

Laos



Laos is different to its neighbours. Where Vietnam and China are intense and entrepreneurial, Laos is the essence of laid-back *c'est la vie*. Where Thailand sweeps away the past in its pursuit of modernity, Laos continues to function from its stock of French-era buildings and ancient Buddhist wat.

For travellers, Laos' apparently serene way of life is a tonic for the soul. It's Southeast Asia's most relaxing destination, somewhere to shift down the gears while at the same time soaking up a heady mix of culture and ecology that's fast disappearing elsewhere.

In both the mountainous north and the dramatic karsts, rivers and plateaus of the south, Laos has a growing reputation for eco- and cultural tourism. These take advantage of vast swathes of pristine wilderness, hundreds of relatively untouched villages populated by scores of ethnic groups and the omnipotent Mekong River that ties it all together. Indeed, getting off the beaten track here is both eminently possible and thoroughly encouraged.

In between is Vientiane, arguably the most laid-back capital on earth with, dollar for dollar, some of its best dining. In Vientiane you'll see the modern face of Laos, where a new urban elite drinks cocktails, races motorbikes and identifies more with Bangkok than Luang Prabang. This, however, is the exception. The rule is just down the road, where subsistence village living is little different from what it was centuries ago.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Decide for yourself whether Unesco-listed **Luang Prabang** (p290) is the most beautiful town in Southeast Asia.
- Meet ethnic villagers and soak up the scenery as you trek through the **Nam Ha NPA** (p311)
- Take a boat through the natural phenomenon that is **Tham Kong Lo** (p316), the astonishing 7km-long limestone cave
- Get thee to **Wat Phu Champasak** (p328) at dawn to feel the mystery and beauty of these Khmer-era temple ruins
- Experience the 'real Laos' – and spend some money where it's needed most – by staying with a family in a village **homestay** (p335)



FAST FACTS

- **Area** 236,000 sq km
- **Capital** Vientiane
- **Country Code** ☎ 856
- **Population** 5.6 million
- **Money** US\$1 = 9600 kip
- **Seasons** high Dec-Feb & Jul-Aug; dry Nov-Apr, wet May-Oct
- **Phrases** *sabqi-dji* (hello), *sábcqi-díi* (goodbye), *khàwp jqi* (thank you)

HISTORY

From the early Khmer influence around Wat Phu in southern Laos right up to the present day, the peoples living in what we know as Laos have mainly been reacting to the politics and aspirations of more powerful neighbours in Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand and China. Even its first taste of nationhood, with the rise of the Lan Xang kingdom, was achieved thanks to Khmer military muscle.

Kingdom of Lan Xang

The kingdom of Lan Xang emerged in the mid-14th century when Khmer-backed Lao warlord Fa Ngum conquered Wieng Chan (Vientiane), Xieng Khuang, a chunk of north-eastern Thailand (which is still mainly ethnically Lao), Muang Sawa (Luang Prabang) and eastwards to Champa and the Annamite Mountains.

It was Fa Ngum who gave his kingdom the title still favoured by travel romantics and businesses – Lan Xang, or (Land of a) Million Elephants. He also made Theravada Buddhism the state religion and adopted the symbol of Lao sovereignty that remains in use today, the Pha Bang Buddha image, after which Luang Prabang is named.

Lan Xang waxed and waned under other kings (commemorated today in street names such as Samsenthai and Setthathirat), reaching its peak in the 17th century when it was briefly the dominant force in Southeast Asia. By the 18th century, Lan Xang had crumbled, falling under the control of the Siamese, who coveted much of modern-day Laos as a buffer zone against the expansionist French. Any hope of a restoration of Lao power was savagely crushed in 1827, when the Siamese put down

a rebellion led by Lao prince Chao Anou by razing Vientiane to the ground and carting off most of the population.

The French

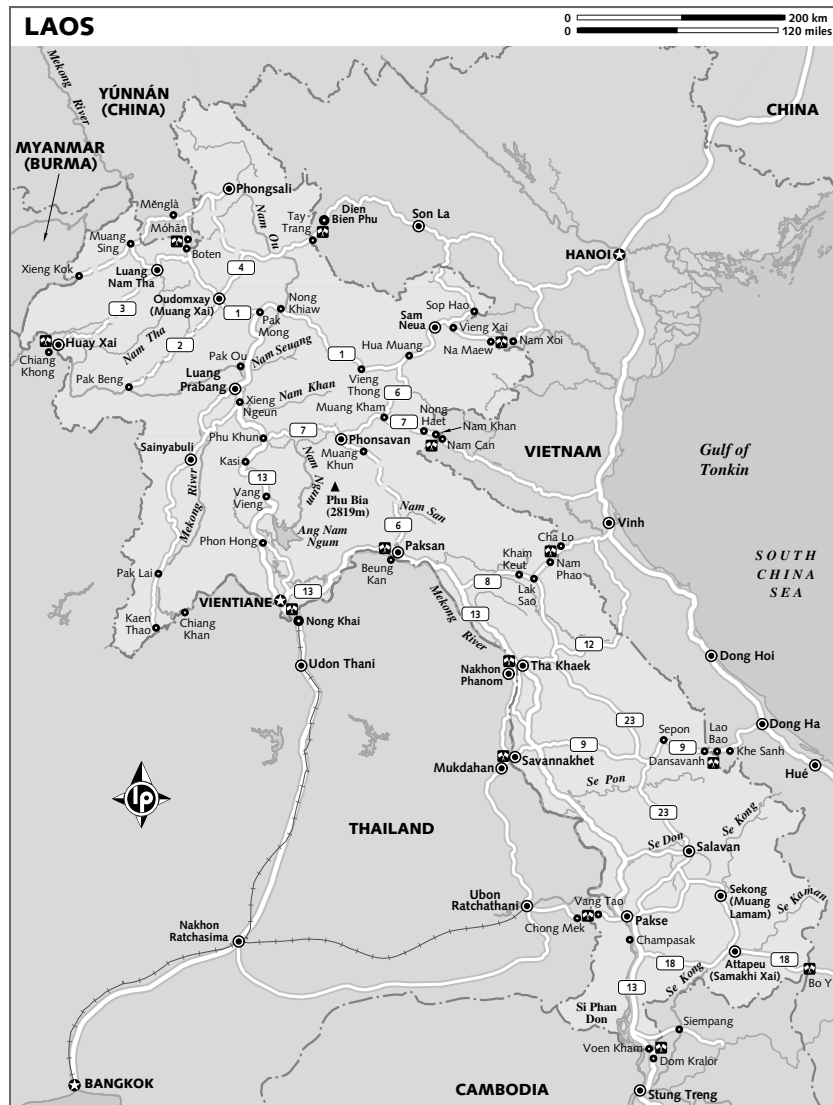
Soon after taking over Annam and Tonkin (modern-day Vietnam), the French used a mix of sweet talk and gunboat diplomacy to bully Siam into relinquishing all territory east of the Mekong, and Laos was born. France had a fairly dim view of Laos' usefulness and did virtually nothing for the country, except permit opium production to flourish and allow its colonial administrators to become renowned for their 'lotus-eating' lifestyle.

Laos' diverse ethnic make-up and short history as a nation-state meant nationalism was slow to form. The first nationalist movement, the Lao Issara (Free Lao), was created to prevent the country's return to French rule after the invading Japanese left at the end of WWII. The French did come back but departed for good in 1953. Full sovereignty was followed by 20 years of chaos as Laos became a shadowy stage on which the clash of communist ambition and American anxiety over the perceived Southeast Asian 'domino effect' played itself out. Multiple parties with multiple agendas eventually settled into two factions: the communist Pathet Lao supported by the North Vietnamese, Chinese and Soviets, and the right-wing elite backed by the US government, which saw Laos rather disproportionately as the crucial Southeast Asian 'domino'.

War & Revolution

From the early 1960s until 1973 Laos became the theatre for the 'Secret War'. This was a conflict no-one acknowledged but which saw the North Vietnamese funnel massive amounts of war materiel down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in eastern Laos, while the US responded with the largest bombing campaign in history. Despite this, the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese slowly won over more of the country, both militarily and through their socialist ideas. The US withdrawal in 1973 saw Laos divided up between Pathet Lao and non-Pathet Lao, but within two years the communists had taken over and the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) was created under the leadership of Kaysone Phomvihane.

Around 10% of Laos' population fled, mostly into Thailand. The remaining opponents of



the government – notably tribes of Hmong (highland dwellers) who had fought with and been funded by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) – were suppressed, often brutally.

The Lao government quickly recognised the shortcomings of the socialist experiment and since the 1980s socialism has been softened to allow for private enterprise and foreign

investment, if not political dissent. Laos entered Asean (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) in 1997, two years after Vietnam.

Laos Today

In 2004 the USA promoted Laos to Normal Trade Relations, cementing the end to a trade embargo in place since 1975. As has been the

case since the French arrived, Laos continues to rely on foreign aid to run its economy, though the source of this 'aid' is changing as China commits ever more money to development – mostly for the end benefit of Chinese firms. The rush to increase its capacity to earn foreign exchange has seen Laos agree to a disturbing number of hydroelectric dam projects; expect to hear more about these in coming years.

Politically, the Party remains firmly in control. And with patrons like one-party China and Vietnam, there seems little incentive for Laos to move towards any meaningful form of democracy. The 30-year-long Hmong 'insurgency' seems on its last legs, with thousands of starving, stunted people emerging from the forest in recent years to face a very uncertain future.

PEOPLE & THE POPULATION

The people of Laos hail from dozens of ethnic groups, many of which are also found elsewhere in the region (see Culture, p71). However, the predominant group is the Lao Loum (lowland Lao), and it's their cultural

beliefs and way of life that are known as 'Lao culture'.

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

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

Education is not as highly valued as in the West, and avoiding any undue psychological

FEELING THE 'REAL LAOS'

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

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

Villages are small, full of kids and, depending on the season, dusty or muddy. You'll be billeted with a family, usually with a maximum of two travellers per family. Toilets will be the squat variety, with scoop flush, in a dark hut at the corner of the block. You'll bathe before dinner, either in a nearby stream or river, or by using a scoop to pour water over yourself from a well, 44-gallon (170L) drum or concrete reservoir in your family's yard. Bathing is usually a public event, hence the sarong. Don't expect a mirror.

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

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

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

stress remains a cultural norm. From the typical Lao perspective, unless an activity – whether work or play – contains an element of *múan* (fun), it will probably lead to stress.

The communist era has had a marked effect on the national consciousness. The government has been at pains to encourage national pride and a ‘Lao’ identity, despite the fact that more than 30% of the country is made up of non-Lao-speaking non-Buddhist hill tribes with little connection to traditional Lao culture. Government education also ensured that knowledge of the outside world was very limited, though Thai TV is changing that.

Men dominate Lao public life, but you do not have to be in the country long to see who is really running the show. All over Laos you’ll see women staffing offices and running businesses. However, they’re still expected to organise the family and run the home – often while the husband drinks the ubiquitous *lào lào* (Lao liquor, or rice whisky) with his friends.

In many ways Lao culture is very similar to Thai culture, though more conservative because it’s had less exposure to Western influence. Cultural mores are similar (see the Dos & Don’ts boxed text, below), they share many of the same superstitions, and belief in ghosts is almost universal. However, the Lao government goes to great lengths to keep the ‘corrupting’ influences of modern Thai life at bay, most notably in a strict (superficially, at least) approach to things such as late-night drinking and prostitution.

RELIGION

Most lowland Lao are Theravada Buddhists and many Lao males choose to be ordained temporarily as monks, typically spending any-

where from a month to three years at a wat. After the 1975 communist victory, Buddhism was suppressed. But it wasn’t long before it was back in full swing, with a few alterations. Monks are still forbidden to promote *phi* (spirit) worship, which has been officially banned in Laos along with *sàiyasaat* (folk magic).

Despite the ban, *phi* worship remains the dominant non-Buddhist belief system. Even in Vientiane, Lao citizens openly perform the ceremony called *sukhwān* or *bqasii*, in which the 32 *khwān* (guardian spirits of the body) are bound to the guest of honour by white strings tied around the wrists.

Outside the Mekong River Valley, the *phi* cult is particularly strong among tribal Thai, but also many other groups. *Māw* (priests) who are trained to appease and exorcise troublesome spirits preside at important Thai Dam festivals and other ceremonies. The Khamu and Hmong-Mien tribes also practise animism; the latter group combining it with ancestral worship.

ARTS

Lao art and architecture is mostly religious in nature. Distinctively Lao is the Calling for Rain Buddha, a standing image with a rocketlike shape and hands held rigidly at his sides, fingers pointing towards the ground. Wat in Luang Prabang feature *sīm* (chapels), with steep, low roofs. The typical Lao *thāat* (stupa) is a four-sided, curvilinear, spirelike structure.

Traditional Lao art has a more limited range than its Southeast Asian neighbours, partly because Laos has a more modest history as a nation-state and partly because successive occupiers from China, Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar (Burma) and France have stolen or burnt it.

Upland crafts include gold- and silver-smithing among the Hmong and Mien tribes, and tribal Thai weaving (especially among the Thai Dam and Thai Lü). Classical music and dance have been all but lost in Laos, although performances are occasionally held in Luang Prabang and Vientiane.

Foot-tapping traditional folk music, usually featuring the *khaen* (Lao panpipe), is still quite popular and inspires many modern Lao tunes. Increasingly, though, soppy heartbreak Thai pop and its Lao imitations are the music of choice.

ECOTOURISM IN LAOS Steven Schipani

With forests covering about half of the country, 20 National Protected Areas (NPAs), 49 ethnic groups, more than 650 types of birds and hundreds of mammals, it’s no mystery why Laos is known as having Southeast Asia’s healthiest ecosystems and is a haven for travellers looking to get off the beaten path. Nowadays there are many tour companies and local tour guides offering forest trekking, cave exploration, village homestays and river journeys where the roads don’t go.

Following the success of the Nam Ha Ecotourism Project in Luang Nam Tha Province, which began in 1999, the Lao Government is actively promoting ecotourism as one way to help reduce poverty and support the protection of the environment and local culture. It is estimated that culture- and nature-based tourism generates more than half of the country’s US\$150 million in annual tourism revenue.

The Lao National Tourism Administration defines ecotourism as ‘Tourism activity in rural and protected areas that minimizes negative impacts and is directed towards the conservation of natural and cultural resources, rural socioeconomic development and visitor understanding of, and appreciation for, the places they are visiting.’

Unfortunately, some uninformed companies label everything ‘ecotourism’. Therefore it is important to determine who is the real deal and who is simply greening their pockets. Ask tour operators the following questions to ensure you are on the right track:

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

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

www.ecotourismlaos.com

ENVIRONMENT

Laos consists of 236,800 sq km of rugged geography and small population. The sum is the least changed environment in Southeast Asia. Unmanaged vegetation covers about 75% of the country, with 25% of this primary forest.

It’s a heady mix in a region that has been so badly savaged for short-term profit, and it’s pleasing to report that the Lao government is paying attention to the tourism dollars such rare, pristine environments attract (see the boxed text, above). It’s not, however, all safe.

Laos has an impressive 20 National Protected Areas (NPAs) comprising about 14% of the country. But several issues threaten these areas and, more immediately, areas that are not

protected. Illegal timber felling, the smuggling of exotic wildlife and a rush to build giant hydroelectric dams – more than 20 are planned or being built – are the main threats.

Laos is rich in wildlife, with wild elephants, jackals, bears, leopards, tigers, deer and the Irrawaddy dolphin among the best known. However, with no full national parks – areas without any human habitation – and hunting still an important source of protein for many Lao families, actually seeing these species isn’t easy. Irrawaddy dolphins are the most seriously endangered of Laos’ creatures. Their habitat is concentrated in the southern Mekong particularly around Si Phan Don, where you have the best chance of sighting

DOS & DON'TS IN LAOS

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

them. There are believed to be fewer than 100 left in the Mekong, so see them soon or, possibly, not at all.

VIENTIANE

☎ 021 / pop 300,000

As Laos opens up to the world, Vientiane is growing, but it can still mount a strong case for being the most relaxed capital city on earth. The combination of tree-lined boulevards and dozens of temples contribute to an atmosphere of timelessness, while the kaleidoscopic architectural styles reflect its historic influences: from classic Lao through Thai, Chinese, French, US and Soviet.

Today it's the stage for the subtle yet dramatic struggle between Laos' communist past and inevitably more capitalist future. You can dance to live music with trendy Lao youth, but the lyrics might have been censored. Or take in the fading glories of the revolution in the Lao National Museum, then pop across the street to another new restaurant in what is becoming one of the best-value eating cities on earth.

Vientiane isn't full of must-see sights, but the 6400 Buddha images at Wat Si Saket, the lotus-inspired lines of Pha That Luang and Patuxai are all worth a look, while the surreal Xieng Khuan (Buddha Park) is, like the city itself, not short of appeal.

HISTORY

Vientiane means Sandalwood City, and is actually pronounced Wieng Chan (the French are responsible for the modern transliteration). Vientiane's peaceful demeanour belies a history in which it's been occupied, looted, razed to the ground and eventually rebuilt by successive Vietnamese, Burmese, Siamese and French conquerors.

The Siamese invasion of 1828, in response to an attack by upstart Lao king Anouvong (Chao Anou), saw virtually every building destroyed. The French rebuilt much of Vientiane when they made it the capital of their protectorate in the early 20th century. During the 1960s and early '70s Vientiane became a den of spies on the front line of the Cold War. It was so debauched that 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'.

The Pathet Lao soon put an end to that and Vientiane was pretty dull during the 1980s and much of the '90s. Today icons of capitalism – such as multistorey shopping malls and plush hotels – signal its move into the 21st century.

ORIENTATION

The three main streets parallel to the Mekong – Th Fa Ngum, Th Setthathirat and Th Samsenthai – are the central inner city of Vientiane and are where most of the guesthouses, hotels, restaurants and bars are located. Nam Phu is the best inner-city landmark if you're catching a taxi or tuk-tuk into town. Heading northeast from Th Setthathirat is the wide boulevard of Th Lan Xang, where you'll find the Talat Sao (Morning Market) and Patuxai. Heading further north from Patuxai is Th That Luang, which is home to a number of foreign embassies and is crowned by the magnificent golden Pha That Luang, Laos' most distinctive structure.

INFORMATION

BOOKSHOPS

Kosila Bookshop 1 (Map p272; ☎ 020-224 0964; Th Chanta Khumman; ☎ 9am-5pm)

Monument Books (Map p272; ☎ 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 p272; ☎ 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 p272; ☎ 215764; www.ambafra-nce-laos.org/centre; Th Lan Xang; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-noon Sat) The 'French Centre' has a busy schedule of movies, musical and theatrical performances, a library, French and Lao language classes and a popular café.

GETTING INTO TOWN

Wattay International Airport is about 4km northwest of the city centre. Taxis cost an extortionate US\$5 into town. Many passengers simply walk about 500m to the airport gate, where you can get a tuk-tuk for about US\$2, once you've bargained.

EMERGENCY

Ambulance (☎ 195)

Fire (☎ 190)

Police (☎ 191)

Tourist police (Map p272; ☎ 251128; Th Lan Xang)

INTERNET ACCESS

There are several places on Th Setthathirat between Nam Phu 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.

PlaNNet Online (Map p272; Th Setthathirat; ☎ 8.30am-11pm) Sells prepaid internet cards (US\$5/10/20) for dial-up access.

Society Internet (Map p272; Th Samsenthai; ☎ 9am-9pm)

Star-Net Internet (Map p272; Th Nokeo Khumman; ☎ 7.30am-11pm)

MEDIA

The government-run *Vientiane Times* (US\$0.40) cleaves largely to the party line in its six editions a week. The What's On page and bus-fare table are handy. French speakers should look for the weekly *Le Rénovateur*. The *Bangkok Post*, *Economist*, *Newsweek* and *Time* can also be found in minimarts and bookshops.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Vientiane's medical facilities will do for broken bones, tropical diseases and the like, but for anything more serious get thee to Thailand and **Aek Udorn International Hospital** (☎ 0066-42-342555; www.aekudon.com), which can dispatch an ambulance to take you to Udon Thani.

In Vientiane try the following:

Australian Embassy Clinic (Map pp268-9; ☎ 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 pp268-9; ☎ 214021/2; Th Fa Ngum; ☎ 24hr) Part of the Mahasot Hospital; probably the best place for not-too-complex emergencies. Some English-speaking doctors.

MONEY

Several banks in Vientiane change cash and travellers cheques and do cash advances against credit cards for a commission. BCEL has an international ATM, but given you can only withdraw about US\$70 worth of kip at a time, it's often cheaper to get a cash advance manually.

Licensed moneychanging booths can be found in Talat Sao, among other places, and the unofficial moneychangers near Talat Sao have particularly good rates and keep longish hours.

BCEL (Map p272; ☎ 213200; cnr Th Pangkham & Th Fa Ngum; ☎ 8.30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-3pm Sat & Sun) Best rates. Longest hours. Exchange booth on Th Fa Ngum and ATM attached to the main building.

Joint Development Bank (Map p272; ☎ 213535; 75/1-5 Th Lan Xang) Usually charges the lowest commission on cash advances. Also has an ATM.

Siam Commercial Bank (Map p272; ☎ 227306; 117 Th Lan Xang)

POST

Post, Telephone & Telegraph (PTT; Map p272; cnr Th Lan Xang & Th Khu Vieng; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat & Sun) Come here for post restante.

TELEPHONE

Lao Telecom Numphu Centre (Map p272; ☎ 214470; Th Setthathirat; ☎ 9am-7pm) International fax and calls for US\$0.20 a minute, or US\$0.10 for domestic calls.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Lao National Tourism Authority (NTAL; Map p272; ☎ 212251; www.tourismlaos.com, www.ecotourismlaos.com; Th Lan Xang; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) Well worth a visit for its descriptions of provincial attractions, helpful English-speaking staff, brochures and regional maps (US\$1). Staff can arrange trips to Phu Khao Kueay NPA (p285) for no charge.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Central Vientiane has plenty of agencies that can book tours, air tickets and in some cases Thai train tickets, including the following:
A-Rasa Tours (Map p272; ☎ 213633; www.laos-info.com; Th Setthathirat; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Sat) Happy to answer questions; runs some tours.

Green Discovery (Map p272; ☎ 251564, 223022; www.greencoverylaos.com; Th Setthathirat) Large range of tours offered as well as normal travel-agent services. Good reputation.

Dangers & Annoyances

Vientiane has a very low crime rate, but readers' reports and local anecdotes suggest petty crime is rising. 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; commonsense should be an adequate defence. Violent crime is rare.

Annoyances include túk-túk drivers, who routinely overcharge; gaping holes in sidewalks that can swallow you whole as you walk home at night; and the fact that most bars and restaurants must close at 11.30pm.

SIGHTS

Pha That Luang

Tall, svelte and golden, **Pha That Luang** (Great Sacred Reliquary or Great Stupa; Map pp268-9; admission US\$0.20; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Tue-Sun) is the most important national monument in Laos, a symbol of both the Buddhist religion and Lao sovereignty. An image of the main stupa appears on the national seal. Legend has it that Ashokan missionaries from India erected a *thâat* here to enclose a piece of Buddha's breastbone as early as the 3rd century BC. Construction of the modern *thâat* began in 1566, but it was destroyed by treasure seekers after the Siamese razed the city in 1828. It was rebuilt by the French in 1900 and again in 1931 (no one liked the first job).

A high-walled cloister with tiny windows surrounds the 45m-high stupa. The cloister measures 85m on each side and contains various Buddha images. Two of the four original wat buildings that surrounded the stupa remain, with Wat That Luang Neua to the north the monastic residence of the Supreme Patriarch of Lao Buddhism.

Pha That Luang is about 4km northeast of the city centre at the end of Th That Luang. It's a decent walk, but shared túk-túks go this way, or you can hire a bike.

Wat Si Saket

Built between 1819 and 1824 by King Anouvong (Chao Anou), **Wat Si Saket** (Map p272; nr Th

Lan Xang & Th Setthathirat; admission US\$0.50; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm) was the only temple to survive the sacking of Vientiane in 1828. 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 cloister similar to – but smaller than – the one that surrounds Pha That Luang (left). The stylistic similarity to their own wats might have motivated the Siamese to spare this monastery when they crushed Chao Anou's rebellion, even as they razed many others. The French restored the temple in 1924 and again in 1930.

Wat Si Saket has several unique features. The interior walls of the cloister are riddled with small niches that contain more than 2000 silver and ceramic Buddha images. More than 300 seated and standing Buddhas of varying age, size and material (wood, stone and bronze) rest on shelves below the niches. A Khmer-style Naga Buddha is also on display, brought from a Khmer site at nearby Hat Sai Fong.

Diagonally opposite is **Haw Pha Kaew** (Map p272; Th Setthathirat; admission US\$0.50; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm), a royal temple built specifically to house the famed Emerald Buddha, but today used as a national museum of religious art; it has the best collection of Buddha images in Laos.

Patuxai

Vientiane's Arc de Triomphe replica is an imposing if slightly incongruous sight, dominating the commercial district around Th Lan Xang. Officially called **Patuxai** (Map pp268-9; Th Lan Xang; admission US\$0.30; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-5pm Sat & Sun), but often called *anusawali* by locals, it commemorates the Lao who died

in prerevolutionary wars. It was built in 1969 with cement donated by the USA for the construction of an airport; hence it's sometimes called 'the vertical runway'. A stairway leads through two levels stuffed with souvenir T-shirts (seriously, there are thousands) to the top, from where the views are grand. Outside, the park is home to musical fountains that draw families and street vendors most nights.

Lao National Museum

Housed in a well-worn French administrative building built in the 1920s, the **Lao National Museum** (Map p272; ☎ 212461; Th Samsenthai; admission US\$1; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm) was formerly known as the Lao Revolutionary Museum and much of the collection retains an unmistakable revolutionary zeal. Artefacts and photos document the Pathet Lao's lengthy struggle for power, and there's enough historic weaponry to arm all the extras in a Rambo film. None of the exhibits is breathtaking, but the newer rooms emphasising cultural influences, traditional musical instruments, Khmer sandstone sculptures, and historical periods that have nothing to do with the communist victory make an interesting contrast with the 'revolution' rooms. Most exhibits are labelled with at least some English.

Xieng Khuan (Buddha Park)

In a grassy field by the Mekong River, 25km southeast of Vientiane, **Xieng Khuan** (Buddha Park or Suan Phut; admission US\$0.50, camera US\$0.50; ☎ 8am-4.30pm, sometimes longer), as the name suggests, is a park full of Buddhist and Hindu sculptures, a monument to one eccentric man's bizarre ambition. Xieng Khuan (which means Spirit City) 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. The concrete sculptures include statues of Shiva, Vishnu, Arjuna, Avalokiteshvara, Buddha and a host of other figures, all supposedly cast by unskilled artists under Luang Pu's direction.

Bus 14 (US\$0.40, one hour, 24km) leaves the Talat Sao bus station every 15 or 20 minutes throughout the day and goes all the way to Xieng Khuan. Alternatively, charter a túk-túk (about US\$10 return, depending on your bargaining skills) or take a shared jumbo (big

túk-túk, US\$0.30) to Tha Deua and walk the final 4km to the park. Going by rented motorbike is also popular.

ACTIVITIES

Bowling

Bright lights, Beerlao and boisterous bowlers is what you'll find at the **Lao Bowling Centre** (Map p272; ☎ 218661; Th Khun Bulom; per frame with shoe hire before/after 7pm US\$1/1.20; ☎ 9am-midnight). It is good fun.

Cooking Classes

Courses at **Thongbay Guesthouse** (Map pp268-9; ☎ 242292; www.thongbay-guesthouses.com; Ban Nong Douang; US\$10) are organised on demand and start at 10am. A half-day class includes a trip to the market, cooking and feasting on your culinary creations.

Gym & Aerobics

Sengdara Fitness (Map pp268-9; ☎ 414061; 5/77 Th Dong Palan; ☎ 6am-10pm) is Vientiane's first Western-style mega-gym, with plenty of machines, a sauna, a pool, massage, aerobics and yoga classes. Visitors can buy a US\$6 day pass, which includes use of everything plus a one-hour massage – a very good deal. Several up-market hotels also have modest gyms.

Massage & Herbal Saunas

For a traditional massage experience, head to **Wat Sok Pa Luang** (Map pp268-9; Th Sok Pa Luang; ☎ 1-7pm). Located in a semirural setting (*wat paa* means 'forest temple'), the wat is famous for herbal saunas (US\$1) and massages (US\$3). It's about 3km from the city centre and túk-túk drivers know it well.

Papaya Spa (Map pp268-9; ☎ 216550; www.papaya-spa.com; ☎ 9am-9pm), in an old French villa west of town (follow the signs), is a classy operation offering Lao massage (US\$6), Swedish oil massage (US\$12), facials, waxing, body scrubs, reflexology and sauna.

Meditation

Foreigners are welcome at a regular Saturday afternoon sitting at Wat Sok Pa Luang (above). The session runs from 4pm until 5.30pm with an opportunity to ask questions afterwards.

Swimming

There are several pools open to the public, including the wonderfully central **Vientiane Swimming Pool** (Map p272; ☎ 020-552 1002; Th Ki Huang;

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 supports 323 *siimáa* (ordination stones). It represents the material world, and also features four arched *hâw wái* (prayer halls) with short stairways leading to them and beyond to the second level. There are 288 *siimáa* on this level, as well as 30 small stupas symbolising the 30 Buddhist perfections (*pdalami sâam-síp thâat*), 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, made of brick and stucco, is supported here by a bowl-shaped base reminiscent of India's first Buddhist stupa at Sanchi. 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.

Clean, sizable rooms, English-speaking owners and great food combine to make this a good choice.

our pick **Mali Namphu Guest House** (Map p272; ☎ 215093; 114 Th Pangkham; r with breakfast US\$11-17; 🍴) Smack bang in the middle of town, the 40-room Mali Namphu is built around a pleasant courtyard and has compact, spotless rooms. Staff are both efficient and eager to please. Great value.

Vayakorn Guest House (Map p272; ☎ 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 TV and spotless bathrooms, though the singles are pretty small. Service is friendly and professional, and rooms are cleaned daily.

Riverside Hotel (Map p272; ☎ 244390; Th Nokeo Khumman; r US\$15-16; 🍴) At the cheap end of the midrange, this new place offers location and well-equipped rooms, even if it's not going to win prizes for its charisma. The even-numbered rooms on the 4th and 5th floors are best, though there's no lift.

Villa Manoly (Map pp268-9; ☎ /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 garden and pool. The house is all hardwood and terrazzo floors, high ceilings and tasteful furnishings (look for the collection of antique typewriters).

our pick **Intercity Hotel** (Map p272; ☎ 242843/4; www.laointerhotel.com; 24-25 Th Fa Ngum; r with breakfast US\$30-70; 🍴 📺) The big rooms with high ceilings, polished-wood floors and tasteful Asian décor make the Intercity a great choice. All front rooms have wonderful views of the Mekong, with the suite room 888 (US\$70) the standout.

our pick **Hotel Beau Rivage Mekong** (Map pp268-9; ☎ 243375; www.hbrm.com; s US\$34, d & tw with 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 16 rooms are stylishly laid out, but those at the front are the best, with Mekong views (US\$55), terrazzo baths and small balconies.

Settha Palace Hotel (Map p272; ☎ 217581; www.setthapalace.com; 6 Th Pangkham; standard/deluxe US\$143/155; 🍴 📺 📺) Vientiane's classic colonial hotel and probably the best in town, the beautifully

restored Settha Palace has 29 tastefully appointed rooms with plenty of French-era style, plus mod-cons such as wireless internet. The poolside bar and Le Belle Epoque restaurant complete the picture.

EATING

When a friend of ours recently described Vientiane 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 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 it's hard to argue with US\$4 or US\$5 for a meal that would probably cost five times as much at home. Note that the cafés (opposite) are also good for food.

Lao & Noodles

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* (rice noodle), *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 *khua fôe*) or dry-mixed in a bowl (eg *fôe hàeng*), among other variations.

our pick **Vieng Sawan** (Map p272; ☎ 213990; Th Heng Boun; meals US\$1.50-3.50; 🍴 11am-10pm) In the middle of Chinatown, bustling Vieng Sawan is a real Lao eating experience. It specialises in *nâem néuam* (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.

our pick **Ban Anou night market** (Map p272; 🍴 5-10pm) Setting up on a small street off the north end of Th Chao Anou every afternoon, this market is an encyclopaedia of street food, all freshly prepared and cheap.

Bunmala Restaurant (Map pp268-9; ☎ 313 249; Th Khu Vieng; meals US\$2-4; 🍴 11am-11pm) This open-sided, timber-floored restaurant is archetypal Lao, with all manner of *pîng* (grilled) dishes the specialities. Evenings are best when the full range of *pîng* is on offer and draught beer is US\$0.50.

