

Laos

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Luang Prabang** – enchanted mystical city of treasured wats, French cuisine and Indochinese villas overlooking the Mekong River (p368)
- **Luang Nam Tha and Muang Sing** – taking eco-conscious treks into the feral jungle of Nam Ha National Protected Area and ethnic Akha villages (p385, p387)
- **Si Phan Don** – a lazy maze of shady islands and rocky islets, home to the rare Irrawaddy dolphin (p400)
- **Wat Phu Champasak** – Khmer-era ruins perfectly placed beneath a mountain facing the peaceful riverside village of Champasak (p399)
- **Bolaven Plateau** – home to the best coffee in Laos and dotted with ice-cold waterfalls to relieve the heat of the south (p398)
- **Off the beaten track** – visiting Vieng Xai caves, the remote and forbidding home of Pathet Lao revolutionaries and the prison of the last king of Laos (p382)

FAST FACTS

- **ATMs** two in Vientiane, one in Luang Prabang, Vang Vieng and Pakse, all with international facilities
- **Budget** US\$15 to US\$20 a day
- **Capital** Vientiane
- **Costs** city guesthouse US\$4-10, four-hour bus ride US\$1.50, Beer Lao US\$0.80
- **Country code** ☎ 856
- **Languages** Lao, ethnic dialects
- **Money** US\$1 = 9627 kip
- **Phrases** *sá bqai-dii* (hello), *sá bqai-dii* (good-bye), *khàwp jqi* (thank you)
- **Population** 6.5 million
- **Time** GMT + seven hours
- **Visas** Thirty-day tourist visas are available in advance in Thailand, China, Vietnam or Cambodia. On-the-spot 30-day visas are available for US\$30 with two photos on



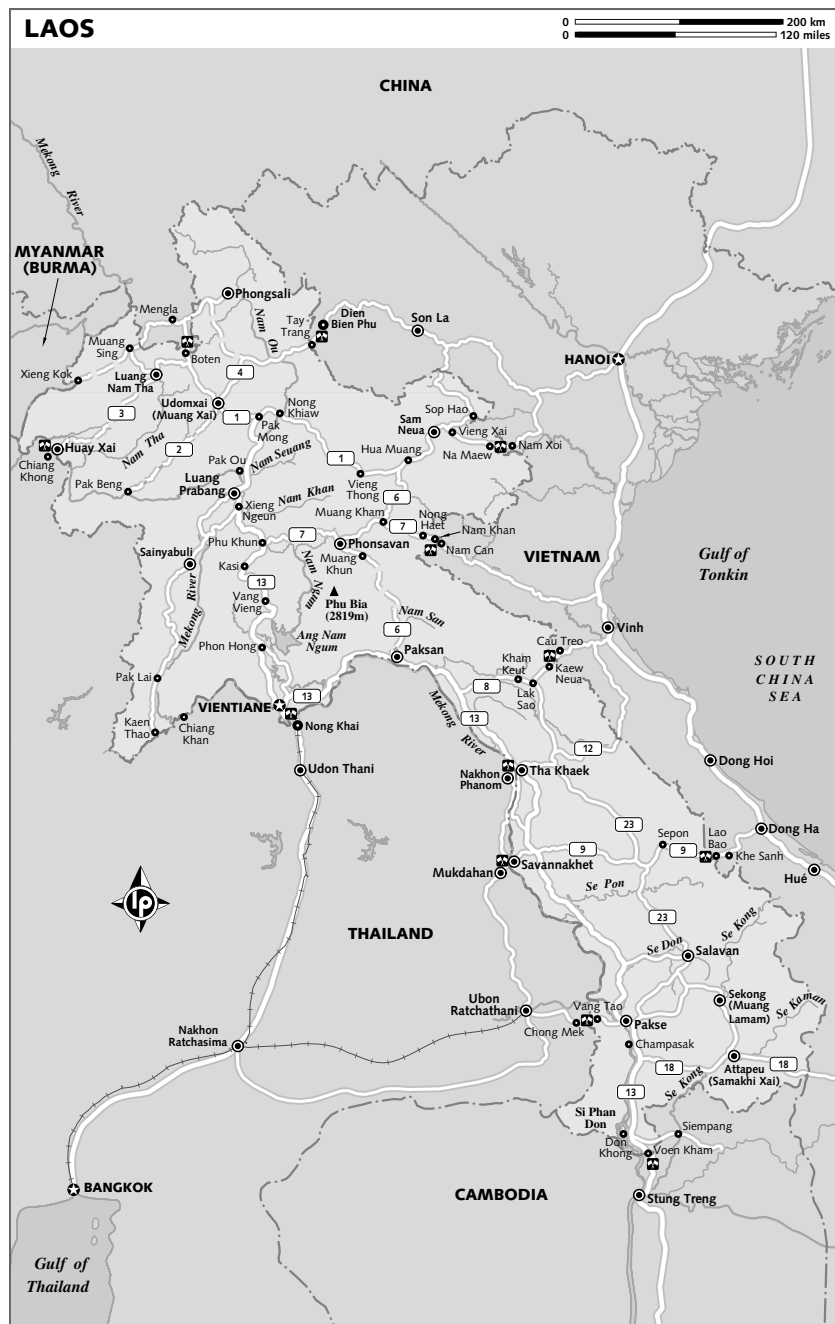
arrival in Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Pakse international airports, and when crossing the border from Thailand, China and Vietnam.

TRAVEL HINT

Flat tyres, breakdowns and unexpected detours are a feature of Laos bus travel; take plenty of provisions and share them round. iPods and inflatable neck cushions may turn out to be your best friends.

OVERLAND ROUTES

Landlocked Laos has multiple entry points from Thailand and Vietnam, one from China, and an unofficial crossing from Cambodia.



Were Laos, Thailand and Vietnam tük-tük drivers, the Thai driver would take you to your destination via a silk shop, the Vietnamese would almost run you over for your custom, while you'd probably have to go find the Lao driver, wake him up and *then* persuade him to do some work. No teeming, smoggy metropolis, no aggressive entrepreneurialism, this is Southeast Asia's most relaxing country to travel in.

In the north, a rugged terrain of emerald mountains and dramatic limestone peaks, criss-crossed with rivers, makes travel impossibly slow. Flat as a pancake and sprinkled with palm trees, the languid south is the quasi market garden of Laos; separated from the economic powerhouse of Thailand by the massive Mekong River.

After 30 years of communist inertia, Laos is hurrying to play catch-up with its neighbours. And while economic reforms have spawned a new urban elite, for the rest of the country subsistence village life remains virtually unchanged since the French sidled in more than a hundred years ago.

CURRENT EVENTS

Eschewing the international arena since its take-over in 1975, the Communist regime learnt by the late 80s that further isolation would be its downfall and gingerly opened its doors to foreign investment. As such Laos has reinvented itself as the crossroads state. Major highways are being built between China, Thailand and Vietnam, transforming the country from being landlocked to land-linked.

And while the government concerns itself with so much Thai TV invading the airwaves, the world's environmentalists are more anxious as to what's happening to the country's wildlife, disrupted by the building of 11 lucrative hydroelectric dams and the continued logging of huge swathes of forest. It's a difficult balance, the preservation of one of the world's richest ecosystems resources versus Laos' need to financially support itself and keep up with other members of Asean.

Rural poverty – and the skyrocketing scrap-metal trade in China – has also seen a rise in unexploded ordnance (UXO) fatalities. A lasting legacy of the US-led Secret War, UXOs are another factor in Laos' slow development as land is virtually unusable until it's cleared – an expensive and time-consuming process.

Government-forced resettlement of Hmong villages, in an attempt to rein in more than three decades of minor insurrection, is having mixed results; security alerts are frequent – though often unpublished – around Xieng Khouang and Xaisamboun Provinces (Special Zone). Don't be surprised to see the odd gun-toting guard knocking around on bus journeys to Phonsavan and around.

Finally, the problem of *swidden* (slash and burn) farming practiced for centuries by ethnic farmers in the cultivation of coffee, rice and rubber, has led to extensive deforestation of original growth forest. Environmentalists are working in earnest to approach change through re-education, but reversing tradition and convincing sceptical tribes is not an overnight process.

On the plus side, literacy has risen considerably; inter-country communication is improving; more hospitals are being built and life expectancy has risen incrementally.

HISTORY

The Kingdom of Lan Xang

Before the French, British, Chinese and Siamese drew a line around it, Laos was a collection of disparate principalities subject to an ever-revolving cycle of war, invasion, prosperity and decay.

Laos' earliest brush with nationhood was in the 14th century, when Khmer-backed Lao warlord Fa Ngum conquered Wieng Chan (Vientiane).

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 reached its peak in the 17th century, when it was the dominant force in Southeast Asia.

French Rule

By the 18th century, the nation had crumbled, falling under the control of the Siamese, who coveted much of modern-day

Laos as a buffer zone against the expansionist French. It was to no effect. Soon after taking over Annam and Tonkin (modern-day Vietnam), the French negotiated with Siam into relinquishing her territory east of the Mekong, and Laos was born.

The country's 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. In 1953 France granted full sovereignty, but 20 years of chaos followed as Laos became a stage on which the clash of communist ambition and USA anxiety over the perceived Southeast Asian 'domino effect' played itself out.

A period of shifting alliances and political mayhem saw multiple parties with multiple agendas settle into two factions: the Pathet Lao supported by the North Vietnamese, Chinese and Soviets, and the right-wing elite backed by the US government.

The Secret War

From 1965 to 1973, the US devastated eastern and northeastern Laos with nonstop carpet-bombing to counter the presence of the North Vietnamese in the country. The campaign intensified the war between the Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao armies and if anything, increased domestic support for the communists. 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 Vietnamese protégé Kaysone Phomvihane.

Around 10% of Laos' population fled, mostly into Thailand. The remaining opponents of the government – notably tribes of Hmong (highland dwellers) in Xieng Khuang and Luang Prabang – were suppressed, often brutally.

A New Beginning

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 (but not political dissent of course). Laos entered the political family of

Southeast Asian countries known as Asean in 1997, two years after Vietnam.

In 2004 the USA promoted Laos to Normal Trade Relations, cementing the end to a trade embargo in place since the communists took power in 1975. The Lao government has set its goal to haul Laos out of the Least Developed Country bracket by 2020. While still heavily reliant on foreign aid, Laos has committed to income-generating projects in recent years in a bid to increase its prosperity.

THE CULTURE

National Psyche

Lao people are generally very laid-back and unassuming, and appreciate others being the same. They love a celebration (and a dirty joke), and at festival time you'll see the characteristic Lao diffidence dissolve as if by magic (or by *lào-lào* aka rice whisky) into bawdy boisterousness. Many are also very superstitious and belief in spirits and ghosts is almost universal; the Hmong still believe in werewolves.

Lifestyle

Laos' strongest cultural and linguistic links are with Thailand, reasserted in a distinctly modern way, with Thai music and TV an almost ubiquitous presence in the country. Similarly, touching another person's head is taboo, as is pointing your feet at another person or at a buddha image. Strong displays of emotion are also discouraged. As in Thailand, the traditional greeting gesture is the *nop* or *wái*, a prayer-like placing together of the palms in front of the face or chest, although in urban areas the handshake is becoming more commonplace.

Socially, Laos is very conservative and regular waves of prohibition sweep the land in response to the perceived menace of bourgeois liberalism seeping over the border from Thailand and the West.

For all temple visits, dress neatly and take your shoes off when entering religious buildings. You should also take off your shoes when entering people's homes, guesthouses and shops. In general you won't see many shirtless Lao; to their credit, visiting *falang* (foreigners) are generally respectful of this rule (it gets harder to maintain in the boiling islands of Si Phan Don). A free booklet, *Do's & Don'ts in Laos*, produced by the Lao National Tourism Authority (p354) comically describes

how to dress and behave in a way that will not offend or encourage irresponsible behaviour among the young and impressionable.

Population

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 and the growing accessibility of the internet are changing that.

RELIGION

Most lowland Lao are Theravada Buddhists and many Lao males choose to be ordained temporarily as monks, typically spending anywhere from a month to three years at a wat. Indeed, a young man is not considered 'ripe' until he has completed his spiritual term. After the 1975 communist victory, Buddhism was suppressed, but by 1992 the government had relented and 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 *sâyasaat* (folk magic).

Despite the ban, *phi* worship remains the dominant non-Buddhist belief system. Even in Vientiane, Lao citizens openly perform the ceremony called *sukhwán* or *bási*, in which the 32 *khwán* (guardian spirits of the body) are bound to the guest of honour by white strings tied around the wrists (you'll see many Lao people wearing these).

Outside the Mekong River valley, the *phi* cult is particularly strong among tribal Thai, especially the Thai Dam. *Mâw* (priests) who are trained to appease and exorcise

SPACE INVADERS

Don't be surprised if an old man puts his hand on your leg in a friendly gesture, or the kid next to you on a long bus journey falls asleep and drools on your shoulder. In Laos they haven't acquired the hang of spatial awareness; what seems like an invasion of privacy to Westerners is perfectly normal in a crammed bus where there's no room (quite literally) for Western reserve.

troublesome spirits preside at important Thai Dam festivals and other ceremonies. The Khamu and Hmong-Mien tribes also practise animism; the latter group also adds ancestral worship.

ARTS

Lao art and architecture can be unique and expressive, and mostly religious in nature. Distinctively Lao is the Calling for Rain Buddha, a standing image with a rocket-like shape. Wats in Luang Prabang feature *sim* (chapels), with steep, low roofs.

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 colonists from China, Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar and France have run off with 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 peoples). Classical music and dance have been all but lost in Laos, although performances are occasionally held in Luang Prabang at the Royal Palace (p374) and in Vientiane.

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

ENVIRONMENT

The Land

Laos' small population and 236,800 sq km of rugged geography mean this is the least altered environment in Southeast Asia. Unmanaged vegetation covers an estimated 85% of the country, and 10% of Laos is original growth forest. A hundred years ago this statistic was nearer 75%, which provides a clear idea of the detrimental effects of relentless logging and slash and burn farming.

Nonetheless, most Lao still live at or just above subsistence level, consuming far fewer of their own natural resources than the people of any developed country.

Wildlife

Laos' forest cover means it has a greater concentration of wild animals than neighbouring Thailand. Its pristine forests, mountains

and rivers harbour a rich variety of creatures, including an estimated 437 kinds of bird and, in southern Laos alone, an incredible 320 different fish species.

There are also wild elephants, jackals, bears, leopards, tigers and the rare Irrawaddy dolphin. Its habitat is concentrated in the southern Mekong particularly around Si Phan Don, where you have the best chance of sighting them in the dry season (we saw three of the 10-strong pod within minutes, so it's worth the journey).

National Parks

In 1993 the government set up 18 National Protected Areas (NPAs), comprising a total of 24,600 sq km, just over 10% of the land. An additional two were added in 1995 (taking the total coverage to 14% of Laos). International consulting agencies have also recommended another nine sites, but these have yet to materialise. Despite these conservation efforts, illegal timber felling and the smuggling of exotic wildlife are still significant threats to Laos's natural resources; the former, sadly, facilitated by the government's granting lucrative logging licenses to China.

Most conservation areas are in southern Laos. However, for the majority of foreign travellers Nam Ha NPA in the northern province of Luang Nam Tha is the most accessible and popular wilderness area to visit (see p385).

TRANSPORT

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

There are currently no intercontinental flights to Laos. You can enter or exit Laos by air at Vientiane (from or to Cambodia, China, Thailand and Vietnam), Luang Pra-

DEPARTURE TAX

Departure tax is US\$10, payable in US dollars, baht or kip (cash only) at the airport. At overland crossings, the exit fee should be 5000 kip. Domestic airport tax is also 5000 kip.

bang (Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam) or Pakse (Cambodia).

Lao Airlines, Thai Airways International (THAI), Bangkok Airways and Vietnam Airlines all operate flights into the country. All fares listed in this chapter are one-way.

Bangkok Airways (code PG; ☎ 071-253334; www.bangkokair.com)

Lao Airlines (code QV; ☎ 021-212051; www.laos-airlines.com)

Thai Airways International (THAI, code TG; ☎ 021-216143; www.thaiairways.com)

Vietnam Airlines (code VN; ☎ 021-217562; www.vietnamairlines.com)

CAMBODIA

Lao Airlines flies regularly from Vientiane to Siem Reap (US\$150) and Phnom Penh (US\$150). Tourist visas are available on arrival at airports in Cambodia for US\$20 (plus one passport photo) for most nationalities.

CHINA

Lao Airlines and China Yunnan Airlines fly between Vientiane and Kunming (US\$140).

THAILAND

Lao Airlines and Thai Airways International fly from Bangkok to Vientiane (US\$100, daily). Bangkok Airways flies to Luang Prabang (US\$220, daily), sometimes stopping en route at Sukhothai in Thailand. Lao Airlines also flies to Chiang Mai (US\$90, Tuesday, Friday and Sunday) from Luang Prabang.

VIETNAM

Lao Airlines and Vietnam Airlines fly between Vientiane and Hanoi (US\$120, daily) and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC; US\$180, daily).

Land

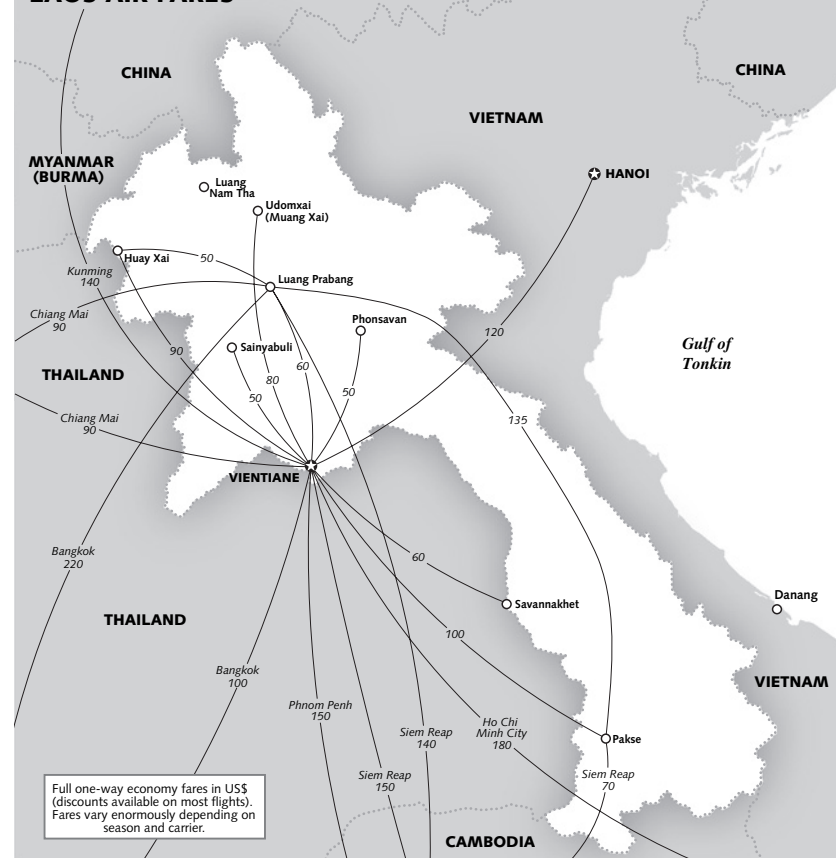
Laos has open land borders with Cambodia, China, Thailand and Vietnam, but the situation at all of them is prone to change without warning. Under current rules, a 30-day tourist visa is available on arrival at all international checkpoints (except at the Cambodian border), but this can change rapidly, so check the situation before leaving. See p929 for a list of border crossings.

GETTING AROUND

Air

Lao Airlines (code QV; ☎ 021-212051; www.laos-airlines.com) handles all domestic flights in Laos. Pur-

LAOS AIR FARES



chasing tickets using credit cards carries an additional surcharge. Schedules are unreliable and during holiday seasons it can be very difficult to get a seat to some destinations, so book ahead.

Safety records for Lao Airlines aren't made public, and many international organisations and Western embassies advise staff not to use this airline. That said a new range of MA60 Chinese-made planes are gradually phasing out the old accident-prone M12s, improving the company's reputation. The international flights and busy domestic routes are as safe as any but flying into Sam Neua, where the descent is tricky and conditions unpredictable, is not for timid air travellers.

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 and you'll see many hardy cyclists scaling mountains. 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 mountainous north proves too challenging, a bus will always pick you up along the road.

Boat

With the main highway upgrading process almost complete in Laos, the days of mass river transport are as good as over. Sadly, most boat services today are geared towards tourists, pushing prices up.

The most popular river trip in Laos – the slow boat between Huay Xai and Luang Prabang – remains a daily event. From Huay Xai (p390) boats are often packed, while from Luang Prabang (p375) there's usually a bit of leg room. Other popular journeys – between Pakse and Si Phan Don, or between Nong Khiaw and Luang Prabang – are no longer regular, so you'll have to charter a boat.

River ferry facilities are quite basic and passengers sit, eat and sleep on the wooden decks. It's a good idea to bring something soft to sit on. 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* (longtail 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) – shallow, 5m-long skiffs with 40HP outboard engines – are common. These are able to 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. For others, it's like riding on a giant runaway chainsaw, a nightmare that can't end soon enough. Speedboats, as well as being deafeningly loud, kill and injure people every year. They tend to flip and disintegrate on contact with any solid floating

WHEEL POWER

Thanks to a much improved road-system, travelling by bike has really taken off; mountain-bikers are reaching dizzying altitudes, pushing further into frontiers and mountain villages previously considered inaccessible. Our only advice is to take plenty of fruit and water on untraveller roads, and a healthy stock of inner-tubes.

MOTORCYCLE DIARIES

A number of travellers have regaled us with their Che-style two wheel adventures, having bought their motorbikes in Ho Chi Minh or Hanoi. For a reported US\$200 to US\$300 you can pick up an old Russian Minsk, though the back wheels are prone to shake more than a hula girl. Provided your bike has decent suspension and knobby tread, there's nowhere too far off the beaten track for you. For more ideas see: **Overland Solutions** (www.overlandsolutions.com).

debris, which is in plentiful supply during the wet season.

Bus & Săwngthăew

Long-distance public transport in Laos is either by bus or *săwngthăew* (literally 'two rows'; converted pick-ups or trucks with two wooden benches down either side).

The majority of main highways in Laos are now either in a reasonable condition or being upgraded; the main exception being Rte 1 between Vieng Thong and Nong Khiaw, though this is undergoing a facelift. Despite improvements, road trips in Laos can still be a test of endurance, especially in the northeast where there is barely a straight stretch of road to be found (you'll soon find out why they hand out those little plastic bags on some buses!).

Car & Motorcycle

Chinese- and Japanese-made 100cc step-through scooters can be rented for 64,000 kip to 80,000 kip per day in Vientiane, Vang Vieng, Savannakhet, Pakse and Luang Nam Tha. A driving licence is increasingly required in larger places like Vientiane where it's also possible to rent dirt bikes for around US\$20 per day. You'll be expected to leave your passport as a deposit, but it's unlikely you'll be covered by the rental company's insurance in the event of an accident. Motorcycle tours of Laos are offered by **Asian Motorcycling Adventures** (www.asianbiketour.com). If you're caught without a helmet, expect to be fined US\$5 by vigilant policemen eager to pocket a little extra cash. Try to get a Japanese bike if you're travelling any distance out of town. Motorcyclists planning to ride through Laos should check out the wealth of information at www.gt-riders.com.

MUST READ

Laos: Culture & Society, edited by Dr Grant Evans, contains a series of academic essays that will deepen your understanding of the history, culture and politics of Laos.

Car rental in Laos is expensive, but it's a great way of reaching remote places. In Vientiane, **Asia Vehicle Rental** (AVR; Map p356; ☎ 021-17493; avr@loxinfo.co.th; Th Samsenthai) has sedans, minibuses, 4WDs and station wagons, with or without drivers, from around US\$70 per day, not including fuel. If you have your own car or motorcycle, you are allowed to import it for the length of your visa after filling in a few forms at the border. Temporary import extensions are possible for up to two weeks, sometimes more.

Hitching

Hitching is possible in Laos, but it's never entirely safe and definitely not recommended for women as the act of standing beside a road and waving at cars might be misinterpreted! In any case, public transport is inexpensive and will pick you up almost anywhere. Otherwise long-distance cargo trucks or cars with red-on-yellow number plates (private vehicles) are also a good bet.

VIENTIANE

☎ 021 / pop 203,000

This delightfully friendly capital, studded with crumbling French mansions, bougainvillea-blooming streets and steaming noodle stalls, is somewhere between a big town and a diminutive city; the kind of place you might find a Graham Greene protagonist. Its conveniently compact travellers' enclave is based around Nam Phu, the Mekong riverside and Setthariat and Samsenthai streets. Full of things to see, from Buddha Park to the Morning market and an impossibly rich selection of international cuisine – most pointedly French – you'll find yourself slowly won over by the easy charms of this evolving backwater. The city may reveal its beauty less readily than Luang Prabang, but spend a few days visiting its unusual sights, sampling its excellent food and enjoying a Beer Lao at sunset by the river, and you'll soon feel at home here.

HISTORY

Vientiane's peaceful demeanour belies a turbulent history. Over the 1000 or so years of its history, it's been variously abused by successive Vietnamese, Burmese, Siamese, Khmer and French conquerors. The French cemented Vientiane's status as a capital city when they took over the protectorship of Laos in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; it was further inhabited by CIA 'spooks' and the charismatic Ravens (the screw-loose CIA-funded pilots of Air America) in the 60s and early 70s. After their victory in 1973 the Pathet Lao briefly considered moving the capital to Vieng Xai but then relented and stuck with Vientiane, and the city began a rapid transformation from notorious den of vice to austere socialist outpost. Since opening up to international investment, Vientiane has slowly been shedding its parochial skin. In 2004, it enjoyed the honour of hosting the Asean Summit, placing it firmly on Southeast Asia's diplomatic map. In 2009 Vientiane will host the Asean Games, litmus proof this once backward-looking country has its sights firmly set on the future.

ORIENTATION

The three main streets parallel to the Mekong – Th Fa Ngum, Th Setthathirat and Th Samsenthai – form the central inner city of Vientiane and are where most of the budget guesthouses, bars and restaurants are located. Nam Phu is the best inner-city landmark if you're catching a taxi or *túk-túk* into town. Heading northeast at a 90-degree angle to Th Setthathirat is the wide tree-lined boulevard of Th Lan Xang, where you'll find the

GETTING INTO TOWN

Most buses coming in and out of Vientiane arrive at the northern bus station. If you're coming in by the more comfortable KVT and Laody buses, you'll be arriving at the Si Muang bus station, while buses from within Vientiane Prefecture arrive at the Talat Sao bus station. All are a short ride from the centre of the city.

Arriving by air at the now impressive Wattay International Airport, you can expect to pay US\$5 to get into town in a licensed taxi. To save money, lug your bag onto the main road and wait for a passing *túk-túk*.

Laundry

Most guesthouses offer same-day laundry service for 10,000 kip per kilo.

House of Fruit Shakes (Map p356; Th Samsenthai; per item 500-4000 kip; ☎ 7am-9pm) Do your laundry at this delightful family-run fruit-drink bar that delivers a vitamin punch.

Media

Laos' only English-language newspaper, published five times a week, is the government-run *Vientiane Times*, so don't expect too many truthful exposés. More informative is the *Bangkok Post*. International news magazines such as the *Economist*, *Newsweek* and *Time* are sold at minimarts and the Vientiane Book Centre (p353).

Medical Services

Aek Udorn International Hospital (☎ 0066 4234 2555; ☎ 24hr). If you're seriously ill seek an emergency evacuation to this hospital in Thailand.

Australian Embassy Clinic (Map pp352-3 ☎ 413603; Th Mahasot; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) Citizens of Commonwealth countries can access treatment here.

Mahasot Hospital (Map p356 ☎ 214023; Th Mahasot) Come here for treatment of minor ailments.

Money

Several banks in Vientiane change cash and travellers cheques and do cash advances against credit cards for a commission. There are also a number of 24-hour ATMs.

Banque pour le Commerce Extérieur Lao (BCL; Map p356 ☎ 213200; cnr Th Pangkham & Th Fa Ngum; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri) Good rates for travellers cheques.

