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LAOS PRE-DEPARTURE INFORMATION (Please only print if necessary. Think before you print!)

Country Profile

Official Name: Lao People's Democratic Republic

Population: 6 million

Capital City: Vientiane, population c. 400,000

People: Over 60 ethnic groups, the main ones are Lao Loum (lowland ~50%), Lao Theung (upland ~30%), Lao Sung (highland ~10%), and tribal Thais (~10%)

Language: Lao

Currency: Kip (KN)

Annual Growth: 2.6%

Major Industries: Agriculture

Time Zone: GMT +7 hours

Electricity: 220V, 50 Hz; 2 pin plugs

Measurements and weights: Metric

International Dialing Code: +856



Before Departure Check list



- Travel Insurance
- Valid Passport and Visa
- Inoculations
- Foreign currency or ATM card (preferably 2 in separate locations)
- Tickets
- Photocopy of passport either scanned into email account or separate from the original.

Travel Insurance (compulsory)

Buffalo Tours Vietnam will do everything possible to ensure a safe and enjoyable trip.

However, certain risks are involved and should be recognized by participants. Thus, we highly recommend the purchase of short-term travel insurance for our adventures. Travel Insurance is a cost effective way to protect yourself and your equipment in the event of problems due to -Canceled Trips, Delays, Medical Problems, Baggage Loss or Damage.

You can buy travel insurance very easily and cheaply online, we recommend www.worldnomads.com



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Visas/passports

We strongly advise you to make copies of all your important documents (visa, passport, credit cards, air-tickets, etc.) If they are lost, it will help in organizing replacements much easier! When getting your Laos visa your passport should be valid for six months after your planned date of departure from the country. You can either get your visa in advance at any Lao embassy which will be valid for 30 days. Otherwise you can obtain your visa at the border 'on arrival'; such a visa will be valid for 30 days and cost depends on your nationality (from 30-42USD). One passport-sized photograph is also required.

It is also possible to extend your 'visa on arrival' for another 30 days at a cost of about 2USD per day. Otherwise you will be charged 10USD per day by border authorities when you leave the country. Citizens of Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand and Cambodia can travel visa-free in Laos for 30 days.

Immunizations

Before travelling to Laos it is important to ensure that you have adequate protection against disease. About two months before departure you should consult with your tropical medicines doctor who will advise you as to the type of vaccinations that you will need. These will vary depending on the regions that you plan on visiting. Bear in mind that there is a malaria risk in very rural parts of Laos. Consult your tropical medicines doctor for the latest information.

In general, most visitors to Laos will require the following vaccinations:

- Hepatitis A and B
- Tetanus
- Typhoid
- Polio
- Diphtheria

Suggested Packing List

You will be able to store any extra luggage or clothing not needed on your excursions in the hotel storage or our office. Most of your toiletries requirements are available in Laos (e.g. tooth paste, soap, shampoo, sanitary towels). Tampons are less widely available. If you wear contact lenses make sure to bring enough cleaning fluids as these are difficult to find.

Light thin layers of cotton clothing are the best.

Long-sleeved shirts and pants are a good idea for a number of reasons:

- they provide good protection against mosquito bites
- to keep yourself warm during chilly November to February evenings
- they are necessary for temple and countryside village visits where the shoulders and legs should be covered to below the knee (see more in the culture section)
- 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 or fleece with you.





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Money



The Lao kip is the official currency of Laos. US dollars are also widely accepted in bigger cities, particularly in restaurants. It's a good idea to arrive in Laos with some US dollars as the Lao kip cannot be exchanged outside Laos and thus you won't be able to buy any in advance of your arrival. Note that torn and old US dollar notes are not generally accepted in Laos. In areas located near the Thai border, the Thai currency, Baht, is also accepted.

