan furnishings, TV, minibar and, in most rooms, large bathrooms with bathtubs. Try for a room in the smaller building (out the back) as some in the main building have outside bathrooms but are the same price. Price includes airport pick-up.

Chanthapanya Hotel (Map p92; ☎ 241541; www.chanthapanyahotel.com; 138 Th Nokeo Khumman; r incl breakfast US\$30-45; 🍷) Centrally located right opposite the Lao National Culture Hall, the Chanthapanya is a new, 31-room hotel that feels a lot like a modern midrange Thai hotel. And that's not a bad thing. The service is efficient and the rooms feel like Asia, though some are a bit cramped. In-room internet is free if you BYO laptop.

our pick Intercity Hotel (Map p92; ☎ 242843-4; www.laointerhotel.com; 24-25 Th Fa Ngum; r incl breakfast US\$30-70; 🍷) The Intercity's years-long makeover is complete and the rooms and atmosphere make this a great choice. Most rooms are huge, with high ceilings, pol-

ished wood floors, big windows and tasteful Asian furnishings and antique decorations. All front rooms have wonderful views of the Mekong. Suite 888 (US\$70) is the standout. Rear rooms are cheaper (\$30).

Lane Xang Hotel (Map p92; ☎ 214102; www.lanexanghotel.com; Th Fa Ngum; s/d incl breakfast US\$30/33, ste incl breakfast \$50-60; 🍷) Built in the 1960s on the site of a prominent Lan Xang-era wat, this hotel facing the Mekong was once the classiest place in town. It has long been popular with Lao government and military types and retains a certain socialist-era feel, something that is almost extinct elsewhere in Southeast Asia. All rooms have satellite TV and minibar, and other amenities include a bar, fitness centre, baby cots, sauna and the sort of nightclub that would have Karl Marx turning in his grave. However, even with the buffet breakfast the rooms are probably a touch overpriced.

our pick Hotel Beau Rivage Mekong (Map pp88-9; ☎ 243375; www.hbrm.com; s US\$34, d & tw incl breakfast US\$43-55; 🍷) Don't be put off by the preponderance of pink; this Australian-owned boutiqueish hotel on the banks of the Mekong is excellent value. All of the 16 rooms are stylishly laid out and furnished with a pink, blue or green theme, and those with Mekong views (US\$55), terrazzo baths and small balconies are best.

Lao Orchid Hotel (Map p92; ☎ 264134; www.lao-orchid.com; Th Chao Anou; d/ste incl breakfast US\$35-55; 🍷) Opened in mid-2006, the Lao Orchid is one of a new breed of tastefully designed hotels beginning to pop up in Vientiane. The 33 well-equipped rooms are fitted out with an emphasis on wood and silk, and the service is a step up from the standard. All rooms have a balcony, but ask for one at the front to take in the Mekong views. Good value.

Also recommended:

Chaleunxay Hotel (Map p92; ☎ 223407; Th Khu Vieng; r US\$10-18; 🍷) 60-room Vietnamese-run place where rooms get cheaper as you climb the five storeys. Fair value.

Hotel Lao (Map p92; ☎ 219280; hotellao@laotel.com; 43 Th Heng Boun; s/d US\$20/25; 🍷) In the heart of Chinatown; rooms have two beds, TV, fridge and some have balconies. Welcoming atmosphere.

Le Parasol Blanc (Map pp88-9; ☎ 215090; Th Sibounheuang; r incl breakfast US\$35; 🍷) Ageing but comfortable and quiet rooms set around a pool, near Patuxai. Popular with NGO workers. Cable TV and good service.

Top End

All Vientiane's top-end establishments are hotels, and all of these have business centres, pool and at least one restaurant. Major credit cards are accepted.

Tai-Pan Hotel (Map p92; ☎ 216906; www.travelao.com; 22/3 Th François Nginn; r incl breakfast US\$58-150; 🍷) Near the riverfront, the Tai-Pan is very reliable with good service and has become popular with people on business. The best rooms have balconies, so it's worth requesting one. Prices drop out of season.

Lao Plaza Hotel (Map p92; ☎ 218800, in Bangkok 0066-2653 9972; www.laoplazahotel.com; 63 Th Samsenthai; r US\$100-140, ste US\$250-450; 🍷) This busy 142-room complex, occupying an entire block east of the Lao National Museum, boasts four-star rooms with views across the city. Discounts are available if you book online and it pays to ask about breakfast when you book – they'll often included it.

Green Park Hotel (Map pp88-9; ☎ 264297; www.greenparkvientiane.com; Th Khu Vieng; r US\$115-380; 🍷) The Green Park doesn't have the spectacular location of the Don Chan Palace, but it's infinitely more classy. Set around a courtyard pool, the 34 rooms are attractive and details like wi-fi and bathtubs put it a cut above the rest. Good choice if you can afford it, though do book ahead.

Settha Palace Hotel (Map p92; ☎ 217581; www.setthapalace.com; 6 Th Pangkham; standard/deluxe r US\$143/155; 🍷) The Settha Palace is Vientiane's classic colonial hotel, and is probably the best hotel in town. It has been beautifully restored, with custom-made rosewood furniture, plank floors and landscaped gardens. The 29 tastefully appointed rooms have wi-fi (US\$6 per hour) and black-and-white Venetian marble bathrooms (the deluxe rooms with bathtubs), but don't expect acres of space. Drinking a cocktail from the poolside bar is a delight, as is the food from Le Belle Epoque restaurant (p107).

Don Chan Palace (Map pp88-9; ☎ 244288; www.donchanpalacelaopdr.com; off Th Fa Ngum; r US\$150-300; 🍷) On an island in the Mekong believed to be home to a powerful *naga*, this gargantuan monstrosity was built for the Asean conference in 2004, somehow managing to bypass Vientiane's seven-storey height limit. It's certainly luxurious and the views are great, but classy it is not.

APARTMENTS

If you're going to be here for a while check out these luxury apartment complexes: **Parkview Executive Suites** (Map pp88-9; ☎ 250888; www.laos-hotels.com; Th Luang Prabang; 🍷) and the French-run **Khunta Residence** (Map pp88-9; ☎ 251199; www.ahlao.com; 🍷).

EATING

When we arrived in Vientiane this time and heard an expat describe the city's eating as 'dollar for dollar the best in the world', we thought he'd had one too many happy pizzas. But the more we ate the more we thought that actually, he might be right. The ever-growing number of cafés, street vendors, beer gardens and restaurants now embrace much of the world's cuisine, and we can't think of anywhere with this range for so little money – it's hard to argue with US\$4 or \$5 for a meal that would probably cost five times as much at home.

Countless simple eateries serving fresh and tasty Lao dishes are complemented by establishments offering food as diverse as French provençale, sushi, Indian fusion and North Korean (with rock 'n' roll waitresses direct from Pyongyang!).

Bakeries & Delis

Scandinavian Bakery (Map p92; ☎ 215199; Nam Phu; pastries US\$0.80-1.50; 🍷) breakfast, lunch & dinner; 🍷) This long-running favourite on Nam Phu sells fresh bread, pies, sandwiches (US\$2), real Scandinavian-style pastries, cakes and ice cream. It has indoor and outdoor seating, and the upstairs room has satellite TV tuned to BBC or CNN.

BREAKING THE FAST

Most hotels (but not guesthouses) offer set 'American' breakfasts (known as ABF; two eggs, toast and ham or bacon) usually for between US\$1 and US\$4. Or you could get out on the streets and eat where the locals do. One popular breakfast is *khào jji paa-tè*, a split French baguette stuffed with Lao-style pâté (which is more like English or American luncheon meat than French pâté) and various dressings. These vendors also sell plain baguettes (*khào jji*) – there are several regular bread vendors around town, but especially on Th Heng Boun between Th Chao Anou and Th Khun Bulom.

Croissant d'Or (Map p92; ☎ 223741; 96 Th Nokeo Khumman; meals US\$2-3; ☺) The coffee, sandwiches and fine pastries make this petit French-run café a long-time favourite.

JoMa Bakery Café (Map p92; ☎ 215265; Th Setthathirat; meals US\$2-5; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Sat; ☺) JoMa is the first-choice lunch stop for many expatriate workers in Vientiane, partly because the large and stylish café is a good place for meetings but mainly because it does a brisk trade in delicious pastries, sandwiches, quiche, muesli, fruit, shakes and coffee. Wi-Fi is available for US\$2.50 an hour.

Swedish Pizza & Baking House (Map p92; ☎ 215705; Th Chao Anou; pizzas US\$3-5) More pizza place than bakery, with some pastries and arguably the best pizzas in Vientiane. Delivery available.

Noodles, Chinese & Vietnamese

Noodles of all kinds are popular in Vientiane, especially in the unofficial Chinatown area bounded by Th Heng Boun, Th Chao Anou, Th Khun Bulom and the western end of Th Samsenthai. The basic choice is *fôe* (a rice noodle that's popular throughout mainland Southeast Asia), *mii* (traditional Chinese egg noodle) and *khào pùn* (very thin wheat noodles with a spicy Lao sauce). *Fôe* and *mii* can be ordered as soup (eg *fôe nâm*), fried (eg *khùa fôe*) or dry-mixed in a bowl (eg *fôe hâng*), among other variations.

PVO (Map p92; ☎ 214444; Th Fa Ngum; meals US\$0.70-1.50; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner) After years selling the best *khào jji paa-tê* (Vietnamese-style paté baguettes) in town (US\$0.70/1.40 half/whole baguette) from their garage-style restaurant on Th Samsenthai, PVO has moved to the riverfront, opposite the BCEL. The food is as good and cheap as ever, with the spring rolls also a favourite. Motorbikes can be hired here, see p116.

our pick **Vieng Sawan** (Map p92; ☎ 213990; Th Heng Boun; meals US\$1.50-3.50; ☺) lunch & dinner) In the middle of Chinatown, Vieng Sawan is a bustling open-sided restaurant that is a real Lao eating experience. It specialises in *nâm néuang* (barbecued pork meatballs) and many varieties of *yâw* (spring rolls), usually sold in 'sets' (*sut*) with *khào pùn*, fresh lettuce leaves, mint, basil, various sauces for dipping, sliced starfruit and green plantain. You can also order *siin ja* here, thinly sliced pieces of raw beef which customers boil in small cauldrons of coconut juice and eat with dipping sauces, or some of the many varieties of spring rolls.

Guangdong Restaurant (Map p92; ☎ 217364; 91-93 Th Chao Anou; meals US\$2-4; ☺) lunch & dinner; ☺) The menu here resembles a small phone book of mainly southern Chinese dishes.

On the riverfront just east of Th Nokeo Khumman are three little shophouse restaurants (Map p92) – Addy, Nok Noy Restaurant and Sokhith Restaurant – that have become a firm favourite among backpackers, or anyone seeking a cheap, tasty feed. There is little difference between the three: all serve a mix of reliable Asian dishes mostly for less than US\$2 and are open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Lao

our pick **Riverfront food and drink vendors** (Map p92; ☺) dinner) The long stretch of vendors that convenes along the levee beside the Mekong River is a great place to watch the sunset eating *ping ka* (grilled chicken), *tâm määk-hung* or *nâm* (minced sausage mixed with rice, herbs and roasted chillies with a plate of greens on the side) and cheap Beerlao.

our pick **Ban Anou night market** (Map p92; ☺) dinner) This night market sets up in a small street off the north end of Th Chao Anou every afternoon. It's an encyclopaedia of street food, all fresh and freshly prepared – the locals love it.

Mekong Riverside Restaurant (Map p92; ☎ 241375; Th Fa Ngum; meals US\$1.50-3; ☺) lunch & dinner) On the river, tucked just behind PVO, this comparatively formal riverfront eatery offers a small menu of tasty Lao staples supplemented by snacks you won't find at home; deep-fried underground *singer* (cricket; US\$2.50) with your Beerlao, anyone?

Ban Vilaylat Restaurant (Map p92; ☎ 222 049; meals US\$2-3.50; ☺) 8am-10.30pm) Hidden between Wat Ong Teu Mahawihan and Wat Chanthabuli, this romantic little place serves tasty Lao and Thai food.

our pick **Bunmala Restaurant** (Map pp88-9; ☎ 313 249; Th Khu Vieng; meals US\$2-4; ☺) lunch & dinner) It's a little out of town, but this open-sided, timber-floored restaurant is about as archetypal Lao as you can find – and the food is great, too. There are all manner of Lao favourites, including *ping pêt* (roast duck), *ping paa* (grilled fish), *ping lin* (roast cow tongue) and *ping kai* made from particularly plump chickens. For a classic Lao meal, order the (very hot) *tâm mää-hung* (papaya salad), *kaeng naw mää* (soupy bamboo-shoot salad), sticky rice and

draught beer. Delicious. It's best to come in the evening when the full range of *ping* is on offer and the draught beer is US\$0.50.

Soukvemarn Lao Food (Map p92; ☎ 214441; www.laofoods.com; 89/12 Ban Sisaket; meals US\$2.50-3.50; ☺) lunch & dinner) Don't be put off by the location down a dirt alley from That Dam – the Lao food at Soukvemarn is very good. Specialities include *kaeng paa khai mot* (fish soup with ant larvae – in season) and *làap paa* (spicy minced fish salad), among many others. The family who manage it make good conversation, too.

Douang Deuane Restaurant & Wine Bar (Map p92; ☎ 241154; Th François Nginn; meals US\$2.50-5; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) The tasty Lao, Thai and Vietnamese favourites here are complemented by an attractive traditional setting and a welcoming French host. We always have a good time when eating here, it's that kind of place. The upstairs balcony has a good table for couples.