Joint Development Bank (Map p356 ☎ 213535; Th Lan Xang; ☎ 8.30am-4pm Mon-Fri) Charges lower commission on cash advances against credit cards.

Lao Development Bank (Map p356; ☎ 213300; Th Setthathirat; ☎ 8.30-11.30am & 2-4pm Mon-Fri)

Lao-Viet Bank (Map p356; ☎ 215418; Th Lan Xang; ☎ 8.30am-4pm Mon-Fri)

Post

Post, Telephone & Telegraph (PTT; Map p356; cnr Th Lan Xang & Th Khu Vieng; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Stamps, poste restante and (slow) internet services available here.

Telephone

International call phonocards can be purchased from the PTT (above) and mini-

mart. Cheaper internet calls can be made at internet shops (p353).

Tourist Information

Lao National Tourism Authority (NTAL; Map p356 ☎ 212251; Th Lan Xang; ☎ 8am-noon, 1-4pm Mon-Fri) Located in a large office with poster information about Laos' wildlife, as well as excursions beyond the capital. Free copies of the official *Lao National Tourism Administration Guide*, with listings and editorial commentary in both English and French (recommended reading). The staff speak some English.

Travel Agencies

Boualian Travel 1 (Map p356 ☎ 263772, 020 551 1646; Th Samsenthai) Books bus and train tickets to Bangkok, Hanoi, Huế, Danang, HCMC; organises tours and visas for Vietnam and Cambodia, plus extensions, charging 5% commission. Boualian is lovely and speaks great English.

Diethelm Travel (Map p356 ☎ 215290; www.dietheltravel.com; Th Setthathirat) Formerly known as Wildside, Green Discovery offers environmentally friendly tours, kayaking, treks and mountain-biking.

Green Discovery (Map p356 ☎ 251564; www.green.discoverylaos.com; Th Setthathirat) Formerly known as Wildside, Green Discovery offers environmentally friendly tours, kayaking, treks and mountain-biking.

Lao Youth Travel (Map p356 ☎ 216314; Th Fa Ngum) Organises onward bus tickets to Laos, Vietnam and Thailand; also books train tickets from Nong Khai to Bangkok; arranges visas and Laos visa extensions.

SIGHTS

Pha That Luang

The beautiful golden **Pha That Luang** (Great Sacred Stupa; Map pp352-3 Th That Luang; admission 2000 kip; ☎ 8am-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 *thàat* (Buddhist stupa) here to enclose a piece of Buddha's breastbone as early as the 3rd century BC. Construction began again in 1566 and, over time, four wats were built around the stupa. Only two remain, Wat That Luang Tai to the south and Wat That Luang Neua to the north. The latter is the monastic residence of the Supreme Patriarch of Lao Buddhism.

The temple is the site of a major festival held in early November (see p358). 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. The best time to visit is late afternoon to catch the reflected setting sun.

Wat Si Saket

Built in 1818 by King Anouvong (Chao Anou), **Wat Si Saket** (Map p356 cnr Th Lan Xang & Th Setthathirat; admission 2000 kip; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm, closed public holidays) is the oldest temple in Vientiane and well worth a visit even if you've overdosed on temples. 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 long shelves below the niches. Most of the images are from 16th- to 19th-century Vientiane, but a few hail from 15th- to 16th-century Luang Prabang. A Khmer-style Naga Buddha is also on display, brought from a Khmer site at nearby Hat Sai Fong.

Patuxai

Vientiane's haughty Arc de Triomphe replica is an imposing if slightly incongruous sight, dominating the commercial district around Th Lan Xang. Officially called **Patuxai** (Victory Monument; Map pp352-3 Th Lan Xang; admission 2000 kip; ☎ 8am-5pm), but more commonly known by locals as *anusawali*, it commemorates the Lao who died in pre-revolutionary wars. It was built in 1969 with cement donated by the USA for the construction of a new airport, hence expats refer to it as 'the vertical runway'. The entrance fee allows you to climb the stairway interior to the top of the monument, with views over Vientiane.

Lao National History Museum

Housed in a well-worn classical mansion originally built in 1925 as the French governor's residence, the **Lao National History Museum** (Map p356 ☎ 212462; Th Samsenthai; admission 3000 kip; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm) was formerly known as the Lao Revolutionary Museum. Rooms near the entrance feature cultural and geographical exhibits. Inner rooms are dedicated to the 1893-1945 French colonial period, the 1945-54 struggle for independence, the 1954-63 resistance to American imperialism, the 1964-69 provisional government, and the 1975 communist victory. Many of the displays are now in English as well as Lao. If you get museum-fatigue, you

WARNING

Always check your government's travel advisories for up-to-date security information before travelling.

can keep your ticket and come back later the same day.

Xieng Khuan (Buddha Park)

In a grassy field by the Mekong River, 25km southeast of Vientiane, **Xieng Khuan** (Buddha Park; off Map pp352-3; off Th Tha Deua; admission 5000 kip, camera 2000 kip; ☎ 8am-sunset) is a park full of Buddhist and Hindu sculptures, a monument to one eccentric man's bizarre ambition. Xieng Khuan was designed and built in 1958 by Luang Pu (Venerable Grandfather) Bunleua Sulilat, a yogi-priest-shaman who merged Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, mythology and iconography into a cryptic whole. The concrete sculptures at Xieng Khuan (which means Spirit City) include statues of Shiva, Vishnu, Arjuna, Avalokiteshvara, Buddha and just about every other Hindu or Buddhist deity imaginable.

Buses passing here (3000 kip, 45 minutes) leave the Talat Sao terminal every 30 minutes during the day. You could charter a *sàwngthàew* for 50,000 kip return.

ACTIVITIES

Bowling

Bright lights and the high-pitched clatter of wooden pins await you at the **Lao Bowling Centre** (Map p356; ☎ 218661; Th Khun Bulom; per game with shoe hire 20,000 kip; ☎ 9am-midnight). Even before its 'official' closing time, it may look deserted, but entry is on the right side of the building. As well as good old-fashioned bowling, you'll find pool tables, beer, and refreshments are available.

Gym & Aerobics

If all that Beer Lao is taking its toll, get thyself to the conveniently located, small, street-level gym at the **Tai-Pan Hotel** (Map p356; ☎ 216906; Th François Ngim; per visit 40,000 kip).

Massage & Herbal Saunas

For a traditional massage experience, head to **Wat Sok Pa Luang** (Map pp352-3; Th Sok Pa Luang; ☎ 1-7pm). Located in a semirural setting (*wat paa* means 'forest temple') the wat is famous



INFORMATION		Lao Plaza Hotel.....26 C2		Nazim.....55 B3	
A1 Internet.....1 C3	Mandarina Massage.....27 C2	C3	Tai-Pan Hotel.....28 B3	Open-air Riverside Food Vendors.....56 A3	
Banque pour le Commerce	Exterieur Lao.....2 C3	D3	Wat Si Saket.....29 D3	PVO.....57 D3	
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Coopération Linguistique.....4 E2	Green Discovery.....(see 51)		Mixok Guest House.....34 B2	Borpennyang.....62 A3	
Coopération Linguistique.....4 E2	House of Fruit Shakes.....9 D3	D3	Nali Namphu Guest House.....35 C3	Dao Fa Bistro.....63 C3	
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Coopération Linguistique.....4 E2	Lao Development Bank.....13 C3	C3	RD Guest House.....39 B3	Samlo.....65 B2	
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Coopération Linguistique.....4 E2	Lao Youth Travel.....15 B3	B3	Syri 1 Guest House.....41 C1	ENTERTAINMENT 🎪	
Coopération Linguistique.....4 E2	Lao-Viet Bank.....16 F2	F2	Syri 2 Guest House.....42 B2	Centre Culturel et de Coopération Linguistique.....(see 4)	
Coopération Linguistique.....4 E2	Mahasot Hospital.....17 E4	E4	Thawee Guest House.....43 C2	Lao Traditional Show.....66 C3	
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			La Terrasse.....52 B3	Talat Sao Bus Station.....72 F3	
			La Vendome.....53 B2		
			Le Provencal.....54 C3		

for herbal saunas (10,000 kip) and massages (30,000 kip). It's about 3km from the city centre, but tük-tük drivers all know how to get there.

In the centre of town, **White Lotus Massage & Beauty** (Map p356; ☎ 217492; Th Pangkham; 🕒 10am-10pm) is a day spa offering oil massage and traditional Lao-style massages (US\$4 to US\$5 per hour).

Mandarina Massage (Map p356; ☎ 218703; Th Pangkham; 🕒 10am-10pm) is next door and with its soothing interior and scented air, may be the superior of the two. Massages cost US\$4 to US\$5 per hour.

Meditation

Foreigners are welcome at a regular Saturday afternoon sitting at Wat Sok Pa Luang (p355). The session runs from 4pm until 5.30pm with an opportunity to ask questions afterwards.

Rafting

Green Discovery (Map p356; ☎ 215156; www.greeniscovey.com; Th Seththathirat) Reliable, well-trained guides with Laos' most successful low impact ecotourism specialists.

Swimming

For serious lap swimming, there's the 25m-long **Sokpaluang Swimming Pool** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 350491; Th Sok Pa Luang; admission 6000 kip; 🕒 9am-8pm Tue-Sun), which also has a children's paddling pool and change rooms and is best visited at the weekend. Alternatively, for a more relaxed swim try the kidney-shaped pool at the **Lane Xang Hotel** (Map p356; ☎ 214102; Th Fa Gnum; admission US\$2) or the slick **Lao Plaza Hotel** (Map p356; Th Samsenthai; admission US\$5)

COURSES

Cooking

Courses at the **Thongbay Guesthouse** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 242292; www.thongbay-guesthouses.com; Ban Nong Douange; US\$10) are organised on demand and start at 10am or 3pm. A half-day class includes a trip to the market before you cook up a storm, then feast on your culinary creations for lunch or dinner.

Yoga

To regain your balance look for signposted information on yoga classes in shop windows around Nam Phu (try the Scandinavian Bakery).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The **That Luang Festival** (Bun Pha That Luang), held in early November, is the largest temple fair in Laos. The full moon festival peaks with a colourful procession of thousands between Pha That Luang (p354) and Wat Si Muang. One traveller from London described it as Wembley Stadium on a cup final day, with everyone on happy drugs!

Another huge annual event is **Bun Nam** (River Festival) at the end of Buddhist Lent in October, when boat races are held on the Mekong River. Rowing teams from all over the country, as well as from Thailand, China and Myanmar compete, and the riverbank is lined with food stalls, temporary discos, carnival games and beer gardens for three nights.

The riverbank is the focus of yet more celebrations on 31 December for the **International New Year**, and again for **Vietnamese Tet-Chinese New Year**, usually in February, then once more in mid-April for the mass water-fight of **Pii Mai** (Lao New Year).

SLEEPING

The old flophouses, once complacent in offering the bare minimum, are slowly being edged out in favour of better, more sanitary accommodation. Anywhere that's cheap and clean fills up very quickly, but there are still some great bargains listed below. Remember also that you can eat for very little in Vientiane and move into a less expensive place once you've had a chance to find your bearings.

Mixay Guest House (Map p356; ☎ 020 526 0558; Th Nokeo Khumman; r 20,000-50,000 kip) Very basic rooms in this spooky old house; with fan and outside toilet, redeemed by amazing sunset views from the vertiginous roof terrace.

Mixok Guest House (Map p356; ☎ 251606; Th Setthathirath; r 40,000-60,000 kip) Rooms in reasonable condition. Blankets available for cooler nights. Fills up by midday during the high season, mostly due to its very convenient location.

Lao Sakonh Guest House (Map p356; Th François Nginn; ☎ 216571; r 40,000-70,000 kip) With its thin partitioned walls and grubby atmosphere this is like something out of *The Beach*. On a plus it's cheap and you can hire bikes for US\$1.

Syri 2 Guest House (Map p356; Th Setthathirath; r with shared/private bathroom 60,000/80,000 kip) Rooms are basic and clean with a choice of attached and outside toilets. Also offers laundry service and bicycles for rent. A nice area to read upstairs. It's run by lovely people.

Soukxana Guest House (Map p356; 13 Th Pangkham; r 60,000-80,000 kip; ☎) This impeccably house-proud accommodation has spotless rooms with a pleasant family-run atmosphere. Fresh as a daisy.

our pick **Syri 1 Guest House** (Map p356; ☎ 212682; Th Saigon; r 60,000-100,000 kip) In a relatively quiet location, Syri is welcoming to newcomers and home to a little tribe of artists who paint out the back. The owner, Air, also offers special bike rides promising another side of Vientiane. A great place to chill, watch a wide range of films and meet other travellers, rooms are large and cool, décor is old style with a palpable sense of atmosphere.

Thawee Guest House (Map p356; Th Phnom Penh; ☎ 217903; r with/without air-con 60,000/120,000 kip; ☎) Adequate digs if a little murky, with attached bathrooms and fan. Make sure you ask for a room with a window, though. Also, be warned, the owner plays guitar. Badly.

Phatoumphone Guest House (Map p356; ☎ 212318; Th Manthatulat; r with shared bathroom 80,000 kip) This friendly old stalwart, with paint-thirsty walls, is showing her age. Set in a peaceful courtyard it's a fun place to meet other travellers or try and make sense of the freaky mural after a large Beer Lao.

Phonepaseuth Guest House (Map p356; Th Pangkham; ☎ 212263; www.phonepaseuth-gh.com; r 100,000 kip; ☎) Just north of Nam Phu (and the delights of the Scandinavian Bakery!) rooms are spotless and elegant with attached bathrooms. For an extra 30,000 kip you can have a balcony.

Nali Namphu Guest House (Map p356; Th Pangkham; ☎ 263298; www.malinamphu.com; r incl breakfast 100,000 kip) Recently opened with pristine rooms, bamboo furnishings, fresh white linen and tiled floors. This is great value if there are two of you. Ask for a room with a view.

RD Guest House (Map p356; Th Nokeo Khumman; ☎ 262112; r 120,000 kip) Spotlessly clean thanks to a recent refurbishment, this is quality accommodation with a hint of luxury. Has fans, laundry service and a very cool lobby. Plush.

Vayakorn Guest House (Map p356; ☎ 241911; Th Nokeo Khumman; r 120,000-170,000 kip) Luxurious accommodation in a salubrious setting, and so it should be given the price. Vayakorn's rooms have hot water, satellite TV – and, wait for it – a telephone! Newspapers and magazines available downstairs.

Dragon Lodge (Map p356; ☎ 250112; dragonlodge2002@yahoo.com; Th Samsenthai; r 120,000-230,000 kip; ☎) Ambient music, a relaxed at-

mosphere in the downstairs bar and good service (the information boards are packed with useful tips if you've just arrived). Also runs air-con minibuses to Vang Vieng (US\$5) and organises onwards visas – all good news if you're feeling lazy.

Orchid Guest House (Map p356; ☎ 252825; Th Fa Ngum; r 130,000-140,000 kip; ☎) Opposite the Mekong with a tiled rooftop to watch the sunset over Vientiane, this place has generously sized rooms with small TVs and BBC. Bikes also available to hire. We found staff a little unapproachable on our visit.

EATING

The dining options here are so varied you'll be reeling with the angst of choice, especially if you've been in the middle of nowhere. Close to Nam Phu are some popular eating spots for homesick *falang* with plenty of pizza and pasta plus Indian, Chinese, Japanese – even Russian. Vegetarians won't be disappointed either. And of course there's the night market – for those on a strict budget you've probably already shelled out too much for a room already, so it's time to take to the streets.

Breakfast

PVO (Map p356; ☎ 020 551 5655; Th Samsenthai; meals 5000-20,000 kip; ☎ breakfast & lunch) Crunchy baguettes with juicy fresh salad, cheese and pâté. The *bo bún* (cold Vietnamese noodle dish) is delicious. A top choice for lunch and to takeaway.

Scandinavian Bakery (Map p356; ☎ 215199; Nam Phu; meals 10,000-30,000 kip; ☎ 7am-7pm; ☎) Despite close competition this original wellspring of delicious coffee and pastries is still the best bakery in town. Since its expansion a couple of years ago there's more room to read and sip coffee.

NIGHTCRAWLERS

As you walk along Th Setthathirath, shapes may take form in darkened doorways, followed by an echo of footfalls behind you. These 'ladies', with five o'clock shadows, impossibly long stilettoes and croaky voices have chosen this street as their after-dark calling card. Smile and keep walking but in no event laugh; last year a man was admitted to hospital after being attacked with a handbag.

Croissant D'Or Bakery (Map p356; Th Nokeo Khumman; meals 10,000-30,000 kip) Cosy little eatery specialising in delicious pastries. Not as refrigerated as Scandinavian.

JoMa Bakery Café (Map p356; ☎ 215265; Th Setthathirath; meals 20,000-30,000 kip; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Sat; ☎) This sanctuary of cool next to Dao Fa Bistro caters to a wide palate with pastries, salads and fresh bespoke-filled baguettes. The yoghurt and muesli is a welcome alternative to the heat outside. Wi-fi available.

French

Where else but Vientiane could you enjoy steak au poivre for less than US\$5? Forget your waistline, by the time you're in the back of beyond you'll wish you had tried the whole menu.

La Terrasse (Map p356; ☎ 218550; Th Nokeo Khumman; meals 30,000-50,000 kip; ☎ 5-11pm) Delightful rustic setting with wood-fired pizzas and delicious French menu; one of the distinguished oldies.

Le Provençal (Map p356; ☎ 216248; Nam Phu; meals 30,000-50,000 kip; ☎ 5-11pm) Piping out jazz across the square by day, glowing invitingly by night, Le Provençal has a charming Franco-rustic feel. The steaks are superb, as are the wood-fired pizzas. A romantic place to score some credit with the other half.

Le Vendome (Map p356; ☎ 216402; Th Inpeng; meals 40,000-50,000 kip; ☎ 5-11pm) This literally hidden gem (fight your way through the ivy) is a slice of Gallic heaven. Staff is friendly, the ambience atmospheric, and curiously, the walls are decked with Spanish bull-fighting posters. Principally French cuisine plus terrific pizzas.

Vegetarian

Vegetarian Buffet (Map pp352-3; ☎ 020 566 6488; Th Saysetha; lunch buffet 15,000 kip, meals 5000-15,000 kip; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) One of several venues doing an excellent all-you-can-eat vegetarian buffet. Head east along Th Setthathirath 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 p356; ☎ 213642; Th Pangkham; meals 20,000-30,000 kip; ☎ 5-10pm) Still the most popular veggie haunt with a varied menu and great shakes. Also sells fair-trade honey, a selection of teas and delicious homemade cheesecake. Yum!

Lao & Asian

Ban Anou night market (Map p356; off Th Chao Anou; meals 5000-20,000 kip; ☎ 5-10pm) Up Th Chao Anou, Vientiane's Chinatown district, turn right before the T-junction and behold a short street lined with food vendors selling *ping kai* (barbecue chicken on a stick), *laap* (spicy salad), curries, noodles and other delights.

Open-air riverside food vendors (Map p356; Th Fa Ngum; meals 10,000-30,000 kip; ☎ 5-11pm) Numerous stands serve up fresh Lao- and Chinese-influenced dishes. If it's popular with locals, it's probably good. Take your pick.

Sabaidee Restaurant (Map p356; ☎ 214278; Th Setthathirath; meals 15,000-40,000 kip; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Also popular, and just down the road from Khop Chai Deu, the mixed menu includes Thai dishes. At night, the beer-garden setting is illuminated with red and yellow fairy lights.

Indian

Nazim (Map p356; ☎ 223480; Th Fa Ngum; meals 10,000-30,000 kip; ☎ lunch & dinner) Great riverside location, dining alfresco with excellent breakfast and lunchtime options. Consistent as ever.

Rashmi's Indian Fusion (Map p356; ☎ 252789; Th Samsenthai; meals 30,000-50,000 kip; ☎ 5-11pm) Impressive double-floored restaurant opposite Lao Plaza Hotel with a smattering of neon and an whiff of art deco. Varied menu, lavish ambience; the cooler side of Vientiane's nightlife.

International

Katusha Restaurant (Map p356; Th Samsenthai; fruit shakes 4000-7000 kip; ☎ 7am-9pm) The premium fruit-shake shop in Vientiane. Seasonal highlights include anything with strawberry from December to February or anything with passionfruit from May to July.

Full Moon Café (Map p356; ☎ 243373; Th François Nginn; meals 20,000-40,000; ☎ 5-11pm) Mellow tunes and style converge in this sumptuously comfy haunt, with an upstairs bar and quiet veranda to read. Asian fusion menu, featuring a combo of Lao/Thai and Vietnamese dishes.

Khop Chai Deu (Map p356; ☎ 223022; Th Setthathirath; meals 30,000-50,000 kip; ☎ lunch & dinner; ☎) The most popular *jalang* hang-out in town. You can dine out on modern Lao, Chinese, Indian or Western, followed by lashings of over-priced Beer Lao.

Sticky Fingers Café & Bar (Map p356; ☎ 215972; Th François Nginn; meals 40,000-60,000 kip; ☎ breakfast, lunch

& dinner Sun-Sat; ☎) Owned and operated by Aussie expats; the staff is friendly, newspapers and magazines make a thankful diversion for solo diners, and the food is delicious.

DRINKING

Sunset Sala Khounta (Map pp352-3; ☎ 251079; ☎ 1-11pm) Shipwrecked on the river bank, this charming bar is, as the name would suggest, the best place in Vientiane for a sunset beer. Rustic in style, overflowing with secluded calm, it's worth every calorie expended in the long walk here.

Khop Chai Deu (Map p356; ☎ 223022; Th Setthathirath; ☎ noon-midnight; ☎) This place takes up two floors in a beautifully restored French mansion next to Nam Phu; one of the busiest and most convivial places to drink. Beware the older ladies eating beetles at the bar who all claim to be hairdressers! See left for more.

Borpennyang (Map p356; ☎ 261373; Th Fa Ngum; ☎ lunch & dinner) This is a kicking rooftop bar with widescreen TV (generally showing sports) and pool tables. There's a great view of the Mekong and urban roof-scape. It also serves meals (10,000 to 30,000 kip).

Jazzy Brick (Map p356; ☎ 212489; Nam Phu; ☎ lunch & dinner) Combining club-lux sophistication with the flickering ambience of old Indochina; great place to sit in the scented darkness and savour an alchemized Bloody Mary. Better make it just the one at US\$4!

Full Moon Café (Map p356; ☎ 243373; Th François Nginn; ☎ 5-11pm) Relax in the upstairs bar or grab a book and head for the veranda. The Asian fusion menu features Lao, Thai and Vietnamese dishes.

Spirit House (Map pp352-3; ☎ 243795; ☎ 1-11pm) By far the most modish joint on the river, this is a place to drink and betray your shoestring genes for a few hours. Dim-lit Manhattan ambience and a list of cocktails that would make your liver glow.

Samlo (Map p356; Th Setthathirath; ☎ 9am-11pm) Atmospheric seedy barfly joint; if there was a Laotian Tom Waits you'd find him in the corner. More call girls than punters.

Sticky Fingers Café & Bar (Map p356; ☎ 215972; Th François Nginn; ☎ 9am-11pm Sun-Sat) During happy hour, on Wednesday and Friday nights, 'Stickies' heaves with NGO workers letting off steam.

CLUBBING

Don Chan Palace – described by expat Jamie Davis as a 'Lego monster' – hosts the **Lunar 36 Nightclub** (Map pp352-3; ☎ 244288; www.donchanpalace.aopdr.com; Don Chan Palace, Piawat village; ☎ 6pm-4am; admission US\$3), Vientiane's official late-night altar of hedonism. It's the only uncensored joint open seven nights a week, and with a heaving dance floor and outside lounging area it's vaguely reminiscent of *Lost in Translation*.

ENTERTAINMENT

Lao Traditional Show (Map p356; ☎ 242978; Th Manthatalat; admission 70,000 kip; ☎ shows 8pm) For those looking for a cultural experience, there are performances of traditional dance, love songs and music nightly to an entirely foreign audience.

Centre Culturel et de Coopération Linguistique (French Cultural Centre; Map p356; ☎ 215764; www.ambafrance-laos.org; 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 (Thursdays, 7pm). Details are published on fliers out the front and in the *Vientiane Times*.

SHOPPING

Talat Sao (Morning Market; Map p356; Th Lan Xang; ☎ 7am-5pm) This labyrinthine market, with its recently expanded concrete market next door, is a bustling weave-world of stalls selling everything from Lao silks and jewellery, to white goods, electronics and bedding. A bit fetid under the food canopies out back but an authentic place to grab a barbecued lunch.

Camacrafts (Mulberries; Map p356; ☎ 241217; www.mulberries.org; Th Nokeo Khumman; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) This is a not-for-profit company that contributes to villages through training and resource preservation practices. It sells naturally dyed clothing, weavings, bed spreads and cushion covers.

Satri Lao (Map p356; ☎ 216592; Th Setthathirath; ☎ 9am-8pm) This three-storeyed boutique is a treasure trove of choice clothes, jewellery, silk pashminas and lacquered paintings of images from *Tintin* books. If you're desperate to do your presents shopping in one fell swoop this may be the place to come, though it's not cheap.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Lao Airlines (code QV; ☎ 212051; www.laos-airlines.com), **Thai Airways International** (THAI, code TG; ☎ 251041; www.thaiair.com) and also **Vietnam Airlines** (code VN; ☎ 217562; www.vietnamairlines.com) are the main carriers for Vientiane. From here you can fly to Siem Reap (US\$140), Phnom Penh (US\$50), Pakse (US\$100), Savannakhet (US\$60), HCMC (US\$180), Bangkok (US\$100), Chiang Mai (US\$90), Kunming (US\$140), Huay Xai (US\$90), Luang Prabang (US\$60), Phonsavan (US\$50) and Hanoi (US\$120).

Boat

It's possible to take a slow cargo boat to Luang Prabang (US\$26, upstream four days to one week). Ferries leave from Kiaw Liaw Pier, 3.5km west of the fork in the road where Rte 13 heads north in Ban Kao Liaw. Go to the Kiaw Liaw Pier to reserve a spot the day before. Boats make several stops and passengers typically sleep on board.

Bus & Săwngthăew

The **northern bus station** (Map p356; ☎ 260255; Th T2), a 5000-kip tŭk-tŭk ride from the centre of town, is the main departure point for domestic and international buses. Buses leave here for everywhere from Phongsali in the far north to Attapeu in the south, and HCMC.

Buses for Luang Prabang (US\$10, 10 hours, four daily at 6.30am, 7.30am, 9am, 7pm; VIP US\$16, eight hours, one daily at 8am); Phonsavan (60,000 kip, 12 hours, three daily at 6.30am, 9.30am and 4pm; VIP 80,000 kip, 10 hours, one daily at 7am); Udomxai (85,000 kip, 16 hours, two daily at 6.30am and 2pm) depart from the northern bus station. The long haul to Hanoi is a gruelling 20 hours on an air-con bus (US\$18) versus a swift ride by plane (\$120, Lao Airlines) and leaves at 7pm from the same location.

From Talat Sao, regular buses head to Vang Vieng (15,000 kip, three to four hours) until 3pm. After that, *săwngthăew* leave from a truck station 7km west of Vientiane. Seats on air-con minibuses to Vang Vieng (US\$7, three hours) can be purchased from guesthouses and travel agents around town.

Si Muang bus station (Map pp352-3; Th Tha Deua) is where the more expensive **KVT** (☎ 242101) and **Laody** (☎ 242102) buses head south to Pakse, via Tha Khaek and Savannakhet.

GETTING TO THAILAND & VIETNAM

To Thailand

The Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge is 20km southeast of Vientiane. The Vientiane–Nong Khai border is open daily between 6am and 10pm and the easiest way to cross is on the comfortable Thai-Lao International Bus (10,000 kip, 90 minutes), which leaves Vientiane's Talat Sao bus station at 7.30am, 10.30am, 3.30pm and 6pm. Buses, túk-túk and tourist minibuses run from the capital to the bridge almost every hour. From Nong Khai there are regular buses and trains to Bangkok. The border crossing is easy, with visas issued on arrival in both countries. Alternative means of transport between Vientiane and the bridge include túk-túk (50,000 kip), or the regular public bus 14 from Talat Sao (5000 kip) between 6.30am and 5pm. At the bridge, shuttle buses ferry passengers between immigration posts every 20 minutes or so. On the Thai side you can take a túk-túk between the bridge and the bus or train station.

