

One month in Laos: an itinerary for the independent traveller

Scarlet Jones Travel

I'll be honest. Independent travel in Laos can be challenging outside of the main tourist hubs, but don't let that put you off.

This itinerary for the independent traveller in Laos will help you to navigate around this wonderfully understated country. The guide is arranged in sections and follows my month long journey with hints and tips along the way.



You can get additional in-depth stories, descriptions and information about what to see and do by clicking on the links which will take you to my relevant blog articles and other sites.

This guide will give you an overall understanding of the country and its people, but don't take my word for it. Read the guide and then go and see for yourself.

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Introduction

Travel in Laos can be difficult outside of the main tourist hubs. English is not spoken widely nor even understood. In fact, outside of the main tourist centres the men and women will very possibly avoid eye contact with you at all costs, whereas the children will at first look at you with shy smiles and then eventually they will bombard you with questions in basic English.

Transport can be erratic; the vehicles are clearly dangerous and even the main highways are more potholes than soil.

The weather can be merciless – with high humidity and a searing sun or torrential downpours of rain which turns the earth roads into quagmires and the cold will eat into your bones.

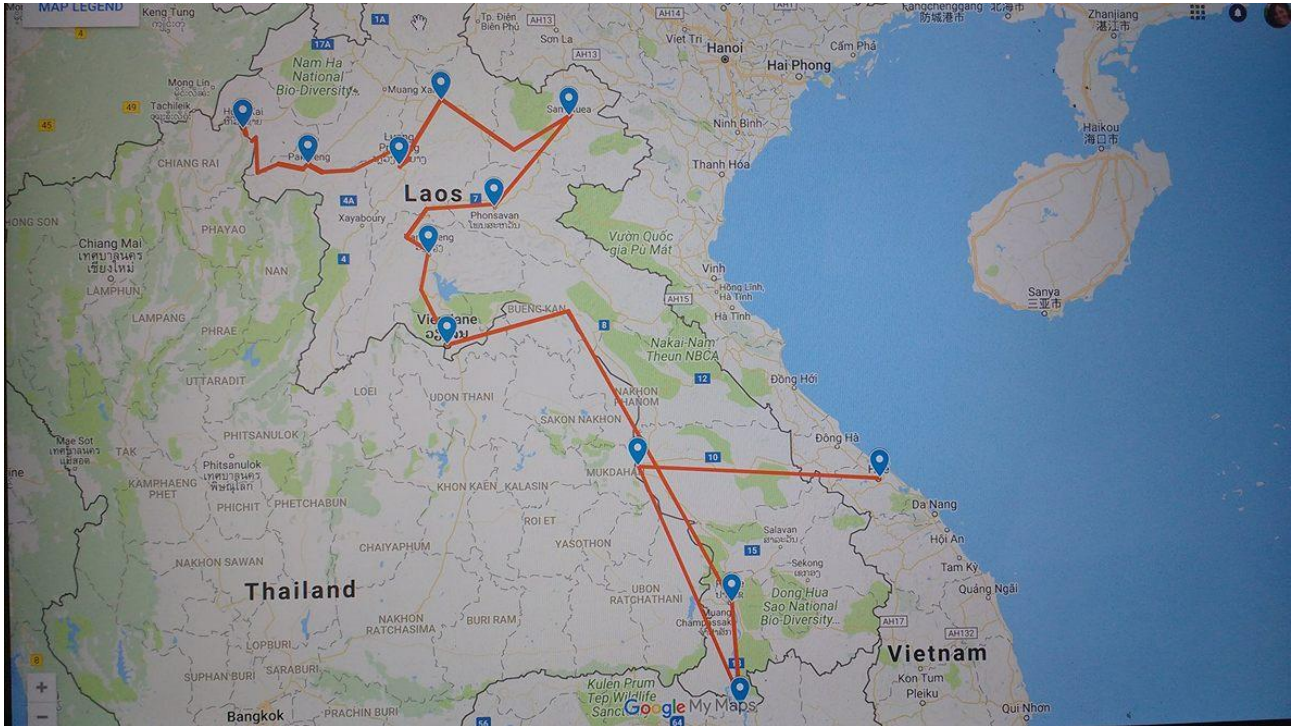
The Mekong River dominates life in Laos and this month long itinerary follows the river for much of the way. The river forms the border with Thailand and also Cambodia and it provides food and water for drinking, bathing and irrigation, as well as being a transport route.

