



GROUP TRAVEL 2008 PRE DEPARTURE INFORMATION GUIDE TO LAOS

Thank you for choosing Jetabout Asia Vacations for your journey into Laos.

A journey into Laos is a journey into an Asia long lost. Laos presents visitors with a beautiful travel experience, rich in atmosphere, natural beauty and culture. To assist with your travel arrangements, we have prepared the following pre departure information. Please read this carefully before traveling and be mindful of some of our suggestions while in Laos.

WHAT TO EXPECT

A journey into Laos is a journey into an Asia long lost. Laos presents visitors with a beautiful travel experience, rich in atmosphere, natural beauty and culture.

Laos is the least developed and least populated of all Southeast Asian and Indochinese countries. Laos is a landlocked country, and its landscape is dominated by mountains and rivers. The Mekong River is the main waterway in the country and is the source of much fishing and farming activity, and village life. Your travels in the country will take in some of the gorgeous river and mountain scenery in the country, as well as two of the most intriguing towns in all Asia - the sleepy waterside capital of Vientiane, and the fabled monastery town of Luang Prabang. Laotian people are warm and welcoming to foreigners who are able to visit after several decades of relative isolation from much of the western world.

The travel industry is slowly developing in Laos. While the freshness and novelty of tourism in the country is why many people choose to visit Laos, it should be remembered that facilities and services do not always reach western standards. Traveling throughout more remote areas may involve bumpy road travel and the use of clean but basic accommodation.

Patience is something you must definitely bring with you when you come to Laos. Lack of development, education and infrastructure, coupled with the laid back customs and lifestyle of Laotian Buddhism means things move at a much slower pace here than Western nations, even neighboring Asian nations. Expecting the same levels of services at hotels, restaurants and bars that you may receive back home will only leave you disappointed and frustrated. Patience and calmness is the best way to optimize your enjoyment of this magical country. Shows of emotion and anger are rare in Laos and considered taboo. It is this 'laid-backness' and care free attitude which makes Laos so unique and is one of the many distinctive lures which draws travelers from around the globe.

RESPONSIBILITY

Information herein was correct at the time of preparation; however the rapid development of tourism in Laos has the potential to make some of the information in this guide irrelevant. This information is intended as a guide only and Jetabout Asia Vacations is not responsible for any inaccuracies. This document does not, in any way, alter the booking terms and conditions in our Jetabout Asia Vacations brochure. Please contact us with your comments if you find during the course of your travels that the information in this guide is incorrect or out of date.

VISA REQUIREMENTS & DEPARTURE TAX

Travelers on all of Travel Indochina's small group journeys can easily obtain 30 day tourist visas on arrival in Laos, at Vientiane, Pakse or Luang Prabang airports, or at the overland border points listed below. The price of a Lao visa varies according to nationality and is \$30USD for holders of Australian and New Zealand passports, \$35USD for holders of USA and UK passports, and \$42USD for holders of Canadian passports. For travelers of all nationalities payment should be made in USD cash and a passport photo must be provided. Visas cost an extra \$1USD on weekends and public holidays. Laos visas can be obtained on arrival at the following border crossings:

- The Friendship Bridge crossing (near Vientiane, bordering Thailand)
- The Vientiane International Airport (Wattay Airport)
- The Luang Prabang International Airport
- Pakse International Airport
- Na Meo/Nam Xoi (Hua Phan Province, bordering Vietnam)
- Nam Kan/Nong Haet (Xiang Khuang Province, bordering Vietnam)
- Nam Phao/Cau Treo (Bolikhamsay Province, bordering Vietnam)
- Densavanh/Lao Bao (Savannakhet Province, bordering Vietnam)
- Thakaek/Nakom Phanom (Khammouane Province, bordering Thailand)
- Vang Tao/Chong Mek (Champasak Province, bordering Thailand)
- Huay Xai/Chiang Khong (Bokeo Province, bordering Thailand)
- Boten/Mohan (Luang Namtha Province, bordering China)

Travelers on Travel Indochina's Laos & Cambodia Experience, Mekong & Beyond, and Inside Laos Small Group Journeys cross into Laos from Chiang Khong (Thailand) to Huay Xai (Laos). These travelers are therefore able to obtain a Laos visa on arrival at Huay Xai. This is a simple and efficient process. Travelers on the Ancient Kingdoms Explorer tour cross into Laos at Chong Mek. Here, getting a visa on arrival is also straightforward.

