

BIG FIVE[®]

TOURS & EXPEDITIONS

Enriching Lives Through Distinctive Journeys

Destination Information Guide

Laos



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Welcome to the World of Big Five!

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

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

Passports: For international travel, a passport valid for at least six months from date of departure, containing at least 3 blank pages are necessary.

Visas: Many countries require travelers to obtain visas prior to arrival. Big Five Tours & Expeditions has appointed Trivisa to process required visas for our passengers. You can find the necessary forms from Trivisa's website at: www.trivisa.com. Please use account code JP1551, and follow the directions.

Important: Even if you do not need a visa prior to departure, please check your passport well in advance of departure to insure:

- 1) It is valid for at least six months after the date of travel.
- 2) You have sufficient blank pages for visa/entry 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.

Note: Remember to carry with you in a safe place photocopies of all important documents in the event your passport or other documents are lost or stolen. Also, it's a good idea to have a passport photo with you. As a tourist, you will need to produce your passport when booking in at hotels, changing money or travelers' checks and prove your identity whenever requested by a policeman.

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. Regardless of where you purchase your travel insurance, it is vital that you do for your own protection.

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.

MONEY

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.

LANGUAGE

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

Tipping should be done at your discretion and as a reward for good or exceptional service.

For general tipping guidelines please refer to: www.cntraveler.com/travel-tips/travel-etiquette/2008/12/Etiquette-101-Tipping-Guide

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 are produced by Lonely Planet, Fodor, Insight, The Rough Guide, etc. Here are a few selections we thought might interest you. Barnes and Noble, www.barnesandnoble.com, and Longitude Books, www.longitudebooks.com, have collections of books, searchable by country.

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.

Norman Lewis witnesses these ancient civilizations as they were before the terrible devastation of the Vietnam War. He creates a portrait of traditional societies struggling to retain their integrity in the embrace of the West. He meets emperors and slaves, brutal plantation owners and sympathetic French officers trapped by the economic imperatives of the colonial experiment. From tribal animists to Viet-Minh guerrillas, he witnesses this heart-breaking struggle over and over, leaving a vital portrait of a society on the brink of catastrophic change.

Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words: Histories of Buddhist Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand by Justin Thomas McDaniel

Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words examines modern and premodern Buddhist monastic education traditions in Laos and Thailand. Through five centuries of adaptation and reinterpretation of sacred texts and commentaries, Justin McDaniel traces curricular variations in Buddhist oral and written education that reflect a wide array of community goals and values. He depicts Buddhism as a series of overlapping processes, bringing fresh attention to the continuities of Theravada monastic communities that have endured despite regional and linguistic variations. Incorporating both primary and secondary sources from Thailand and Laos, he examines premodern inscriptional, codicological, anthropological, art historical, ecclesiastical, royal, and French colonial records. By looking at modern sermons, and even television programs and websites, he traces how pedagogical techniques found in premodern

palm-leaf manuscripts are pervasive in modern education.

Traveller's History of Southeast Asia by J. M. Barwise, N. J. White, N. J. White

From the early Christian era in Europe, Southeast Asia was known as the "Land of Gold." It is a region blessed with a rich diversity of cultures, peoples, and scenery. A Traveller's History of Southeast Asia is a lucid and concise introduction to the histories of the modern states of Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Singapore, Brunei and East Timor, providing an essential guide for both tourist and the general reader alike. It spans the history of the region from "Java Man" some one million years ago to the development of the high-tech, skyscraper cities of the new millennium. Following chapters on the physical environment and the earliest human history of Southeast Asia, the authors carry the reader through the classical kingdoms that produced such architectural marvels as Borobudur in Java and Angkor Wat in Cambodia. The book further explores Southeast Asia's growing trade with the outside world from 1500 culminating in colonization by the European imperial powers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The struggles for independence in the last century -- which made the modern nations of the region -- are discussed in detail, as are the dramatic and tragic events of the post-independence era such as the Vietnam War and the Cambodia genocide. The remarkable successes and failings of the region's recent economic development are highlighted in the final chapter. Above all A Traveller's History of Southeast Asia shows how the region's soul has been preserved against tremendous external pressures.

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. Jane Hamilton-Merritt, Nobel-nominated scholar and photojournalist, has followed the plight of the Hmong and the war in Indochina since the 1960s. The staunchest of allies, the Hmong sided with the Americans against the North Vietnamese and were foot soldiers in the brutal secret war for Laos. Since the war, abandoned by their American allies, the Hmong have been subjected to a campaign of genocide by the North Vietnamese, including the use of chemical weapons. *Tragic Mountains* moves from the big picture of international diplomacy and power politics to the small villages and heroic engagements in the Lao jungle. It is a story of courage, brutality, heroism, betrayal, resilience, and hope.

Laos: From Buffer State to Crossroads?

by Vatthana Pholsena, Ruth Banomyong, Michael Smithies (Translator)

Can Laos—with its small, scattered, ethnically diverse population, enchanting but rugged landscapes, and rich natural resources—emerge from the shadows of its more powerful neighbors? It has been carved up by colonial powers in the nineteenth century and dragged into devastating revolution and war in the twentieth. The authors provide a full, frank, and engaging survey of Laos today, assessing its history, prospects, and hopes. The book is essential reading for scholars, policymakers, and anyone interested in coming to grips with Laos today.

Laos: A Country Between Yesterday and Today

by Ann Helen Unger, Walter Unger, Walter Unger

Still hesitant, yet by now unmistakably, a country in Southeast Asia is beginning to open. This country, which has only just begun to determine

its path into the future, is Laos. Landlocked, it is surrounded by five restless neighbors: mighty China to the North, prospering Vietnam to the East, Cambodia, torn apart by internal discord, to the South, the economic dynamo Thailand, and Myanmar, ruled by unpopular generals, to the West. Yet despite these imminent influences, Laos remains an oasis of calm, now being discovered more and more by visitors from the West. The adventurer is enticed by rugged, fog-wrapped mountain ranges, boundless dense, twisted jungles, and trips in long, slender boats on rivers that turn from dreamy calm to surging whitewater rapids. Laos, hard-hit by the post-colonial ravages of war and since 1975 a socialist republic, is in the process of determining anew its inner structure as well as its role in the political and economic order of Southeast Asia. The geographic position and natural resources of the country - about the same size as England, but with a population of less than five million - will both be key factors in its development. Trading routes between China, Thailand and Vietnam used to run either around Laos or over its time-consuming waterways. Soon Laos will provide highways which are already under construction for this international commerce. Among the underdeveloped nations in the world, Laos is one of the poorest and hopes to raise the standard of living and to improve the systems of education and medical care. These radical changes of landscape and society will inevitably endanger Laos' natural and cultural heritage: the traditional customs of indigenous hilltribes, the forests, wildlife and the still pristine bodies of water. Over the course of several trips, the authors have journeyed into the farthest reaches of this country: from the isolated mountain villages in the North to the ruins of the former Khmer Empire in the South, and from the still war-scarred Plain of Jars in the East to the lowland rice fields along the Mekong in the West. Their photographs show a breathtaking and, at the same time, enchanted beauty, the rich heritage of the minorities still alive today, and the first steps towards the future. Their text describes clearly and concisely the country's history right up to the issues of today. In this book, for the first time, Laos is presented in its entire colorful diversity.