I was sick and the weather was terrible up in the mountains in the north so I didn't accomplish everything that I had hoped to do; but with a just a bit of effort and the will to achieve, you will be rewarded with an amazing travel experience no matter how much ground you cover.

Laos has a charm that you will either fall in love with or hate; but don't pre-judge. Go and make your own mind up. You could be pleasantly surprised and you will have the time of your life.

(Disclaimer: Information was up to date at the time of publication, but you should always double check and confirm details for yourself)

Map of my route around Laos



Route Details

Entering Laos via Thailand

I entered Laos overland from the north of Thailand. Well, to be more specific, I entered over water.

It had such a lovely romantic ring to it... 'the slow boat from Thailand to Laos along the Mekong River'...and I wanted an authentic experience despite my terror of boats and deep water.

I opted for an organised group border crossing, buying my ticket from a lady who had set up office in her house in Chiang Mai and on departure day I was collected from my hostel in a minivan.

It is possible to do the trip totally independently but I had enough to contend with due to my fear of the journey itself so I was happy to hand over responsibility to somebody else and I made some new friends on the trip - who I have since met up with on several other occasions: to date in Laos, Vietnam and Portugal.

Click below for the link to take you to the detailed article about my trip on the slow boat, stopping overnight at the little jungle town of Pak Ben in Laos and ending in the beautiful town of Luang Prabang.

<https://www.scarletjonestravels.com/asia/slow-boat-from-thailand-to-laos/>

Luang Prabang

Luang Prabang is a charming town. Its UNESCO listed thanks to its traditional wooden buildings and it has plenty of historic wats and golden temples. It is surrounded by water on three sides being at the confluence of two main rivers which run through lush green lands and is an ideal starting point and a gentle introduction for any trip to Laos.

Don't miss:

- Climb Mount Phousi for the views
- Stand on top of the Kuang Si Falls; entry includes the Bear Rescue Centre
- Cross one of the bamboo bridges
- Wander around the night market and buy silk goods
- Breakfast at the traditional morning market with the locals.
- Prepare to be saddened at the UXO Lao Visitors Centre
- Visit the Royal Palace
- Spend an evening at the Story Telling Museum
- Marvel at the historic gold-covered Wats

Slightly disappointing:

Monks gather early every morning for the alms giving ceremony all over South East Asia but here in Luang Prabang it's taken to another level.

On one hand it is a sight to behold as just before dawn hundreds of men and boys dressed in their orange robes file past the tourists and local people who are kneeling on the pavement and collect food and gifts.

It does feel like a privilege to watch this ceremony because of the sheer scale of it, but also many people report that they feel like voyeurs and are embarrassed by the actions of some tourists who flout convention and get right up close to the monks for the perfect photograph.

For 8 great things to do in Luang Prabang click here:

<https://www.scarletjonestravels.com/asia/8-great-things-luang-prabang/>



Nong Khiaw

Nong Khiaw lies to the north of Luang Prabang. It is a small dusty town surrounded by imposing mountains, thick jungle and paddy fields. Mini vans run daily from Luang Prabang. Your luggage will be strapped on top and the roads are rough but the countryside is beautiful.

The best bits

- Climb to the top of the Nong Khiaw mountain
- Stay at Delilah's Hostel – or at least stop off for cake and a film night
- Hire bikes and cycle, along earth roads. You may even see elephants at work.
- Wander around villages which are untouched by time.
- Eat in one of the small Indian restaurants that are in the village
- Watch the local boys play their skilful game of [kataw](#)

Find out more about the charming town of Nong Khiaw in the article over in this link:

<https://www.scarletjonestravels.com/asia/luang-prabang-to-nong-khiaw-laos/>

Xam Neua

We broke our journey from Nong Khiaw in the small town of Xam Neua. We took the tortuous bus from Nong Khiaw because we wanted to visit the large cave complex at Viengxay which had been such an important location during the Secret War.