Douang Deuane Restaurant & Wine Bar (Map p272; ☎ 241154; Th François Nginn; meals US\$2.50-5; 🍴 8.30am-

11.30pm Mon-Sat) The tasty Lao, Thai and Vietnamese favourites here are complemented by an attractive traditional setting and a welcoming French host. The upstairs balcony is ideal for couples.

Makphet (Map p272; ☎ 260587; Th Setthathirat; meals US\$3-6; 🍴 11am-4pm 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 tasty.

Other Asian

PVO (Map p272; ☎ 214444; Th Fa Ngum; meals US\$0.70-1.50; 🍴 7am-9pm) PVO has been selling the best *khào jji paa-tê* (Vietnamese-style paté baguettes) in town for years, plus Vietnamese spring rolls and assorted soups. It's an excellent breakfast option.

7 Plus Korean Food (Map pp268-9; ☎ 415343; meals US\$2-5; 🍴 10am-11pm) The Korean food here isn't bad, but it's mainly about having a night out Lao-style in a big, noisy beer-garden. It's a young crowd and the atmosphere is always 'up'.

Taj Mahal Restaurant (Map p272; ☎ 020-561 1003; Th Setthathirat; meals US\$2-4; 🍴 10am-10.30pm Mon-Sat, 4-10.30pm Sun) It looks like a garage, but the Taj Mahal serves what we think is the best Indian food in Vientiane. Prices are very reasonable and there are plenty of vegetarian dishes.

YuLaLa (Map p272; ☎ 215214; Th Heng Boun; meals US\$2.50-4; 🍴 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun, closed last Sun of month; 🍴) Run by a hip young Japanese couple, YuLaLa serves tasty, cheap Japanese fusion cuisine (no sushi or sashimi) in a cool atmosphere.

Western & International

There's a gaggle of long-running French and Italian places around Nam Phu, all of which have good reputations. Elsewhere, French fare is the standout, with plenty of good options around.

Saovaly Restaurant (Map p272; ☎ 214940; Th Manthatulat; meals US\$2.50-6; 🍴 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Unpretentious little Saovaly serves surprisingly subtle and artistically presented French cuisine, complemented by attentive but not harassing service. Great value.

Le Côte D'Azur Restaurant (Map p272; ☎ 217252; 62-63 Th Fa Ngum; meals US\$3-8; 🍴 lunch Mon-Sat, dinner daily; 🍴) Le Côte D'Azur is popular with French expats, and when your food arrives you'll understand why. The delicious prov-

ençale cuisine, pastas, salads and pizzas are consistently good.

Sticky Fingers Café & Bar (Map p272; ☎ 215972; 10/3 Th François Nginn; meals US\$3.50-6; 🍴 10am-11pm Tue-Sun; 🍴) With the atmosphere of a cosmopolitan Sydney café, Sticky Fingers serves a delicious menu of international dishes – we loved Mr Cho's subtly flavoured crispy fish (US\$4.90). And the hangover special (US\$4) breakfast works wonders.

La Gondola (Map p272; ☎ 264057; 39 Th Chao Anou; meals US\$5-8; 🍴 11.30am-10.30pm Tue-Sun) Reliable Italian fare is served up by the Italian owner in uncluttered surrounds. Warm atmosphere.

Vegetarian

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

Vegetarian Buffet (Map pp268-9; ☎ 020-566 6488; Th Saysetha; lunch buffet US\$1.50, meals US\$0.50-1.50; 🍴 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) This place has an excellent, all-you-can-eat vegetarian buffet and an à la carte menu for dinner. Head east along Th Setthathirat to Th Saysetha (a Honda store on the left side marks the street). Turn left and the restaurant is a few doors along with a wooden front.

Just for Fun (Map p272; ☎ 213642; 51/2 Th Pangkham; meals US\$1-3; 🍴 8am-9pm Mon-Sat) Just for Fun has been serving its small but mainly vegetarian menu for years, with offerings inspired by Thai and Lao cuisine, plus Lao coffee and lots of herbal teas.

Self-Catering

The markets are your best bet for fresh food. If there's something Western you're yearning for, check out **Phimphone Market** (Map p272; 94/6 Th Setthathirat; 🍴 7.30am-9pm), opposite Nam Phu, and visit **Vins de France** (Map p272; ☎ 217700; 354 Th Samsenthai; 🍴 8.30am-8pm Mon-Sat) for an astonishing range of French wines and a US\$6.90 degustation.

DRINKING Cafés

Trendy cafés are popping up all over the city.

JoMa Bakery Café (Map p272; ☎ 215265; Th Setthathirat; meals US\$2-5; 🍴 7am-9pm Mon-Sat; 🍴) Does a brisk trade in delicious pastries, sandwiches, quiche, muesli, fruit, shakes and coffee. Wi-fi is available for US\$2.50 an hour.

Maison du Café (Map p272; ☎ 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 to read and the owner offers various tourist services.

Delight House of Fruit Shakes (Map p272; ☎ 212200; Th Samsenthai; ☎ 7am-9pm) One of two places here that make incredible fruit shakes. Understandably popular. It also does laundry.

Bars & Beer Gardens

As the sun goes down over the Mekong River, **riverfront food & drink vendors** (Map p272; ☎ 5-11pm) turn the riverbank into one long beer garden, with tables and chairs set out under the stars and the Full Taste of Happiness (Beerlao) washing down *ping ka* (grilled chicken) and *tqm maak-hung* (green papaya salad).

Sala Sunset Khounta (Map pp268-9; ☎ 251079; ☎ 11am-11pm) At the west end of the dirt road along the riverfront, the 'Sunset Bar' is a Vientiane institution that's been serving Beerlao at sunset for years. The friendly proprietors also offer local food and interesting snacks.

Bor Pen Nyang (Map p272; ☎ 020-787 3965; Th Fa Ngum; ☎ 10am-midnight) If you're on the pull and/or seeking traveller company, this rooftop bar on the Mekong was the place to be when we were researching.

Chicago Bar (Map p272; ☎ 020-552 6452; Th Nokeo Khumman; ☎ 7pm-late; 🍷) The Chicago Bar is a cocktail-cum-lounge bar with a tendency 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.

Sticky Fingers Café & Bar (p275), Douang Deuane Restaurant & Wine Bar (p274) and 7 Plus Korean Food (p275) are also popular spots for a few drinks.

ENTERTAINMENT

Check the *Vientiane Times* and fliers on shop windows around Nam Phu for info on public one-off events.

Laos Traditional Show (Map p272; ☎ 242978; Th Manthatulat; child/adult US\$4/7, still/video camera charge US\$1/3) This performance of traditional music and dancing, aimed directly at tourists, plays nightly from about November to March.

Centre Culturel et de Coopération Linguistique (French Cultural Centre; Map p272; ☎ 215764; www.am

bafrance-laos.org/centre; Th Lan Xang; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-noon Sat) The centre runs a year-round programme of events such as musical performances and English-subtitled films and documentaries. Check at the centre of the *Vientiane Times* for details.

For live music, check out **On the Rock Pub** (Map pp268-9; ☎ 7.30pm-midnight), down a lane off Th Luang Prabang, which usually has live rock; or the similar but more central **Music House** (Map p272; Th Fa Ngum; ☎ 8pm-midnight).

Conveniently, three of Vientiane's better nightclubs are near each other on the airport road, so wander along until you find one you like. First up is **Future Nightclub** (Map pp268-9; Th Luang Prabang; ☎ 8pm-1am) not far past the Novotel, and the nearby **Highwayman** (Map pp268-9; Th Luang Prabang; ☎ 8pm-midnight) has occasional live acts but mainly DJs. A few hundred meters further along, **Marina** (Map pp268-9; ☎ 216978; Th Luang Prabang; ☎ 8pm-1am) is the biggest and most ostentatious club; go bowling if you don't fancy the music. Elsewhere, **Lunar 36** (Map pp268-9; Don Chan Palace Hotel; ☎ 6pm-3am Wed, Fri & Sat), off Th Fa Ngum, was the hottest night in town when we passed through, and opens quite late.

SHOPPING

Talat Sao (Morning Market; Map p272; Th Lan Xang; ☎ 7am-5pm) Vientiane's labyrinthine market sells everything from Lao silks, 'Firkenstocks' and jewellery to white goods, electronics and bedding. At the time of writing, work had begun on the new Talat Sao Shopping Mall, a Malaysian-owned shopping complex and multi-storey car park that will replace the bustling goods market. It's expected to be completed by 2009.

Numerous handicraft and souvenir boutiques are dotted around the streets radiating from Nam Phu, particularly on Th Pangkham and Th Nokeo Khumman. Among the better places:

Camacrafts (Mulberries; Map p272; ☎ 241217; www.mulberries.org; Th Nokeo Khumman; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) A not-for-profit company that sells striking Hmong-inspired textiles and homewares and contributes to villages through training and resource-preservation practices.

Carol Cassidy Lao Textiles (Map p272; ☎ 212123; www.laotextiles.com; 84-86 Th Nokeo Khumman; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat, or by appointment) Sells high-end contemporary, original-design textiles inspired by older Lao weaving patterns, motifs and techniques.

(Continued on page 285)

(Continued from page 276)

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Wattay International Airport is the main air hub for domestic flights, and is also served by five airlines flying internationally (see p342).

Boat

Rare cargo boats head upstream to Luang Prabang (four days to one week) from Kiaw Liaw Pier, 3.5km west of the fork in the road where Rte 13 heads north in Ban Kao Liaw. Go there and speak with the boatmen in advance to see if, when and how far they're running. This is real old-style Lao travel so expect no luxuries.

Bus & Săwngthăew

Buses use three different stations in Vientiane, all with some English-speaking staff. The **Northern Bus Station** (Map pp268-9; ☎ 260255; Th T2), about 2km northwest of the centre, serves all points north of Vang Vieng, including China, and has some buses to Vietnam.

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

The **Talat Sao Bus Station** (Map p272; ☎ 216507) is where desperately slow local buses depart for 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. It's also home to the Thai-Lao International Bus; see below.

Our table (p286) gives timetable info.

GETTING AROUND

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

Bicycle & Motorcycle

Bicycles can be rented for between US\$0.50 and US\$2 per day from loads of tour agencies and guesthouses. Small motorbikes are popular and widely available. The cheapest are from outside the **Douang Deuane Hotel** (Map p272; Th Nokeo Khumman), where 110cc bikes cost US\$5.50 a day, but they're notoriously unreliable (we took back four in one day!). Much better Japanese bikes are available from **PVO** (Map p272; ☎ 214444; Th Fa Ngum; per day US\$7), which also rents the best 250cc bikes for US\$20 a day.

Túk-Túk

Many túk-túks have a laminated list of vastly inflated tourist prices. These guys, usually found in queues outside tourist sights, won't budge for less than the price already agreed upon with the other drivers (starting at US\$1). You're better off trying a free-roaming túk-túk (one driving along the street), where negotiation is possible. You can also flag down a shared túk-túk (with passengers already in it); shared túk-túks ply fixed routes and cost about US\$0.20 to US\$0.50 depending on your destination.

AROUND VIENTIANE

PHU KHAO KHUAY NATIONAL PROTECTED AREA

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 home to several waterfalls and a herd of wild elephants. Phu Khao Khuay (pronounced poo cow kwai) means 'Buffalo Horn Mountain' and is home to three major rivers flowing off a sandstone mountain range into the Ang Nam Leuk Reservoir.

The main attraction is the wild elephants, which make regular appearances at their

CROSSING INTO THAILAND: THE FRIENDSHIP BRIDGE

The Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge is 20km southeast of Vientiane. The border is open between 6am and 10pm, and the easiest way to cross is on the comfortable Thai-Lao International Bus (US\$1.50, 90 minutes), which leaves Vientiane's Talat Sao bus station at 7.30am, 9.30am, 12.40pm, 2.30pm, 3.30pm and 6pm. From Nong Khai in Thailand, it leaves at the same times for 55B. Similar buses run to Udon Thani (US\$2.20, two hours) six times a day. Visas are issued on arrival in both countries. Alternative means of transport between Vientiane and the bridge include taxi or jumbo (US\$5 to US\$7 - bargain hard) or regular public buses from Talat Sao (US\$0.40) between 6.30am and 5pm. At the bridge, regular shuttle buses ferry passengers between immigration posts. For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see p167.

LEAVING VIENTIANE BY BUS

All services depart daily except where noted. 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). For Vietnam, buses leave daily for Hanoi (US\$20, 24 hours) via Vinh (US\$16, 16 hours); and less often for Huế (US\$17), Danang (US\$20) and even Ho Chi Minh City (US\$45, up to 48 hours).

Destination	Fare normal/ air-con/VIP (US\$)	Distance (km)	Duration (hr)	Departures
Talat Sao Bus Station				
Vang Vieng	1.50	153	3½	7am, 9.30am, 10.30am, 11.30am, 1.30pm, 2pm
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, 1.30pm, 4pm, 6pm, 7.30pm (air-con)
Oudomxay	11/12	578	14-17	6.45am, 1.45pm, 4pm (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, and takes up to 30hr)
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 30min from 4.30am to 5pm
Pakse	8.5/11/13	677	14-16/9½ (VIP)	normal buses every 30min from 9.30am-5pm; air-con buses at 7pm & 8pm; 4 VIP buses leave at 8.30pm
Salavan	10	774	15-20	4.30pm, 7.30pm
Savannakhet	5.50/7	457	8-10	every 30min 6am until 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

favourite salt lick an easy walk from the village of **Ban Na**. Several tour operators in Vientiane work with the local community in running treks that involve staying overnight in the Elephant Observation Tower, which overlooks the salt lick. Travellers who've seen the elephants say it's an awesome experience, but they are wild and the chances of them turning up are only about 50-50, so be prepared for disappointment.

The best way to organise a trek, either to see the elephants or other parts of the NPA, is through the NTAL office in Vientiane (p267), which has loads of information and can do the organising for free (by calling the villagers, who don't speak English). In the case of Ban Na, you could also get a Lao-speaker to call **Mr Bounthanom** (☎ 020-220 8286) direct and arrange it with him. Other treks, including visits to several impressive **waterfalls**, depart from **Ban Hat Khai**. 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 higher if you stay in the elephant tower, which has a US\$10 per person fee that goes to the Elephant Conservation & Research Fund. Prices do not include transport from Vientiane. All moneys go to the village and NPA.

Getting There & Away

Buses from Talat Sao in Vientiane leave regularly for Ban Tha Bok and Paksan. For Ban Na get off near the Km 79 stone near the Tha Baht Phonsan stupa; Ban Na is about 2km north.

For Ban Hat Khai, stay on the bus until a turnoff left (north) at Km 92, just before Ban Tha Bok. Then take any passing *sāwngthāew* the 5km to Ban Huay Leuk. Ban Hat Khai is 2km further. For the various waterfalls, find detailed information at www.trekkingcentral.laos.com or the NTAL office (p267) in Vientiane. If you need a bed en route, there are two decent guesthouses in Tha Bok.

VANG VIENG

☎ 023 / pop 30,000

Nestled beside the Nam Song amid stunning limestone-karst terrain, Vang Vieng is one of those destinations everyone has an opinion on. Most travellers enjoy the scenery and the myriad activities – caving, rock climbing, kayaking, rafting and tubing – that take ad-

vantage of the convenient supply of dramatic topography and tourists with time and money to spend.

Opinions start varying when you take a closer look at the town itself. 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. The main street of this once-quiet village is now a sort of poor man's Khao San Rd, with backpackers laid out in TV bars watching Hollywood blockbusters and endless reruns of *Friends* while sucking down 'happy' shakes.

But whether this side of Vang Vieng appeals to you or not (if you don't like it, respite is only a short walk away), this is still a truly beautiful part of the world and it's worth stopping here en route between Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

Orientation & Information

Buses stop east of a large patch of tarmac that was the war-era airstrip. Head west into town, then turn right to reach the main concentration of guesthouses, restaurants and bars. Parallel to the main street are a basic provincial hospital and several more restaurants, plus a few newer bungalow-style guesthouses along the river. Internet cafés have popped up almost as fast as the mushrooms in Vang Vieng, most charging 300 kip per minute.

BCEL (☎ 511434; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Sun)

Exchanges cash, travellers cheques and handles cash advances on Visa, MasterCard and JCB.

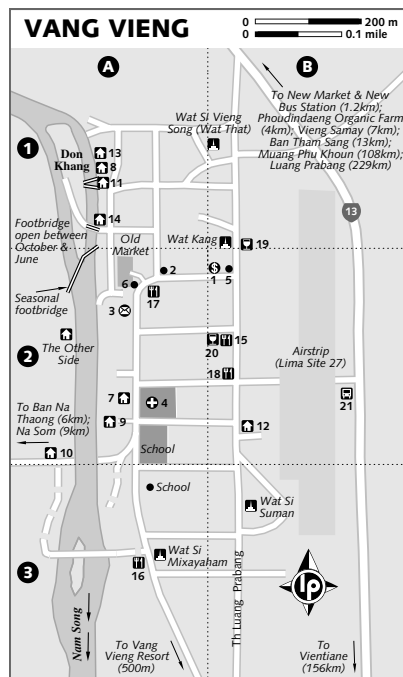
BKC Bookshop (☎ 511009) Secondhand novels plus guidebooks and maps.

Post office (☎ 511009) Beside the old market.

Provincial Hospital (☎ 511604) This flash new hospital has X-ray facilities and is fine for broken bones, cuts and malaria.

Dangers & Annoyances

Vang Vieng has its fair share of thefts, many by fellow travellers. Take the usual precautions, and don't leave valuables outside caves. Be aware that there have been several drownings here in recent years, so show the river respect. The other trouble that tends to find travellers is the law. Police are adept at sniffing out spliffs, especially late at night. Getting caught with a stash – be it grass, opium, mushrooms or *yabba* – usually results in the police issuing a US\$500 on-the-spot fine. You can try pleading poor (though forget about innocent – if you're carrying, you're guilty), but you'll



have to pay something – US\$200 is usually the minimum. Don't expect a receipt.

Sights & Activities

CAVES

The caves that open out from the surrounding limestone karsts are Vang Vieng's most enduring attractions. Several are open to tourists and have signs to help you find them. Hiring a local guide is a good idea.

The most famous cave, **Tham Jang** (admission US\$1), south of town, was used as a hide-out from marauding Yunnanese Chinese in the early 19th century. A set of stairs leads up to the main cavern entrance. There's also a cool spring at the foot of the cave. Follow the signs from the Vang Vieng Resort.

Another popular cave is **Tham Phu Kham** (Blue Lagoon; admission US\$0.50). To reach it, cross the **bridge** then walk or pedal 6km along a scenic, unsealed road to Ban Na Thang, from where you have to walk 1km to a hill on the northern side of the village: follow the signs. It's a tough final 200m climb through scrub forest to the cave.

The **Tham Sang Triangle** is a popular half-day trip that's easy to do on your own and takes

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in Tham Sang plus three other caves within a short walk of each other. Begin this odyssey by riding a bike or taking a *sáwngtháew* 13km north along Rte 13, turning left a few hundred metres beyond the barely readable Km 169 marker. A rough road leads to the river, where a boatman will ferry you across to Ban Tham Sang for a small fee. **Tham Sang** (admission US\$0.20), meaning 'Elephant Cave', is a small cavern containing a few Buddha images and a Buddha 'footprint', plus the elephant-shaped stalactite that gives the cave its name. It's best visited in the morning when light enters the cave.

From here a signed path takes you 1km northwest through rice fields to the entrances of **Tham Loup** and **Tham Hoi** (admission US\$0.50 for both). Tham Hoi reportedly continues about 3km into the limestone and an underground lake. About 400m south of Tham Hoi, along a well-used path, is the highlight of this trip, **Tham Nam** (admission US\$0.50). This 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 must enter in a tube (available outside). Dragging yourself through the tunnel on the fixed rope is good fun. From Tham Nam an easy 1km walk brings you back to Ban Tham Sang.

KAYAKING & RAFTING

Kayaking is increasingly popular, with day trips (US\$8 to US\$12 per person) typically taking you down a few rapids and stopping at caves and villages. Longer trips to Vientiane involve paddling for half a day then going the rest of the way by road. Though all guides are supposed to be trained, many are not. Before using a cheap operator, check guides' credentials.

Rafting is less popular but more adventurous, with trips down the Nam Ngum the pick; Green Discovery (below) is the pick of the operators.

ROCK CLIMBING

Green Discovery (☎ 511230; www.greeniscoverylao.com; Th Luang Prabang) operates guided rock-climbing courses for novices (around US\$30 per day) and can lead more experienced climbers up Vang Vieng's dramatic limestone cliffs. It has a good reputation and the number of routes is rising all the time.

TUBING

Tubing down the Nam Song has become a rite of passage on the Indochina backpacking circuit. And it has to be said, it's a lot of fun. The tube renters have formed a cartel that operates from a shed near the old market site; the price is fixed at US\$3.50 for the trip, including your tube, life jacket and the túk-túk ride to the launch point 3km north of town. The trip can take two or more hours depending on river conditions and how many of the makeshift bars you stop off at en route! People have died on this trip, so don't go too stupid with the drink and drugs.

Sleeping

Vang Vieng has a dizzying array of guesthouses. Most are cheap and central, so it's easy to compare. Here are some of the better options.

Pan's Place (☎ 511484; neilenolix@hotmail.com; rUS\$2-6) Expat-run Pan's (named after his wife) has had a makeover but the atmosphere will be more appealing than the basic but clean rooms. The 'backyard' has everything the backpacker could want – a TV *sala* (open-sided shelter) with big screen, bar, restaurant and kiddie pool – but not a single Lao the night we visited.

Maylyn Guest House (☎ 020-560 4095; jophus_foley@hotmail.com; rUS\$3-6) On the far side of the Nam Song, the Maylyn's 15 simple rooms

and bungalows are set in a lush garden beside a stream. Owner Joe is a good source of local information. The barbecued fish is a highlight.

Vang Vieng Orchid (☎ 020-220 2259; r US\$6-10; ☺) Situated on the banks of the Nam Song opposite Don Khang, 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. However, the noise from the island can make sleep difficult.

Our pick **Elephant Crossing** (☎ 511232; d US\$25-30, f with breakfast US\$45; ☺) With almost every comfortable room boasting a balcony overlooking the Nam Song and out to the dramatic karsts, it's hard to beat this place in the midrange. Prices fall US\$5 in low season. Recommended.

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

A couple of others we like:

Champa Lao (☎ 020-501 8501; 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. There are a couple of others nearby.

Organic Mulberry Farm (☎ 511220; www.laofarm.org; r US\$3-5) Known locally as *súran máwn phúu dñ dqeng* (Phouindaeng Mulberry Farm), this organic farm has simple accommodation and a great restaurant. If you're looking to volunteer, see Mr Thi.

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** (☎ 020-501 8501; 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** (☎ 020-562 3297; r US\$4-6) has bungalows with hot-water bathrooms.

Eating

Most of Vang Vieng's restaurants produce a varied selection of cuisines including Lao, Thai, Chinese, Western and Rasta-infusion. Following are a few decent eateries that have

so far managed to resist Vang Vieng's *Friends* phenomenon.

our pick **Nokeo** (meals US\$1-3; ☎ 8am-8pm) The last real Lao-style restaurant in Vang Vieng, Nokeo serves consistently good Lao food at low prices. The succulent *pieng pqa* (grilled fish) is excellent, as are the various *laap* (spicy salad of minced meat, poultry or salad). Highly recommended.

our pick **Organic Mulberry Farm Café** (☎ 511174; 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.

Kangaroo Sunset Bar (☎ 020-771 4291; meals US\$2-4.50) This Australian-run place is a decent sunset and evening drinking hole, with tasty Lao, Thai and fusion-ish food. The fried 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.

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, four bars compete for your business and any one of those could be the most happening place on the night – we trust you to find it. In town, **Jaidee's** (☎ 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

From the airstrip **bus terminal** (☎ 511341; Rte 13), which still operates despite the new terminal 2km north of town, buses leave for Luang Prabang (US\$7, seven to 11 hours, 168km, several daily), Vientiane (US\$2.50, 3½ to 4½ hours, 156km, four times daily) and Phonsavan (US\$7.50, six to seven hours, 219km, daily at about 9am). For Vientiane, pick-ups (US\$2.50, 3½ to 4½ hours) leave every 20 minutes from 5am until 4pm.

Tickets for minibuses and VIP buses with air-con travelling direct to Vientiane (US\$7, three hours) or Luang Prabang (US\$9.50, six to eight hours) are sold at guesthouses, tour agencies and internet cafés in town.

Getting Around

The township is small enough to walk around with ease. Bicycles can be rented for around US\$1 a day. A few places hire motorbikes for US\$8 per day. A tük-tük up to the Organic Farm or the Tham Sang Triangle costs around US\$1 per person.

NORTHERN LAOS

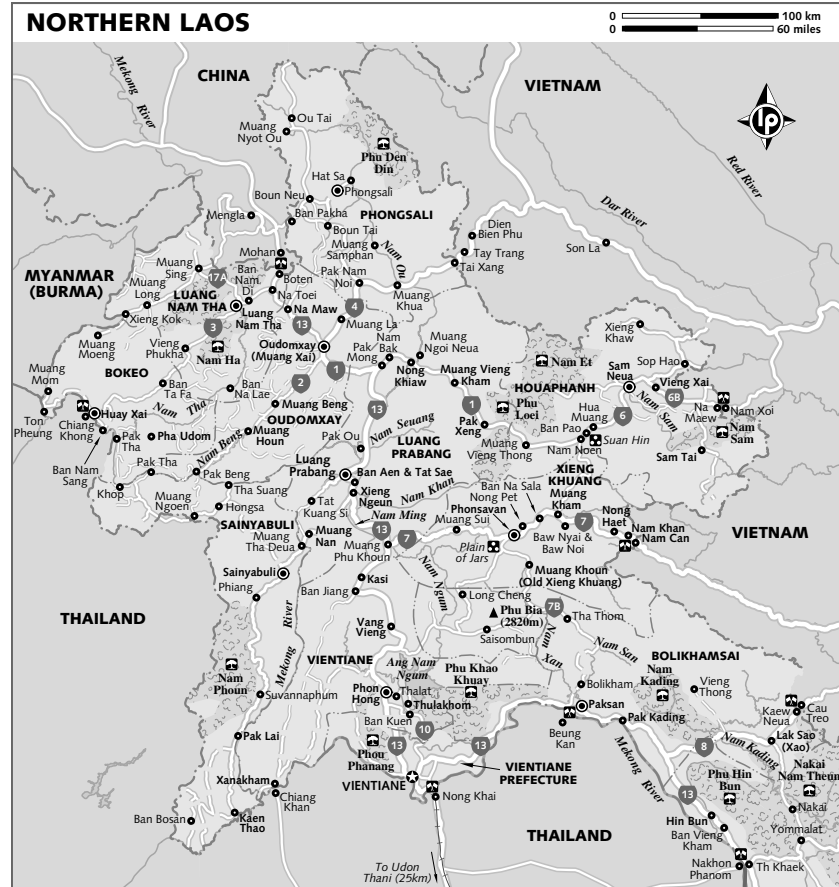
Laos' mountainous north is popular with travellers for its spectacular scenery and traditional village life, which remained isolated from the modern world until relatively recently. The hills and valleys are populated by a potpourri of ethnic groups, ranging from the relatively recently arrived Hmong back to the tribal Thai groups who have lived here for millennia. To learn more about the culture and customs of different ethnic groups, a trip to Muang Sing's trekking guide service office (p312) is recommended; you could also opt for a village homestay to see first-hand what the 'real Laos' is for almost 80% of the population. The slow upgrading of roads has made travel in the north less arduous, although you still can't get anywhere very quickly – patience is definite virtue.

LUANG PRABANG

☎ 071 / pop 26,000

Luang Prabang is a tonic for the soul. The former royal capital taps into the senses in a way few other cities can. It's thick with the perfume of pearly frangipanis and the enticing flavours of high-quality Asian and European food. The greens of the giant shade trees contrast with the burnt sienna robes and bare-foot silence of countless Buddhist monks and novices collecting alms. And the gleaming temples, French-era palace and villas, and the multiethnic peoples who live here give Luang Prabang a romantic and relaxed feel that can captivate even the most jaded travellers.

At the confluence of the Nam Khan (Khan River) and the Mekong River, this ancient royal city retains its colour despite being Laos' foremost tourist showpiece. This is in part



because it is Unesco Heritage Listed, which means a blessed ban on buses and trucks, and in part because of the quiet benevolence of its residents, which lulls visitors into somnambulant bliss. Although Luang Prabang teems with travellers, it is not a party destination, and the 11.30pm curfew mercifully maintains its traditional disposition.

Orientation

Most of the tourist sights are in the old quarter, on the peninsula bounded by the Mekong and the Nam Khan. Dominating the centre of town, Phu Si is an unmissable landmark. The majority of restaurants, tour companies and internet cafés line Th Sisavangvong, while accommodation and more eateries dot the

surrounding streets. Pedal or pedi power are the best ways to get around.

Information

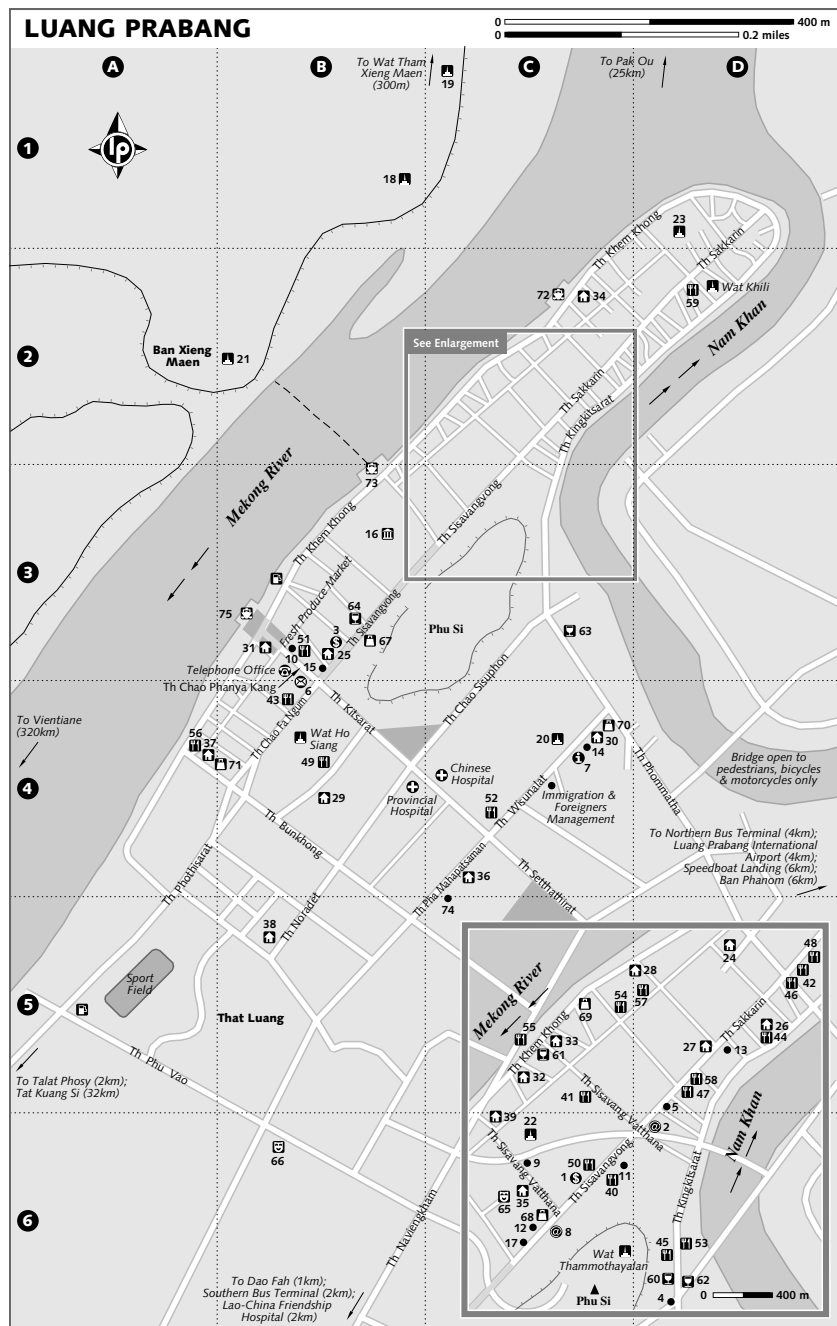
BOOKSHOPS

L'Étranger Books & Tea (booksinlaos@yahoo.com; Th Kingkitsarat; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat, 10am-10pm Sun) New and used books about Laos, plus book rental and exchange. There's a tea lounge-cum-gallery on the 2nd floor.

INTERNET ACCESS

For wireless access try Le Café Ban Vat Sene (p297). Internet cafés along Th Sisavangvong charge 300 kip per minute.