Tum Zaap (Map p92; ☎ 252368; Th Khun Bulom; meals US\$3-5; ☺) lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) This new hole-in-the-wall is a reflection of the growing sophistication of Lao youth and their palate, serving Lao cuisine with a modern twist.

Makphet (Map p92; ☎ 260587; Th Setthathirat; meals US\$3-6; ☺) lunch Mon-Sat) Run by Friends International (www.friends-international.org), this small restaurant trains homeless youths to cook and wait tables. The modern Lao cuisine is both interesting and tasty. A shop upstairs sells handicrafts made by underprivileged families.

Tammak Lao Restaurant (Map pp88-9; ☎ 413562; Th That Luang; meals US\$5-10; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Sat; ☺) If you mention Tammak Lao to locals, they will be impressed. It has a well-earned reputation for excellent Lao and Thai food. You can sit inside or in the manicured garden, and there is a traditional dancing show most nights.

French & Italian

It is no surprise that this former French colony should boast so many French restaurants, but their overall high quality is surprising. When you consider that this fine dining experience will cost a fraction of what you'd pay at home, it gets even better.

Saovaly Restaurant (Map p92; ☎ 214940; Th Mant-hatlat; meals US\$2.50-6; ☺) lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) The French and Lao food here is wonderful, with subtle flavours and artistic presentation complemented by attentive but not harassing ser-

vice. And all for very reasonable prices. It's just a pity the atmosphere is so, well, living room – when we ate here it was to the dulcet tones of Martin Tyler on a Man U TV re-run.

Le Vendôme (Map p92; ☎ 216402; Th In Paeng; meals US\$3-7; ☺) lunch Mon-Fri, dinner daily; ☺) Tucked away in an old house in a quiet street behind Wat In Paeng, Le Vendôme's intimate, romantic ambience and mix of salads, French cuisine, wood-fired pizza and pasta make it a good choice.

Le Côte D'Azur Restaurant (Map p92; ☎ 217 252; 62-63 Th Fa Ngum; meals US\$3-8; ☺) lunch Mon-Sat, dinner daily; ☺) Long-running Le Côte D'Azur is popular with French expats, and when your food arrives you'll understand why. The delicious Provençal cuisine and understated service make this a top choice. Also on offer are pastas, salads and pizzas (order anything with fresh herbs).

La Gondola (Map p92; ☎ 264057; 39 Th Chao Anou; meals US\$5-8; ☺) lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Reasonably good Italian fare is served up by the Italian owner in unpretentious surrounds. Warm atmosphere.

our pick **Le Silapa** (Map p92; ☎ 219689; 17/1 Th Sihom; meals US\$5-12; ☺) lunch & dinner Mon-Sat; ☺) Le Silapa has been serving some of the best French cuisine in Vientiane for years, complemented by refined surrounds and discrete service. The menu changes frequently and consists of classic as well as improvised dishes. If you order a bottle of wine the restaurant contributes to a medical fund for economically disadvantaged children... what better excuse? The lunch set menu is good value.

Le Belle Epoque (Map p92; ☎ 217581; 6 Th Pangkham; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner; US\$8-13; ☺) For a taste of colonial-era luxury it's hard to beat this restaurant in the Settha Palace Hotel. The menu is mainly French but also has a Lao component; dishes include braised lamb shank with organic mash potato (US\$13.50) and the delicious flat noodles with grilled eggplant and cream sauce (US\$5.50).

L'Opera Italian Restaurant (Map p92; ☎ 215099; Nam Phu; meals US\$8-16; ☺) 11.30am-2pm & 6-10pm; ☺) L'Opera has become something of a Vientiane institution, but that doesn't make it either overly welcoming or great value. The food, however, is pretty good, with pasta (US\$6.50 to US\$7.50) being the standout.

The French influence is most noticeable around Nam Phu, where you'll find three small, atmospheric eateries each serving

Gallic cuisine. On the east side is the intimate **Restaurant-Bar Namphu** (Map p92; ☎ 216248; Nam Phu; meals US\$4-10; ☺ lunch & dinner; ☺), where the menu offers a mix of French and Asian fare combined with sophisticated service and an extensive wine cellar – the lunchtime set menus are great value. Next door is the mercifully not-so-grotto-like **La Cave des Chateaux** (Map p92; ☎ 212192; Nam Phu; meals US\$5-9; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon-Fri, dinner only Sat & Sun; ☺), which specialises in French cheeses (grilled to perfection) and wines; while on the other side of the circle the cosy **Restaurant Le Provençal** (Map p92; ☎ 219685; Nam Phu; meals US\$3-10; ☺ lunch & dinner; ☺) serves rustic southern-French-style dishes, though its pastas and oven-baked pizzas are at least as good.

International

More expats and travellers means a demand for a greater variety of cuisines, one that Vientiane seems to be meeting fairly well. There are also plenty of eateries offering a combination of cuisines. And while you should justifiably be wary of any kitchen purporting to know *lâap* as well as lasagne, there are a few here that manage to do their multicultural menus justice.

Khop Chai Deu (Map p92; ☎ 251564; 54 Th Setthathirait; meals US\$2.50-8; ☺ lunch & dinner; ☺) In a remodelled colonial-era villa near Nam Phu, Khop Chai Deu has been a traveller's favourite for years because of its range of well-prepared Lao, Thai, Indian and assorted Western fare, and lively ambience. There's live music most days.

Full Moon Café (Map p92; ☎ 243373; Th François Nginn; meals US\$3-6.50; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner; ☺) The relaxed-but-hip look of the Full Moon might lure you in, and once there the Asian fusion food won't disappoint. The tapas and ever-changing set menus are worth considering.

our pick Sticky Fingers Café & Bar (Map p92; ☎ 215972; 10/3 Th François Nginn; meals US\$3.50-6; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner Tue-Sun; ☺) It has the atmosphere of a Sydney café, but Sticky Fingers is actually one of the best places to eat in Vientiane. The cuisine could be described as 'modern international', with delicious dishes cooked up by Mr Cho and his team – Mr Cho's crispy fish (US\$4.90) was subtle and delicious. And the hangover special (US\$4, an extra 10c for paracetamol) works wonders.

Le Ranch (Map pp88-9; ☎ 413700; Th Phonsay; meals US\$4-6; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner Thu-Tue) Oddly, for a place run by a French-Lao couple, this big, breezy restaurant northeast of the centre pays homage to the American southwest. The heavy wooden furniture and buffalo horns set the scene, and the steaks (US\$4.50) and woodfired pizzas (US\$4.50 to US\$6) are worth the trip.

Thai

Considering Thailand is just over the Mekong, there are surprisingly few dedicated Thai restaurants in Vientiane. This, though, is partly because Thai dishes also appear on the menus of many Lao restaurants.

Phikun (Map pp88-9; ☎ 222340; Th Sihom; meals US\$1-1.50; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) It's none too inspiring to look at but give it a chance and you'll find Phikun's Thai food is both good and very cheap. Dishes vary, but the dozen or so prepared dishes might include the delicious *kai phat bai kaphrao* (chicken fried in holy basil). They're served with rice – about US\$1 for two dishes, an extra 20c for each extra. The English sign reads 'Thai Food'.

Linda Sathaporn Restaurant (Map pp88-9; ☎ 415355; cnr Th Dong Palan & Th Phonsay; meals US\$3-6; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner; ☺) Linda Sathaporn's three (yes, three) plastic folders filled with pictures of their varied tasty Thai dishes make it worth the trip. It's very popular with Thais, and with smart service and large portions it's easy to see why. Seating is inside or in the more pleasant shaded courtyard out back.

Indian

Fathima Restaurant (Map p92; ☎ 219097; Th Fa Ngum; meals US\$1-2.50; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Indians like this place, and for good reason – the food is cheap and many times better than the décor. Vegetarian dishes (US\$1) are a big draw, and the chicken and meat curries (about US\$2) are also delicious. Real ice cream is sold outside.

Taj Mahal Restaurant (Map p92; ☎ 020-5611003; meals US\$2-4; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, dinner Sun) It looks like a garage, but the Taj Mahal serves what we think is the best Indian food in Vientiane (and yes, we researched the lot). Prices are very reasonable and there are plenty of vegetarian dishes. Recommended.

Rashmi's Indian Fusion (Map p92; ☎ 251513; cnr Th Samsenthai & Th Pangkham; meals US\$3-6; ☺ lunch & dinner) It was only a matter of time before fusion cuisine arrived in Vientiane, but a mix of Indian and Chinese isn't quite what we

expected. It's actually better than it sounds, and if fusion doesn't appeal there are more traditional Indian offerings too. Letting Rashmi explain the menu is recommended.

Japanese & Korean

7 Plus Korean Food (Map pp88-9; ☎ 415343; meals US\$2-5; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The Korean food here isn't bad but coming here is mainly about having a night out Lao style. The beer-garden-type place is huge, and with lots of young Lao and US\$0.70 Beerlao the atmosphere is always 'up'.

YuLaLa (Map p92; ☎ 215214; Th Heng Boun; meals US\$2.50-4; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun, closed last Sun of month; ☺) Run by a young Japanese couple, YuLaLa serves tasty, cheap Japanese fusion cuisine in a cool atmosphere – think music by Bob Dylan. Note there is no sushi or sashimi here.

Pyongyang Restaurant (Map pp88-9; ☎ 263118; Th Nong Bon; meals US\$5-25; ☺ lunch & dinner) Owned by the same people as the Phnom Penh restaurant of the same name, this Pyongyang is even more surreal. Waitresses direct from North Korea, trained to sing and dance since childhood, will take your order one minute and step up to the microphone the next to perform perfectly choreographed dance routines and/or play electric guitar and drums (it starts about 7.30pm). It's a complete trip. Don't, however, let them order for you, as you'll be served only the most expensive dishes on what is a relatively pricey menu. There is no obvious sign; look for 'Korean Restaurant' on the window.

Fujiwara Restaurant (Map p92; ☎ 222210; Th Luang Prabang; meals US\$6-10; ☺ breakfast & lunch Mon-Sat, dinner daily; ☺) Just west of Wat In Paeng, Fujiwara has an epic menu including all the Japanese favourites and several set meals. Sushi is the specialty and it's good, but not cheap.

Vegetarian

While you can find vegetarian dishes on almost every menu (particularly the Indian restaurants), only a couple of places market themselves directly to vegetarian diners.

Just for Fun (Map p92; ☎ 213642; 51/2 Th Pangkham; meals US\$1-3; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Just for Fun has been serving its small but mainly vegetarian menu for years, with offerings inspired by Thai and Lao cui-

sine. It also serves Lao coffee and lots of herbal teas.

Khouadin Vegetarian (Map p92; ☎ 215615; buffet US\$1.30; ☺ breakfast & lunch) Hidden away behind Talat Sao, this simple restaurant serves pre-cooked but thoroughly recommended vegetarian dishes. Great for a fast, tasty lunch.

Self-Catering

For the largest selection of fresh groceries and the best prices, you should stick to the markets. But if there's something 'Western' you're yearning for, or a bottle of wine, check out the following minimarkets and wine cellar.

Pimphone Market (Map p92; 94/6 Th Setthathirait; ☺ 7.30am-9pm) The mother of all Pimphones, this store near Nam Phu has a wide selection of imported goods, including canned and frozen foods, magazines, personal hygiene and women's products such as tampons. There's more wine upstairs.

Pimphone Market 2 (Map p92; ☎ 214609; cnr Th Samsenthai & Th Chanta Khumman; ☺ 8am-8.30pm) This is a smaller branch of the Pimphone market.

DRINKING

Vientiane is no longer the illicit pleasure palace it was when Paul Theroux described it, in his 1975 book *The Great Railway Bazaar*, as a place in which 'the brothels are cleaner than the hotels, marijuana is cheaper than pipe tobacco and opium easier to find than a cold glass of beer'. Nowadays, brothels are strictly prohibited. Talat Sao's marijuana stands have been removed from prominent display and cold Beerlao has definitely replaced opium as the nightly drug of choice. Most of the bars, restaurants and discos close by 11.30pm or midnight.

Vins de France (Map p92; ☎ 217700; 354 Th Samsenthai; ☺ 8.30am-8pm Mon-Sat) Vins de France is one of the best French wine cellars in Southeast Asia. Even if you don't like wine, it's worth popping in for a look at a place so completely out of character with its surrounds. If you do like wine, the US\$6.90 degustation might be a wise investment.

Cafés

A growing number of cafés serve food and shakes along with a range of Lao and foreign coffees. Several more are listed under Bakeries & Delis in the Eating section (p105).

Maison du Café (Map p92; ☎ 214781; 70 Th Pangkham; ☺ 7am-6pm) A few metres north of Nam Phu,

this welcoming place brews up a dizzying array of coffees (US\$1 to US\$2) and serves them with fresh sandwiches or baguettes (US\$1.50), plus great shakes. There's plenty of reading matter around and the owner offers a range of tourist services.

Paradice (Map p92; ☎ 312836; Th Lan Xang; ☎ 8am-8.30pm Mon-Sat) In the grounds of the Centre Culturel et de Coopération Linguistique, this airy, comfortable bar and café is, understandably, popular with Francophone expats and serves cheap coffee (from US\$0.30), sandwiches and simple meals.

Delight House of Fruit Shakes (Map p92; ☎ 212200; Th Samsenthai; ☎ 7am-9pm) One of two places here that make incredible fruit shakes. Understandably popular.