I was sick, the weather was freezing and the roads were switch-backs all the way through the steep, foggy mountains. Plastic bags were in big demand as just about every passenger vomited for hours on end and we stopped at a grim roadside cafe where I am convinced that I picked up whatever bug was to plague me for the next four months. Our hotel for the night was horrible, the mud on the roads was ankle deep and the rain was relentless

Unless you are heading north I can see no reason to visit this town, but I always try to find the positive in any situation. There were smiles from the people who invited us into their shop to join them huddled around their hot coals and smiles from the women weaving under their houses on stilts and...that's about it.

I'm sure had the sun been out and I hadn't been so sick things this town wouldn't have been so bad.

The weather and sickness got the better of us so we decided not to continue on to the cave complex which would have taken another few days and we headed south west in another beaten-up minivan.

Phonsovan

This was another stop-over point after another nightmare bus journey. We broke our journey south at Phonsovan which is where many people take guides and tours to the Plain of Jars and which we fully intended to explore until the weather and my sickness once again got the better of us.

Like Xam Neua there is not a lot in this town BUT we hit gold and arrived during the Hmong New Year celebrations.

This was a highlight of the northern region of Laos. The sun came out and it seemed that everybody of Hmong descent in Laos was in the town. A traditional fairground had been set up and a courtship ritual was taking place.

Lines of men and women faced each other and nonchalantly tossed tennis balls back and forth while chanting. The idea is to look as bored as possible whilst checking out the prospective marriage candidates.

Everybody was wearing the most fabulous outfits, the girls all had killer heels and the young people were keen to engage with us and were just as intrigued with us as we were with them.

Do read more about the courtship ceremony and see the photos of their wonderful clothes at this link:

<https://www.scarletjonestravels.com/asia/hmong-new-year-2/>

Vang Vieng

This riverside town once had a reputation for booze, drugs and hard partying, with tubing down the river attracting hordes of backpackers although it's now a lot quieter since the authorities have closed down some of the worst venues.

Vang Vieng is best for

Tubing on the river; floating down the river in a giant rubber ring.

Exploring the town and the surrounding countryside

Sitting on floor cushions in the restaurants on stilts high above the river

The sunsets over the limestone karst mountains

Don't worry if you miss...

The continuous re-runs of 'Friends' in the bars!



<https://www.scarletjonestravels.com/asia/travel-in-laos-vang-vieng-vientiane-pakse/>

Vientiane

Vientiane has to be the most sleepy, laid back capital city anywhere in the world and as a bonus it had the fastest (but still excruciatingly slow) wifi to be found in Laos.

We stopped off in this city for a few days over Christmas so that we could apply for our visas from the Vietnamese Embassy. Christmas Day was spent queuing in the embassy and eating fish on the banks of the Mekong. It was really quite a memorable time.

What is there to do in Vientiane?

Climb the Patuxai Victory Monument – a sort of a mini Arc de Triumph
Eat salted, grilled fish on the banks of the Mekong
Seek out the hidden bars and the nightlife
Visit some of the many temples
Wander around the night market.
Get a Laos massage
Eat and drink and people watch.

<https://www.scarletjonestravels.com/asia/travel-in-laos-vang-vieng-vientiane-pakse/>

Pakse

This town is a stopping off point for the Bolaven Plateau – a recognised motorbike loop and is a transport hub where many long distance buses swap passengers over – although the timings of these often mean that you need to spend a night here.

In my opinion, unless you have to change buses here there is not much point in visiting. I could see on the map that there was a large green space along the riverbanks but when I went for a walk, planning to read my book somewhere pretty in the shade I soon discovered to my disappointment that it was completely covered in rubbish and the discarded plastic bags which plague Laos.

Champasak

I am always wary about recommending a 'best of' place because every experience is so different for each person, but for me, Champasak is a fantastic little gem.

When I was there, the weather was sunny, hot and dry and our accommodation was a cute little wooden bungalow with hammocks strung outside on the veranda.