Indochina Explorer, Vietnam & Laos Explorer, and Highlights of Laos travelers can obtain their Laos visa on arrival at Vientiane's international airport. Please note that Indochina Explorer and Vietnam & Laos Explorer travelers will need to obtain their Vietnam visas in advance of arriving in Indochina.

The Laos domestic departure tax is excluded from all air tickets issued prior to 1 January 2008 and is \$2USD for a one-way flight, and \$3USD for a return flight. Similarly, the Laos international departure tax is excluded from international tickets issued prior to 1 January 2008, and is \$10USD.

Please note that it is now law in Laos to carry an ID document at all time but this does not have to be your passport. Fines for failing to do this can be high. Please take all due precaution when carrying original documents.

ARRIVAL INSTRUCTIONS

The ground operator taking you through Laos is Travel Indochina.

If you have arranged an arrival transfer you will find a representative from Travel Indochina waiting to meet you outside the airport. Please look carefully for a Travel Indochina sign with your name on it (not a hotel sign). If you cannot find a sign with your name please call our local office contact number (on your detailed itinerary) and our duty officer will advise you what to do.

INSURANCE

Local medical facilities across developing Asia are often unable to provide the full range of medical services that are available in developed countries, making evacuation a requirement in many non-life threatening medical emergencies. The costs of evacuation as well as international standard care are extremely high. In the most serious emergencies, travelers may not be positioned to authorize payment for an appropriate medical response that is urgently required. This may delay or prevent the provision of critical and possibly life-saving medical attention.

It is a condition of travel on Small Group Journeys that all travelers are adequately covered by travel insurance prior to arrival. Insurance should cover personal accident and medical expenses, evacuation and repatriation, baggage loss, and cancellation or curtailment of holiday. Insurance details must be supplied to us at the time of booking, and where they are not provided we reserve the right to cancel bookings and apply charges as per our cancellation policy (in the Conditions of Reservation section of our brochure and on our website). Travelers will be asked to present their insurance details upon arrival in Asia as part of a registration process, and in the event that possession of insurance is unable to be confirmed, in the interests of the traveler and fellow travelers, Travel Indochina reserves the right to prevent participation in the journey. In such instances, we will assist with onward travel arrangements, however full cancellation penalties will apply.

Note that travel insurance 'attached' to credit cards is often limited in scope (eg. not covering serious medical, repatriation or evacuation expenses) and in any case is usually effective only if travel arrangements have been purchased with the card. Please note also that government regulations in Asia do not always require or enforce the possession of liability insurance by hotels, transport and other suppliers. Even when insurance is in place, it can be for very limited coverage only. Travel Indochina does its best to work with suppliers who possess liability insurance, however it is not always possible to find and contract with such suppliers.

Travelers who book private touring arrangements with Travel Indochina will also be asked to provide insurance details at the commencement of touring, as part of a tour registration process.

MONEY

The official currency of Laos is the kip, however United States dollars and Thai baht are accepted almost everywhere. The exchange rate fluctuates but at time of writing, \$1USD was the approximate equivalent of 9,500 kip (See below for detailed currency exchange rates). As you will accumulate kip as change from payments you make in USD, we recommend you change a little (eg. \$30USD) into kip upon your arrival in Laos. We advise you to carry USD cash. Credit cards (Visa and Mastercard) can be used in only a limited number of shops and restaurants in Vientiane and Luang Prabang. Travelers crossing from Thailand at Chiang Khong/ Huay Xai can change money at fair rates next to the Huay Xai (Laos) visa post.

ATM services for international cards are available throughout Vientiane (money is dispensed in kip). Cash advances from banks on international cards are also readily available throughout Vientiane.

