

Laos (Laos People's Democratic Republic)



Location: Asia

Status: UN Member Country

Capital City: Vientiane

Main Cities: Vientiane, Pakxe, Savannakhet, Luang Prabang,

Xam Neua, Phonsavan, Thakhek, Muang Xai, Vang Vieng, Muang Pakxan

Population: 6,700,000

Area: 236,800 km²

Currency: Kip (LAK)

Languages: National: Lao

Religions: Theravada Buddhism 67%

Calling code: +856

Drive on the right

Laos is the only landlocked country in Southeast Asia. In the northwest the country is bordered by China and Burma, Cambodia to the south, Thailand to the west and Vietnam to the east. If you are looking for Laos in the list of the wealthiest countries in the world, you will not find it and even if you do, it will be the last one. A third of the population lives below the international poverty line. Also, it is ranked among the hungriest nations around the globe.

Nevertheless, the country charms many with its rich culture and heritage sites. The architecture and events in Laos are greatly influenced by Buddhist religion customs. Its past woes and current challenges have not prevented this country from being a destination for many. It receives more than a million visitors per year. This can be attributed to its maintenance of ancient culture that has been washed away in other countries in the region. There are many things to see in the country. Ancient temples grace the Vientiane capital, a blend of modern and historic culture characterizes the Plain of Jars and lots of wildlife in Nam Et-Phou Louey. In addition, there are a number of caves and lofty waterfalls located near Thakhek. You will definitely love the sightly Luang Prabang and Wat Phu, which are UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Best time to go

There is no time that you cannot travel to Laos. Being a landlocked country, it is protected from the effects of coastline. Many tourists visit the country during the dry spell. This season starts in November and goes all the way to February. During this period, rainfall is minimal and the weather is amazing. The average temperature is 28 degrees. This is the most ideal time to travel destinations that are located in the remote areas of the country.

General Information

Passport and visa

One must have a valid visa to enter Laos regardless of the port of entry. This applies for all foreigners except those from Japan and Southeast Asia. In addition, you must bear a valid passport with at least six months allowance before it expires. The visa can be applied in advance or upon arrival. A visa on arrival is valid for 30 days after entry. For the application, you will require two passport size photos. Cost depends on nationality (from US\$30 to US\$42). One passport-sized photograph is required. Alternatively, you can get one from their embassy in your home country, which is more convenient.

Currency

The main currency of Laos is the Kip. However, you will find that US dollars are largely accepted across the country. Hence, ensure that you have enough money in both Kip and dollar currencies. In areas located near the Thai border, the Thai currency, Baht, is commonly used. Visa and MasterCard are becoming more accepted in many of the bigger hotels and restaurants, especially in the larger cities. ATM's are available in larger cities and tourist spots.

Post and Telecommunications

Sending a mail from Laos will cost more than you will in other places. Post cards are cheaper but for the parcels the rates will vary with the weight. Currently, one dollar will fetch you 8000 Kip. By sending a postcard to countries outside Asia, you will have to part with between 11,000 to 12000 Kip. For parcels, the case is quite different; to send a 1kg parcel it will cost you 245,000 Kip to countries far away Asia. Delivery by air is the fastest since it will take approximately two weeks.

Telephone connections to the rest of the world are widely available, however they aren't cheap.

Internet access is available in most major tourist places such as hotels, restaurants and cafes.

Transportation

Getting around in Laos is an adventure by itself. The buses are old and slow. Traveling through short distances can take long as the vehicles try to maneuver their way along the rough roads. Nevertheless, in most cities the road network has been upgraded and the situation is better. Buses are the main transport means that link major cities. The prices are affordable and are in good condition. On the other hand, buses plying remote areas' routes are often aged and slow. If you cannot stand the buses, take a van or minibus, although it will cost you more. These are fast and not congested. For shorter distances, there are three wheelers. Water transport is also available here. There are about 4600 km navigable waterways, where boats are used to ferry passengers to other regions such as Luang Prabang. Cycling is also an option around the city. If your budget allows you can rent a car but expect challenges, for the roads are bad in some areas. Travel by motorbike in Laos is not safe and under no circumstances is this sanctioned.

Taxis and tuk-tuks

This is by far the easiest way to get around towns and cities, and negotiating the price is the norm.

Health and Safety

Climate

Laos experiences a tropical monsoon climate. It features a substantial amount of sunshine, high humidity and high rainfall. Regions that are situated near the mountains tend to exhibit a temperate climate. Average temperatures around the year, fall between 22^oC to 27^oC. There are two distinct seasons, dry and wet. The wet period starts in May and ends in October. It is characterized by heavy rainfall, high humidity levels and cooler temperatures. August is the wettest month and floods are prevalent in the countryside.

The dry season runs from November and February. The temperatures are ambient and the weather is suitable for all kinds of activities. During this period you can sport light clothing but you will still need warm clothing for the evening for it can get cold.

The weather can be unpredictable so it may be a good idea to carry an umbrella or raincoat with you. You can purchase these from most supermarkets and general stores.

Health and well-being

Please be aware that your health can be at risk in Laos due to poor sanitation and lack of effective medical facilities. Rural areas may not have pharmacies and hospitals so make sure you travel with a full supply of any prescribed medicine you take. Every traveller is responsible for his or her own health. First and foremost, make sure that you have travel insurance for your trip. You should also consult your doctor or local travel clinic for the latest information and advice on travelling to Laos before departure.

If you have a medical condition or allergy which requires particular attention, please carry a doctor's letter with you that describes the nature of the condition and treatment needed. We also recommend you pack a medical kit, including paracetamol and a diarrhoea remedy.

Vaccinations

Before travelling to Laos, please ensure you have adequate protection against disease. Contact your doctor for the latest medical advice on the vaccinations you need, no less than two months before your departure.