Beer Gardens

As the sun goes down, the banks of the Mekong River become one long beer garden, with tables and chairs set out under the stars and the 'Full Taste of Happiness' (Beerlao) flowing freely – it's a great way to finish a day. There's plenty of choice, from the more impromptu vendors lined along the river between PVO and Th Khun Bulom, where it's more beer than garden, to the more established structures overhanging the water as far west as the original of the species, Sala Sunset Khounta.

Several restaurants, such as 7 Plus Korean Food (p109), are also wildly popular local beer gardens. They tend to be found down non-descript side streets and typically involve a big *sala* (open-sided shelter), lots of staff and large groups of Vientiane youngsters.

Sala Sunset Khounta (Map pp88-9; ☎ 251079; snacks US\$0.50-1.50; ☎ 11am-11pm) At the west end of the dirt road along the riverfront, the 'Sunset Bar' is a Vientiane institution. The rustic wooden platform made of old boat timbers has been serving Beerlao at sunset for years, and was the only such bar to survive the government's riverfront-bar demolition a few years ago. The friendly and enterprising proprietors also offer local food and interesting snacks.

Bars

Bars open and close at a remarkable rate in Vientiane, though the recent trend has been leaning more heavily on the opening side. If you're looking for something cheaper and more local than the expat bars, look for

nondescript *bja sôt* (draught beer) bars with plastic jugs of beer on the tables.

Bor Pen Nyang (Map p92; ☎ 020-7873965; Th Fa Ngum; ☎ 10am-midnight) The rooftop bar in this four-storey building was the place to be when we were researching. And it was easy to see why. With expansive views over the Mekong, a reliable range of music (if a little Aussie-centric), decent food and a generally 'up' atmosphere, it was a lot of fun. If you want to avoid backpackers, however, go elsewhere.

Chicago Bar (Map p92; ☎ 020-5526452; Th Nokeo Khumman; ☎ 7pm-late; 🍷) The Chicago Bar is a sort of cocktail-cum-lounge bar with a leaning towards jazz and blues. It's fun, especially as it tends to stay open later than most Vientiane bars. Upstairs is a gallery/cinema with regular events. Tip though: avoid the mojitos.

Spirit House (Map pp88-9; ☎ 262530; 105 Th Fa Ngum; ☎ 7am-midnight) Popular with expats, this classy place in a quiet position opposite the river specialises in cocktails, but also serves tasty tapas and burgers.

Jazzy Brick (Map p92; ☎ 020-2449307; www.jazzybrick.com; Th Setthathirat; ☎ 11am-midnight) Run by a Lao who studied in Australia, the Jazzy Brick is a cut above most of its competitors on the style front. It's ostensibly a cocktail bar, and the cocktails are well mixed, but the prices (US\$4 to US\$5, or US\$2.50 for a small Beerlao) are difficult to justify in a town as cheap as Vientiane. It's often open later than midnight.

Blue Sky (Map p92; ☎ 216368; nr Th Setthathirat & Th Chao Anou; ☎ 8am-10pm) Blue Sky is a four-storey backpacker bar with the seemingly obligatory Hollywood movies on screen. Better is the rooftop bar, which is ideal for sundowners – when it's open.

Samlo Pub (Map p92; ☎ 222308; Th Setthathirat; ☎ 4-11.30pm) This dark, smokey dive is good for live sport.

ENTERTAINMENT

Like everything else, Vientiane's entertainment scene is picking up as money and politics allows, though the range remains fairly limited. You could make your way through all of Vientiane's live music venues and nightclubs in a couple of big nights out, though this is better than the couple of hours it would have taken a few years ago. Bowling and cinema are also gaining popularity. By law entertainment venues must

close by 11.30pm, though most push it to about midnight.

Cinema

Lao cinemas died out in the video shop tidal wave of the 1990s.

Centre Culturel et de Coopération Linguistique (Map p92; ☎ 215764; www.ambafance-laos.org/centre; Th Lan Xang; movies US\$1; screenings 7.30pm Tue & Thu, 3.30pm Sat) The French Centre screens French films (usually subtitled in English); check the *Vientiane Times* or call the centre for information.

Lao ITECC (☎ 416374; Th T4) This centre includes a cinema that shows a mix of cinematic fare at hard-to-pin-down times.

Circus

National Circus (Hong Kanyasin; Map pp88-9; Th Thong Khan Kham) The old 'Russian Circus' established in the 1980s is now known as Hong Kanyasin. It performs from time to time in the National Circus venue, in the north of town. Check for dates in the *Vientiane Times*.

Traditional Music & Dancing

Laos Traditional Show (Map p92; ☎ 242978; Th Manthatulat; child/adult US\$4/7, still/video camera charge US\$1/3) The Lao National Theatre has a performance of traditional music and dancing aimed directly at the tourist market, and it's quite good. It plays nightly, though only during the tourist season (from November to March). At other times it can be seen in the Lane Xang Hotel (p104).

Live Music

On The Rock Pub (Map pp88-9; Th Luang Prabang; ☎ 7.30pm-midnight) Down a lane off Th Luang Prabang, On The Rock isn't quite what it was in its intimate old location, but has still been known to put on a good show. The live music is usually rock, or some variation of. Well worth a look.

Music House (Map p92; Th Fa Ngum; ☎ 8pm-midnight) This tiny venue was On The Rock until the owners, and the house band, had a dose of 'artistic differences'. It's still worth a look, though, with the band crammed into the corner and the mainly Lao patrons inches away, it's good fun.

Wind West (Map p92; ☎ 020-2000777; Th Luang Prabang; ☎ 5-11pm) A Western-US-style bar and restaurant, Wind West (yes, Wind, that's not a typo) has live Lao and Western rock

music most nights – the music usually starts about 10pm. Depending on the night it can be heaving, or completely dead.

Nightclubs

Vientiane's few nightclubs are split between big, independent affairs and those attached to a top-end hotel. Music is diverse, with DJs or sometimes live bands playing everything from electrified Lao folk (for *lám wóng* circular dancing) to quasi-Western pop, but is usually dominated by the latest Thai hits. Clubbers tend to be younger Lao, though not exclusively so. There is generally no charge to enter, but the Beerlao is more expensive than elsewhere. All up, good Lao-style fun.

Conveniently, three of the better clubs are within walking distance of each other on the way to the airport. First up is **Future Nightclub** (Map pp88-9; Th Luang Prabang; ☎ 8pm-1am), not far past the Novotel, where the music can make stepping into the Future seem more like leaping into the past. Fun though. Nearby is **Highwayman** (Map pp88-9; Th Luang Prabang; ☎ 8pm-midnight), which has occasional live acts but mainly DJs. A few hundred meters on is **Marina** (Map pp88-9; ☎ 216978; Th Luang Prabang; ☎ 8pm-1am), probably the biggest and most ostentatious of the lot. And if you get sick of dancing you can bowl instead!

HOTEL CLUBS

Lunar 36 (Map pp88-9; Don Chan Palace Hotel, off Th Fa Ngum; ☎ 6pm-3am Wed, Fri & Sat) This was the hottest nightclub in town when we passed, partly because two nearby clubs that had been popular were mysteriously forced to close after the Palace opened. In fairness, it is fun, though only on the prescribed nights – at other times it's just karaoke in private rooms.

***Tech** (Map pp88-9; ☎ 213570; Th Samsenthai) At the Novotel, this place often has a Philippine cover-band sharing space with its DJ.

Anou Cabaret (Map p92; ☎ 213630; nr Th Heng Boun & Th Chao Anou) On the ground floor of the Anou Hotel, the cabaret has been swinging along for years. It's a funny place, with booths and old crooners that feel very 1960s.

Recreation Clubs

Australian Embassy Recreation Club (Australian Club; Map pp88-9; ☎ 314921; Km 3 Th Tha Deua; ☎ 6am-8.30pm) About 3km out of town on the way to the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge, the AERC is universally known as the 'Australian Club'. It's

probably best known for its brilliant salt-water pool, right next to the Mekong River, though the barbecues held every second and last Friday of the month (except in June and July) are also popular. There is also an air-con squash court (open from 6am to 8.30pm). Short-term memberships can be arranged for US\$10/20 per single/family per day, or you could go as the guest of a member (US\$2).

SHOPPING

Just about anything made in Laos is available for purchase in Vientiane, including hill-tribe crafts, jewellery, traditional textiles and carvings. The main shopping areas in town are Talat Sao (Morning Market), the eastern end of Th Samsenthai (near the Asian Pavilion Hotel), Th Pangkham and along Th Nokeo Khumman.

Handicrafts, Antiques & Art

Several shops along Th Samsenthai, Th Pangkham and Th Setthathirath sell Lao and Thai tribal and hill-tribe crafts. The Lao goods are increasingly complemented by products from Vietnam and Thailand, such as lacquer work and Buddha images. Many of the places listed under Textiles and Clothing (right) also carry handicrafts and antiques.

Handicraft Products of Ethnic Groups (Map p92; Th Khu Vieng) Beside the PTT office and opposite Talat Sao, this market-style place sells handicrafts from around Laos. The quality is variable, but at the least this is a good place to get an idea what is out there and how much it costs.

T'Shop Lai Galerie (Map p92; ☎ 223178; Th In Paeng; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Sat) This beautiful shop is well worth a look if you're interested in modern and traditional art in a range of media, furniture and interesting handicrafts. The owner is committed to promoting fair trade products.

Carterie du Laos (Map p92; ☎ 241401; 118/2 Th Setthathirath) This shop has a wide range of postcards, cards, posters and books, and a few small souvenirs.

Kanchana Boutique (Map p92; ☎ 213467; 102 Th Chanta Khumman; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Sat) Kanchana carries an extensive selection of Lao silk (the best is out the back) and can arrange visits to their Lao Textile Museum (open 10am to 4pm).

Satri Lao (Map p92; ☎ 244384; Th Setthathirath; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-7pm Sun) This tastefully presented three-storey shop has an eclectic range of local and imported handicrafts and

clothes – from miniskirts and bikinis made from Hmong weavings to lacquer portraits of Ho Chi Minh.

Jewellery

Most of the jewellery shops are along Th Samsenthai and trade primarily in gold and silver. Among the better options are **Saigon Bijoux** (Map p92; ☎ 214783; Th Samsenthai), which also repairs jewellery, and **Bari Jewellery** (Map p92; ☎ 212680; Th Samsenthai), which deals in precious stones as well.

Talat Sao (opposite) has plenty of gold and silversmiths, though many are more artisan than artist.

Textiles & Clothing

Downtown Vientiane is littered with stores selling textiles to tourists. Th Nokeo Khumman is the epicentre; Talat Sao is also a good place to buy fabrics. You'll find antique as well as modern fabrics, plus utilitarian items such as shoulder bags (some artfully constructed around squares of antique fabric), cushions and pillows.

To see Lao weaving in action, seek out the weaving district of Ban Nong Buathong, northeast of the town centre in Muang Chanthabuli. About 20 families (many originally from Sam Neua in Hua Phan Province) live and work here, including a couple of households that sell textiles directly to the public; the **Phaeng Mai Gallery** (☎ 217341; 117 Th Nong Buathong; ☎ 10am-6pm), in a white, two-storey house, is among the best. It's out past the National Circus – most tuk-tuk drivers know it and will charge about US\$2 one way.

Carol Cassidy Lao Textiles (Map p92; ☎ 212123; www.laotextiles.com; 84-86 Th Nokeo Khumman; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat, or by appointment) Lao Textiles sells high-end contemporary, original-design fabrics inspired by older Lao weaving patterns, motifs and techniques. The American designer, Carol Cassidy, employs Lao weavers who work out the back of the attractive old French-Lao house. They are internationally known, with prices to match.

Couleur d'Asie (Map p92; ☎ 223008; Nam Phu) The owner, a French-Vietnamese dress designer with Paris fashion-school experience, manages to fuse Lao and Western styles into some attractive designs at reasonable prices.

KPP Handicraft Promotion Enterprise of Sekong Province (Map p92; ☎ 241421; pholsana@laotel.com; cr Th Setthathirath & Th Chao Anou; ☎ 9am-8pm) This modest-

looking place sells fair-trade textiles from the Bolaven Plateau province of Sekong.

Nikone Handicrafts (Map pp88-9; ☎ 212191; nikone@hotmail.com; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) Located out near the National Circus, this is another good place to see weaving and dyeing in action.

True Colour (Map p92; ☎ 214410; Th Setthathirath; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat) This store sells textiles and clothes made in the Houey Hong Vocational Training Center for Women (p101).

Other stores on Th Nokeo Khumman worth a look include **Khampan Lao Handicraft** (Map p92; ☎ 222000; ☎ 8am-9pm), with textiles from the Sam Neua area at very reasonable prices; upmarket **Mixay Boutique** (Map p92; ☎ 216592; ☎ 9am-8pm); and **Camacrafts** (Mulberries; Map p92; ☎ 241217; www.mulberries.org; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat), which stocks silk clothes and weavings from Xieng Khuang Province, plus some bed and cushion covers in striking Hmong-inspired designs.

Markets

Talat Sao (Map p92; Th Lan Xang; ☎ 7am-4pm) Vientiane's biggest market is a sprawling collection of stalls offering fabrics, ready-made clothes, jewellery, cutlery, toiletries, bedding, hardware and watches, as well as electronic goods and just about anything else imaginable. In the centre of the area is a large building that houses the Vientiane Department Store. Most of the existing structure was built in the 1960s, but like so much else in Laos Talat Sao is in a period of change. A huge new Malaysian-backed market should have opened next door by the time you arrive, bringing 'modernity' and homogenisation to Vientiane in equal measure. Exactly how this affects the existing market remains to be seen.