Luang Prabang only contains a few ATM's (only for Maestro cards at time of printing). Cash advances can be obtained from numerous bank branches in the city for all international cards. Hotels often change foreign currency cash, and sometimes travelers checks, but rates tend to be more favorable at banks. If traveling to other cities and provinces within Laos apart from Vientiane or Luang Prabang it is advisable to make sure you have enough funds for the duration of your stay in that region. Lao kip cannot be converted outside of Laos, so don't change too much money into kip.

Remember that passports are required for travelers checks and credit card transactions.

- 9,500 kip = 1 US dollar
- 9,000 kip = 1 Canadian dollar

CLIMATE

Laos is affected by the annual Southeast Asian monsoon cycle. The 'wet' season is from May to October. During this time, the tropical lowlands average 85 degrees Fahrenheit, while the mountains remain cooler. The first half of the 'dry' season is from November to February; temperatures during this time range from 50 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit. Mornings and evenings in the north of Laos around Luang Prabang can be quite cool at this time of the year. People traveling between Huay Xai and Luang Prabang on the Mekong should bring at least one layer of warm clothes. During the second half of the 'dry' season - from March to June - the temperature can rise to up to 95 degrees Fahrenheit. Many travelers prefer Laos outside the dry season; there are fewer tourists, and rainfall is often limited to brief afternoon showers, which lend a different atmosphere to the country and towns.

BAGGAGE & CLOTHING

Standard sized bags (preferably soft bags), backpacks or soft cases only are permitted on our journeys. Your baggage should be clearly labeled and kept to a reasonable minimum. Luggage limits on airlines are strictly enforced and space on vehicles and trains is limited. Any flights booked through Travel Indochina (domestic and international) have a luggage limit of 20 kilograms per person. You may be required to carry your own luggage at times where porters are not available - you should be capable of carrying your own bags on and off trains, and up and down stairs. If you are doing lots of shopping during your travels, it may be necessary for you to forward any excess to the city where your tour concludes, or ship purchases directly home. Keeping the amount of luggage you carry in check will ensure your safety and comfort, and the safety and comfort of your fellow travelers. Porterage is not included in the cost of your journey. Please ensure you pay porters around \$1USD per person for carrying your luggage. Should you wish to avoid such payments, please carry and take responsibility for your luggage. For some of the longer more adventurous journey passengers may like to bring an overnight bag when staying in towns and villages for only one evening. The bulk of your luggage may be left on your bus or boat. Packing a small padlock is a good idea to ensure safety.

Comfortable casual clothes made of cotton are best in tropical and semi tropical climates - packing one set of smart casual clothes is advisable. Laundry services are available throughout the country, although hotel laundry costs can be expensive. We suggest you include:

- Flat walking shoes and sandals
- Hat & sunglasses
- Jumper/coat
- Bathers
- Money belt
- Raincoat or umbrella
- Basic first aid kit (see below)
- Insect repellent
- Alarm clock
- Small torch
- Swiss Army pocketknife
- Power adapter
- Women's sanitary products
- Ear plugs and eye patches for the train

Please note that airlines insist all sharp items (knives, scissors, nail clippers etc.) are packed in your 'check-in' luggage. Alcohol is no longer permitted onboard domestic flights and must also be stored in your check-in luggage.

ELECTRICITY

The electric current in Laos operates on 220 volts. Electrical plugs of the two-rounded pin type are the most commonly required. You will need to purchase a power adaptor suitable for this region prior to your departure. You may want to bring a small hair dryer - not all hotels provide one.

HEALTH

Some of the diseases known to exist in Laos include malaria, hepatitis A and B, typhoid, tuberculosis, Japanese encephalitis, dengue fever, diphtheria, tetanus, and HIV/ AIDS. We recommend you take adequate preventative measures to minimize your risk of exposure to these health risks. We are a travel company and we are not qualified to provide detailed medical information appropriate to your individual needs. We recommend you consult with your local doctor or a specialist travel medical centre for up to date health information on vaccinations and medicine for your trip, at least one month prior to departure. Medical facilities are limited throughout the country (even in the capital Vientiane) compared to western standards.

