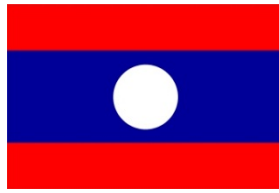


Laos



Official name is Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Capital city is Vientiane

History/Background

The Lao people migrated into Laos from southern China from the 8th century onward. In the 14th century, the first Laotian state was founded, the Lan Xang kingdom, which ruled Laos until it split into three separate kingdoms in 1713. During the 18th century, the three kingdoms came under Siamese (Thai) rule and, in 1893, became a French protectorate. With its territory incorporated into Indochina. A strong nationalist movement developed during World War II, but France reestablished control in 1946 and made the king of Luang Prabang constitutional monarch of all Laos. France granted semiautonomy in 1949 and then, spurred by the Viet Minh rebellion in Vietnam, full independence within the French Union in 1950.

In 1951, Prince Souphanouvong organized the Pathet Lao, a Communist independence movement, in North Vietnam. Viet Minh and Pathet Lao forces invaded central Laos, resulting in civil war. By the Geneva Agreements of 1954 and an armistice of 1955, two northern provinces were given to the Pathet Lao; the rest went to the royal regime. Full sovereignty was given to the kingdom by the Paris Agreements of Dec. 29, 1954. In 1957, Prince Souvanna Phouma, the royal prime minister, and Pathet Lao leader Prince Souphanouvong, the prime minister's half-brother, agreed to reestablishment of a unified government, with Pathet Lao participation and integration of Pathet Lao forces into the royal army. The agreement broke down in 1959, and armed conflict began anew.

In 1960, the struggle became a three-way fight as Gen. Phoumi Nosavan, controlling the bulk of the royal army, set up in the south a pro-Western revolutionary government headed by Prince Boun Oum. General Phoumi took Vientiane in December, driving Souvanna Phouma into exile in Cambodia. The Soviet bloc supported Souvanna Phouma. In 1961, a cease-fire was arranged and the three princes agreed to a coalition government headed by Souvanna Phouma.

But North Vietnam, the U.S. (in the form of CIA personnel), and China remained active in Laos after the settlement. North Vietnam used a supply line (Ho Chi Minh Trail) running down the mountain valleys of eastern Laos into Cambodia and South Vietnam,

particularly after the U.S.–South Vietnamese incursion into Cambodia in 1970 stopped supplies via Cambodian seaports.

An agreement reached in 1973 revived the coalition government. The Communist Pathet Lao seized complete power in 1975, installing Souphanouvong as president and Kaysone Phomvihane as prime minister. Since then, other parties and political groups have been moribund and most of their leaders have fled the country. The monarchy was abolished on Dec. 2, 1975, when the Pathet Lao ousted the coalition government and King Sisavang Vatthana abdicated.

The Supreme People's Assembly in Aug. 1991 adopted a new constitution that dropped all references to socialism but retained the one-party state. In addition to implementing market-oriented policies, the country has passed laws governing property, inheritance, and contracts

During the 1990s, the country began making more diplomatic overtures toward its neighbors. In 1995, the U.S. announced a lifting of its ban on aid to the nation. By most international estimates, Laos is one of the 10 poorest countries in the world. The subsistence farmers who make up more than 80% of the population have been plagued with bad agricultural conditions—alternately floods and drought—since 1993.

Since March 2000, Vientiane has been rocked by a series of unexplained blasts. The activity has been widely attributed to a group of Hmong tribesmen based in the north. The anti-Communist rebel group has been protesting the government's reluctance to embrace democratic reforms. Others attribute the bombs to rival factions in the government or military.

In Feb. 2002 parliamentary elections, 165 out of 166 candidates were members of the governing Lao People's Revolutionary Party. In 2006, Choummaly Sayasone became party secretary-general and president of Laos. First Deputy Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh became prime minister.

Population

In 2014, the population of Laos is estimated at 6.9 million, which ranks 106th in the world.

Religion

Buddhism

Theravada Buddhism is by far the most prominent organized religion in the country, with nearly 5,000 temples serving as the focus of religious practice as well as the center of community life in rural areas. In most lowland Lao villages, religious tradition remains strong. Most Buddhist men spend some part of their lives as monks in temples, even if only for a few days.