We would breakfast on a large wooden platform hanging over the Mekong River which meandered lazily by and we explored the surrounding lands by bicycle.

Cows ambled up the main road, the children were adorable as they tumbled out of school in their pristine white shirts and people worked hard in the rice fields with their conical hats to protect them from the sun.

In this rural backwater a couple of cafes, small restaurants and bars offered excellent coffee, meals and drinks and nobody, tourists or locals alike, rushed around too

much at all.

And in this slightly difficult to get to place there was the understated but oh my goodness, so worth a visit Vat Pho.

This Khmer temple is a part of the celebrated Angkor Wat system over the border in Cambodia. When we visited it, the frangipani was blooming and filling the air with buzzing insects and heady perfume. The majority of visitors were Laos – many of them families out for the day with a picnic or making the pilgrimage to the temple complex at the top of the hill.

The sense of history and the feeling of past ancestors watching as we climbed up the steep stone steps added to the magic of the place, and this was continued the following day as we wandered around the deserted abandoned palaces down by the river.

Our stay in Champasak was complete when we lay on colourful raffia mats and cushions under the stars and the frangipani blossoms to watch a shadow puppet theatre show whilst an enormous orange moon rose above the Mekong.

You will never forget...

The journey to Champasak: you approach by boat across the Mekong

The cute riverside bungalow accommodations

The Vat Phou Khmer temple complex

The shadow puppet theatre under the stars

Cycling around the forgotten and abandoned palaces

The rural scenery and the calmness of the entire area



Read my full article at this following link – but even better – make sure that you don't miss out Champasak when you go to Laos.

<https://www.scarletjonestravels.com/asia/champasak-shadow-puppets-vat-phou/>

Don Det and the 4000 Islands

Another small ferry boat takes people across the river Mekong to Don Det. This is the sleeper of the 4000 islands and it's a fantastic place to chill and relax at the end of your stay in Laos (assuming you are following my route and doing Laos this way around).

As you sit sipping your beer Laos on a wooden decking you can see people bathing in the river below, men casting their nets for fish or teams practising for a dragon-boat race.

Life here is completely centred on the Mekong River before it finally tumbles out of Laos and continues on its way into Cambodia and most of the cute bungalow accommodations make the most of the river. There are wooden decks built on stilts where you can lounge around on cushions, eating the simple but tasty Laos food or taking your time over a long cool drink and watching amazing sunsets, or if you are early enough, some spectacular sunrises.



Read my article to find out why you shouldn't skip the south of Laos if you have the time and experience the contrast with the north of the country.

<https://www.scarletjonestravels.com/asia/don-det-4000-islands/>

Leaving Laos

We planned to cross over into Vietnam from the south of Laos but having been told that the border was closed to foreigners we had to double back up via Pakse and then to Savannakhet where we spent a night and then crossed the border into Vietnam the following day by bus. After nearly a month in Laos we had covered much of the country and experienced some extreme weather, severe sickness, and a fascinating culture and scenery.



2 teenagers pose for a photo at the Hmong New Year festivities

My highlights of Laos

You have probably realised that Champasak was my favourite place in Laos, but sadly many tourists miss it out, sticking to the north of the country. The fact that there were so few tourists there made it very special indeed, BUT I loved just about everything else about Laos. If I have to pick just some highlights I would recommend the following:

- Everything about Champasak
- The Kuang Si Falls and the Bear Rescue Centre
- UXO Lao Visitors Centre in Luang Prabang
- Hike to the top of the Nong Khiaw mountain
- The slow boat from Thailand to Laos
- The sleepy, laid-back atmosphere across Laos
- The Hmong New Year celebrations in Phonsovan
- Eat fish on the banks of the Mekong in Vientiane
- Laze away the days and lounge on cushions in the riverside bars on Don Det
- The Mekong River
- Shop at the night market in Luang Prabang
- The sunsets

In my opinion you could miss out...

Xam Neua and Phonsovan unless you are making your way up to the caves at Viengxay or going to the Plain of Jars.

Pakse is also not really worth a visit but you may find that you are forced to overnight here when you change buses and you will at least find quite a few travellers here doing the same.