Travelers' checks (in US dollar or Euro) can be cashed at banks. Credit cards (Visa, MasterCard and Amex) are accepted in major hotels and in a very limited number of upscale shopping places. Please note that there is usually a levy of 4 % charged on credit card purchases. In Vientiane and Luang Prabang you'll find several ATM machines which dispense Lao kip only (at about 700,000 kip/time)

Heading to the countryside it is recommended that you carry kip with you as banks are not always available.

At time of print, the most common (though not fixed) rates of exchange are:

1 Euro: 11,019 Lao kip 1 USD: 8,550 Lao kip Carry your money in a way that you will feel most comfortable with e.g. money belt, wallet etc. You may want to carry a combination of travelers' checks, credit/debit cards, cash or all three. It's always a good precaution to split your money about your person and/or wallet.

Make sure to keep some cash in small denominations for last minute purchases, as well as airport taxes (see below). Most hotels offer safe-keeping for your valuables if you so wish.

Trip Budgeting

Allow \$5- \$15 per meal for additional meals not included in the trip price. You may also want to have some cash for shopping in markets etc. -budget according to your taste.

Arriving in Laos



We will arrange your transfer to and from Vientiane Wattay airport or Luang Prabang Airport, unless otherwise specified.

Airport departure tax is included.

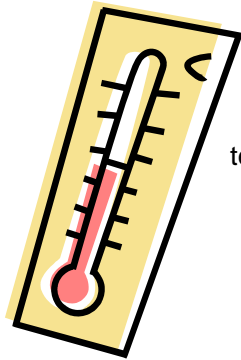


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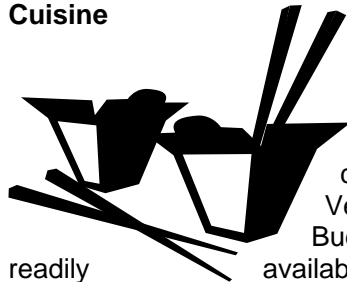
More about Laos

Climate



Laos has a tropical monsoon climate with two distinct seasons May to October is the rainy season and November to April is the dry season. It gets hottest in March and April when temperatures can reach as high as 38C/100F. The lowest temperatures, usually in December are around 15C/59F. The average temperature is between 25C/77F and 30C/84F.

Cuisine



Laos food is very similar to Thai cuisine and offers delightful national staple food like sticky rice (khao niauw), laap (a meal of minced meat or fish with lime juice, garlic, onions, mint leaves and chilies) or tam maak hung (a spicy salad made of green papaya). Vegetarian food is widely available, in no small part due to the strong Buddhist influence. Bottled mineral water, soft drinks, tea and coffee are readily available. Beer is the main alcoholic drink and is usually a light lager style.

As a general rule, travelers should avoid tap water, ice made from tap water, peeled fruit and vegetables, uncooked food, shellfish and street vendor offerings. Traveler's diarrhea is common and easily treated, choose a remedy that works best for you (Imodium, Pepto-Bismol, etc...); antibiotic solutions are also available for intestinal ills.

Drinking Water

Bottled water can be purchased almost everywhere, at local convenience stores, hotels, restaurants, supermarkets, etc. We do not recommend you drink water from the tap in any location. If camping on one of our trips, you are not required to buy water as boiled/treated water with which to fill your water bottles will be provided every evening after dinner. If you wish to add water purification tablets to the water, you should bring those with you. Special Dietary Requests If you are a vegetarian, vegan, allergic to any foods or adhere to a special diet, please advise us prior to your booking so we can comply with your dietary requirements. We can accommodate any diet.



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Clothing



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Responsible Tourism

Please read our separate Responsible Tourism Guidelines before you arrive in Asia. We want to ensure that all our clients travel as responsibly as possible to ensure the future of is sustainable

People

There are over 60 ethnic groups in Laos, the main ones are Lao Loum (lowland ~50%) and other groups: Lao Theung (upland ~30%), Lao Sung (highland ~10%), and tribal Thais (~ 10%).