See p758 for information on travelling in the opposite direction.

To Vietnam

The border crossing between Kaew Neua in Laos and Cau Treo in Vietnam can be accessed from Vientiane.

Buses run to Lak Sao in the early morning from Vientiane's northern bus station; from there buses head across the border to Vinh, in Vietnam. It is also possible to organise transport to Hanoi with traders in Lak Sao, but don't relinquish any money until you're physically in the city – horror stories of people being left in the middle of nowhere abound.

Vietnamese guards at the border are rigorous in their checks, and it's vital to organise a visa before you attempt to enter here. The border is open from 8am to 5pm.

See p838 for details on doing the trip in reverse.

The other key departure point is the **Talat Sao bus station** (Map p356; ☎ 216507; Th Mahasot) from where buses run to destinations within Vientiane province and south. This is also where the Thai-Lao International Bus begins its trip across the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge to Nong Khai (see the boxed text, above).

Local buses leave Talat Sao for Savannakhet (US\$6, eight hours), departing at 7am and every two hours thereafter until 3pm, and for Pakse (US\$12, 14 hours, nine daily from 10am to 4pm), stopping for a break in Tha Khaek on the way through. VIP buses to Pakse (US\$18, 11 hours), including an overnighter, leave Si Muang Air Bus Station at 8pm. Tickets can be purchased from travel agents in Vientiane.

Up-to-date bus-fare information is published in the *Vientiane Times* or pop into Boualian Travel (p354) for information.

GETTING AROUND

Bicycle & Motorcycle

Bicycles can be rented for 15,000 kip per day from tour agencies and guesthouses in the city centre. Scooters cost around US\$6 to US\$8 per day. Shop around for one in good

condition (your safety depends on it). Without insurance, most hirers expect you to pay to replace the bike if it is seriously damaged or stolen. Read the fine print before signing any contracts and ask your guesthouse to lock your bike inside overnight.

Boualian Travel 1 Map p356; ☎ 263772; Th Samsenthai; bicycle per day 15,000 kip; ☎ 8am–6pm

KT Shop (Map p356; ☎ 020 561 4201;

ktbikereental@yahoo.com; Th Wat Xieng Nyeun; scooters/motorcycles per day US\$8/20)

PVO (Map p356; ☎ 020 551 5655; Th Samsenthai; scooters per day US\$7) Hire scooters at this eatery.

Túk-túk

Standard trip costs are posted inside túk-túks, which makes haggling difficult though not impossible. Túk-túks standing in a queue on a street corner won't leave the stand for less than the price already agreed with the other drivers (ie approximately 5000 kip for 1km to 2km; 10,000 kip for 2km to 4km). You're better off trying a free-roaming túk-túk (one driving along the street) where a bit of fare negotiation is possible. You can also flag down a shared túk-túk (one with passengers already in it)

that is heading in the direction you want to go. A journey in a shared túk-túk will cost you around 2000 to 5000 kip depending on your destination.

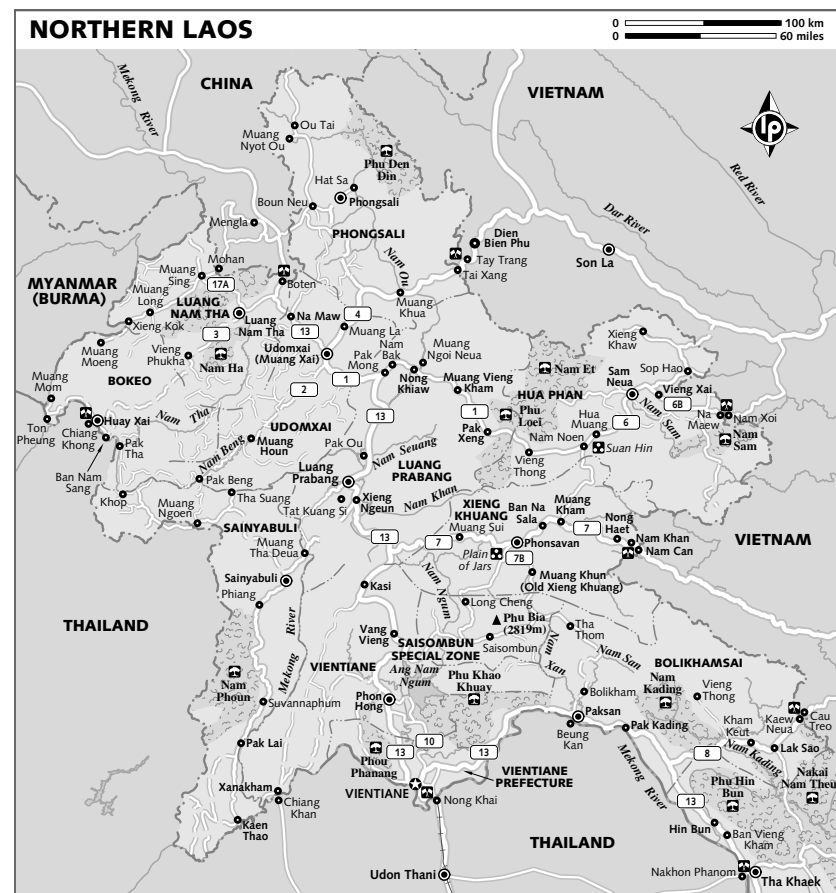
NORTHERN LAOS

Mist-laced mountains carpeted in thick forest, diverse ethnic hill-tribe villages and a wealth of trekking adventures await the intrepid. Over the last ten years, Northern Laos has blossomed beyond the beautiful destination of Luang Prabang, the karst-graced resort of Vang Vieng and Phonsavan's Plain of Jars; improved roads, though

still sinuously slow, are seeing more and more travellers push further toward the Chinese border and remote regions like Muang Sing and Phongsali.

VIENTIANE PROVINCE

Heading through Vientiane province (a different area from Vientiane Prefecture, which holds the capital) you may wish to take in the serenity of the Ang Nam Ngum Reservoir, or if it's been declared safe, the mountainous Special Zone. The roads are poor but navigable by motor-cross bike, the landscape pristine and rarely seen due to the government's historical problems in the area with Hmong guerrillas.



UNHOLY SMOKE

Travellers passing through Vang Vieng told us of the latest brazen hustle – people pretending to be plain-clothes coppers. Sven, a traveller from Finland said, 'They're like bloodhounds on the scent of reefer. If they catch you with a joint, the on the spot fine is from US\$500 to US\$700. The impersonators are quite credible, so try and remain calm and ask for ID. If it fails to materialise suggest you take a trip with them to the police station. I heard some girls did this and ended up paying US\$30 to get rid of them.'

Quasi police aside, if you bump into the real article (they're all plain-clothed in Vang Vieng) you have no choice but to pay the fine or be deported/jailed.

Vang Vieng

☎ 023 / pop 25,000

As if a section of Bangkok's Khao San Rd has been transplanted to this once sleepy retreat, Vang Vieng offers a plethora of western comforts and comatose-inducing video bars in an attempt to secure its claim on visitors. But despite its reputation as a sullied paradise, this beautiful setting beside the Nam Song River and jagged limestone karsts is far from that. Besides a wide selection of outward bound pursuits from tubing (for which the town is famous) to trekking, caving and climbing, there are still plenty of

authentic spots to savour a slice of old Vang Vieng. It grew up around the river, and this is where you should spend your time if you want to enjoy the best of it.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Buses stop east of a patch of tarmac that was the 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 hospital and several more restaurants, plus a few newer bungalow-style guesthouses along the river. For any serious health concerns, get to Vientiane for an ambulance pick-up to Thailand.

Banque pour le Commerce Extérieur Lao

(☎ 5114480; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Sun) Just west of Xayoh Café, does exchanges and cash advances and has a 24-hour ATM.

BKC Bookshop

(☎ 511303; Market St; ☎ 7am-7pm) Sells a small selection of secondhand novels, old guidebooks and hand-drawn – and coloured-in – tourist maps.

IT Internet (☎ 020 2244 7755; per min 300 kip; ☎ 7am-7pm) Next to Riverside Tours, super quick connection in a cool space.

PlaNet Online (☎ 511209; per min 300 kip; ☎ 8am-11pm) Internet access, CD burning, international internet phone calls. Organises onward visas.

Post office (☎ 511009; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) Beside the old market.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Vang Vieng has its fair share of thefts, many by fellow travellers. Take the usual precautions, and don't leave valuables lying around near caves. Be aware that there have been a few drownings here in recent years (see the boxed text Safety Tips from the Expert, p366). The other trouble that tends to find travellers is the law. Police are nasally adept at sniffing out spliffs (see Unholy Smoke, op-

posite). Three months in jail without appeal or US\$500 to US\$700 on-the-spot fine.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

There are two outfits running trekking, cycling, caving and tubing options. The best known is **Green Discovery** (☎ 511230; www.green.discovery.laos.com; Th Luang Prabang; ☎ 7am-7pm) while **Riverside Tours** (☎ 020 2244 7755; www.riverside.tours.laos.com; Th Luang Prabang; ☎ 7am-7pm) also offers a similar range at competitive prices and can assist with booking onward air and bus tickets.

Caves

The caves around Vang Vieng are generally open from dawn to dusk and with the addition of signs in English there are now entrance charges and, although not strictly compulsory, guide fees. Guides lead you by torchlight, but it's wise to bring your own for back-up. You can buy a local map from BKC Bookshop (opposite) and at several guesthouses. There's someone trying to make a quid at every turn around Vang Vieng, so take plenty of small notes and a sense of humour.

The most famous cave, **Tham Jang** (admission 9000 kip) 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** (admission 4000 kip). To reach it, cross the **bamboo footbridge** (toll 2000 kip) near the Hotel Nam Song, then walk or pedal 6km along a scenic, unsealed road to Ban Na Thong, 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 but worth it for a dip in the blue stream afterward. Climb the tree and take a jump into the pool far below. Can you get to level three?

Kayaking

Kayaking is another popular pursuit. All-day trips (US\$8 to US\$12 per person) typically take you down a few rapids and include visits to caves and villages. Kayaking trips to Vientiane, advertised around town for about US\$15, involve paddling for half a day then going the rest of the way by road. Though

VOLUNTEERING IN VANG VIENG

Jamie Thomas, Herefordshire, UK

Mr Thi at the **Phoudindaeng Organic Farm** (☎ 511220; www.laofarm.org) welcomes those who wish to stay for a week or more and are keen to lend a hand. The days of WWOOFing have gone, but there's still plenty of work for anyone who has the initiative and patience to hang around and to muck in wherever they're needed. Mr Thi's enthusiasm for community development has seen the building of a community centre, a library and the establishment of a free school bus for local children. Teaching at the local school is perhaps the most valuable contribution visitors can make. Teaching local children offers a great opportunity to interact with Lao youngsters and hand something back to the community.

all guides are supposed to be trained, many are not. Before using a cheap operator, check the guides' credentials.

Rock Climbing

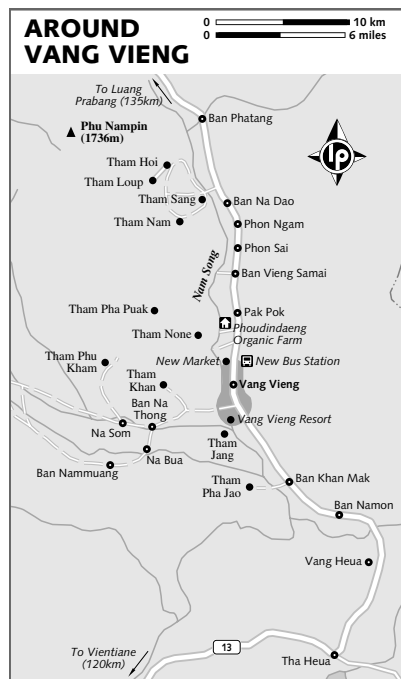
Green Discovery (☎ 511230; www.green.discovery.laos.com; Th Luang Prabang) operates guided rock-climbing courses for novices (around US\$30 per day) up Vang Vieng's dramatic limestone cliffs. If you're a climber you can DIY, but permits (US\$5 per day for a group) must be obtained from the Green Discovery office in Vang Vieng.

Tubing

Tubing down the Nam Song is one of Vang Vieng's biggest attractions and there are dozens of tube rental places in shops and guesthouses around town. Prices are fixed at 30,000 kip, which includes the tük-tük 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 at en route! Of course it's pretty stupid and dangerous to tackle the rapids intoxicated.

SLEEPING

There are so many guesthouses in Vang Vieng they're doing each other out of business. The best options, if you're in search of tranquillity, are by the river.



SAFETY TIPS FROM THE EXPERT *Mick O'Shea*

Professionally managed kayaking and rafting trips are a great way to experience the wonderful environments of Laos yet it is important to ensure you go with outfitters who are equipped and prepared should something go wrong. The following questions will help you identify who to trust.

- Do your tours have all of the relevant safety equipment such as life jackets, throw ropes, a first-aid kit and helmets?
- Can I see your first-aid kit, boats and throw bag?
- How long is the pretrip safety briefing and practice session?
- Are your guides trained in basic first aid (discuss CPR) and river rescue? By whom?
- Is the lead guide fluent in English? How long has he or she been leading paddle tours?

Several tourists have drowned while tubing in Vang Vieng during the rainy season. Even if you're a confident swimmer wear a lifejacket. Look well ahead for obstructions such as trees or branches in the river; water flows through such obstructions, tubers don't. Stay together so that you can help your friends if they have trouble.

The caves of Vang Vieng are fascinating and delicate ecosystems that should be enjoyed yet treated with respect and caution. It is strongly recommended to go caving with guides; this is relatively cheap and will ensure that you go directly to the most interesting caves. Cave exploration without a guide is not recommended, tourists have been lost in Vang Vieng caves for days on end and several have perished when search parties could not locate them.

Finally, please promote sustainable ecotourism by paying the signposted fees to cave minders; encouraging locals to use flashlights (torches) rather than candles; not smoking or urinating in caves; and not touching formations, which soon become degraded due to the chemical reactions with human sweat.

Mick O'Shea is a certified white-water kayaking expert and the expedition leader of the first descent of the Mekong River from source to sea in 2004.

Paradise Island Bungalows (r 20,000-40,000 kip) Perfectly positioned to the west of the bamboo footbridge, this peaceful new venue has lovely cabanas with some of the best river views in town. Its alfresco bar throws off candy light reflections into the water by night. Deserves to become one of the most popular places in town.

our pick **Maylyn Guest House** (☎ 511083; r 30,000-40,000 kip) West of the bamboo footbridge across the Nam Song, this secluded paradise is set in lush vegetation and landscaped gardens. The views of the nearby karsts and river are divine. Its 15 cabanas are basic with fan and en suite. Maylyn now has a herbal steam sauna, and the only place in town to hire a powerful set of Baja motorbikes.

Phobane Guest House (☎ 511037; r 30,000-40,000 kip) Head south from the market taking the river road before taking your first left. Bungalows are clean and simple with a fan included. Perhaps a little nondescript, but who cares with such a fantastic view of the river.

Thavisouk Guest House (☎ 511124; r 30,000-40,000 kip) opposite The Rising Sun off Khao San Rd, this charming wood-fronted house has decent rooms and friendly staff who also offer free rides to the bus station. Fans are included.

Nana Guest House & Restaurant (☎ 511036; Khao San Rd; r 30,000-50,000 kip; 🍷) Close to the night market (ear plugs may be an option) this recently spruced-up accommodation is great value with slick modern rooms and fans. The bouncy beds will swallow you up.

Phoudindaeng Organic Farm (☎ 511220; www.laofarm.org; r 30,000-60,000 kip) Around 3km north of town on the banks of the Nam Song, this farm, which grows mulberry trees and organic fruits and vegetables, offers accommodation in dorms or small private rooms with shared bathroom. The attached restaurant (meals 10,000 to 15,000 kip), open for lunch and dinner, makes delicious organic dishes. See the website for directions. You can also organise volunteer work through the farm; see p365 for details.

Dok Khoun 1 Guest House (☎ 511032; r 30,000-70,000 kip; 🍷) Right in the centre of town between the old market and Th Luang Prabang, Dok Khoun is an oldie but goodie, with some rooms fresher than others. Fan is a standard inclusion.

Vang Vieng Orchid (☎ 020 220 2259; r 60,000-100,000 kip; 🍷) Fresh three-storey venue on the banks of the Nam Song, Orchid has 20 spacious rooms, 12 with views over to Don Khang and the karst peaks beyond. Walk down through the old market and turn right (north), then it's another 50m on the left.

Riverside Bungalows (☎ 511035, 020 352 3426; r 60,000-120,000 kip; 🍷) Situated just north of town where the river bends to the west. The basic bamboo bungalows all have balconies and shared bathrooms, or you can move upmarket and take a room with private bathroom and air-con. The view is truly like something out of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

EATING

You won't have any problem finding something to suit your tastes among a range of Lao, Thai, Chinese and Western cuisine. Following are a few restaurants that have so far been uninfected by Vang Vieng's *Friends* phenomenon. Please also note: in most of Southeast Asia, including Vang Vieng, the word 'happy' before 'pizza' does not mean, as one traveller discovered, extra pineapple.

Nokeo (meals 6000-20,000 kip; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Nokeo serves consistently good Lao dishes at prices even locals can afford. It's on the corner opposite the old market.

Restaurant Luang Prabang Bakery (☎ 511145; meals 7000-30,000 kip; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Offering cakes, brownies, pastries and bespoke sandwiches, plus a great view of the karsts whilst having your alfresco latte.

Organic Farm Café (☎ 511174; meals 10,000-25,000 kip; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Innovative dishes, an alliterative menu and Laos-famous mulberry shakes make this an excellent choice. The best veggie food on the strip. See opposite for more about the farm.

Sisavang Restaurant (Khao San Rd; meals 20,000-30,000 kip) A feeding hole on the video-chain gauntlet of Khao San offering a rich selection of Western fare, and for those who might have forgotten where they are, Lao food.

Xayoh Café (☎ 511088; meals 20,000-40,000 kip; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) A typically Western menu of pizza, pasta, burgers and chips – similar to what's on offer at the Vientiane branch.

Sunset Restaurant (☎ 511096; meals 20,000-50,000 kip; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) On the river, this is an ideal spot for breakfast, lunch and sun-downers. The menu ranges from Western breakfasts to Lao cuisine.

Nazim Indian Restaurant (☎ 511214; Khao San Rd; meals 30,000 kip; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Generic but ever tasty Indian food from the Nazim franchise.

DRINKING

With its corner location, pool table, both indoor and outdoor seating, and an easy atmosphere, Xayoh Café (above) is a popular drinking spot.

Babylon Bar (Khao San Rd) Down the south end of the street, Babylon Bar is a welcoming joint where you can recline on comfy cushions and soak up the low-tempo atmosphere. Playstation 2 is also available.

Jaidee's Bar (☎ 606339; Khao San Rd) Psychedelic walls, flickering interior and reclined cushions make this a good place to regain your equilibrium. Slightly 'too cool for school' staff.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From the airstrip bus stop buses leave for Luang Prabang (55,000 kip, six to seven hours, five daily), Vientiane (25,000 kip, four to five hours, almost every hour until dark) and Phonsavan (75,000 kip, eight to nine hours, one daily at 9am – a tortuous, winding journey so try and sit near a window).

Tickets for minibuses and VIP buses with air-con, travelling direct to Vientiane (US\$5, three hours) or Luang Prabang (US\$7, six to seven 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\$2 per day, mountain bikes cost US\$5. A few places hire out scooters for US\$5 per day. A tük-tük up to the organic farm or the Tham Sang Triangle costs around 10,000 kip per person.

LUANG PRABANG PROVINCE

Luang Prabang

☎ 071 / pop 52,466

Nestled on the sacred confluence of the Nam Khan and Mekong Rivers, this Unesco-protected World Heritage city is both enchanting and diverse in what it has to offer the traveller. From the fascinating history of the Royal Family to its myriad stunning wats, glittering in emerald and gold, this once sleepy capital is perhaps the most sophisticated, photogenic city in the whole of South-east Asia. With its orange-robed monks, and fantastic food at the many bistros, cafés and night-market, Luang Prabang is a wonderful place to kick back for a few days. Be it wandering through the old city streets peppered with shuttered French mansions or enjoying sybaritic evenings in ubertrendy bars such as the Hive Bar, you may find yourself staying longer than planned.

ORIENTATION

Most of Luang Prabang's tourist attractions are in the old quarter, on the peninsula bounded by the Mekong and Nam Khan Rivers. Dominating the centre of town, Phu Si is an unmissably good landmark. The majority of restaurants, tour companies and internet cafés line Th Sisavangvong, while more accommodation options and eateries can be found in the streets running from Th Sisavangvong to the Mekong and Nam Khan Rivers. The old quarter is easily covered on foot, but hiring a bicycle is an excellent way to explore the city and its attractions.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

L'Étranger Books & Tea (☎ 537 7826; booksinlaos@yahoo.com; Th Kingkitsarat; ☎ 7am-10pm Mon-Sat, 10am-10pm Sun; books per hr/day 20,000/50,000 kip) The city's best bookshop-cum indie cinema; with a café outside and upstairs lizard lounge. Titles, fiction and non-fiction, are generally French, English and German. Pedigree films shown nightly at 7pm. Trade your old books for vouchers or take half the equivalent in cash.

Internet Access

You won't have any trouble getting online here. Internet shops are dotted along Th Sisavangvong and charge between 150 and 200 kip per minute. The best place is **All Lao**

Travel Co (☎ 253522; Th Sisavangvong; per hr 10,000 kip; ☎ 8am-11pm) – it's easily the coolest and most spacious place to catch up on your email.

Medical Services

Lao-China Friendship Hospital (☎ 252049; Th Setthathirat) All-new and eerily deserted. About 5km south off Th Naviengkham, after the stadium (a 10,000 kip tük-tük trip). A large white tower signals the spot. Serious cases need to be flown to Thailand.

Pharmacie (Th Sakkarin; ☎ 8.30am-8pm) Stocks basic medicines. Open daily, although closes sometimes for a few hours on weekends.

Money

Banque pour le Commerce Extérieur Lao (☎ 252983; Th Sisavangvong; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-3.30pm Sat & Sun) Now has ATM (MasterCard symbol only) Will change travellers cheques and cash including Thai baht; US, Australian and Canadian dollars; euros; and UK pounds. Open weekends, cash advances available weekdays only.

Lao Development Bank (Th Sisavangvong; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2-3.30pm) Good exchange rates.

Post

Post office (cnr Th Chao Fa Ngum & Th Kitsarat; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat & Sun)

Telephone

Internet shops along Th Sisavangvong offer long-distance internet calls. You can make regular international calls from the post office with a phonecard or from the **Telephone Office** (Th Phothisalat; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm).

Tourist Information

Unesco World Heritage office (www.unesco.org; Th Sakkarin; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) An anteroom in an old French customs house at the northeastern tip of the peninsula contains posted public information on the Unesco project in Luang Prabang.

Travel Agencies

Diethelm Travel (☎ 212277; ditralpt@laotel.com; Th Xieng Thong) Books air tickets, organises cars with guides.

All Lao Travel Co (☎ 253522; Th Sisavangvong; ☎ 8am-6pm) The best travel centre on the peninsula. Authorized agents for Thai Airways International, and Bangkok and Vietnam Airways, can also sort bus and boat tickets. Most staff speak good English and can advise on trips to Pak Ou caves and other attractions in the surrounding area.

SIGHTS

Royal Palace Museum

To get a foothold on the city's history visit the **Royal Palace Museum** (☎ 212470; Th Sisavangvong; admission 20,000 kip; ☎ 8-11.30am & 1.30-4pm, last entry 3.30pm, closed Tue). The palace was originally constructed beside the Mekong River 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 and imprisoned in the caves of Vieng Xai, following which 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. The murals on the walls in the king's former reception room, painted in 1930 by French artist Alix de Fauteureu, 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 can't be worn inside the museum, no photography is permitted and you must leave bags with the attendants. A dress code declares that foreigners must not wear shorts, T-shirts or sundresses.

Markets

Luang Prabang's main market, the newly built **Phousy Market** (Th Phothisarat; ☎ 6am-5pm), which is located just a few kilometres south of the town centre, is heaving with vendors selling an impressive array of hardware, cookware and mountains of fresh produce. To get there follow Th Chao Fa Ngum south towards Tat Kuang Si. You'll see the market on the left at a major intersection.

At sundown, Th Sisavangvong is closed to traffic between the Royal Palace and Th Kitsalat for the candle-lit gauntlet of the **Hmong Night Market** (☎ 5.30-10pm). Lao textiles, handicrafts, jewellery, traditional medicine and antique weavings, mulberry-paper lanterns, mass-produced T-shirts and other souvenirs are all sold here.

Phu Si

The temples on the slopes of **Phu Si** (admission 10,000 kip; ☎ 8am-6pm) are all of relatively recent

construction, but the magnolia-laced climb to the temples is well worth it for the superb views – especially near sunset. An admission fee is collected at the northern entrance near Wat Pa Huak. 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 Phutthabaht, which was originally constructed in 1395 during the reign of Phaya Samsenthai on the site of a Buddha footprint.

Wat Xieng Thong

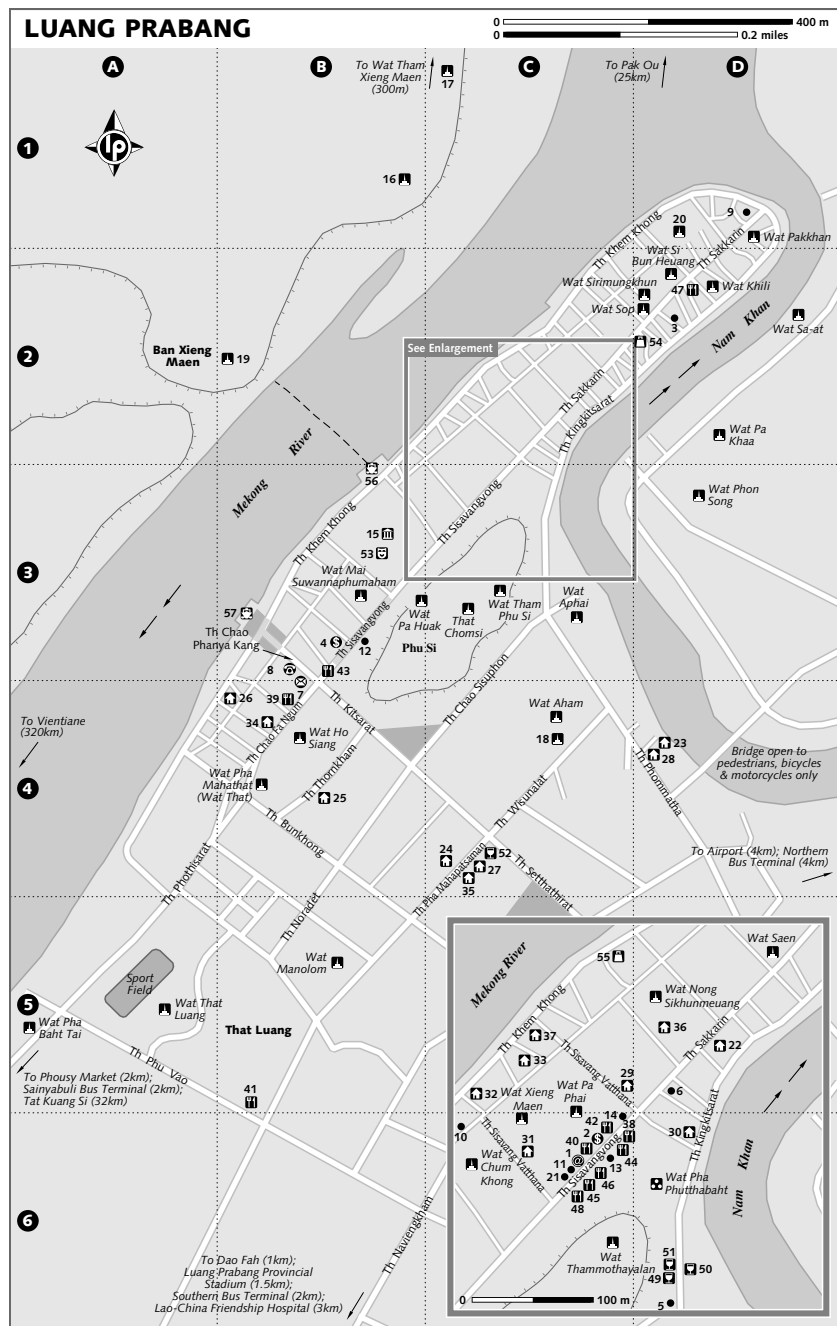
Near the northern tip of the peninsula formed by the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers, **Wat Xieng Thong** (off Th Sakkarin; admission 10,000 kip; ☎ 8am-5pm) is Luang Prabang's most magnificent temple. Built by King Setthathirat in 1560, it remained under royal patronage until 1975. Like the royal palace, Wat Xieng Thong was placed within easy reach of the Mekong River. The *sim* (main sanctuary) represents classic Luang Prabang temple architecture, and its rear wall features an impressive tree-of-life mosaic. Inside, richly decorated wooden columns support a ceiling that's vested with *dhammacakka* (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 of Luang Prabang) is **Wat Wisunalat** (Th Wisunalat; admission 5000 kip; ☎ 8am-5pm). It was rebuilt in 1898 following an 1887 fire started by a marauding gang of Yunnanese robbers known as the Black Flag Haw. Inside the high-ceilinged *sim* is a collection of wooden Calling for Rain buddhas and 15th- to 16th-century Luang Prabang *sima* (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 Maen** (admission free; ☎ 8am-5pm) is painted with gold *naga* (mythical serpent-beings) and the elaborate



INFORMATION		SLEEPING		EATING	
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SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		ENTERTAINMENT		SHOPPING	
Action Max Laos.....	10 C6	Royal Ballet Theatre.....	53 B3	Baan Khily Gallery.....	54 D2
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Wat Xieng Maen.....	19 B2				
Wat Xieng Thong.....	20 D1				
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háang thiên (candle rail) has *naga* at either end. With backing from Unesco and New Zealand, young novices and monks have been trained in the artistic skills needed to maintain and preserve Luang Prabang's temples.