Savannakhet was horrible BUT in its defence it turned out that we didn't see the main town which may have been better. We were stranded in the vicinity of the bus station with its threatening gangs of stray dogs, the filthiest hotel room that I have ever seen after arriving late at night in a total panic after fearing that I was being kidnapped, all of which coloured our opinion of the town!

Travel into, out of and around Laos.

You can fly into Laos, landing at one of the 3 main airports. You will find these at Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Pakse.

You can also cross by land from many points by coach, boats or car. Laos shares borders with Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar and China; and the frontier situation can change often - so do check that the border that you intend to cross over at is accessible before you set off.

Carry copies of passport photos with you and some US\$ for the visas which are issued as you enter. Depending on your nationality you can often get up to a month long tourist visa which is what I took advantage of for this trip.

I had planned to cross into Vietnam from Laos in the south from Bo Y to Ngoc Hoi but we were denied a ticket by the bus company who told us that the border was closed to foreigners. Instead we had to make a 36 hour detour via Savannakhet to Hue, so be prepared for plans to change.

Many travellers rent motorbikes and follow standard circuits or loops which take in stunning views and unspoilt countryside or hire scooters to whizz around the towns. Do make sure that you have travel insurance in place. Laos is a very poor country and if anything serious happens to you, you may need to fly to a neighbouring country or even back home for treatment.

If you would like a quote from the travel insurance company that I use you can get one on my resources page at this link:

<https://www.scarletjonestravels.com/resources/>

In Laos you can hire local guides to take you around and show you the sights or take a tuk tuk or similar or a group of you (which is why I always recommend hostels) can book a mini-van.

Bicycles are extremely popular but models are often outdated and basic but functional and are a great way to explore.

The sleeping buses are certainly an experience. Many have gaudy neon lights and loud music and the one that I took was certainly basic but we survived and got where we needed to be with little drama.

The roads are generally terrible and the best way to deal with them is with a big bottle of water, a supply of plastic bags and tissues and plenty of good humour. When you realise that the roads are so bad partly because the infrastructure of the country is so poor due to the legacy of the unexploded bombs it puts a different perspective on things.

The Laos are not good travellers so be prepared for a high level of travel sickness among your fellow travellers. Plastic bags are regularly filled with vomit and casually slung out of the windows onto the roadside which can be a bit off-putting. This is when one of the face masks that everybody wears is invaluable. Settle back and enjoy the passing scenery.

Customs and Etiquette

Generally, the Lao people are gentle, polite and shy. It is extremely important to the Lao that you are polite and courteous. Bad behaviour, rudeness and loudness will horrify the Lao. Please be aware of this and modify your own behaviour if necessary.

Remember, you are a guest in their country and an ambassador for your own. You may not share the same beliefs but you should respect the beliefs of others.

Photographs:

Always ask if you can take somebody's picture and smile and thank them if they refuse. When they do agree, be discreet. Don't shove your lens right in their face - use your zoom lens.

Please respect the alms ceremonies and keep your distance from the monks and the people who are receiving the blessings and show the person the photo that you have taken if you are able to.

Be curious:

It is perfectly acceptable to be curious, but don't point or stare. Despite the language barrier you should be able to communicate. If a lady is wearing an amazing dress your admiration can easily be conveyed by body language, facial expression and gestures.

Be polite:

You should cover your shoulders and thighs in temples and you should never sit with the soles of your feet pointing towards the Buddha or the monks as this is highly insulting. Try to fold your knees under you and hide your feet from everybody when you sit and never touch or pat the top of anybody's head either. Shoes are always left at the door in temples and are often taken off before entering a house, hostel or even a bar.

Be aware:

The Lao are generally shy. The people from the hill tribes are very reserved and distrustful of outsiders. Remember that many of these people are treated as second class citizens by their neighbours and their own government. They are often exploited and have serious problems with child trafficking, low educational chances and very limited resources pumped into their regions (see the Raising Awareness section below)



I asked this child's mother if I could take her photo after admiring her hot water hand warmer

Safety & Security

Most of the Laos are gentle and honest. There are problems that are often exacerbated by poverty such as alcohol and drug abuse and this in turn can lead some to crime but I felt a lot safer travelling in Laos than I do in many European countries.

