

BIG FIVE

TOURS & EXPEDITIONS

Enriching Lives Through Distinctive Journeys™

Destination Information Guide

Laos



The following general outline offers practical information, suggestions and answers to some frequently asked questions. It is not intended to be the definitive guide for your trip.

1551 SE PALM COURT, STUART, FL 34994
772 287 7995 / FAX: 772 287 5990 / 800 BIG FIVE (800 244 3483)
WWW.BIGFIVE.COM & WWW.GALAPAGOS.COM EMAIL: INFO@BIGFIVE.COM

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Welcome to the World of Big Five!

Big Five Tours & Expeditions is pleased to welcome you on this exciting adventure. We take great care to insure that your travel dreams and expectations are well met. Our distinctive journeys allow you to experience the finest aspects each destination has to offer. We also aim to provide you with a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the places you'll visit and the people you'll meet.



Luang Prabang, Laos Elevation: 997 feet Latitude: 19 53N Longitude: 102 08E
Average Temperature Years on Record: 28

	YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
°F	78	69	73	78	82	84	83	82	82	82	79	74	70

Average High Temperature Years on Record: 28

	YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
°F	90	82	89	93	96	95	93	90	90	91	89	85	81

Average Low Temperature Years on Record: 28

	YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
°F	67	56	58	63	69	73	74	74	74	73	69	64	59

Vientiane, Laos Elevation: 561 feet Latitude: 17 57N Longitude: 102 34E
Average Temperature Years on Record: 17

	YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
°F	80	73	77	82	85	84	84	83	83	82	81	78	72

Average High Temperature Years on Record: 17

	YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
°F	87	83	86	91	93	90	89	88	87	88	87	85	81

Average Low Temperature Years on Record: 17

	YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
°F	73	64	68	72	77	78	78	78	78	77	75	70	63

WEATHER

Throughout most of the country, the climate is hot and tropical. The annual monsoon cycle gives Laos two distinct seasons: May to October is wet, and November to April is dry. Temperatures vary according to altitude. In the Mekong River Valley, the highest temperatures occur between March and April, and can reach 100°F. The lowest temperatures are found between December and January, and fall around 59°F. During most of the rainy season, daytime temperatures average around 84°F in the lowlands and 77°F in mountain valleys.

TIME ZONES & TRAVELING TIME

Laos is GMT + 7 hours.

PASSPORTS & VISAS

While in Laos, you are required to carry your passport or tourist card with you at all times. A photocopy with your passport and entry stamp will usually suffice if stopped by officials. Passports: For international travel, a U.S. passport valid for at least six months from date of departure, containing at least two blank pages is necessary. On entering Laos visitors must ensure they receive an entry stamp in their passport as fines for not having one are high.

Visas: Currently visas are available on arrival: available at all entry points except at Nam Heuang Bridge and Veun Kham. Those requiring visas should obtain them in their home country before traveling to Laos. Big Five Tours & Expeditions has appointed Zierer Visa Service (www.ZVS.com) to process required visas for our passengers. The Visa Application Kit is included with your pre-trip confirmation packet.

You can also download the necessary forms from the website, where you will enter the visa section for Big Five Tours & Expeditions. Here you will find a list of country-specific forms. You will also discover useful hints such as how to obtain a passport, adding passport pages, and other tips.

Important: Please look at your passport before you submit it to ZVS to insure that:

1) It is valid for at least six months after the date of travel.

2) You have sufficient blank pages for visa stamps that will be added as you travel in and out of various countries.

Please note: Pages reserved for amendments and endorsements cannot be used for visas.

AIRPORT FORMALITIES

Upon arrival, proceed through immigration, baggage claims and customs. Big Five personnel or their representatives meet you outside the arrival hall and escort you to your hotel.

****** Please note that for departures from Luang Prabang Airport, usually only passengers are allowed to enter. Most likely our guides will not be allowed in, but they will advise you about what to expect and where you need to go.

Departure Tax: Currently, all airport taxes are included in the air tickets.

Please note that all government taxes are subject to change without notice.

CUSTOMS INTO LAOS

The following goods may be imported into Laos, from countries not bordering Laos, without incurring customs duty: 500 cigarettes or 100 cigars or 500g of tobacco; one bottle of alcoholic beverage and two bottles of wine; personal jewelry up to 500g.

Prohibited: Antiques items such as Buddha images and others old cultural artifacts cannot be taken out of Laos. If you have already traveled in neighboring countries, you are advised to declare your valuable items to the customs upon entry to prevent any inconvenience upon departure. If you buy silver or copper items in Laos, you are also required to pay custom duty according to weight at the airport.

US CUSTOMS

Returning U.S. residents are allowed to bring back \$800 worth of merchandise duty-free. There are limits on some items. Regulations

frequently change. For a list of exempt items and more information contact your nearest Customs office or write the U.S. Customs Service, Box 7407, Washington, DC 20044.