Internet email shop (Th Sisavangvong; ☎ 8am-11pm)
Treasure Travel Laos (☎ 245403; Th Sisavangvong; ☎ 7am-11pm)



MEDICAL SERVICES

For any serious illness or injury consider travelling to Thailand.

Pharmacie (Th Sakkarin; ☎ 8.30am-8pm) Stocks basic medicines. On weekends hours are variable.

MONEY

BCEL (Th Sisavangvong; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Sat) Changes major currencies in cash or travellers cheques, and allows you to makes cash advances against Visa and MasterCard.

Lao Development Bank (65 Th Sisavangvong; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Sat) Cash only.

POST

Post office (Th Chao Fa Ngum; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat) Phone calls too.

TELEPHONE

Most internet cafés in town have Skype and also offer international calls for 2000 kip per minute.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Provincial Tourism Department (☎ 212487; Th Wisunarat) This office, opposite Wat Wisunarat, stocks a few brochures but is largely useless. Opening hours are erratic.

Unesco World Heritage Information (www.unesco.org; Villa Xiengmouane, Th Sakkarin; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) Situated in an anteroom of an old French customs house, this office contains information on the Unesco World Heritage project operating in Luang Prabang.

Sights

ROYAL PALACE MUSEUM (HO KHAM)

A good place to start a tour of Luang Prabang is the **Royal Palace Museum** (Ho Kham or Golden Hall; ☎ 212470; Th Sisavangvong; admission US\$2; ☎ 8-11am & 1.30-4pm). The palace was originally constructed in 1904 as a residence for King Sisavangvong and his family. When the king died in 1959, his son Savang Vattana inherited the throne, but shortly after the 1975 revolution he and his family were exiled to northern Laos (never to be heard from again) and the palace was converted into a museum. Various royal religious objects are on display in the large entry hall, as well as rare Buddhist sculptures from India, Cambodia and Laos. The right front corner room of the palace, which opens to the outside, contains the museum's most prized art, including the Pha Bang, the gold standing Buddha after which the town is named. This, however, should

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LAOS

LAOS

have moved to the ornate **Wat Ho Pha Bang** by the time you arrive.

The murals on the walls in the king's former reception room, painted in 1930 by French artist Alix de Fautereau, depict scenes from traditional Lao life. Each wall is meant to be viewed at a different time of day, according to the changing light. Footwear, photography, shorts, T-shirts and sundresses are all forbidden.

PHU SI

The temples on the slopes of 100m-high **Phu Si** (admission US\$1; ☞ 8am-6pm) are all of relatively recent construction, but the climb up is well worth it for the superb views – especially near sunset. At the summit is That Chomsi, the starting point for a colourful Pii Mai (Lao New Year) procession. Behind the stupa is a small cave-shrine sometimes referred to as **Wat Tham Phu Si**. Around the northeast flank are the ruins of **Wat Pha Phutthaht**, which was originally constructed in 1395 during the reign of Phaya Samsenthai on the site of a Buddha footprint.

WAT XIENG THONG

Near the northern tip of the peninsula formed by the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers, **Wat Xieng Thong** (off Th Sakkarin; admission US\$1; ☞ 8am-5pm) is Luang Prabang's most magnificent temple. Built by King Setthathirat in 1560, it remained under royal patronage until 1975. Like the royal palace, Wat Xieng Thong was placed within easy reach of the Mekong River. The *sim* represents classic Luang Prabang temple architecture, with roofs that sweep low to the ground. The rear wall features an impressive tree-of-life mosaic, and inside richly decorated wooden columns support a ceiling that's vested with *dharmacakka* (dharma wheels). Near the compound's eastern gate stands the royal funeral chapel. Inside are an impressive 12m-high funeral chariot and various funeral urns for each member of the royal family. The exterior of the chapel features gilt panels depicting erotic episodes from the Ramayana.

WAT WISUNALAT (WAT VISOUN)

To the east of the town centre and originally constructed in 1513 (which makes it the oldest continually operating temple in Luang Prabang) is **Wat Wisunarat** (Wat Visoun; Th Wisunarat; admission US\$1; ☞ 8am-5pm). After being burnt

down by marauding Haw Chinese in 1887, it was rebuilt in 1898. Inside the high-ceilinged *sim* is a collection of wooden Calling for Rain Buddhas and 15th- to 16th-century Luang Prabang *simas* (ordination stones). In front of the *sim* is That Pathum (Lotus Stupa), which was built in 1514.

OTHER TEMPLES

In the old quarter, the ceiling of **Wat Xieng Muan** (☞ 8am-5pm) is painted with gold *naga* (mythical serpent-beings) and the elaborate *háang thien* (candle rail) has *naga* at either end. With backing from Unesco and New Zealand, the monks' quarters have been restored as a classroom for training young novices and monks in the artistic skills needed to maintain and preserve Luang Prabang's temples. Among these skills are woodcarving, painting and Buddha-casting, all of which came to a virtual halt after 1975.

Across the Mekong from central Luang Prabang are several notable temples. The ferry stops near **Wat Long Khun** (admission US\$0.50; ☞ 8am-5pm), which features a portico dating from 1937 plus older sections from the 18th century and a few fading *jataka* murals. When the coronation of a Luang Prabang king was pending, it was customary for him to spend three days in retreat here before ascending the throne.

Wat Tham Xieng Maen (admission US\$0.50; ☞ 8am-5pm) is in a 100m-deep limestone cave, Tham Sakkarin Savannakuha, a little to the northwest of Wat Long Khun. At the top of a hill peaceful **Wat Chom Phet** (☞ 8am-5pm) offers undisturbed views of the Mekong.

Activities

CYCLING

Cycling is one of the more popular ways to enjoy Luang Prabang. Bicycles can be rented from numerous guesthouses and shops around Th Sisavangvong. The old quarter can be easily covered in half a day, taking in temples and other sights. It doesn't take much effort to get out of town either: head south past Talat Phosy and into the hills (watch out for punctures on rocky roads).

SPA & MASSAGE

Luang Prabang is one of the best places in Southeast Asia to indulge in a herbal sauna or Swedish, Lao or Khamu massage. Prices are generally 30,000 kip for an hour-long body

or foot massage, 40,000 kip for an oil massage, and 10,000 kip for a sauna. Options are abundant, but the following are recommended based on selfless research by the author:

Aroma Spa (☞ 207611255; Th Sisavangvong;

☞ 10am-10pm) Also facials, body scrubs and indulgent combination packages ranging from US\$30 to US\$50.

Khamu Spa (☞ 212092; Th Sakkarin; ☞ 10am-10pm) Excellent traditional Lao and Khamu massages.

Lao Red Cross (☞ 252856; Th Wisunalat; ☞ massage 9am-9pm, sauna 5-9pm) Housed in a nicely preserved Lao-French building with half-timbered walls. Proceeds go towards the Lao Red Cross, so really, any visit here is an act of pure selflessness. Take your own towel or sarong.

Courses

Luang Prabang is well-known for its quality cooking courses.

Tamarind (www.tamarindlaos.com; Ban Wat Nong)

Excellent cooking classes for truly authentic Lao food, including market tours for fresh ingredients and jungle picnics, where you can actually catch your own fish, and more. See p297.

Tamnak Lao Three Elephant Cafe (www.laocookingcourse.com; Th Sakkarin; per person US\$25) Full-day cooking classes including market shopping and a Lao lunch and dinner.

Tum Tum Cheng Restaurant & Cooking School

(☞ 253224; tumtumcheng@yahoo.com; 29/2 Th Sakkarin; 1/2/3 days per person US\$25/45/60) Well-regarded classes.

Tours

Luang Prabang has plenty of travel agents offering tours from a few hours to several days. Tours to the waterfalls and the Pak Ou Caves (p300) are particularly popular. Many also book domestic and international flights. Prices are similar, but it still pays to shop around and to seek recommendations from other travellers. The following are recommended for good trekking, rafting and cycling excursions:

Action Max Laos (☞ 252417; actionmaxasie@yahoo.fr; cnr Th Ounheuan & Th Khem Khong) Elephant treks and comfortable, small-group tours to surrounding area. Prices around US\$30 per person per day.

Green Discovery (☞ 21212093; www.greendiscoverylaos.com; Th Sisavangvong) Kayaking, trekking, mountain biking, motorcycling and multiday trips north including motorcycle tours.

Lao Youth Travel (☞ 253340; www.laoyouthtravel.com; 72 Th Sisavangvong) Tour company highly recommended for its focus on community-based ecotourism. Prices around US\$35 to US\$50 per day, all inclusive.

Tiger Trails (☞ 252655; www.laos-adventures.com; Th Sisavangvong) Single-day and multiday trips involving trekking, rafting, cycling and homestays, but not tigers. Elephant treks and mahout training also offered at an elephant camp. Strong emphasis on conservation and community support. Prices range from US\$29 to US\$40 per day.

Festivals & Events

The two most important annual events in Luang Prabang are **Pii Mai** (Lao or Lunar New Year) in April, when Luang Prabang gets packed out with locals as well as tourists (book accommodation well in advance), and boat races during **Bun Awk Phansa** (End of the Rains Retreat) in October. See p337 for more.

Sleeping

Luang Prabang is wonderfully compact and you'll need nothing more than your legs to get to and from most of these places. The best area to stay if you want to soak up the Luang Prabang atmosphere is the historical temple district on the peninsula, on and off Th Sisavangvong/Th Sakkarin. Most places in this area are midrange and top-end affairs. If you're looking for a budget room, the old silversmithing district near the Mekong, a neighbourhood known as Ban Wat That (named for nearby Wat Pha Mahathat), and the adjacent Ban Ho Xiang, have become a centre for a cluster of modest guesthouses.

Luang Prabang can get very busy in high season, so it's worth booking ahead, especially for more expensive places. During low season, however, prices might be negotiable.

Oudomphone Guest House (☞ 252419; s/d without bathroom US\$4/5, with bathroom US\$5/6) Spick-and-span rooms with spring mattresses, fans and small windows greet the weary traveller at this homely guesthouse. Perfect for those looking to escape the tourist glut for a quiet night's sleep.

Koun Savan Guest House (☞ 212297; off Kitsarat Rd; r without bathroom US\$4-6, with bathroom US\$12; ☞) In a quiet street Koun Savan spreads around a colourful garden and has compact rooms with outside bathrooms, and spotless doubles with air-con and private bathrooms. The owners are lovely.

Vanvisa Guest House (☞ 212925; vandara1@hotmail.com; 42/2 Ban Wat That; s/d US\$8/15) Vanvisa features six rooms at the back of a shop that sells textiles, antiques and handicrafts. The owner, a cultured Lao lady, sometimes makes breakfasts and family-style dinners for guests

and can even arrange an informal cooking workshop.

Ammata Guest House (☎ 212175; phetmanyp@yahoo.com.au; Ban Wat Nong; r \$15; 🏠) One of the best deals in town, this small and popular guesthouse has a low-key ambience and spacious rooms with polished wood interiors and renovated bathrooms. It's midrange quality at small-pocket prices.

Lane Xang Guest House (☎ 212794; villalanexang@yahoo.com; Th Wisunarat; r & tr incl breakfast US\$26-40; 🏠) This supremely tasteful villa has just seven big, cool rooms with lofty ceilings and oversized tubs. Its sophisticated blend of colonial and traditional Lao influences is highly recommended.

Kiang Mouane Guest House (☎ /fax 252152; 86/6 Ban Xieng Mouane; r/f US\$30/40; 🏠) The rooms in this white two-storey colonial house are snug, but stylish. Muted colours, quilted beds, low lighting and high ceilings are matched by ample bathrooms. Many are set in a quadrangle around a flourishing garden at the back.

Sayo River Guest House (☎ 212484; http://sayoguesthouse.free.fr/cms; Th Khem Khong; r incl breakfast US\$30-50; 🏠) This new and stylish guesthouse has sizable and tastefully decorated rooms. Cheaper ground-floor rooms have compact bathrooms; others have glossy bathrooms with tubs and/or balconies with river views.

Ancient Luangprabang Hotel (☎ 212264; www.ancientluangprabang.com; Th Sisavangvong; s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$40/45/50; 🏠) The boutique-style studio rooms here come with polished teak, local handicrafts and divine timber-clad baths. Some have street views, but triples are a tight squeeze.

Apsara (☎ 212420; www.theapsara.com; Th Kingkitsarat; r incl breakfast US\$55-85; 🏠) Commonly tagged Luang Prabang's most chic hotel, the Apsara fills its rooms with contemporary Asian décor in bold colours. The cheaper standard rooms are relatively minimalist, but all have huge beds and excellent facilities. Plus, enjoy superb food at the fusion restaurant.

Auberge les 3 Nagas (☎ 253888; www.3nagas.com; Th Sakkarin; r US\$105, ste US\$140-180; 🏠) Straddling both sides of Th Sakkarin in two gloriously restored villas, this hotel has boutique rooms with discreet East-meets-West panache. Suites have private courtyards or balconies, and there's internet access if you have your laptop.

Also recommended:

Thavisouk Guest House (☎ 252022; Th Pha Mahapatsaman; r US\$4; 🏠) In a less-inspiring part of

town, the laid-back Thavisouk features fatter-than-usual mattresses in clean, sunny rooms.

Thatsaphone Guest House (☎ 020-567 1888; Ban Xieng Mouane; r \$8-10) Gorgeous location and airy rooms.

Kongsavath Guesthouse (☎ 212994; khongsavath@hotmail.com; Th Khem Khong; r/ste US\$20/30; 🏠) Perched on the southern bank of the Mekong, Kongsavath is a cosy place where rooms have large beds, Lao lamps, gleaming bathrooms and shuttered windows. Suites are considerably larger.

Villa Suan Maak (☎ 252775; www.villa-suan-maak-laos.com; Th Noradet; r incl breakfast \$20-35; 🏠) Gorgeous villa with tastefully decorated rooms, set behind a handsome garden. Owners are endearing and breakfast is served alfresco.

Sala Prabang (☎ 252460; http://salaprabang.salalao.com; 102/6 Th Khem Khong; r incl breakfast US\$60-75; 🏠) This artistically refurbished, century-old mansion facing the river is joined by a newer wing a few doors up, built in similar style, all painted in earth tones. Boutique and beautiful, rooms come with flowers on the pillows, tiled interiors, gracious French doors and plush sheets and towels. Service is exceptional.

Eating

A bustling set of night food stalls appear on streets running off Th Sisavangvong near the night market. The main congregation is one street north of Th Kitsarat, where you can dine on a whole barbecued pig's head, superb vegetarian dishes and noodles, and just about everything in between. There's even a 'Vegan' stall. All-you-can-fit bowls cost around US\$0.50. The baguette and fruit stalls at the corner of Th Sisavangvong and Th Kitsarat are other good budget options, and they're open all day.

Lining the Mekong are numerous **riverside restaurants** (🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner), often with kitchens in a namesake guesthouse across the street, serving delicious Lao fare at good prices in a wonderfully serene setting.

CAFÉS & BAKERIES

JoMa Bakery Café (☎ 252292; Th Chao Fa Ngum; meals US\$1-2; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Arguably the best bakery in town, JoMa has a great menu of sandwiches, soups and salads, a large bread and pastry selection and excellent coffee.

Morning Glory Café (☎ 0207774122; Th Sakkarin; meals US\$2-3.50; 🍴 breakfast & lunch, closed Tue) Here you'll find jazz, comfy street-side chairs and some of the town's tastiest breakfasts – smoked ham omelettes, fresh muesli, rice soup and fabulous coffee. For lunch tuck into pesto chicken pasta or a fragrant Thai curry.

Le Café Ban Vat Sene (Th Sakkarin; meals US\$3.50-5; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This quietly chic café in a restored colonial building serves tapenades and tapas, smoked chicken and feta salads, and roast pork and tarragon-filled baguettes. The tarts and cakes are delicious.

Also recommended:

Phouisi Café & Gallery (Th Kingkitsarat; meals US\$2-2.50; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Tranquil courtyard café serving set breakfasts, salads, sandwiches and stir fries.

Café des Artes (Th Sisavangvong; meals US\$3-10; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Delicious deli fare with plenty of smallgoods, plus French fare, soups, tartines, burgers, brochettes and set menus.

RESTAURANTS

There are plenty of *falang*-oriented restaurants on and around Th Sisavangvong. Several up-market hotels also have top-notch restaurants.

Fruit Shake Restaurant (☎ 5672376; Th Sakkarin; meals US\$1; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) The effort they didn't spend on the name has all gone into the fine Lao food at this local restaurant. Fried dried beef (Luang Prabang style), fresh chilli pastes and wild deer with basil are up for grabs as well as three-course set menus for US\$3.

Somchanh Restaurant (☎ 252021; Th Suvannabanglang; meals US\$1-3; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This simple outdoor place near the guesthouses in Ban Wat That serves a large selection of Lao and Luang Prabang specialties, including the best choice of vegetarian Lao food in town.

Café Toui (☎ 253397; Th Sisavang Vatthana; meals US\$3-5; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This cosmopolitan little oasis serves delicious breakfast bagels and mostly European mains, such as grilled buffalo with red wine and tomato sauce.

Tamarind (☎ 020-777 0484; www.tamarindlaos.com; Ban Wat Nong; meals US\$2.50-4; 🍴 breakfast & lunch) Chic little Tamarind has invented its very own make of 'Mod-Lao' cuisine. The à la carte

menu boasts delicious sampling platters with bamboo dip, stuffed lemongrass and *meuyang* (DIY parcels of noodles, herbs, fish and chilli pastes, and vegetables).

Lala Café (Th Kingkitsarat; meals US\$3.50-6; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Trendy Lala serves refreshingly different Western fare, including Greek dishes, massaman curries and a spicy catfish and mango salad that you won't forget in a hurry.

Restaurant Brasserie L'Elephant (☎ 252482; Ban Wat Nong; meals US\$8-16; 🍴 lunch & dinner) One of Luang Prabang's most elegant eateries features wooden floors, subdued lighting and Lao antiques. The menu is mostly French, but you'll find other treats such as New Zealand rib eye with gorgonzola cheese sauce.

Tum Tum Cheung Restaurant & Cooking School (☎ 252019; Th Sakkarin; meals 10,000-30,000 kip; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Renowned for its excellent cooking classes (p295), the Lao and Lao-European fusion cuisine here is top notch. It's a short walk north from the centre, in a quieter *bàan* (house) next to Wat Khili. Recommended.

Among the dozens of other eating options are the following:

Nazim Indian Food (☎ 253493; Th Sisavangvong; meals US\$1.50-2.50; 🍴 lunch & dinner) A huge menu of North and South Indian food, though the faux tandoori chicken adorning the walls ain't too appealing.

Paradise Restaurant (☎ 253200; Th Mahapatsaman; meals US\$1.50-2; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Quiet, ambient place serving Lao and Luang Prabang specialties, including *aw lám* – stewed meat with eggplant and a bitter-spicy root.

Mr Hong's Coffeshop & Restaurant (71/6 Ban Thongchaleun; meals US\$2-2.50; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Fair-priced Lao dishes and potent cocktails make this a traveller favourite.

Lao Lao Garden (Th Kingkitsarat; meals US\$3-5; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Super Thai, Lao and Western fare served in a candle-lit garden. The DIY Lao barbecue is a speciality.

EATING LUANG PRABANG STYLE

Luang Prabang has its own unique cuisine – consider trying some of the local specialties, no matter how unnerving they sound. A local favourite, *jqew bqwnq* is a thick condiment made with chillies and dried buffalo skin. *Aw lám* is a soup made with dried meat, mushrooms, eggplant and a bitter-spicy root (roots and herbs with bitter-hot effects are a force in Luang Prabang cuisine). The perfect accompaniment to a bottle of Beerlao is *khái pāen*, dried river weed fried in seasoned oil, topped with sesame seeds and served with *jqew bqwnq*. Other delicacies include *phák nám*, a delicious watercress that's unique to Luang Prabang. Salad Luang Prabang is a savoury arrangement of *phák nám*, sliced boiled eggs, tomatoes and onions with a tasty dressing.

BAŚĀSĪ (BACI)

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

Lao believe everyone has 32 spirits, known as *kkhwān*, each of which acts as a guardian over a specific organ or faculty – mental and physical. *Kkhwān* occasionally wander away from their owner, which is really only a problem when that person is about to embark on a new project or journey away from home, or when they're very ill. Then it's best to perform the *bqasii* to ensure that all the *kkhwān* are present, thus restoring the equilibrium.

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

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

Drinking

Most of Luang Prabang is sound asleep, or at least nodding off behind a bottle of *khào kam* (pink rice wine), by 10pm, but there are a few bars around. Closing time, by law, is 11.30pm.

LPQ (Th Kingkitsarat) A hint of the South Pacific permeates the interior of this gay-friendly (and straight-friendly, too) bar. The atmosphere is subdued until the after-dinner crowd arrives...

Hive Bar (Th Kingkitsarat) This sultry den has a honeycomb of brick-lined, candlelit rooms and corridors, as well as a cluster of afresco tables located out the front. The debauchorous mood is offset a tad by the blaring soundtrack, which travels from old-school Pixies to Thai pop. *Lào-lào* cocktails are the house speciality.

Lemongrass (Th Khem Khong) This sleek and sophisticated bar serves classic cocktails and good wine in a chic setting. Unfortunately it's mostly for the benefit of gay travellers, and women might find they get a careless whisper suggesting as much.

Martin's Pub (Th Vattmou-Enna) Martin's is a relaxed English pub à la Laos, with the obligatory curved wooden bar and stools offset by local décor. There's a good range of booze and burgers on the menu and '70s, '80s and '90s classics in the background. Movies are screened nightly at 6pm.

More drinking holes:

Nao's Place (Th Sisavangvong) Central spot with international sports on a big screen.

Lao Lao Garden (Th Kingkitsarat) Two-for-one cocktails, Beerlao and shooters once the dining's done.

Entertainment

Royal Theatre (Th Sisavangvong; admission US\$6-15; ☎ shows 6pm) Inside the Royal Palace Museum compound, local performers put on a show that includes a *bqasii* ceremony (see the boxed text, above), traditional dance and folk music. There are traditional dances of Lao ethnic minorities such as the Phoo Noi and Hmong people.

Dao Fah (☎ 9-11.30pm) A young Lao crowd packs this cavernous club, located off the road to the southern bus terminal. Live bands playing Lao and Thai pop alternate with DJs who spin rap and hip-hop. The bar serves Beerlao and mixers for patrons bringing their own liquor. Dao Fah and Muangsua (following) are the only two places in Luang Prabang where dancing is permitted.

Muangsua Hotel (☎ 212263; Th Phu Vao; ☎ 9-11.30pm) In a low-ceilinged room behind the hotel, a Lao band plays the usual mix of Lao and Thai pop. Only Beerlao is sold.

There are several minicinas where you can catch a flick, including the following:

Le Cinema (Ban Xieng Mouane; tickets US\$3; ☎ 6pm-midnight) On a laneway opposite the eastern wing of the Royal Palace, this ingenious spot enables you to hire a room and recent-release DVD for the night. It's fun and cosy.

L'Etranger Books & Tea (booksinlaos@yahoo.com; Th Kingkitsarat; ☎ 7pm) Screens nightly films, ranging from new blockbusters to old art house.

Shopping

There's some very tempting shopping in Luang Prabang, ranging from cheap but interesting gifts and souvenirs to high-quality and

expensive textiles, arts and antiques. Much of it originates in far-off villages and it's possible to buy direct from these producers in the tranquil, no-pressure **handicraft night market** (Hmong night market; Th Sisavangvong; ☎ 5-11pm) that assembles along Th Sisavangvong near the Royal Palace Museum. It's incredibly cheap and because you're injecting currency directly into the local economy you *have* to feel good about splashing cash here.

Shops line Th Sisavangvong and neighbouring streets, and prices and quality are often higher here. Vendors tend to ask more from the well-dressed – so don't be afraid to haggle, but equally don't get upset if you are being asked a fair price.

OckPopTok Ban Wat Nong (☎ 253219; 73/5 Ban Wat Nong); Ban Xieng Mouane (☎ 254406; Th Sisavangvong) Naturally dyed house-woven Lao silk and cotton is used for bespoke clothing as well as household decorative items. The gallery in Ban Wat Nong is nonprofit and offers weaving classes.

Pathana Bouppha Antique House (☎ 212262; 29/4 Ban Visoun) Pathana Bouppha carries antique statuary; jewellery; silverwork; Royal Lao government currency and old photos, mostly from the Lao owners' private collection; and high-quality textiles.

Thithpeng Maniphone (Ban Wat That) Thithpeng crafted silverware for Luang Prabang royalty before 1975. He has 15 apprentice silversmiths but still does the most delicate work himself.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Luang Prabang International Airport (☎ 212173) is 4km from the city centre. **Lao Airlines** (☎ 212172; www.laoairlines.com; Th Pha Mahapatsaman) flies from Luang Prabang to Vientiane (one way US\$62, daily), Phonsavan (US\$40, three times a week) and Pakse (US\$135, twice a week). Internationally, flights go to Chiang Mai in Thailand (US\$85, Tuesday, Friday, Sunday), Bangkok (US\$120) and Hanoi (US\$112).

Bangkok Airways (☎ 253334; www.bangkokair.com; Th Sisavangvong) flies from Luang Prabang to Bangkok (US\$120). **Siem Reap Airways** (www.siemreapairways.com) goes direct from Luang Prabang to Siem Reap (US\$120); bookings are through travel agents.

BOAT

As we went to press there was talk in Laos of banning foreigners from using speedboats. Check the **Thorn Tree** (www.lonelyplanet.com/thornree) for the latest.

Pak Beng & Huay Xai

Slow boats motor northwest to Huay Xai (US\$20), departing at 8am. These boats stand by the Mekong and you can buy tickets direct from them or from a travel agent. The trip takes two days with an overnight stop in Pak Beng (US\$10, one day). From Pak Beng it's also possible to take the bus northeast to Oudomxay.

White-knuckle speedboats up the Mekong leave from Ban Don, a 7km, US\$1 shared tük-tük ride from the centre. They race to Pak Beng (US\$20, three hours) and Huay Xai (US\$30, six hours) in half the time...but 10 times the danger.

Nong Khiaw

Although it's quicker by road, many travellers charter a boat for the beautiful trip up the Nam Ou to Nong Khiaw (US\$12, four to seven hours). Inquire at the Navigation Office in Luang Prabang or with travel agents in town, where you can add your name to the passenger list of impending departures. With enough passengers, speedboats travel from Luang Prabang to Nong Khiaw (US\$16, two hours), though usually from June to January only.

Vientiane

Once in a blue moon slow cargo boats travel between Luang Prabang and Vientiane (US\$40, around three days downriver). Check at the Navigation Office for departures. These boats are basically large floating trucks, with all the comforts of floats – not many – but memorable character.

BUS & SĀWNGTHĀEW

Most interprovincial buses and *sāwngthāew* heading north depart from the northern bus terminal (on Rte 13 about 4km north of town), while southbound vehicles use the southern bus terminal, 3km south of town. However, there are exceptions, so double-check if you're buying your ticket in town. On all these routes the durations can vary wildly depending on road and weather conditions. So just remember, this is Laos where arriving late is part of travelling.

Vientiane & Vang Vieng

Several buses leave the southern terminal for Vientiane (ordinary/air-con US\$9/10, 10 to 14 hours) between about 6.30am and 9.30am,

sometimes later. They stop in Vang Vieng (ordinary/air-con US\$7.50/8.50, six to nine hours). Travel agents also sell tickets on minivans (US\$18, about eight hours, four daily) and 'VIP' buses (US\$12, about 10 hours, two daily). Neither is much more comfortable, but they are faster.

Oudomxay, Luang Nam Tha, Nong Khiaw & Sam Neua

From the northern bus terminal, daily *sáwngháew* and buses go to Oudomxay (US\$4.50, five hours, 8am), Luang Nam Tha (US\$7, eight hours, 9am and 4.30pm), Nong Khiaw (US\$3.20, four hours, two to five daily), and Sam Neua (US\$10, 16 hours, 4pm).

Xieng Khuang, Saiyabouli & Huay Xai

From the southern terminal buses leave daily to Phonsavan (US\$8.50, 10 hours, 8.30am), Saiyabouli (US\$4, five hours, 9am) and Huay Xai (US\$14, eight to 11 hours, 5pm), although in the rainy season the Huay Xai bus might not run.

Getting Around

From the airport into town jumbos (big túk-túks) or minitrucks charge a uniform US\$5.50 per vehicle, and up to six can share the ride. In the reverse direction you can usually charter an entire jumbo for US\$2 to US\$4.

Most of the town is accessible on foot. Jumbos charge US\$0.40 per kilometre in town, although they usually just ask foreigners for US\$1 a ride. Motorcycles can be hired from several shops in the town centre for US\$5 a day. Bicycles are widely available for between US\$1 and US\$3 a day depending on the bike.

AROUND LUANG PRABANG Pak Ou Caves

About 25km by boat from Luang Prabang up the Mekong River, at the mouth of the Nam Ou, are the famous **Pak Ou caves** (admission US\$1). These two caves in the lower part of a limestone cliff are crammed with a variety of Buddha images, a kind of graveyard where unwanted images are placed. Bring a torch (flashlight).

Most boat trips stop at small villages along the way, especially **Ban Xang Hai**. Boatmen call this tourist-dominated place 'Whisky Village', and it's known for its free-flowing *lào-lào*.

You can hire long-tail boats to Pak Ou from Luang Prabang's charter boat landing

at US\$15 for one to three people or US\$20 for four to five people, including petrol. The trip takes two hours upriver and one hour down, plus stops. Túk-túks make the trip for about half the price.

Tat Kuang Si

This beautiful spot 32km south of town has a wide, many-tiered waterfall tumbling over limestone formations into a series of cool, turquoise pools. The lower level of the falls has been turned into a well-maintained **public park** (parking US\$0.25, admission US\$2). Near the entrance are enclosures housing a tiger and sun bears rescued from poachers. A trail climbs through the forest to a second tier that is more private (most visitors stay below) and has a pool large enough for swimming and splashing around.

On the way to Kuang Si you'll pass Ban Tat Paen, a scenic Khamu village with a cool stream, rustic dam and several miniature waterfalls. **Vanvisa 2 Guest House** (per person incl breakfast & dinner US\$20) is a simple Lao-style wooden guesthouse in this village; with notice they can arrange cooking classes for US\$15 per person.

Some visitors come by hired bicycle (for the fit only) or motorcycle, stopping in villages along the way. Freelance guides offer trips by jumbo, or boat and jumbo (both for about US\$3 to US\$5 per person) – they'll find you.

LUANG PRABANG PROVINCE Nong Khiaw (Muang Ngoi)

☎ 071

Nestled next to the looming limestone cliffs of Phu Nang Nawn (Sleeping Princess Mountain), Nong Khiaw is a quiet market town on the banks of the Nam Ou. The location is stunning, but most travellers only stop for a short break before catching a boat further north. Those who stay and explore the dramatic surrounds are rewarded with walks to nearby caves and Hmong villages. The friendly guesthouses, on both sides of the river, are markedly less busy than the bungalow huts of Muang Ngoi Neua. Nong Khiaw and Ban Sop Houn have electricity from 6pm to 10pm.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

There are great **trekking** opportunities around Nong Khiaw. You can walk by yourself to **Tham Pha Tok**, a cave where villagers hid out

during the Second Indochina War. To get there, walk 2.5km east of the bridge, then look for a clearly visible cave mouth in the limestone cliff to your right (it's about 100m from the road). Longer treks to Hmong and Khamu villages are arranged by the Sunset Guest House for around US\$10 per day. You can also try your hand at **traditional river fishing**; ask at Bamboo Paradise.

The **GreenHeart Foundation** (www.wowlao.com) based at Chan-a-Mar Guest House has a gallery and offers sustainable small-group tours with an emphasis on Lao culture.

SLEEPING & EATING

Guesthouses are in Nong Khiaw, near the bridge on the west side of the river, and the more popular Ban Sop Houn, on the east side, where most have balconies with panoramic views. Most guesthouses have attached restaurants, and there are several other options that you won't need a compass to find.

Bamboo Paradise Guest House (Ban Sop Houn; r US\$2) The friendly owners, decent if basic bungalows (with floor mattresses) and impromptu Lao language lessons make this a good choice.

Sengdao Guest House (r US\$8, r with shared bathroom US\$3) With the best views from the Nong Khiaw side of the river, this guesthouse has simple huts or pleasant bamboo bungalows with clean private bathrooms.

Sunset Guest House (Ban Sop Houn; s/d without bathroom US\$2.50/5, r with bathroom US\$12) This Lao-style wooden house has simple rooms or more comfortable bungalows overlooking the river. The shady veranda with reclining cushions, river views and decent food is popular.