Across the Mekong from central Luang Prabang are several notable temples, including **Wat Long Khun** (admission 5000 kip; ☎ 8am-5pm). **Wat Tham Xieng Maen** (admission 5000 kip; ☎ 8am-5pm) is in a 100m-deep limestone cave where decayed buddha statues come to rest. At the top of the hill peaceful **Wat Chom Phet** (admission free; ☎ 8am-5pm) offers undisturbed views of the Mekong.

ACTIVITIES

Cycling

Cycling is one of the best ways to enjoy Luang Prabang. Bicycles can be rented from numerous guesthouses and shops around Th Phothisalat (US\$2-3 per day). The old quarter's temples can easily be covered in half a day, it doesn't take much effort to get out of town either: head south past Phousy Market and into the hills. The road to Kuang Si Waterfalls is a gently undulating 35km through rice paddy.

Massage

The city, with its ever growing sophistication, has upped its game to cater for those in search of refined pampering, at affordable prices. There are a couple of heavenly (legit) massage parlours and beauty spas on Th Phothisalat. Go on, after that two-day trip from Huay Xai you deserve it.

Khmu Massage (☎ 5672888; Th Phothisalat; per hr US\$3) Irresistible oeuvre of herbal steams, foot, body and neck massages brought to you with flair and style.

Who said shoestringers can't have a little comfort now and again?

Lotus Du Lao Herbal Spa & Massage (253448; Th Sisavangvong; per hr US\$3-7) Beneath the wood blade fans, suspended in Indochinese luxury, you'll listen to the cheesy sounds and think you've gone to nirvana.

COURSES

Attend a half-day cooking course at **Tum Tum Cheung Restaurant & Cooking School** (☎ 252019; Th Sakkarin). You can choose which meal you want to learn, then you're taken to the Phousy Market to buy ingredients, before returning to prepare authentic Luang Prabang cuisine under supervision. Classes are US\$10 per person. If you prefer to leave the cooking to the experts, Tum Tum Cheung (p373) also has its own restaurant.

TOURS

Overnight stays in villages, trekking in the forest, kayaking on the river and mountain biking tours are all available. Below are the most established tour operators.

White Elephant (☎ 254481; white_elephant_adventures@yahoo.ca; Th Sisavangvong; trips per day from US\$20) offers excursions combining rafting, kayaking, trekking and cycling with an overnight stay in a nearby village. Tours are set at a maximum of six people with two guides.

Geared towards low-impact tourism and a popular outfit with good reports from travellers, **Action Max Laos** (☎ 253489; www.actionmaxasia.com; Ban Xieng Mouan; guided trek 1-3-day US\$25/65) offers combination trips as well as elephant riding. French and English guides available.

Green Discovery (☎ 212093; www.greeniscovery.laos.com; Th Sisavangvong; per day US\$35) specialises in all-inclusive guided white-water rafting on the Nam Seuang, plus treks from one- to four-days through the forests and villages around Luang Prabang.

If you're not keen on outdoor pursuits, Action Max Laos hosts historical tours of the town with Unesco support.

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 soaked in a giant water-fight in an incantation to the coming monsoon (book accommodation well in advance), and the boat races during **Bun Awk Phansa** (End of the Rains Retreat) in October. See p407 for more.

SLEEPING

Post-tsunami depression in Thailand saw an added migration of travellers to Luang Prabang and consequently prices have risen sharply. Also, thanks to improved transport links it's no longer an inaccessible oasis but something of an intrepid package destination. Locals have been quick to push for as much as they can get, though you may be able to haggle a bit in the low season. There are a multitude of guesthouses to choose from in and around the old city. Below we've listed the pick of a very varied bunch.

Luang Prabang

Pathomphone Guest House (☎ 212946; Th Kingkitsarat; r 50,000-60,000 kip) Just off the corner of Savang Vatthana St, this sweet little guesthouse is a well-kept secret with serene views, a sense of calm and simple little rooms with fan. The best value for money on the peninsula.

Paphai Guest House (☎ 212752; Th Sisavang Vatthana; r with shared bathroom 50,000-100,000 kip) With its giggly employees, central location and eccentric garden, this wilting house offers very basic but colourful rooms. The upstairs ones have a communal veranda.

Maethao Khao Guest House (☎ 252061; off Th Khem Khong; r 60,000 kip) One street north of Rattana, this peaceful blue and white timbered house near the river offers clean and simple accommodation with fans and separate bathroom.

Thavisouk Guest House (☎ 252022; Th Pha Mahapatsaman; r 60,000 kip) Thavisouk has massage, hairdressing, internet, laundry and ticket-

booking services. Great value with clean rooms and fan.

Phousi Guest House (☎ 212973; Th Kitsalat; r 60,000-80,000 kip) On the north side of the Royal Palace heading toward the Mekong, this charming old colonial mansion offers a sense of peace and escape (provided new construction's finished by the time you read this). Eight spacious rooms, with fan and wooden floors.

Phousi Guest House II (☎ 253717; Th Khem Khong; r 60,000-80,000 kip) Set in a typical wood-frame building overlooking the Mekong, rooms have fans, modern bathrooms and if you've chosen one on the riverside, excellent views. The lobby is impressive with a nice restaurant for breakfast and a few computers with medium speed internet.

Khounsavanh Guest House (☎ 5670989; Th Thornkham; r with shared bathroom 60,000-90,000 kip) In a quiet location with a nice garden view of Phu Si, this is one of the better budget options in Luang Prabang. Beds are in the main building with timber walls, or across the street in the new house where facilities are more upmarket.

Silichit Guest House (☎ 212758; Th Sisavang Vatthana; r 60,000-150,000 kip) Beautiful rooms with fan in a newly renovated house yards from the Mekong. Wooden floors, comfy mattresses, relaxing lobby...the list goes on. Prices above reflect the maximum you can expect to pay in high season. Off season expect to pay 80,000 kip for two of you.

View Khen Khong (☎ 213032; Th Khem Khong; r 80,000-100,000 kip) A spit from the Mekong, this neat little guesthouse is run by a friendly family. All rooms come with private hot-water bathrooms and are cleaned daily. Nice riverside restaurant over the road.

Mano Guest House & Restaurant (☎ 253112; manosotsay@hotmail.com; Th Pha Mahapatsaman; r 80,000-120,000 kip; ☎) Rooms, though a little small, are clean, have fans and there's a sumptuous Lao-style lobby to relax in.

Suankeo Guest House No 2 (☎ 254740; Ban Ho Xiang; r 80,000-150,000 kip; ☎) Impeccably clean accommodation near the Mekong. Run by a kindly gentleman, this is a sanctuary of calm. Cheaper rooms include a fan and more expensive rooms have air-con.

Jaliya Guest House (☎ 202150; Th Pha Mahapatsaman; r with shared/private bathroom 90,000/150,000 kip; ☎) Tidy new guesthouse in an authentic part of the city. Behind the main building a row of

small motel-style rooms open onto a sunny garden area. Bicycles are available to hire.

Old Quarter

In and around the old quarter budget options are also limited, but at the following you will get what you pay for.

Chittana Guest House (☎ 020 567 2243; off Th Sakkarin; r with shared bathroom 40,000-80,000 kip) Opposite Villa Santi, this old-fashioned part-timbered guesthouse offers simple but characterful accommodation with fans. Near the Nam Khan River.

Vatthanaluck Guest House (☎ 212838; off Th Sakkarin; r 60,000-80,000 kip) Family-owned guesthouse deliciously sandwiched between nearby Wat Nong Sikhunmeuang and Villa Santi. Rooms are pristine, fragrant with cool, tiled floors and fans.

East of Phu Si

More budget options are found 300m east of Phu Si down a rocky lane running to the Nam Khan.

ourpick Cold River (☎ 252810; off Th Phommatha; r 40,000-70,000 kip) With its exquisite views of the Nam Khan River, family-run Cold River offers the tired traveller comfort and ambience. Rooms are house proud with fans (some with verandas). The shared outside area buzzes with family and friends teaching backpackers to speak Lao.

Merry Guest House 1 & 2 (☎ 252325; off Th Phommatha; r 60,000-80,000 kip) Just over the way from Cold River, Merry has attractive rooms with wooden floors (recently refurbished), fans and regularly fresh linen. The views of the Nam Khan River are also spectacular.

EATING

Luang Prabang has its own unique cuisine – consider trying one of the local specialties, no matter how unnerving they sound. A local favourite, *jaew bqwnng* is a thick condiment made with chillies and dried buffalo skin. Another is *Aw lam*, 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).

For dining on a strict budget, Th Chao Phanya Kang between Th Kitsalat and the river closes to vehicles at night and transforms into a bustling **night food market** (meals 10,000 kip; ☎ dinner) with a large array of food stalls.

Sample some Luang Prabang specialties at one of the open-air wooden bench tables.

Lining the Mekong are numerous **riverside restaurants** (meals 20,000-40,000 kip; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner), often with kitchens in a namesake guesthouse across the street, serving delicious Lao fare at good prices, with excellent sunset views and a lanterns-and-fairy-lights festive atmosphere.

Cafés

The ghost of French occupation leaves an aromatic trail of freshly baked baguettes and redolent, ground coffee at every turn.

JoMa Bakery Café (☎ 252292; Th Chao Fa Ngum; meals 12,000-25,000 kip; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner, closed Sun; ☎) Everything about JoMa shows considerable thought and care: breakfast-sets include coffee (cappuccinos come with cinnamon sprinkles) or juice. The lunch menu includes quiche, muffins, pizza, pasta, sandwiches and salads.

Scandinavian Bakery (Th Sisavangvong; mains 15,000 kip; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This haven of chocolate cake, pastries and deliciously fresh breakfasts will soon put back the pounds you lost trekking in Muang Sing. The oldest bakery in town, it's perfect for people-watching and pretending to be interested in the contents of the *Bangkok Post*.

Restaurants

Restaurants competing for the western dollar are concentrated on Th Sisavangvong, with more upmarket options as you head down the peninsula.

Nazim (Th Sisavangvong; meals 10,000-25,000 kip; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) For a taste of southern India, both veggies and carnivores will find Nazim's to be the healthy equivalent of McDonalds – ubiquitous, but without the plastic toy giveaways.

Tum Tum Cheung Restaurant & Cooking School (☎ 252019; Th Sakkarin; meals 10,000-30,000 kip; ☎ lunch & dinner) Renowned for its excellent cooking classes (p371), this place has top-notch Lao food. It's a short walk north from the centre, in a quieter area next to Wat Khili.

Maly Lao Food (☎ 252013; Th Phu Vao; meals 10,000-30,000 kip; ☎ lunch & dinner) If you're tiring of pizzas, this restaurant is worth the trek from town, specialising in *laap* made with buffalo, deer or fish, *tôm jaew pqa* (spicy fish and eggplant soup) and *sáa* (minced

fish or chicken salad with lemon grass and ginger).

Yongkhoun Restaurant (☎ 212342; Th Sisavangvong; meals 15,000-30,000 kip; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Alfresco dining near the top of the main drag (superb people-watching location), this endearing old place was established in 1960. Thanks to a generic Western and Lao menu, plus consistently good fare, it's often packed with *falang*.

Samsara (☎ 254678; Th Sisavangvong; meals 15,000-40,000 kip; ☺ lunch & dinner) A chichi interior and table settings – even the menu is an object of beauty. But the modern Indochinese dishes, although a happy change from the standard Lao fare, do not match up to the expectations raised by the 'look' – or the prices.

Pizza Luang Prabang (☎ 253858; Th Sisavangvong; meals 20,000-30,000 kip; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Typical Western fare, from the eponymous pizzas to burgers and Italian dishes. Lavish setting and a good place to stock up on carbs before heading north.

Lasi Cuisine (212342; Th Sisavangvong; meals 20,000-40,000 kip; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Romantic candle-flickering venue (dark enough to go home with the wrong person) serving up tasty Lao and Thai food.

Dao Fa Bistro (☎ 252656; Th Sisavangvong; meals 20,000-40,000 kip; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Run by a French expat, this chic establishment offers a sophisticated menu and tasteful ambience. Cool tunes and Franco-Italian menu. Carbonara recommended.

DRINKING

L'Étranger Books & Tea (☎ 537 7826; booksinlaos@yahoo.com; Th Kingkitsarat; ☺ 7am-10pm Mon-Sat, 10am-10pm Sun) Twenty-five different teas are available in the upstairs café of this funky little bookstore, gallery and minicinema.

Lao Lao Garden (Th Kingkitsarat; ☺ 5pm-late) With its tiered garden, the centre-piece of which is a nightly lit bonfire, the Garden's an easy-on-the-eye venue to chill out in and listen to Western sounds. Also serves Lao and Western food.

Khob Chai & Ban Aphy (☎ 020 997 0106; Th Kingkitsarat; ☎ noon-late) Nestled in a curve in the road, this bar serves mainly Western burgers-and-chips-style meals, but the upbeat atmosphere and occasional live music draws locals here.

Hive Bar (hive_bar@yahoo.com; Th Kingkitsarat; ☺ 5pm-1am) Also on the northeast side of Phu

Si, this ubertrendy, moody-lit watering hole is a magnet for *falang* seeking a slice of sophistication. Trip-hop and trance tunes, two-for-one spirits from 5pm to 9pm. Check out the illuminated bottle sculpture.

Maylek Pub (cnr Th Pha Mahapatsaman & Th Setthathirat; ☺ 5-11pm) Stylishly decorated with modern furniture, Maylek Pub has a fully stocked bar that includes hard-to-find-in-Laos drinks such as Bailey's Irish Cream, making it a popular choice for travellers staying in the area. Snacks are available if you're feeling peckish.

ENTERTAINMENT

Royal Ballet Theatre (☎ 253705; Royal Palace Museum, Th Sisavangvong; admission US\$6-15; ☺ shows 6pm Mon, Wed & Sat) Here you can attend performances of different episodes of the 600-year-old Ramayana ballet, plus traditional dances of Lao ethnic minorities such as the Phoo Noi and Hmong people.

SHOPPING

Luang Prabang has become a shopping mecca. Dozens of handicraft and souvenir stores line Th Sisavangvong, while the Hmong Night Market (p369) on Th Sisavangvong has stalls selling similar goods as shops, but without the additional overheads and middlemen, so they're cheaper.

While you're in town, also check out **Ock-PopTok** (☎ 253219, 020 570148; www.ockpoptok.com; Ban Vat Nong; ☺ 8.30am-9pm), a quality handicrafts gallery and workshop selling naturally dyed Lao silk and cotton in modern and traditional styles, as well as clothes and other decorative items. **Baan Khily Gallery** (☎ 212622; Th Sakkarin; ☺ till 7pm) sells hand-crafted lamps, stationery and cards made from mulberry bark. The gallery building and the charming owner are worth a visit alone.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Lao Airlines (code QV; ☎ 212172; www.laos-airlines.com) flies from Luang Prabang to Vientiane (US\$60, daily), Huay Xai (US\$50), and to Chiang Mai in Thailand (US\$90; Tuesday, Friday, Sunday). Flights to Phonsavan, Luang Nam Tha and Udomxai were still cut from schedules at the time of research.

Bangkok Airways (code PG; ☎ 253334; www.bangkokair.com) flies from Luang Prabang to Bangkok

(US\$225). **Siem Reap Airways** (code FT; ☎ 380330; www.siemreapairways.com) goes direct from Luang Prabang to Siem Reap (US\$140); bookings through travel agents.

Boat

Slow boats northwest to Huay Xai (US\$24) depart at 8am. The long-distance ferries stand by the Mekong from the day before departure; you can buy tickets there or from a travel agent in town. The trip takes two days with an overnight stop in Pak Beng, a tiny village roughly halfway between Huay Xai and Luang Prabang. From Pak Beng (US\$12, 10 to 12 hours) it's also possible to take the bus northeast to Udomxai.

White-knuckle speedboats up the Mekong leave from Ban Don, a 7km 10,000-kip shared tük-tük ride from the centre, to Pak Beng (US\$32, three hours) and Huay Xai (US\$26, six hours), but it's a trip you take at your own risk. In the dry season boatmen shouldn't take you, but there's always someone keen to make a buck.

Although it is quicker by road, many travellers charter a boat for the beautiful seven-hour karst-rich trip up the Nam Ou to Nong Khiaw for around US\$100 for up to 10 people. You can inquire about these trips at the Navigation Office in Luang Prabang or with the travel agents in town, who will post a list of names outside their office where you can join a trip.

Cargo boats to Vientiane have become less frequent since Rte 13 was sealed, but it's still possible to hop on a ferry for the three-day downstream trip for around US\$24. Check the chalkboard outside the Navigation Office for departures.

CAN I CARRY YOUR LUGGAGE PLEASE?

Two Pak Beng scams to be mindful of: firstly your bag will be grabbed from the boat by porters before you've had a chance to disembark. Stories have circulated about rucksacks occasionally disappearing. One traveller put out a reward for his lost luggage and said bag turned up very quickly! Secondly, stow your bag away from your guesthouse window if it doesn't lock – unusual in Laos, but some rooms have been burgled while travellers were asleep.

Bus

Turn up early at the bus station and buy a ticket on the spot for less than you'll pay in town; contrary to popular wisdom – there are no reserved seats!

There are three main bus terminals in Luang Prabang. The northern bus terminal is 6km from town (a 15,000-kip tük-tük ride), while the southern terminal is 3km south of the town centre (10,000 kip by tük-tük). A third terminal, on the road to Tat Kuang Si, serves buses going to Sainyabuli Province.

Buses leave the southern terminal for Vientiane (90,000 kip, 11 hours, six daily starting at 6.30am) stopping in Vang Vieng (US\$5, eight hours) en route. Travel agents also sell tickets for VIP express buses to Vientiane (US\$12, nine hours).

Buses and *sáwngtháew* leave the northern bus terminal for Udomxai (40,000 kip, five hours, three daily at 8am, 9am and 10am), Luang Nam Tha (70,000 kip, nine hours, one daily at 6pm) and Nong Khiaw (45,000 kip, four to five hours, three daily at 8am, 9am and 10am). Alternatively catch a morning *sáwngtháew* to Pak Mong (20,000 kip, two to three hours) and catch another *sáwngtháew* to these destinations from there.

There is one direct bus to Phonsavan (70,000 kip, eight hours, daily at 8am). Buses going on to Sam Neua from Vientiane pass through Luang Prabang once a day at around 1pm going the long route north on Rte 13, then east on Rte 1 through Nong Khiaw.

GETTING AROUND

From the airport a tük-tük ride will cost around 15,000 kip, though tük-tük drivers have become accustomed to charging foreigners special tourist prices. Bicycles (10,000 kip per day) are available from many guesthouses and rental shops around town. Motorbike rental is still banned due to rather accident-prone *falang*.

Around Luang Prabang

PAK OU

About 25km by boat from Luang Prabang up the Mekong River, at the mouth of the Nam Ou, are the famous caves at Pak Ou. The 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. If you go by boat, most trips will involve a stop at small villages along

the way. Quite popular is a stop at Ban Xang Hai, or what boatmen call the 'Whisky Village', a now-tourist-dominated village that specialises in producing large jars of *lào-lào* (rice whisky). An enthusiastic collection of boatmen congregates below the Royal Palace Museum touting for Pak Ou passengers. A six- to seven-hour trip including stops at the Whisky Village costs around US\$5 per person. Trips can also be arranged through guesthouses and tour operators.

TAT KUANG SI

This beautiful spot 32km south of Luang Prabang features a wide, multi-tiered waterfall tumbling over limestone formations into a series of cool, turquoise-green pools. The lower level of the falls has been turned into a public park with shelters, picnic tables and food vendors. A trail ascends through the forest along the left side of the falls to an idyllic second tier, which is usually very private except for thousands of butterflies, and has a pristine swimming hole. Entry to the falls site is 15,000 kip. Pak Ou boatmen do the return trip to Tat Kuang Si for around US\$5 per person, plus US\$2 for the tük-tük ride to reach the falls at the other end. Exercise junkies can also get to Tat Kuang Si by road by bicycle. Tük-tüks can be chartered for about US\$10 return.

Nong Khiaw

If you've suffered the sinuous highland journey from Udomxai, you'll feel more than rewarded by the sight that greets you here. Nestled on the banks of the Nam Ou river and positively towered over by limestone karsts, Nong Khiaw is magical. By night you can eat at a clutch of tasty restaurants, listen to the cicadas and watch the lights of the fishermen on the water. By day it's a friendly little town with happy locals and blossom-bursting river banks.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

If it's trekking you're after, go to Sunrise Guest House; they can organise up to three-day excursions to neighbouring Hmong and Khamu villages. Trips cost around 80,000 kip per day. Alternatively walk yourself to Tham Pha Tok, a cave where villagers hid during heavy shelling during the second Indochina War. It's about 2.5km out of town

as you head over the bridge past Phanoy Guest House. Near the cave is a waterfall.

SLEEPING & EATING

Phanoy Guest House (r 20,000-30,000 kip) Just over the bridge on the east side, Phanoy's seven bungalows are fresh and cosy with not only fans, wooden floors and mossie nets, but a great adjoining restaurant and bakery. The food is mainly Western (breakfasts recommended) plus there's a good place to lounge in the café and read from a wide selection of books (Q: Why do you always find Ron Hubbard books and romance novels in the middle of nowhere?).

Sunset Guest House & Restaurant (☎ 253933; r 20,000-30,000 kip) First on your right after the Phanoy Guest House, Sunset's hidden down a U-bend lane. The town's oldest guesthouse, rooms here are available with outside toilets at affordable prices; however, cabanas are top end. Rates can vary according to season. The views from the sun deck and chill lounge are terrific, as is the service.

Sunrise Guest House (r 30,000-40,000 kip) Over the bridge opposite Phanoy, this delightful guesthouse hugs the mountainside, boasting the best views in town and a clutch of beautifully finished bungalows with fan, attached showers, mosquito nets and flowered verandas. Dip and pour showers due for an upgrade in 2008.

Chittavong Guest House (r 30,000-70,000 kip) Next to the bridge with fine views of the river, Chittavong has nine lovingly furnished wooden bungalows. Rooms have balcony, fan and hot water. There's a nice spot to read under the blossom tree in the large garden; by night the candlelit restaurant looks alluring.

Nong Kiau Restaurant (mains 10,000-30,000 kip) Built from recovered timber and perched on the side of the opposite river bank, Nong Kiau is a journey into taste and vista, with an amazing view to match a seafood-dominated menu. Banana pancake to die for!

GETTING THERE & AWAY

If you're heading upriver to Muang Ngoi Neua (15,000 kip; one hour) boats leave at 11am and 1.30pm. Expect to stop off at various villages en route. Tickets are bought at a small office near the boat landing 100m south of the bridge. The journey by boat to Luang Prabang is one of the most dramatic in Laos;

that said you need a few of you to cut the cost as the boatman charges US\$75 per boat (up to 10 people).

The bus for Luang Prabang (32,000 kip) leaves at 11am (if you're returning from Muang Ngoi Neua to catch it the driver usually waits for the boat). A public bus leaves Nong Khiaw for Luang Prabang at 8am from outside the post office on the west side of the bridge. Săwngthăew for Pak Mong leave regularly when full. For Udomxai, the bus leaves at 11am (31,000 kip, four hours), or catch a săwngthăew back to Pak Mong to pick up a bus there. The bus heading for Sam Neua passes through Nong Khiaw about 6pm.

If you're heading east, you can catch a săwngthăew as far as Muang Vieng Kham (15,000 kip, three hours), where you change vehicles for Sam Neua (30,000 kip, six hours), Nam Noen (15,000 kip, three hours), or Phon-savan (75,000 kip, 12 hours). These leave when full – arrive early.

Muang Ngoi Neua

Watching the sun set between the jagged karsts you'll feel as if you've stepped into a silkscreen painting. So peaceful is this secluded riverside village it's become something of a traveller's gem; you can either relax supine in your hammock or undertake a more-active trek. Accommodation has over-mushroomed during the last few years making the guesthouse-dollar a competitively sought commodity.

INFORMATION

Generators provide electricity to guesthouses and restaurants from 6pm to 10pm. There's no internet but you can make international calls at the Restaurant Nangphonekeo. You can exchange US dollars at Lattanavongsa on the main road, behind the guesthouse of the same name, for unexceptional rates. A couple of pharmacies sell basic medicines; for anything serious get yourself back to Luang Prabang.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Trekking is one of Muang Ngoi Neua's main attractions. From the main street turn east at Kaikeo Restaurant, then follow the path through the large schoolyard and into an area of secondary forest. An admission fee, by donation, will be collected here by a vol-

unteer from town (between dawn and dusk). 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 the villages of **Huay Bo** (one hour, 3km), **Huay Sen** (1½ hours) and **Ban Na** (another 20 minutes, 1km). It's also possible to organise a **village stay** if you want to experience something less touristy, although this is also popular so be prepared to walk back again if there's no room at the inn.

Run by a former teacher, Mr Kongkeo, **Muang Ngoi Tour Office** (☎ 7-8am & 6-7pm) is located behind the main street, 300m south of the boat landing – look for the signs directing you. Mr Kongkeo takes treks to the caves and local villages (US\$15), and he'll be happy to organise canoeing and fishing trips (US\$10). The only noise you're likely to hear is the pattering of pirogues and kids playing in the Nam Ou river.

To the left of the boat landing is **Lao Youth Travel** (☎ 7.30-10.30am & 1.30-6pm), which organises overnight treks (from US\$10 per day) or will take you up the river with a tube (from 15,000 kip) from where you can amble back.

SLEEPING & EATING

There's little to differentiate between many of the riverfront guesthouses in terms of price or standard; most feature bungalows with shared cold-water bathrooms, squat toilets and small restaurants. That said there are a few luxurious exceptions.

Ning Ning Restaurant & Guest House (r 20,000 kip) With its fine panoramic view, alfresco dining on a lovely decked area, the Ning Ning is a favourite. The menu is an amalgam of Thai, Lao and Western (mains 15,000 kip). Its three rustic-style bungalows are superior and spacious.

Phetdavanh Guest House (r 20,000-30,000 kip) West at the top of the boat landing steps, this venue definitely competes with Lattanavongsa as the most tasteful accommodation on the street. Spacious rooms in this attractive old wooden house have comfy sprung mattresses and a fairy-lit decked area conducive for chilling. They also serve food (mains 15,000 kip).