Talat Khua Din (Map p92; Th Khua Vieng) East of Talat Sao and beyond the bus terminal, this rustic market offers fresh produce and meats, as well as flowers, tobacco and assorted other goods.

Talat Thong Khan Kham (Map pp88-9; cr Th Khan Kham & Th Dong Miang) This market north of the centre in Ban Khan Kham is open all day, but is best in the morning. It's one of the biggest in Vientiane and has virtually everything, including good food. Nearby are basket and pottery vendors.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air Departures from Vientiane are perfectly straightforward. The Domestic Terminal is

in the older, white building east of the impressive International Terminal. There is an (often unmanned) information counter in the arrivals hall, and food can be found upstairs in the International Terminal.

See p319 for details on air transport to Laos, p323 for information on flights within Laos.

AIRLINE OFFICES

See also Travel Agencies, p91.
China Eastern Airlines (Map pp88-9; ☎ 212300; www.chinaeastern.com; Th Luang Prabang) Same building as Thai Airways.

Lao Airlines (www.laoairlines.com) Airport Office (☎ 512028; ☎ 7.30am-noon & 1-4.30pm); Head Office (Map p92; ☎ 212051-4; 2 Th Pangkham; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Sat) Handles domestic and international ticketing.

Thai Airways International (Map pp88-9; ☎ 222527; Th Luang Prabang; 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat)

Vietnam Airlines (Map p92; ☎ 217562; www.vietnamairlines.com; 1st fl, Lao Plaza Hotel, Th Samsenthai; ☎ 8am-noon & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

Boat

Passenger boat services between Vientiane and Luang Prabang have become almost extinct as most people now take the bus, which is both faster and cheaper.

Occasional six-passenger *héua wái* (speedboats) do run from Vientiane to Pak Lai, 115km away, and if you have the cash will go all the way to Luang Prabang – a full day's trip for at least US\$240 for the boat. To charter a speedboat head out to Tha Heua Kao Liaw (Kao Liaw Boat Landing), which is 7.7km west of the Novotel (3.5km west of the fork in the road where Rte 13 heads north) in Ban Kao Liaw. It's best to go the day before you plan to travel.

If you get very lucky you might chance upon a rare cargo boat running to Luang Prabang, three to five days upriver. It would be an amazing trip, but you'll need patience to arrange it.

Bus

Our table (p114) gives timetable information. Buses use three different stations in Vientiane, all with some English-speaking staff, and food and drink stands. The **Northern Bus Station** (Map pp88-9; ☎ 260255; Th T2), about 2km northwest of the centre, serves all points north of Vang Vieng, including China, and

LEAVING VIENTIANE BY BUS

All services depart daily except where noted, though times do change so use this as a guide only. The bus to Huay Xai might not run in the wet season. Note that in Laos buses break down, so it might take longer than advertised. For buses to China, contact the **Tong Li Bus Company** (☎ 242657) at the Northern Bus Station. For Vietnam, buses leave daily for Hanoi (US\$20, 24 hours) via Vinh (US\$16, 16 hours), and less often for Hue (US\$17), Danang (US\$20) and even Ho Chi Minh City (US\$45, up to 48 hours) – they all start at or go past the Southern Bus Station.

Destination	Fare normal/ air-con/VIP (US\$)	Distance (km)	Duration (hr)	Departures
Northern Bus Station				
Huay Xai	20	869	30-35	5.30pm
Luang Nam Tha	14	676	19	8.30am
Luang Prabang	9/10/11.50	384	11/11/9-10	6.30am (air-con), 7.30am, 8am (VIP), 9am (air-con), 11am, 1.30am, 4pm, 6pm, 7.30pm (air-con)
Phongsali	15	811	26	7.15am (doesn't leave every day)
Phonsavan	9/10	374	9-11	6.30am, 7.30am (air-con), 3.30pm, 7pm (air-con)
Sainyabuli	10/11.50	485	14-16	4.30pm, 6.30pm
Sam Neua via Phonsavan	15	612	15-17	7am, 9.30am, 12.30pm (7am bus goes via Luang Prabang, takes up to 30 hours)
Udomxai	11/12	578	14-17	6.45am, 1.45pm, 4pm (air-con)
Southern Bus Station				
Attapeu	11	812	22-24	9.30am, 5pm
Don Khong	11	788	16-19	10.30am
Lak Sao	6	334	7-9	5am, 6am, 7am
Paksan	2.50	143	3-4	Take any bus going south, roughly every 30 mins from 4.30am to 5pm.
Pakse	8.5/11/13	677	14-16/9½ (VIP)	Normal buses every 30 mins 9.30am-5pm; air-con buses at 7pm, 7pm & 8pm; four VIP buses leave at 8.30pm
Salavan	10	774	15-20	4.30pm, 7.30pm
Savannakhet	5.50/7	457	8-10	Every 30 mins 6am-9am; air-con at 8.30pm; or any normal or air-con bus to Pakse.
Tha Khaek	4/5	337	6/4½	5am, 6am, noon, or any bus to Savannakhet or Pakse
Voen Kham	11	818	17-20	11am
Talat Sao Bus Station				
Vang Vieng	1.50	153	3½	7am, 9.30am, 10.30am, 11.30am, 1.30pm, 2pm

CROSSING THE THAI BORDER AT THE THAI-LAO FRIENDSHIP BRIDGE

The Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge (Saphan Mittaphap Thai-Lao) spans the Mekong River between Nong Khai in Thailand and Tha Na Leng in Laos, 19km southeast of Vientiane. The border is open between 6am and 10pm and the easiest and cheapest way to cross is on the comfortable Thai-Lao International Bus (US\$1.50, 90 minutes), which leaves Vientiane's Talat Sao (Morning Market) Bus Station at 7.30am, 9.30am, 12.40pm, 2.30pm, 3.30pm and 6pm and stops at the Nong Khai bus station. From Nong Khai, it leaves at the same times and costs 55B. The Thai-Lao International Bus also runs to Udon Thani bus station (US\$2.20, two hours) at 8am, 10.30am, 11.30am, 2pm, 4pm and 6pm, though the times do tend to change. A tuk-tuk from the bus station to Udon Thani airport should cost about 100B.

The border itself is easy; visas are issued on arrival in both countries (p315). Don't be tempted to use a tuk-tuk driver to get your Lao visa, no matter what they tell you – it will take far longer than doing it yourself, and you'll have to pay for the 'service'. Insist they take you straight to the border.

Alternative means of transport between Vientiane and the bridge include taxi or jumbo (US\$5 to US\$7 – bargain hard) or the regular public bus from Talat Sao (US\$0.40) between 6.30am and 5pm. At the bridge, regular shuttle buses (15B or 20B on weekends) ferry passengers between immigration posts. On the Thai side you'll need to take a tuk-tuk between the bridge and bus or train stations (about 30B per person). For details on trains between Nong Khai and Bangkok see p322.

some buses to Vietnam. Destinations and the latest ticket prices are listed in English.

The **Southern Bus Station** (Map pp88-9; ☎ 740521; Rte 13 South), commonly known as Dong Dok Bus Station or just *khiw lot lak kao* (Km 9 Bus Station), is 9km out of town and serves everywhere south. Buses to Vietnam will usually stop here.

The final departure point is the **Talat Sao bus station** (Map p92; ☎ 216507), from where desperately slow local buses run to destinations within Vientiane Province, including Vang Vieng, and some more distant destinations, though for these you're better going to the Northern or Southern stations. The Thai-Lao International Bus also uses this station for its trips to Nong Kai and Udon Thani; see above for details.

Train

See p322 for information on Thai trains to the Lao-Thai border.

GETTING AROUND

Central Vientiane is entirely accessible on foot. For exploring neighbouring districts, however, you'll need transport.

To/From the Airport

Wattay International Airport is about 4km northwest of the city centre, which makes the US\$5 flat fare for a taxi more than a little

steep. The fare is set by the government and the US\$5 takes you anywhere in Vientiane (to the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge is US\$9). Only official taxis can pick up at the airport, and even the drivers think the fare is too high because it costs them business.

Many passengers simply walk out of the terminal, across the car park and on for 500m to the airport gate, where jumbos and tuk-tuks loiter. These guys ask upwards of US\$3 for the trip, but you might be able to bargain them down to US\$2. Alternatively, walk a few metres further to Th Luang Prabang and hail a shared jumbo (US\$0.30 per person), or even a bus (US\$0.20). Prices on shared transport will rise if you're going further than the centre.

From the centre of town to the airport costs should be the same, though tuk-tuk and jumbo drivers will typically ask for twice as much. The Phon Hong bus from Talat Sao makes the journey for US\$0.20.

Bicycle

Cycling is a cheap, easy and recommended way of getting around mostly flat Vientiane. Loads of guesthouses and several shops hire out bikes for between US\$0.50 and US\$2 a day; you won't need a map to find them.

Bus

There is a city bus system, but it's oriented more towards the distant suburbs than the

central Chanthabuli district. Most buses leave from Talat Sao bus station; to the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge costs US\$0.40.

Car & Motorcycle

Small motorbikes are a popular means of getting around Vientiane and can be hired from several places. The cheapest are from outside the **Douang Deuane Hotel** (Map p92; Th Nokeo Khumman) where 110cc bikes cost US\$5.50 a day, but we can tell you from experience that they're notoriously unreliable (we took back four in one day!). Much better Japanese bikes are available from **PVO** (Map p92; ☎ 214444; Th Fa Ngum; per day US\$7). They also hire the best 250cc bikes, usually Honda Bajas, for US\$20 a day, less for longer hire. Recommended.

For car hire and drivers, see p328.

Jumbo & Tuk-Tuk

Drivers of jumbos and tuk-tuks will take passengers on journeys as short as 500m or as far as 20km. Understanding the various types of tuk-tuk is important (see below) if you don't want to be overcharged. Tourist tuk-tuks are the most expensive; share jumbos that run regular routes around town (eg Th Luang Prabang to Th Seththathir or Th Lan Xang to That Luang) are much cheaper – usually US\$0.20 to US\$0.40 per person.

Taxi

Car taxis of varying shapes, sizes and vintages can often be found stationed in front of the larger hotels or at the airport. Some of these (usually the newer models) are fitted with air-con and meters and wear a 'Taxi Meter' sign. The meters, however, are ornamental only – you'll still have to negotiate the fare, which will be higher than in a naturally cooled jumbo. To call a taxi, try **Lavi Taxi Company** (☎ 350000).

A car and driver costs about US\$30 to US\$40 per day as long as the vehicle doesn't leave town. If you want to go further afield, eg to Ang Nam Ngum or Vang Vieng, expect to pay more.

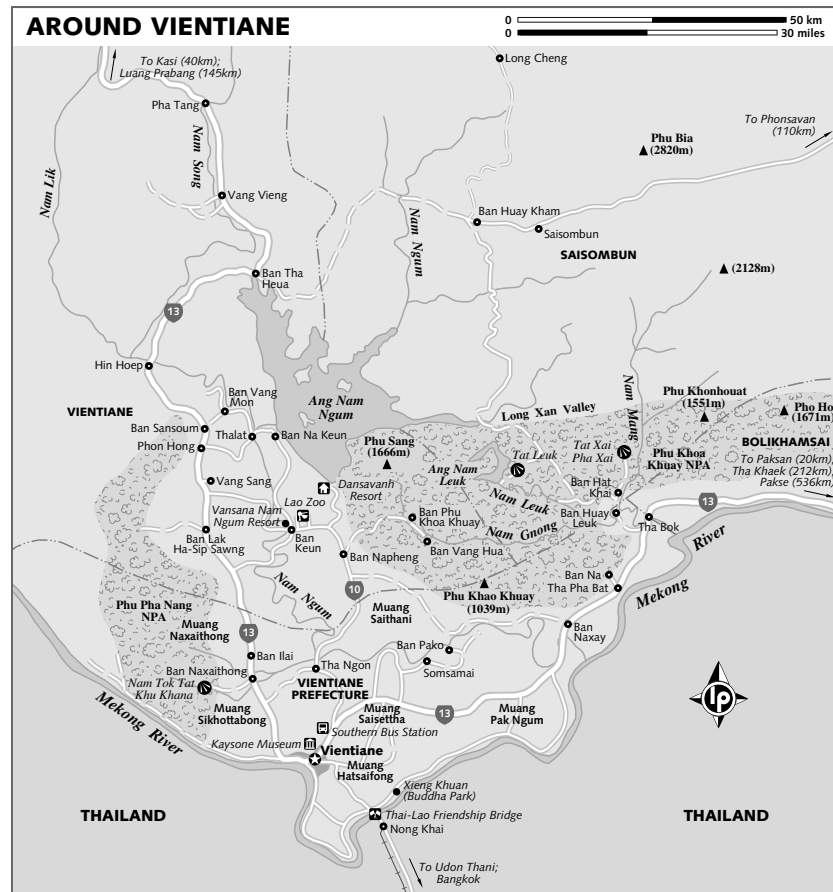
AROUND VIENTIANE

There are several places worth seeing within an easy trip of Vientiane. Some make good day trips while others could detain you much longer.

BAN PAKO

ບ້ານປາກ

Situated on a lushly forested bend of the Nam Ngum (Ngum River) about 55km from Vientiane, **Ban Pako** (☎ 030-525 7937; in Vientiane



AN IDIOT'S GUIDE TO TUK-TUKS & JUMBOS

Three different types of tuk-tuk/jumbo operate in Vientiane and if you know the difference it can save you money and a lot of argument.