There are approximately 22,000 monks in the country, nearly 9,000 of whom have attained the rank of "senior monk," indicating years of study in temples. In addition, there are approximately 450 nuns, generally older women who are widowed, residing in temples throughout the country. The Buddhist Church is under the direction of a supreme patriarch who resides in Vientiane and supervises the activities of the church's central office, the Ho Thammasaphat has the 20% of the populations.

Lao Buddhists belong to the Theravada tradition, based on the earliest teachings of the Buddha and preserved in Sri Lanka after Mahayana Buddhism branched off in the second century B.C. Theravada Buddhism is also the dominant school in neighboring Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia.

That Luang, a Lao-style stupa, is the most sacred Buddhist monument in Laos and the location of the nationally important festival and fair in November.

For the Lao Loum, the wat is one of the two focal points of village life (the other is the school). The wat provides a symbol of village identity as well as a location for ceremonies and festivals. Prior to the establishment of secular schools, village boys received basic education from monks at the wat. Nearly every lowland village has a wat, and some have two. Minimally, a wat must have a residence building for the monks and novices (vihara), and a main building housing the Buddha statues (sim), which is used for secular village meetings as well as for prayer sessions. Depending on the wealth and contributions of the villagers, the buildings vary from simple wood and bamboo structures to large, ornate brick and concrete edifices decorated with colorful murals and tile roofs shaped to mimic the curve of the naga, the mythical snake or water dragon. An administrative committee made up of respected older men manages the financial and organizational affairs of the wat.

Buddhist ceremonies generally do not mark events in a life-cycle, with the exception of death. Funerals may be quite elaborate if the family can afford it but are rather simple in rural settings. The body lies in a coffin at home for several days, during which monks pray, and a continual stream of visitors pay their respects to the family and share food and drink. After this period, the body is taken in the coffin to a cremation ground and burned, again attended by monks. The ashes are then interred in a small shrine on the wat grounds.

Although officially incorporated into the dominant Mahanikai School of Buddhist Practice after 1975, the Thammayudh sect of Buddhism still maintains a following in the country. Abbots and monks of several temples, particularly in Vientiane, reportedly are followers of the Thammayudh School, which places greater emphasis on meditation and discipline.

There are four Mahayana Buddhist temples in Vientiane, two serving the ethnic Vietnamese community and two serving the ethnic Chinese community. Buddhist monks from Vietnam, China, and India have visited these temples freely to conduct services and minister to worshippers. There are at least four large Mahayana Buddhist pagodas in other urban centers and smaller Mahayana temples in villages near the borders of Vietnam and China.

Satsana Phi

"Satsana Phi" is a classificatory term for the ethnic religions practiced by 30.7% of the population of Laos. These religions are of the pantheistic and polytheistic-animistic kind, often including shamanic roles.

The category comprehends traditions of the Lao and other Tai-Kadai folks, the Khmu and other Mon-Khmer folks, as well as religions of the Hmong-Mien (Hmongism and Yao Taoism), Tibeto-Burman, and other ethnic groups of Laos. Among the Lao, the Lao Loum and Lao Lom are predominantly Buddhist, while the Lao Theung and Lao Sung are predominantly Phiist.

Christianity

Christianity is a minority religion in Laos. There are three recognized Churches in Laos: the Lao Evangelical Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Roman Catholic Church.

There are approximately 45,000 members of the Roman Catholic Church, many of whom are ethnic Vietnamese, concentrated in major urban centers and surrounding areas along the Mekong River in the central and southern regions of the country. The Catholic Church has an established presence in five of the most populous central and southern provinces, and Catholics are able to worship openly. The Catholic Church's activities are more circumscribed in the north. The church's property in Luang Prabang was seized after 1975, and there is no longer a parsonage in that city. An informal Catholic training center in Thakhek prepared a small number of priests to serve the Catholic community (20%).

Approximately 400 Protestant congregations conduct services throughout the country for a community that has grown rapidly in the past decade. Church officials estimate Protestants to number as many as 100,000. Many Protestants are members of ethnic Mon-Khmer groups, especially the Khmu in the north and the Brou in the central provinces. Numbers of Protestants also have expanded rapidly in the Hmong and Yao communities.

In urban areas, Protestantism has attracted many lowland Lao followers. Most Protestants are concentrated in Vientiane Municipality, in the provinces of Vientiane, Sayaboury, Luang Prabang, Xieng Khouang, Bolikhamsai, Savannakhet, Champassak, and Attapeu, as well as in the former Saisomboun Special Zone, but smaller congregations are located throughout the country. The LFNC officially recognizes only two Protestant groups - the Lao Evangelical Church and the Seventh-day Adventist Church - and requires all non-Catholic Christian groups to operate under one of these organizations.