HEALTH

Visitors traveling internationally should be in generally good health. Talk with your personal physician about any shots or boosters recommended depending on your personal health profile and your itinerary. Tetanus and polio vaccines should be up to date. Be prepared to take precautions against sunburn with sunscreen and lip balm.

Yellow Fever: Yellow fever inoculation is required if one of the following applies:

If you are coming from any area other than the United States, Europe, or Canada.

If you plan on visiting more than one African country.

Typhoid may occur. Poliovirus transmission has been interrupted, but complete eradication is not yet certain.

Malaria risk exists throughout the year in the whole country, except in Vientiane. The malignant *falciparum* form is prevalent and is reported to be highly resistant to chloroquine. The recommended prophylaxis is mefloquine.

Other risks: Hepatitis A and E occur; hepatitis B is highly endemic. Dengue fever, diphtheria, tuberculosis and Japanese encephalitis occur. Some vaccinations may be advised. Liver fluke (opisthorchiasis) is present; travelers should avoid eating raw or undercooked fish. Rabies is present. For those at high risk, vaccination before arrival should be considered. If you are bitten, seek medical advice without delay.

Please note: If you are on medication, be sure to bring enough for the duration of the trip. Prescription medicines should always be carried in their original containers in your hand luggage. If you wear contact lenses or glasses, we suggest you bring an extra pair and cleaning fluid.

Health insurance is essential for any foreign travel.

Check the latest regulations with your local health office or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention hotline for international travelers at 1-877-FYI-TRIP (1-877-394-8747); fax: 1-888-CDC-FAXX (1-888-232-3299), or their main telephone number in Atlanta, 404-332-4559. To receive these documents, call 404-332-4565 and follow the prompts. You can also get information on the CDC's website at www.cdc.gov/travel.

CLOTHING

For general clothing information, please review the Travel Handbook in your pre-departure materials. See pre-departure information for general packing check list.

Bring lightweights and rainwear, with a sweater for winter and upland areas. Light, loose-fitting cotton garments are still the best choice, including cotton socks. Please be sure to observe appropriate dress codes when visiting religious sanctuaries, buildings, sites, or palaces, where modesty is the rule. If you are inappropriately dressed, you will not be allowed to enter. Casual clothing is acceptable for tourists, but when visiting special places and sacred sites do not wear short shorts, halter-tops or muscle shirts. Note that sandals or other easily removed shoes are best on days you visit pagodas and monasteries as you will need to remove your shoes upon entering.

LUGGAGE

For general baggage information, please review the Travel Handbook in your pre-departure materials.

Flights within the country may have weight restrictions, depending on several factors, including type and size of aircraft, destination, etc. Specific weight limitations will be noted in your pre-departure information.

CURRENCY / BANKING

KIP is the official currency of the Lao PDR and bank notes are presently in denomination Bank notes – 500, 1000, 2000, 5000, 10000, 20000

and 50000. There are money exchange facility at the airports, and several licensed bureau in towns. It is best to use cash to ensure the best bargains, but a few businesses and restaurants do accept travelers' checks. Traveler's checks in other currencies are best changed in Vientiane and the major provinces. In general, US dollar traveler's checks can be cashed at most banks nationwide. Credit cards, Visa is the most common. Master Card and American Express are accepted at most banks and major provinces, and in large hotels, restaurants and shops.

COMMUNICATION

The official language is Lao, however, many tribal languages are also spoken. French, Vietnamese and some English are spoken as well.

ELECTRICITY

Laos uses 220 volt AC, 50 Hz electricity for use with either two-pronged round or flat plugs.

FOOD & DRINK

All water should be regarded as being potentially contaminated. Water used for drinking, brushing teeth or making ice should have first been boiled or otherwise sterilized. Milk is unpasteurized and should be boiled. Powdered or tinned milk is available and is advised, but make sure that it is reconstituted with pure water. Avoid dairy products that are likely to have been made from unboiled milk. Only eat well-cooked meat and fish, preferably served hot. Pork, salad and mayonnaise may carry increased risk. Vegetables should be cooked and fruit peeled. As a general rule when. Remember: boil it, cook it, peel it, or forget it! Never eat undercooked ground beef and poultry, raw eggs, and unpasteurized dairy products.

Note: If you have food allergies or are on a special/restricted diet, please notify your travel agent or our office in advance, so that we may try to comply with your needs. Also, please advise your travel agent or our office if you have any mobility restrictions, so that we may inform our representatives accordingly. They

will always strive to accommodate you to the best of their ability.

TIPPING

Practiced modestly in hotels and restaurants. There is really no one standard that is followed for tipping. In general, US\$ 2-3 per day should be enough for 1 to 2 travelers, and US\$2-3 should cover everything, guide, luggage carrier, etc. For larger groups, the amount that each individual traveler should contribute is less and depends on the size of the group.

