

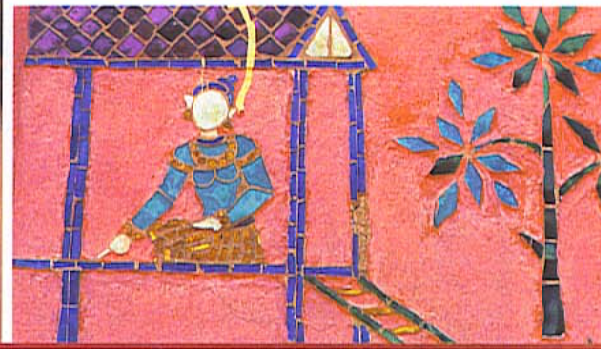
Opposite page, from left: a village girl in traditional dress; "good luck" birds, awaiting their freedom as part of Lao New Year celebrations. Below: dusk on the Mekong.

WITH ITS SERENE CHARM AND RELATIVELY SMALL POPULATION, LAOS IS AN OASIS OF CALM FOR TRAVELLERS ACCUSTOMED TO THE HECTIC PACE OF SOUTH-EAST ASIA.

# laos and found



DECORATIVE TEMPLES AND COLONIAL VILLAS GIVE LUANG PRABANG A TIMELESS AMBIENCE.



One of the least-travelled countries in South-East Asia, Laos was founded in 1353 as the Kingdom of Lan Xang. The name roughly translates as "Kingdom of a Million Elephants and White Parasols".

Today, there are less parasols and even fewer elephants, but this landlocked nation is still quaint, with its blend of colonial Indochina, quiet Buddhist observance and simple village life. Nestled between Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar (Burma) and China, Laos is gradually becoming a popular place for travellers keen to experience its relatively untouched charms.

After the Angkor period (AD 839-1434), Laos was divided into administrative states – relics of which can still be seen at checkpoints within the country. In the north, Luang Prabang became the religious capital. A World Heritage-listed town, its decorative temples and colonial villas give Luang Prabang a graceful, timeless ambience. The presence of Buddhist monks provides a sense of tranquillity that has become all too rare in this frenetic corner of Asia.

The muddy vein of the Mekong River frames and defines Luang Prabang. Strolling along its

banks, stopping for a drink or snack at one of several simple cafes is a pleasant way to spend a lazy afternoon.

For more vigorous sightseeing, climb the stairs leading to Phu Si Hill to get a 360-degree view of the town. From the top you can observe the meandering river, the airstrip and the glints of gold reflecting from the temple roofs which peek through the canopy of green below.

In the evening, pick up a quick bite at the market stalls or dine at one of the many restaurants clustered around the busy Thanon Sisavangvong road. Choices range from simple shopfront eateries favoured by backpackers to restaurants catering to the well-heeled traveller.

Laos food is a delight. Try *lâap* – a salad of minced meat tossed with lime juice, garlic, mint leaves and chilli served with a plate of crunchy lettuce. There are delicate fish stews, fried rice, spicy tofu curry and *fou* (noodle soups). Most dishes are usually accompanied by a wicker basket of sticky rice which has been slowly steamed to release the gluten that binds it together.

Resplendent in red and gold, the 32 remaining temples in Luang Prabang are distinguished by extremely wide, low-slung eaves, tiered roofs and

intricate roof hooks. Their majestic style is similar to that of the temples in neighbouring Northern Thailand. The stunning Wat Mai Suwannaphumahan features a highly ornate, gilded facade, a marble entrance and golden columns. Wat Xieng Thong (Golden City Monastery) is a compound of monasteries with a decorative central *sim* (hall). The rear wall features a mosaic "celebrating enlightenment", constructed from small, bright tiles, squares of glass and coloured panels, all mounted on a red background.

No stay in Luang Prabang is complete without a visit to the Royal Palace Museum, built in 1904, during the early colonial period, and the home of King Sisavangvong. He was Laos's last official royal head of state and died in a prison camp in 1959. The palace has been preserved as it was when the king was alive, and today gives testimony to the royal history of Laos. The front rooms are filled with antique Buddhas and various gifts from other nations. The rear living quarters display memorabilia of the former royal family.