Tourist tuk-tuks

You'll find these loitering in queues outside popular tourist spots, such as at Nam Phu. In theory, chartering a tuk-tuk should be no more than US\$0.60 for distances of 1km or less, plus about US\$0.20 for each kilometre beyond 2km. But these guys will usually show you a laminated card with a list of fares at least double what a Lao person would pay and never less than US\$1. Bargaining is essential but probably won't get you far because there is an agreement within the queue that tuk-tuks won't leave without a minimum fare, which while lower than the outrageous printed fare is still significantly more than locals would pay.

Wandering tuk-tuks

These tuk-tuks will pick you up anywhere and negotiate a fare to anywhere – prices are lower than tourist tuk-tuks and rise as you head further away from main roads. It's best not to hail a wandering tuk-tuk near a queue of tourist tuk-tuks as he'll likely be harassed by drivers in the queue.

Fixed route share jumbos

The cheapest tuk-tuks are more like buses, starting at tuk-tuk stations and operating along set routes for fixed fares. The biggest station is near Talat Sao and one very useful route runs to the Friendship Bridge (US\$0.40, compared with about US\$6 for a charter). Just turn up and tell them where you want to go.

021-451841; www.banpako.com; d US\$5, r US\$25-50) is an ecologist that has, over the years, been instrumental in creating a 40-hectare forest preserve and protecting the surrounding environs. The rustic bamboo and thatch 'village' is in a secluded spot that was first settled about 2000 years ago – archaeological excavations nearby have unearthed artefacts that shed light on village life around 2000 years ago. Activities include swimming, boating and hiking to nearby villages, a wat and waterfalls. Or just sit around sweating in the herbal sauna in the forest.

A change of management has seen standards rise dramatically but so too have prices, which seem a little steep at the top end. Lodgings are built of native materials

and include rooms with bathrooms and river views or jungle views, and dorms with share bathroom. Food is served on a picturesque riverside terrace. Power comes from solar cells.

Getting There & Away

The best way to reach Ban Pako is to drive or take the bus along Rte 13 south, turn left (north) after 24km, follow the signs to Somsamai and take a boat (US\$1.50 per person one way, 30 minutes) to the lodge. Buses run between Talat Sao and Somsamai (US\$0.50 one way, 90 minutes) six times daily between 6.30am and 5.30pm. With your own vehicle you can follow the road another few kilometres to Ban Pako itself.

PHU KHAO KHUAY NPA

ສວນອຸດທິຍານແຫ່ງຊາດພູເຂົາຄວາຍ

Covering more than 2000 sq km of mountains and rivers to the east of Vientiane, the under-rated **Phu Khao Khuay NPA** (www.trekkingcentrallaos.com) is the most easily accessed protected area in Laos. Treks ranging in duration from a couple of hours to three days have been developed in close consultation with two villages on the edge of the NPA, Ban Na and Ban Hat Khai.

Phu Khao Khuay (pronounced poo cow kwai) means 'Buffalo Horn Mountain', a name derived from local legend, and is home to three major rivers that flow off a sandstone mountain range and into the Ang Nam Leuk Reservoir. It boasts an extraordinary array of endangered wildlife, including wild elephants, gibbons, Asiatic black bear, clouded leopard, Siamese fireback pheasant and green peafowl. About 88% of the NPA is forested, though only 32% has been classified as dense, mature forest. Depending on elevation, visitors may encounter dry evergreen dipterocarp (a Southeast Asian tree with two-winged fruit), mixed deciduous forest, conifer forest or grassy uplands. Several impressive waterfalls are accessible on day trips from Vientiane.

But while all of this is undoubtedly impressive – even more so if you actually get to see the endangered wildlife – by far the greatest attraction at Phu Khao Khuay is its herd of wild elephants (see below).

Several tour operators in Vientiane (see p91) can arrange the trips mentioned following, or you could do it yourself. Don't,

however, just turn up unannounced (except at the waterfalls).

The best way to organise a trek is through the LNTA office in Vientiane (p91). It doesn't take any commission and can check on availability and, in the case of Ban Na, whether the elephants have been around recently. Prices vary depending on the number of trekkers but are reasonable; for example, a three-day trek from Ban Hat Khai is US\$37/23 per person in a group of two/eight people. A one-day trip is US\$18/13. From Ban Na trekking prices are slightly lower as there is no boat trip, but higher if you stay overnight in the elephant tower, which has a US\$10 per person fee that goes to the Elephant Conservation & Research Fund. The prices do not include transport from Vientiane and are not negotiable. All monies go to the village and NPA. To contact Ban Na directly, call Lao-speaking **Mr Bounthanom** (☎ 020-2208286). Or, get anyone else who speaks Lao to call for you.

There are additional small charges if you opt for 'luxury' items such as tents and hammocks with built-in mosquito nets. In addition trekkers need to buy a yellow trekking permit (US\$4 per trip), which can be arranged in the village.

Ban Na

ບ້ານນາ

The lowland farming village of Ban Na, 82km northeast of Vientiane, is home to about 600 people. The village is typical Lao, with women weaving baskets from bamboo (skills they will happily impart for a small fee) and men

THE SWEET-TOOTHED ELEPHANTS OF BAN NA

The farmers of Ban Na grow rice and vegetables, but a few years ago they began planting sugar cane after being encouraged by a local sugar company. What they didn't count on was the collective sweet tooth of the elephants in the nearby mountains. It wasn't long before these jumbos had sniffed out the delights in the field below and were happily eating the sugarcane, pineapples and bananas planted around Ban Na. Not surprisingly, the farmers weren't happy. They decided the only way to get rid of the elephants was to rip up the sugarcane and go back to planting boring (and less lucrative) vegetables.

It was hoped the 30-odd elephants would take the hint and return to the mountains, but they didn't. Instead, they have made the lowland forests, bamboo belt and fields around Ban Na their home. The destruction they cause is significant, affecting both the environment and finances of Ban Na. The only way the villagers can continue to live with the elephants (ie not shoot them) is by making them pay their way. The result is elephant ecotourism. So far it's working and the number of elephants has actually grown to about 40. Though how long the peace can hold is anyone's guess if plans to build a sugar refinery nearby – with the resulting demand for locally produced sugarcane – come to fruition.

tending the fields. But it's the local herd of elephants that is most interesting to visitors (see the boxed text opposite).

Village guides lead one-, two- and three-day treks from Ban Na, including through elephant territory to Keng Khani (three to four hours one way), through deep forest to the waterfall of **Tat Fa** (four to five hours) and to the elephant observation tower at **Pung Xay** (4km). The trek to this tower is not the most spectacular in Laos, but if you're lucky your overnight stay will be. The tower overlooks the elephants' favourite salt lick, which they visit at dusk or later. Trekkers sleep in the tower, on the floor, with guides who cook a local dinner. We've met people who have had a fantastic time, seen 10 elephants and raved about this larger-than-life taste of the Laos wilderness. Others, however, have seen nothing and come away disappointed. So it's important to remember these pachyderms are wild and there's only about a 50/50 chance (perhaps less) they'll turn up. If you go, take a torch and a flash if you want photos, and/or go when the moon is full.

En route to Ban Na it's worth stopping briefly at **Wat Pha Baht Phonsan**, which sits on a rocky outcrop at Tha Pha Baht, beside Rte 13 about 2km south of Ban Na. The wat is revered for its large *pha bàat* (Buddha footprint) shrine, monastery and substantial reclining Buddha figure. You'll know it by the large and well-ornamented 1933-vintage stupa.

Ban Hat Khai

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Along with Ban Na, the village of Ban Hat Khai is a launch point for treks into Phu Khao Khuay NPA. Destinations include the huge cliff, views and beautiful landscape of **Pha Luang** (three to four hours one way), and the forested areas around **Huay Khi Ling** (two to three hours one way). A trek taking in both these areas takes two or three days, depending on the season; you sleep in the forest. Boats can be arranged here to take you upriver to **Pha Xai**. The villagers are also happy to have homestays (p48).

Waterfalls

Phu Khao Khuay's three most impressive waterfalls are accessed from the road running north from Rte 13, just before Ban Tha Bok. **Tat Xai** cascades down seven steps, and 800m downstream **Pha Xai** plunges over a 40m-high

cataract. There's a pool that's good for swimming, though it can get dangerous during the wet season.

Tat Leuk is much smaller but makes a beautiful place to camp for the night. You can swim above the falls if the water isn't flowing too fast, and the Visitor Centre has some information about the area, including a detailed guide to the 1.5km-long **Huay Bon Nature Trail**. The guy who looks after the Visitor Centre can arrange local treks for about US\$7 to US\$10, and rents quality four-man tents for US\$4, plus hammocks, mattresses, mosquito nets and sleeping bags for US\$1 each.

Getting There & Away

Buses from Talat Sao in Vientiane leave regularly for Ban Tha Bok and Paksan. For Wat Pha Baht Phonsan and Ban Na get off near the Km 79 stone; the shrine is right on Rte 13 and Ban Na is about 2km north – follow the signs.

For Ban Hat Khai, keep on the bus until a turn-off left (north) at Km 92, just before Ban Tha Bok, or all the way into Tha Bok (a further 2km). From Tha Bok or the turn-off take a *sáwngháew* or any transport the 5km to Ban Huay Leuk. Ban Hat Khai is 2km further, but the road beyond tends to get washed out in the rainy season, meaning you might have to take a boat (40 minutes, 12km), then walk another hour to Tat Xai.

From Ban Huay Leuk, continue 1km, cross an iron bridge and follow this laterite road a further 7km to the well-marked turn-off left to Tat Leuk – it's about 4km from here. For Tat Xai, follow the signs from Ban Huay Leuk (much more detailed instructions are available at www.trekkingcentrallaos.com or at the LNTA office in Vientiane, p91).

If you need a bed en route there are two decent guesthouses in Tha Bok. Note that as you come from Vientiane there are three signed entrances to Phu Khao Khuay, the second leads to Ban Na and the third to Ban Hat Khai and the waterfalls.

VIENTIANE TO ANG NAM NGUM

On the way to Ang Nam Ngum (Nam Ngum Reservoir) are a few interesting stopover possibilities. The **Nam Tok Tat Khu Khana** waterfall (also called Hin Khana) is easy to reach via a 10km dirt road, leading west from Rte 13 near the village of Ban Naxaithong, near Km 17.

At Km 52 on Rte 13 is **Ban Lak Ha-Sip Sawng** (Km 52 Village). As more established Hmong centres have been moved or depopulated, this town has evolved into the focal point for Hmong people for miles around. At the heart of town is a large daily market with plenty of stores selling 'traditional-style' Hmong dress. It's 'traditional style' because much of it is actually imported from China. You're unlikely to find locally made dress here because many Hmong have sold their locally made clothing to foreigners and Hmong in the USA, who onsell it for a tidy profit. There's plenty of good food available here, and it's cheap, and a couple of budget guesthouses.

At **Vang Sang**, 65km north of Vientiane via Rte 13, a cluster of 10 high-relief Buddha sculptures on cliffs is thought to date from the 16th century. Two of the Buddhas are over 3m tall. The name means 'Elephant Palace', a reference to an elephant graveyard once found nearby. To reach Vang Sang, follow the sign to the **Vang Xang Resort** (☎ 021-211526; r US\$6), near the Km 62 marker, then take the laterite road around a small lake, up the hill and right until you reach the shaded forest at the end. Keep an eye out for lazy sunbathing snakes on this road; we met two and neither was especially hasty in slithering out of the way.

A bit further north is the prosperous town of **Phon Hong** at the turn-off for Thalat and Ang Nam Ngum; Rte 13 continues north from here to Vang Vieng. Phon Hong is another good place to stop for food, and like Ban Lak Ha-Sip Sawng it has a couple of cheap guesthouses.

ANG NAM NGUM

Ang Nam Ngum is the vast artificial lake created when the Nam Ngum was dammed. It's a popular destination for day-trippers from Vientiane, though doesn't attract too many foreign travellers.

The highest peaks of the former river valley became forested islands after the valley was inundated in 1971. Following the 1975 PL conquest of Vientiane, an estimated 3000 prostitutes, petty criminals and drug addicts were rounded up from the capital and banished to two of these islands; one each for men and women. Today the Nam Ngum hydroelectric plant generates most of the electricity used in the Vientiane area and sells power to Thailand.

About 250 sq km of forest were flooded when the river was dammed, submerging a mass of valuable timber. In the 1990s Thai timber companies decided all those submerged teak trees were worth the cost of buying and operating hydraulic underwater saws, and the trees are slowly being extracted. A few towns and villages on or near the shores of the lake, such as **Ban Tha Heua** at the northern end, specialise in crafting furniture from the salvaged teak.

Fishing is also an important local industry, and one that attracted thousands of people to the area during the '80s and '90s. Too many, perhaps. In recent years fishers have reported a drastic fall in their catch and many have been forced to find other work.

Ang Nam Ngum is dotted with picturesque little islands and it is well worth arranging a cruise. Boats holding up to 20 people can be hired from Ban Na Kheun, or any other lakeside village, for about US\$10 to US\$12 an hour if you bargain hard.

A short drive from the lake is **Thalat**, between Phon Hong and Ang Nam Ngum, which is known for its environmentally incorrect market (Thalat means 'market') selling all kinds of forest creatures – deer, spiny anteaters, rats and so on – for the dinner plate.

Sleeping & Eating

Since most people day-trip to Ang Nam Ngum from Vientiane the few guesthouses are often empty and it can be difficult to find anyone with a key. You should, eventually, find somewhere to sleep in either Ban Kheun, Ban Na Kheun or Ban Tha Heua, usually for less than US\$10.