Nong Kiau Riverside (Ban Sop Houn; ☎ 254770; www.nongkiau.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$12/16) This bargain of a resort has huge bungalows with four-post beds and wide balconies that make you feel like royalty. There's also a good Lao restaurant.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Boat

In high season boats heading up the Nam Ou to Muang Ngoi Neua (US\$1.80, one hour) leave regularly until about 3pm. In low season they're less regular but usually meet buses arriving from Luang Prabang around lunchtime. Tickets are bought at an office at the bus station. Boats sometimes continue to Muang Khua (US\$10, seven hours).

Occasional public boats still make the six-hour trip through striking karst scenery south to Luang Prabang, though more likely you'll have to charter one for about US\$100. See p299 for information on boat travel from Luang Prabang.

Bus & Sáwngháew

Sáwngháew going to Oudomxay (US\$2.50, three hours, three daily) leave from the west end of the bridge. You can also take one of the more frequent *sáwngháew* southwest to Pak Mong (US\$1.80, two hours), then change to another *sáwngháew* to Oudomxay (US\$2, two to three hours from Pak Mong) and anywhere further west. *Sáwngháew* and buses to Luang Prabang (US\$3.20, four to five hours) depart between 8am and 11am; usually the earliest is a public bus.

If you're heading east towards Houaphanh or Xieng Khuang, you can get a bus to Sam Neua (US\$7, 12 hours, one daily), or start a *sáwngháew* hop by heading to Muang Vieng Kham and changing there.

Muang Ngoi Neua

After an hour puttering along an almost deserted stretch of the Nam Ou, arriving at Muang Ngoi Neua is a slightly surreal experience. Until a few years ago, this was a small Lao village like many others, dependent on the river for its livelihood and – being inaccessible by road – largely cut off from the outside world. Today it is wall-to-wall guesthouses, and tourism has become the mainstay of the local economy. Despite its undeniable strangeness, Muang Ngoi Neua is a relaxing, scenic place to hang out and a good base for frolicking in the river or trekking into the majestic hills that surround it on all sides. And there are no cars!

INFORMATION

Generators provide electricity from 6pm to 10pm. There are no internet or telephone facilities, but you can exchange US dollars at several guesthouses at unattractive rates. A couple of pharmacies sell basic medicines.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

In town you'll find a sea of signs advertising guides for fishing trips, tubing, kayaking and trekking. Some guides speak decent English, which is imperative if you want to enjoy the cultural aspect of any activity. Treks cost US\$5

to US\$10 per day and tubing costs around US\$1.50 per day.

Recommended English-speaking guides include **Sang Tours** (☎ 8am-9pm), not far from the boat landing on the main 'street', and **Lao Youth Travel** (www.laoyouthtravel.com; ☎ 7.30-10.30am & 1.30-6pm) to the left of the boat landing. Run by a former village school teacher, **Muang Ngoi Tour Office** (☎ 7-8am & 6-7pm) is located behind the main street 300m south of the boat landing – look for the signs. This outfit organises small-group treks to Hmong and Khamu villages for around US\$8 per day including food, and **fishing trips**.

Two **caves** can easily be visited in under an hour's walk. At the southern end of the village, turn left (east) in front of Kaikeo Restaurant and follow the path through a large rural schoolyard (don't forget to pay the US\$1 admission fee here) and into an area of secondary forest. After a 5km walk along a path passing rice fields, you come to a stream running into **Tham Kang**, a popular spot for spear-fishing. After another five minutes on the same trail you arrive at another cave, **Tham Pha Kaew**. Beyond the caves you can continue on to villages **Huay Bo** (one hour, 3km), **Huay Sen** (1½ hours) and **Ban Na** (another 1km). If you fancy a village stay, try the **Konsavan Guest House** (US\$1) in Huay Bo.

SLEEPING

Unless otherwise noted, these guesthouses feature bungalows with river views, shared cold-water bathrooms, squat toilets, hammocks, small restaurants and, often, a local family of friendly rats. This is only a small selection, and as things change fast here, please don't restrict yourself to what we've listed here.

Saylom Guest House (r US\$2) This welcoming place on the right of the boat ramp has clean bungalows with decent beds. All have shared bathrooms. The restaurant has delightful river views.

Phetdavanh Guest House (r US\$2) This sturdy two-storey building on the main strip is clean and secure. Rooms are rat-free and have crisp sheets and tidy bathrooms, but there are no hammocks or river views.

Lattanavongsa Guest House (r US\$5) A step up from the bamboo bungalow brigade, this friendly place to the left of the boat landing has clean rooms with hard beds and tiled bathrooms, but no fans.

Aloune Mai Guest House (r US\$5) Off the path and away from the river, this new place is good for a quiet night's sleep and a private bathroom. Look for the signs.

More options:

Kham's Place Bungalows & Restaurant (r US\$1) Simple bungalows and cold beer.

Sunset Guest House & Talee 2 (r US\$2) At the southern end of the village, it's basic but quiet with a riverfront location.

EATING

Basic Lao and Western food can be found all over town in simple restaurants and at guesthouses; just follow your nose. All are open all day, the following being particularly notable.

Sengdala Bakery (meals US\$0.50-1.50) This bakery restaurant serves good rice, noodles, curries, soups and salads but also distinguishes itself with great pancakes and baguettes. Water-bottle refills cost US\$0.10 per litre.

Nang Phone Keo Restaurant (meals US\$0.50-1.50) The 'falang roll' of peanut butter, sticky rice and vegies lures ravenous travellers to this restaurant on the main street. The *fôe* is good, too.

Lattanavongsa Guest House (meals US\$1-2) The restaurant here makes outstanding spring rolls and a hearty noodle soup, served on an ambient open-air deck.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Boats to Nong Khiaw leave regularly (US\$1.80, one hour), the last at about 3pm or 4pm. Heading north, the very occasional public boat (US\$8, five hours) goes to Muang Khua, or you can hire one for about US\$50. It's a stunning trip. From Muang Khua, take a boat to Hat Sa (another five hours, US\$10 or charter US\$80 to US\$100) or a bus back to Oudomxay (US\$6, eight to 12 hours, 8am). From Hat Sa *sāwngthāew* take the rough road to Phongsali (US\$1.50 per person, US\$15 charter). There's a basic guesthouse in Hat Sa.

XIENG KHUANG PROVINCE

Virtually every town and village in Xieng Khuang Province was bombed between 1964 and 1973. Today the awesome beauty of the mountains and valleys of this province is tragically overshadowed by the denuded hills and valleys pockmarked with bomb craters. This remains the province most heavily contaminated with UXO (unexploded ordnance) in Laos; walking off paths is foolish.

UXO IN XIENG KHUANG

Between 1964 and 1973, the USA conducted one of the largest sustained aerial bombardments in history, flying 580,344 missions over Laos and dropping two million tons of bombs, costing US\$2.2 million a day. Around 30% of the bombs dropped on Laos failed to detonate, leaving the country littered with unexploded ordnance (UXO). For people all over eastern Laos (the most contaminated provinces are Xieng Khuang, Salavan and Savannakhet), living with this appalling legacy has become an intrinsic part of daily life, and for too many a cause of death. Today about 40% of Xieng Khuang's estimated 30 to 60 casualties per year are children, who continue to play with found UXO. The major problem is the harmless-looking, ball-shaped 'bomb light units' (BLUs, or bombies) left behind by cluster bombs.

Tourists can play a role in reducing the number of UXO and their casualties by visiting the **Mines Advisory Group** (MAG; ☎ 4-8pm) office in Phonsavan. MAG is a British organisation that has been clearing UXO in conjunction with UXO Lao since 1994. The office has an information display and sells T-shirts and DVDs to fund its operations.

Most visitors come to Xieng Khuang to visit the mysterious Plain of Jars, but there are also several fascinating sites relating to the war that are open to tourists.

Phonsavan

☎ 061 / pop 60,000

A sprawling collection of wide streets and concrete shophouses, Phonsavan (often called 'Xieng Khuang') has little aesthetic appeal except for the ubiquitous collections of war scrap that decorate guesthouses and restaurants. However, it's a comfortable base for exploring the surrounding area and the locals are known to give foreigners a warm welcome.

Traditionally, the area surrounding Phonsavan and the former capital of Xieng Khuang has been a centre of Phuan language and culture. But these days you'll hear Vietnamese spoken almost as frequently as Lao and Phuan.

INFORMATION

Hot Net (Rte 7; per hr US\$3; ☎ 8am-10pm) Slow internet connections.

Lao Development Bank (☎ 312188) Currency exchange; has two branches.

Lao-Mongolian Friendship Hospital (☎ 312166)

Good for minor needs, but medical emergencies will need to be taken to Vientiane.

Post office (☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Has a domestic phone service.

Provincial tourist office (☎ 312217) Useful for simple information if you can find any staff.

Sousath Travel (☎ 312031; www.malyht.laotel.com; Maly Hotel) A reader fave. Trips further afield include Tham Piu, Muang Sui, Sam Neua and Long Cheng (former site

of the CIA's infamous mountain base during the Second Indochina War).

SLEEPING

You should be able to secure a room in Phonsavan at any time of year. Finding character, however, isn't so easy.

KongKeo Guest House (☎ 211354; www.kongkeojar.com; r US\$4-5) Hidden off the main street, the popular KongKeo has four spartan rooms with shared bathroom or a scattering of great bungalows with cool interiors and attached bathrooms. The industrious owner can organise tours.

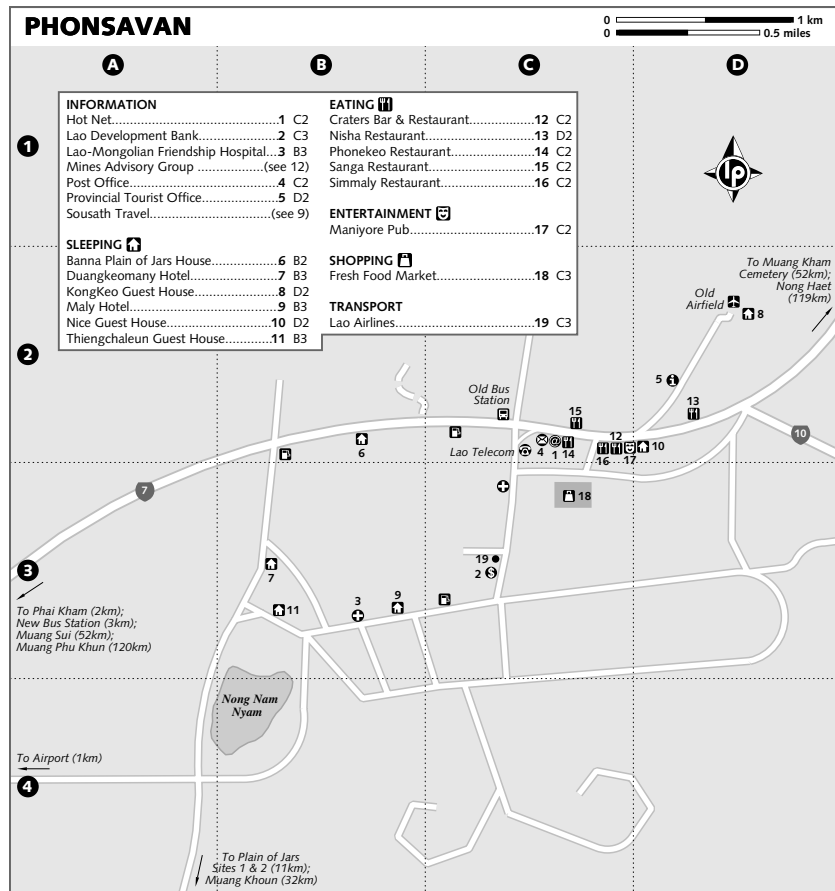
Nice Guest House (r US\$6) The clean and generous rooms with firm beds and pretty bathrooms are, well, nice enough. Rooms upstairs share a balcony.

Banna Plain of Jars House (☎ 212484; www.bannagroup.com; r US\$10) This polished guesthouse has unadorned but neat rooms upstairs with comfy beds. Some are dark, so ask to see a few. A cheery restaurant downstairs serves breakfast.

Thiengchaleun Guest House (☎ 211774; r US\$10-15) This isolated and pleasant guesthouse has sunny rooms with pastel hues, large Western-style bathrooms and ceiling fans. Prices rise with the room size.

Maly Hotel (☎ 312031; www.malyht.laotel.com; r US\$8-50; ☎) The well-run Maly offers 30 comfortable rooms. They vary in size and some have a TV and/or balcony. The US\$15 rooms are the best value. The restaurant is among the best in town and the owner speaks good English, German and French.

Duangkeomany Hotel (☎ 020-551 6553; r US\$25) The place for fussy travellers, this hotel has spacious rooms with bright interiors, crisp



bedding, TVs, wardrobes and gleaming bathrooms with tubs. Excellent value.

EATING

There are a number of reasonable dining options in Phonsavan, from the daytime-only **fresh food market** (☎ 6am-5pm) – with its noodle stands, fresh fruit and other street food – to Indian, Korean, Lao or Western food.

Phonekeo Restaurant (meals US\$1; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This friendly noodle shop serves the best *fôe* in town.

Simmaly Restaurant (☎ 211013; meals US\$1-1.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The welcoming Simmaly has a simple menu that's popular with both locals and tourists. Its fried spicy meats, rice dishes and noodle soups are all done well.

Sanga Restaurant (Sa-Nga; ☎ 312318; meals \$1-4; ☎ lunch & dinner) The clean, well-run Sanga, near the market and post office, offers an extensive menu of Chinese, Thai and Lao food, including good *yâm* (a tart, spicy Thai-style salad), *tôm yâm* (spicy lemon grass-based soup), *khào khũa* (fried rice) and *fôe*, plus a few Western items.

Nisha Restaurant (meals US\$1-4; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Tuck into delicious *aloo ghoibi* (potato and cauliflower), *dosas* (flat bread), *tikka masala* and *rogan josh* at this spacious Indian diner. The list of vegetarian options is long and you can down a whole tandoori chicken for US\$4.

Maly Hotel (meals US\$1-5) This hotel restaurant has a great selection of Lao and Western food. In the rainy season ask for the delicious *hét wâi* (wild matsutake mushrooms).

Craters Bar & Restaurant (☎ 020-780 5775; meals US\$2-4; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This cosmopolitan eatery has a mostly *falang* menu of club sandwiches, pizzas and even Australian T-bone. There are also Thai and Lao dishes tamed to Western palates.

ENTERTAINMENT

The tourist authority's 'DIY Phonsavan' fact sheet recommends politely crashing a wedding party, provided you're happy to give a monetary gift in a white envelope to the couple. Turning up uninvited is unlikely to offend your hosts, but neglecting to contribute to the gift-giving would be more than a faux pas (and will probably ensure foreigners are no longer welcomed!). If no one's getting married, the Maniyore Pub on the main street serves as a dimly lit nightclub and drinking den, and is well-patronised by locals and travellers.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Lao Airlines (☎ 212027) flies to/from Vientiane (one way US\$53, daily except Tuesday and Thursday) and to/from Luang Prabang (US\$40, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday). Jumbos to the airport cost US\$1.50 per person.

Most buses now leave from the new bus station, which is about 4km west of town, though some services might still begin in town. Most long-distance buses depart between 7am and 8am – check times the day before. Buses run to Sam Neua (US\$7, eight to 10 hours, two daily), Vientiane (ordinary/VIP US\$9/10, 11 hours), Vang Vieng (ordinary/VIP US\$7.50/10, six hours) and Luang Prabang (ordinary/VIP US\$9.50/8.50, 10 hours). There's also a daily bus to Paksan (US\$8), but the road is diabolical and trip times vary from long to very long.

There are public buses and *săwnghâew* to Muang Kham (US\$2, two hours, four daily),

Muang Sui (US\$2, one hour, three daily) and Nong Haet (US\$2, four hours, four daily).

Other destinations include Lat Khai (Plain of Jars Site 3; US\$1, 30 minutes, one daily) and Muang Khoun (US\$2, 30 minutes, six daily). Buses also go all the way through to Vinh in Vietnam (US\$11, 11 hours, 6.30am Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday).

Plain of Jars

The Plain of Jars is a large area around Phonsavan where huge jars of unknown origin are scattered in about 20 groupings. Visitors can wander around three main sites, which have been largely cleared of UXO.

Site 1 (Thong Hai Hin; admission US\$0.70), the biggest and most accessible site, is 15km southwest of Phonsavan and features 250 jars, most of which weigh from 600kg to 1 tonne each. The largest jar weighs as much as 6 tonnes and is said to have been the victory cup of mythical King Jeum, and so is called Hai Jeum.

Two other jar sites are readily accessible by road from Phonsavan. **Site 2** (Hai Hin Phu Salato; admission US\$0.70), about 25km south of town, features 90 jars spread across two adjacent hillsides. Vehicles can reach the base of the hills, then it's a short, steep walk to the jars.

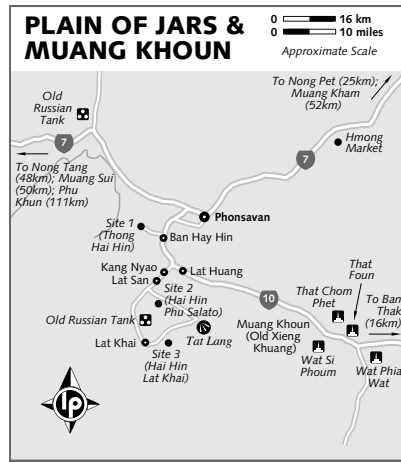
More impressive is 150-jar **Site 3** (Hai Hin Lat Khai; admission US\$0.70). It's about 10km south of Site 2 (or 35km from Phonsavan) on a scenic hilltop near the charming village of Ban Xieng Di, where there's a small monastery containing the remains of Buddha images damaged in the war. The site is a 2km hike through rice paddies and up a hill.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

It's possible to charter a *săwnghâew* to Site 1 for about US\$8 return, including waiting time, for up to six people. All three sites are reachable by bike or motorcycle (per day US\$15

CROSSING INTO VIETNAM: NONG HAET TO NAM CAN

The Nong Haet-Nam Can crossing is little used by travellers because it's difficult, potentially expensive if you get ripped off, and not really convenient if you're heading north in Vietnam (you have to go 200km south to grim Vinh first). On the Laos side, Nam Khan is 13km east of Nong Haet via Rte 7. You can get between Nong Haet and Phonsavan by bus (US\$2, three to four hours, four daily) or chartered car for about US\$30 or US\$40. Coming into Laos, do not rely on getting a visa on arrival. There is also a direct bus between Phonsavan and Vinh (US\$11, 11 hours, Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday). For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see p366.



track and come; your exploration will be well rewarded.

Sam Neua

☎ 064 / pop 46,800

There is an unmistakable 'frontier' feeling to Sam Neua. Men in military caps and jackets nurse coffees and cigarettes, wrapped up against the morning chill, and pick-up trucks piled high with local villagers, crates of chilli sauce or nylon bags stuffed with goods pass through. It's one of the least touristy provincial centres in Laos. While the town offers little in terms of sights, the riverside market is fascinating – all manner of freshly slaughtered or harvested delicacies, as well as textiles, jewellery and consumer goods are sold here. In mid-December, local ethnic groups take part in all-important courtship games and festivities during a **Hmong Lai Festival**.

INFORMATION

Lao Development Bank (☎ 312171; 🕒 8am–4pm Mon–Fri) On the main road 400m north of the bus station on the left; exchanges cash and travellers cheques.

Post office (🕒 8am–4pm Mon–Fri) In a large building directly opposite the bus station. A telephone office at its rear offers international calls.

Provincial tourist office (☎ 312567; 🕒 8am–noon & 1.30–4pm Mon–Fri) An excellent tourist office with English-speaking staff eager to help.

SLEEPING & EATING

The block between the bus station and the Nam Sam is where the reputable guesthouses and a few restaurants can be found, all within a short walking distance.

Phootong Guest House (☎ 312271; rUS\$3.50) Simple, cheap and central, this small guesthouse behind a shopfront has basic rooms with ceiling fans, mosquito nets and small cold-water bathrooms. They're a little bit tired but decent value, and the owners are extremely gracious.

Shuliyo Guest House (☎ 312462; rUS\$5–6) Tucked into an alley near the market, Shuliyo has rudimentary but welcoming rooms with decent bathrooms, hot water, ceiling fans and aged beds. There's a lovely central sitting area with free tea and coffee.

Kheamxam Guest House (☎ 312111; rUS\$5–7) This pastel-hued, corner hotel next to the bridge is the best value in town. Rooms range from neat and simple affairs with spotless, shared bathrooms to large corner rooms with satel-

lite TV, attached hot-water bathroom and street views.

Dan Nao Restaurant (☎ 314126; meals US\$1–1.50; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) At the end of the lane-way and a few doors west of Khaemxam, this is probably the best eatery in a town that's not winning any gourmet awards. The basic Lao menu also includes Western-style breakfasts, excellent fried rice, fresh baguettes and tender beef salad.

For cheap *jõe*, samosas, spring rolls and fried sweet potato, the **market** (🕒 6am–6pm) is the place to go.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Lao Airlines (☎ 312023; airport) flies three times a week between Vientiane and Sam Neua (one way US\$75), though flights are regularly cancelled or delayed because the airport gets shrouded by mist. The airport is 3km from town and a motorcycle taxi costs about US\$1.

There are two buses a day from Sam Neua to Phonsavan (US\$7, eight to 10 hours, 9am and noon). The bus then continues on to Vientiane (from Sam Neua US\$13, 20 to 24 hours), on a winding sealed road.

A daily bus heads southeast along Rte 6 and then Rte 1 to Nong Khiaw (US\$7, 12 hours, 8am) and continues on to Luang Prabang (from Sam Neua US\$8, 16 hours). If you're heading for Oudomxay, take this bus and change at Pak Mong. The Nam Noen to Nong Khiaw leg runs along winding roads

and past brilliant scenery, passing many Blue Hmong villages along the way.

You can rent a motorcycle (US\$6 per day) from a shop between the provincial tourist office and the bus station.

Vieng Xai

☎ 064 / pop 32,800

In a narrow valley of limestone peaks are caves that served as the elaborate homes and shelters of the Pathet Lao leaders and some 23,000 of their followers for more than a decade before their victory in 1975. The caverns are virtually unassailable by land or air, but the area was still heavily pounded by American bombs. Today, the most historically significant caves, named after the leaders who lived in them, are open to tourists. Vieng Xai is a fascinating and peaceful place to spend a day or two in. A wooden board in front of the market features a map of town.

You must report to the **Kaysone Phomvihane Memorial Tour Cave Office** (☎ 314321; 🕒 8am–11.30am & 1–4.30pm), a 2km walk from the bus station, to pay the US\$3 fee for entrance and the mandatory guide. It's another US\$0.50 for a camera. Two-hour tours leave the office at 9am and 1pm and take in three or four caves. At other times you will need to pay an additional fee of US\$5 per tour to cover staff costs.

The leaders' caves feature multiple entrances, bedrooms, offices, and emergency rooms fitted with steel doors and equipped

through guesthouses), and Craters Bar & Restaurant (p305) has two bicycles for rent (US\$3 per day).

Otherwise, you're on a tour. Guesthouses and a number of travel agents offer tours for US\$10 to US\$12 per person in a minivan of around eight passengers. **Sousath Travel** (☎ 312031; sousathp@aotel.com), **Phou Kham** (☎ 312121) and **Kong-Keo Guest House** (☎ 020-551 6365; www.kongkeo.jar.com; off Rte 7) have all received good reports.

Tours are often extended to include other interesting sites, including a crashed US F-105 Thunderchief, a Russian tank, Viet Cong bunkers, the US Lima Site 108 airstrip supposedly used for drug running, and hot springs. Trips can also be arranged to the Tham Piu cave, about 60km east, where 400 local people were killed in a US bombing raid.

HOUAPHANH PROVINCE

Rugged and beautiful, Houaphanh is unlike any other province in Laos. Although home to 22 different ethnic groups, including Yao, Hmong, Khamu, Thai Khao and Thai Neua, the strong Vietnamese influence is evident. The province's high altitude means the climate can be cool – even in the hot season – and forested mountains are shrouded in mist. Road journeys to Houaphanh are memorably scenic, described by one local as 'a journey of a million turns'.

Despite the remote border to Vietnam and Hanoi opening to foreigners, this remains one of the least visited provinces in Laos. Which is a great reason to get off the beaten

JARS OF THE STONE AGE

The purpose of the Plain of Jars (p305), which are possibly 2000 years old, remains a mystery. And without any organic material – such as bones or food remains – there is no reliable way to date them. Archaeological theories and local myth suggest the enigmatic jars were used for burial purposes – as stone coffins or urns – or maybe for storing *lào-lào* (rice whisky) or rice?

In the 1930s, pioneering French archaeologist Madeline Colani documented the jars in a 600-page monograph *Mégalithes du Haut Laos* (Megaliths of Highland Laos), concluding that they were funerary urns carved by a vanished people. Colani found a human-shaped bronze figure in one of the jars at Site 1, and tiny stone beads nearby. Today the whereabouts of these artefacts is unknown.

The relief of a human figure carved onto Jar 217 at Site 1 – a feature Colani missed – lends weight to the sarcophagi theory. Whether they were used for cremation or in a burial practice where a person is 'distilled', their presence reinforces various theories on the pattern of human migration here over the last two millennia.

Aerial photography suggests a thin 'track' of jars may link the various jar sites in Xieng Khuang, and some researchers hope future excavations will uncover sealed jars whose contents may be relatively intact. Unfortunately, excavations will take some time while UXOs are slowly removed from the area.

CROSSING INTO VIETNAM: NA MAEW TO NAM XOÏ

The remote, seldom-used and often difficult border (open 7.30am to 11.30am and 1.30pm to 4.30pm) at Na Maew in Laos and Nam Xoï in Vietnam is an adventurer's delight. There's a daily *sǎwngthǎew* from Sam Neua (US\$2.30, four hours, 6.30am), or several from Vieng Xai (US\$1.50, two hours, 8am to 11am). Visas are not available on arrival. In Vietnam you can negotiate a motorbike to Thanh Hoa or to Ba Thuoc. Both options can be pricey and drivers will likely rip you off. There are a couple of guesthouses on the Vietnamese side. For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see p366.

with large Russian oxygen machines in case of a chemical attack. Many of the caves are now fringed by magnificent gardens, making them look more like holiday grottoes than scenes of war and hardship.

Tham Than Souphanouvong, named after the Red Prince, has a crater from a 230kg bomb near the entrance that has been concreted as a war relic. **Tham Than Kayson**, named after the former president, has the most to look at, with original beds, clothing, office equipment, books, a portrait of Che Guevara and a politburo meeting room. **Tham Than Khamtay**, where up to 3000 Pathet Lao rank and file would hide out, is the most spectacular of the caves.

SLEEPING & EATING

Naxay Guest House (☎ 314336; r US\$2-4) There are five cute twins here that share a homely living room and rudimentary bathrooms, plus one private bungalow with attached bathroom.

Thavisay Hotel (☎ 020-571 2392; r US\$4-6) Currently being renovated, this two-storey hotel in a lovely setting promises to be the best place in town, with attached hot-water bathrooms and two double beds with mosquito nets. There's also a restaurant (meals US\$2 to US\$3, open breakfast, lunch and dinner) overlooking a manmade lake.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Sǎwngthǎew run regularly between Sam Neua and Vieng Xai (US\$0.80, 50 minutes, 29km, 6.20am to 5.20pm), with departures more frequent in the morning.

ODOMXAY PROVINCE

This rugged province is wedged between Luang Prabang, Phongsali, Luang Nam Tha, Bokeo and Sainyabuli Provinces, with a small section that shares a border with China's Yunnan province. It is home to 23 ethnic minorities, but the dominant group is increasingly

the Yunnanese working in construction and plantation operations. Most people travelling in northern Laos will pass through Oudomxay, but there are better places to stop.

Oudomxay

☎ 081 / pop 80,000

During the Second Indochina War, the regional capital became the centre for Chinese troops supportive of the Pathet Lao. Today its position at the junction of Rtes 1, 2 and 4 has made it a booming Laos-China trade centre riding on imported Chinese wealth. Despite the enthusiasm of the staff at the tourist office, the town is not particularly exciting.

INFORMATION

BCEL (☎ 21260; Rte 1) Changes US dollars, Thai baht or Chinese yuan into kip.

Oudomxay Internet (Rte 1; per hr US\$1.80; ☎ 8am-7pm) Speedy and reliable.

Oudomxay provincial tourism office (☎ 211797; Rte 1; ☎ 8am-noon & 1.30-4pm Oct-Mar, 7.30-11.30am & 1.30-6pm Apr-Sep) Just west of the bridge; information about accommodation, ecotourism tours and transport.

SLEEPING & EATING

Most places are along Rte 1. The **Valving Guest House** (☎ 212503; r US\$4) is a good choice for the budget conscious, while the welcoming **Lithavixay Guest House** (☎ /fax 212175; Rte 1; r \$7-15; ☎ ☎), east of the bridge, has rooms with private hot-water bathrooms and, for a few dollars more, breakfast, satellite TV and air-con.

The **Sinphet Restaurant** (meals US\$0.50-1.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner), at the base of a basic guesthouse, whips up good Chinese-Lao fusion dishes and a few Western favourites.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Lao Airlines (☎ 312047; airport) flies to/from Vientiane (one way US\$75) every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. The Chinese-built bitumen

roads that radiate from Oudomxay are in fair condition (except for the road to Pak Beng) and the city is the transport hub of the north. The **bus terminal** (☎ 21218) at the southwestern edge of town has buses to Luang Prabang (ordinary US\$4, five hours, three daily; VIP US\$5, three hours, two daily), Nong Khiaw (US\$3.10, three to five hours, four daily), Pak Beng (US\$3.30, five hours, two daily), Luang Nam Tha (US\$3.20, four hours, three daily), Muang Khua (US\$2.80, four hours, three daily), Boten (US\$3, four hours, two daily), Phongsali (US\$6, eight to 12 hours, daily) and Vientiane (ordinary US\$11, 16 hours, two daily; VIP US\$12.10, 14 hours, two daily).

Pak Beng

If you're taking a river boat between Huay Xai and Luang Prabang, there's a good chance you'll spend a night in this rustic town at the junction of the Mekong River and the smaller Nam Beng. Pak Beng isn't nearly as grim as it once was, but it's not that appealing, either. Scams, including overcharging for carrying bags and promising rooms that sound much better than the squalid hovels they are, are common. For electricity most places rely on generators, which run between 6pm and 10pm.

There's little in the way of attractions, but the **Traditional Massage & Sauna** (sauna US\$1, massage US\$3; ☎ sauna 4-10pm, massage 8am-noon & 2.30-11.30pm) near Bounmee Guest House, is a good way to kill an hour or two.

Several guesthouses populate the riverside road, most with small rooms, hard mattresses, mosquito nets and shared facilities. The **Monsavan Guest House** (☎ 5771935; r US\$2-5) isn't bad for budgeteers, while the **Villa Salika** (☎ 212306; r US\$5-7) has private bathrooms for a little more. For greater comforts, the **Pak Beng Lodge** (r US\$30; ☎ ☎) and the eco-friendly **Luang Say Lodge** (☎ 212296; www.mekongcruises.com; r from US\$60) should satisfy.

See p314 for details on river travel between Pak Beng, Luang Prabang and Huay Xai. *Sǎwngthǎew* head along potholed Rte 2 towards Oudomxay (US\$3.30, five hours, two daily) from a bus station 1.5km from the boat landing.

LUANG NAM THA PROVINCE

With the capital virtually destroyed during the Second Indochina War, Luang Nam Tha has been revived as a commercial node

between Thailand, China and Laos, with Chinese plantation operations popping up faster than mushrooms. The success of the Nam Ha Ecotourism Project has seen tourism take off and chances are you'll meet more than one traveller raving about their trekking experience out of Luang Nam Tha or Muang Sing. The new Rte 3 from China to Thailand is set to alter the dynamic of village life here, as Laos reinvents itself as an important crossroads state between two of the world's fastest-growing economies.

Luang Nam Tha

☎ 086 / pop 35,400

Luang Nam Tha is actually two towns set in a wide, flat river valley. The new town, which has the main bus station and the bulk of the guesthouses, restaurants and facilities, lies 7km to the north of the old town – where you find the airport and Nam Tha boat landing. The town itself is not particularly appealing, though a new night market selling textiles, clothing, basketry, paper and other locally produced handicrafts should liven things up a bit. The surrounding mountains and rice fields have a number of Thai Dam, Khamu and Thai Lü villages that are worth visiting by bicycle.

INFORMATION

BCEL (☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) Changes US-dollar travellers cheques and cash; gives cash advances on credit cards.

Internet Cafe (per hr US\$1.80)

KNT Internet (per hr US\$1.80; ☎ 8am-10pm) Fast and reliable.

Lao Development Bank (☎ 8.30am-noon & 2-3.30pm Mon-Fri) Exchanges US-dollar travellers cheques and cash.

Lao Telecom Long-distance phone calls.