Nixas's Place (r 20,000 kip) Decent wooden bungalows, outside toilet, no fan. Good restaurant here with a decent view of the mountain.

Banana Café & Restaurant (r 20,000 kip; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Simple balconied bungalows with outside toilet and pour-and-scrub showers. Ideal for pondering the river. The family-run restaurant is nondescript but fresh. Watch out for the lovely old guy out back who skins rat for his dinner!

Say Lom Guest House (r 20,000 kip) Generic river-front digs next to the boat landing, with outside toilet and shower, this is good shoestring value – you may even get a faded Leo DiCaprio poster on your wall.

Lattavongsa Guest House (r 50,000-60,000 kip) Definitely edging out the competition with its immaculate wooden bungalows offering fine views over the river. Rooms have balconies with a beautiful garden of flame trees and flowers. The restaurant is also good (mains 15,000 kip), offering a varied Western and Thai/Lao menu. Opposite the steps at the Boat Landing.

Kaiko Restaurant (mains 5000-15,000 kip; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A couple of doors east of the main intersection this is a great breakfast spot (where you can watch local kids hurrying off to school, ball of sticky rice in hand). There's a mix of tables and cushioned seating.

Sengala Bakery (mains 15,000 kip; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Specialises in mouth-watering pancakes and fresh bread (baked at 7am and 4pm), with an interesting variation on steak (buffalo?) sandwich.

Restaurant Nangphonekeo (mains 30,000 kip; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This friendly café does a good turn in Lao food and Western fare. You can also make international calls here.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Boats to Nong Khiaw leave at 8.30am, 9.30am and 1pm (15,000 kip, one hour).

BONES & BOONIES

American MIA (Missing In Action) recovery missions have long given up hope of finding bearded waifs limping around bamboo jungle compounds (sorry Rambo). Instead, the MIA programme visits Laos for three months a year to try and recover the interred bones of their soldiers, but not without considerable expense (US\$30 million per year). Considering Laos is carpeted in dense 'boonies' forest (more than 10% of its total land mass), this makes for slow and difficult work.

In contrast, the money the US donates to Laos to help with the UXO problem it created is a paltry sum rumoured to be less than US\$5 million per year. Whilst this might enrage the reader, historically, attempts to financially salve the wound were rejected by the ever dogmatic Lao Government – there was also the possibility the money would never find its way to the right places. Instead, the US sends mine detection apparatus – lots of it. As one anonymous mine-clearance NGO said, 'there are rooms full of metal detectors just sitting there. We've got more than we need.'

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 is overshadowed by the denuded hills and valleys pockmarked with bomb craters, where little or no vegetation grows. This remains the province most heavily contaminated with UXO in Laos; walking off paths is extremely inadvisable.

Most visitors come to Xieng Khuang to visit the mysterious Plain of Jars, but there are also several fascinating sites relating to the war open to tourists. Rte 7 from Phu Khun (intersecting with Rte 13 between Luang Prabang and Vang Vieng) is now sealed, making travel to Phonsavan by road a lot quicker.

Phonsavan

☎ 061 / pop 57,000

A sprawling collection of wide streets and austere concrete shophouses, Phonsavan has little aesthetic appeal except for the ubiquitous collections of war scrap that decorate guesthouses and restaurants. Essentially the place merits a visit for its involvement in The Secret War, or to see the enigmatic Plain of Jars; an eerie conundrum of large stone jars randomly positioned over three sites.

INFORMATION

Diethelm Travel Laos (☎ 213200; chansmon@aotel.com; Rte 7) Opposite the old bus station; books plane tickets back to Vientiane, and organises tours of the province if you want to create your own sightseeing itinerary. You'll need a few people to make the costs manageable.

Hot Net (Rte 7; per min 300 kip; ☎ 8am-10pm) A few doors along from the post office; has slow internet connections.

Indochina Travel (☎ 312409; Rte 7) offers Visa advances (6% commission) as well as organising onward

travel and trips to the Jars (US\$15 per person, including lunch and English speaking guide). Speak to Mr Thong.

Lao-Mongolian Friendship Hospital (☎ 312166) 500m west of the Maly Hotel. Medical emergencies will need to be taken to Vientiane for possible transfer to Thailand.

Post office (Rte 7; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) On the eastern corner of the town triangle.

SLEEPING

Accommodation here has barely improved, but there are a few gems in an otherwise drizzly crown.

Vinh Thong Guest House (☎ 212622; Rte 7; r 30,000-40,000 kip) On a street corner located just past Nisha Guest House, this is basic accommodation. Rooms have rattan walls plus there is a very atmospheric lobby with recovered UXO and Secret War paraphernalia.

Phoukham Guest House (Rte 7; r 50,000 kip) Opposite the old bus station, the modern two-storey Phoukham Guest House has reasonably soft beds. You can also get onward visas and make internet phone calls or download digital photos to disk.

Dok Khoun Guest House (☎ 312189, 020 563 4792; Rte 7; r 50,000 kip) A well-run guesthouse on the main road, with hot water in some rooms and tiled floors. Laundry service is available for 10,000 kip per kilo and onward visas can be arranged. You'll need your own sleeping bag and earplugs (it's next to Phonsavan Nightclub).

Vanealoun Guest House (☎ 312070; Rte 7; r 50,000 kip) Despite the cell-like rooms, this is another good option for its cleanliness and electric hot-water showers. It even has shampoo satchels in each bathroom: very swish! The tiled floors are cool, and rooms come with fan. Doors close at 11pm.

Kong Keo Guest House (☎ 211354; www.kongkeojar.com; r 60,000-80,000 kip) Still the only interesting option in town, King Kong prevails with his delightful cabanas featuring hot water and en suites. Rooms in the house are cheaper. The garden is peaceful, as is the little lounge-café where you can request to watch *Bombies*, a documentary about UXO. This is a much needed exposé which will enrich your stay here. It's 150m off Rte 7, across the old air field.

Nice Guest House (☎ 312454; Rte 7; r 80,000 kip) A favourite with NGOs, this new venue is both modern and immaculate with fresh tiled floors and friendly staff. After Kong Keo, probably

MUST SEE

To get a greater handle on not only the history of Laos but also its continuing curse, keep an eye out for the critically acclaimed documentary, *Bombies* (2001). Filmmaker Jack Silberman examines the legacy of the US-led Secret War in Laos through the experiences of those people dealing with the unexploded ordnance (UXOs) scattered throughout the country today. While the foreign policies of old administrations are relegated to the archives, *Bombies* is a powerful reminder of the open and still smarting wounds left behind on innocent people. More than 10,000 people have been killed by UXO, with the figure rising all the time. The surest place to see this uncompromising doc is Kong Keo Guest House (see left for details).

the best place to stay if you don't mind forking out the extra cash.

EATING

Cuisine in town is somewhat two dimensional – aren't you missing Luang Prabang now? There are a couple of tasty places that will keep you vertical, most of them along Rte 7.

Kong Keo Guest House (☎ 020 551 6365; www.kongkeojar.com; dishes 8000-20,000 kip) Even if you're not staying, this is a great place to eat if you want to meet fellow travellers. The service can be errr... a little forgetful, but you're in Laos: sip a beer by the fire – in a former bomb casing – while sitting cross-legged on cushions soaking up the convivial atmosphere. Try the excellent rice-paper rolls.

Nisha (☎ 020 569 8140; Rte 7; mains 10,000-30,000 kip) For vegetarians, who haven't many options in these more remote parts of the country, Indian curries are a gift from Ganesh. It's on the left as you head east.

China Restaurant (☎ 312220; Rte 7; meals 10,000-20,000 kip) Chinese dumplings, spicy eel slices... an excellent option if your tastebuds desperately desire something Chinese. A popular *falang* haunt with a little more life than some places. Near the *dead* centre of town.

Craters Restaurant (☎ 7805775; Rte 7; mains 20,000-40,000 kip) The nearest you'll get to brasserie sophistication, this little eatery, west of Diethelm Travel, serves up western food. Omelettes are tasty and the chicken soup, if it's a cold rainy

AN ENDURING LEGACY

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. Since the British Mines Advisory Group (MAG) began clearance work in 1994, only a tiny percentage of the quarter of a million pieces in Xieng Khuang and Salavan has been removed. At the current rate of clearance it will take more than 100 years to make the country safe. The **Mines Advisory Group Office** (☎ 312459; www.magclearmines.org; Rte 7; ☎ 8am–4pm Mon–Fri) has information on UXO-clearing projects in Laos including the Plain of Jars. Donations are greatly appreciated.

day, warms the soul. Also the only place in town to get a proper coffee.

Located one block south of Rte 7, the **fresh food market** (☎ 6am–5pm) has an undercover section with numerous noodle stands, ideal for a delicious and inexpensive meal. Fresh fruit and vegetables, deep-fried bananas, sticky rice-balls, slippery noodle spring rolls and other culinary treasures also await. The old dry market beside the bus station has moved south a few blocks on Rte 7, to a more sturdy concrete building. It's about 10 minutes' walk.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Lao Airlines (code QV; ☎ 312027; www.laos-airlines.com) flies to Vientiane from Phonsavan (US\$50, daily).

The old bus and sawngthāew station is above the main triangle intersection. At the time of research, buses departed from here

then did a pick-up at the new bus station, situated 13km west along Rte 7. There are regular direct buses to Vientiane (90,000 kip), via Vang Vieng (70,000 kip, 12 to 13 hours, 7am, 9.30am and 4pm), plus buses to Luang Prabang (85,000 kip, eight hours), with an optional VIP bus (95,000 kip) leaving at 7pm.

For Sam Neua (60,000 kip, eight hours) the bus leaves at 6pm. There's a daily bus to Udomxai (90,000 kip, 13 hours). A bus for Thavieng (30,000 kip) departs at 10am.

The roads on these routes are in good condition but because of continuing Hmong insurrection in this area you may see the presence of a gun-toting guard on board. Don't be alarmed, recent attacks have been minimal.

Plain of Jars

The Plain of Jars is a large area extending around Phonsavan from the southwest to the northwest where huge jars of unknown origin are scattered about in dozens of groupings. There are three main sites for visitors to wander around, which have been largely cleared of UXO.

Site 1 is 10km southwest of Phonsavan and is the largest, featuring 250 jars mostly between 1m and 3m tall and weighing between 600kg and one tonne. There's an undercover rest area at this site, where you can buy snacks and drinks – plus read comprehensive information boards provided by Unesco, on the jars and the UXO-clearing project here.

Two other jar sites are accessible by an unsealed road from Phonsavan and have fewer jars, but much better views. **Site 2**, 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**, which is also known as Hai Hin Lat Khai, located about 10km south of Site 2. This site is on a scenic hilltop near the charming village of Ban Sieng Di, where there's also a small monastery containing the remains of Buddha images damaged in the war. The site is a stiff 2km walk across rice paddies and up a hill.

TOURS

Officially, vehicles must be 'registered' to visit the sites, meaning you have to go on a tour. It seems inconvenient, but there are a number of tours available. Tours can be arranged in Phonsavan, which is notable for its excellent English-speaking guides.

Organised tours to the jars are often extended to include other interesting sites, including a crashed US Thunder Chief 105 plane, a Russian tank, Viet Cong bunkers, the US Lima S 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.

Speak to Mr Sawat at **Lao Youth Travel** (☎ 312409; Rte 7) for info on their tours. Prices including entrance fee to the sites and lunch cost US\$15. Alternatively, tours from **Kong Keo Guest House** (☎ 020 551 6365; www.kongkeojar.com; off Rte 7) have received glowing reports. A car with driver and guide costs around US\$8 per person, depending on the size of the group. The first stop is the fresh food market where you're expected to buy your own provisions for the day.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

It is possible to charter a sawngthāew from Phonsavan to Site 1, 10km from the centre,

for 50,000 kip return, including waiting time, for up to six people.

HUA PHAN PROVINCE

Rugged and beautiful, Hua Phan province is unlike any other province in Laos. Although it is home to 22 different ethnic groups including Yao, Hmong, Khamu, Thai Khao and Thai Neua, the province clearly shows the influence of the Vietnamese. The province's high altitude means the climate can be cool – even in the hot season – and its forested mountains are shrouded in mist. Road journeys to Hua Phan are memorably scenic; it was described by one local as 'a journey of a million turns'. Now that the border here to Vietnam is open to foreigners, you no longer have to turn around and go all the way back along that twisting road again. With improved public transport across the border to Hanoi, this remote corner of Laos will hopefully see visitor numbers increase over the coming years.

Sam Neua

☎ 064 / pop 46,800

There is an unmistakable 'frontier' feeling to the town of 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 striped 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**.

JARS OF THE STONE AGE

The purpose of these possibly 2000-year-old jars 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, as well as tiny stone beads in the area. Today the whereabouts of these cultural artefacts is unknown.

INFORMATION

Hua Phan Tourist Office (☎ 312567; 🕒 8am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) Located 200m north of the bus station. The staff, who speak a little English, have a few dusty pamphlets on hand and can arrange vehicles around the province to more remote sites such as Suan Hin (Sao Hin Tang), a stone garden often likened to Britain's Stonehenge.

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 using a phonecard and it opens the same hours.

SLEEPING & EATING

The block between the bus station and the Nam Xam is where the reputable guesthouses and a few restaurants can be found, all within a short walking distance. Accommodation is of a similar standard: multistorey buildings with a sitting area and a pot of tea on each floor, rooms with or without an attached bathroom, and reasonably clean although hard beds to kip in.

Shuliyao Guest House (☎ 312462; r with shared bathroom 30,000-50,000 kip) Turning right from the bus station, this is the first place you come to. The family owners speak almost no English, so this is your chance to practise your Lao (or signing skills). The rooms on the top floor come with shared bathroom – on the ground floor. The electric hot-water tanks in each bathroom provide only five minutes of water at a moderate pressure, so be kind to your roommate and have a quick shower.

Khaem Xam (☎ 312111; r with shared bathroom 30,000-60,000 kip) Located on the corner next to the bridge and opposite the river, the tiled fan-cooled rooms here have long been a popular choice for foreign travellers and travelling businesspeople. The attached restaurant does simple Lao dishes that are hearty and filling.

Bounhome Guest House (☎ 312223, 020 234 8125; r 35,000-40,000 kip) The distinguishing feature of this multistorey guesthouse directly opposite Phatphousay is the balcony on each floor. Otherwise the standards are similar to the rest and the price differences are a little inexplicable.

Phatphousay Guest House (☎ 312943; r with shared bathroom 40,000-50,000 kip) On a dark laneway running parallel to the river, this is another family-run guesthouse with clean rooms, twin or double beds.

Chittavanh Restaurant (☎ 312265; meals 8000-20,000 kip) On the river road between the bridge and the market is another good option, with a short menu of fried meat and fish, soups and fried rice. It's popular for breakfast or dinner and warming glasses of *lào-lào*.

Dan Nao Muang Xam Restaurant (☎ 314126; meals 10,000-20,000 kip) At the end of the laneway and a few doors west of Khaem Xam, this is 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.

Mitsampanh Restaurant (☎ 312151; meals 10,000-30,000 kip) In the laneway, a few doors north of Phatphousay Guest House, this restaurant does reasonable Lao food for good prices, but unfortunately it doesn't have much on offer for vegetarians.

At lunchtime, the market is a source of all sorts of delights including bamboo-leaf-wrapped curry with rice, noodle soups, and creepy-crawlies plucked straight from the river, for the adventurous diner!

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Lao Airlines (code QV; www.laos-airlines.com) flies to and from Sam Neua from Vientiane (US\$70, twice a week). The descent through the Nam Xam valley is tricky; the mountains are frequently shrouded in mist.

There are three main bus departures daily all heading for Vientiane (120,000 kip, 24 hours). The first leaves at 7.30am and arrives in Vientiane at 6am the next day, going via the southern route through Phonsavan (50,000 kip, eight hours), on a good but very winding sealed road. The second leaves at 8am via Rte 1 through Muang Vieng Thong (30,000 kip), Nong Khiaw (60,000 kip) and down through Luang Prabang (70,000 kip, 15 hours), arriving in Vientiane around midnight. If you're heading for Udomxai, take this bus and change to a *sāwngthāew* at Pak Mong. This is a slow, uncomfortable trip, especially in the wet season. The third option is the VIP express bus (130,000 kip) leaving Sam Neua at midday and arriving in Vientiane around 5am.

Vieng Xai (Pathet Lao Caves)

In a narrow valley of limestone peaks are caves that served as the elaborate homes and shelters of the Pathet Lao leaders and 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.

This is a fascinating and peaceful town to spend a day or two in. A wooden board in front of the market features a map of Vieng Xai.

You must report to the **Kaysone Phom Vihan Memorial Tour Cave Office** (☎ 064-314321; 🕒 8am-noon & 1.30-4pm), a 2km walk from the bus station, to pay the caves entrance fee of 10,000 kip, plus 10,000 kip for a guide who will take you to the caves and let you in. It's another 2000 kip to take a camera.

At the time of writing two guides spoke English. A dozen caves at three different sites are open for visitors and tours take two to three hours. The leaders' caves feature multiple entrances, bedrooms, offices, and emergency rooms fitted with steel doors and equipped 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 500lb bomb near the entrance that has been concreted as a war relic. **Tham Than Kaysone**, named after a former president and Pathet Lao leader, 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** is the most spectacular of the caves, where up to 3000 Pathet Lao rank and file would hide out.

SLEEPING & EATING

Naxay Guesthouse (☎ 064-314336, 020 576 4729; r with shared bathroom 10,000-20,000 kip) Clean rooms in a rickety wooden house with lino floors. The cold-water bathrooms are in a nearby building. Hot water is provided in a thermos.

Government Hotel (☎ 064-314356; r with shared bathroom 10,000-30,000 kip) The best location in town by a small lake. The shared bathrooms come with small electric hot-water tanks. Rooms with up to three beds have mosquito nets. Leather armchairs line up

GETTING TO VIETNAM

Buses to Na Maew on the Vietnam border depart from Sam Neua at 7am (20,000 kip, three hours), passing through Vieng Xai on the way. The crossing here is open from 8am to 5pm; make sure you've organised your Vietnamese visa in advance as they can't be granted at the border.

At the time of research transport on the Vietnamese side was scarce, but with more travellers making the journey this will pick up. It's a long winding journey from Nam Xoi in Vietnam to Hanoi.

See p839 for information on making the journey in the reverse direction.

on the red-tiled veranda and a small restaurant serving simple meals, with notice, is downstairs.

Next to the Naxay, a small **restaurant** (☎ 064-314336; meals 10,000 kip) does Korean-style steamboat, heating coals in an epoxy bombshell out the front.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

A bus leaves Sam Neua for Vieng Xai at 6am (7000 kip, 40 minutes), or *sāwngthāew* leave almost every hour when full until mid-afternoon. From Vieng Xai, *sāwngthāew* for Sam Neua leave the market almost hourly until 5pm.

UDOMXAI PROVINCE

This rugged province is wedged between Luang Prabang, Phongsali, Luang Nam Tha, Bokeo and Sainyabuli, with a small section that shares a border with China's Yunnan Province. It is home to 23 ethnic minorities, mostly Hmong, Akha, Mien, Phu Thai, Thai Dam, Thai Khao, Thai Lü and Thai Neua. The Yunnanese presence continues to intensify with the influx of Chinese skilled labourers working in construction, as well as tradespeople from Kunming, the capital of Yunnan.

Udomxai

☎ 081 / pop 80,000

During the Second Indochina War the regional capital became the centre for Chinese troops supportive of the Pathet Lao.

GETTING TO VIETNAM

The border at Tay Trang (Laos) and Dien Bien Phu (Vietnam) started operating in April 2007 after years of rumours of its impending opening.

To cross the border, catch a bus from Udomxai to the town of Muang Khua (US\$4, four hours, two daily), set on the banks of the Nam Ou. (Two daily buses also travel from Luang Prabang to Muang Khua; the trip costs US\$6 and takes eight hours.) From Muang Khua, a bus leaves for Dien Bien Phu (40,000 kip) three times a week at 7am. There is transport to Hanoi from Dien Bien Phu.

The border is open from 8am to 5pm daily, but does not issue Vietnamese visas; you'll need to organise one in advance in Luang Prabang or Vientiane.

See p839 for information on travelling from Vietnam to Laos.

Today, if Northern Laos were to host a beauty contest for all its towns, Udomxai wouldn't be allowed in the building. A dusty amalgam of randomly erected Chinese- and Thai-style buildings, there is little that is Lao here; indeed many of the inhabitants of this important trading town are Chinese lorry drivers who use the town as a transport hub. Try and get here early in order to catch a connecting bus out. If the inevitable happens, here are a few decent places to seek solace.

INFORMATION

Banque pour le Commerce Extérieur Lao

(☎ 211260; Rte 1; ☎ 8.30am-4pm) Changes US dollars, Thai baht or Chinese yuan into kip.

Lao Development Bank

(☎ 312059; Rte 4; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm) Also changes US dollars, Thai baht or Chinese yuan into kip.

Oudomsay Provincial Tourism Office

(☎ 211797; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Located just up the hill from the bridge; can help you plan your forward escape.

Post office (☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) You can make international calls at the post office with a phonecard.

Udomxai Travel (☎ 212020; travel_kenchan@yahoo.com; Rte 1) For tours to local attractions such as the Houay Nam Kat Reserve find Mr Kenchan O'Phetsan at this travel agency, located next to the bus station.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Besides checking out the **Chinese market**, a vast sprawl of stalls beside the **Kaysone Monument**, there's little to do apart from taking a Swedish-style massage at the **Lao Red Cross** (☎ 312269; massage per hour US\$1-3). Alternatively you can take a sunset trip up to **Wat Santiphap** to chat with the monks, who are usually keen to brush up on their English.

SLEEPING & EATING

Saylomyen Guest House (☎ 211377; off Rte 1; r with shared/private bathroom 30,000/50,000 kip) Turn right at the main intersection about 800m north of the bus station; Saylomyen is well sign-posted. The main building has clean rooms with shared bathroom. In a newer construction next door, rooms have attached bathrooms – all with hot water. Great views can be enjoyed from the top floor of the main building.

Saensabay Guest House (off Rte 1; r 40,000 kip) Six undistinguished yet peaceful rooms on a road 27m back from Saylomyen Guesthouse, with a pleasant view of the mountains.

Linda Guest House (☎ 312147; Rte 1; r 40,000-50,000 kip) Has 14 pongy rooms in a three-storey, ornate building on the main street opposite the petrol station. If full, there's another branch, Linda 2, on Rte 4, behind the Kaysone Monument, with the same prices and amenities.

Vivanh Guest House (Rte 1; r 50,000 kip; ☎) Pristine, cool accommodation with fresh linen daily. Located beside the bridge. Friendly owner.

Lithavixay Guest House (☎ 212175; Rte 1; r 60,000 kip) Offering a pleasant internet-enabled communal area plus enormous rooms with armoire and TV. About 90m on the left up from Linda Guest House, heading toward the bus station.

Pholay (☎ 312324; Rte 1; meals 10,000-30,000 kip) Located next to a petrol station, Pholay is another reliable place to eat, with an extensive menu of Chinese and Lao food.

Keomongkoun Restaurant (Rte 1; mains 20,000 kip) Located on Rte 1 opposite Linda Guest House, this unpretentious little restaurant is garnering plenty of praise from passing *falang* with its delectable Chinese and Western fare.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Lao Airlines runs an irregular flight from Udomxai over to Vientiane (US\$80). The Chinese-built bitumen roads that radiate from Udomxai are in fair condition (except for the road to Pak Beng) and the city is the largest land-transport hub in the north. The bus terminal at the southwestern edge of town has buses to and from Luang Prabang (30,000 kip, five hours, three daily), Nong Khiaw (24,500 kip, three hours, one daily), Pak Beng (26,500 kip, four hours, two daily), Luang Nam Tha (26,000 kip, three to five hours, three daily), Boten (23,000 kip, four hours, two daily), Phongsali (50,000 kip, eight hours, one daily) and Vientiane (ordinary 90,000 kip, 15 hours; VIP 100,000 kip, 14 hours).

LUANG NAM THA PROVINCE

Luang Nam Tha

☎ 086 / pop 35,400

Razed to the ground during the Indochina War, Luang Nam Tha is essentially two towns; the new town, in which you'll find the bulk of restaurants and guesthouses, and the old village near the airport and boat landing (for river trips to Huay Xai), some 7km away. Give it a day and the place will grow on you; be it its excellent coffee houses, diverse cuisine, or the amicable charm of the locals – and not forgetting its deserved status as a mecca for ecotourism.

With its proximity to the beguiling wilds of the Nam Ha NPA, Luang Nam Tha is the perfect base. Hire a bike and explore the nearby waterfall or Thai Lue, Thai Dam and Khamu villages; take a trek or kayak in some of the most virginal forests in northern Laos.

INFORMATION

BCL Bank (☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) Opposite the telecom office on the main road, this place charges 2% commission for cashing travellers cheques into US dollars

BROTHER CAN YOU LEND YOUR TIME

If you want to get involved in improving local literacy, seek out **Big Brother Mouse**, a home-grown initiative that aims to bring the delights of the written word to infants who, for lack of materials, rarely get the chance to read. Buy a few books and carry them with you to donate to children. Or better still, hang out at your local BBM for a couple of hours and read to the kids who attend; the more *falang* drop in, the more children will come to listen. They have a range of colourful self-published books, plus great stories such as *Where the Wild Things Are*, currently being translated into Lao. Look out for them in Luang Nam Tha, Luang Prabang and Vientiane (www.bigbrothermouse.com).

and 4% for Visa cash advances (kip) and 5% (US dollars). There's also a BCL exchange booth at the bus station.

Green Mountain Internet (☎ 020 519 7999; per min 500 kip; ☎ 8am-8pm) Near Many Chan Guest House, the place has Skype and a super-speedy broadband connection.

KNT Internet (☎ 211066; per min 500 kip; ☎ 8am-11pm). Opposite Green Discovery, KNT has slow internet connection. Downloading of digital photos and international phone calls also available. KNT sells an informative not-to-scale local map for 3000 kip.

Lao Development Bank (☎ 312232; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2-3.30pm Mon-Fri) Next to KNT.com; exchanges cash and travellers cheques.

Lao Telecom office (☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm) Next door to Saikhonglongsack Guest House.

Nam Ha Ecotourism Project (☎ 312047; namha guides@hotmail.com; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm) Treks range from one to three days, costing around US\$10 per day. The provincial tourism office has information on trips as well as excellent brochures on responsible tourism. To find it, turn left after the post office on the corner then take the first right.

Planet Online (☎ 312435; per min 650 kip) This solar-powered internet café on the main road has broadband connection and offers decent maps of the town detailing neighbouring hill tribe villages.

Post office (☎ 312007; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri) A little further north of the Many Chan Guest House on the opposite side of the road.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Most people are drawn here for the hiking and trekking possibilities in the **Nam Ha NPA**. Within the Eden-like jungle lurk 37 species of large mammals including clouded leopard, elephant, gaur and tiger. Rumours of tigers entering tribes-people's villages are denied for obvious reasons, but still linger.

Tours to the park are organised by **Nam Ha Ecotourism Project** (☎ 312150; namhaguides@yahoo.com). One to 3 day treks cost 80,000 kip per day. Your best bet, however, is the excellent **Green Discovery** (☎ 211484; www.green.discovery.laos.com);

THE GREEN CRUSADE

Nam Ha NPA (National Protected Area) was the first of 18 eco parks set up in '93 by the Lao government to protect its wildlife and forests from slash-and-burn farming, hunting and logging. Unlike Thailand which seems to have learned too late, Laos is flourishing as an eco-conscious nation – if you forget about the destructive HE power dams and logging licenses granted to the Chinese, who are munching their way through ancient teak and rosewood forests (in return for aiding with road-building and the odd stadium in Vientiane for the Asean Games 2009). To be fair, Laos is still one of the poorest nations on earth, trying desperately to become self-sufficient; the fact the government has welcomed international eco-advice is encouraging in itself.