Seventh-day Adventists number slightly more than 1,000 country-wide, with congregations in Vientiane Municipality as well as Bokeo, Bolikhamsai, Champassak, Luang Prabang, and Xieng Khouang provinces. Christian denominations that have some following in the country, but which are not recognized by the Government, include the

Methodists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Church of Christ, Assemblies of God, Lutherans, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Baptists. Official membership numbers are not available.

Ethnicities

There are around six million people spread across 16 provinces. The Lao government has tried to simplify the diversity of ethnic groups, by nominating three main groups determined by the altitude of where they live:

- The Lao of the Plain or "Lao Loum" living below an altitude of 400m above sea level
- The Lao of the Mountains "Lao Theung", living between 400m and 900m
- The Lao of the High Mountains "Lao Sououng", living above 900m.

But this classification is hardly ever used so instead, here is an overview of the distribution of linguistic groups:

- The Tai-Kadai family: about 55% of the population.
- The Austro-Asiatic family: about 30% of the population.
- The Mia-Yao family: about 10% of the population.
- The Sino-Tibetan family: about 5% of the population.

Main Languages and Dialects

Lao is the national language of Laos, spoken by over four million people there. It is also spoken by a minority in Northeast Cambodia, and a large minority (at least ten million) in Northeast Thailand (in areas bordering lowland Laos). There are also scattered Lao-speaking villages in Western Cambodia and Central and Eastern Thailand. The dialects spoken in Thailand are undergoing rapid change under the influence of central Thai. Lao is also spoken in sizeable expatriate communities in the US, Australia, and France.

Political System Important Information

The politics of Laos takes place in the framework of a single-party socialist republic. The only legal political party is the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). The head of state is President Choummaly Sayasone, who also is LPRP general secretary.

The head of government is Prime Minister Thongsing Thammavong. Government policies are determined by the party through the all-powerful nine-member Politburo of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party and the 49-member Central Committee. Important government decisions are vetted by the Council of Ministers.

General Legal System and Laws of Everyday Importance

The Law of Laos is not determined by a democratic parliament or by legal precedent, but by the arbitrary rule of Laos's single party.

Civil Liberties and Human Rights

The Laos criminal justice system is controlled by the party and the government. There are few legal restraints on government actions, including arrests, which are often arbitrary in nature. Dissent is frequently handled by suppressing basic civil rights. Although the constitution provisions of the mid-1990s cover freedom of worship, expression and press, citizens by December 2010 were not free to exercise these rights fully. There were no legal safeguards and arrests were commonly made on vague charges. A penal code and a constitution which guarantee civil liberties have been proposed. Implementation is another matter, particularly in the area of freedom of political expression. The media is state-controlled.

Nonetheless, there is a system for prosecuting criminal behavior. Common crimes are evaluated at the local village level. More serious cases, especially politically sensitive ones, are referred to higher authorities. Tribunals operate at district and provincial levels with judges appointed by the government.

Both Laotian journalists and Western officials are critical of the limitations on personal freedoms. In 1987, a Laotian journalist living in Thailand noted that there was little popular support for the government, but that most Laotians accepted its authority because they had little choice. In 1988, a Laotian journalist protested that open criticism of the government was forbidden and one of his friends was imprisoned after he complained about the continuing lack of a constitution. The same year, Western diplomats reported that hundreds or thousands of individuals were being held in detention centers in Laos and that citizens were being arrested and held for months without being charged.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the government instituted the New Economic Mechanism, a series of sweeping economic reforms geared toward establishing a market-oriented economy. Along with these economic reforms came a slight opening to the West, which provided some opportunity for scrutiny of human rights violations. However, few foreign journalists are allowed to visit Laos, and travel by diplomats and foreign aid workers is restricted. Both domestic and foreign travel by Laotians also is subject to scrutiny and restriction.

Criminal Justice System

The Ministry of Interior is the main instrument of state control and guardianship over the criminal justice system. Ministry of Interior police monitor both Laotians and

foreign nationals who live in Laos; there is a system of informants in workplace committees and in residential areas. According to the United States Department of State's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1993, both the party and state monitor various aspects of family and social life through neighborhood and workplace committees. These committees are responsible for maintaining public order and reporting "bad elements" to the police, as well as carrying out political training and disciplining employees.