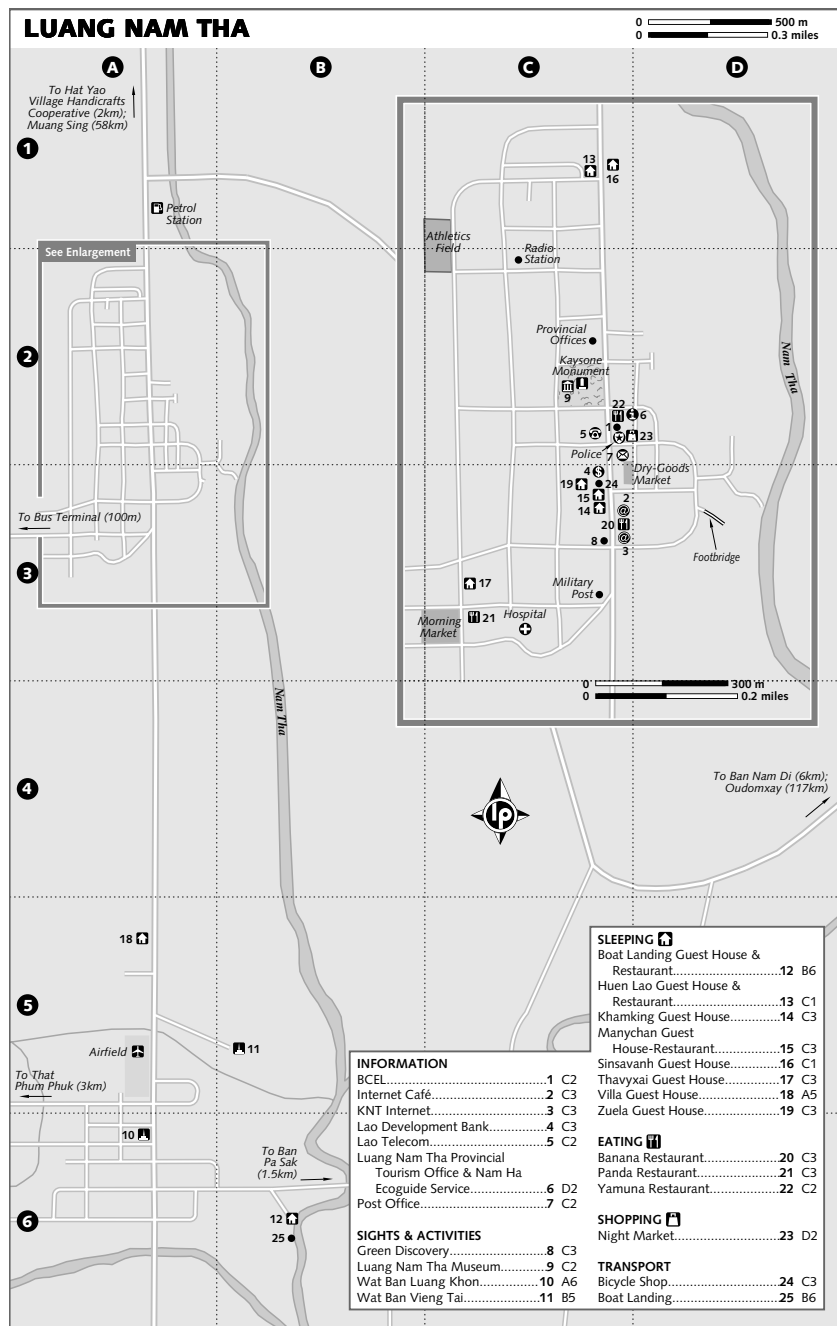
Luang Nam Tha provincial tourism office (☎ 211534, 312047; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm) Excellent tourist office with English-speaking staff.

Post office (☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri)

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The **Luang Nam Tha Museum** (admission US\$0.50; ☎ 8.30-11.30am & 1.30-3.30pm Mon-Thu, 8.30-11.30am Fri) contains a collection of local anthropological artefacts, such as ethnic clothing and Khamu bronze drums, Buddha images and a display chronicling the revolution.

However, most people come to Luang Nam Tha for the **trekking, kayaking** and **rafting**



opportunities in the **Nam Ha NPA**. Many of the tours and treks stop for at least a night in a village; usually Khamu and Lenten to the south and Akha to the north, west and east. Trips follow strict guidelines on group sizes and frequency, limiting the impact of tourism on villages. Profits go back into the local economy, and it's illegal to trek in the Nam Ha NPA with unlicensed guides.

Treks vary in duration and difficulty but most traverse spectacular landscape and involve a decent dose of huffing and puffing. At the time of writing, tours were offered by the **Nam Ha Ecoguide Service** (☎ 211534; ☎ 8am-9pm), a wing of the provincial tourist office, and the privately owned **Green Discovery** (☎ 211484; www.greencoverylaos.com; ☎ 8am-9pm). The provincial tourism office has information on trips as well as excellent photocopied brochures on responsible tourism, local flora and fauna, local ethnic minorities, customs and etiquette, and maps. Green Discovery also runs one- to four-day kayaking and rafting trips on the Nam Ha for about US\$30 per day, depending on numbers.

Places of interest within easy cycling or motorbiking distance include two 50-year-old wat, **Wat Ban Vieng Tai** and **Wat Ban Luang Khon**, near the airfield; a hilltop stupa, **That Phum Phuk**, about 4km west of the airfield; a small **waterfall** about 3km northeast of town past **Ban Nam Dee**; plus a host of Khmu, Lenten, Thai Dam and Thai Lü villages dotted along dirt roads through rice fields. Pick up a map and brochures at the provincial tourist office before setting off.

Alternatively, join a guided mountain-bike tour with the **Boat Landing Guest House** (☎ 312398; www.theboatlanding.com). Ten percent of profits go to grassroots development projects in the region.

SLEEPING & EATING

Most lodging in Luang Nam Tha is in the newer, northern part of town. Rooms fill up fast during the December-to-March high season, and morning arrivals stand a better chance of finding a bed.

Khamking Guest House (r US\$5) Glistening and new, the Khamking has plain but welcoming rooms with large, screened windows, comfy beds, fans and cramped but spotless tiled hot-water bathrooms. Good value.

Manychan Guest House-Restaurant (☎ 312209; r US\$5) Central and exceedingly popular, this guesthouse has had a good makeover and con-

tains pleasant fan-cooled rooms with temperamental hot-water showers. The *falang*-oriented restaurant (meals US\$1.50 to US\$2.50) is also a favourite.

Huen Lao Guest House & Restaurant (☎ 211111; r US\$6) Atmospheric rooms are aesthetically appealing and complement the relatively sophisticated open-air restaurant (meals US\$1.50 to US\$3, open lunch and dinner) upstairs; try the dried pickled bamboo with pork or the tangy chicken.

Thavyxai Guest House (☎ 511 0292; r US\$6.50) A great choice close to the bus station, Thavyxai has immaculate rooms that verge on hotel standard. It's run by a friendly family and is relatively quiet.

our pick Boat Landing Guest House & Restaurant (☎ 312398; www.theboatlanding.laopdr.com; r incl breakfast US\$32-42) Located 7km south of the new town and about 150m off the main road, this quiet ecolodge near the Nam Tha boat landing has attractive wooden bungalows with river views, and private bathrooms with solar-heated showers. The restaurant (meals US\$2 to US\$5) serves the most authentic northern Lao cuisine in town, including plenty of vegetarian options (a nightly tük-tük comes from Green Discovery at 6.30pm, returning at 8.45pm, for US\$1). Staff can also arrange rafting, tubing, fishing, bird-watching, mountain biking and trekking with English- and French-speaking guides.

Panda Restaurant (☎ 566 3122; meals US\$1.50-2.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The phonebook-sized menu at this welcoming open-air restaurant encompasses everything from (divine) pancakes to tasty tofu fry ups and delicious fruit shakes.

Yamuna Restaurant (meals US\$1.50-2.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A spread of Indian curries is just what the doctor ordered after days spent in the villages.

Other eating and sleeping options: **Sinsavanh Guest House** (☎ 211141; r US\$2-4) Bright two-storey wooden house with basic rooms and shared, cold-water bathrooms.

Zuela Guest House (☎ 312183; r US\$5) New brick-and-timber house with big, spotlessly clean rooms and hot-water bathrooms.

Villa Guest House (☎ 312425; r incl breakfast US\$20) South of town, this colourful place has big, sunny rooms, large beds and an open-air restaurant (meals US\$2 to US\$4, open for dinner).

Banana Restaurant (☎ 5718026; meals US\$1-1.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Cheap and tasty food catering to *falang* palates with Western breakfasts (even cornflakes), stir fries and curries.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Luang Nam Tha's airport was being turned into an 'international' airport when we passed. When it reopens expect **Lao Airlines** (☎ 312180) to resume flights to/from Luang Prabang (one way US\$45) and Vientiane (US\$84).

Charter boats make the wonderful trip along the Nam Tha, through truly remote country, to Pak Tha on the Mekong, or all the way to Huay Xai. They leave from the **boat landing** 7km south of town on the Nam Ha, and cost about US\$100 to Na Lae, US\$170 to Pak Tha, or US\$180 to US\$200 to Huay Xai. Sign up before your departure to share the charter costs for this two-day trip in an open long-tail boat. In the high season a boat leaves almost every day, depending on passenger numbers. An additional US\$4 or so covers food and lodgings in Na Lae, or with the boatman's family. Bring sun protection, plus plenty of water and snacks.

The **bus terminal** (☎ 312164) is opposite the morning market. Buses run to Oudomxay (26,000 kip, three to five hours, four daily) and Boten (US\$2, two hours, four daily) on the Laos–China border. One bus runs to Vientiane (US\$14, 19 hours) via Luang Prabang (US\$7, eight hours, 8.30am); you can't buy tickets the day before, so arrive early.

One *sāwngthāew* travels daily to Huay Xai (US\$6.50, eight hours), stopping in Vieng Phoukha (US\$2.50, four hours); conditions and travel times on this road are improving. About six *sāwngthāew* run to Muang Sing daily (US\$2, two hours), and one bus goes to Muang Long (US\$3.60, five hours).

GETTING AROUND

Jumbos from the main street to the airport, 7km away, cost US\$4. Shared pick-ups also ply this route for US\$0.30 per person. To the Nam Tha boat landing, or the nearby Boat Landing Guest House, figure on US\$5 to charter a jumbo from the bus terminal, or US\$0.30 per person on a shared jumbo.

Mountain bikes or garden variety one-speed bikes cost US\$0.30/1 per hour/day from the **bicycle shop** (☎ 9am–6pm) on the main street, which also rents motorcycles.

Muang Sing

☎ 081 / pop 29,307

Deep in the legendary 'Golden Triangle', Muang Sing is a cultural melting pot, with the dominant Thai Lū and Thai Neua cultures

mixing with Thai Dam, Akha, Hmong, Mien, Lolo and Yunnanese traders. Since the Guide Services Centre was set up to regulate the once exploitative trekking business, trips into the beautiful Nam Ha NPA have improved substantially. If you're keen to visit ethnic minorities on a socially and environmentally responsible tour, this is possibly your best bet in Southeast Asia.

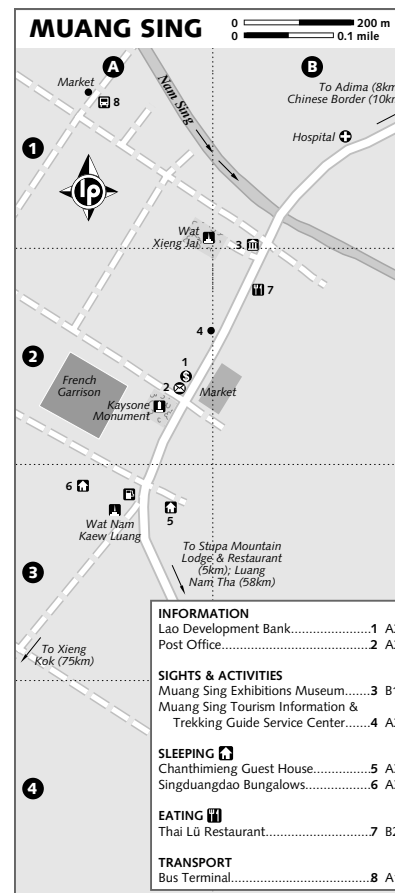
Muang Sing follows a quadratic grid pattern. A map of the old city is on display in the Guide Services Centre. The few services include a **Lao Development Bank** (☎ 8am–noon & 2–3.30pm Mon–Fri), which changes cash only, and a **post office** (☎ 8am–4pm Mon–Fri).

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The crumbling remains of the French colonial presence and a population often wearing colourful traditional dress are charming. And the beautifully restored Lao–French building housing the **Muang Sing Exhibitions Museum** (Tribal Museum; admission US\$0.50; ☎ 8.30am–4pm Mon–Fri, 8–11am Sat), displaying traditional textiles, woven baskets, handicrafts, amulets and cymbals, is worth a look. Saturday opening hours vary. But most people come to Muang Sing to trek in the Nam Ha NPA. Treks can only be organised through the **Muang Sing Tourism Information & Trekking Guide Service Center** (☎ 020-239 3534; ☎ 8–11am & 1.30–5pm Mon–Fri, 8–10am & 3–5pm Sat & Sun), which has seven different treks to remote hill-tribe villages, ranging from one to three days with homestays. Prices are US\$35 per person per day for one person, but drop significantly the more people there are (as little as US\$10

CROSSING INTO CHINA: BOTEN TO MÓHĀN

The only crossing between China and Laos that is open to foreigners is between Mòhān, in Yúnnán province, and Boten, in the Luang Nam Tha Province. Laos issues 30-day visas on arrival; China does not. The crossing is open from 8am to 4pm on the Lao side and 8am to 5pm in China. In both directions, onward transport is most frequent in the mornings, soon after 8am. In Laos, transport runs to Luang Nam Tha and Oudomxay. If you get stuck in Boten there are a couple of cheap guesthouses. For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see p470.



with seven people). Drug use is banned on these treks. Guides include former farmers, teachers, policemen and agricultural workers. A breakdown of how your money is spent is posted on the wall.

SLEEPING & EATING

Guesthouses in Muang Sing are pretty average. There are a number of large and not overly hospitable options on the main road just north of the old market, with rooms of a similar standard and price. If you're only crashing for one night and have an early trekking departure, these are fine. Check out a few and find the best bed for the night. If you're staying in Muang Sing for a few days, it's worth heading beyond the main street for

better options – and atmosphere. Most of the guesthouses have small dining areas downstairs and the main street is peppered with simple *fôe* shops selling tasty cheap fare. The large market next to the bus station sells a limited selection of fresh fruit and vegetables.

Chanthieng Guest House (☎ 212351; r US\$4–8) The owners adopt all guests upon entry to this new place, where the beds aren't great but the location and panoramic rice paddy views are idyllic.

Singduangdao Bungalows (r US\$5) Choose the roomy timber and bamboo bungalows for good-value access to hot-water showers.

Adima (☎ 212372; r US\$5–6) The long-running Adima, in a rice field 8km north of Muang Sing, is within walking distance of several Mien and Akha villages. Call to coordinate with their transport.

Stupa Mountain Lodge & Restaurant (☎ 020-568 6555; stupamtr@aotel.com; r US\$10) This sits on a hillside 5km south of 'town' and has some lovely wooden bungalows with hot-water bathrooms and private verandas.

Thai Lū Restaurant (☎ 212375; meals US\$1–1.60; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Muang Sing's top spot for authentic Thai Lū fare such as *nam pik awng* – fermented soy bean paste, or *jeow* (local chili paste) wafers. There's also Thai, Lao and Western dishes, and the open setting is pleasant.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Sāwngthāew ply back and forth between Muang Sing and Luang Nam Tha (US\$2, two hours, about six daily). There are also about four *sāwngthāew* a day to Xiang Kok (US\$2, three to four hours) on the Burmese border, from where speedboats race down to Huay Xai. Most passenger vehicles depart from the 'new' bus station in the northwest of town, near the Nam Sing. Rent bikes from shops and guesthouses.

BOKEO PROVINCE

Laos' smallest province, wedged between the Mekong River border with Thailand and Luang Nam Tha Province, is a popular entry point for travellers from Thailand. Despite its small size and tiny population, it is home to 34 different ethnic groups, second only to Luang Nam Tha for ethnic diversity.

Huay Xai

☎ 084 / pop 15,500

Huay Xai is a busy riverside town that has existed for centuries as a staging point for

trade between Thailand and China. That function remains, though as you walk down the main street (there aren't many streets) you'll soon see that tourism is also a major industry. Many guesthouses have sprung up to cater for tourists waiting to catch the slow boat to Luang Prabang, head north by road or river, or cross to Thailand. Chinese barges still navigate this far, and a couple of passenger ferries come down this stretch of the Mekong from China. However, they only stop on the Thai side.

INFORMATION

Khaenlao Tours (Th Saykhong) Sells boat tickets and tours around Bokeo.

Lao Development Bank (☎ 8am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) Not far from the boat landing.

Phoudoi Travel Co (Th Saykhong) Boat tickets and tours to Lanten and Khamu villages.

Post office (Th Saykhong) Contains a telephone office (open 8am to 10pm).

SLEEPING & EATING

Most hotels and guesthouses in Huay Xai quote their rates in Thai baht. There are loads of open-air rice and noodle stands along Th Saykhong.

Thanormsub Guest House (☎ 211095; Th Saykhong; r US\$5) One of the best deals in town, this single-storey guesthouse has fresh rooms with ceiling fans and hot-water showers. It's low-key, immaculate and welcoming.

Arimid Guest House (Alimit; ☎ 211040; Ban Huay Xai Neua; r US\$5.50-13; 🍷) This collection of bamboo bungalows, about 200m from the slow boat pier, is run by a husband-and-wife team who speak French and English. Good choice.

BAP Guest House (☎ 211083; Th Saykhong; s/d US\$3/6) Turn left coming from the pier, and BAP is 50m up. All rooms come with fan and hot-water shower, and management has information on boats to Luang Nam Tha via Pak Tha or Xieng Kok. There's a good restaurant downstairs.

Keodomphone Hotel (☎ 211405; Th Saykhong; r US\$5-10; 🍷) The big, bright, charming rooms here are the best in town, making it worth the 15-minute walk from the main strip.

Latsuly Restaurant (meals US\$1.50-2; ☎ 6.30am-9pm) Overlooking the Mekong beside the slow-boat landing, Latsuly serves noodle and rice dishes, buffalo steaks, a good basil pork and sandwiches to take on the boats.

Muang Neur (Th Saykhong; meals US\$1.50-3; ☎ 6.30am-9pm) There's plenty of fragrant Lao cuisine,

CROSSING INTO THAILAND: HUAY XAI TO CHIANG KHONG

Long-tail boats (one way US\$1, five minutes, 8am to 6pm) run across the Mekong between Huay Xai in Laos and Chiang Khong in Thailand. A huge vehicle ferry (US\$50) also does the trip. On the Huay Xai side, the Lao immigration post is alongside the pedestrian ferry landing and issues 30-day visas on arrival. Boats from Pak Beng and buses from Luang Nam Tha always seem to arrive just after the border shuts. For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see p148.

such as whole crisp fried fish stuffed with ginger and garlic, to be had at this humble little restaurant.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Huay Xai's airport lies a few kilometres south of town. **Lao Airlines** (☎ 211026, 211494) flies to/from Vientiane (one way US\$84, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday).

Boat

The slow boat down this scenic stretch of the Mekong River to Luang Prabang (US\$20 per person, two days) is hugely popular among travellers. However, your experience will depend largely on the condition of the boat and how many people are on it. Boats should hold about 70 people, but captains try to cram in more than 100. If this happens, passengers can refuse en masse and a second boat might be drafted in. Even better, you can get a group together and rent your own boat for US\$500 and enjoy the trip with plenty of space.

Boats leave from the boat landing at the north end of town and stop for one night in Pak Beng (US\$9.50, six to eight hours). Tickets are available from the boat landing the afternoon before you travel, or from guesthouses. It is wise to see the boat in person (not just the photo) before you buy. Some boats are enclosed, with no view out and 80 or more people plus their cargo packed inside, which makes it a cramped, disappointing experience.

For more comfort, consider the *Luang Say*, a steel-hulled boat operated by **Asian Oasis** (☎ 2525533; www.asian-oasis.com; Ban Vat Sene, Luang Pra-

bang; per person May-Sep/Oct-Apr US\$185/270) that runs three times a week in each direction. **Phoudoi Travel Co** (Th Saykhong) also has a comfortable boat (US\$60) that makes the trip in one day, twice a week – see www.chiangsaenriverhill.com for details.

Six-passenger speedboats to Pak Beng (US\$14, three hours) and Luang Prabang (US\$28, six hours) leave from a landing about 2km south of the town centre. This is not the safest transport south, and fatalities are not uncommon. When we passed there was even talk of banning *falang* from these boats.

Slow boats also run to Luang Nam Tha (US\$180 to US\$200 per boat split between passengers, plus US\$4 each for food and accommodation) via Ban Na Lae. However, in the dry season this small river can be so shallow you'll need to wade some of the way. These boats are uncovered, so bring sun protection. Ask at BAP Guest House for more information.

For any journey take plenty of water and food supplies. Keep a sleeping bag or towel separate from your pack as the hard wooden benches lose their novelty value very quickly.

Bus

Buses and large *sáwngháew* ply the road northeast to Vieng Phoukha (US\$4.50, five hours, three to four daily), Luang Nam Tha (US\$6.50, eight hours, three daily) and Oudomxay (US\$10, 11 hours, one daily). There are also daily buses to Luang Prabang (US\$13, eight hours) and Vientiane (US\$17, 18 hours).

SOUTHERN LAOS

After years of being ignored in favour of the north, southern Laos is starting to attract the travellers it deserves. What they're finding is a contrasting yet incredibly seductive combination of dramatic landscapes, pristine forest areas, sleepy Mekong cities, timeless riverine islands and chilled-out villagers. Most of this vast area remains refreshingly undertouristed, so it's easy to just get on a *sáwngháew* or motorbike and get off the beaten track. And a series of community-based tourism projects has made getting to the seriously remote villages and untouched forests – and getting inside village life Lao-style – easier than ever.

Many travellers still blast straight through from Vientiane to Si Phan Don, but it pays to take your time heading south. The 7km-long cave at Tham Kong Lo, trekking in the Phu Hin Bun NPA, exploring the cooler climes of the Bolaven Plateau and seeing Wat Phu Champasak are just some of the recommended stops before you reach the hammocks of the Four Thousand Islands.

BOLIKHAMSAI & KHAMMUAN PROVINCES

Bolikhamsai and Khammuan straddle the narrow, central 'waist' of the country, climbing from the Mekong valley to the Annamite range via an area of moderately high but often spectacular mountains. Laid-back and well-connected Tha Khaek (p317) is the logical base.

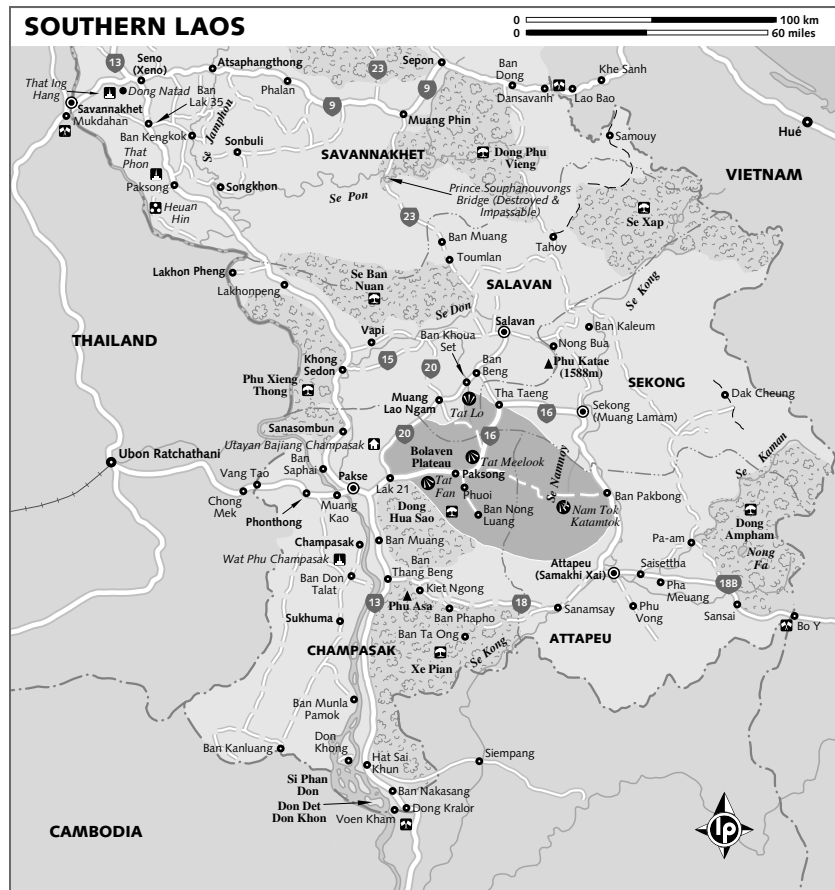
Much of the region is relatively sparsely populated and five large swathes of forest have been declared NPAs. These areas have turned into a battleground for those wishing to exploit Laos' largely untapped hydroelectricity capacity and those wishing to preserve some of the most pristine wilderness areas in Asia. Dam-builders, it seems, are winning.

Paksan

The capital of Bolikhamsai Province, Paksan sits at the confluence of the Nam San (San River) and the Mekong River. There's nothing to see here, but there is a little-used crossing into Thailand (see p317). If you have to stay, the **BK Guesthouse** (☎ 054-212638, 020-561 2348; r US\$5-8; 🍷) is Paksan's best budget choice; cross the bridge going east then take the first right (south), and it's a few hundred metres along on the right. Alternatively, the new **Paksan Hotel** (☎ 054-791333; fax 791222; Rte 13; r US\$10-15; 🍷) is more upmarket. All buses going to or from Vientiane stop on Rte 13 outside the Talat Sao (Morning Market).

Route 8 to Lak Sao

Route 8 has been described as like something out of a video game, with its smooth winding road through spectacular forest, hills and limestone karst scenery. The first major stop is **Ban Khoun Kham** (also known as Ban Na Hin), 41km east of Rte 13, in the lush Hin Bun valley. The village is not without charm but it serves mainly as a base from which to visit the extraordinary Tham Kong Lo (p316). While you're there, however, it's worth visiting the twin-cataract



of **Tat Namsanam**, 3km north of town along a sometimes slippery trail. Community-based treks should also be available from the **tourist information centre** (Rte 8) just south of the Tat Namsanam entrance.

The best place to stay is **Mi Thuna Restaurant & Guesthouse** (☎ 020-224 0182; Rte 8; r US\$5-9; 🍽️ 📺), where the new rooms are surprisingly comfortable and owners Ralph and Mon are, respectively, a great source of local information and Western and Lao food. Mi Thuna is about 800m south of the market on Rte 8, past the Shell station. The best of the basic guesthouses in town is the **Seng Chen Guesthouse** (☎ 051-214399; s/d US\$4/6), opposite the market.

All transport along Rte 8 stops at Ban Khoun Kham. Buses for Vientiane (US\$4)

usually stop between 7am and 9.30am. For Tha Khaek (US\$4, three hours, 143km) there are a couple in the morning, while for Lak Sao take any passing bus or *sāwngthāew*.

THAM KONG LO

Imagine a river disappearing at the edge of a monolithic limestone mountain and running 7km through a pitch-black, winding cave and you'll start to get an idea of **Tham Kong Lo**, truly one of the natural wonders of Laos. The cave-cum-tunnel is in the **Phu Hin Bun NPA**, a 1580-sq-km wilderness area of turquoise streams, monsoon forests and striking karst topography across central Khammuan. The cave is up to 100m wide in some places and almost as high. It takes a motorised canoe nearly an hour to pass through – be sure to

bring a torch (flashlight) and wear rubber sandals as you'll probably need to get out and wade at shallow points.

You can make a long day-trip to Tham Kong Lo from Ban Khoun Kham, but it's more fun to overnight near the cave. At the edge of Phon Nyaeng, about 12km from Tham Kong Lo, **Sala Hin Boun** (☎ 020-561 4016; www.sala.lao.com; r with breakfast US\$18-23) offers comfortable Lao-style rooms overlooking the mountains and river. Food is available if you order in advance. In Ban Tiou, about 6km closer to Ban Kong Lo, the same outfit runs the simpler **Sala Kong Lor** (www.salalao.com; r US\$4-12).

More memorable are the **homestay** (per person incl dinner & breakfast US\$5) options in Ban Kong Lo, about 1km downstream from the cave mouth. For more on homestays, see p263.

Getting There & Away

A 50km road from Ban Khoun Kham (Ban Na Hin) to Ban Kong Lo should be finished by mid-2008, when it will be an easy one-hour motorbike or *sāwngthāew* trip. Until then, you have to go by boat during the wet season. Go by bike or *sāwngthāew* to Ban Na Phuak (US\$1 per person, 35 minutes, 14km), from where boats follow the beautiful Nam Hin Bun for about 3½ hours to Ban Kong Lo. It costs US\$50 (the price is fixed) a boat for the return trip, with a maximum of four people.

Between about late-October and June you can ride a motorbike to Ban Kong Lo along the road (as far as it's been completed), then through the dry rice paddies – which is like riding a jackhammer. You'll almost certainly get lost, so leave early.

In Ban Kong Lo boatmen charge US\$10 per boat for the return trip (about 2½ hours, maximum four people) through the cave, plus there's the US\$0.20 entrance fee. For the latest information ask at Mi Thuna Guesthouse.

LAK SAO

☎ 054 / pop 28,000

While the forest, mountain and karst scenery near Lak Sao (Lak Xao; literally, Kilometre 20) is strikingly beautiful, the town itself is a disappointment. If you get stuck here travelling to or from Vietnam (see p318) there is a **Lao Development Bank** (Rte 8B) but no internet café. The **Souriya Hotel** (☎ 341111; Rte 8B; r US\$5-8; 🍽️ 📺), is a good choice, with clean rooms and a manager who speaks some French and English, and a good Lao restaurant next door.

Scheduled buses leave from near the market for Vientiane (US\$6, six to eight hours, 334km) at 5am, 6am and 8am, stopping at Vieng Kham (Thang Beng, US\$3, 1½ to 2½ hours, 100km), while other transport to Vieng Kham leaves throughout the day.

Tha Khaek

☎ 051 / pop 70,000

With Franco-Chinese architecture in varying states of repair, tall trees shading quiet streets and no-one seeming in any particular hurry, Tha Khaek is a charming base from which to explore Khammuan Province. On the banks of the Mekong River, the area has been settled since the Mon-Khmer Funan and Chenla empires, when it was known as Sri Gotapura (Sikhottabong in Lao). The modern city traces its roots to French-colonial construction in 1911–12. Tha Khaek means 'guest landing', believed to be a reference to its role as a boat landing for foreign traders.

The epicentre (if we can call it that) of the old town is the modest Fountain Sq at the western end of Th Kuvoravong near the river. Riverside beer shops near here are a good place for sundowners.

INFORMATION

BCEL (☎ 212686; Th Vientiane) Changes major currencies and travellers cheques, and makes cash advances on Visa.

Lao Development Bank (☎ 212089; Th Kuvoravong) Cash only.

Post office (Th Kuvoravong) Also offers expensive international phone calls.

Tha Khaek Hospital (cnr Th Chou Anou & Th Champasak) Fine for minor ailments or commonly seen problems such as malaria or dengue.

CROSSING INTO THAILAND: PAKSAN TO BEUNG KAN

The Mekong River crossing (open 8am to noon and 1.30pm to 4.30pm) between Paksan and Beung Kan is rarely used and Laos does not issue visas on arrival. The boat (60B, 20 minutes) leaves when five people show up or you charter it (300B). To get there, go west along Rte 13 from Paksan for about 1.5km and turn south – look for the 'Port' sign. Thailand doesn't issue visas on arrival at this border either. For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see p168.

CROSSING INTO VIETNAM: NAM PHAO TO CAU TREO

The border at Nam Phao (Laos) and Cau Treo (Vietnam) through the Kaew Nuea Pass is 32km from Lak Sao and is open from 7am to 6pm. *Sáwngtháew* (US\$1.50, 45 minutes) leave every hour or so from Lak Sao market. Alternatively, direct buses from Lak Sao to Vinh (100,000 or equivalent, three to four hours) leave several times between about noon and 2pm; you might need to change conveyance at the border. You'll need your Vietnamese visa in advance. Laos issues 30-day visas on arrival.

From the border to Lak Sao, jumbos and *sáwngtháew* leave when full or cost about US\$10 to charter. There's a good chance you'll get ripped off crossing here, particularly on the Vietnamese side; see the boxed text, p104. For info on crossing this border the other way, see p366.

Tha Khek Travel Lodge (☎ 030-530 0145; travell@laotel.com; per hr US\$3) Tha Khek's only internet where we passed.