The environmental blueprint, designed to benefit both travellers and ethnic peoples in a sustainable controlled way, has improved hygiene, education and commerce. A number of villages receiving organised visits from trekkers have seen a reduction in opium addiction and a renewed zeal to preserve their natural heritage. Your visit counts.

main road). Besides offering a range of easy to difficult one- to four-day treks with experienced local guides, Green Discovery has been careful to limit the numbers of travellers in its groups and the frequency with which tribes are visited. So far the low-impact blueprint is working; 32% of the money you pay goes directly to the village visited. If possible, try and remember to take some spare tooth-paste, soap and biros to give away.

For **mountain biking** tours contact the **Boat Landing Guest House** (☎ 312398; www.theboatland ing.com), which runs one- to four-day tours of the dramatic Nam Tha valley for around US\$30 a day. Places of interest within easy cycling distance include two 50-year-old wats, **Wat Ban Vieng Tai** and **Wat Ban Luang Khon**, near the airfield; a hill-top 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.

SLEEPING

Thanks to a growing number of local entrepreneurs eager for a slice of the *falang* eco-rush, fresh and reasonably priced accommodation is popping up all over town. Cuisine here is equally diverse and Western-friendly. If you want to get off the beaten path there are a couple of cafés opposite the bus station.

Many Chan Guest House (☎ 312209; r 20,000-40,000 kip) Family run, consistently friendly accommodation. Rooms are generous with fan and hot water and an atmospheric balconied café serving up Thai, Lao and Western fare.

Luang Kham Guest House (☎ 211888; r 40,000 kip) If you're catching an early morning ride down the river from the boat landing, this is a good place to stay. Accommodation here is clean and roomy, with hot water and TVs in the heart of old town Luang Namtha.

Bounthavong Guest House (☎ 312256; r 40,000 kip) Peaceful accommodation set off a side road near the Coffee House, Bounthavong sports 10 fresh rooms that are generous on size, and cool thanks to the tiled floors. Hot water and fan are included in the price.

Bus Station Guest House (☎ 211090 r 40,000-50,000 kip) Positioned near the market and bus station, these secluded bungalows offer hot water, and some have TV. That said they're screaming for a lick of paint (someone with muddy shoes has been playing Spiderman on the walls).

Khamking Guest House (r 50,000 kip) Situated next to Many Chan, this new and pristine accommodation, comprising 15 rooms with fan and tiled floors, really does deliver. Immaculate bathrooms with hot water and a great laundry service next door.

Dalsavath Guest House (☎ 211299; r with shared bathroom 50,000 kip) Beside Lao Airlines at the southern edge of the strip, this place has seven bungalows with hot water.

Tippavanh Guest House (r 50,000 kip) This is a good place to stay if you want the peace of the old town and consider the steep prices of the Boat Landing beyond your range. Tippavanh is situated a few kilometres past the latter toward Huay Xai. If your driver is confused, mention the Teacher Training College; you'll find the guesthouse a further two clicks from here.

Saikhonglongsack Guest House (☎ 312257; r 50,000 kip) Next to Lao Telecom and a little threadbare, this last resort is being edged off the map by superior upstarts. Rooms are basic and functional.

our pick Zuela Guest House (☎ 312183; r 60,000 kip) Tucked down a quiet lane beside Many Chan, this handsomely built guesthouse of wood and brick offers large rooms with wooden floors, hot water and fan. Within its tranquil, landscaped courtyard is a great restaurant. It's easily the best bet in Luang Nam Tha.

Palanh Guest House (☎ 312439; r 60,000 kip) Next to the Yamuna Restaurant and a little noisy thanks to its proximity to the main road, the 11 rooms in this modern-style house are clean with hot water and internet services in the lobby.

EATING

Panda Restaurant (mains 10,000-20,000 kip) Two blocks east of the bus station, Panda has moved more times than Liz Taylor's had husbands (and is due for another relocation). Great fruit shakes and a generally Oriental and Western menu. Sweet and sour chicken is mouth-watering.

Coffee House (mains 10,000-20,000 kip) An open eatery with a comprehensive Western and Thai menu, this new *falang* magnet serves fantastic lattes and cappuccinos. Great fruit shakes, plus a friendly atmosphere will have you coming back for more. Nithat, the owner, is also an ecologist and worth a chat if you're interested in finding out more about environmental matters.

our pick Yamuna Restaurant (☎ 211529; meals 10,000-20,000 kip) Delicious Indian food to rival the omnipresent Nazim. Generous portions, excellent service and low-lit ambience all make this one of the best places to eat after a long day's trek.

Baytong Restaurant (mains 20,000 kip) Just north of Palanh Guest House this is an authentic eatery offering Lao and Chinese food. Noodles are cooked up in a bubbling cauldron before your eyes.

Over the road from the Baytong Restaurant are food stalls which spring to life after twilight. Eating barbecued grub by candlelight is a nice way to meet local people and save a little money.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Currently Luang Nam Tha airport is closed for refurbishment until 2008. Given Lao time that may well mean 2009, so if you're pushed for time and want to trek here, take the daily flight from Vientiane to Udomxai (US\$80) and catch the bus headed for Luang Nam Tha (four hours).

Boat

Charter boats headed for Pak Tha (US\$100) or Huay Xai (US\$110) can be caught at the Boat Landing Guest House in the old town. Boats run all year except sometimes in the dry season (March to May) when river levels become dangerously low. The figures above can be split between up to 10 people, but make sure you bring shade or shelter with you as the boats are open-topped. Also ensure the price agreed at dock is written down to avoid any later misunderstandings.

Bus

The bus station is next to the morning market and about 400m west of the main road. Buses for Luang Prabang leave each morning at 9.30am (70,000 kip, nine hours) and Vientiane at 8.30am (90,000 kip, 20 hours).

GETTING AROUND

Bicycles (10,000 kip per day), mountain bikes (15,000 kip per day) and not-in- exemplary-condition scooters (80,000 kip per day) are for rent at **Yook Mai** (☎ 312183; ☎ 7am-6pm), north of the Many Chan Guest House. Other guesthouses and shops hire bicycles for 10,000 kip.

Muang Sing

☎ 081

Within whispering distance of China, this mountainous border town offers an authentic

GETTING TO CHINA

Crossing the Chinese border at Boten is easy provided you have your visa already. There are regular buses to Boten from Luang Nam Tha (one hour) and Udomxai (four hours). From Mohan, on the Chinese side, it's a two- to three-hour ride to Mengla, the nearest large town and a good stopover point on the way north.

atmosphere of wilting shop-fronts (punctuated occasionally by the broken form of an opium addict) and an extremely rich diversity of ethnic hill tribes, including Hmong, Akha, Thai Lu, Lolo and Thai Deu; many of whom you're likely to see at the colourful local market. The town's main draw however, is its reputation as a trekker's paradise, ideally situated for visits to the jungle of the nearby Nam Ha Protected Area or local hill tribes. 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 Visitor Information & Trekking Guide Services Office, just north of the post office.

INFORMATION

Muang Sing has two banks, a **BCL** branch and the **Lane Xang Bank** opposite the market, changing US dollars, baht and yuan. The post office is opposite the market.

The **Visitor Information & Trekking Guide Services** (☎ 020 570 80318; ☎ 8-11.30am & 2-5.30pm) is just north of the post office. Bicycles are available for rent around town for between 5000 and 10,000 kip per day.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Most people come to Muang Sing for the trekking. Unlike Thailand, Laos has gone to considerable trouble to ensure its ethnic culture is viewed with minimal invasion. Thanks to an ethnically friendly blueprint developed by the **Visitor Information & Trekking Guide Services** (☎ 020 570 80318; ☎ 8-11.30am & 2-5.30pm), a little wooden building that's signposted off the main street, you can visit without too much of the 'human zoo' guilt clouding your experience. A minimum of five people is required (costs US\$15 per person). After the guide has been paid, the money goes directly to the tribe. Drug use is banned on these treks. Guides include former farmers, teachers, police and agricultural workers.

The **Nam Ha National Protected Area (NPA)** is nearby and offers the intrepid an adventure into pristine, triple-canopied jungle; a few minutes into the feral cathedral and you'll be looking for Col Kurtz, your daydream possibly broken by the roar of a local tiger – it happens!

In a beautiful Lao-French wooden building further north on the main street is the

Muang Sing Exhibitions Museum (admission 5000 kip; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30-11.30am Sat). A photographic exhibition, 'The Last Guardians of the Mountains', is dedicated to the hill tribes of the area, represented in honest up-close black-and-white portraits.

Next to Sing Charean Hotel, a small family-run **traditional massage & sauna** (sauna/massage 10,000/30,000 kip) has been set up in a bamboo thatched building, with the herbal sauna located out the back.

SLEEPING & EATING

Thanks to a raft of new accommodation, you no longer have to worry about your guesthouse falling over. Here are a few gems and slightly more vertical flophouses.

Thai Lu Guest House (r 20,000-30,000 kip) Ageing rooms in a wooden building near the BCL bank on the main street. Offering hot water and mossie nets. Rooms out front are best, with a friendly restaurant – the town's main *falang* nucleus – downstairs. Try the sticky rice pancake.

Muang Sing Guest House (r 20,000-30,000) Flophouse ambience, offering a great rooftop in the main house from where to ponder the sunset mountains and crumbling nearby wat. The owner is a delightful multilingual lady who will make you feel welcome, even if the room won't.

Adima Guest House (☎ 212372; s/d with shared/private bathroom 40,000/60,000 kip) Comfortable accommodation 8km north of Muang Sing, this tranquil guesthouse is favoured among travellers wishing to do their own trek from here to neighbouring Akha and Yao villages – hand-drawn maps available from reception. Rooms vary from wooden to brick bungalow accommodation.

Anousone Guest House (r 50,000 kip) Next to Muang Sing hospital, Anousone is fresh, new and well worth the five-minute walk out of town. Rooms are spacious and cool with tiled floors.

Sangduane Guest House (☎ 212376; r 50,000 kip) With nine large rooms, each with fan, plus two more intimate bungalows out the back, this is tranquil accommodation 100m north of the main street. Also has a restaurant with a karaoke machine to relive those Dean Martin fantasies.

our pick Phouiou Guest House (r 60,000 kip) Set off the south end of the main drag, Phouiou boasts nine lovingly crafted rattan cabanas

placed in a flowered, landscaped garden. With spotlessly clean rooms, hot water, fan and friendly management, this accommodation is worth every dollar compared to the sloppy competition.

Chieng Theung Guest House (☎ 312085; r 70,000 kip) This hidden gem is situated 5km south of Muang Sing on a hillside overlooking the rice paddy. The wooden bungalows are comfortable, tastefully-finished with hot water, and most importantly, a sense of peace barely equalled in town with exception to Phouiou.

Many of the guesthouses, as is normal in Laos, double as restaurants; however, beyond the friendly, reasonably comprehensive menu at Thai Lu, there's only the **Hasina Indian Restaurant** (mains 7000-25,000 kip) worth a visit. You'll find it at the northern end of town after the bridge.

Fresh fruit and vegetables as well as local delicacies can be bought at the **morning market** (☎ 6-8am). To get here, turn left (west) at the exhibitions building and then right (north) two blocks up. *Foë* (rice noodle) stands are bustling early in the morning, and Laos' ubiquitous roaming baguette vendors sell fresh rolls with condensed milk for breakfast.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Sǎwngthǎew leave from the bus station in front of the morning market for Luang Nam Tha at 8am, 9.30am and 11am (20,000 kip, one to two hours). Heading west, sǎwngthǎew bound for Muang Long leave four times a day between 8am and 1pm (15,000 kip, two hours). Heading southwest, for Xieng Kok on the Burmese border, sǎwngthǎew (19,000 kip, three to four hours) depart at 9.30am, 11am, 1pm and 2pm. From Xieng Kok it's possible to charter a boat down the Mekong to Huay Xai (outside of the dry season).

Bicycles are available to rent (5000 kip per day) from several shops on the main road, for journeys to local villages.

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 Bokeo's small size and tiny population, the province is home to 34 different ethnic groups, second only to Luang Nam Tha for ethnic diversity.

Huay Xai

☎ 084 / pop 17,500

Hugging the banks of the Mekong, overlooking Thailand's Chieng Khong, Huay Xai is a major border-entry point, as well as being the HQ of the much talked about **Gibbon Experience** (www.gibbonx.org), a three-day gibbon watch in tree-houses perched high above the Bokeo Nature Reserve. Travellers freshly arrived from Thailand needn't concern themselves Huay Xai is the shape of Laos to come; just two days south on a slow boat will take you to the majesty of Luang Prabang (six hours on a speedboat if you're a masochist) or five hours north to sleepy Luang Namtha. That said, the locals are friendly and by night the dusty street is aglow with burning braziers and fairy lights.

INFORMATION

The **Lao Development Bank** (☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri), opposite Arimid Guest House, is 200m up the hill from the slow-boat landing.

The **post office** (☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) also contains a telephone office.

Phoudoi Travel (☎ 020 598 5732) offers one-day tours to Thai Du ethnic villages combined with visits to the waterfalls. Speak to Saytha.

SLEEPING & EATING

A recent boom in Thai-Roman-style guest houses has seen a slight improvement in what you can expect for your money, plus a number of stalwart traveller favourites are still turning a good trade.

Friendship Guest House (☎ 211219; Th Saykhong; r 40,000-60,000 kip) With its breezy rooftop views, communal satellite TV and clean, spacious rooms, the Friendship Guest House is a good place to hang your hat. The owner's a genuine individual, his English is solid and he can arrange your bus and boat tickets. All rooms have a fan.

BAP Guest House (☎ 211083; Th Saykhong; r 40,000-70,000) This old trusty offers immaculate, wood-veneered rooms, communal places to chat and an adequate restaurant. The owner can organise onward travel and day trips. Rooms overlooking the Mekong are the best but expect to pay more.

Sabaydee (☎ 020 548 4075; Th Saykhong; r incl breakfast 60,000-70,000 kip) Well-situated Thai-style villa offering 14 clean rooms with fan. It's 100m north of BAP Guest House.

Armid Guest House (☎ 211040; Ban Huay Xai Neua; r 60,000-150,000) Located 200m from the slow-boat landing, this secluded complex is a peaceful place to stay if you want to get out of town. The wooden bungalows are well constructed, there's a decent restaurant and multilingual owner who's happy to dispense advice – just don't try and haggle on price!

Oudomphone Guest House (r 70,000-80,000 kip) Set slightly off the main drag, Oudomphone is fresh and new with fans in all its rooms. There's also a restaurant downstairs.

Riverview Restaurant (mains 20,000 kip) Atmospheric diner featuring reindeer ornamented rattan walls; you may feel like you've stepped into an old colonial living room. Wood-fired pizzas and local staple are fresh, as are the fruit shakes – electricity allowing. Perhaps the best place to meet other *falang*, absorb their stories and plan your route accordingly. It's a few doors down from BAP.

Deen Restaurant (mains 30,000 kip) Just down the road from the Friendship, Deen offers crisp, no-nonsense Indian cuisine. The chicken tikka masala is particularly delicious as is the wood-fired nan bread.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Lao Airlines (code QV; www.laos-airlines.com) flies Monday, Wednesday and Friday from Huay Xai to Vientiane (US\$90) and Luang Prabang (US\$50).

The ferry ride to Chiang Khong costs 20B. The border to Thailand is open from 8.30am to 5pm; the same opening hours apply to arriving in Laos. At weekends and after 4pm it's normal for Lao border guards to charge 15B surcharge. On crossing the border you'll automatically be granted a 30-day visa (US\$35).

GETTING TO THAILAND

Heading to northern Thailand, cross the border at Huay Xai to Chiang Khong, where there are connecting buses or *sǎwngthǎew* (small pick-up truck with two benches in the back) to Chiang Rai and Chiang Saen. Huay Xai is accessible by boat from Luang Prabang, Luang Nam Tha and Xieng Kok or by bus from Luang Nam Tha. The ferry ride to Chiang Khong costs 10,000 kip and the Thai border is open from 8.30am to 5pm. Thirty-day visas are issued on arrival on either side. At weekends or during their lunch hour, Lao immigration officers charge an additional 10,000 kip 'overtime' fee. Boats from Pak Beng almost always arrive just a little too late to make the border crossing to Thailand as do buses from Luang Nam Tha. So make sure you're not on the last day of your Laos visa, or you'll be charged for overstaying.

See p744 for information on travelling in the reverse direction.

Thanks to the all but finished Highway 3, the bus journey to Luang Namtha is no longer a tortuous experience; minibuses (which can be organised at BAP, Phoudoi and Friendship guesthouses and cost 400B) leave at 11am and take an easy five hours.

Boats for Luang Prabang leave at around 11.30am from the boat landing at the north end of town, costing US\$13 per person. Get there the afternoon before to buy a ticket or purchase one through your guesthouse. The trip takes two days by slow boat (US\$25), with an overnight stop in Pak Beng, and is a great way to take in the increasingly dramatic scenery toward Luang Prabang, but check whether your boat offers views and if you're allowed on deck. In high heat it can be unbearable if you're stowed away in the bowels of your charter. If asked to pay for insurance, refuse point blank; it's a scam.

Speedboats for Luang Prabang (US\$40) leave from the landing 2km south of town at 11am. The trip takes six hours and unless you love white-knuckle experiences, don't mind being cramped and narrowly avoiding pillars of underwater rocks, this may not be your idea of fun. Helmets and life-jackets are provided. In the dry season it's advised not to travel; officially sanctioned boats are forbidden; however, there's always someone prepared to take the risk. Considering someone dies in these flimsy boats almost yearly it's worth asking yourself if you're really in that much of a hurry.

One of the most talked about boat journeys is the route upriver to Luang Nam Tha (impossible in the dry season), terminating at the now famous Boat Landing Eco lodge (www.theboatlanding.laopdr.com). Boats take up to 10 people with a typical charter costing US\$110.

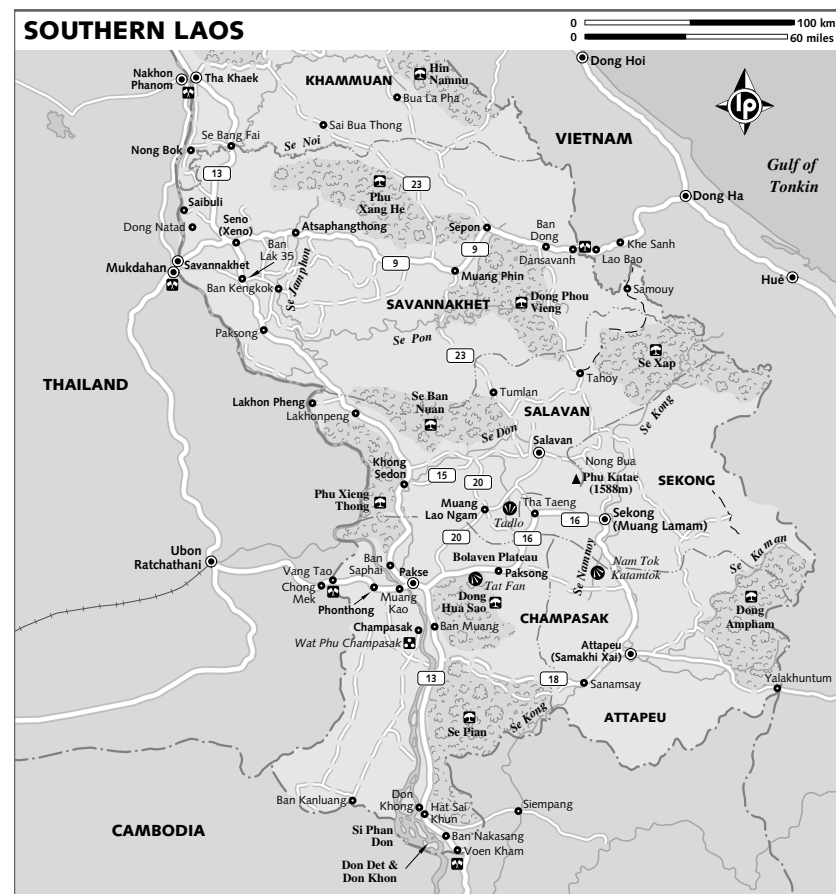
SOUTHERN LAOS

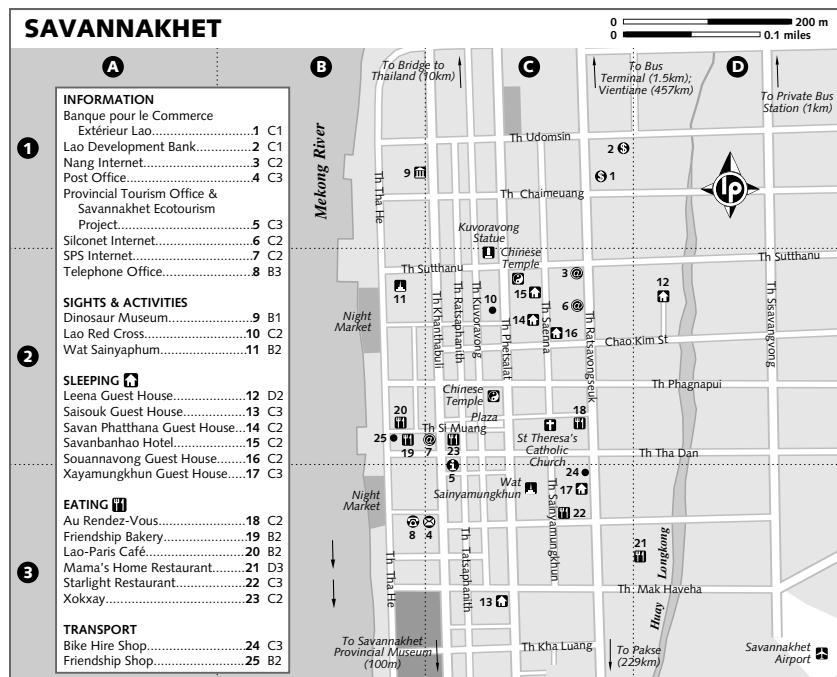
The tourist industry is much less developed in southern Laos than in the north, with only a handful of areas visited by travellers heading to and from Vietnam and Cambodia. Most travellers make time to visit the Unesco World Heritage-listed Khmer ruins at Wat Phu Champasak and otherworldly Si Phan Don (Four Thousand Islands). However, the lush fertile highlands of the Bolaven Plateau, with its coffee plantations and dramatic, plunging waterfalls, and the faded charms of Savannakhet are also must-sees on your travels around the south.

SAVANNAKHET PROVINCE Savannakhet

☎ 041 / pop 120,000

Laos' third-largest city is a confection of beautifully faded Indochinese mansions and flat-topped Soviet-style houses. Indeed, the crumbling colonial buildings, some sheltering food vendors, others overgrown with weeds, have a ghostly charm that has been lost in the gentrification of Luang Prabang. The streets are abloom with bougainvillea, and the locals are still curious about visitors. Thanks to the recent opening of the Mekong Bridge, further connecting Laos with Thailand, the city's status as an important trade hub has been resuscitated.





ORIENTATION

Savannakhet is a great sprawl of boulevards and narrow streets, and the best way to meander through its sleepy streets is on a bicycle. Most of the town's (charmingly) limited activity is near the river.

From the bus station on the north side of town, you should be paying around 10,000 kip to travel the 2km into the centre.

INFORMATION

Internet Access

Nang Internet (☎ 252066; Th Ratsavongseuk; per hr 4000 kip; ☎ 9am-10pm) Broadband connection in a cool room on the cnr of Th Sutthanu.

Silconet Internet (☎ 213560; Th Ratsavongseuk; per hr 4000 kip; ☎ 9am-10pm) Large shop with excellent facilities, including cold drinks, tea and instant coffee.

SPS Internet (☎ 212888; Th Khanthabuli; per hr 12,000 kip; ☎ 10am-10pm) Opposite the plaza with plenty of terminals.

Money

The following two banks, located in close proximity to each other, have exchange

counters. You can also exchange money next to the immigration office.

Banque pour le Commerce Extérieur Lao

(☎ 212226; Th Ratsavongseuk; ☎ 8.30am-4pm)

Lao Development Bank (☎ 212272; Th Udomsin; ☎ 8.30-11.30am & 1.30-3.30pm)

Post

Post office (☎ 212205; Th Khanthabuli; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm) This is situated couple of blocks south of the plaza.

Telephone

Telephone office (☎ 212047; Th Khanthabuli; ☎ 8am-10pm) This office is located behind the post office. Overseas calls are available here using a phonecard.

Tourist Information

Provincial Tourism Office & Savannakhet Ecotourism Project (☎ 214203; savannakhet guides2@yahoo.com; Th Ratsaphanith; ☎ 8am-noon & 1.30-4pm) Has hand-drawn maps of town, brochures and photos with descriptions of nearby sites. It also runs one- to five-day environmentally driven treks to NPAs

BEER SHOPS

If an establishment looks like a restaurant, but inside there are only men sitting around drinking beer and there's no sign of a kitchen or menu, you have probably stumbled on one of Laos' 'special' beer shops, where a bottle of draught is sometimes followed by an appointment with a friendly lady whose affections come at a price.

in the region, which leave on different days of the week with a minimum number of participants. Nang, a lovely lady, works here both as a guide and info officer and her English is solid.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The **Savannakhet Provincial Museum** (Th Khanthabuli; admission 5000 kip; ☎ 8-11.30am & 1-4pm Mon-Sat) is a good place to see war relics, artillery pieces and inactive examples of the deadly UXO that has claimed the lives of over 10,000 Lao (one third of them children) over the last 30 years. There's also a display dedicated to political leader Kayson Phomvihane, who was born only 1km away from Savannakhet. To gain access to the collection try the curator's house – a wooden building in the southwest corner of the School of Medicine compound.

The nostalgia-evoking exhibits at the **Dinosaur Museum** (☎ 212597; Th Khanthabuli; admission 1000 kip; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri) inspire a certain childlike wonderment at prehistoric times. Savannakhet Province is home to five dinosaur sites. This is a well-presented little museum with an enthusiastic curator.

The oldest and largest monastery in southern Laos, **Wat Sainyaphum** (Th Tha He) was originally built in 1542, although most of what stands today is from the last century. The grounds are large and include a couple of centuries-old trees; the one by the northern gate is colourfully decorated with a small shrine at its base.

Lao Red Cross (☎ 214670; Th Phetsalat; ☎ 10am-9pm) offers traditional herbal sauna (15,000 kip) plus vigorous Lao-style massages (25,000 kip). Money raised, coupled with donations from the government, Médecins Sans Frontières and Unicef, helps fund AIDS-prevention workshops and care for those in the province infected with HIV.

SLEEPING

Ourpick Saisouk Guest House (☎ 212207; Th Phetsalat; r 30,000-50,000 kip) A few blocks south of the centre, this large wooden house is spotlessly clean and the owner welcoming. There's also a communal area with a large TV to catch up on the news (satellite). One room comes with air-con and private bathroom. Showers are cold-water only. The guesthouse's gates are locked at 11pm.

Savan Phatthana Guest House (☎ 214242; Th Saenna; r 30,000-50,000 kip) An OK option if Souannavong Guest House is full, or you're on a tighter budget. The rooms, off a wide corridor, are a little musty and resident geckos are complimentary. All have fans and attached cold-water bathrooms without sinks.

Xayamungkhun Guest House (☎ 214246; Th Ratsavongseuk; r 35,000-80,000 kip; ☎) In one of the last colonial-era buildings still being used as a guesthouse, Xayamungkhun has clean wood-floored rooms with an inviting atmosphere. The downstairs sitting area has a shelf full of second-hand books to peruse.

Savanbanhao Hotel (☎ 212202; Th Saenna; r 45,000-90,000 kip; ☎) Plenty of rooms, all with electric hot water, though a little shabby and nondescript. Also hires scooters for US\$8 per day, more if you want to leave the city. The restaurant is now closed as is the tour agency which used to operate here.

Leena Guest House (☎ 212404; Th Chao Kim; r 50,000-60,000 kip; ☎) One of the better guesthouses, rooms here are quiet and shaded with air-con and fan. There's a sense of pride and sanitary obsessiveness (extending as far as free contraceptives).

Souannavong Guest House (Th Semma; ☎ 212600; r 60,000-80,000 kip) Fresh accommodation offering shady spots to read with very clean rooms with fan and hot water. It is located down a peaceful bougainvillea-bordered street.