You may be travelling Laos on a budget, but no matter how tight your budget I can guarantee that you will have much more than the average citizen of Laos so do not flaunt your wealth and guard your valuables as you should wherever you go.

Drugs:

You will very possibly be offered a host of drugs by furtive looking men on the streets, from opium to cocaine to weed. My advice is to decline! At the best you may be funding crime or a trafficking ring; at the worse you might find yourself arrested and facing extremely severe penalties including death.

In some places, for example the 4000 islands and Vang Vieng where there is a lazy laid-back feel, many small bars and hostels will offer to make a 'happy pizza' or a joint or two will be circulating. You make that decision whether to accept. Drugs are illegal in Laos and can carry the death penalty.

Unexploded bombs:

During the Secret War ([click to read more](#)), over 270 million cluster bombs were dropped on Laos in the overlap with the Vietnam War (210 million more bombs than were dropped on Iraq in 1991, 1998 and 2006 combined). Up to 80 million of these bombs didn't detonate and nearly 40 years on, less than 1% of these munitions have been destroyed.

More than half of all confirmed cluster munitions casualties in the world have occurred in Laos.

This legacy is still a very real problem for the population and is one of the main reasons for the poor infrastructure in the country.

Do NOT go wandering off the main paths and if you see anything suspicious do not poke it. Report it.

The roads

The roads in Laos are probably going to be the biggest challenge to your safety. People don't often follow the rules, vehicles are usually poorly maintained and the roads are rough. They can be chaotic but if you want to see the country properly you will have to take your chances.

Approach vehicle transport with good humour and care and as a pedestrian do not assume that a car or scooter will slow down or has even seen you when you cross the road. If you are hiring a bicycle you will be lucky if it has working brakes or lights – just be aware of everything else going on around you.

Protect your valuables

Bag snatching can be a problem like just about anywhere in the world so be street-wise. Spread your valuables around your person while you're travelling and keep a tight hold of your bags when you are in a tuktuk. But don't let fear hold you back. Generally Laos is a very safe country whether you are with a group of friends or a female travelling alone.

A lot of hostels in Laos don't offer security lockers which is why I recommend that you travel with a PacSafe which will stop you worrying about your valuables – [click here for the most up to date prices and to order one.](#)

Health

Laos is an incredibly poor country but it doesn't stack up that you will get sick. I did get sick – and I believe that it was because I ate some food that was 'off' while travelling in the mountains. It tasted and smelt bad and I didn't finish my bowl but it was enough to affect me for a long time after.

You can read about that experience at this link:

<https://www.scarletjonestravels.com/asia/getting-sick-while-travelling/> but there are precautions that you can and that you should take.

Make sure that your travel jabs are up to date (*if you are in the UK do check out the [Nomad Travel Clinics](#)*), drink plenty of bottled water and never travel without [travel insurance](#).

To re-balance and re-energise yourself I would thoroughly recommend that you try a massage in Laos. Similar to the Thai massage although often the tiny little Lao ladies will actually walk along your back, these therapies will click you back into place in no time.

Weather/Best time to visit Laos

The wet season runs from May to October, the cool dry season from November to February; and March and April are scorching hot. But be aware, the topography of the country affects the weather. I was in the north of Laos in the mountains in December and the rain was relentless and the weather icy cold.

The worse effects of the weather are that the roads can be affected by landslides and the mud, and in the 'burn season' during March to May which happens all over S E Asia, smoke hangs in a haze everywhere and can affect your eyes or your respiratory system.

Personally, because I am nomadic and I am constantly moving around I rarely take the weather or the seasons into account. I deal with what I get when I get there, although I do understand that if you only have one vacation a year the weather can be important to you

Money

The Lao currency is the kip and it's not widely available outside Laos. The main border crossing points have ATMs so that you can get money once you are in the country but I always find this a little stressful.