Language



Laos is a stunning, relatively undiscovered landlocked country nestled between Thailand, Vietnam, China and Cambodia. The least well known of the three Indochinese countries, it is a country of sublime beauty and unspoiled charm. The official language is Lao and there are many dialects throughout the country, particularly in tribal areas. The language is very close to Thai. The most widely spoken foreign languages are English and French. Some Lao people also speak German, Russian, and Vietnamese. During the communist regime some Lao people received university training in Eastern Europe. Elderly Lao people may speak French as a result of being a former French colony.

Post and Telecommunication



Depending on your (foreign) provider, some mobile phones will receive a signal in major towns as Vientiane. But you can also easily purchase a local SIM card. Services for making international phone calls are widely available. All major tourism centers offer internet access (rates in Vientiane 1min/100 kip) and some provide chat-webcams. Email is the cheapest and fastest way to communicate while travelling. All major cities and tourist towns have email services. The rate is usually

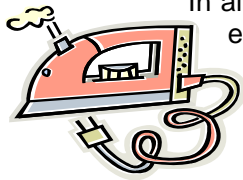


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around 1 min/100kip in Vientiane. Some Internet cafes provide chat and webcams. Services for making international phone calls are widely available in tourist areas. Your own mobile phone should be able to receive a signal in major towns like Vientiane and Luang Prabang or you can easily purchase a local SIM card.

Electricity and Adaptors



In all of Laos, the electricity is 220 volts and 50 cycles. You will probably want to use electricity in Laos for recharging batteries for digital cameras or hairdryers etc. so make sure to bring plug adaptors and a voltage transformer that will allow you to use the equipment on 220 volts. You can use either round-hole or flat-hole sockets in hotels, guest houses or households. If your electrical item doesn't match with the socket, you can ask one of the staff for assistance.

Cultural Differences

Experiencing cultural diversity is one of the great joys of travelling, and it is important that these differences are encouraged and respected. Things are done differently in Asia, which is why we love it! At a general level, we need to respect the cultural rules in the areas we travel to. Please remember to accept these differences and not try and change them for the benefit of your own comfort. The traveller who wishes to have a happy and successful trip should keep as calm, cheerful and friendly as humanly possible. Patience and courtesy are virtues that open many doors. Demanding tourists do not get smiles, service or respect. For more extensive insights into cultural difference, please read the Responsible Tourism note included in this pack.

Attire

Asian people generally dress modestly. Modest clothing is required in Laos. To respect the Laotian culture it is advisable to wear pants and skirts to below knee-length. Bare shoulders are not really appreciated. Not wearing a bra and tight body-hugging clothes are not acceptable. Also please bear in mind that in Laos, the feet are considered to be the lowest part of the human body, so please take off your shoes before entering temples or a house. Similarly, never pat a person on the head, even a child, as the head is the most sacred part of the body. Modest clothing goes a long way towards making a good impression with the local people. As previously mentioned more formal dress codes apply for temples or mosques or any other religious sites you may visit. So to prevent the wrath of the gods as well as the locals these should be closely followed. In general one should have covered shoulders and legs, shoes and hats should be removed.

Swimming

While Laos is landlocked you may have opportunities to swim in waterfalls. Remember that there are no areas in Asia where nude sunbathing or swimming is acceptable. In most places Lao people will swim wearing all their clothes which is a reminder of the level of modesty that exists in here. If



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you are staying in a small village you will probably be bathing in a stream, river or waterfall, and women should wash in a sarong or in the mode that the local women use.

Saving Face

It is inappropriate to express anger in a raised voice. Becoming angry is embarrassing to the local people with whom you are dealing - they will not be embarrassed for themselves, but for you making a fool of yourself. "Keeping face", that subtle but important quality of personal dignity, is important! Personal candor in Asia is largely a matter of sensibility and face.

Tips

Tipping is a personal matter, and passengers are encouraged to tip an amount they find appropriate. For your convenience we've included a tipping guide below for your travels in Laos. Please note however that these amounts are only suggestions, we encourage our passengers to reward guides based on their performance. Meals (restaurants): \$1-2 for good service
Tips for guides and drivers are completely at your discretion, but here are some guidelines:



- \$5 per half day, \$10 per full day tour per person for guides
- \$2 for half day and \$5 per person for full day for drivers
- Another "pot" for the guides - \$8 to \$10 per day

Tips for the staff of cruise ships and all inclusive lodges are generally pooled - one "pot" for the staff excluding guides - \$10 per day.