Tourist information centre (☎ 212512; Th Vientiane; ☎ 8am-4pm) Get information on community-based treks and meet the English-speaking guides here. As trek prices vary depending on group size, it's worth calling Mr Somkied (☎ 020-571 1797) to see when other travellers are booked in.

Tourist police (☎ 250610; Fountain Sq)

SIGHTS

Tha Khek doesn't have much in the way of sights, the main attractions being out of town. The large **Talat Lak Sawng** (Km 2 Market; Th Kuvoravong) is good for an atmospheric lunch or if you want to watch silversmiths at work, but isn't especially notable.

SLEEPING

Tha Khek has a small range of rooms. These three are reliable and have decent restaurants.

Phoukhanna Guesthouse (☎ 212092; Th Vientiane; r US\$3.50-8; 📶) The English-speaking manager creates an easygoing atmosphere. Rooms out the back are the best value.

our pick **Tha Khek Travel Lodge** (☎ 030-530 0145; travell@laotel.com; dm US\$2.50, r US\$5-11; 📶) Despite its location away from the river, the Travel Lodge is the clear favourite with travellers for its easy atmosphere, decent food, welcoming staff and clean if slightly more expensive rooms. The travellers' book has feedback from the popular motorbike trip the Loop, and the lodge hires motorbikes (US\$10 to US\$15 per day).

Mekong Khammouane Hotel (☎ 250777; Th Setthathirat; r US\$11; 📶) You can't miss the blue exterior of this Vietnamese-run, four-storey hotel on the riverfront. The clean, well-equipped if-a-bit-dim rooms are typically good value for a Vietnamese hotel.

EATING & DRINKING

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

Smile Barge Restaurant (☎ 212150; meals US\$3-4.50; ☎ noon-1am) One of several floating restaurants set up along the Mekong south of Fountain Sq, the Smile Barge is popular for its karaoke and tasty Lao and seafood. There's also a landlubbing version opposite.

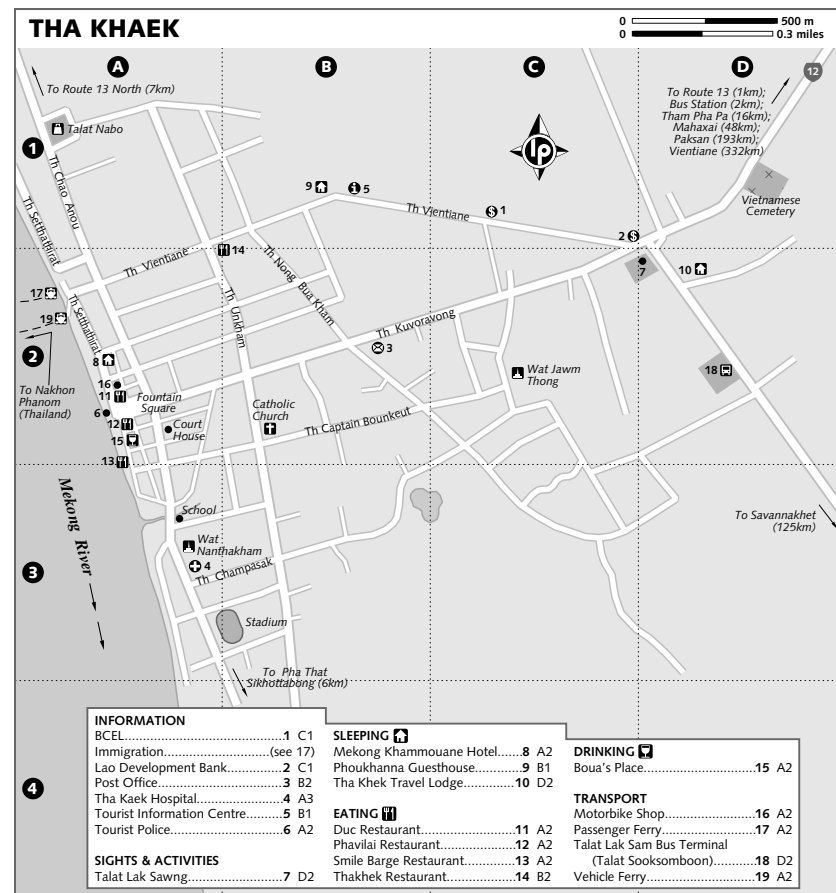
Boua's Place (Th Setthathirat; ☎ 3pm-10pm) On the river just south of Fountain Sq, wonderfully camp Boua is a hairdresser-turned-bar owner who serves downers with atmosphere at tables overlooking the river; order snacks from nearby restaurants.

Several *khào jji* (baguette) vendors can be found on or near Fountain Sq in the morning, and the riverfront near here is good for a cheap meal any time. **Duc Restaurant** (meals US\$1.50; ☎ 6am-10pm) serves delicious *fôe hàeng* (dry rice noodles served in a bowl with herbs and seasonings but no broth), and **Phavilai Restaurant** (Fountain Sq; meals US\$1-2; ☎ 6am-9pm) serves standard Lao-Chinese rice and noodle dishes.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Tha Khek's **bus station** (Rte 13) is about 3.5km from the centre of town and has a sizable market and basic guesthouses. For Vientiane (US\$4, six hours, 332km), buses leave every hour or so between 4.30am and midnight, stopping at Vieng Kham (Thang Beng; US\$2, 90 minutes, 102km) and Paksan (US\$3, three to four hours, 193km).

Southward buses to Savannakhet (US\$2, two to three hours, 125km) and Pakse (US\$4.50, six to seven hours, 368km) are reasonably frequent between 10.30am and midnight. For Vietnam, buses leave at 8am for Hué (US\$8) and



8pm for Danang (US\$8) and Hanoi (US\$16, 17 hours).

Sáwngtháew heading east along Rte 12 depart every hour or so from the Talat Lak Sam Bus Terminal (Sooksomboon Bus Terminal) between 7am and 3pm for Mahaxai (US\$1.50, 1½ to 2½ hours, 50km), Nyommalat (US\$2, two to three hours, 63km), Nakai (US\$2.50, 2½ to 3½ hours, 80km) and Na Phao for the Vietnam border (US\$3.50, five to seven hours, 142km).

GETTING AROUND

Chartered jumbos cost about US\$1.50 to the bus terminal. The Tha Khek Travel Lodge (opposite) rents Chinese 110cc bikes for US\$10 or US\$15 a day, and a small river-

front **motorbike shop** (Th Setthathirat), just north of Fountain Sq, rents similar bikes for similar prices. The tourist information centre can arrange bicycle hire.

Around Tha Khek

Apart from the nationally important **Pha That Sikhottabong** (Pha That Muang Ka; admission US\$0.30; ☎ 8am-6pm) stupa 6km south of town, which is said to date from the 1st-millennium Si Khotabun kingdom, the main reasons for staying in Tha Khek are the caves along Rte 12 east of the city and the stunning limestone terrain in the nearby **Phu Hin Bun NPA**. Treks into the NPA come in one-, two- and three-day varieties operated by the guides at the **tourist information centre** (☎ 212512; Th Vientiane) in Tha

Khaek. Overnight trips involve village home-stays – the centre has loads of brochures and photos to give you an idea of what you'll get.

Travellers are also hiring motorbikes and taking on the **Loop**, a three- or four-day motorbike trip through the province via Nakai, Lak Sao, Khoun Kham (Na Hin) and Tham Kong Lo; for details read the guestbooks in the Tha Khek Travel Lodge (p318).

EAST ON ROUTE 12

The first 22km of Rte 12 east of Tha Khaek is an area with several caves, an abandoned railway line and a couple of swimming spots that make a great day trip. All these places can be reached by tük-tük, bicycle or hired motorcycle.

The first cave is **Tham Xang** (Elephant Cave), also known as Tham Pha Ban Tham after the nearby village – Ban Tham. The cave is famous for its stalagmite 'elephant head', which miraculously appeared soon after another formation, believed to be evil, was blown to smithereens in the 1950s. Take the right fork about 2.5km east of the Rte 13 junction and follow the road or, if it's too wet, continue along Rte 12 and turn right (south) onto a dirt road shortly after a bridge.

Back on Rte 12, turn north to **Tham Pha Pa** (Buddha Cave; admission US\$0.20; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm), which was discovered 15m up a sheer 200m-high cliff in April 2004 by a villager hunting for bats. The 229 bronze Buddha images are believed to have been sitting undisturbed for more than 600 years. To get there, take a lat-

erite road north from Rte 12 about 4km after you cross Rte 13. Turn right after about 500m and follow the old railway bed before taking the left fork. The tourist information centre also runs day treks to the cave.

Back on Rte 12 are several other caves. A track heading south for about 400m at Km 14, near the bridge over the Huay Xieng Liap and the village of Ban Songkhone (about 10.5km from Rte 13), leads to the stunning limestone cave **Tham Xieng Liap**, the entrance of which is at the base of a dramatic 300m-high cliff. Rte 12 continues through a narrow pass (about 11.5km from Rte 13), with high cliffs either side, and immediately beyond a track leads north to the holy cave of **Tham Sa Pha In** (Tham Phanya Inh); swimming is not allowed. The last cave is the touristy **Tham Nang Aen** (admission US\$0.50), about 18km from Tha Khaek; look for two big signs in Lao pointing right (south).

SAVANNAKHET PROVINCE

Savannakhet is the country's most populous province, produces a huge amount of rice and has become an increasingly important trade corridor between Thailand and Vietnam. The newest Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge, opened in December 2006, means the province is gearing up for even more traffic and a fat wad of Thai investment. Most people stop here to experience a bit of Mekong city life and/or go trekking in the Dong Natad and Dong Phu Vieng protected areas.

Savannakhet (Muang Khanthabuli)

☎ 041 / pop 124,000

The crumbling colonial-era buildings of Savannakhet are reminders of the importance the French attached to what was their largest trading and administrative centre south of Vientiane. These days the city's riverside centre retains a languid ambience, with tall trees shading French-era buildings that remain appealing despite their ever-more-forlorn appearance. Outside the centre, Savannakhet (officially called Muang Khanthabuli but usually known simply as Savan) is growing fast, with a sharp rise in the number of bars particularly notable. The large, lively **Talat Savan Xai** (Th Sisavongvong; ☎ 7am-5pm), north of the centre near the bus terminal, is the site of much of the city's commerce.

INFORMATION

BCEL Bank (☎ 212226; Th Ratsavongseuk; ☎ 8.30am-4pm) Cash exchange and credit-card advances.

CROSSING INTO VIETNAM: NA PHAO TO CHA LO

This border (open 7am to 5pm) is rarely used by *falang* (Westerners) because it's way off the beaten track. Transport on both sides is infrequent; *sáwngháew* from Tha Khaek (US\$3.50, five to seven hours, 142km) leave at least daily. Chances are you'll have to wait for transport on the other side. Neither Laos nor Vietnam issues visas here.

On the Vietnam side the nearest sizable city is Dong Hoi. A bus does run directly between Tha Khaek and Dong Hoi (US\$13, 10 to 14 hours). It leaves Tha Khaek at 7am on Wednesdays and Sundays and returns from Dong Hoi at 6am on Mondays and Fridays. For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see p366.

Lao Development Bank (☎ 212272; Th Udomsin; ☎ 8.30-11.30am & 1.30-3.30pm) Same services as BCEL.

Police (☎ 212069; Th Ratsaphanith)

Post office (☎ 212205; Th Khanthabuli)

Provincial hospital (☎ 212051; Th Khanthabuli)

Provincial tourism office (☎ 214203; Th Ratsaphanith; ☎ 8am-11.30am & 1.30pm-4.30pm) One of the best-organised tourism offices in Laos. English-speaking staff provides information on and books treks to Dong Natad and Dong Phu Vieng NPAs, plus plenty of other info.

SPS Furniture Shop (Th Khanthabuli; per hr US\$0.60; ☎ 10am-10pm) The pick of several internet places.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

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

The **Savannakhet Provincial Museum** (Th Khanthabuli; admission US\$0.50; ☎ 8-11.30am & 1-4pm Mon-Sat) should be the main attraction, but these days it's rarely open, so you'll have to settle for seeing the few rusting artillery pieces and the barely recognisable remains of an American-built plane in the front yard. Not that you're missing much if you don't get in.

It might come as some surprise to learn Savannakhet Province is an exciting place for palaeontologists. In a colonial-era building, the small but well-presented **Dinosaur Museum** (☎ 212597; Th Khanthabuli; admission US\$0.50; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm) displays some of the finds from the five sites where dinosaur bones or footprints have been found. The curators are unfailingly enthusiastic and are more than willing to use their limited English or French on you.

The oldest and largest monastery in southern Laos, **Wat Sainyaphum** (Th Tha He) was origi-

nally built in 1542, although most of what stands today is from the last century. The large grounds include some centuries-old trees and a workshop near the river entrance that's a veritable golden-Buddha production line.

SLEEPING

Savannakhet has a reasonable range of budget options but little in the way of luxury. Most places are in the attractive old town, though there are also a couple of cheapies at the bus station.

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

Leena Guesthouse (☎ 212404, 020-564 0697; Th Chaokeen; r US\$4-8; ☎) It's a little far from the river, but the 26 smallish rooms here are clean and good value; room with bathrooms with hot water cost US\$7 or US\$8. You can rent bicycles (US\$1.50 per day) and motorbikes (US\$8 a day).

Sayumungkhun Guest House (☎ 212426; Th Ratsavongseuk; r US\$5-8; ☎) In an attractive colonial-era building, the superfriendly Sayumungkhun has spacious and spotlessly clean rooms and an inviting atmosphere. It's on the main road, so front rooms are a bit noisy.

Phonepaseut Hotel (☎ 212158; fax 212916; Th Santisouk; r US\$25-100; ☎) On the far side of town, the Phonepaseut has the best rooms and service, with most rooms boasting English TV, mini-bar and bathtubs.

EATING & DRINKING

Baguette vendors on the corner of Th Ratsavongseuk and Th Phagnapi sell *khào jji*

CROSSING INTO THAILAND: THA KHAEK TO NAKHON PHANOM

Boats cross the Mekong from Tha Khaek to Nakhon Phanom in Thailand about every hour from the boat landing and **immigration office** (☎ 8am-6pm) about 400m north of Fountain Sq. The ferry costs US\$1.50 or 60B. On weekends boats might be less frequent and you'll be asked for an extra US\$1 on the Lao side, and an extra 10B in Thailand.

In Tha Khaek, Lao immigration *usually* issues 30-day tourist visas on arrival and there is a **money exchange service** (☎ 8.30am-3pm) at the immigration office. For info on crossing this border in the other direction, see p165.

SAVANNAKHET

0 200 m
0 0.1 miles

INFORMATION

BCEL Bank.....	1	C2
Lao Development Bank.....	2	C2
Police.....	3	B4
Post Office.....	4	B4
Provincial Hospital.....	5	B5
Provincial Tourism Office.....	6	B4
SPS Furniture Shop.....	7	B3
Thai consulate.....	8	B4
Vietnamese consulate.....	9	D3

SLEEPING

Leena Guesthouse.....	13	C3
Phonepaseut Hotel.....	14	D2
Saisouk Guesthouse.....	15	B4
Sayamungkhun Guest House.....	16	C4

EATING

Baguette Vendors.....	17	C3
Hay Thien.....	18	B4
Lao-Paris Restaurant.....	19	B4
Moonlight Ranch.....	20	C2
Savan Restaurant.....	21	C4
Snack & Drink Vendors.....	22	B3
Xokxay.....	(see 18)	

DRINKING

Dragon.....	23	C3
Rose Bar.....	24	C4

TRANSPORT

Pier for Passenger Ferry to Mukdahan.....	25	B4
Pier for Vehicle Ferry to Mukdahan.....	26	B3

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Dinosaur Museum.....	10	B2
Savannakhet Provincial Museum.....	11	B5
Wat Sainyaphum.....	12	B3

LAOS

páa-tê (baguette sandwiches) all day and breakfast baguettes filled with scrambled eggs (*khào jii sai khai*).

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

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

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

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

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

Opposite Wat Sainyaphum the riverside **snack & drink vendors** (☎ afternoons & evenings) are great for sundowners; look particularly for the friendly family of long-haired ladies. More recognisable drinking establishments include **Dragon** (Th Ratsavongseuk; ☎ 7-11pm), with its young crowd and deafeningly karaoke, and **Rose Bar** (Th Ratsavongseuk; ☎ 6-11pm) with its occasional live music and more spacious feel.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Savannakhet's **bus terminal** (☎ 212143), usually called the *khíw lot*, is near the Talat Savan Xai at the northern edge of town. Buses leave here for Vientiane (US\$5.50, eight to 11 hours, 457km) hourly from 6am to 10pm, stopping at Tha Khaek (US\$2.50, 2½ to four hours, 125km). A VIP bus (US\$7, six to seven hours) to Vientiane leaves at 9.30pm.

Heading south, loads of buses either start here or pass through from Vientiane for Pakse (US\$3, five to six hours, 230km). Buses for Lao Bao (US\$3, five to seven hours) leave at 6.30am, 9.30am and noon, stopping at Sepon (US\$3, four to six hours). *Sáwngtháew* leave more frequently.

GETTING AROUND

A túk-túk to the bus terminal will cost about US\$1, or US\$0.50 each shared; prices double after dark. Elsewhere you'll probably be able to walk. Several guesthouses and the Lao-Paris Restaurant rent bicycles (between US\$1 and US\$2 per day) and motorcycles (US\$7 to US\$10 per day), though usually only for a day at a time.

East on Route 9

If you're heading east towards Vietnam, there are several places worth stopping. The first, and probably the most popular, is **Dong Natad Provincial Protected Area**, just 15km from Savannakhet. The provincial tourism office (p321) runs informative day and overnight treks here, with local guides explaining the myriad uses of the forest, and overnighters staying in a village home. Three-day treks into the remote **Dong Phu Vieng NPA** offer a similar but more extreme experience. Staying in Katang villages, local guides show how they live with the many taboos governing life in their animist community. These treks are relatively expensive, but prices fall as numbers rise, so contact the tourism office before you arrive to see when people are heading out.

Further east is **Sepon**, which has a couple of decent guesthouses. Sepon exists because its predecessor was bombed into the Stone Age during the Second Indochina War – you can see what's left at **Sepon Kao** (Old Sepon), a few kilometres east. About 20km east of Sepon is **Ban Dong**, a sleepy village on what was once an important branch of the Ho Chi

CROSSING INTO THAILAND: SAVANNAKHET TO MUKDAHAN

The new Friendship Bridge linking Savannakhet and Mukdahan in Thailand means the days of regular ferries might be numbered. A Thai–Lao International Bus connects the towns' bus stations 12 times a day; check the tourism office for details. Ferries should continue from the boat pier, crossing (US\$1.30 or 50B, 30 minutes) the Mekong six times between 9.10am and 4pm on weekdays, less often on weekends. Visas are usually available on arrival in Laos (see p341). For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see p163.

CROSSING INTO VIETNAM: DANSAVANH TO LAO BAO

The busy border (open 7am to 11am, and 1pm to 6pm) at Dansavanh (Laos) and Lao Bao (Vietnam) is regularly used by travellers. Buses leave from Savannakhet (US\$3, five to seven hours) at 6.30am, 9.30am and noon, and regularly from Sepon (US\$1.40, one hour, 45km). It's a walk between the border posts, but formalities don't take long if you have your Vietnam visa; Laos issues 30-day visas on arrival. Entering Laos, *sáwngháew* to Sepon leave fairly regularly. There is simple accommodation on both sides of the border. Alternatively, a daily 10pm bus runs from Savannakhet to Dong Ha (US\$12, about eight hours, 329km), Hué (US\$11, about 12 hours, 409km) or Danang (US\$14, about 14 hours, 508km). No matter what you are told, you *will* have to change buses at the border. For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see p384.

Minh Trail. Today there are a couple of rusting American-built tanks (kids will direct you) that are among the most accessible war relics in southern Laos.

Buses and *sáwngháew* head in both directions along Rte 9 between Savannakhet and Dansavanh; your best bet is to travel in the morning.

CHAMPASAK PROVINCE**Pakse**

☎ 031 / pop 66,000

Founded by the French in 1905 as an administrative outpost, Pakse sits at the confluence of the Mekong River and the Se Don and is the capital of Champasak Province. Its position on the way to Si Phan Don in the far south, the Bolaven Plateau and remote provinces to the east, and Thailand to the west means anyone travelling in the south will almost certainly spend time in Pakse.

The centre of Pakse retains the sort of lowland lethargy found in Savannakhet and Tha Khaek, though with fewer colonial-era buildings and less charm. Some people find Pakse a bit dull (there's little to see here), but its unhurried ambience and relative comforts do draw in others. The vast Talat Dao Heung (New Market) and day or overnight trips to Don Kho, Wat Phu Champasak (p328) and Tat Fan (p333) are highlights.

ORIENTATION

Central Pakse is bound by the Mekong to the south and by the Se Don to the north and west. Route 13 cuts through the northern edge of town. On and below Rte 13 towards the Mekong are most of Pakse's guesthouses, shops and restaurants. Heading west across Se Don takes you to the northern bus terminal. The southern bus terminal and market are 8km in the opposite direction.

INFORMATION**Emergency****Hospital** (☎ 212018; cnr Th 10 & Th 46)**Police** (☎ 212145; Th 10)**Internet Access**

There are several places on Rte 13, or nearby, which have ADSL:

Next Step Internet (Rte 13; per hr US\$0.60; ☎ 8am-11pm) Burns CDs and DVDs for US\$1.50 each.**SD Internet** (Rte 13; per hr US\$0.60; ☎ 7am-8pm) Fast connections.**Money**

BCEL (☎ 212770; Th 11; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri & 8.30-10am Sat) South of Wat Luang, this has the best rates for cash and travellers cheques. Cash advances against Visa and MasterCard.

Lao Development Bank (☎ 212168; Rte 13; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-3pm Sat & Sun) Changes cash and travellers cheques in the smaller exchange office; cash advances (Monday to Friday only) in the main building.

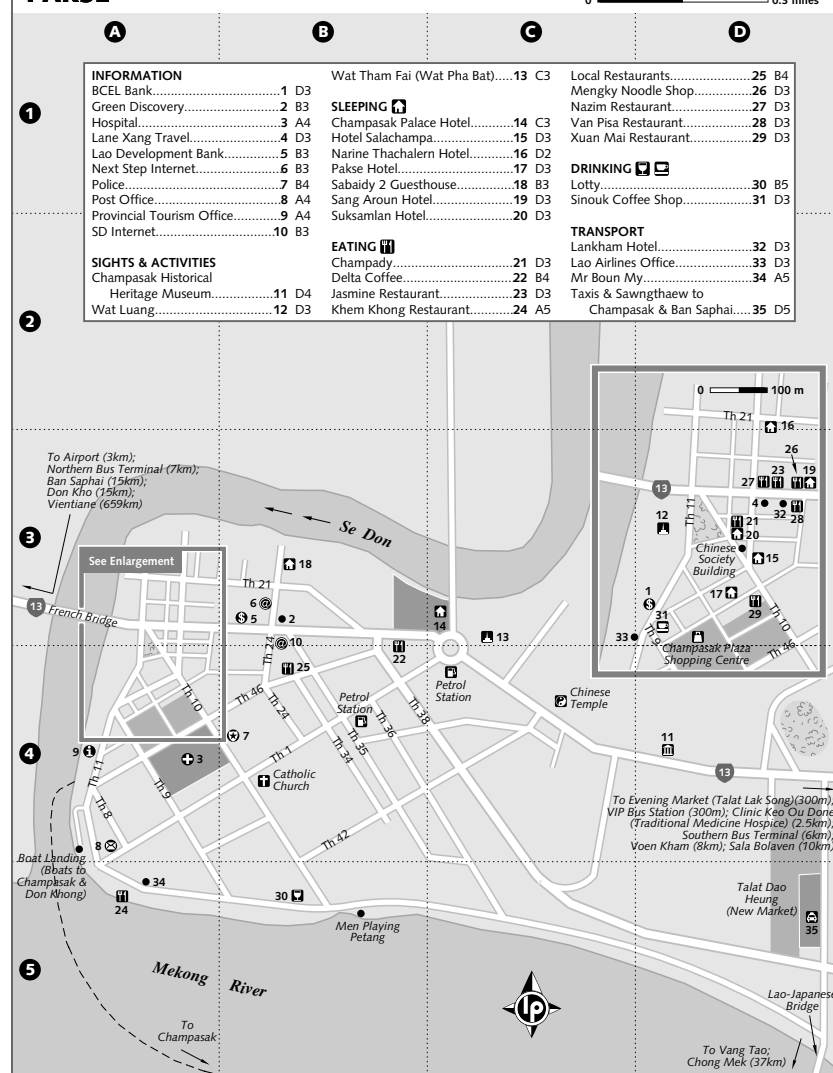
Post**Post office** (cnr Th 1 & Th 8; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm)**Tourist Information**

Provincial tourism office (☎ 212021; Th 11; ☎ 8am-noon & 1.30-4pm Mon-Fri) Beside the Lao Airlines office; the well-organised English-speaking staff can book you onto community-based treks in Xe Pian NPA and Phu Xieng Thong NPA, and into homestays on Don Kho and Don Daeng. There's no commission. Staff can also help with bus schedules.

Travel Agencies

Most hotels and guesthouses can arrange day trips to the Bolaven Plateau, Wat Phu Champasak and Si Phan Don.

Green Discovery (☎ 252908; www.greendiscoverylaos.com; Rte 13) Operates rafting, kayaking (both US\$27 per person for four or more), mountain biking and trekking trips. Well respected.

PAKSE

Lane Xang Travel (Xplore Asia; www.xplore-asia.com; Rte 13) Similar trips to Green Discovery, with more trips to Si Phan Don.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Pakse's 20 wats are not the most impressive in Laos. The largest are **Wat Luang** (Th 11), featuring ornate concrete pillars and carved wooden

doors and murals, and **Wat Tham Fai** (Rte 13), which has a small Buddha footprint shrine in its grounds. The monks in both will be happy to practise their English with you, especially in the afternoon.

The **Champasak Historical Heritage Museum** (Rte 13; admission US\$0.50; ☎ 8.30-11.30am & 1.30-4pm) has a small collection of interesting artefacts

including three old Dong Son bronze drums and striking 7th-century sandstone lintels found at Um Tomo (Um Muang). Still, you'll do well to be here longer than 15 minutes.

A massage and sauna at the **Clinic Keo Ou Done** (Traditional Medicine Hospice; ☎ 251895, 020-543 1115; ☎ 4-9pm Mon-Fri & 10am-9pm Sat & Sun) is a real Lao experience. The herbal sauna (US\$0.80) usually comes first, with three stints of 15 and eight minutes each, before showering and heading in for a vigorous massage, often with medicated balms (US\$3 per hour). Go east on Rte 13, turn right about 100m before the Km 3 marker, and follow the 'Massage Sauna' signs another 800m. The **Champasak Palace Hotel** (☎ 2-10pm) has a compact gym, and it costs just US\$0.70 for visitors to use the weight room. It also has massages, sauna and Jacuzzi.

SLEEPING

In peak season rooms in Pakse fill up fast.

Sabaidy 2 Guesthouse (☎ /fax 212992; www.sabaidy2laos.com; Th 24; dm US\$1.90, r US\$3.50-5.50; 🏠) If you want cheap-but-clean lodgings, good information and to be surrounded by other backpackers, look no further – book ahead in high season.

Suksamlan Hotel (☎ 020-563 2077; Th 14; r US\$5.50-6.50; 🏠) The central Suksamlan has 24 ageing but large and clean rooms with hot-water bathrooms. The building itself has a certain fading charm and manager Mr Bouphan is helpful.

Pakse Hotel (☎ 212131; www.paksehotel.com; Th 5; r US\$12-32; 🏠) This six-storey place in the centre of town has smart rooms and professional service at very competitive rates. The US\$19 rooms are the best value. The rooftop restaurant-cum-bar is great at sunset.

Hotel Salachampa (☎ 212273; fax 212646; Th 14; r US\$13-15; 🏠) Rooms in this old villa offer a flavour of the colonial past, with wooden floors, high ceilings and tasteful furnishings. Those in the newer building are much less charismatic.

Champasak Palace Hotel (☎ 212777; www.champasak-palace-hotel.com; Rte 13; r with breakfast US\$20-150; 🏠) The vast, wedding-cake-style Champasak Palace is a sight in itself. Built as a palace for Chao Boun Oum na Champasak, the last prince of Champasak and the prime minister of Laos between 1960 and 1962, it wasn't finished until the 1990s. Rooms are mostly excellent value, particularly the superior (US\$40) and VIP suites (US\$50), the latter of which have

panoramic views. All rooms superior and above have free broadband internet connections.

Other options include the following: **Narine Thachalen Hotel** (☎ 212927; Th 21; s/d US\$4/8; 🏠) Central, clean and welcoming budget option. Ask to see a few rooms.

Sang Aroun Hotel (☎ 252111; Rte 13; r US\$17-20; 🏠) New Thai-style place with modern, well-equipped rooms if not much soul.

EATING

Eating with the locals, especially at breakfast and lunch, is the most interesting option in Pakse. The Mengky Noodle Shop on Rte 13 is rightly popular for its duck *fôe* breakfasts, while each of the nameless local restaurants on Th 46 serves something slightly different; just wander along and take your pick.

Xuan Mai Restaurant (☎ 213245; Th 4; meals US\$1-2.50; ☎ 6am-midnight) On the corner opposite the Pakse Hotel, Xuan Mai serves top-notch *fôe* (US\$0.80), *khào pân* (white flour noodles with sweet-salty sauce), fruit shakes and even garlic bread. It's the best place for a late feed.

Delta Coffee (☎ 030-534 5895; Rte 13; meals US\$1.50-5; ☎ 7am-10pm) Delta serves a vast array of food, with the Thai dishes and most Italian pretty good. Breakfasts are great value and the coffee – from its own plantation – is arguably the best in town.

Khem Khong Restaurant (☎ 213240; Th 11; meals US\$2-5; ☎ 11am-10pm) On the banks of the Mekong, this floating restaurant has a well-earned reputation for excellent seafood. The *piang paa* (grilled fish) is delicious.

Other good options:

Champady (☎ 020-513 0513; meals US\$1.50-4.50; ☎ 6.30am-10pm) Champady serves Thai cuisine and coffee in an attractive streetside location.

Van Pisa Restaurant (☎ 212982; Rte 13; pizzas US\$3.50; ☎ 8am-10pm) An Italian-run Italian restaurant where the pizzas, pastas and ice cream are all good.

Travellers flock to two neighbouring Indian restaurants in the centre of town. **Jasmine Restaurant** (☎ 251002; Rte 13; meals US\$2-4; ☎ 8am-10pm) is the original but now faces competition from a former partner running **Nazim Restaurant** (☎ 252912; Rte 13; meals US\$1.50-3.50; ☎ 5.30am-11.30pm). In both the food, including loads of vegetarian dishes, is cheap and tasty.

DRINKING & ENTERTAINMENT

Sinouk Coffee Shop (☎ 212552; nr Th 9 & Th 11; coffee US\$0.60; ☎ 7am-8pm) The closest thing to a café

in Pakse, this renovated French shophouse is good for a brew – bean or beer.

At sunset, both the Champasak Palace Hotel and Pakse Hotel have rooftop bars with panoramic views. For something more local, **Lotty** (Th 11; ☎ 6-11pm) was the favourite nightclub among young Lao looking to drink and dance when we passed through.

SHOPPING

Sala Bolaven (☎ 020-580 0787; Km 12, Rte 16; ☎ 9am-4pm) Sala Bolaven sells Fair Trade produce from the Bolaven Plateau, including jams, tea, Lao Bia (palm beer), local wine and coffee. It's on the road up to the plateau, about 12km slightly uphill from Pakse.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Lao Airlines (☎ 212252; www.laoairlines.com; Th 11; ☎ 8-11.30am & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Fri) flies between Pakse and Vientiane daily (one way US\$95, 70 minutes), and usually twice a week to Luang Prabang (US\$135, one hour 40 minutes). International flights go to Phnom Penh (US\$95, one way, 70 minutes) and Siem Reap (US\$85, 45 minutes) two or three times a week. Bangkok Airways should be flying from Pakse to Bangkok by the time you read this.

The airport is 3km northwest of town and has a BCEL exchange office. A jumbo to the airport should cost about US\$1.

Boat

The public boat from Pakse to Don Khong has more or less stopped, unable to compete with soaring fuel prices and cheaper, faster road transport. We've heard a private boat is now running tourists as far as Champasak (US\$5) – ask at the provincial tourism office. Alternatively, get a group together and

find **Mr Boun My** (☎ 020-563 1008; Th 11) at the first barbecue pork stall opposite the Mekong as the road bends left. He rents boats to Champasak (from US\$50, one hour) and Don Khong (from US\$140, four to five hours).