In villages around the lake, floating restaurants keep fish tethered beneath the deck and, when there's an order, the cook lifts a grate and yanks a flapping fish directly into the galley. They're famous for tasty *kawy paa* (tart and spicy minced fish salad), *kaeng paa* (fish soup) and *neung paa* (steamed fish with fresh herbs).

Vansana Nam Ngum Resort (☎ 023-241162; www.vansanahotel-group.com; Ban Kheun; r US\$30-40; ☎ ☎) More comfortable than the guesthouses, Vansana is actually on the banks of the Nam Ngum a few kilometres downstream from the dam at Ban Kheun. It's mainly aimed at families from Vientiane.

Dansavanh Nam Ngum Resort (☎ 021-217595; www.dansavanh.com; packages from US\$30; ☎ ☎) Opened in 1999, this US\$200 million lakeside resort – 75% owned by a Malaysian company and 25% owned by the Lao military – is part of a planned mega-development centred around one of only two legal casinos in Laos. It's 10 minutes by boat from the landing at Na Nam, although most visitors and guests arrive on free shuttle buses from Vientiane or Nong Khai.

Getting There & Away

From Vientiane's Talat Sao Bus Station you can catch a 7am service all the way to Kheun Nam Ngum (Nam Ngum Dam; US\$0.90, about three hours), near Ban Na Kheun. This trip goes along Rte 13 through Thalat. If you don't make the 7am bus, buses leave semi-frequently from Talat Sao to Thalat (US\$0.80, 2½ hours, 87km); take a pick-up or jumbo to the lake.

Taxis in Vientiane usually charge from US\$35 to US\$50 return to the lake. Ask the driver to take the more scenic Rte 10 through Ban Kheun for the return trip.

VANG VIENG

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☎ 023 / pop 30,000

Nestled beside the Nam Song (Song River) amid stunningly beautiful limestone karst terrain, Vang Vieng provokes a mix of responses. In the last edition we wrote that people either love or hate it, but that was probably a little unfair. It's more of a love *and* hate relationship – which parts you love depend on who you are.

The area's main attraction has always been the dramatic landscape surrounding Vang Vieng. Honeycombed with unexplored tunnels and caverns, the limestone cliffs are a spelunker's heaven. Several caves are named and play minor roles in local mythology – all are said to be inhabited by spirits. These caves and cliffs have also earned a reputation for some of the best rock-climbing in the region.

The Nam Song, meanwhile, plays host to kayakers and travellers floating along on tractor inner tubes – a pastime so thoroughly enjoyable and popular that it has become one of the rites of passage of the Indochina backpacking circuit. Other activities include rafting, trekking and bicycle and motorbike

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0 0.1 mile

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trips. Or you could just find a riverside seat for one of the regular postcard sunsets when, if you're lucky, you might see thousands of bats pouring forth from the karst like an oil slick flooding the skyline.

So what's to dislike, you might ask. The most common complaint is that in earning its stripes as a fully paid-up member of backpacker world, Vang Vieng has lost its soul. It's probably not as bad as that, but the growth of Vang Vieng has taken its toll. Inevitably, the profile of the town has changed and the reason travellers first came here – to experience small-town Laos in a stunning setting – has been replaced by multistorey guesthouses. Even the local market has moved to a big, soulless slab of concrete north of town.

But if we accept that most visitors are going to enjoy the scenery and at least some of the activities, if not the misfit Greco-Laotian architecture of the guesthouses, then it's the 'TV bars' and their 'happy' menus that provoke the real love and hate. For some travellers, sitting on an axe pillow, sucking down a shake laced with marijuana/mushrooms/opium/*yaba* (methamphetamine) and tripping through endless reruns of *Friends* is heaven on earth. For others, it's a nightmare.

If you're in the latter camp then take heart because it's easy enough to escape this scene by staying a bit away from the centre. It's also reassuring that the locals seem to have accepted this influx of *falang* without losing their sense of humour. And as Vang Vieng continues to evolve, its accommodation options have too. There are still plenty of cheap guesthouses where you can sleep off a hangover between long nights in the island bars, but there are now also more luxurious offerings.

No matter what you think of the Khao San Rd side of Vang Vieng's personality, you can't deny that this is a beautiful part of the world. So even if you're not a fan of *Friends*, it's worth stopping for at least a day or two.

Information

Internet cafés have popped up almost as fast as the mushrooms in Vang Vieng, most charging 300 kip per minute. New lines should reduce this price in coming years.

Agricultural Promotion Bank (Th Luang Prabang) Exchanges cash only.

BCEL (☎ 511434; 🕒 8.30am–3.30pm Mon–Sun) Exchanges cash, travellers cheques and handles cash advances on Visa, MasterCard and JCB.

BKC Bookshop (📞 7am–7pm) Second-hand novels plus guidebooks and maps.

Post office (☎ 511009) Beside the old market.

Provincial Hospital (☎ 511604) The flash new hospital is a reflection of the money coming into Vang Vieng. It now has x-ray facilities and is fine for broken bones, cuts, malaria and most noninternal injuries.

Dangers & Annoyances

Most visitors leave Vang Vieng with nothing more serious than a hangover, but this tranquil setting is also the most dangerous place in Laos for travellers. At least five people have died around here in recent years from river accidents, drug misadventures and while caving. Theft can also be a problem, with fellow travellers often the culprits. Take the usual precautions and don't leave valuables outside caves.

ON THE RIVER

Whether tubing or kayaking down the Nam Song or rafting in more turbulent waters, rivers can be dangerous. Wearing a life jacket is a must when rafting any rapids and is advisable even on the normally tranquil Nam Song, especially during the wet season when waters flow up to four times faster than normal. Tubing/rafting/kayaking companies should provide one.

When tubing, it's worth asking how long the trip should take (durations vary depending on the time of year) and allowing plenty of time to get back to Vang Vieng before dark – it's black by about 6pm in winter. If you stop for the rope swing be a little careful, as one woman drowned here when something went wrong.

Finally, don't forget that while tubing the Nam Song might be more fun when you're off your head, it's also more dangerous.

DRUGS

With so many drugs washing around Vang Vieng it's no surprise that the local police are particularly adept at sniffing out spliffs, especially late at night, and if you're caught with a stash of marijuana (or anything else) it can be expensive. The normal practice is for police to take your passport and fine you US\$500. If you don't have much cash on you, you might be able to negotiate the fine downwards. But ultimately you have broken the law and will have to pay something. Don't expect a receipt, and don't bother calling your embassy.

If you must use opium, don't mix it with too much else and certainly not with lime juice. We haven't tested this theory (our dedication to research doesn't go quite that far), but several Vang Vieng residents told us that at least one traveller has died after using opium and having an innocuous-sounding glass of lime juice! Sounds unlikely, but apparently/allegedly this mix has long been used by hill-tribe women who suicide as an ultimate act of protest against a bad husband.

CAVING

The caves around Vang Vieng are often spectacular, but being caves they come with certain hazards – they're dark, slippery and disorienting. It's easy to get lost, especially if you're torch batteries die. It's well worth hiring a guide at the cave (see below).

Sights & Activities

Vang Vieng has evolved into Laos's number-one adventure destination, with kayaking, rafting, caving, trail- and mountain-biking and world-class rock climbing all available. These activities tend to be more popular than the sights, which are mainly monasteries dating from the 16th and 17th centuries. Among these, **Wat Si Vieng Song** (Wat That), **Wat Kang** and **Wat Si Suman** are the most notable. Over the river are a couple of villages to which Hmong have been relocated, which are accessible by bicycle or motorbike (see p125).

CAVES

Following, we've described several of the most accessible *tham* (caves). Most are signed in English as well as Lao, and an admission fee ranging from US\$0.10 to US\$1 is collected at the entrance to each cave. A guide (often a young village boy) will lead you through the cave for a small fee; bring water and a torch (flashlight), and be sure your batteries aren't about to die.

For more extensive multicave tours, most guesthouses can arrange a guide. Trips including river tubing and cave tours cost around US\$8/13 for a half/full day.

Tham Jang (Tham Chang)

📍📍
The most famous of the caves, **Tham Jang** (Tham Chang; Map p124; admission US\$1; 🕒 8am–11.30am & 1-

4.30pm), was used as a bunker in defence against marauding *jün haw* (Yunnanese Chinese) in the early 19th century (*jang* means 'steadfast'). Stairs lead up to the main cavern entrance.

The main cave chamber isn't the most impressive, but it does afford magnificent views over the river valley through an opening in the limestone wall. A cool spring at the foot of the cave feeds into the river and you can swim up here about 80m into the cave. Inside are electric lights, which the caretakers turn on once you've paid the admission fee. You can swim outside the cave for free; not a bad option.

To get there, walk south to the Vang Vieng Resort where you must pay a US\$0.20 fee to cross the grounds, plus US\$0.20 for a bike. The cave is signed on the far side of the bridge.

Tham Phu Kham

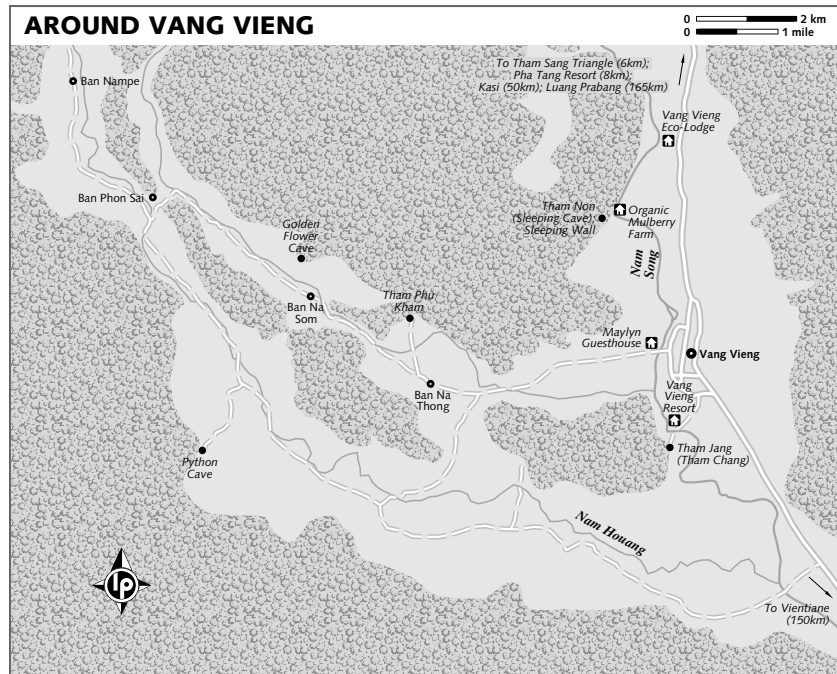
📍📍
Vast **Tham Phu Kham** (Blue Lagoon; Map p124; admission US\$0.50) is considered sacred by Lao and is popular largely due to the lagoon in the cave. The beautiful green-blue waters are perfect for a dip after the stiff climb. The main cave chamber contains a Thai bronze reclining Buddha, and from here deeper galleries branch off into the mountain. To get there, cross the bridge and walk or pedal 6km along a scenic but unpaved road to the village of Ban Na Thong. From Ban Na Thong follow the signs towards the cliff and a stiff 200m climb through scrub forest.

Tham Sang Triangle

A popular half-day trip that's easy to do on your own takes in Tham Sang plus three other caves within a short walk. Begin this caving odyssey by riding a bike or taking a jumbo 13km north along Rte 13, turning left a few hundred metres beyond the barely readable Km 169 stone. A rough road leads to the river, where a boatman will ferry you across to Ban Tham Sang (US\$0.50 return). Tham Sang itself is right here, as is a small restaurant.

Tham Sang (Tham Xang; admission US\$0.20), meaning 'Elephant Cave', is a small cavern containing a few Buddha images and a Buddha 'footprint', plus the (vaguely) elephant-shaped stalactite that gives the cave its name. It's best visited in the morning when light enters the cave.

From Tham Sang a signed path takes you 1km northwest through rice fields to the entrances of **Tham Loup** and **Tham Hoi** (admission



for both US\$0.50). The entrance to Tham Hoi is guarded by a large Buddha figure; reportedly the cave continues about 3km into the limestone and an underground lake. Tham Loup is a large and delightfully untouched cavern with some impressive stalactites.

About 400m south of Tham Hoi, along a well-used path, is the highlight of this trip, **Tham Nam** (admission US\$0.50). The cave is about 500m long and a tributary of the Nam Song flows out of its low entrance. In the dry season you can wade into the cave, but when the water is higher you need to take a tube from the friendly woman near the entrance; the tube and headlamp are included in the entrance fee. Dragging yourself through the tunnel on the fixed rope is fun.

From Tham Nam an easy 1km walk brings you back to Ban Tham Sang. This loop is usually included in the kayaking/trekking/tubing combo trip run by most Vang Vieng tour operators.

KAYAKING

Kayaking is almost (but not quite) as popular as tubing and trips typically include visits to

caves and villages and traverse a few rapids, the danger of which depends on the speed of the water. There are loads of operators and prices are about US\$8/12 per person for a half/whole day. Kayaking trips to Vientiane involve a lot of paddling and part of the trip is by road.

Not all guides are as well trained as they could be. Before using a cheap operator, check the equipment and the guides' credentials, and ask other travellers.