SHOPPING

The markets in Vientiane and Luang Prabang (about 40 minutes by air from Vientiane) are worth visiting. Silk, silver jewelry and handmade shirts are good buys. Although the majority of shops have fixed prices, bartering is still advisable for antiques and other art objects.

Things to look for include Lao skirts (or Sinh), beautiful, unique and elegant. You can buy them at markets in every province from the north to the south, especially at the Morning Market in Vientiane, handicraft shops and souvenir shops. Designs vary with regions so you may want to pick them up along the way.

Lao cotton and silk are simply gorgeous. If you are interested, your guide can take you to Lao Cotton company and Lao clothing shops. Some textile manufacturers such as MaiCome and Couleur d'Asie are quite well known outside Laos. Lao handicrafts are wonderful and charming. Most of them are made of wood, cotton and other native materials.

SOCIAL CONVENTIONS

The generally accepted form of greeting among Lao people is the Nop, placing one's palms together in a position of praying, at chest level, but not touching the body. The higher the hand, the greater the sign of respect, although they should never be held above the level of the nose. This is accompanied by a slight bow to show respect to persons of higher status or age. The Nop is not only an expression of greeting, but also of thanks, of regret or saying goodbye. However, it is appropriate to shake hands with westerners.

As in many Asian cultures, the head is considered the most sacred part of the body, and the soles of the feet are the lowliest. One should not touch a person's head nor use one's foot to point at a person or any object. Men and women rarely show affection in public. It is forbidden for a woman to touch a Buddhist monk.

It is customary to remove one's shoes or sandals when entering a Buddhist temple or private home. In Lao PDR, homes are raised off the ground, shoes or sandals are left at the stairs. In a traditional home, one sits on low seats or cushions on the floor. Men may sit with legs crossed or folded to one side. Women sit with legs folded to the side. If served tea or fruit, try not to refuse, even if you only take a taste.

SUGGESTED READING LIST

Many comprehensive and readily available guides produced by Lonely Planet, Fodor, Insight, The Rough Guide, etc., many books relating this destination. Here are a few selections we thought might interest you. Longitude Books at <http://www.longitudebooks.com> has an extensive collection of books, searchable by country.

A GUIDE TO KHMER TEMPLES IN THAILAND AND LAOS

By Michael Freeman

A compact guide to Khmer temples throughout the region, both famous and little-visited, featuring color photography, maps, temple plans and diagrams. It includes many remarkable sites near the border with Cambodia that are open to the public for the first time.

A DRAGON APPARENT: TRAVELS IN CAMBODIA, LAOS AND VIETNAM

By Norman Lewis

Originally published in 1951, this classic account of travels and adventure during the last years of French Indo-China, strong on atmosphere and including wonderfully detailed descriptions of local cultures and archaeological treasures.

DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, THE WINDS OF CHANGE

Clark D. Neher

A study of the link between economic development and the emergence of democratic institutions in Southeast Asia. Written for the lay reader, this book includes chapters on conditions of each country, from the Philippines to Burma.

A PHOTOGRAPHIC GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

By Morten Strange

This compact guide to the birds of Southeast Asia features color photographs of 700 species with a concise description and distribution map for each bird. Introductory chapters cover birding in the region, seasonality, biogeography, and popular locations.

HOT, SOUR, SALTY, SWEET: A CULINARY JOURNEY THROUGH SOUTHEAST ASIA

By Jeffrey Alford, Naomi Duguid

Award-winning authors Jeffrey Alford and Naomi Duguid followed the river south, as it flows through

the mountain gorges of southern China, to Burma and into Laos and Thailand. For a while the right bank of the river is in Thailand, but then it becomes solely Lao on its way to Cambodia. Only after three thousand miles does it finally enter Vietnam and then the South China Sea. It was during their travels that Alford and Duguid—who ate traditional foods in villages and small towns and learned techniques and ingredients from cooks and market vendors—came to realize that the local cuisines, like those of the Mediterranean, share a distinctive culinary approach: Each cuisine balances, with grace and style, the regional flavor quartet of hot, sour, salty, and sweet. It has more than 175 recipes for spicy salsas, welcoming soups, grilled meat salads, and exotic desserts are accompanied by evocative stories about places and people. The recipes and stories are gorgeously illustrated with more than 150 color food and travel photographs.

A TRAVELLER'S HISTORY OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

By J.M. Barwise, Nicholas J. White

A compact history of the region, including the Khmer and other ancient kingdoms that produced Borobudur, Angkor and other architectural marvels. The authors include the history of diverse nations from Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and Indonesia, to Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

TRAGIC MOUNTAINS: THE HMONG, THE AMERICANS, AND THE SECRET WARS FOR LAOS, 1942-1992

By Jane Hamilton-Merritt

Here is a portrait of the Hmong, and their role in America's clandestine war in Laos during the Vietnam era, and their persecution and plight in Laos since being abandoned by America in 1975. The author, a reporter during the Vietnam War, has worked for decades on behalf of the Laotian mountain people.