Travel insurance (compulsory)

We do everything possible to ensure a safe and enjoyable trip. However, travel inevitably involves some risk and this should be recognised by holidaymakers. Travel insurance is a cost effective way of protecting yourself and your equipment should any problems occur such as cancelled trips, delays, medical emergencies, baggage loss or damage. It also gives you peace of mind. Please make sure your travel insurance covers all activities planned on your trip.

Culture & Customs

Laos has a rich culture that has not been eroded by the Western culture. It is therefore important for any visitor to learn how to behave in this country. For an enjoyable vacation, try under all costs to do as Laos people do. They are friendly and welcoming so the least you can do is respect their customs. To start with, do not embrace or kiss a stranger even if you are just showing appreciation. Learn their way of greeting and you will definitely earn their hearts. In addition, regardless of the weather do not dress in flimsy clothes as this will only earn you unwanted attention. Do not display your feelings in the public for it is considered to be insulting and humiliating. As the Buddhism religion dictates, avoid touching an Asian head; you will be courting trouble. Also remember to remain calm in Laos. The people here will not like it even if you shouted to a taxi man. Last but not the least, if you visit any of their residences; remember to leave your shoes outside. In this country just observe what they do and you will have a memorable trip with an interesting story to take home.

Food and drink

Laos's food has some influences from the neighboring Thailand. You will find popular Thailand dishes such as meat salad, papaya salad and Som Tam. However, there are certain meals that are pure Lao. The most famous is "Khao niaw" which is sticky rice. It is largely enjoyed by the Lao ethnic community that resides in the Mekong River Valley. This dish is featured in almost every meal. In the countryside, the people eat it with their hands while sitting on the floor. Besides the sticky rice, other dishes are spicy and delicious.

Laos was a French colony, so expect to find dishes that carry a French touch. Drinks range from tea to the common local beer. It is not advisable to drink tap water. Bottled water is widely available in most shops but in the remote cities, you will need to carry some. You can rest assured of getting quality food in some of restaurants available. All cuisines are represented but try the local dishes too, you will really like them.

Traditional Laotian cooking involves a lot of game, wild boar and river fish. The freshness of ingredients is very important to Lao people who like to prepare everything from scratch. Herbs such as galangal and lemongrass are favourites and padaek (Lao fish sauce) is found on every table. A national dish is called Lap, which is a spicy mixture of marinated meat and/or fish that is sometimes served raw. Like its neighbour countries, rice is a staple food in Laos. However, sticky rice is preferred, which is crushed into a ball with fingers and used to soak up sauces.

Public holidays

New Year on January 1

International Women's Day on March 8

Lao New Year in April celebrated for 3 days and defined by festivities around the country

Labor Day on May 1

Rocket Festival in mid May held at the start of rainy season

Dragon Boat Races held in late summer and early fall in Nam Kan

That Luang Festival celebrated in early November

Lao National Day on December 2 to commemorate the establishment of Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975

Helpful tips

Donations and gift giving

Although there is poverty in certain areas of Laos, please read the following points about donations and gift giving.

Do not give money to people begging, especially children. This reinforces the belief that begging is an acceptable way to make a living. If children make money from begging, their parents are less likely to send them to school. Children working on the streets are also vulnerable to abuse. However in many places, it is considered acceptable to give money to the elderly or disabled people.

Giving money and goods to beggars can accentuate an unequal relationship between locals and visitors, with tourists being seen as purely money givers.

Do not give sweets to children in villages that we visit.

Do not feel that you necessarily have to give material things. Sometimes, giving your friendship, time and interest to locals can be the best gift of all.

Tipping

Tipping is a personal matter and travellers are encouraged to tip any amount they feel is appropriate. For your convenience, we have included a suggested tipping guide below:

Bellboy: \$1

Chambermaid: \$1 per day

Guides: \$5-\$10 per day for guides (depending on group size and performance)

Drivers: \$3-\$5 per day, per person

Restaurants: In smart establishments, you may find that the tip is already included in the bill. In local restaurants, tips are not expected but you may wish to leave loose change on the table.

Price guide

Laos is generally an inexpensive country to travel around; however, some goods are more expensive than neighbouring countries if they have to be imported.

Street food

Noodle soup: 15,000KIP

Noodle with pork/chicken/vegetable: 15,000KIP

Baguette: 15,000 KIP

Restaurants:

Western food: from 45,000 KIP

Lao set menu: 60,000 KIP

Drinks:

Soft drinks: 7,000 KIP

Beer Lao/bottle: 12,000 KIP

Other

Souvenirs (bags/t-shirts): between 30,000-150,000 KIP

Mobile Phone: 200,000 – 250,000 KIP

SIM card: between 10,000- 30,000 KIP

Oversea call: 2,000 KIP/minutes

Bicycle rental: city bikes 20,000KIP, Trek bikes 15USD

DVD: 5,000 KIP

Pre-departure checklist

Travel insurance

Passport with at least six months validity from date of entry

Photocopy of passport

Passport-sized photo and \$USD for visa on arrival

Vaccinations

Foreign currency (US\$) and/or ATM card

All relevant tickets

Reconfirmed flights

Light weight clothing

Long sleeved shirts and trousers (November-February evenings)

Depending on the season, your activities and the region you will be visiting (e.g. mountainous areas) it may be advisable for you to bring a jacket with you.

Electrical adaptor: 220V, 50Hz; 2 pin plugs

A small bag/backpack for day and overnight trips

Appropriate shoes for trekking, cycling and walking

Insect repellent

Sunscreen

Medication/first aid kit

Please note: Domestic airlines do impose restrictions on baggage at approx 20kg maximum, so travel lightly where possible.