RAFTING

The brutal Grade 4 and 5 rapids along the magical Nam Ngum are easily the most thrilling river ride around Vang Vieng. Two-day expeditions begin with a drive into the previously off-limits area formerly known as the Saisombun Special Zone (see p129) to put in on the Nam Ngum. A day's paddling takes you to Ang Nam Ngum, where you sleep on an island in the lake and finish with a ride to Vientiane.

Choosing a company with experienced guides is the best way to maximise safety. Guides, of course, come and go, but those at Green Discovery and Xplore-Asia are generally pretty good; ask around before you sign

WEST VANG VIENG LOOP

To get right into the heart of the limestone karsts rising out of the rice paddies opposite Vang Vieng, consider this loop by motorbike or bicycle (see Map p124). The scenery is stunning but the roads are not, so give yourself plenty of time. The whole circuit, including the road to Nampe and diversions to see caves, took us about six hours and was 43km. Not going to Nampe shaves off about 10km. It's best done on a trail bike, though possible on smaller motos or mountain bikes. It's much more difficult, if not impossible, in the wet season.

Starting from the road running past Maylyn Guest House, head west for about 4km and keep right when the road splits. You'll pass through the Lao Loum village of **Ban Na Thong** and after 2km come to another fork and a sign pointing right to **Tham Phu Kham** (Blue Lagoon; p123), about 700m along a track.

Back on the main track, continue west and you'll soon be in **Na Som**, a village of Hmong who have been resettled here. Around here the vegetation on the karsts is scarred by slash-and-burn farming. Just beyond Na Som are signs to **Golden Flower Cave**. Reaching it involves walking through rice fields, climbing a fence and following two white arrows for a few minutes. The cave is about 50m up the hill – look into the undergrowth for the vague stairs. It's barely worth the effort.

Continuing west a beautiful stretch of track hugs the edge of the karsts and crosses a couple of streams, that could be difficult in the wet, and eventually comes to **Ban Phon Sai**. Here the track joins with a better dirt road, but first you need to cross the Nam Houang (Houang River), which is tricky in the wet season.

You have a choice now: continue 5km west through more dramatic scenery to **Ban Nampe**, a pretty village but nothing more, or start heading back east along the southern route. About 6km southeast of Ban Phon Sai, over another couple of creeks, signs point across a small bridge to a track to **Python Cave**, about 800m away. Once you've seen this, it's plain sailing back to Vang Vieng. Keep along the road, then go left at the junction (follow the power poles), immediately cross a stream and soon you'll be back on the main track, loop complete.

up. Rafting is best and safest between October and March.

ROCK CLIMBING

In just a few years the limestone walls around Vang Vieng have gained a reputation as some of the best climbing in Southeast Asia. One experienced climber we met had spent a week in world-renowned Krabi in Thailand, then a week climbing in Vang Vieng. He promptly reported that he'd had a much better time climbing the routes in Vang Vieng.

More than 100 routes have been identified by several well-regarded international teams and most have been bolted. The routes are rated between 4 and 8b, with the majority being in or near a cave and less than 20m high. The most popular climbing spots are at **Tham Non (Sleeping Cave)**, with more than 20 routes, and the tougher **Sleeping Wall** nearby, where some routes have difficult overhangs.

The climbing season usually runs between October and May, with routes too wet at other times. **Green Discovery** (☎ 511440;

www.greencoverylaos.com) runs a highly professional operation with experienced guides and equipment. It also sells a handy guide to the various climbs, with basic maps, and conducts three-day beginners' courses.

TUBING

Virtually everyone who comes to Vang Vieng goes tubing down the Nam Song in an inflated tractor-tyre tube. The 3.5km trip from near the Organic Mulberry Farm, north of Vang Vieng, has become such a popular rite of passage on the Southeast Asia backpacker circuit that 'bars' have been set up on islands and beaches along the route, selling Beerlao and food, among other things. The tubing operators have formed a cartel so all tubing is organised from a small building where the old market once was. Prices are fixed at US\$3.50 and include your trip to the launch point. There is, however, a catch.

There's a contract that, among other things, says you must return the tube or pay a US\$7 fine. This is fair enough, but it gets dodgy when you've finished the trip,

have planted yourself at one of the island bars and a kid offers to take your tube back for you. What a good idea, you might think. If you do think that, you'll have someone knocking on your door the next morning asking for US\$7. The other thing you should remember is to take something – a sarong, perhaps – to put on when you finish the trip and have to walk through town. The locals don't appreciate people walking around in bikinis as much as you might think.

In times of high water, rapids along the Nam Song can be quite daunting; see *Dangers & Annoyances* p122.

Tours

Several companies operate so-called adventure tours out of Vang Vieng. Prices and standards vary, though the following have good reputations:

Green Discovery (☎ 511440; www.greendiscoverylao.com; Th Luang Prabang) Green Discovery is the biggest and most reliable operator, offering trekking, kayaking, rafting, rock climbing and caving. Recommended.

LV Natural Tours (☎ 020-5208283; lavone_thipsady@yahoo.com) Good-value kayaking and trekking. Vone (a guide) gets good feedback.

Xplore-Asia (☎ 030-520 0746, 020-2255176; www.xplore-asia.com; Th Luang Prabang) Good for kayaking.

Sleeping

Vang Vieng has some of the best-value rooms in Laos, and prices often fall even further in low season. Prices in Vang Vieng haven't changed much in several years.

BUDGET

Pan's Place (☎ 511484; www.pansplace.net; r US\$2-6) Pan's has had a makeover but you'll probably find the atmosphere more appealing than the basic but clean rooms. The 'backyard' has everything the backpacker could want – a TV *sala* with big screen, bar, restaurant and kiddie pool – but not a single Lao the night we drank there.

our pick **Maylyn Guest House** (☎ 020-5604095; jophus_foley@hotmail.com; r US\$3-6) On the far side of the Nam Song, the Maylyn's 15 rooms are set in a lush, butterfly-filled garden beside a stream. The mix of bungalows and rooms with and without bathrooms aren't luxurious, but they're clean and the atmosphere is good. Owner Joe can advise on various hikes in the surrounding peaks, the West Vang Vieng Loop (p125) and rents trail bikes and a range

of bicycles. Food is served at reasonable prices, the barbecued fish is a highlight.

Dok Khoun 1 Guest House (☎ 511032; r US\$3-7; ☺) Right in the centre of town, the Dok Khoun 1 has long been popular for its clean rooms and fair prices. A solid choice.

Saysong Guest House (☎ 511130; saysong1@yahoo.com; r US\$4-15) This family-run place has a good atmosphere, popular communal balconies and a mix of rooms, some overlooking the island and river, others without a bathroom.

Le Jardin Organique (☎ 020-5474643; r US\$4-15) These 26 bungalows and rooms are in a fantastic riverside position and the atmosphere here is upbeat but low-hassle. Price varies depending on facilities and proximity to the river.

Khamphone Guest House (☎ 511062; r US\$5-10; ☺) Khamphone's three buildings on the southern edge of town offer good-value rooms; the US\$10 options with TV, air-con and fridge are best.

Villa Malany (☎ 511083; malany-guesthouse@hotmail.com; Th Luang Prabang; r US\$5-12; ☺) This four-storey Greco-Laotian style place has clean but unremarkable rooms in the centre of town.

Vang Vieng Orchid (☎ 020-2202259; r US\$6-10; ☺) On the banks of the Nam Song north of the old market, this three-storey place has 20 clean, spacious rooms, 12 of which have balconies and wonderful views over Don Khang and the karst peaks beyond. Rooms 101-4, 201-4 and 301-4 have the views, though noise from revellers on Don Khang (see p128) can make it hard to sleep.

Also recommended:

Bountang Guest House (☎ 511328; dm/tw US\$1/3) Small, simple fan rooms and Vang Vieng's cheapest dorm; but one bathroom for 12 beds...

Chanthala Guest House (☎ 511146; r US\$2-8) Psychedelic sheets in some of the cheapest rooms in town.

Moukdavanh Guesthouse (☎ 020-5812913; bungalows US\$4) Several bungalows with double beds, fans and hot-water bathrooms around a well-kept garden.

Phoubane Guesthouse (☎ 511037; s/tw US\$4/6) Tranquil riverside setting but still crawling distance to town. Simple bungalows, some on very edge of the river.

Seng Duen Guesthouse (☎ 511138; r US\$3-10; ☺) A mix of rooms, a bit out of town. The big draw is the pool.

Riverside Bungalows (☎ 511035; r US\$4-12; ☺) Good riverside location, but less character and value than some.

At the north end of town are three small, new places not far from the river that have

a refreshing amount of soul. First up is the **Nam Song Garden** (☎ 511544; arnelao@hotmail.com; r US\$5), with just five rooms but an atmosphere as serene as owner Arné. A little further is **Champa Lao** (☎ 020-5018501; www.thelongwander.com; r US\$2-3), a real old-style Lao guesthouse in a wooden house with simple rooms, a communal *sala* and a good feel. Finally the **Sunset Home** (☎ 020-5623297; r US\$4-6) has bungalows with hot-water bathrooms.

There are a couple of cheap places to stay on Don Khang, but given it's usually very loud very late, it's only recommend for insomniacs or those expecting to be too numb to care.

MIDRANGE

These places all have prime riverfront locations between the old market and the bridge.

Thavonsouk Resort (☎ 511096; www.thavonsouk.com; r US\$18-75; ☺) Thavonsouk was one of the first Vang Vieng lodgings, and it's come a long way. There are now 39 rooms crammed onto the property representing different eras and price ranges. Look at a few.

our pick **Elephant Crossing** (☎ 511232; d/ind breakfast US\$25-30, find breakfast US\$45; ☺) With almost every room boasting a balcony overlooking the Nam Song and out to the dramatic karsts, it's hard to beat this place. That the rooms are comfortable, relatively stylish and fair value doesn't hurt, either. Prices fall US\$5 in low season.

Ban Sabai Bungalows (Xayoh Riverside Bungalows; ☎ 511088; r US\$25-30; ☺) These modern bungalows in a serene riverside setting are a good choice. Some rooms have a bathtub and there are two romantic 'singles' with a double bed and balcony over a pond. There is a riverside bar-restaurant.

Vansana Hotel (☎ 511598; www.vansanahotel-group.com; r/ind breakfast US\$30-50; ☺) The 38 rooms here are comfortable if not desperately stylish, though quite a few don't have a view. It does, however, have a very nice pool.

OUT OF TOWN

If Vang Vieng town isn't your bag, head out of town for a quieter location.

Organic Mulberry Farm (☎ 511220; www.laofarm.org; r US\$3-5) Known locally as *sưn mán phuu đin đặng* (Phoudindaeng Mulberry Farm), this organic farm 4km north of Vang Vieng raises mulberry trees for silk and tea production. It also grows organic produce and plays a vital role in the surrounding com-

munity. Accommodation is in rooms with shared bathroom, or in a dorm with spectacular views. Volunteer workers can no longer get free board. The attached restaurant, open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, makes great vegetarian food, or drink a delicious mulberry shake before beginning your tubing trip.

Vang Vieng Resort (☎ 511050; r US\$5-10) Slightly south of town but near the river and opposite Tham Jang, Vang Vieng Resort is quiet and the cottages are comfortable, if ageing a bit.

Vang Vieng Eco-Lodge (☎ 020-2247323; r US\$5.50, bungalows US\$20-25) About 7km north of town (look for the sign after the Km 162 stone), calling this an 'eco-lodge' might be overstating it but the scenic location and attractive bungalows are still a good option away from the crowds. Lao food is served and it rents motorbikes (US\$5.50 a day). Prices fall from May to September.

Pha Tang Resort (☎ 020-5319573; Rte 13; r US\$7-10) It's a full 17km north of Vang Vieng, but the setting here is as dramatic as it gets. The rooms and bungalows sit on the Nam Song and the karst cliff of Phu Pha Tang rises almost on top of you. Rooms are simple but attractive and comfortable, and the riverside restaurant (meals US\$1 to US\$2.50) is a good place for lunch even if you're not staying. We like it.

Eating

You know by the time you sit down for your third meal that something is amiss in the Vang Vieng restaurant scene. 'This looks a lot like the menu at that other place,' is commonly heard. Usually followed by something like: 'Hang on, it is the same!' The sad truth is that several restaurants, particularly those TV bars on the main street, do serve virtually identical fare aimed squarely at perceived Western tastes. And as with most places offering such a varied selection of cuisines (usually including Lao, Thai, Chinese, Italian, American, French and with a Rasta option), none of it is done particularly well.

There are, however, a few decent eateries – which even have their own menus. Most restaurants are open from about 7am or 8am until about 11pm, though in the low season hours can be shorter. Note that this is just a small selection of restaurants we know to be reliable. You don't need a guidebook to find the others, just look around.

HAPPINESS IS A STATE OF MIND

'Don't worry, be happy' could be the national motto for Laos, but in some backpacker centres the term 'happy' has taken on a wholly different connotation. In the TV bars of Vang Vieng and the riverside bungalows of Si Phan Don (p272) seeing the word 'happy' in front of 'shake', 'pizza' or anything else does not, as one traveller was told, mean it comes with extra pineapple. The extra is usually marijuana, added in whatever quantity the shake-maker deems fit. However, it could also be mushrooms, *yaba* (methamphetamine) or opium, and these usually cost more, so orders must be specific.