Lacking the charm of Luang Prabang, Vientiane was named the capital when Laos became a French protectorate in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was the centre of events when Laos overthrew their colonial

French masters, ousted the royals and eventually installed a communist government. Today, this busy, dusty city is alive with the rich and turbulent history of the country. The Lane Xang Hotel was popular during the socialist era, while nearby the serene and enchanting Haw Pha Kaew was ransacked by invading Siamese armies. (Soldiers stole the Emerald Buddha and installed it in the temple of the same name in Bangkok.) Elsewhere, the crumbling, yellow facade of Wat Si Saket encloses an interior temple which has more than 2000 small silver and ceramic Buddha statues set in the cloister walls.

Besides a host of temples, Vientiane has many charming restaurants and even a bit of a nightlife, making it a great stopover destination. A short tuk-tuk (three-wheeled taxi) ride across town past the bustling Morning Market takes you over to Patuxai, the Lao equivalent of the Arc de Triomphe. An internal stairwell allows visitors to climb to the top for a view over the sights of Vientiane, including the nearby Buddhist monument Pha That Luang. Each November, Pha That Luang is the site of a four-day Buddhist festival with stalls, markets and much celebration. The huge gold building has three levels set on a solid flat base >

From left: the view over the Mekong to Luang Prabang; the Royal Palace Museum, formerly the residence of King Sisavangvong, the last royal head of state; Buddhism is the predominant religion; the impressive mosaic at Wat Xieng Thong.



Above: becoming a monk is one way to gain an education in a country where it's estimated that half the population live below the poverty line. Right: tuktuks are an easy and inexpensive way to get about.

decorated with gold lotus flowers and a pointed, gold stupa at the top. It is probably more impressive from a distance, where its size and shape make a bold spiritual statement.

About 24 kilometres outside the city, visitors will find Xieng Khuan, or Buddha Park. A public park, it contains strange, hybrid sculptures, featuring a giant, reclining Buddha, images of Hindu gods and other figures with both Hindu and Buddhist features. It was created in 1958 by Luang Pu Bunleua Sulilat who attempted to meld Buddhist and Hindu philosophy and iconography.

Novice monks wander around the park looking to strike up conversations with foreigners to practise their English skills. With an average annual income in 2001 of \$US263 (\$400) per capita, it's estimated that about half of the population falls below the poverty line. For many young men, becoming a monk is a way to both honour their religion, and find education and employment prospects other than subsistence farming. Learning and practising English is part of that education.



Thanks to foreign aid, the roads in Laos have been improved, extending the possibility of travel beyond Vientiane to the south. Pakse, a former colonial outpost in the southern state of Champasak, is a dusty, unremarkable place which has become a hub for road entry in and out of Laos through Ubon Ratchathani (Thailand) and for travel south to Si Phan Don (Four Thousand Islands), the district of Champasak and Cambodia.