We suggest you bring a simple medical kit. Your doctor should advise you what to include, but as a minimum we suggest you bring:

- Aspirin or paracetamol (for pain or fever)
- Antihistamines (for allergies and itches)
- Cold and flu tablets
- Something to stop diarrhea
- Something appropriate for nausea and vomiting
- Rehydration mixture (to prevent dehydration)
- Insect repellent
- Antiseptic and bandages
- Sunscreen and lip balm
- Antibiotics (discuss with your doctor)

As part of our travel registration process at the start of any journey with Travel Indochina, you will be asked to declare any serious pre-existing medical conditions or allergies.

SAFETY & SECURITY

Laos is a safe country by world standards, but the usual common sense safety precautions should be adhered to. Cities are small, and even at night you will feel quite safe walking outside. Most Laotians go to bed fairly early so streets will usually be very quiet after 9 pm. When outside your hotel, spending money should be kept in a secure place, close to your body. Wear as little jewellery as possible. You should leave valuables in hotel safety deposit boxes at all times and make sure you have photocopies of your passport, airline tickets, and a detailed record of your encashed traveler's checks and credit card numbers. It is advisable to always carry a hotel card to ensure you have a fool proof way of directing a driver back in the event you get lost or encounter language barriers. Uneven surfaces and potholes around streets and footpaths are commonplace in Laos, so always watch where you put your feet, especially at night when visibility is reduced.

FOOD & WATER

Lao cuisine is somewhat similar to Thai food and can be quite spicy. Ingredients include vegetables, freshwater fish, beef, duck, pork and chicken. Food is generally flavored with fermented fish sauce, coconut milk, peanuts and chilies. Vegetarians are well catered for. Breakfast is included each day on our tours and is usually a mix of buffet and continental style. You should only drink bottled water - available everywhere for purchase.

POST & COMMUNICATION

International post generally takes ten to fourteen days to reach its destination and prices are similar to western postal prices. Reverse charge (collect) calls are not currently available and IDD telephone calls and faxes are moderately priced.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Print film, such as Kodak, Konika or Fuji is widely available and costs approximately \$4USD per roll. There are reasonable quality processing facilities in Laos. A roll of 24 exposures can be developed for approximately \$4USD. Slide film and Hi8/V8 video cassettes are not widely available in Laos. The x-ray machines at all airports are film-safe. There are now a number of photo shops in Vientiane and Luang Prabang which will print photos from memory cards on digital cameras or burn images to CD. The purchase of new memory cards is available in main cities for a reasonable price.

HOTELS

Most hotels we use have private western style bathrooms, hot water, air-conditioning, IDD telephones, laundry and other facilities. Where possible we endeavor at passenger request to accommodate couples in double rooms. Please note however that on occasions during your journey, this may not be possible and a twin room will be provided. The standards at some hotels will not always match western standards, as Lao tourism infrastructure is still developing.

Check in and check out times can vary but most hotels in Vietnam require guests to check out by 12 noon and do not allow check in until 2pm. Many hotels may allow an earlier check in or later check out subject to availability on the day.

MASSAGE SERVICES

Many countries in Asia are deservedly renowned for their massage techniques and the quality and value for money of these services. Unfortunately, many massage parlors including some in otherwise 'reputable' hotels are also linked to the paid sex industry. We advise you to check carefully before using massage services in Asia.

TRANSPORT

There are only approximately 1200 miles of sealed road in Laos. On the road, late model Toyota Coaster or Hyundai air-conditioned buses are generally used with either 25-40 seats - depending on the size of the group. Larger vehicles are used for bigger group sizes. Modern sedan cars are used when there are only one or two people in the group. Some tours involve at least one domestic flight. Lao Airlines operates a relatively modern fleet, however schedules frequently change which can result in alterations to your tour program. Some tours also involve boat journeys along the Mekong River. This is a great opportunity to view the way of life for most families living along the banks of the river and will provide you with terrific photo opportunities. Toilets on the boats, where available, are generally of the Asian squat style. There is no train network in Laos.