The criminal justice system is deficient in the area of legal precedent and representation. Trials are not held in public, although trial verdicts are publicly announced. Although there is some provision for appeal, it does not apply to important political cases. Under the constitution, judges and prosecutors are supposed to be independent with their decisions free from outside scrutiny. In practice, however, the courts appear to accept recommendations of other government agencies, especially the Ministry of Interior, in making their decisions. Theoretically, the government provides legal counsel to the accused. In practice, however, defendants represent themselves without outside counsel.

The National Assembly enacted a criminal code and laws establishing a judiciary in November 1989 and a new constitution was adopted by the National Assembly in 1991.

In 1992 the government launched a campaign to publicize the latter. The leadership claims efforts at developing a legal system with a codified body of laws and a penal code. However, as of mid-1994, there had been little, if any, progress in implementing the freedoms provided for in the constitution and the legal codes still had not been implemented with individuals still being held without being informed of charges or their accusers' identities.

Detention Centers

In Laos, there are four categories of persons held in confinement by the State. Aside from common criminals, there are also political, social, and ideological dissidents. These are people who the government feels are a threat to their control, most commonly because of their public objection to governmental policies or actions. Commonly the specific crimes for which these dissidents are arrested and confined are vague at best. Their arrests are typically arbitrary and their length of confinement ambiguous and indefinite.

The LPDR established four different types of detention centers: prisons, reeducation centers or seminar camps, rehabilitation camps, and remolding centers. Social deviants or common criminals were considered less threatening to the regime than persons accused of political crimes, who were considered potential counterrevolutionaries; social deviants were confined in rehabilitation camps. According to MacAlister Brown and Joseph J. Zasloff, prisons were primarily reserved for common criminals, but political prisoners were also held there for usually six to twelve months. Ideologically suspect persons were sent to remolding centers. Reeducation centers were

for those deemed politically risky[clarification needed], usually former RLG officials. Political prisoners usually served three- to five-year terms or longer. At the prisons, inmates worked hard under rugged conditions and had limited supplies of food. Bribery in order to secure food and medicine was reported.

In 1986, Brown and Zasloff also reported that prisoners were not tried but were incarcerated by administrative fiat. Former inmates said that they were arrested, informed by the security officials that they had been charged with crimes, and then sent off to camps for indeterminate periods. Typically, prisoners were told one day prior to their release to prepare for departure.

The status of the detention centers is also vague. In 1984, Vientiane declared that all reeducation centers had been closed. At that time, Amnesty International estimated that 6,000 to 7,000 political prisoners were held in these centers. The government acknowledged that there were some former inmates in remote areas but claimed that their confinement was voluntary. In the late 1980s, the government closed some of the reeducation centers and released most of the detainees.

In 1989, Laos took steps to reduce the number of political prisoners, many of whom had been held since 1975. Several hundred detainees, including many high-ranking officials and officers from the former United States-backed RLG and Royal Lao Army, were released from reeducation centers in the northeastern province of Houaphan. Released prisoners reported that hundreds of individuals remained in custody in as many as eight camps, including at least six generals and former high-ranking members of the RLG. These individuals reportedly performed manual labor such as log cutting, repairing roads, and building irrigation systems. In 1993, Amnesty International reported human rights violations in the continued detention of three "prisoners of conscience" detained since 1975 but not sentenced until 1992, as well as those held under restrictions or, according to international standards, the subjects of unfair trials.

As of 1993, reports indicated that some high-ranking officials of the RLG and military remained in state custody[who?]. Those accused of hostility toward the government were subject to arrest and confinement for long periods of time. Prison conditions were harsh, and prisoners were routinely denied family visitation and proper medical care.

Cultural Do's and Don'ts

1. The Lao word for 'hello' is 'sabai dee', usually said with a smile. Touching or showing affection in public will embarrass your host.
2. In Laos your head is 'high', your feet 'low', using your feet for anything other than walking or playing sports is generally considered rude. Do not point with your feet/toes and do not have your feet raised/or propped up on tables.

3. Touching someone's head is very very impolite! [Not even childrens'.] It is polite to gently crouch down when passing someone who is seated. Never ever step over someone in your path.

3A. Monks are revered and respected in Laos. However, women should not touch a monk or a monk's robe.

4. Lao people appreciate clean and neatly dressed visitors! Please show respect and dress neatly while in temples and when taking photos. Dress appropriately, no tank tops or shorts in temples, no low cut neck-lines, or revealing clothes.