There can be difficulties with many of the ATM's not recognising foreign bank cards so try to take a couple from different banks if you can. I always carry a small emergency supply of US dollars, British sterling and euros which can be used to bail me out in an emergency, and I carry both debit and credit cards.

£1 = 10,700 KIP (*August 2017*)

There are no coins in circulation

Cost guidelines:

A bed in a hostel dormitory or a bed in a cheap hostel: US\$ 3-10

Street food and cheap cafes: US\$ 1-2

Local tour guide for a day: US\$20 -25



Food & Drink

If somebody is eating something that smells tasty, don't be afraid, simply point to their plate and indicate that you want to eat the same. This goes for street food too – simply hover around and watch and then do what the locals do.

It's an undisputed fact among travellers that despite being the poorest country in the region, Laos makes the best beer in S E Asia. Beer Lao is the best.

The national dish of Laos is called laap and there are enough varieties of this to suit every palate. Traditionally made with uncooked meat, nowadays it is usually cooked. Often made with minced beef, pork or duck and cooked with

spices and other things to flavour it such as mint, lime juice and fish sauce as well as chillies it is never boring.

Sticky rice is sold everywhere and it can be bought by the side of the road sealed inside a bamboo segment. It is scooped up with the fingers and rolled around and around into a small ball and then popped into your mouth or used to mop up the sauce from your meal or it is simply eaten by itself. It is often flavoured with other things, such as coconut or herbs and is a staple part of the diet for most people.

There are quite a lot of settlers who originated from the Indian sub-continent in Laos, so if you are missing your fix of Indian style curries you can be sure to find something in the bigger towns of Laos.

Soup, soup glorious soup – the Laos love soup in every colour, every density and containing everything. Try the soups.

Coffee is good and generally comes very sweet and milky, often using condensed milk.

Laos excels with its selection of delicious fresh fruits and there are always ladies selling whatever is in season from a basket or a rug on the floor in the street.

Mangosteens, rambutan and longons are all delicious as are the mangoes, papaya and pineapple. Jackfruit, tamarind and durian are also plentiful as are many of the more common fruits known around the world.

Spicy Lao papaya salad and mango salads are similar to the dishes in Thailand. In all of the markets and on food stalls you can hear the pounding noise as the ingredients are bashed to within an inch of their lives and produce an extraordinary, yet unforgettable flavour.

At the traditional food markets you can see people choose live fish whilst the stallholder will hit them on the head with the back of a knife before wrapping them in paper, you will see chickens bundled up in nets and you can get a very decent, wholesome meal for pennies cooked right in front of you.

Best buys

Silk

Silk products are everywhere. I am constantly amazed at how cheap the silk products are and I am almost embarrassed to buy them at the low prices that are advertised in the markets.

The Laos are ingenious with their silk products, making purses, dresses, pictures bookmarks – everything from the most beautifully soft silk and with intricate designs.

Turning bomb casements into jewellery

Some of the villages are using the scrap metal from the many tons of bombs that have fallen on Laos to make jewellery and cutlery.

Just be sure that you are buying from an ethical source which is supported by the government or an NGO. Too many villagers have lost limbs whilst trying to salvage the metal without receiving the necessary training.

Backpacker elephant pants

You can find these trousers all around S E Asia and they are a dubious badge of honour for all backpackers.

They are cheap and wholly directed at the tourists but they are comfortable, cool and easy to wash and dry.

The Bear Rescue Centre

Buy a tee-shirt to support the work that this rescue centre does for the bears at their refuge at the foot of the Kuang Si waterfalls

Other artisan products:

There is a whole host of paintings, hand-made paper and cloth items to be bought in Laos. Do spend – you will be supporting the local people (just check that you are not buying a cheap import from China) – and whilst it is OK to barter, do consider the cost and the value of the item so don't be overly brutal and forceful.

DO NOT BUY:

Please, do not buy ANY wildlife products or antiques.

The Lao are extremely poor and as a result they often flout the law in order to make some dollars.

In the same way that giving money to child beggars can only exacerbate the problem, tourists buying products from endangered animals or things that are a part of the national heritage will only encourage more to be captured and sold in the markets.