LOCAL TIME

Laos is:

- 12 hrs ahead of Canada Eastern Time
- 15 hrs ahead of Canada Pacific Time
- 12 hrs ahead of US Eastern Time
- 15 hrs ahead of US Pacific Time

TOUR LEADERS & GUIDES

Providing the group tour reaches a minimum of seven passengers a western tour leader will guide you on your entire journey through Laos. All our tour leaders have an in-depth knowledge of Laos and an enthusiasm for the country that is contagious. Your tour leader is your link with Laos and is there to ensure the smooth running of the trip. Your tour leader will try - wherever practicable - to cater for your individual interests. Local English speaking guides also accompany you on your tour. They impart local information about history, customs and culture that can only come from living in the area. Generally we have a different local guide for each city or region we visit and so local guides are usually only with the group for one to two days.

LANGUAGE

The Lao language is written in a Thai-Khmer script. Because the language is tonal the same written word can have several different meanings. This makes it fairly difficult to learn, but any attempt to speak the language will be well received by local people. Many Laotians recognize the importance of learning English for business and tourism purposes and for this reason English is becoming more widely spoken throughout the country. The Lonely Planet Lao phrasebook is recommended for those wanting to learn more about the language.

GROUP DYNAMICS

Our small group journeys provide you with a good balance of group activity and personal discovery. Travelers need to be aware of certain personal responsibilities when traveling with a group. Simple things like being ready at agreed times and keeping to schedule will ensure the smooth running of the program. Furthermore, the traditions and culture of the country you are visiting should be respected. Correct behavior includes wearing the appropriate dress when visiting religious sites and refraining from making comments or acting in a manner that would be viewed as unacceptable by your fellow group members or by the local people in the country you are visiting. Please ask your tour leader for further clarification of the issues mentioned above.

IMPORTANT DATES AFFECTING TOURING, AND COMPULSORY MEALS

01 Jan. 2008 - International New Year's Day:

Public holiday. Banks and public offices will be closed, as will some businesses.

06 Jan. 2008 - Pathet Lao Day:

Banks will however be open. Some public offices only will be closed.

20 Jan. 2008 - Military Day:

Public holiday. Banks and public offices will be closed, as will some businesses.

08 Mar. 2008 - Public holiday (women's day):

Banks will however be open. Some public offices only will be closed.

22 Mar. 2008 - Public holiday (Lao People's Party Day):

Banks will however be open. Some public offices only will be closed.

13 to 15 Apr. 2008 - Lao New Year:

Public holiday. Banks and public offices will be closed, as will some businesses. Wats and museums in Vientiane and Luang Prabang will also be closed for at least one day during this period. Hotels in Luang Prabang are very heavily booked.

01 May 2008 - International Labour Day:

Public holiday. Banks and public offices will be closed, as will some businesses. Boat races in Luang Prabang, and maybe in Vientiane (TBA).

01 June 2008 - Public Holiday (Children's Days):

Public holiday. Banks and public offices will be closed, as will some businesses.

13 August 2008 - Lao Isara:

Banks will however be open. Some public offices only will be closed.

23 August 2008 - Liberation Day:

Public holiday. Banks and public offices in Vientiane and Luang Prabang will be closed, as will some businesses. Some streets blocked along the Mekong. Hotels heavily booked.

12 Oct. 2008 - Freedom from France Day:

Public holiday. Banks and public offices will be closed, as will some businesses.

Oct. 2008 (exact date TBA) - Boat Racing festival Vientiane:

Public holiday. Banks and public offices in Vientiane and Luang Prabang will be closed, as will some businesses. Some streets blocked along the Mekong. Hotels heavily booked.

02 Dec. 2008 - National Day:

Public holiday. Banks and public offices will be closed, as will some businesses. Wats and museums in Vientiane and Luang Prabang will also be closed.

22 Dec. 2008 to 02 Jan. 2009 - International New Year period - Public holiday:

Banks and public offices will be closed, as will some businesses.

Over the festive period, there will be compulsory dinners at a number of hotels. The cost of these dinners must be settled directly with the hotel. At time of writing, 2008 compulsory meal rates had not yet been finalised. Please contact us for further information.

GROUND OPERATOR CONTACT DETAILS

The ground operator taking you through this fascinating part of the world is **Travel Indochina**. Travel Indochina has been running tours to Asia since 1993, and offers unique, innovative and exciting itineraries that allow you to experience the best a destination has to offer as well as giving you plenty of free time to explore.

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