Bus & Săwngthăew

Pakse has several bus and *săwngthăew* terminals. VIP buses leave the **VIP Bus Station** (Km 2 Bus Station; ☎ 212228), off Rte 13, for Vientiane (US\$13, eight to 10 hours, 677km) every evening, though they usually also stop in town. The handy Thai-Lao International Bus also leaves from here; see below for details.

At the **northern bus terminal** (☎ 251508; Rte 13), usually called *khíw lot lăk jét* (Km 7 bus terminal), agonisingly slow normal buses (without air-con) rattle north every hour or so between 6.30am and 4.30pm for Savannakhet (US\$3, four to five hours, 277km), Tha Khaek (US\$5.50, eight to nine hours) and, for those with a masochistic streak, Vientiane (US\$8.50, 16 to 18 hours).

For buses or *săwngthăew* anywhere south or east, head to the **southern terminal** (Rte 13), which is usually called *khíw lot lăk pəet* (Km 8 bus terminal). The terminal is 8km south of town and costs US\$0.50 on a shared túk-túk. For Si Phan Don, transport departs for Muang Khong (US\$3.50 including ferry, three hours, 120km) between 10am and 3pm; and to Ban Nakasang (for Don Det and Don Khon; US\$3, three to four hours) between 7.30am and 3pm. A *săwngthăew* runs to Kiet Ngong and Ban Phapho (US\$1.50, two to three hours) at 1pm.

To the Bolaven Plateau, transport leaves for Paksong (US\$1.50, 90 minutes) hourly between 9am and 1pm, stopping at Tat Fan if you ask. Transport leaves for Salavan (US\$2, three to four hours, 115km) five times between 7.30am

CROSSING INTO THAILAND: VANG TAO TO CHONG MEK

The crossing at Vang Tao (Laos) and Chong Mek (Thailand) is the busiest in southern Laos and is open from 5am to 6pm. From Pakse, *săwngthăew* (US\$0.80, 75 minutes, 44km) and some of the most battered taxis (US\$2 per person or US\$10 for whole vehicle, 45 minutes) you'll ever see run between Talat Dao Heung (New Market) and Vang Tao. Easier is the Thai-Lao International Bus (200B or equivalent, 2½ to 3 hours, 126km) direct from the VIP Bus Station to Ubon at 7am, 8.30am, 2.30pm and 3.30pm, returning at 7.30am, 9.30am, 2.30pm and 3.30pm. For details on crossing the border in the other direction, see p162.

At the border you have to walk a bit but formalities are straightforward. Laos issues visas on arrival, as do the Thais in their startling new building, which looks vaguely like a plate full of purple nachos minus the guacamole.

and 2pm, most going via Tat Lo. Transport also leaves for Sekong (US\$2.50, 3½ to 4½ hours, 135km) at 7.30am, 9.30am and 2pm; and for Attapeu (US\$3.50, 4½ to six hours, 212km) at 6.30am, 8am and 10.30am.

Regular buses and *sāwngthāew* leave the **Dao Heung Market** for Champasak (US\$1.30, one to two hours) and Ban Saphai (for Don Kho; US\$0.50, about 40 minutes).

GETTING AROUND

Pakse's main attractions are accessible by foot. Bicycles (10,000 kip per day) and scooters (US\$8 to US\$10 per day) can be hired from **Sabaity 2 Guesthouse** (☎ 212992; Th 24) and **Lankham Hotel** (☎ 213314; latchan@laotel.com; Rte 13), which also has some Honda Bajajs for US\$20 a day.

Champasak

☎ 031

Once the capital of a Lao kingdom, Champasak is now the epitome of the somnolent Lao riverside town. The main road runs parallel to the river before turning inland toward the dramatic mountainside location of Wat Phu Champasak. Most visitors use the town as a base for visiting the ruins, and a lucky few have discovered the idyllic lifestyle of **Don Daeng**, the 8km-long island opposite Champasak, where you can stay in a basic community guesthouse or a homestay – ask at the new **Champasak District visitor information centre** (☎ 020-220 6215; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) for details. In Champasak itself, activity – such as it is – centres on the ferry wharf and in riverside guesthouses-cum-restaurants.

Champasak cranks it up every year when pilgrims from near and far amass for **Bun Wat Phu Champasak**. During this three-day Buddhist festival (usually held in February) worshippers wind their way up and around Wat Phu Champasak, praying and leaving offerings; bands play traditional and modern music; and Thai boxing, comedy shows and cockfights all add to the entertainment. Stands selling food and drink do a roaring trade along the road from town to Wat Phu and accommodation in town is booked out weeks in advance; camping at Wat Phu is possible, but take care of your gear.

SIGHTS

Overlooking the Mekong valley, **Wat Phu Champasak** (admission US\$3; ☎ 8am-4.30pm) is one

of the most impressive archaeological sites in Laos. Wat Phu has been worshipped since the mid-5th century, though most of what you see today dates from the late Angkorian period (see p32). It was added to the World Heritage List in 2001.

The site is divided into three main levels linked by a processional causeway. The lower level consists of one large and two smaller *baray* (rectangular water reservoirs). The latter are split by the recently restored processional causeway – the marker posts lining the causeway are now standing for the first time in centuries. The middle level is actually several levels, on which two large pavilions stand, with the Nandi Pavilion just behind the southern pavilion.

The processional causeway, lined with frangipani trees, climbs via a steep stairway with *naga* balustrades to the upper level and the temple sanctuary itself, which once enclosed a large Shiva *linga*. The sanctuary was later converted into a Buddhist temple, but original Hindu sculpture remains in the lintels. Just north of the lingam sanctuary, you'll find the enigmatic elephant and crocodile stones. The upper platform affords spectacular views of the Mekong River Valley below.

Much more history is available in the pamphlet you should receive with your ticket, and in the small but accessible **museum** (admission with Wat Phu ticket; ☎ 8am-4.30pm) near the ticket office. Getting here at dawn is worth it (pay for the ticket when you leave).

SLEEPING & EATING

Champasak has several decent guesthouses strung along its main road, most of which have bedrooms with fans and peaceful riverside restaurants. We like these two, but camping is easy enough on foot.

Khamphoui Guest House (☎ 252700; r US\$2-3) Just south of the circle, the simple rooms and bungalows with cold-/hot-water (US\$2/3) bathrooms at this friendly place are recommended.

Souchitra Guesthouse (☎ 920059; r US\$3-15; ☎) Souchitra has a touch more style. The rooms are good value if you opt for a fan (US\$5), though the same room with air-con is overpriced at US\$15. The spacious common veranda, riverside hammocks and restaurant (meals US\$1 to US\$2.50, open 7am to 10pm) are good places to hang out. Motorbikes can be hired for US\$5/10 per half-/full day.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Regular buses and *sāwngthāew* run between Champasak and Pakse from about 6.30am until 3pm (US\$1.30, one to two hours); early morning is busiest.

If you're heading south to Ban Nakasang (for Don Det) or Muang Khong (on Don Khong), take a ferry from Ban Phaphin (1.8km north of Champasak) over the Mekong to Ban Muang (US\$0.20), then a *sāwngthāew* or motorcycle taxi to Ban Lak 30 (on Rte 13), where you can flag down anything going south.

Bicycles (US\$1 to US\$2 per day) and motorbikes (US\$5/10 per half-/full day) can be hired from guesthouses. A tük-tük to Wat Phu costs about US\$6 to US\$8 return, including waiting time, depending on your bargaining skills.

Si Phan Don

☎ 031

Si Phan Don (Four Thousand Islands), where the Mekong fans out forming an intricate network of channels, rocks, sandbars and islets 14km wide, is one of nature's marvels. At night the Mekong is dotted with the lights of fishermen bobbing in the river, while during the wet season the islands, studded with coconut and betel palms, are alight with fireflies. Water buffalo wade in the shallows, in the morning women wash clothes and children in the river, and steady flows of long-tail boats motor back and forth between the islands and the mainland. Si Phan Don is also home to a couple of impressive waterfalls and the rare Irrawaddy dolphins, which can be seen at the southern tip of Don Khon.

DON KHONG

pop 13,000

The largest and most populous of the islands, Don Khong lacks the magical scenery of its neighbours to the south; however, it's an excellent choice if you're after a more 'authentic' experience. The 32km round-island cycle through rice fields, villages and a small huddle of hills in the north is highly recommended for its absence of traffic and its excellent paved – if often rather exposed – road (thank you, President Khamtai Siphandone, who hails from here). The island boasts a few interesting old temples, 24-hour electricity (coming soon to the islands further south) and virtual silence after nightfall. For visitors, the

guesthouses and life-support services are all in Muang Khong, the district capital.

Information

One road back from the river, 400m south of the distinctive *naga*-protected Buddha at Wat Phuang Kaew, the **Agricultural Promotion Bank** (☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) exchanges travellers cheques and cash at poor rates. The **telephone office** (☎ 8am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri) is west of the boat landing. The **post office** (☎ 8am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri) is just south of the bridge. **Alpha Internet** (☎ 214117; per hr US\$6; ☎ 8am-9pm), 100m north of Pon's River Guest House, has slow internet and international calls at high prices.

Sleeping & Eating

Don Khong has a good collection of guesthouses and rarely gets so busy you can't find a bed. Virtually all are dotted along the riverfront road. Most have attached restaurants.

Souksabay Guesthouse (☎ 214122; r fan/air-con US\$5/10; ☎) We like this little place, as much for the genuine welcome as the darkish but clean, fair-value rooms.

Villa Kang Khong (☎ 213539; r US\$5-10; ☎) If being laid-back was a palpable thing, you'd be able to feel it here. The traditional teak house a block back from the boat landing is a favourite for its easy, convivial atmosphere, large and clean rooms and shaded communal balcony (that guests actually use). Every room is different.

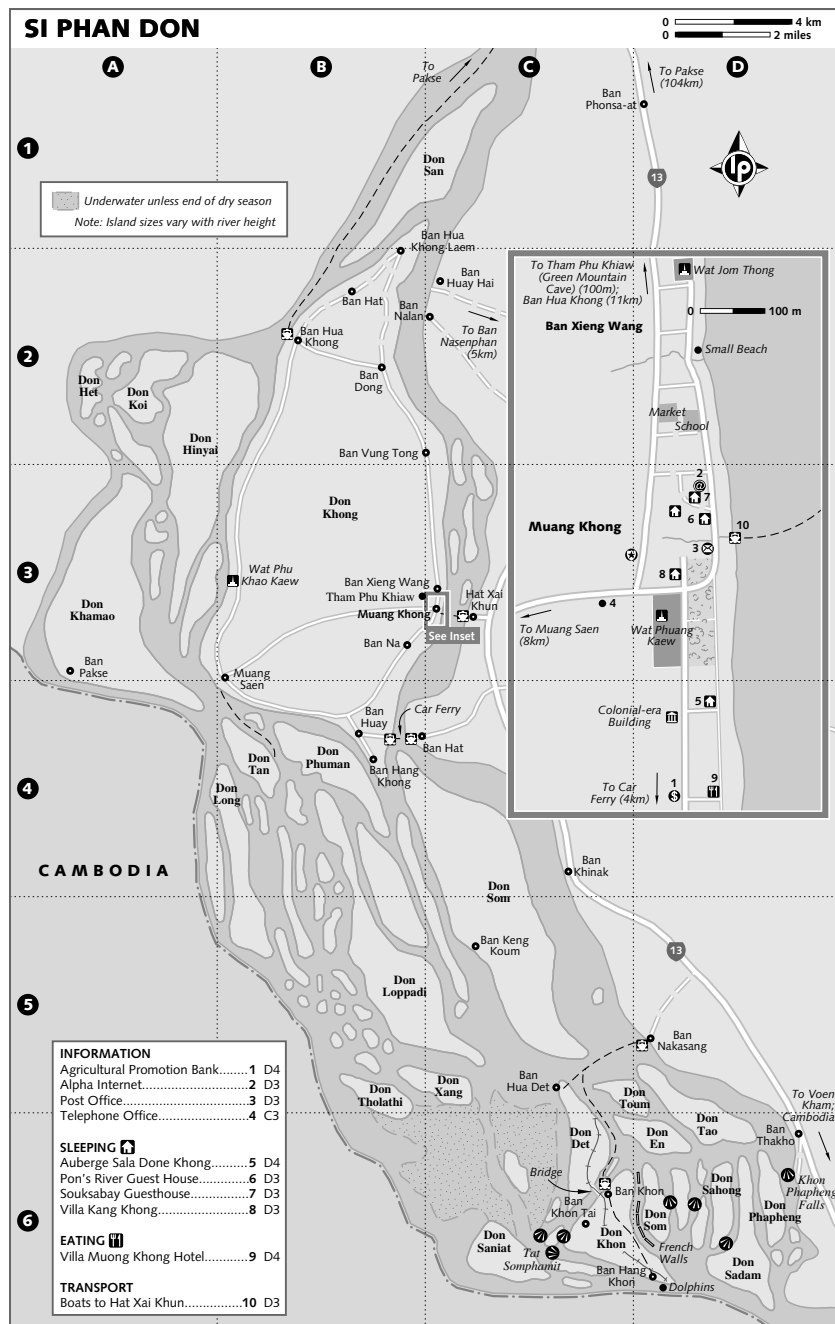
Pon's River Guest House (☎ 214037, 020-227 0037; r US\$6-20; ☎) Located just north of the bridge, English-speaking Mr Pon's busy place reflects his entrepreneurial style. He's generous with information and the 18 clean rooms are fair value, particularly the US\$6 fan rooms.

Auberge Sala Done Khong (☎ /fax 212077; www.sala.lao.com; s/d with breakfast US\$23/28; ☎) About 250m south of the bridge, the setting in two French-era teak mansions is atmospheric but the rooms don't have the same charisma; ask to see several. Prices drop US\$5 from May to September.

You'll see all the eating options as you walk along the riverfront. Standards are reasonably good, if not that imaginative. If you fancy something European, walk about 450m south from the bridge to the relatively intimate restaurant at the **Villa Muang Khong Hotel** (meals US\$2-6; ☎ 6.30am-10pm).

Getting There & Away

From Don Khong to Pakse, buses (US\$3.50 or US\$4, 2½ to 3½ hours, 128km) and



sáwnghtháew leave from outside Wat Phuang Kaew between 6am and 8am. After that, head over to Rte 13 and wait for anything going north. Guesthouses also run daily minibuses to Pakse (US\$7).

If you're heading south to Cambodia, guesthouses arrange transport to the border, which links with the rare minibuses from the border to Stung Treng, so is recommended. Otherwise, cross the river to Hat Xai Khun, get to Rte 13 and wait for the Pakse-Voeng Kham bus, which usually passes about 8.30am or 9am. There are regular boats between Hat Xai Khun and Don Khong; it's US\$3 per boat for one to three people, or US\$1.50 per person for more. Bargaining is futile.

Boats for Don Det and Don Khon (US\$15, 1½ hours) leave whenever you stump up the cash – boatmen hang out under the tree near the bridge. Alternatively, Mr Pon's boat (US\$4 per person) leaves daily at 8.30am.

Getting Around

Bicycles (US\$1 a day) and motorbikes (US\$10 a day) can be hired from guesthouses and elsewhere along the main street. Alternatively, start haggling with a jumbo driver.

DON DET & DON KHON

The beautiful, palm-fringed islands of Don Det and Don Khon, 16km south of Don Khong on the border with Cambodia, have managed to largely retain their chilled-out charm in spite of a veritable flood of tourism in recent years. From a couple of ultrabasic guesthouses and no electricity Ban Hua Det, at the north end of Don Det, has emerged as a sort of traveller tractor beam, with cheap bamboo bungalows and restaurants where you can make any order 'happy' for an extra US\$0.50. At this stage that side of life is mainly confined to Ban Hua Det, so getting away from it is easy enough.

Don Det is linked to Don Khon by an attractive arched railway bridge that carried cargo between freighters operating above and below the falls. The line hasn't operated since WWII, though a rusted engine sits just to the south of the bridge. A report in early 2007 said the government was planning to rebuild the railway, but don't hold your breath.

Life on Don Khon is even more laid-back than on Don Det, and marginally more luxurious. It's less active by night, but better if you want to explore by day the narrow and mostly

shady paths that cross the islands. Electricity will probably arrive in the next couple of years, but until then generators provide power to some places between about 6pm and 10pm.

Information

A couple of places offer slow internet for high prices. Otherwise, there is no bank, no medical services and not even a post office. **Lane Xang Travel** (www.xplore-asia.com) has an office-cum-bar-cum-internet café in Ban Hua Det. It offers various activities, including kayaking, rafting and sunset pleasure cruises, and can arrange all manner of transport. Bring as much money as you'll need, including plenty of kip.

Sights & Activities

Rare **Irrawaddy dolphins** can sometimes be seen off the southern tip of Don Khon, mainly in the mornings and evenings from December until May. Boats chartered (US\$5, maximum three people) from the old French pier at the south end of Don Khon run out to a small island that looks over a deep-water conservation zone.

Don't expect Flipper-style tricks from these dolphins. If they are there at all you'll see a brief flash as they surface to breathe, then they're gone. If they don't show, that's not the boatman's fault, so don't expect a discount. Alternatively, most guesthouses offer tours for about US\$5 per person.

Walking or hiring a **bicycle** is the best way to explore the dirt paths that cross the islands. The defunct **railway line** (a little rocky on a bike: don't be shocked if you get a puncture and have to push it home) links the two French loading piers, but it's pretty hot and using alternate shaded paths is more pleasant. Heading east from the bridge on Don Khon, turn south through a wat (past Sala Phae) to see a local village and the French-built **concrete channels** once used to direct logs through the falls. In the other direction, go through Wat Ban Khon and follow the shaded path about 1km to the dramatic **Tat Somphamit** waterfalls, also known as Li Phi Falls, which means 'spirit trap' because locals believe bad spirits are trapped here as they wash downstream. Two travellers have drowned here, so be careful. There's a charge of US\$0.90 per day to cross the bridge, including entry to Tat Somphamit.

At the muscular **Khon Phapheng Falls** (admission US\$0.90), millions of litres of water crash over the rocks and into Cambodia every second at the largest (by volume, not height) waterfall in Southeast Asia. The falls are often included on the itinerary of dolphin-viewing trips.

Tubing, kayaking and rafting are also possible – you'll see them widely advertised; speak to Lane Xang Travel. See p508 for information on water-borne parasites.

Sleeping & Eating

Seemingly every farmer on Don Det has jumped aboard the bungalow bandwagon and there are now dozens of guesthouses around the edge of the island. Most feature basic stilted wooden- or bamboo-thatched bungalows with mosquito nets, hammocks and shared or basic attached bathrooms. The greatest concentration is squeezed into Ban Hua Det, which is the place to be if you want to socialise into the night. Sunrise Blvd, on the eastern edge, is busier and noisier than the footpath known as Sunset Strip along the northwestern edge. The rest of the accommodation is spread further along Sunrise down to the pleasant southern shore. Don Khon is home to more upmarket places, pleasant eateries on the water and a less-youthful atmosphere. Most places also serve food and drinks.

Most bungalows look the same, but they do differ in subtle but important ways. Thatched roofs are cooler, detached bungalows are more private, two windows are better than one, and almost all have shared bathroom and cold water. Also note, things are changing fast. By the time you arrive, there are bound to be new places, so use this list as a guide only. Boatmen will drop you near your chosen guesthouse – saving you a walk – if you insist. On Don Khon, all the sleeping and eating options are spread along the river either side of the bridge.

These first few are on Don Det:

Santiphab Guesthouse (☎ 030-534 6233; Don Det; bungalow US\$1) Beside the north end of the bridge, the long-running Santiphab is a good option if the view and chilled atmosphere is more important than partying. The restaurant (meals US\$1 to US\$2.50) is a cooler place for sundowners.

Seng Chan's Bungalows (Sunrise Blvd, Don Det; bungalow US\$1-2) These thatch-roofed and detached bungalows have two beds and two windows each and sit right on the river. Good choice.

Mr Phao's Sunrise Bungalows (Sunrise Blvd, Don Det; bungalow US\$1.50) South of the pier, Mr Phao's has a wonderfully warm, family feel to go with tasty food and bungalows with multiple windows and hammocks. Good option.

Sunset Bar & Guesthouse (Sunset Strip, Don Det; bungalow US\$1.50) There's a fun atmosphere here and it's the bar over the river that drives it. Warning: the *lào-lào* mojitos (US\$0.50) can become addictive.

River Garden (☎ 020-527 4785; Southern Shore, Don Det; r US\$1.50) This three-bungalow place on the southern shore calls itself Don Det's friendliest guesthouse, and the guests agreed. Good value.

Mama Tanon Café Guest House (☎ 020-546 5262; Sunrise Blvd, Don Det; r US\$3) If you're partial to a bit of the Bob Marley air freshener, this basic but communal place and vivacious Mama (expect to be slapped for any insolence) should appeal.

Noy's Sunset Bungalows & Restaurant (☎ 030-534 6020; Don Det; bungalow US\$3) In a prime sunset location, Noy's was one of the first guesthouses on Don Det and it's still very popular. Noy's Belgian husband has introduced some tasty European food to the restaurant (meals US\$1.50 to US\$5), which we thought was worth the little extra.

Guesthouse Souksanh (Don Khon; r US\$2-3) The cheapest place on Don Khon, about 600m east of the bridge, this has a family feel and small rooms overhanging the river (US\$2), or bungalows with bathroom and fan (US\$3).

Pan's Guesthouse & Restaurant (☎ 020-563 1434; pkounnavong@yahoo.co.uk; Don Khon; r US\$8; 📧) Not far east of the bridge, Pan's wooden bungalows are a cut above the bamboo places, with soft mattresses, fans, clean bathrooms and plans for solar hot water. Over the track the restaurant isn't bad and information is free-flowing. Internet costs US\$6 per hour.

Auberge Sala Don Khone (☎ 020-563 3718; www.salalao.com; Don Khon; s/d with breakfast US\$16/21) Romantics will love the three rooms in this converted French-era hospital. There are also sturdy wooden rooms (single US\$11, double US\$16) with verandas and attached cold-water bathrooms. From May to September prices drop by US\$3. A generator runs from 6pm to 10pm.

Seng Ahloun Restaurant (☎ 030-534 5807; Don Khon; meals US\$1-4; 🕒 7am-10pm) The Seng Ahloun serves delicious comfort food, including great fish and chips (US\$3), and local dishes in a prime location just downriver from the bridge.

They were also building four rooms (US\$10 with breakfast) when we passed.

Also recommended:

Mr Vong's Guest House Hang Det (☎ 020-526 2591; Southern Shore, Don Det; r US\$1.50-4) At the south end of Don Det. Has simple bungalows but English-speaking Mr Vong is a great guy.

Souksan Hotel (☎ 030-534 5154; Don Det; r US\$5-15) Squeezed onto the north tip of the island. Don Det's best rooms are overpriced and there's not much atmosphere. Electricity runs 6pm to 10pm.

Mr B's Guest House & Bungalows (☎ 030-534 5109; Sunset Strip, Don Det; bungalow US\$3-4) English-speaking Mr B's is next door to Noy's; has reasonable bungalows in a quiet position and delicious food. The pumpkin burger (US\$2) is legendary.

Getting There & Away

It seems hyperinflation has struck the Si Phan Don boatmen. Prices have tripled for trips between Ban Nakasang and Don Det (US\$1.50 per person or US\$2 alone) or Don Khon (US\$2 per person or US\$4 alone). Boats can be hired to go anywhere in the islands for about US\$10 an hour.

For Pakse (US\$3, 2½ to 3½ hours, 148km), buses or *sāwngthāew* leave Ban Nakasang at 6am, 8am, 9am and 10am. See p327 for buses from Pakse.

Bolaven Plateau

The fertile Bolaven Plateau (Phu Phieng Bolaven in Lao) rises more than 1000m above the Mekong River Valley. It's a beautiful claw-shaped highland fortress of forests, rivers, waterfalls and plantations. The plateau is a centre for several Mon-Khmer ethnic groups, including the Alak, Laven (Bolaven means 'land of the Laven'), Ta-oy, Suay and Katu. The Alak and Katu are known for a water-buffalo sacrifice they perform yearly, usually on a full

moon in March. The area wasn't farmed intensively until the French planted coffee, rubber and bananas here. Today the Laven, Alak and Katu tribes have revived cultivation and it's here that the distinctive Lao coffee is grown.

The plateau has several spectacular waterfalls, including **Tat Fan**, a few kilometres west of **Paksong**, the biggest town on the plateau where there are two modest guesthouses. The **Tad Fane Resort** (☎ 020-553 1400; www.tadfane.com; r with breakfast US\$30-40), overlooking the falls, is very nice.

TAT LO

☎ 034

Tat Lo, about 90km from Pakse on Rte 20, is a sort of backpacker retreat with cheap accommodation, an attractive setting and things to do, but not many travellers. Which is much of its charm. Waterfalls are the town's *raison d'être* and they give it a serenity that sees many visitors stay longer than they planned. Soulideth at Tim Guesthouse is great for local information, and has an expensive internet connection (US\$6 per hour) too.

There are actually three waterfalls on this stretch of river. The nearest to town is **Tat Hang**, which can be seen from the bridge, while **Tat Lo** itself is about 700m upriver via a path leading through Saise Guesthouse. The spectacular third cascade is **Tat Suong**, about 10km from town and best reached by motorbike or bicycle – get directions from Soulideth. Guides to the falls and local villages are available from Tim Guesthouse or the community guides, office nearby. Trips start at US\$4 per person for a four-hour trip. Elephant rides (US\$5 per jumbo) can be organised here too.

Sleeping & Eating

The town is a one-street affair, with most accommodation either side of the bridge.

CROSSING INTO CAMBODIA: VOEN KHAM TO DOM KRALOR

This remote but popular border actually has two different crossings, but when we passed only one was really being used. That was the road via Dom Kralor that continues on smooth tar to Stung Treng. Cambodia issues visas on arrival at Dom Kralor for US\$20 plus 'processing fee' – have small notes ready; Laos does not issue visas. From the islands, most travellers are taking a traveller minibus at least as far as Stung Treng (US\$13, two hours), and given there is barely any other transport on the Cambodian side, this makes sense despite the cost. Minibuses leave in the morning and tickets are available all over the islands. For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see p233.

The second crossing is by boat from Voeng Kham, but given Cambodia has closed its border post here and speedboats are hugely expensive and hard to find, it's not recommended.

CROSSING INTO VIETNAM: ATTAPEU TO BOY

In far southeastern Attapeu Province a new border to Vietnam links to Kon Tum and Pleiku. It's 113km southeast of attractive Attapeu town, where there are several guesthouses. Visas are not issued here (yet). It's a new border, and transport is sketchy, but at least three Vietnamese-run buses were operating each week from Attapeu to Pleiku via Kon Tum (US\$10, 12 hours) when we visited. The buses depart Attapeu at 9am Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and come the other way on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Tickets are sold at the Thi Thi Restaurant just west of the bridge. For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see p403.

Budget places are concentrated on the east side of the bridge. **Siphaseth Guest House & Restaurant** (☎ 211890; r US\$2-6) is the pick with newish fan-rooms (US\$4 to US\$6) and more traditional bamboo rooms (US\$2) with shared bathroom. The **restaurant** (meals US\$1.50-3) is ideal for sundowners. Next door the **Saylomyn Guest House** (r US\$2.50) offers simple fan-conditioned huts with balcony and an equally simple shared bathroom.

The cane-and-wood bungalows at **Tim Guesthouse & Restaurant** (☎ 211885; 020-564 8820; soulidet@gmail.com; r US\$4-6; 📺) are not luxurious, but the jazz-fueled atmosphere, English- and French-speaking Souldideth and social restaurant (meals US\$1.50 to US\$3, open from 6.30am to 10pm) make it a good choice all the same.

More comfort and better views can be found at the riverside **Saise Guest House** (☎ /fax 211886, 020-564 2489; r US\$6-60) and the **Tadlo Lodge** (☎ /fax 211889; souriyavincent@yahoo.com; bungalows s/d with breakfast US\$20/30), though both these options can involve long walks to dine in their restaurants.

Getting There & Away

Just say 'Tat Lo' at Pakse's southern bus station and you'll be pointed to one of the several morning buses to Salavan that stop at Ban Khoua Set. It's 1.8km to Tat Lo from here. To Paksong, get yourself up to Ban Beng, at the junction, and jump a bus coming through from Salavan.

LAOS DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

There's no shortage of accommodation in Laos, where even the smallest town will have a guesthouse or a village homestay option. Standards are rising across all price ranges but remain modest compared with the other countries in this book. Rates are usually quoted in US dollars or kip, though many also accept payment in Thai baht.

Outside of major centres such as Vientiane, Pakse and Luang Prabang, or tourist magnets such as Vang Vieng, there isn't a huge range to choose from. In those centres you'll find some very stylish top-end rooms and a decent selection of midrange comforts. But in most other places, including many provincial capitals, the best room in town won't be too luxurious. Fortunately, prices are also modest, with a budget air-con room going for less than US\$10, or half that with a fan. Accommodation is cheapest in the rural north and far south, where it's still possible to find a US\$2 bungalow in backpacker spots such as Muang Ngoi Neua and Si Phan Don, and most expensive in Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

Accommodation prices are high-season prices for rooms with attached bathroom, unless stated otherwise. An icon is included to indicate if air-con is available; otherwise, assume a fan will be provided. In this book, accommodation is listed by price order, starting

PRACTICALITIES

- Laos uses 220V AC circuitry; power outlets usually feature two-prong round or flat sockets.
- The *Vientiane Times* (www.vientianetimes.org.la), published Monday to Friday, cleaves to the party line in English. Francophones can read the weekly *Le Renouveateur*.
- Lao National Television has two TV channels, but most people watch the more exciting Thai TV and/or karaoke videos. The single radio station, Lao National Radio (LNR), broadcasts sanitised English-language news twice daily.
- Laos uses the metric system.

at the cheapest. Budget is defined as accommodation costing less than US\$15, midrange as US\$16 to US\$50, and top end as more than US\$50.

Homestays

For more than 75% of Laotians the 'real Laos' is life in a village. To get a taste of this families in villages across the country welcome travellers into their homes to experience life, Lao-style. This means sleeping, eating and washing as they do. It's not luxury, and often the mattress will be on the floor and you'll 'shower' by pouring water over yourself from a 44-gallon (170L) drum while standing in the middle of the yard (men and women should take a sarong). But it's exactly this level of immersion that makes a homestay so worthwhile. It's also good to know the US\$5 you'll pay for bed, dinner and breakfast is going directly to those who need it most.

If you're up for it, remember to pack a sarong, torch, flip-flops or sandals, a phrasebook and some photos from home.

For more info on homestays, see p263.

ACTIVITIES

Cycling

Laos' relatively peaceful roads are a haven for cyclists, and bringing your own bicycle into the country is easy. Traffic is light and, unlike Thailand and Vietnam, drivers quite considerate. Even better, if you get knackered, you can flag down any passing bus or *sáwngháew*. Laos' main towns all have bicycle-rental shops. In cities be careful about leaving bags in the front basket, as passing motorcyclists have been known to lift them. Several companies offer mountain-bike tours, particularly from Luang Nam Tha (see Boat Landing Guest House & Restaurant, p311) and Luang Prabang (p295).

Kayaking & Rafting

Kayaking and white-water rafting have taken off and Laos has several world-class rapids, as well as lots of beautiful, although less challenging, waterways. Unfortunately, the industry remains dangerously unregulated and you should not go out on rapids during the wet season unless you are completely confident of your guides and equipment. Vang Vieng has the most options. **Green Discovery** (☎ 023-511440; www.greendiscoverylaos.com) has a good reputation, but for really serious expeditions speak with **Wildside** (www.wildside-asia.com).

Rock Climbing

Organised rock-climbing operations are run by **Green Discovery** (☎ 023-511440; www.greendiscoverylaos.com) in the karst cliffs around Vang Vieng and, on a smaller scale, near Luang Prabang. Vang Vieng has the most-established scene, with dozens of climbs ranging from beginner to very tough indeed. Climbers have compared the routes and guides here favourably to the high-profile climbing at Krabi in Thailand. Green Discovery has a very good reputation for safety and equipment; see its website for more details.

Trekking

Laos' large areas of wilderness are a trekker's dream and for many travellers trekking has become one of their primary reasons for visiting Laos. Fortunately, several environmentally and culturally sustainable tours have been developed that allow you to both get into these pristine areas and experience the lives of those who live there, without exploiting them.

These treks are available in several provinces and are detailed on the excellent website www.ecotourismlaos.com. You can plan to trek from Luang Nam Tha, Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Tha Khaek, Savannakhet and Pakse. Treks organised through the provincial tourism offices are the cheapest, while companies such as **Green Discovery** (www.greendiscoverylaos.com) offer more expensive and professional operations.

tubing

Something of a Lao phenomenon, 'tubing' simply involves inserting yourself into an enormous tractor inner tube and floating down a river. Vang Vieng is the tubing capital with Muang Ngoi Neua and Si Phan Don popular runners-up.