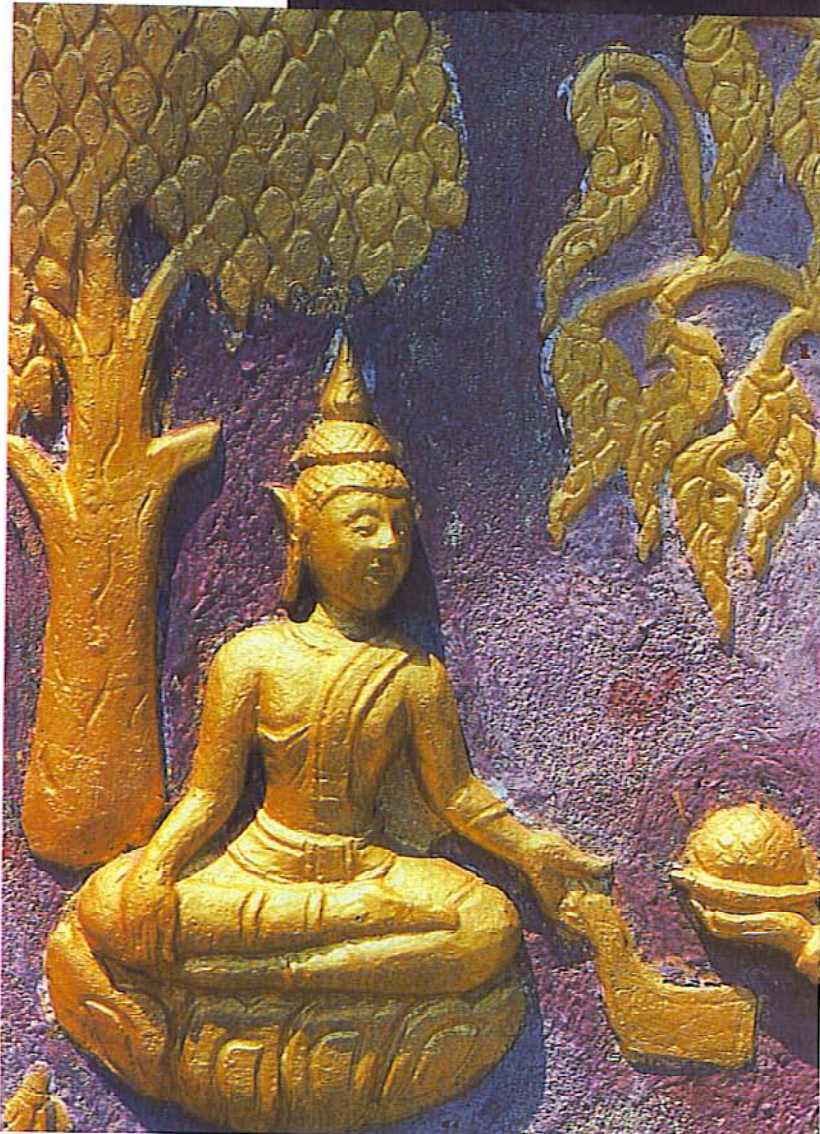
About 25 kilometres south of Pakse, Champasak is notable for the Angkor-period ruins of Wat Phu Champasak. Lacking the grandeur of the better-preserved monuments in Cambodia, this three-level temple is currently being restored. A number of small buildings and a great deal of rubble is all that remains of the lower level; the middle level contains the temple and other buildings; and the upper level, which is undergoing the most serious work, is off-limits to visitors.

*Sawngthaews* (converted pick-up trucks) ply the road to and from Pakse. They are a good form of transport for locals and hardy travellers who are happy to squeeze in with the produce... and wait by the side of the road during the inevitable breakdowns.

The mighty Mekong reappears around Si Phan Don, which can be reached by road or boat from Pakse. It's a long day of travelling, but what awaits is something quite special. The Four Thousand Islands – a name which is more or less accurate >



Right: fresh-baked goods at the local market.  
Far right: traditional sticky rice holders.  
Below: Wat Xieng Thong in Luang Prabang.



depending on the water level – is a collection of islands located among the lower reaches of the Mekong. The larger of the habitable islands, Don Khong, has a number of quaint villas and riverside eateries. The local monastery has an imposing gold Buddha that stares out over the water, in stark contrast to the rickety, wooden, stilt houses and surrounding bush.

The smaller islands of Don Det and Don Khon offer bungalows built over the water. At around \$US1 (\$1.50) a night, this is holidaying at its most basic, but it's a welcome respite from the clamour of life. The cafes do fabulous fish curries, papaya shakes and pancakes for travellers hungry from cycling around the island, discovering the waterfalls and rapids.

At the western end of Don Khon (which can be reached from Don Det by bridge) is an impressive set of rapids known as Tat Somphamit, or Li Phi Falls. Read a book or take a boat trip – either way you'll enjoy the beauty of Mekong life.

Watching the sunset while sipping a refreshingly cold Beerlao is the perfect way to see out the day. At this point, time seems to slow down and the rest of the world becomes a vague, hazy memory. The setting sun is a bit like Laos itself – a country of faded glories, tarnished by political austerity, yet still capable of dazzling you with occasional flashes of golden radiance.



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