EATING

With only a few restaurants catering for the Western palate, Savannakhet has a more authentic feel to its gastronomy than some of the major places you'll visit. Besides the places highlighted here, there are also dozens of street-side vendors (especially by the river in the evening) serving up local food and atmosphere to go with it.

Starlight Restaurant (☎ 213026; Th Sainyaphum; mains 2000 kip; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Situated in

GETTING TO THAILAND**To Mukdahan**

With the bridge at the Savannakhet–Mukdahan border now built, you no longer have to catch the ferry to Thailand. Buses leave Savannakhet's Public Bus Station to Mukdahan every hour from 8.15am till 7pm. The border is open from 9am to 4.30pm; travellers are automatically granted a free 30-day visa on arrival in Thailand. It's a long way south to Ubon, where you can catch a night sleeper train or VIP bus to Bangkok.

See p756 for information on doing the journey in the reverse direction.

To Nakhon Phanom

Another river border crossing further south takes you from Tha Khaek in Laos to Nakhon Phanom in Thailand, although it is rarely used by *falang* (foreigners).

There are frequent *sāwngthāew* (small pick-up truck with two benches in the back) and buses to Tha Khaek from Savannakhet (see opposite for details), and boats between Tha Khaek and Nakhon Phanom run half a dozen times a day.

The border is open from 8.30am to 3.30pm daily, and free 30-day Thai visas are granted to most nationalities on entry.

See p757 for information on doing the trip from Thailand to Laos.

an attractive colonial building, Starlight has a dazzlingly comprehensive menu ranging from steamboat barbeque to Western, noodles and a handsome selection of Mekong seafood. Try the fried squid...umm!

Mama's Home Restaurant (☎ 231592; off Th Mak Haveha; meals 5000-15,000 kip) A few blocks from the centre but well worth the trek. Follow the signs from the canal and bring a torch (flashlight) if it's after dark. Literally in Mama's home replete with photos of her kids on the walls. You can catch up on some cable TV news, or watch a film – you just have to ask.

Lao-Paris Cafe (☎ 212792; Th Si Muang; meals 8000-25,000 kip; ☎ lunch & dinner) Located across the road from the old ferry terminal, this *falang* haunt is a low-ceilinged affair decorated with red lanterns and stone floors. The menu covers both Lao and French food. The service is indifferent but who cares – the food is good and the place has atmosphere.

Friendship Bakery (Th Tha Dan; ☎ 213026; meals 10,000-20,000kip; ☎ breakfast & lunch) Next to the now derelict Santyphab Hotel, this fresh, new café has a fine array of alchemized chocolate fudge brownies, cakes and pastries.

Au Rendez-Vous (☎ 213181; Th Ratsavongseuk; meals 10,000-30,000 kip; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Open, ventilated restaurant on the busiest road in town, serving a range of Chinese, Vietnamese and international dishes. Sadly the service is lacking due to the Thai music channel blaring from the TV a few yards away.

Xokxay (☎ 213122; Th Si Muang; mains 20,000 kip; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Tucked at the side of the square down from the Catholic church, this authentic little diner delivers with chiefly Chinese and Lao food, and Western breakfasts.

For a Lao-style dinner on a budget try the riverside vendors that are situated both north and south of the ferry pier, plus the restaurants on the plaza.

GETTING TO VIETNAM

If you're heading through Laos in a hurry to get to Vietnam, Rte 9 takes you from Savannakhet to the Dansavanh–Lao Bao border; this is the most popular land crossing into Vietnam. It takes 3½ hours to travel from Savannakhet to Dansavanh; bus times and tickets are available from the Provincial Tourist Office (p392). From the border, you're near Hué, but a long way south of Hanoi if you wanted to visit Vietnam's north. Buses go to Dong Ha in Vietnam (nine hours), from where there are connecting buses to Hué (three hours), Danang (six hours) and Hanoi (15 hours). A tourist bus also does the trip every other day.

See p858 for information on doing the journey in the opposite direction.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Lao Airlines (code QV; ☎ 212140; www.laos-airlines.com) flies twice weekly to Savannakhet from Vientiane (US\$60).

Buses to Vientiane (55,000 kip, eight to 10 hours) leave from the bus terminal at the north end of town from 6am until 6pm. A VIP express bus leaves the private bus station (70,000 kip, six to seven hours) at 9.30am. For Tha Khaek, frequent *sāwngthāew* (20,000 kip, two to three hours) depart all morning, enabling you to stop for a few hours to break up the journey to Vientiane. All public buses heading north go via the bus station on the outskirts of Tha Khaek.

Heading south, regular buses (US\$12, five hours) depart all morning for Pakse. A tourist bus to Dong Ha in Vietnam leaves from the Savanbanhao Hotel (US\$12, nine hours) at 7.30am.

GETTING AROUND

A túk-túk to the bus station or just about any location around Savannakhet costs 5000 kip per person. Bicycles can be rented from the **Friendship Shop** (☎ 213026; Th Si Muang; per day 10,000 kip; ☎ 8am-7pm) or a **bike hire shop** (☎ 213149, 020 565 8379; Th Ratsavongseuk; per day 10,000 kip; ☎ 8am-6pm), two doors north of Xayamungkhun Guest House.

Pakse

☎ 031 / pop 70,000

Pakse is very much the transport hub of the south thanks to its location beside the Mekong and the country's main highway, Rte 13. It's generally viewed as a stepping-stone by travellers en route to Si Phan Don further south or fresh out of Cambodia heading north. Perhaps not the most photogenic place, it has an easy charm and is a great base for day trips to ancient Wat Phu, sleepy Don Kho, and waterfalls Tad Lo and Tad Fan, high up in the coffee-growing region of the Bolaven Plateau. Thanks to the opening of a **Green Discovery branch** (☎ 252908; www.greendiscoverylaos.com; Rte 13), white-water rafting trips and three-day paddles to Si Phan Don are taking form.

ORIENTATION

Central Pakse is bound by the Mekong to the south and by the Se Don to the north and west. Rte 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 station and market are 8km in the opposite direction.

INFORMATION**Emergency**

Hospital (☎ 212018; cnr Th 10 & Th 46)

Police (☎ 212145; Th 10)

Internet Access

@d@m's Internet (☎ 251445; Rte 13; per hr 5000 kip) Fast connections, but the extra expense per minute – even if time is calculated more accurately than elsewhere – was sending customers to other outlets.

Lankham Internet (☎ 213314; Rte 13; per hr 6000 kip) Broadband connection in a cool room annexed to the Lankham Hotel, drinks available.

Vandersa Internet Service (☎ 212982; Rte 13; per min 200 kip; ☎ 8am-11pm) Internet plus fruit shakes, the perfect combination!

Money

There is one **ATM** in town, at the **Banque pour le Commerce Extérieur Lao** (☎ 212770; Th 11; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri), which also offers good rates and does cash advances from Monday to Friday. The ATM however, only accepts cards with a MasterCard symbol and often runs out of cash at the weekend. If the latter happens your only option for exchanging cash and travellers cheques or getting a cash advance, all for a hefty commission, is at **Champa Residence Hotel** (☎ 212120; Rte 13), 2km east of the centre. If you have no joy here and your time is short, you'll have to head over to Thailand and have your driver wait while you cross the border (with an explanation to Thai passport control you can leave your passport with them without getting stamped, while you pop to the ATM).

Lao Development Bank (☎ 212168; Rte 13; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm) Exchanges travellers cheques and cash.

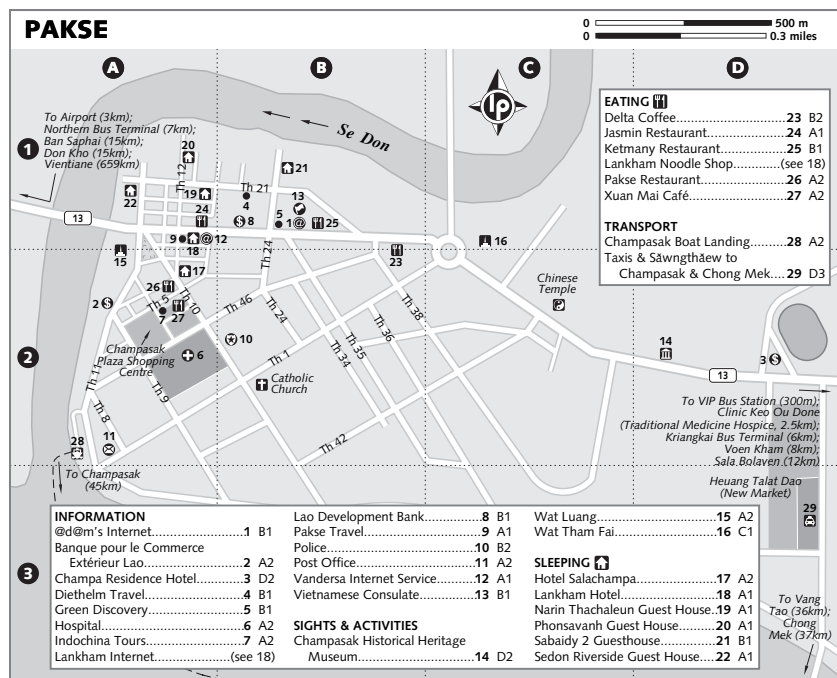
Post

Post office (☎ 212293; cnr Th 1 & Th 8; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm)

Travel Agencies

Diethelm Travel (☎ 212596; dtlplkz@laotel.com; Th 21) Around the corner from Sabaidy 2 Guesthouse. Organises tours to the Bolaven Plateau and Wat Phu Champasak.

Green Discovery (☎ 252908; Rte 13; www.green-discoverylaos.com) Still finding its feet here, offering white-water rafting, treks to the Bolaven Plateau and three-day canoeing trips down to Four Thousand Islands. It can also



provide minibus transport to Four Thousand Islands for a competitive US\$6, leaving at 8.30am and 11.30am (2½/hr).

Indochina Tours (☎ 212620) At the northern entrance to the market off Rte 5, Indochina is a good place to head for advice; organises visas, trips to Wat Phu, travel tickets. Some of the staff speak good English.

Pakse Travel (☎ 277277; Rte 13) Next to the Lankham Hotel, this little outfit can organise visas, forward travel tickets north and south and a range of treks.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

There are 20 wats in town, the largest are **Wat Luang**, featuring ornate concrete pillars and carved wooden doors and murals, and **Wat Tham Fai**, which has a small Buddha footprint shrine in its grounds.

The Champasak Historical Heritage Museum (Rte 13; admission 3000 kip; ☎ 8-11.30am & 1-4pm) documents the history of the province, with historical photos and ethnological displays. Some exhibits have captions in English, for others you'll have to let the pictures tell the story.

For a vigorous Lao massage (albeit slightly distracted by pressing mobile-phone calls) **Clinic Keo Ou Done** (Traditional Medicine Hospice; ☎ 251895; ☎ 4-9pm Mon-Fri & 10am-9pm Sat) can be

found down a road off to the right, 100m before the Km 3 marker east along Rte 13.

For the languid fishing island of **Don Kho**, an easy 30km drive south of Pakse, head north out of town following signs for Savannakhet, and take the Ban Xaphai turn on your left. A pleasant ride past buffalo-dotted emerald paddy takes you to the port where you can catch a longtail for US\$2. The island itself has a couple of wats, a handicraft market and motley gang of toddlers who may extort money from you on the northern tip of the island.

For something different, **Sala Bolaven** (☎ 020 580 0787; Km 12 Rte 16; ☎ 9am-4pm) offers free tastings and sells produce exported to Europe through the Fair Trade network. Try jams, iced tea, Lao Bia (palm beer), local wine and coffee. To get here take Rte 13 to the southern bus station and follow the road to the left towards Paksong. It's a 12km slightly uphill (downhill on the way home!) bike ride, or a 10,000-kip tuk-tuk ride. The newish shop has outdoor seating and at the time of research there was talk of opening a small kitchen down the track.

SLEEPING

Our pick Sabaidy 2 Guesthouse (☎ 212992; Th 24; dm 20,000 kip, r 40,000-50,000 kip) This old-timbered French building is a traveller's rest. The owner, Mr Vong, extends a warmth and hospitality unrivalled elsewhere in town. Free maps are available should you decide to rent one of their mopeds (US\$8 per day) and explore the Bolaven Plateau. There's a pleasant harbour to chill and meet others. Rooms are basic, all with fan. Beds could be comfier and less itchy but it's the atmosphere you pay for here.

Sedon Riverside Guest House (☎ 212735; Th 10; r from 40,000 kip) A tranquil setting with great views of the river from a secluded communal area. Rooms are large with fan but nothing to shout about. What it lacks in finesse, Sedon compensates with the friendliness of its staff; the owner may offer you a free coconut with a straw in it on your arrival.

Phonsavanh Guest House (☎ 212482; Th 12; r 50,000-70,000 kip) Tucked down a dirt road, this is an adequate prospect with simple fan rooms, some with en suites and hot showers. Management is a little surly though.

Lankham Hotel (☎ 213314; lathan@laotel.com; Rte 13; r 50,000-80,000 kip; ☎) This four-storey behemoth is an old favourite, rooms are clean, some with en suite and TV. Try for one at the back as you get a dramatic view of the mountain. Downstairs is one of Pakse's best noodle shops. Also rents bikes (25,000 kip per day) and Baja motorbikes (US\$18 per day).

Narin Thachaleun Guest House (☎ 212927; Th 21; r 60,000-80,000 kip; ☎) This place has 12 rooms, all of them cool with high ceilings in a modern Thai-style house. Nondescript accommodation except for the room in the garage, which offers fine views of a souped-up Morris Minor – seriously!

Hotel Salachampa (☎ 212273; Th 10; r 120,000-170,000; ☎) One of the prettiest remnant French villas in town, Salachampa has sumptuous outside bungalows with air-con or more expensive rooms in the main house. There's also a lovely lounge to sit and read in. Fresh linen every day.

EATING

Ketmany Restaurant (☎ 212615; Rte 13; meals 10,000-30,000 kip; ☎ lunch & dinner) Lit up like Christmas, Ketmany serves decent Chinese and international dishes. Coconut ice cream recommended. Does the owner remind you of a Lao Basil Fawlt?y

Delta Coffee (☎ 212488; Rte 13; meals 15,000-30,000 kip; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Offering decent Western breakfasts, Italian and Thai food, this popular spot is a five-minute walk from Sabaidy 2. The best cappuccino in Pakse.

Jasmin Restaurant (☎ 251002; Rte 13; meals 20,000 kip; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Beside Nazim's, this no-frills backpacker haunt is consistently on form with its tasty southern Indian fare. The wood-fired, envelope-thin nan bread is delicious and the owner, Deen, so welcoming you may be coming back a few times.

Xuan Mai Cafe (Rte 10; meals 20,000-30,000 kip; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) On the corner of Rtes 5 and 10, this is an authentic pavement joint cooking up sizzling Lao and Vietnamese dishes before your eyes. Street alchemy.

Pakse Restaurant (☎ 212131; Th 5; meals 20,000-40,000 kip) Seven floors up, this new roof-terraced restaurant is both relaxing and dramatic. From this lavish vantage you can see the Mekong rolling by and soak up the sunset with a cool Beer Lao. The menu is keen to please with Lao and Western food on offer. The *lap moo* is pretty tasty.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Lao Airlines (code QV; ☎ 212252; www.laos-airlines.com; Th 11; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) flies to Pakse daily to and from Vientiane (US\$100 one way). Flights from Pakse to Siem Reap on Wednesday, Friday and Sunday (US\$70) are a good option if you've come this far without a Cambodian visa.

Boat

Regular local boat services run from Pakse to Don Khong via Champasak (US\$3 going south, US\$5 coming north, six to 10 hours), leaving at 8am from near the junction of the Se Don and the Mekong. You'll be dropped in Ban Hua Khong, a small village near the north tip of Don Khong. From there a tuk-tuk (1000 kip per person, 12km) or motorcycle taxi (1500 kip) will take you around to Muang Khong where plenty of guesthouses are located. Boats heading back to Pakse usually leave Ban Hua Khong between 6.30am and 8am and take about 11 hours.

Bus & Sǎwngthǎew

There are four different bus stations in Pakse and as such it can be a little confusing. Pakse has several bus and *sǎwngthǎew* 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.

At the **northern bus terminal** (☎ 251508; Rte 13), 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 transport south and east, go to the Kriangkai bus terminal (aka southern terminal), 8km south of town on Rte 13 and a 5000 kip tük-tük ride away. To Champasak buses (US\$1.30, two hours, two daily) depart at 10am and noon. Other departures include Don Khong (US\$3, three hours) at 8am and 10am; Tat Lo (US\$1.20, two hours) at 9am; and Ban Nakasang for Don Det and Don Khon (US\$2, three to four hours) at 7am, 8.30am, 10am and 11.30am. Săwngthăew and pick-up trucks also leave the southern bus station regularly between about 7am and 3pm for Champasak (US\$1, two hours), Don Khong (US\$3, three hours), Ban Nakasang (US\$2, three to four hours) and Voeng Kham (US\$2.50, three to five hours).

KVT (☎ 212228), which operates out of Kriangkai bus terminal, runs a well-oiled service to Ubon (US\$3, 2.30pm, 3.30pm), for those headed over the border to Thailand. Take the earlier bus if you want to ensure getting to Ubon train station to catch the night-sleeper to Bangkok (7pm), or book a through ticket to Bangkok's main bus terminal with KVT (US\$18).

Regular săwngthăew and pick-ups leave Talat Dao Heuang (New Market) for the Thai border (see the boxed text, below).

GETTING AROUND

Pakse's main attractions are accessible on foot. Bicycles (10,000 kip per day) and scooters (US\$8 to US\$10 per day) can be hired from **Sabaidy 2 Guesthouse** (☎ 212992; Th 24) and **Lankham Hotel** (☎ 213314; latchan@laotel.com; Rte 13).

Bolaven Plateau

The fertile Bolaven Plateau (Phu Phieng Bolaven in Lao) rises 1500m above the Mekong valley – 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, Ta-oy, Suay and Katu. The Alak and Katu arrange their palm-and-thatch houses in a circle. They are well known in Laos for a water buffalo sacrifice, which they perform yearly, usually on a full moon in March (see also opposite). 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.

TADLO

Cool and peaceful, the broad 10m-high Tadlo falls and Saset River are surrounded by forests and villages inhabited by the Katu and Alak. This is a popular spot for day treks, elephant riding and of course swimming. Although the recent guesthouse boom gives the area a

resort-like feel, the nearby local village is still distinctly Lao.

Activities

Most travellers spend their time **swimming** around Tadlo and Tadhing, reading, walking in the surrounding forest, and generally relaxing with the sounds of constantly tumbling waterfalls. Tadhing, a few hundred metres along, has a deep swimming hole and is also a popular local fishing spot.

Other activities include **trekking** in the forest either on your own (stick to the track) or with a guide from Tim's Guest House & Restaurant to surrounding villages and waterfalls. Guided treks start at 30,000 kip per person. For more information and maps ask at Tim's. Both Tadlo Lodge and Tim's Guest House & Restaurant organise **elephant rides** through the forest and streams, costing 50,000 kip for 1½ hours. Tim's also hires out bikes for 8000 kip per hour to cycle to local villages.

Sleeping & Eating

Tim's Guest House & Restaurant (☎ 214176; r with shared bathroom 25,000 kip) This is by far the best set-up in Tadlo, with comfortable bungalows, ceiling fans, shared hot-water bathrooms and internet facilities. The restaurant serves breakfast, lunch and dinner (meals 6000 to 15,000 kip). Tim's also offers water-bottle refills (1000 kip), transport to the main road (3000 kip) and a book exchange. The English- and French-speaking owner has travel information in a neighbouring hut.

Sephaseuth Guest House & Restaurant (☎ 214185; r 40,000-60,000 kip) There are five clean – although a little gloomy – rooms here, in a wooden building by the river. The attached restaurant, serving breakfast, lunch and dinner (15,000 to 30,000 kip for a meal), is a popular spot in the afternoon.

Saylomyen Guest House (020 227 5542; r with shared bathroom 30,000 kip) This guesthouse offers the cheapest river views from simple huts with fans.

Getting There & Away

From Pakse, buses heading for Salavan drop you at the Tadlo turn-off (just ask for Tadlo). They leave at 7am, 9am, 10am, 11am and 1pm (12,000 kip, 1½ hours). From the turn-off just after the bridge, it's a 2km walk (or a 3000 kip tük-tük ride) to Tadlo. Leaving Tadlo, get to the bridge early to catch a Pakse bus.

Champasak

☎ 031

Once the capital of a Lao kingdom, Champasak is now a lazy one-street town. The main road runs parallel to the river then turns inland and makes its way to the dramatic mountain-side location of Wat Phu Champasak. Most visitors use the town as a base for visiting the ruins, although some choose to see the ruins on a day trip from Pakse. Champasak boasts great views of the Mekong's riverside beaches and a serene atmosphere. Activity centres on the ferry wharf and, at the other end of town, Wat Phu Champasak. Guesthouses are mainly found near the fountain.

This town cranks it up every year when pilgrims from near and far amass for **Bun Wat Phu Champasak**. During this three-day Buddhist festival (usually February) worshippers wind their way up and around Wat Phu Champasak, praying and leaving offerings; bands play traditional and modern music; young and old dance together; and Thai boxing, comedy shows and cockfights all add to the entertainment.

If you've got time, visit the nearby fishing island of **Don Daeng**; secluded, sleepy and utterly unblemished by the tourist trail. There's neither guesthouse nor restaurant to be found, which is what makes the short ferry trip here (3000 kip return) so rewarding. Ask your boatman to pick you up after two hours and take your bike for a blissful trip around the happy-faced island of paddy fields and horizontal locals. There's a beach for swimming in the cool green water, but mind the currents; the wider the river the stronger it gets.

SIGHTS

Overlooking the Mekong valley, **Wat Phu Champasak** (admission 30,000 kip; ☎ 8am-4.30pm), while not being in the same league as Angkor Wat, is one of the most impressive archaeological sites in Laos and well worth visiting. It's divided into lower and upper parts and is joined by a steep stone stairway, which will stretch your calves a bit so take a break halfway and take in the valley below. The whole site is earmarked for restoration, but progress appears to be very slow.

The lower part consists of two ruined palace buildings at the edge of a large square pond, itself split in two by a causeway, used for ritual ablutions. The upper section is the temple sanctuary itself, which once enclosed a

GETTING TO THAILAND

The crossing at Vang Tao (Laos) and Chong Mek (Thailand) is the busiest in southern Laos and is open from 6am to 5pm daily. From Pakse, săwngthăew (8000 kip, 75 minutes) and taxis run between Talat Dao Heuang and Vang Tao regularly. When you arrive walk up the hill to the building with the green roof, where you'll be stamped in and can buy or sell kip at the exchange office.

Walk through the border to Thai immigration, who'll issue you with a visa; it's free for most nationalities. Continue about 500m to the end of the stall-lined street to the bus station and find a săwngthăew to Phibun (B30, one hour). It will drop you at Chong Mek, a small lively market town where another săwngthăew will soon pick you up for the trip to Ubon Ratchathani (B30, 1½ hours). Buses leave Ubon regularly (including overnight) for Bangkok, and there are several trains as well, including overnight sleepers at 5.55pm (1st class available) and 7.15pm (2nd and 3rd class only); ensure you book ahead to guarantee a berth.

See p755 for information on making the trip in the reverse direction.

& 2-4pm Mon-Fri) is directly west of the boat landing. The **post office** (☎ 8am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri) is next door to Done Khong Guest House, just south of the bridge. In 2005 **Alpha Internet** (per min 1000 kip; ☎ 7am-9pm), 100m north of Pon's Guest House, brought the world wide web to the island. For internet, travel information, visas and bus and boat tickets, talk to Tom at **Lane Xang Travel** (☎ 030-5345262) opposite Souksan Hotel.

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation-wise, the island is certainly more upscale than its sister islands, but no less atmospheric for that. Don Khong has a decent collection of guesthouses and as it's not particularly busy even in the high season, finding a bed shouldn't be a problem. Here are a few good options.

Phoukhong Guesthouse & Restaurant (☎ 213673; r 30,000 kip) Next door to Pon's with a similar outdoor decking overlooking the Mekong, this is a good dining option with a mixed Asian menu. It's open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and meals cost from 7000 to 15,000 kip. Paint-parched, small rooms come with cold-water bathrooms.

Mekong Guesthouse (☎ 213668; r 30,000-40,000 kip; ☎) By the river about 500m south of the boat landing, this guesthouse's more secluded location may appeal to you. The rooms in the main house are basic with wooden floors and riverside views. There's also a nice courtyard threaded with coconut palms and butterflies. The attached restaurant, open for breakfast, lunch and dinner (meals from 5000 to 35,000 kip) has Canadian and Lao food.

Souk Sabay Guest House (☎ 214122; r 50,000-100,000 kip) Secreted down a dirt lane next to Pon's, rooms here are a little poky, a tad musty, but

have cool-tiled floors. There's also one room at 30,000 kip without a toilet. There are bikes to rent at US\$1 per day.

Souksan Guesthouse & Restaurant (☎ 212071; r 50,000-150,000 kip) This is an upmarket complex of sturdy bungalows with fan and en suite. The owner, Tom, knows everything worth knowing about travel to and from the island and runs Lane Xang Travel over the road. Opposite the other side of the hotel, overlooking the river, Souksan Restaurant (meals 19,000 to 53,000 kip; open breakfast, lunch & dinner) serves good Chinese food or, for the seriously homesick, a full roast dinner with mashed potatoes.

Done Khong Guest House & Restaurant (☎ 214010; r 50,000-150,000 kip; ☎) Cool, waterfront colossus boasting fresh, immaculately house-proud rooms with en suites. Opt for fan only and save yourself US\$9. The downstairs restaurant serves excellent noodle dishes. It's open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and meals cost between 8000 and 25,000 kip. Try the grilled Mekong fish.

Villa Khan Khong (☎ 213539; r 60,000-70,000 kip; ☎) For a touch of affordable elegance you can't do better than this excellent, well-run teak mansion one block back from the boat landing. All rooms have smooth old-wood floorboards plus attached cold-water bathrooms. There are irresistible lounging areas inside and on the undercover veranda. Scooters and rusty pushbikes are available for hire. A real sanctuary.

Pon's Guest House (☎ 214037; r 70,000-100,000 kip; ☎) Charming accommodation next to Phoukhong. Redolent of old Indochina with its overhanging mossie nets and ornate bedside lamps, all rooms have air-con. The friendly owner, Mr Pon, can organise dolphin-spotting

day trips to Don Khon. The restaurant, which serves breakfast lunch and dinner (meals 8000 to 20,000 kip), is on decking overlooking the Mekong and the fish specialities are a highlight. Order ahead for the mouthwatering *mak pai* (steamed fish).

Getting There & Away

Lane Xang Travel, Pon's and Done Khong Guest House can organise your return from the island to wherever you need to go, catching a boat first to Hat Xai Khun to pick up your minibus. To Pakse, the bus leaves Hat Xai Khun at around 11.45am (70,000 kip, three hours), stopping en route at Champasak (50,000 kip). For Ubon catch the 11.45am bus (180,000 kip), while for Stung Treng, in Cambodia, the bus leaves at 10am (180,000 kip). Alternatively, Pon's Guest House arranges transport to the border for 50,000 kip.

For Don Det, organise a ride on a boat taking people on a day trip to see the Irrawaddy dolphins (try Pon's Guest House, 40,000 kip one way) or negotiate with the boat drivers near the bridge (you'll need to employ your Lao language skills).

Getting Around

Bicycles can be rented for 15,000 kip per day from guesthouses along the river road or from Alpha Internet. Villa Khan Khong has motorcycles for US\$10 per day. Buses, motorcycle taxis or tuk-tuks run irregularly from Ban Hua Khong to Muang Khong and Ban Huay, from where the car ferry departs.

DON DET & DON KHON

Despite a major tourism boom resulting in an oversaturation of guesthouses, these steamy islands 16km south of Don Khong have managed to retain their beauty and charm, as sarong-clad villagers ply their trade on the iridescent waterways. The two islands are connected by a railway bridge (the only line the French ever laid in Laos) and are traversed by narrow shady paths, which make them ideal for walking and cycling. Don Det has the bigger backpacker scene (avoid the main bungalows strip if you want an early night). Don Khon is better value for money in terms of quality accommodation options, it's also the better island for exploring by day.