Raising awareness: Social issues

The Lao are generally shy. The people from the hill tribes are very reserved and distrustful of outsiders. Remember that many of these people are treated as second class citizens by their own government and neighbours and are often exploited with child trafficking, low educational chances and very limited resources pumped into their regions (see Raising Awareness section below)

Begging:

The majority of the people are poor. There is little government support for people with disabilities so many turn to begging.

Often, the poorest members of society do not send their children to school. Either they don't see the value in an education, or none is available near them, or they can't afford to send their children to school or they need the children to work on the land or to take care of younger siblings.

Many people will use the charms of a child to get money from tourists. No matter how endearing or how sad a child looks, please do not give money to them or buy anything from them. The more that this happens the less likely the parents are to take them off the streets and put them into school.

Look out for people selling things that they have made themselves or projects and groups that support people and train them to make artisan goods, give massages or offer guiding services. The only thing that I give out is water if I see that a child has been working a crowd for a long time.

Poverty

In 2013 Laos ranked at #13 in the global hunger index. Much of the population has limited resources and no access to quality food, good nutrition or clean water. Bear this in mind when you barter the costs down for something that is already cheap or when you step over the adult who is trying to sell something on the street.

Elephant riding

Avoid this tourist activity at all costs. Despite their size, elephants cannot carry tourists in baskets on their backs – it actually damages their spines and the training of an elephant is not normally done with much kindness either. Laos still use elephants in the logging industry but some owners are diversifying into elephant rides.

Land mines

Do not wander off the tracks or go exploring in the jungle by yourself no matter how tempting it is. Countless people are continuing to be killed every year by the unexploded devices that litter the countryside. The unexploded armaments are one of the reasons for the poor infrastructure – before any new road is built or land cleared for a new building, it all has to be very carefully checked and cleared of bombs and landmines.

Hill people

There are many groups of hill tribe people, each with their own customs and culture.

Meeting new people, trying their food and seeing their way of life is one of the best bits of travel for me but you must always remember to be respectful.

Never take photos without asking permission and travel responsibly.

Here are some links so that you can explore further:

- <https://www.scarletjonestravels.com/asia/hmong-new-year-2/>
- <http://tidd.ly/20eec0b1>
- <https://www.roughguides.com/article/pictures-of-hill-tribes-in-laos/>
- http://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Laos/sub5_3c/entry-2964.html

What travel resources do I use?

When I travel in S E Asia my go-to trip planning resource on the ground is the [Travel Fish website](#).

I also read other travel bloggers and I love the [Lonely Planet Guide books](#).

I personally always like to stay in hostels – you can compare many hostels and the relevant booking sites here at [Hostelz.com](#) or if you prefer a hotel or a guest house, [Agoda](#) is great site to use in S E Asia

I travel slowly and solo but in my previous life I travelled with Explore many times and I would highly rate the company if your vacation time is short, you don't enjoy the nitty gritty of planning or you would prefer to travel with a small group of like-minded people. You can check out the holidays that they offer at this link: [Explore](#)

And finally, I never travel anywhere without travel insurance. I have been using Alpha Travel Insurance lately and whilst I have not yet had to make a claim, I have heard good things about them – get an up to date quote here: [Alpha Travel Insurance](#)

And finally....

.....here the links to all of my articles on Laos

- <https://www.scarletjonestravels.com/asia/slow-boat-from-thailand-to-laos/>
- <https://www.scarletjonestravels.com/asia/secret-war-in-laos/>
- <https://www.scarletjonestravels.com/asia/8-great-things-luang-prabang/>
- <https://www.scarletjonestravels.com/asia/luang-prabang-to-nong-khiaw-laos/>
- <https://www.scarletjonestravels.com/asia/getting-sick-while-travelling/>
- <https://www.scarletjonestravels.com/asia/hmong-new-year-2/>
- <https://www.scarletjonestravels.com/asia/travel-in-laos-vang-vieng-vientiane-pakse/>
- <https://www.scarletjonestravels.com/asia/champasak-shadow-puppets-vat-phou/>
- <https://www.scarletjonestravels.com/asia/don-det-4000-islands/>