BOOKS

Lonely Planet's *Laos* has all the information you'll need for extended travel in Laos, with more detailed descriptions of sights and wider coverage to help get you off the beaten track. Lonely Planet also publishes the very useful *Lao Phrasebook*. See also p336.

BUSINESS HOURS

Government offices are typically open from 8am to 11.30am or noon, and 1pm to 4pm or 5pm, Monday to Friday. Banking hours are

generally 8.30am to 4pm Monday to Friday. Shops have longer hours and are often open on weekends. Most businesses close Sunday, but not restaurants, which typically open early and close by 10pm. Bars stay open until the officially mandated closing time of 11.30pm, sometimes a little later.

CLIMATE

Laos has two distinct seasons, mid-May to mid-November is wet, and at other times it's dry. The coolest time of year is November to January and the hottest is March to May. The lowlands of the Mekong River Valley are the hottest, peaking at around 38°C in March and April and dropping to a minimum of around 15°C in the cool season. Up in the mountains of Xieng Khuang and Sam Neua, cool season night-time temperatures can drop to freezing and even in the hot season it can be pleasant.

The wettest area of the country is southern Laos, where the Annamite mountain peaks get more than 3000mm of rain a year. Luang Prabang and Xieng Khuang receive less than half that amount of rain and Vientiane and Savannakhet get from 1500mm to 2000mm.

CUSTOMS

Customs inspections at ports of entry are very lax as long as you're not bringing in more than a moderate amount of luggage. You're not supposed to enter the country with more than 500 cigarettes or 1L of distilled spirits.

Of course, all the usual prohibitions on drugs, weapons and pornography apply.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Urban Laos is generally safe. You should still exercise ordinary precautions at night, but your chances of being robbed, mugged, harassed or assaulted are much lower than in most Western countries. There are significant dangers around the country, however. For the latest travel warnings for Laos, check government travel advisories on the internet.

Shootings have plagued Rte 13 between Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang since the '75 revolution. Route 7 between Phu Khun and Phonsavan has also had a spot of trouble in the past.

In 2003 the security situation deteriorated. Ambushes in and around Sam Neua in Houaphanh Province, bombings in Vientiane and attacks on public transport in southern Laos caused considerable anxiety for travellers and locals alike. While there have been no recent incidents of serious civil unrest that have affected tourists, the population of Laos is not exactly happily and peacefully governed by the current administration, so be sure to stay abreast of the political situation before – and while – travelling in Laos.

In the eastern provinces, particularly Xieng Khuang, Salavan and Savannakhet, UXO is a hazard. Never walk off well-used paths.

LAOS IN WORDS

- *Another Quiet American* (2003) Brett Dakin's account of two years working at the National Tourism Authority of Laos reveals a lot about what drives – or does not – people working in Laos, both local and *falang* (Western).
- *One Foot in Laos* (1999) Dervla Murphy's lone bicycle trip through off-the-beaten-track Laos is written with passion for the local people and some stinging assessments of travellers and modern ways.
- *Shooting at the Moon: The Story of America's Clandestine War in Laos* (1998) Roger Warner's well-respected book exposes the 'Secret War' against the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and the CIA and Hmong role in it.
- *Stalking the Elephant Kings: In Search of Laos* (1998) and *Bamboo Palace: Discovering the Lost Dynasty of Laos* (2003) Christopher Kremmer's two thoroughly researched and entertaining books detail his pursuit of the truth behind the final demise of the Lao monarchy in the late 1970s; great for history fans.
- *The Ravens: Pilots of the Secret War of Laos* (1987) Christopher Robbins' page-turning account of the 'Secret War' and the role of American pilots and the Hmong is an excellent read.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES Lao Embassies & Consulates

See the relevant chapters for Lao embassies in neighbouring countries.

Australia (☎ 02-6286 4595; lao.embassy@interact.net.au; 1 Dalman Cres, O'Malley, Canberra, ACT 2606)

China Beijing (☎ 010-6532 1224; 11 Dongsie Jie, Sanlitun, Chao Yang, 100600); Künming (☎ 0871-317 6624; Rm 3226, Camelia Hotel, 154 E Dong Feng Rd, 650041)

France (☎ 01 45 53 02 98; www.laoparis.com; 74 Ave Raymond Poincaré, 75116 Paris)

Germany (☎ 030-890 60647; hong@laos/botschaft.de; Bismarckallee 2A, 14193 Berlin)

Japan (☎ 03-5411 2291; 3-3-21 Nishi Azabu, Minato-ku, Tokyo)

Myanmar (Burma; ☎ 01-222482; A1 Diplomatic Headquarters, Tawwin (Fraser) Rd, Yangon)

Sweden (☎ 08-668 5122; Hornsgaten 82-B1 TR 11721, Stockholm)

USA (☎ 202-332 6416; www.laoembassy.com; 2222 South St NW, Washington, DC 20008)

Embassies & Consulates in Laos

Australia (Map pp268-9; ☎ 021-413600; www.lao.embassy.gov.au; Th Nehru, Ban Phonxai) Also represents nationals of Britain, Canada and New Zealand. The Australian embassy is set to move to Th Tha Deua, just past the Australian Embassy Recreation Club at Km 4, during the life of this book.

Cambodia (Map pp268-9; ☎ 021-314952; fax 021-314951; Km 3, Th Tha Deua, Ban That Khao) Issues visas for US\$20.

China (Map pp268-9; ☎ 021-315105; fax 021-315104; Th Wat Nak Nyai, Ban Wat Nak) Issues visas in four working days.

France (Map p272; ☎ 021-215258, 215259; www.amba-france-laos.org; Th Setthathirat, Ban Si Saket)

Germany (Map pp268-9; ☎ 021-312111, 312110; Th Sok Pa Luang)

Myanmar (Burma; pp268-9; ☎ 021-314910; Th Sok Pa Luang) Issues tourist visas in three days for US\$20.

Thailand Vientiane embassy (Map pp268-9; ☎ 021-900238; www.thaiembassy.org/vientiane; Th Phonthong;

☎ 8.30am-noon & 1-3.30pm Mon-Fri); Vientiane consulate (Map pp268-9; Th That Luang; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4.30pm); Savannakhet consulate (Map p322; ☎ 041-212373; Th Kuvoravong)

USA (Map p272; ☎ 021-267000; http://vientiane/usbassy.gov; Th That Dam)

Vietnam Vientiane embassy (Map pp268-9; ☎ 021-413400; Th That Luang); Savannakhet consulate (Map p322; ☎ 041-212418; Th Sisavongvong) The embassy in Vientiane issues tourist visas in three working days for US\$50, or in one day for US\$55. The consulate in Savannakhet issues a one-month tourist visa for US\$45, one photo, three working days.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The Lao Buddhist Era (BE) calendar calculates year one as 638 BC, so AD 2008 is 2646 BE in Laos. Festivals are mostly linked to agricultural seasons or historic Buddhist holidays. Dates change with the lunar calendar and even from village to village, but www.tourismlaos.gov.la has more accurate dates for some major festivals, known as *bun* in Lao.

February

Makha Busa (Magha Puja or Bun Khao Chi, Full Moon)

This commemorates a speech given by the Buddha to 1250 enlightened monks who came to hear him without prior summons. Chanting and offerings mark the festival, culminating in candlelit circumambulation of wat throughout the country. Celebrations in Vientiane and at Wat Phu (p328) are most fervent.

Vietnamese Tet & Chinese New Year (Tut Jiin) Celebrated in Vientiane, Pakse and Savannakhet with parties, fireworks and visits to Vietnamese and Chinese temples.

April

Bun Pi Mai (Lao Lunar New Year) Practically the whole country celebrates the Lao new year; held 14 to 16 April. Houses are cleaned, people put on new clothes and Buddha images are washed with lustral water. Later, people douse one another (and sometimes random tourists) with water. This festival is particularly picturesque in Luang Prabang, where it includes elephant processions and lots of traditional costuming. The 14th to 16th are public holidays.

May

Visakha Busa (Visakha Puja, Full Moon) Falling on the 15th day of the sixth lunar month (usually in May), this is considered the day of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and *parinibbana* (passing into nirvana). Activities are centred on the wat.

Bun Bang Fai (Rocket Festival) One of the wildest festivals in Laos. It's a pre-Buddhist rain ceremony celebrated alongside Visakha Busa, involving huge homemade rockets, music, dance, drunkenness, cross-dressing, large wooden phalluses and the occasional incinerated house... great fun.

July

Bun Khao Phansa (Khao Watsa, Full Moon) Late July is the beginning of the traditional three-month-rains retreat, when Buddhist monks are expected to station themselves in a single monastery.

October

Bun Awk Phansa (Ok Watsa, Full Moon) Celebrating the end of the three-month-rains retreat.

Bun Nam (*Bun suang héua*, Boat Racing Festival) Held the day after Awk Phansa. Boat races are held in most

riverside towns, though in smaller towns they're often postponed until National Day (2 December).

November

Bun Pha That Luang (That Luang Festival, Full Moon) Takes place at Pha That Luang in Vientiane in early November. Hundreds of monks assemble to receive alms and floral votives early on the first day. There is a colourful procession between Pha That Luang and Wat Si Muang. Elsewhere, it's all fireworks, music and drinking.

December

Lao National Day Held on 2 December, this public holiday celebrates the 1975 victory of the proletariat over the Royal Lao with parades and speeches.

FOOD & DRINK Food

Lao cuisine lacks some of the variety of Thai food, but don't limit yourself to the ubiquitous diet of noodles, fried rice and 'travellers' fare' so common in Southeast Asia (fruit pancakes, muesli, fruit shakes...) There are some excellent Lao dishes to try.

The standard Lao breakfast is *fôe* (rice noodles), usually served floating in a broth with vegetables and a meat of your choice. The trick is in the seasoning, and Lao people will stir in some fish sauce, lime juice, dried chillies, mint leaves, basil, or one of the wonderful speciality hot chilli sauces that many noodle shops make, testing it along the way, before slurping it down with chopsticks in one hand and a spoon in the other.

Làap is the most distinctively Lao dish, a delicious spicy salad made from minced beef, pork, duck, fish or chicken, mixed with fish sauce, small shallots, mint leaves, lime juice, roasted ground rice and lots and lots of chillies. Another famous Lao speciality is *tam màak hung* (known as *som tam* in Thailand), a salad of shredded green papaya mixed with garlic, lime juice, fish sauce, sometimes tomatoes, palm sugar, land crab or dried shrimp and, of course, chillies by the handful.

In lowland Lao areas almost every dish is eaten with *khào niaw* (sticky rice), which is served in a small basket. Take a small amount of rice and, using one hand, work it into a walnut-sized ball before dipping it into the food. When you've finished eating, replace the lid on the basket. Less often, food is eaten with *khào jào* (plain white rice), which is eaten with a fork and spoon.

In rural areas, where hunting is more common than raising animals for food, you're likely to encounter exotic meats that apparently make delicious, but not always ecologically sound, meals.

In main centres, French baguettes are a popular breakfast food. Sometimes it is eaten with condensed milk or with *khai* (eggs) in a sandwich that also contains Lao-style pâté and vegetables. When they are fresh, they are superb.

For more on dining in the Mekong region, see p86.

Alcoholic Drinks

Beerlao is ubiquitous, excellent and a source of great pride in a country where international recognition of any kind is scarce. Carlsberg now owns half of the brewer – Lao Brewery Co – and competition from international brands is rising. But Beerlao is still the choice of more than 90% of Lao beer drinkers.

Lào-lào (Lao liquor, or rice whisky) is a popular drink among lowland Lao. Strictly speaking, *lào-lào* is not legal but no-one seems to care. *Lào-lào* is usually taken neat, sometimes with a plain water chaser, and this is what you're most likely to be fed when you bowl up in some remote village. In a Lao home the pouring and drinking of *lào-lào* takes on ritual characteristics – it is first offered to the house spirits, and guests must take at least one offered drink or risk offending the spirits.

In rural provinces, a weaker version of *lào-lào* known as *lào hái* (jar liquor) is fermented by households or villages. *Lào hái* is usually drunk from a communal jar using long reed straws. It's not always safe to drink, since unboiled water is often added to it during and after fermentation.

Nonalcoholic Drinks

Water purified for drinking purposes is simply called *nàam deum* (drinking water), whether it's boiled or filtered. All water offered to customers in restaurants or hotels will be purified, and bottles of purified water are sold everywhere.

Lao coffee is usually served very strong and sweet enough to make your teeth clench. If you don't want sugar or sweetened condensed milk, ask for *kạ-jáe đạm* (black coffee).

Chinese-style green or semicured tea is the usual ingredient in *nàam sàa* or *sàa lào* – the weak, refreshing tea traditionally served free

in restaurants. If you want Lipton-style tea, ask for *sàa hawn* (hot tea).

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Laos has a fairly liberal attitude towards homosexuality, but a very conservative attitude to public displays of affection. Gay couples are unlikely to be given frosty treatment anywhere. Unlike Thailand, Laos does not have an obvious gay scene, but you'll find a greater concentration of gays in Vientiane's late-night clubs. Luang Prabang boasts Laos' first openly gay bar, with the rainbow-coloured gay pride flag flying in a few places around town.

Lesbians won't be bothered, but do expect some strange looks. Lao men, in particular, can't understand why women 'would be lesbians'.

HOLIDAYS

Schools and government offices are closed on these official holidays, and the organs of state move pretty slowly, if at all, during the festivals mentioned previously. Most Chinese- and Vietnamese-run businesses close for three days during Vietnamese Tet and Chinese New Year in February. International Women's Day is a holiday for women only.

International New Year 1 January

Army Day 20 January

International Women's Day 8 March

Lao New Year 14–16 April

International Labour Day 1 May

International Children's Day 1 June

Lao National Day 2 December

INTERNET ACCESS

You can get online in most, but not all, provincial capitals. Generally, if tourists go there in numbers, someone will have established a connection. In places where there's plenty of competition – such as Vientiane and Luang Prabang – rates are usually very low, about US\$0.50 to US\$1.50 an hour. In towns where there are only one or two places, or where they need to call long-distance to reach the server, rates will be higher – US\$3 to US\$6 an hour.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Ecotourism Laos (www.ecotourismlaos.com) Excellent site focussing on trekking and other ecotourism activities. Recommended.

Lao National Tourism Authority (www.tourismlaos.gov.la) Mostly up-to-date travel information from the government.

Travelfish (www.travelfish.org) The most consistently updated website for independent travellers in Southeast Asia, including excellent coverage of Lao border crossings.

Vientiane Times (www.vientianetimes.org.la) Website of the country's only English-language newspaper. Operated by the government.

LEGAL MATTERS

There is virtually nothing in the way of legal services in Laos. If you get yourself in legal strife, contact your embassy in Vientiane, though the assistance it can provide may be limited. In most cases you will have actually committed a crime if you're being held. If so, you're going to pay, one way or the other.

It's against the law for foreigners and Lao to have sexual relations unless they're married. Travellers should be aware that a holiday romance could result in being arrested and deported.

MAPS

The best all-purpose country map is GT-Rider.com's *Laos*, a sturdy laminated affair with several city maps. Look for the 2005 or more recent editions. Hobo Maps has produced a series of good, if sometimes unwieldy, maps to Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Vang Vieng, widely available in the relevant destinations.

MONEY

Though not as bad as a few years ago, the Lao kip remains relatively volatile, so prices in this chapter are quoted in US dollars at a rate of 10,000 kip to the dollar. In Laos you'll see prices quoted in kip, dollars and/or Thai baht but it's always worth having a stock of kip for smaller purchases or if you're out of town.

ATMs

Vientiane's lone ATM linked to the international network should soon have some brothers, if only in the capital. You can only withdraw 700,000 kip at a time (about US\$70).

Bargaining

The Lao will bargain with you – especially in markets – but it's nothing near as intense as in Thailand or Vietnam, and you shouldn't expect prices to fall too far. A quiet, gentle bargaining technique works much better than arm-waving melodramatics.

Foreigners often pay more than locals, particularly in more heavily toured areas where the concept of overcharging tourists has

caught on. Túk-túk drivers are the worst, but elsewhere price differences are minimal and usually not worth getting angry about.

Cash

The only legal currency is the Lao kip, but three currencies are in everyday use: the kip, US dollar and Thai baht. Most places will accept any of these currencies, or combinations of all three, as payment. Kip come in denominations of 500, 1000, 2000, 5000, 10,000, 20,000 and new 50,000 kip notes, which look deceptively like the 20,000s.

Credit Cards

A limited number of hotels, upmarket restaurants and gift shops in Vientiane and Luang Prabang accept Visa and MasterCard, and to a much lesser extent Amex and JCB – Visa is best. Banque pour le Commerce Extérieur Lao (BCEL) branches in Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Vang Vieng, Savannakhet and Pakse offer cash advances/withdrawals on Visa credit/debit cards for a 3% transaction fee.

Exchanging Money

US dollars and Thai baht can be exchanged all over Laos. Banks in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, and some provinces, change euro, Thai baht, UK pounds, Japanese yen, and Canadian, US and Australian dollars. US-dollar travellers cheques can be exchanged in most provincial capitals and attract a better rate than cash.

The best overall exchange rate is usually offered by BCEL. The only advantage of other moneychangers – often found in gold shops and at markets – is longer opening hours. In rural areas exchange rates can be significantly lower. For the latest rates check www.bcel.laos.com; at the time of press, the following exchange rates applied:

Country	Unit	Kip
Australia	A\$1	7630
Cambodia	1000r	2600
Canada	C\$1	8365
China	¥1	1220
euro zone	€1	12,380
Japan	¥100	7900
New Zealand	NZ\$1	7410
Thailand	10B	2750
UK	UK£1	18,000
USA	US\$1	9600
Vietnam	10,000d	5930

Travellers Cheques

Banks in most provincial capitals will exchange US-dollar travellers cheques. If you are changing cheques into kip, there is usually no commission, but changing into dollars attracts a minimum 2% charge.

POST

Postal services from Vientiane are generally reliable, the provinces less so. If you have valuable items or presents to post home, there is a **Federal Express** (Map p272; ☎ 021-223278; ✉ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) office inside the main post office compound in Vientiane.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Laos is a poor country and all the usual guidelines for responsible travel apply here. On the environmental front, relatively rapid economic growth has seen traditional packaging, such as banana leaves, replaced by millions of plastic bags. Try to set a positive example by either not accepting a plastic bag in the first place, or at the least putting any bags or other rubbish in a bin.

Begging children seldom keep the money they are given and kids grow up with an expectation that survival depends upon hand-outs; if you want to give something to a child give food. On the other hand, the legless beggars you'll see, mostly victims of the Second Indochina War, have mostly fallen through the sizable gaps in the Lao system and, unable to work, rely almost completely on hand-outs. There is no downside to giving money to these guys. And it's always worth rewarding people who have helped you out as guides or porters.

One of the most appealing aspects of Laos has always been the friendly, open nature of the Lao people. However, many of those who work in the tourism business have become jaded in recent years by what they see as unreasonably aggressive bargaining, usually by travellers who lose a little perspective in their pursuit of the cheapest stay possible. One guesthouse owner told us: 'Some people spend 20 minutes negotiating to get a US\$5 room for US\$4, then go and drink US\$7 of beer, or they spend US\$45 on a rafting trip. Is that US\$1 so important for them?'

When you stop for a moment and consider what that US\$1 would buy you at home – a small fraction of one beer, perhaps – the answer is it's probably not.

By all means try to get the best rate you can – that's part of travelling. But be aware of the cultural context. Generally speaking, the Lao avoid conflict as much as they can and while they are happy to bargain a little, they don't usually buy into protracted negotiations/arguments over price. If the rate seems unfair to you (as opposed to being beyond your budget) by all means make a counter offer. This will usually be accepted straight away, or not at all.

It's also worth understanding that international economic imperatives such as inflation and the price of oil affect inflation in Laos as much as they do prices in your own country. Room rates will probably go up compared with those listed in this book. When that happens remember that this book is called a guidebook for a reason – it's just a guide.

For information on responsible trekking, see p484 and p138.

TELEPHONE

Laos' country code is ☎ 856. To dial out of the country press ☎ 00 first, or ask for the local mobile operator's cheaper code. You will find public phone booths in Laos, but these days they're little better than rusting greenhouses and phonecards are no longer sold. Instead, for long-distance calls use a post office, Telecom Lao centre (rates vary in these, but in Vientiane are very reasonable) or internet cafés.

As a guide, all mobile phone numbers have the prefix ☎ 020 followed by seven digits, while the newer WIN Phones (fixed phones without a landline) begin with ☎ 030.

Mobile Phones

You can use your own GSM mobile phone in Laos, either on roaming (expensive) or by buying a local SIM card for about US\$5, then purchasing prepaid minutes. Domestic calls are reasonably cheap. In our experience, Lao Telecom and ETL have the widest network coverage.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The Lao National Tourism Administration (NTAL) and provincial tourism authorities have offices throughout Laos, though standards vary greatly. The offices in Tha Khaek, Savannakhet, Pakse, Luang Nam Tha, Sainyabouly, Phongsali and Sam Neua are excellent, with well-trained staff and plenty of brochures. Travel agencies and tour compa-

nies such as Green Discovery and Lane Xang Travel are also worth a look.

NTAL also has three good websites:

Lao National Tourism Administration www.tourismlaos.gov.la

Lao Ecotourism www.ecotourismlaos.com

Central Laos Trekking www.trekkingcentrallaos.com

VISAS

Laos issues 30-day tourist visas on arrival at several popular airports and borders. They are available at Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Pakse airports. For land borders, see the table, p101. Visas on arrival cost US\$30 to US\$42 in US dollars or Thai baht cash, depending on what passport you hold, plus two passport photos.

However, regulations and prices change regularly, so it's worth checking online, on the traveller grapevine or with the nearest Lao embassy (but not their websites, which are way out of date), before pitching up to some remote border. See p337. If you want to be doubly sure, or plan to use a border where visas are not issued, consulates and travel agents in Vietnam, China, Cambodia and Thailand all issue/arrange visas.

Visa Extensions

Visa extensions cost US\$2 per day from the **Immigration Office** (Map p272; ☎ 021-212250; Th Hatsady; ✉ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri), in the Ministry of Public Security building in Vientiane, and give up to a maximum of 30 days. Outside Vientiane, travel agents and guesthouses can usually arrange extensions for US\$3 per day. Your passport will be sent to Vientiane, so it can take a few days. If you overstay your visa, you'll have to pay a fine on departure of US\$10 for each day over.

VOLUNTEERING

It's not easy to find short-term volunteer work in Laos. The Organic Mulberry Farm in Vang Vieng (p289) needs volunteers occasionally. Otherwise, just ask around the expat community and you might get lucky.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Women travellers are more likely to be troubled by aggressive Western 'guru' male travellers, who have unravelled the spiritual mysteries of existence and are willing to share them in exchange for an invitation to your room, than by Lao men. Elsewhere, long-distance buses

and guesthouses are where you're most likely to attract unwanted attention. Choosing a guesthouse with female staff and management helps avoid this.

The best way to avoid unwanted attention from Lao men is to refrain from wearing overly revealing clothes. Laos is much more conservative than Thailand and it's highly unusual for most women, even in more modern places such as Vientiane and Vang Vieng, to wear singlet tops or very short skirts or shorts. So when travellers do, people tend to stare. Lao people will almost never confront you about what you're wearing, but that doesn't mean they don't care. As one young woman in Vang Vieng told us: 'I wouldn't say anything, but I'd prefer it if they put on a sarong when they get out of the river. It's not our way to dress like that [a bikini only] and it's embarrassing to see it.' It's good advice – every woman traveller should carry a sarong.

WORK

English teaching is the most common first job for foreigners working in Laos, and schools in Vientiane are often hiring. There is also an inordinate number of development organisations – see www.directoryofngos.org for a full list – where foreigners with technical skills and volunteer experience can look for employment. Ask around.

TRANSPORT IN LAOS

Transport infrastructure in Laos is barely recognisable from what existed a few years ago. Huge, foreign-funded road construction projects have transformed a network of rough dirt tracks into relatively luxurious sealed affairs. The lack of potholes has ushered in a battalion of buses and scheduled services, making domestic transport easy and cheap, if sometimes very slow.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are many land and river borders into Laos and they're becoming increasingly popular with travellers. By air, there is a small but growing number of routes and airlines, though prices don't vary that much.

Air

There are no intercontinental flights operating to Laos. You can fly into or out of Laos

DEPARTURE TAX

Departure tax is US\$10, payable in US dollars, baht or kip (cash only) at the airport. Domestic airport tax is US\$1.

at Vientiane (from or to Cambodia, China, Thailand and Vietnam), Luang Prabang (Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam) or Pakse (Cambodia and Thailand).

The following airlines fly to and from Laos. All fares are one way. See also the regional air fares map, p499.

Bangkok Airways (☎ 071-253334; www.bangkokair.com; 57/6 Th Sisavangvong, Ban Xiengmuan, Luang Prabang)

China Eastern Airlines (Map pp268-9; ☎ 021-212300; www.ce-air.com; Th Luang Prabang, Vientiane)

Lao Airlines (Map p272; ☎ 021-212051; www.laoairlines.com; Th Pangkham, Vientiane)

Thai Airways International (THAI; Map pp268-9; ☎ 021-222527; www.thaiair.com; Th Luang Prabang, Vientiane)

Vietnam Airlines (Map p272; ☎ 021-217562; www.vietnamairlines.com; 1st fl, Lao Plaza Hotel, Th Sam-senthai, Vientiane)

CAMBODIA

Between Phnom Penh and Vientiane (US\$145, 1½ hours) there are two flights a week with Lao Airlines (stopping in Pakse) and a daily direct flight with Vietnam Airlines. Lao Airlines flies between Siem Reap and Vientiane (US\$110, 2½ hours) five times a week, stopping at Pakse (US\$70, 50 minutes), and from November to March offers two more flights between Siem Reap and Pakse that continue to Luang Prabang (US\$135).

CHINA

Lao Airlines shares three services a week between Künming and Vientiane (US\$120, 2½ hours) with China Eastern Airlines.

THAILAND

Lao Airlines and THAI (Thai International Airways) have regular flights between Bangkok and Vientiane (US\$99 to 5000B). Bangkok Airways flies daily between Bangkok and Luang Prabang (5000B, 1¼ hours), and Lao Airlines has three flights a week for US\$120. Lao Airlines has five flights a week between Vientiane and Chiang Mai (US\$111, 2½ hours), via Luang Prabang (US\$85, one hour).

Some people save money by flying from Bangkok to Udon Thani in Thailand, then carrying on by road to Vientiane. Udon Thani is 55km south of Nong Khai and Bangkok–Udon tickets on **Thai Air Asia** (www.airasia.com) start at about 1300B.

Bangkok Airways should have started flights between Bangkok and Pakse by the time you read this.

VIETNAM

Lao Airlines and Vietnam Airlines fly between Vientiane and Hanoi (US\$115, one hour, 10 times a week), and Ho Chi Minh City (US\$140, three hours) daily; and between Luang Prabang and Hanoi.

Border Crossings

Laos has open land borders with Cambodia, China, Thailand and Vietnam, but not Myanmar. Under current rules, 30-day tourist visas are available on arrival at several (but not all) international checkpoints. These crossings are outlined in the table (p101), and in detail in boxes in the relevant chapters. However, we still recommend checking the **Thorntree** (<http://thorntree.lonelyplanet.com/>) and checking with other travellers before setting off because things change frequently. Note that most crossings involve changing transport at the border.

Car & Motorcycle

If you have your own car or motorcycle, you can import it for the length of your visa after filling in forms and paying fees at the border; it's much easier if you have a carnet. Motorcyclists planning to ride through Laos should check out the wealth of info at www.gt-rider.com.

ON THE BUSES

The buses of Laos probably won't be what you're used to. Depending on your luck, you might get a relatively new bus, moving at something approaching 60km/h, with two seats to yourself and no karaoke. Or you might not...

The bus might be so old and rubbish it makes an otherwise flat road feel like a potholed monster. The music might be deafeningly loud and diabolically bad, and you might be sharing the bus with a menagerie of farmyard animals. While researching this chapter we had several flat tires; a bus without windows driving through a storm; a bus that picked up 5 tonnes of rice from a local mill and stuffed them everywhere flat, including the aisle, seats and roof; and a broken engine that the driver tried (unsuccessfully) to fix with a condom (full marks for improvisation, though).

Our advice is don't look at your watch too much and just soak it up. These sort of trips are actually more fun than they sound. They're inevitably social events and make much better stories than a few uneventful hours on a VIP bus.

GETTING AROUND Air

Lao Airlines (www.laoairlines.com) handles all domestic flights in Laos. Both the airline's safety record and the reliability of its schedules are better than they were. However, during holiday seasons it can be difficult to get a seat, so book ahead. Prices have been fairly stable recently. Except at Lao Airlines' offices in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, where credit cards are accepted for both international and domestic tickets, you must pay in US dollars cash.

Always reconfirm your flights a day or two before departing as undersubscribed flights may be cancelled, or you could get bumped off the passenger list.

Bicycle

The light and relatively slow traffic in most Lao towns makes for favourable cycling conditions. Bicycles are available for rent in major tourist destinations, costing around 10,000 kip per day for a cheap Thai or Chinese model. For long-distance cyclists, bicycles can be brought into the country usually without any hassle, and if the mountains prove too challenging, you can always jump on a passing bus or *sáwngtháew*. Several companies offer cycling tours.

Boat

With the highway-upgrading process almost complete, the days of mass river transport are as good as over. Sadly, most boat services today are geared at tourists, pushing prices up and taking away the fun of travelling with the locals, their produce...and domestic animals.

The most popular river trip in Laos – the slow boat between Huay Xai (p313) and Luang Prabang – remains a daily event. Other popular journeys – between Pakse and Si Phan Don, or between Nong Khiaw and Luang Prabang – are no longer regular, so you'll probably have to charter a boat.

River ferries are basic affairs and passengers usually sit, eat and sleep on the wooden decks; it's worth bringing some padding. The toilet (if there is one) is an enclosed hole in the deck at the back of the boat.

For shorter river trips, such as Luang Prabang to the Pak Ou caves, you can easily hire a river taxi. The *héua hang nyáo* (long-tail boats), with engines gimbal-mounted on the stern, are the most typical, though for a really short trip (eg crossing a river) a *héua phai* (rowboat) or a small improvised ferry will be used.

Along the upper Mekong River, between Luang Prabang and Huay Xai and between Xieng Kok and Huay Xai, Thai-built *héua wái* (speedboats) are common. These craft are little more than surfboards with car engines mounted on the back, and are both deafeningly loud and painfully uncomfortable. They do, however, cover a distance in six hours that might take a river ferry two days or more. They're not cheap but some ply regular routes, so the cost can be shared among several passengers. For some, a ride on these boats is a major thrill, but for others they're a nightmare that can't end soon enough. They also kill and injure people every year when they disintegrate on contact with floating debris, which is in plentiful supply during the wet season, or flip when they hit a standing wave. Word from Laos is that foreigners might be barred from using these boats in 2007.

Bus & Săwnghăew

Long-distance public transport in Laos is either by bus or *săwnghăew* (literally 'two rows'), which are converted trucks or pick-

ups with benches down either side. Buses are more frequent and go further than ever before, and destinations that were all but inaccessible a few years ago now see regular services. Privately run VIP buses operate on some busier routes, but slow, simple standard buses (occasionally with air-con) remain the norm. Prices are about US\$2 per 100km for VIP buses, and US\$1.50 per 100km on standard buses.

Săwnghăew usually service shorter routes within a given province. Most decent-sized villages have at least one *săwnghăew*, which will run to the provincial capital daily except Sunday, stopping wherever you want. Given everyone is sitting on top of, or facing, each other, they're even more social than the bus.

Car & Motorcycle

Chinese- and Japanese-made 100cc step-through motorbikes can be rented for US\$5 to US\$15 a day in Vientiane, Vang Vieng, Tha Khaek, Savannakhet, Pakse and Luang Nam Tha. No licence is required, and gallivanting about the countryside by motorcycle has become increasingly popular with travellers. Try to get a Japanese bike if you're travelling any distance out of town. In Vientiane, Pakse and Vang Vieng it's also possible to rent dirt bikes for around US\$20 per day. Motorcycle tours of Laos are offered by **Asian Motorcycling Adventures** (www.asianbiketour.com), among others.

Car rental in Laos is a great if relatively costly way of reaching remote places. In Vientiane, **Asia Vehicle Rental (AVR)**; Map p272; ☎ 021-217493; www.avr.laopdr.com; Th Samsenthai) has sedans, minibuses, pick-ups and 4WDs, with or without drivers; they're very reliable.

Hitching

Hitching is possible in Laos, if not common. It's never entirely safe and not recommended, especially for women as the act of standing beside a road and waving at cars might be misinterpreted.