Electricity is supposed to arrive on the islands in 2008 which will unavoidably im-

pact on the escapist, candlelit evenings you enjoy at present; however, you can help protect the islands from becoming the south's answer to Vang Vieng by voting with your feet if anyone thinks a TV bar is a great business idea.

Information

It's possible to change US dollars cash at several guesthouses on the island. **Bungalow Souksan** (☎ 020 227 0414) also exchanges travellers cheques with passport ID for a poor rate and high commission (in other words come here with enough money to see you through your stay if you can). **Khieo Internet** (☎ 020 584 1290) offers quick connection for 600 kip per min and can be found near Souksan Bungalows. **Happy Island Internet** (☎ 5494928), around 100m south down the main path, offers the same rate plus travel information, tubing, kayaking, white-water rafting (in the wet season) and tours to see the dolphins. Speak to Mr Boun.

Sights & Activities

If you like dolphin-watching in natural environments you've come to the right place. The best chance of seeing these unusual beak-nosed cetaceans is in the dry season, either early or late in the day. Some people get lucky and view them up-close; we saw them appear within minutes.

The easiest way to get to the sand bar viewing area is to join an organised half-day trip (for around 50,000 kip); sign-up on one of the whiteboards along Sunrise Blvd. Others charter a boat from the pier at Kong Ngay (around 25,000 kip per person). Alternatively, walk or ride to the beach at Ban Hang Khon and ask the boatman to take you from there see the boxed text, p404).

Another must-do-if-you're-motivated, is to **walk** or hire a **bicycle** for the day and explore the dirt pathways circumnavigating and criss-crossing Don Det and Don Khon. The defunct **railway line** (a little rocky on a bike: don't be shocked if you get a puncture and have to walk home) takes you to a French loading pier at the southern end of Don Khon. You can also visit the French-built **concrete channels** on the eastern edge of the Don Khon (head northwest from the railway bridge then turn south about 1km along), or the dramatic **Tat Somphamit** waterfalls (go under the railway bridge then follow the road southwest for

GETTING TO CAMBODIA

Once at the Voen Kham-Dom Kralor border (open 8am to 5pm), you'll almost certainly be asked for anything up to US\$5 in 'administration fees' by the guards. It may take a lot of patience to haggle this down, but since Voen Kham is not an official crossing you don't really have much bargaining power. Fees tend to be a lot lower on the Cambodian side and once there vehicles run to Stung Treng, the nearest main town.

Heading from Laos, guesthouses in Si Phan Don can arrange transport to the border (see opposite for details). There are also buses from Pakse to Voen Kham (US\$2.50, three to five hours). You need a visa before you arrive and these start from the day of issue, not the day you arrive in Cambodia. Many choose to fly to Siem Reap from Pakse where a visa is issued on arrival rather than waiting for one from Vientiane.

See p115 for information on doing the trip in the opposite direction.

DIY DOLPHIN

While you can pay to be taken to see the Irrawaddy dolphins by a tour operator it's cheaper to do it yourself. Hire a bike at Souksan Hotel (US\$1), meander down the path over the old French bridge to Don Khon (admission US\$1), then follow the road to the little beach of Ban Hang Khon and you'll find a few boatmen. Try and haggle the price down to US\$4 per person if there's two of you. The longtail trip through the unearthly, rocky waterway is worth the money alone. Should you be lucky enough to see these shy creatures consider it a privilege; there's less than a dozen left in these waters. Local fishermen and the WWF are making efforts to ensure gill-net fishing is practiced away from their habitat as much as possible. Fortunately the Khmer Rouge, their other nemesis, is no longer around to throw grenades in the water.

around 2km). There's a charge of 10,000 kip per day to cross the bridge.

Admirers of waterfalls will like **Khone Phapheng**. Although less dramatic than Tat Somphamit, it is considered the largest (by volume) in Southeast Asia and is therefore a boast-worthy sight to visit. Entry is 10,000 kip and the falls are often included on the itinerary of dolphin-viewing day trips.

Tubing and **kayaking** are both possible around the islands, either organised for you, or do-it-yourself. Tubes are available for hire at a number of guesthouses. Lazing in a tube by the small beach at the northern tip of Don Det is another popular way to pass the day.

Sleeping & Eating

The myriad sleeping opportunities on the two islands vary considerably in quality and price. Near the boat landing on Don Dhet, there's an alley with a dozen cabana guesthouses and self-styled restaurants, which are much of a muchness; however, by heading south you'll find some superior places. Over the bridge on Don Khon, new and fresh accommodation, many featuring fans and en suites as standard, are looking to oust the ultra basic resorts.

If you do opt for a tilted thatched bungalow, make sure it has a mosquito net and hammock (paramount for chilling). Also, try and get one with two windows so you can rely on natural ventilation to keep cool.

River Garden Guest House (☎ 030-5274785; Don Det; r 10,000-20,000 kip) Recent sunrise-facing addition offering spruce and comfortable accommodation. The owner's very friendly and keen to extend a welcome to any gay people looking for a relaxed environment. There's also a nice sundeck festooned in flags, to eat dinner on.

Mamas & Papas Guest House (☎ 020 227 4293; Don Det; r 10,000-20,000 kip) Has cabanas without attached toilet and fan but it catches the river breeze nicely. Losing ground now to the new competition but still good value.

Santiphab Guest House & Mekong Restaurant (☎ 030 5346233; Don Det; r with shared/private bathroom 20,000/50,000 kip) Overlooking the old French bridge this idyllic spot features eight cabanas – Rooms 3 and 4 are new with attached bathroom.

Mr Tho's Bungalows & Restaurant (☎ 020 656 7502; Don Det; r 22,000-25,000 kip) This popular riverside digs has sturdier cabanas than Mamas & Papas. Rooms are basic with two windows for decent ventilation, plus hammocks on verandas. Nice restaurant facing the river, plus a decent stock of old books.

Bounphan Guest House (Don Det; r 40,000 kip) Has sturdy (vertical!) bungalows with hammock-strung verandas. All set in a pretty little garden to watch river-life go by.

Our pick Pan's Guest House (☎ 030-5346939; pkounnavong@yahoo.co.uk; Don Khon; r 50,000 kip) These new riverside bungalows, with their tastefully finished bathrooms and south-facing rooms (avoiding the morning microwave effect) have fans and lovely clean verandas. Definitely head and shoulders over the competition. The restaurant offers a mixed Thai and Western menu with great shakes to boot.

Bungalow Souksan (☎ 030-5345154; Don Det; s/d with shared bathroom 60,000-120,000 kip) On the northern tip of the island, Souksan offers pristine, minimalist bungalows without attached bathrooms in its flower-proud garden. The owner, once she decides she likes you, is very nice and speaks English. The attached restaurant serves Chinese food and a range of cocktails and uses purified water.

Miss Noy's Guesthouse & Restaurant (☎ 020 233 7112; Don Det) The still dazzling Miss Noy is

building new accommodation so her guesthouse is currently closed. By the time you read this her delightful garden should have blossomed with eight new, well-appointed rooms, all enjoying westerly views.

Seng Ahloune Restaurant (☎ 5345807; Don Khon; mains 10,000-30,000 kip) Ambient spot for a Beer Lao moment as the sun sets over the mossy river islets and the night fishermen set to work. Decent authentic Lao menu with an array of fruit shakes.

Chanthounma's Restaurant (Don Khon; mains 15,000 kip) A shaded little café north of the bridge Don Khon side. Specialities include local grilled fish with garlic in an atmospheric setting.

Bamboo Restaurant (Don Khon; mains 20,000-30,000 kip) A little further along past Pan's Guest House, you'll find Bamboo leaning into the river. By night it's decked in lights and has a dash of élan combined with an earthy local menu. Enjoy the local catch whilst watching fishermen drift by in pirogues. Bring some mossie repellent!

Getting There & Around

From Pakse, buses and *sāwngthāew* leave the southern market to Ban Nakasang, the jumping off point for Don Det and Don Khon, every hour until 1.30pm (40,000 kip, four to five hours). From the boat landing it's a 15,000 kip trip to Don Det (slightly more if it's late in the day or if you have fewer passengers). When the river is low and fewer trips are being made, it's harder to get a boat to go further around to Don Khon, so prepare to negotiate.

For buses and *sāwngthāew* back to Pakse, get across to Ban Nakasang early to be sure of a seat and some legroom.

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. The standard of guesthouses has risen in the last few years, as have prices. Guesthouses usually advertise rates in either US dollars or kip and many also accept payment in Thai baht.

Accommodation is cheapest in the rural north and far south, where it's still possible

to find a US\$2 bungalow in backpacker spots like Muang Ngoi Neua and Si Phan Don. In larger towns like Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Savannakhet, Pakse and Luang Nam Tha, expect to pay 50,000 kip for a budget room with shared bathroom and around 80,000 kip for a room with a bathroom or air-con. Unless otherwise noted, prices are for rooms with private bathroom.

ACTIVITIES Cycling

Laos' relatively peaceful roads are a haven for cyclists. It's easy to bring your own bicycle into Laos if you're on a long-distance trip, and if cycling up mountains in the north gets too much, you can flag down a bus. Laos' main towns all have bicycle-rental shops. Note that it is wise to tie your bag in your basket when riding in town. While theft isn't a particular problem in Laos, if the opportunity presents itself you could lose your day-pack to a passing motorcyclist. Mountain-bike tours are run from Luang Nam Tha see p386) and Luang Prabang (see p371).

Kayaking & Rafting

Kayaking and white-water rafting have taken off here 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 in your guides and equipment. **Green Discovery** (www.greendiscoverylaos.com) is the most professional kayaking and rafting outfit in the country and should be your first stop for advice.

Rock Climbing

Currently there is only one organised rock-climbing operation in Laos, also run by **Green Discovery** (☎ 023-511440; www.greendiscoverylaos.com) in the karst cliffs around Vang Vieng. Experienced rock climbers also organise climbing expeditions in Southeast Asia. Contact clubs in your home country to find out more.

Trekking

Laos' endless areas of wilderness are a trekker's dream. Fortunately, responsible travel has taken root in Laos and some of the country's adventure tour companies are

keen to avoid repeating the damage wreaked on Thailand's hill tribes by the tourism industry there. The most popular areas for trekking are Luang Nam Tha, Nong Khiaw, Luang Prabang and the Bolaven Plateau.

Tubing

Something of a Lao phenomenon, 'tubing' simply involves inserting yourself into an enormous tractor tube inner and floating down a river. Vang Vieng is the tubing capital of the country, 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. Lonely Planet also publishes the *Lao Phrasebook*, an introduction to the Lao language.

For some light predeparture reading have a look at *Another Quiet American*, where Brett Dakin shares his sometimes very funny experiences and insights into Laos from an outsider's perspective. *Stalking the Elephant Kings: In Search of Laos*, by Christopher Kremmer, presents a fascinating insight into the last days of King Savang Vatthana before he was removed from the royal palace by the Pathet Lao, and takes up the challenge of solving the mystery of his demise. Harder to track down though often available in Bangkok's airports, *The Ravens: Pilots of the Secret War of Laos*, by Christopher Robbins, is a compelling journey into the lives of the brave, some say lunatic CIA-hired pilots who flew jungle sorties over Laos during the Secret War.

BUSINESS HOURS

Government offices are typically open from 8am to noon and 1pm to 4pm, Monday to Friday. Banking hours are generally 8.30am to 4pm Monday to Friday. Shops have longer hours and are often open on weekends. Restaurants typically close by 10pm and bars stay open until around midnight.

CLIMATE

Laos has two distinct seasons: May to October is wet and November to April is dry. The coolest time of year is November to January and the hottest is March to May, when Southern Laos becomes almost too hot for the locals. 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.

See the climate charts, charts, p916.

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, though it seems pacific at the moment. Rte 7, between Phu Khun and Phonsavan, is rumoured to be smarting with a little Hmong activity and guns are again being carried by some bus drivers.

In 2003 the security situation deteriorated. Ambushes in and around Sam Neua in Hua Phan 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.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Embassies & Consulates in Laos

Visas can be obtained in your home country through the Lao embassy or consulate. See p411 for more details.

Australia (Map pp352-3; ☎ 021-413610; Th Nehru, Ban Phonxay, Vientiane)

Cambodia (Map pp352-3; ☎ 021-314952; Th Tha Deua Km 2, Ban Phonxay, Vientiane)

China (Map pp352-3; ☎ 021-315105; Th Wat Nak, Ban Wat Nak, Vientiane)

France (Map p356; ☎ 021-215253; Th Setthathirat, Ban Sisaket, Vientiane)

Germany (Map pp352-3; ☎ 021-312111; Th Sok Pa Luang, Vientiane)

Indonesia (Map pp352-3; ☎ 021-413900; Th Phon Kheng, Ban Phonsaat, Vientiane)

Malaysia (Map pp352-3; ☎ 021-414203; Th That Luang, Vientiane)

Myanmar (Map pp352-3; ☎ 021-314991; Th Sok Pa Luang, Vientiane)

Philippines (Map pp352-3; ☎ 021-315179; Th Salakokthan, Vientiane)

Singapore (Map pp352-3; ☎ 021-412477; Th Nong Bon, Vientiane)

Thailand (Map pp352-3; ☎ 021-214582; Th Phon Kheng, Vientiane)

UK (☎ 021-413610; Th Nehru, Ban Phonxay, Vientiane)

USA (Map pp352-3; ☎ 021-212581; Th Bartholomie, Vientiane)

Vietnam Pakse (Map p396; ☎ 031-212058; Th 24); Vientiane (Map pp352-3; ☎ 413400; Th That Luang)

Lao Embassies & Consulates Abroad

Australia (☎ 02-6286 4595; 1 Dalman Cres, O'Malley, ACT 2606)

China Beijing (☎ 01-532 1224; 11 Sanlitun Dongsi Jie, Beijing 100600); Kunming (☎ 0871-317 6623; Room 3226, Camelia Hotel, 154 East Dong Feng Rd, 650041)

France (☎ 01-45 53 02 98; 74 av 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)

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

USA (☎ 202-332 6416; 2222 S St NW, Washington, DC 20008)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The Lao Buddhist Era (BE) calendar calculates year one as 638 BC, so AD 2006 is 2644 BE according to the Lao Buddhist calendar.

Festivals are mostly linked to agricultural seasons or historic Buddhist holidays.

February

Magha Puja (Makkha Busaa; Full Moon) This is held on the full moon of the third lunar month. It commemorates a speech given by Buddha to 1250 enlightened monks who came to hear him without prior summons. Chanting and offerings mark the festival, culminating in the candlelit circumambulation of wats throughout the country.

Vietnamese Tet-Chinese New Year This is celebrated in Vientiane, Pakse and Savannakhet with parties, deafening nonstop fireworks and visits to Vietnamese and Chinese temples. Chinese- and Vietnamese-run businesses usually close for three days.

April

Pii Mai (Lunar New Year) This festival begins in mid-April (the 15th, 16th and 17th are official public holidays) and practically the entire country comes to a halt and celebrates. Houses are cleaned, people put on new clothes and buddha images are washed with specially purified water. Later the citizens, their hair dyed red, their faces whitened with talcum powder, take to the streets, drink lots of beer and douse one another with water. Expect to get very, very wet.

May

International Labour Day 1 May is a public holiday. **Visakha Puja** (Visakha Busaa; 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).

Bun Bang Fai (Rocket Festival) One of the wildest festivals in Laos, a pre-Buddhist rain ceremony celebrated alongside Visakha Puja, involving huge home-made rockets, music, dance, drunkenness, cross-dressing, large wooden penises and sometimes a few incinerated houses.

July

Khao Phansaa (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.

September/October

Awk Phansaa (Awk Watsa; Full Moon) Celebrating the end of the three-month rains retreat.

Bun Nam (Water Festival) Held in association with Awk Phansaa. Boat races are commonly held in towns on the Mekong, such as Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Savannakhet.

November

That Luang Festival (Bun That Luang; Full Moon) Takes place at Pha That Luang in Vientiane in early November. Hundreds of monks assemble to receive alms and floral votives early in the morning on the first day of the festival. There is a colourful procession between Pha That Luang and Wat Si Muang.

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 the variety of Thai food and foreigners often limit themselves to a diet of noodles, fried rice and the ubiquitous 'travelers' fare' that has swept Southeast Asia (fruit pancakes, muesli, fruit shakes...) But there are some excellent Lao dishes to try.

The standard Lao breakfast is *fôe* (rice noodles), which are usually served floating in a bland broth with some 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 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.

Most Lao food is eaten with *khào nío* (sticky rice), which is served up in a small wicker container. 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 container. 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 some exotic meats. Appar-

ently these are delicious: wild boar, wild fowl, wild dog and wild squirrel. Monitor lizard and bush rat might take some getting used to.

In main centres, French baguettes are a popular breakfast food. Sometimes they're eaten with condensed milk or with *khái* (eggs) in a sandwich that contains Lao-style pâté and vegetables. When they're fresh, they're superb.

Drink

The Lao Brewery Co produces the ubiquitous and excellent Beer Lao. Imported beers are also available in cans. Lao Bia – a dark, sweetish palm beer made in Savannakhet – is an interesting brew and is sold mostly around southern and central Laos in small bottles with a distinctly antique-looking label.

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. The government distils its own brand, Sticky Rice, which is of course legal. *Lào-lào* is usually taken neat, sometimes with a plain water chaser.

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, however, since unboiled water is often added to it during and after fermentation.

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 *kà-fáe dàm* (black coffee).

Chinese-style green or semicured tea is the usual ingredient in *nàam sàa* or *sáa láo* – the weak, refreshing tea traditionally served free in restaurants. The black tea familiar to Westerners is usually found in the same places as Lao coffee and is usually referred to as *sáa háwn* (hot tea).

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Like Thailand, Laos has a very 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 in Vientiane's late-night clubs you'll see plenty of young gay Lao whooping it up with everyone else. Luang Prabang boasts Laos' first openly gay bar, with the rainbow-coloured gay pride flag flying in a few places around town. See right for information on relations with Lao nationals.

HOLIDAYS

Aside from government offices, banks and post offices, many Lao businesses do not trouble themselves with weekends and public holidays. Most Chinese- and Vietnamese-run businesses close for three days during Vietnamese Tet and Chinese New Year in February.

Most businesses are closed for the following holidays.

Pii Mai (Lunar New Year) 15, 16 and 17 April

Labour Day 1 May

Lao National Day 2 December

INTERNET ACCESS

In Vientiane, there are dozens of internet places with rates at a standard 100 kip per minute. The further you get from Vientiane, the slower and more expensive connections become. At press time, reasonably priced internet was available in most tourism centres outside Vientiane, including Vang Vieng, Luang Prabang, Savannakhet, Pakse and Luang Nam Tha; plus Phonsavan, Udomxai, Don Khong and most recently on Don Det (where internet can be slow and expensive).

INTERNET RESOURCES

Central Intelligence Agency – The World

Factbook (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/la.html>) An encyclopaedic overview of the country.

Laos Globe (www.laosguide.com) This well-organised site compiles news stories about Lao PDR and the overseas Lao community from many online news services.

Laos National Unexploded Ordnance Program (www.uoxlao.org) Information regarding ongoing mine-clearing work in Laos.

Laos-Travel.net (www.laos-travel.net) Travel information and news, with a slick design.

Laos WWW Virtual Library (www.global.lao.net/laovi.html) Comprehensive site with features on Lao culture, art, government and political issues.

Vientiane Times (www.vientianetimes.com) Not affiliated with the newspaper of the same name. Its tag-line, the Gateway to Democracy, says it all.

Visit Laos (www.visit-laos.com) Not the official tourist authority site, but more helpful than many of its offices!

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.

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

An excellent road map of Laos, with city maps of Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Vang Vieng, Muang Sing and Luang Nam Tha, is produced by motorcycle tour company **Golden Triangle Rider Ltd** (www.gt-rider.com).

MEDIA

Laos' proximity to Thailand means Thai satellite TV, which also runs BBC and CNN, is the main source of uncensored world news for many Lao. Two official foreign-language newspapers, the English *Vientiane Times* and the French *Le Rénovateur*, are available at minimarts in Vientiane. Thailand's English-language dailies, the *Bangkok Post* and the *Nation*, are also found in guesthouses and cafés frequented by foreigners.

Lao Airline's *Laos Magazine* looks like it was put together by a high-school student in the 1960s, but has some useful listings and sometimes runs interesting cultural features.

MONEY

The only legal currency is the Lao kip, but three currencies are in everyday use: the kip, US dollar and Thai baht. Prices in this chapter are quoted in kip or US dollars, but pretty much anywhere in Laos will accept any of kip, US dollars or Thai baht, or combinations of all three, as payment. Kip come in denominations of 500, 1000, 2000, 5000, 10,000 and new 20,000 kip notes.

ATMs

There are a growing number of 24-hour ATMs in Vientiane, Vang Vieng, Luang Prabang and Pakse. Some (as is the case in Pakse) are only partial to credit cards with a MasterCard symbol.

Bargaining

Almost everything for sale in Laos can be bargained over and although more upmarket shops have fixed prices it never hurts to suggest an alternative. Lao people are not usually aggressive hagglers and a quiet, gentle bargaining technique works much better than arm-waving melodramatics.

There is a two-tier price system in Laos and foreigners often pay more for goods and services than locals (foreign residents are charged up to 10 times more for utilities, so it's not just tourists being asked for more!). In more heavily toured areas the concept of overcharging tourists has caught on, particularly among túk-túk drivers; but generally in Laos price differences are not worth getting angry about, unless you are being dramatically ripped off.

Black Market

The days of favourable black market moneychanging are over and the best exchange rates are usually available in banks, though most guesthouses and many travel agents will change dollars and baht cash at bank rates.

Credit Cards

Visa cards are becoming more widely accepted these days and many travel agents, upmarket guesthouses, restaurants and shops in tourist areas accept them. MasterCard and Amex are much less common. Cash advances on Visa cards are available in some regional centres but not all so plan ahead.

Exchanging Money

US dollars and Thai baht can be exchanged all over the country. US-dollar travellers cheques can be exchanged in most provincial capitals and attract a better rate than cash. Banks in Vientiane and Luang Prabang change UK pounds, euro, Thai baht, Japanese yen, and Canadian, US and Australian dollars.

The best overall exchange rate is usually offered by Banque pour le Commerce Ex-

térieur Lao. The only advantage of licensed moneychangers is longer opening hours. Exchange rates are as follows:

Country	Unit	Kip
Australia	A\$1	8117
Cambodia	1000r	2389
Canada	C\$1	9348
Euro zone	€1	13,360
Japan	¥100	8,358
New Zealand	NZ\$1	6871
Thailand	10B	3008
UK	UK£1	19,335
USA	US\$1	9627
Vietnam	10,000d	5932

Travellers Cheques

Banks in all provincial centres 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 painfully slow but generally reliable, the provinces less so. If you have valuable items or presents to post home, there is a **Federal Express** (Map p356; ☎ 021-223278; ✉ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) office inside the main post office compound in Vientiane.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

In terms of tourism, Laos is very young and the rapid growth in the country's popularity has taken Lao society a little by surprise. Travellers and locals both raise two main tourism concerns over and over again.

The first is drugs. As Laos opened up to tourism, it gained a reputation as a free-for-all drug haven. It isn't. While opium use has traditionally been sanctioned only for the elderly, attitudes to drugs like marijuana are not very liberal. There is a strong feeling that widespread opium and marijuana use by travellers, who are often seen as wealthy and cool by young Lao, is having a negative influence and drawing them into trouble from which they have little means of escape. If caught smoking opium in the far north you can expect three months in jail. In Vang Vieng possession of a joint may cost you US\$500 in fines. Exercise a little respect and caution before you light up.

Many are also concerned that the exploitative and intrusive Thai-style hill-tribe trekking business is spilling over into Laos. There seems to be a simple solution: the Nam Ha Ecotourism Project Map p356, run from Luang Nam Tha town and Muang Sing, has set up treks with strict guidelines to limit the impact and maximise the economic benefits of trekking to villages, as has Green Discovery. So far the signs are good; it's a project worth supporting. A similar experiment is being conducted by the Provincial Tourism Office & Savannakhet Ecotourism Project (p392).

STUDYING

There are no formal opportunities to study in Laos, but if you are passionately keen to learn more about this country, consider setting up your own study exchange, or develop a research topic, through your home university. Short courses in cooking are available in the capital and informal Lao language lessons are advertised in Vientiane.

TELEPHONE

Laos' country code is ☎ 856. To dial out of the country press ☎ 00 first.

Mobile Phones

If you bring an overseas mobile phone to Laos you can buy a sim card from GMS providers such as Tango for around US\$5 and then purchase credits. But at the time of research coverage was limited to Vientiane province, Luang Prabang, Savannakhet and Pakse, where international SMSing is possible.

Mobile phone numbers in Laos have the prefix ☎ 020 followed by seven digits.

Phonocards

Phonocards for domestic calls can be bought at telephone offices and minimarts for use at the increasing number of public phones in provincial towns. International calls can be made from fixed landlines using an international phonocard.

TOILETS

Unlike Thailand, the hole-in-the-floor toilet is not common. The exception is if you're visiting out-of-the-way destinations such as hill-tribe villages.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The Lao National Tourism Authority maintains offices throughout Laos. Travel agencies and tour companies like Green Discovery, Diethelm and Lane Xang Travel are also excellent sources of information, often staffed by English speakers.

TRAVELLERS WITH DISABILITIES

Laos has virtually no facilities to meet the needs of disabled travellers. Urban pavements are full of hazards and public transport is often cramped. Any trip to Laos will require considerable forward planning. Many international organisations, such as **Mobility International USA** (☎ 541 343 1284; www.miusa.org; PO Box 10767, Eugene OR, USA), have resources, information and tips on travelling with disabilities.

VISAS

On-the-spot 30-day (recently upgraded from 14 days) tourist visas (US\$30 to US\$35 with two passport photos) are available at Vientiane's Wattay International Airport, Luang Prabang International Airport and Pakse International Airport, as well as at the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge at Nong Khai, the Thai border at Huay Xai, Savannakhet, Pakse and the Boten border with China in Luang Nam Tha.

However, the Lao government can be very fickle about its visa regulations and prices. It has cancelled all automatic visas without warning in the past so check the current situation before trying to enter the country. Lao consulates and travel agents in Vietnam, China, Cambodia and Thailand all issue visas and will be able to advise on the latest border crossing situation.

Once in Laos it is easy to obtain a visa extension costing US\$1 per day (from the immigration office in Vientiane; Map p356), up to a maximum of 30 days. Elsewhere, guesthouses and travel agents in provincial centres offer visa extension services for around US\$2 to US\$3 per day. Your passport will be sent to Vientiane, so it can take up to five days depending on how far from the capital you are. If you overstay your visa, you must pay a fine at the immigration checkpoint upon departure. The fine is US\$10 for each day over the visa's expiry date.

VOLUNTEERING

It's not easy to find short-term volunteer work in Laos; however, one place you can walk in off the street is the Phoudindaeng Organic Farm (p365) in Vang Vieng. Occasionally groups seeking assistance from foreigners, such as the teachers' college in Luang Prabang or the orphanage in Phonsavan, will advertise at *falang* hang-outs like restaurants, tourist offices or guesthouses. If you're keen to contribute to the country in any small way, ask around for ideas or projects you can join. If you're passing through Luang Prabang, Luang Nam Tha or Vientiane try and spend some time at Big Brother Mouse (see box p385).

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Women travellers rarely get hassled in Laos, but it does occur. In fact, you are more likely to be troubled by aggressive Western 'guru' male travellers (you know, the ones who have unravelled the spiritual mysteries of existence

and are willing to share them with you in exchange for an invitation to your room) than you are by Lao men. Apart from wandering darkened streets alone at night of course, the main potential danger areas are guesthouses and long-distance buses. Picking a guesthouse run by women will dramatically reduce your chances of trouble. Some women have also been hassled on overnight bus trips, particularly the bus to Vietnam from Vientiane. The best way to combat this threat is to travel in a group and stay alert.

WORKING

Compared to other countries in the region, finding work in Laos is relatively simple. There are an inordinate number of development organisations in Laos (160 at last count), where foreigners with skills can find employment; see www.directoryofngos.org for info. The old standby of teaching English is always an option and schools in Vientiane are often hiring. Ask around.