Bellboy: it's up to you; the average amount is US\$ 1.0/bag or luggage.

Chambermaid: again it's up to you; the average amount is US\$ 1.0/day.

Departure airport taxes

Airport departure tax is included

Other general points of etiquette

There are a few general codes of behavior that apply in Laos:

- Crooking your finger to call somebody is considered impolite. Asian people generally use a subtle downward waving motion to summon someone.
- Public displays of affection are considered to be quite offensive in Laos - definitely no kissing! It is also extremely rare to see couples holding hands. To the contrary it is quite common to see friends of the same sex holding hands.



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- It is polite to remove your shoes before entering a house. Look for shoes at the front door as a clue and follow suit.
- Criticism should only be used when put among praise.

Donations and gift-giving



Do not give to begging children as it reinforces for these children that begging is an acceptable way to make a living. However in many places, it is considered acceptable to give to the elderly and disabled as there is no social security or other way these people can earn money.

Giving money and goods away at random to individuals can result in the local communities acting like beggars. It accentuates an unequal relationship between locals and visitors, with tourists being seen as purely 'money givers'.

We also need to be careful not to pay for acts of kindness in monetary terms, for example paying for photographs. We do not want to encourage the development of a society that equates every human action as a potential money making scheme.

Do not to give sweets to children in villages that we visit. Local people do not have access to dentists, nor can they afford them and again there is the issue of turning children into beggars. Pens, toothbrushes, clothing or other perhaps 'worthwhile' items are best distributed via a local charity, school teacher, or community leader.

Avoid feeling that you necessarily have to give 'material' things. The best giving can sometimes be shared interactions: a smile, a joke, a sing-song, dance or playing a game. Giving something of your friendship, time and interest to interact with locals can be the best gift of all.

And Finally...



We at Buffalo Tours do our best to facilitate your adventure by arranging all of the services that free you to get the most out of your experience. However, every traveler has his or her own idea and expectations of how the adventure will be. Bearing this in mind and considering our own experiences, we offer the suggestions below to ensure that your adventure meets and hopefully exceeds your expectations. Please also read our

enclosed guidelines on Responsible Tourism so that that joy of cultural diversity unique to travelling is a beneficial experience for both yourself and the communities that you visit.

- Take responsibility for your adventure - do not assume your interests are shared by everyone else
- If you have any special interests (weavings, archaeology, religious art, jewelry, etc.) or wish to do some particular activities (mountain biking, kayaking etc.) let our guides or the hotel staffs know ahead of time. They will do their best to help you find what you want.
- Read up on Laos before you visit, you are sure to get more out of the experience if you have some familiarity with the history and culture of the country.
- Most information provided by the guides is to give you a general understanding of what and where you are touring. Don't be shy! Ask questions if you want more specific information.
- Try to learn some Lao before you arrive! The more Lao you know, the more fun you will have. However, please note that not knowing Lao will not impede you from having a great



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time. English is widely spoken, but you will certainly get a great reaction and have deeper interaction with local people if you can muster up a few Laotian phrases.

- If you need something or have a problem, please let someone know. Our drivers, operators, guides and hotel staff are there to assist you.
- Where possible try to support locally owned businesses, hotels and restaurants. In particular try to buy from traditional artisans.
- While bargaining is part of the shopping culture in Asia, be realistic!
- Bring a book, journal, postcards or playing cards with you to occupy yourself when waiting.
- Remember the adage: "Take only photos, leave only footprints", but be sensitive with the photos and footprints!
- Smile! It will get you much further than a lost temper ever will.
- Finally... welcome to Laos - slow down, chill out and relax! This is your holiday! Enjoy it!