For many travellers 'happy' is a well-understood alias, but there are others who innocently quaff down their shake or pizza only to spend the next 24 hours somewhere near the outer reaches of the galaxy paranoia, with no idea why. So if you'd prefer not to be nine miles high for your tubing trip, then avoid the 'happy' meals and steer well clear of anything described as 'ecstatic'. If you do fancy floating down both literally and figuratively, then at least consider wearing a life jacket.

our pick **Nokeo** (meals US\$1-3; ☎ 8am-8pm) Nokeo is one of the last remnants of the old Vang Vieng. There are no bells or whistles, but it's been around for years because it serves consistently good Lao food at prices low enough that locals can afford to eat here. The succulent *ping paa* is excellent, as are the various *laap* and curries. It's the most Lao place to eat in Vang Vieng.

our pick **Organic Mulberry Farm Café** (☎ 511174; Th Luang Prabang; meals US\$1-3.50) The ever-growing and innovative menu here is one of the best in Vang Vieng, especially for vegetarians. The mulberry shakes (US\$0.80) and pancakes (US\$1.30) are famous and everything is fairly priced. You can also eat at the organic farm itself (p127).

Luang Prabang Bakery (☎ 511145; meals US\$1.50-7) This long-running bakery serves good breakfasts, pastries and strong coffee, but the pizzas (US\$5.50 to US\$6.50) and other meals can be a bit pricey.

Kayoh Restaurant (☎ 511088; meals US\$2-4) The typically international menu has a heavy Italian influence; pizzas (US\$2.50) and pastas (US\$1.20) mix with burgers (US\$1.80) and a pretty good caramel flan (US\$0.80). The riverside patio is quite romantic by night and also has several sun loungers. The same menu is available at Kayoh Café, located on Th Luang Prabang.

Kangaroo Sunset Bar (☎ 020-7714291; meals US\$2-4.50) This Australian-run place is a decent sunset and evening drinking hole (it does have the coldest Beers in town), and the Lao, Thai and fusion-ish food is very edible indeed. The garlic bread and prawn rolls are delicious.

Erawan Restaurant (☎ 511093; Th Luang Prabang; meals US\$2-5) The good Asian and European food, lovely owner and chilled ambience refreshingly free of TVs makes Erawan a perennial favourite. Recommended.

Via Via Pizza (☎ 511543; Th Luang Prabang; pizzas US\$4-6) Probably the best pizzas in Vang Vieng.

The Indian restaurants are predictably popular, especially with vegetarians. Tiny **Nisha** (☎ 511579; Th Luang Prabang; meals US\$2-4) lacks atmosphere but the food is reliable. A few metres south is another branch of the empire **Nazim** (☎ 511214; Th Luang Prabang; meals US\$2-5); while **Aysha Indian** (☎ 511369; meals US\$1-3) offers something a bit different with its riverside balcony location and mix of Pakistani, Indian and Lao dishes.

Drinking

You can drink in every guesthouse and restaurant in town and you won't need a guidebook to track down the most happening places. In general, they're split into the open-air, anything-goes bars on Don Khang (aka 'the island'), and more familiar-looking places on or just off Th Luang Prabang.

On Don Khang, the **Island Bar** (☎ 020-539 9954), Namsong Island Café, Lucky Bar, Smile Bar and Sunset Bar are all competing for your business. We trust you to sniff out the best party.

In town, **Jaidee's** (Th Luang Prabang; ☎ 8am-1am) has consistently good music and Supermao (ask him) Jaidee maintains an upbeat vibe. **Sakura** (☎ 5-11.30pm) has regular DJs and is the best place to dance, though few people seem to bother.

Getting There & Away

Buses, pick-ups and *sáwngtháew* continue to depart from a simple **bus terminal** (☎ 511341; Rte 13) on the eastern side of the airstrip, a few minutes' walk from town. This is mildly surprising given a new bus station has been built 2km north of town, opposite the New Market. No-one we met seemed to know if or when transport would move to the new station, but wherever you end up jumbo drivers will be there trying to talk you into taking a ride into town.

Minibuses and air-con buses catering especially to *falang* often leave from one of the guesthouses in town, but don't expect any extra leg room. Tickets are available almost everywhere, though buses do fill fast in peak season. Anyone who suffers motion sickness should take necessary precautions before the trip to Luang Prabang.

VIENTIANE

For buses from Vientiane see p114.

Heading south from Vang Vieng, regular buses leave for Vientiane (US\$2.50, 3½ to 4½ hours, 156km) at 5.30am, 7am, 12.30pm and 1.30pm. Alternatively, pick-ups (US\$2.50, 3½ to 4½ hours) leave about every 20 minutes from 5am until 4pm and as they're often not full can be quite enjoyable.

A minibus (US\$7, three hours) leaves at 9am and air-con buses (US\$5.50, three hours) at 10am and 1pm. You might also be able to jump on buses coming through from Luang Prabang at about 1pm.

LUANG PRABANG

Buses for Luang Prabang (US\$7, seven to 11 hours, 168km) stop for about five minutes en route from Vientiane about every hour between 11am and 8pm. Minibuses (US\$9.50, six to eight hours) and air-con buses (US\$9.50) leave between 9am and 10am, the number varying depending on demand. All these services stop at Kasi and Muang Phu Khoun (for Phonsavan), though you might need to pay the full Luang Prabang fare on some.

For transport from Luang Prabang, see p155.

PHONSAVAN

There's one bus to Phonsavan (US\$7.50, six to seven hours, 219km) which leaves between about 9am and 9.30am.

Getting Around

Vang Vieng is easily negotiated on foot. Renting a bicycle (about US\$1 a day) is also popular; they're available almost everywhere. For cave sites out of town you can charter *sáwngtháew* near the old market site – expect to pay around US\$10 per trip up to 20km north or south of town.

VANG VIENG TO LUANG PRABANG

The road between Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang winds its way up over some stunningly beautiful mountains and back down to the Mekong at Luang Prabang. If you suffer from motion sickness, take precautions before you begin. In the middle of a fertile valley filled with rice fields, **Kasi**, 56km north of Vang Vieng, is a lunch stop for bus passengers and truck drivers travelling on this route. The surrounding area is full of interesting minority villages, but few people bother to stop as there isn't much in the way of tourist infrastructure. There are, however, a couple of simple guesthouses.

About 40km north of Kasi, at the T-junction between Rte 13 and Rte 7 east to Phon-savan, lies **Muang Phu Khoun**, site of a former French garrison. Surrounded by jagged, mist-shrouded mountain peaks, Muang Phu Khoun lies near the heart of Hmong country and it was only in the 1920s, when the French extended Rte 13 this far, that it became linked to the rest of French Indochina. During the Second Indochina War the RLA and PL constantly fought for control of the town (then known as Sala Phu Khun) because of its strategic location on the road to the Plain of Jars battlefields. Other than a market, a few shops and a single guesthouse, there is little to see.

As you go further north towards Luang Prabang, you'll start getting views (to the east starting at about Km 228) of Phu Phra, a craggy limestone peak considered holy to animist hill tribes and Buddhists alike.

(FORMER) SAISOMBUN SPECIAL ZONE

ເຂດພິເສດໄຊສົມບູນ

After 30 years as a no-go zone, off-limits due to an armed insurgency by Hmong rebels that has persisted since 1975, the Lao government has finally decided the Saisombun Special Zone is no longer required. The zone was actually a 4506-sq-km area of rugged mountains and plateaus at the northeast corner of Vientiane Province, stretching into Xieng Khuang

GOING TO LONG CHENG: THE CIA'S SECRET CITY *Andrew Burke*

Long Cheng, the CIA's 'secret city' in its long war in Laos, had been somewhere I'd wanted to visit for years. Finally, it seemed, with the Saisombun Special Zone (p129) disbanded, getting there would be possible. So with rented dirt bikes, sunglasses and full tanks of gas, my friend Wil and I set off from Vang Vieng. First, though, a little background....

From the early 1960s until May 1975, Long Cheng (also spelt Long Tien) was the heart and soul of the American war against communism in Laos. Long Cheng means 'clear valley' and it was the relatively open space, combined with a population of Hmong who opposed the Pathet Lao-North Vietnamese push, that appealed to the CIA when they chose it as a base for training Hmong guerrillas (see p38).

As the fighting intensified on the Plain of Jars, just 60km north, so Long Cheng grew. By 1964 a 1260m-long runway had been built and sealed. Storage facilities, a communications centre and housing were constructed. The charismatic Hmong General Vang Pao, who was even then the most important man in Laos as far as the US was concerned, coordinated his fighters from Long Cheng. By 1966 it was one of the largest US installations on foreign soil; by 1969 Long Cheng had become one of the busiest airports on earth, with a takeoff or landing roughly every minute.

The planes were mainly a mix of small, propeller-driven T-28 attack planes flown by Hmong, Lao and Thai pilots, and tiny Cessnas flown by American Forward Air Controllers (FACs). These guys were known as Ravens and lived an almost comic-book superhero existence: plucked out of the regular military in Vietnam and signed up to the 'Steve Canyon Program', they seemingly disappeared into a world of secrecy when they arrived in Laos, even flying in civilian clothes because the US was, as far as everyone else was concerned, not actually fighting in Laos.

Long Cheng wasn't defeated until after the US left. By that time, in May 1975, there were almost 50,000 Hmong fighters and refugees living in the valley. In the chaotic US evacuation thousands were airlifted out, but tens of thousands more were left behind. Many of those chose to continue the struggle, and even today the insurgency has a few diehard adherents. It's little wonder, then, that Long Cheng has been off limits for decades...

The road leading up to Huay Kham, where the enormous Australian-run Phu Bia copper mine cuts a colossal red scar across the earth, wasn't too bad. But soon after we turned north the sign announcing the 'Long Cheng track' was ominous. Fortunately, the track with all its washouts and precipitous drops was at least as spectacular as it was dangerous. It was like

Province. It was established because the area is home to a large population of Hmong, and was the Hmong/CIA headquarters during the Second Indochina War. Saisombun means 'bountiful victory', and while the government has controlled the towns and places like Long Cheng since 1975, the irony is that the Hmong insurgents have had enough control over the rest of the area (or at least had the Lao army worried enough) that the authorities felt it too dangerous to open up to just anyone. The victory, it seemed, was in name only.

Despite a reported confrontation north of Vang Vieng in early 2007, the government has decided to disband the zone, close its administrative offices in Saisombun town and open it up to all comers (in theory, at least). This change was motivated by several factors, including the lack of insurgent attacks in the

area and the rapid development of foreign-run mining operations. But the main factor has been a series of surrenders by Hmong groups that have been pursued mercilessly by Lao and Vietnamese troops for most of the last 30 years. These people have been living in the forests of this area since 1975 and many have lived their entire lives on the run in the most primitive circumstances. Some Hmong have fled to Thailand and eventually been resettled in the United States. The fate of many who have surrendered remains unknown.

Rafting trips out of Vang Vieng start in the zone, and it's possible to take infrequent buses from Ban Tha Heua, on Rte 13 at the north end of Ang Nam Ngum, to Ban Huay Kham (where there's a guesthouse) and the vast and already controversial Phu Bia mine site, run by Pan Australian Mining. Road conditions are rugged, to put it mildly. In your own transport

riding through a traditional Chinese painting; jagged peaks and steep-sided valleys, surrounded by hills either forested or cleared for planting. We passed through only a few villages, some little more than military garrisons, before eventually stopping at an advanced base of Phu Bia Mining where a serious North American was cleaning a decades-old mortar with a toothbrush. He was assessing the amount of unexploded ordnance (UXO) lying around; his initial appraisal was that back here about 10km south of Long Cheng it wasn't too bad, but around Long Cheng itself the ordnance was 'everywhere'.

It turned out we couldn't make it in a day. The wiring for my headlight had broken and with mists washing into the valleys as the shadows grew long, it was too far back to the nearest guesthouse - in Huay Kham. Instead we stopped in a Hmong village where the headman reluctantly agreed to put us up. In Laos, and particularly among the Hmong, this reluctance seemed unusual. Later we learned Westerners are not allowed to stay in Hmong villages in this part of Laos. The lodgings were simple but as generous as they could offer. Dinner, a mix of rice and pot noodles, was prepared over a fire contained in a cluster bomb casing. Conversation was too interesting to safely report here.

Our bikes were wheeled into our room, whether out of fear they'd be stolen or fear they'd be seen by the military, we weren't sure. What was certain was the village was constantly under surveillance. When we asked about the lights on the hill across the valley the answer was simple: 'Soldiers'.

The village woke early and it was cold when we set off through the morning mists. After another hour of long, steep climbs and shorter but equally steep descents we rounded a bend to see a boom gate ahead, and several surprised Lao soldiers. This was Long Cheng, at 1000m elevation, and the runway was above us to the right. Beyond the valley stretched off to some menacing-looking peaks.

Unfortunately, our stay was brief. A colonel soon appeared and his reception wasn't warm. No, we couldn't come in for a look around, he told us, this is still a military base. We tried several different angles and reasons but each was promptly rejected. Finally, the colonel laughed, turned on his heel and said: 'Come back in five years' as he strode off.

For more on Long Cheng read: *The Sky is Falling: An Oral History of the CIA's Evacuation of the Hmong from Laos* by Gayle Morrison, and *The Ravens: Pilots of the Secret War of Laos* by Christopher Robbins. See also 'Secret Army and the Hmong', p38, for further details about Hmong involvement with the CIA.

(preferably a dirt bike or 4WD) it's also possible to reach Ban Huay Kham and Saisombun town via a mining road from near Tha Bok, on Rte 13 south. In theory, if you make it to Ban Huay Kham or Saisombun town you should be able to continue on to Phonsavan via an

eastward loop. However, we haven't tried this so ask around before you set off.

Long Cheng, the 'secret city' from where the Hmong and CIA operated during the Second Indochina War (see opposite), is reachable but remains off limits to visitors.

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