5. [While bathing daily and personal hygiene is appreciated], Bathing NUDE IS IMPOLITE and rude to their culture!

6. Please remember to take your shoes off before entering a Lao person's home. [Several weeks back while swinging thru Vang Vieng for a night I was appalled to be having dinner with a local friend who operates a guesthouse and it was his chance to have dinner and unwind a bit and I could hear this foreigner searching for him, going thru the guesthouse's little shop, going thru the reception area, and walking into his private quarters to insist that he wanted to buy a minibus ticket from him while his wife was 'managing' during his dinner time. There were more than enough workers/help to have sold him the ticket and to just barge in on his dinner let alone into his private quarters was one of the rudest acts I've witnessed but the sadest part was that the foreigner most likely wasn't even aware how rude he was in going into someone's private area!]

7. Kissing and hugging in public is impolite; please be discrete!

8. Lao people speak softly and avoid confrontation. Please do not shout or raise your voice.

9. Before taking a photo of someone, ask if it's OK.

10. Please do not distribute gifts [such as candy] to children as it encourages begging, but give to an established organisation [a school, monastery/temple/kyaung] or village elder instead.

11. Try eating delicious Lao food whenever you can. It helps local businesses and Lao farmers.

12. There are many other sacred items and sites in Laos. Please don't touch or enter these places without permission.

13. Laos loses a little of its cultural heritage everytime an antique is taken out of the country. Please do not buy antique buddhas or other sacred items. Instead, support local craftsmen by purchasing new yet quality, handicrafts.

14. The illegal sale of wildlife and wildlife products endangers many species native to Laos. Help protect Lao wildlife by refusing to buy wildlife products.

15. Please help to keep Laos clean and beautiful by not leaving litter. Picking up rubbish sets a good example for Lao youth.

Cross Gender Do's and Don't's

As with many Asian cultures, the position of women is complex and not always as it seems. On the one hand, the role of women in Lao society is still traditional according to Western values. Women carry a great responsibility in the family with little recognition from men. The inferior position of Lao women is deeply entrenched in Buddhist tradition and is perceived as natural by the great majority of Lao women. For educated Lao women, however, this tradition can pose considerable difficulty. There are few Lao women in senior positions in the public sector. Yet 63 percent of the informal business sector and the larger private sector organisations are run by women. The Lao constitution acknowledges the full equality of women but there is still a large gap between policy and reality.

And yet, if one looks at the family system, at least of lowland people in central and northern parts of the country, it is essentially matriarchal. Land, house and inheritance is passed through the wife not the husband. When the woman comes from a wealthy family, the wife has enormous power. Her husband moves into her family, behaves as a kept man and does what her family tells him to.

Women have considerable freedom and independence. Women may even outnumber men as entrepreneurs. One sees as many, if not more, young women driving motorcycles and cars as men.

You may be in the position to encourage the active participation of women colleagues. If given the opportunity, Lao women will assume responsibility at the work place and will demonstrate their considerable competence. On many occasions, women are overlooked because their bosses assume family responsibilities prevent them from playing more active roles at work and women often succumb to this understanding. This is where your encouragement is required. If you can affirm their value and contribution and their ability to carry on professionally without harming their family, it will foster their courage to continue.

In greetings, a woman's status derives from that of her husband. For example, if a woman is younger than you but her husband is older or more senior in position then you would greet her in Lao by using the term "older sister."

Types of Food (Delicious Foods and Foods to Watch Out For)

Lao food is distinct from other Asia cuisines, although it is somewhat similar to the food found in the northeastern part of Thailand in the area known as Isan.

Most Lao dishes contain vegetables and herbs, rice or noodles and fish, chicken, pork or beef. The freshness of the ingredients is very important to Lao people who like to

prepare everything from scratch, rather than use pre-prepared ingredients, as they believe this makes their food more delicious. Herbs such as galangal and lemongrass are favourites and padaek (Lao fish sauce) is found on every table.

One of the staples of Laos food is sticky rice. As the name reveals this rice naturally sticks together so it is easy to roll into small balls, dip into food and eat with your fingers. A traditional everyday Lao meal is simple and normally consists of sticky rice, some natural vegetables and at least one kind of spicy sauce to dip the sticky rice into, plus perhaps some fish or meat.

Another daily favorite is noodle soup (called feu also spelt pho) which is a hearty soup incorporating meat, noodles and vegetables. Don't be surprised if when ordering your noodle soup, a huge plate of local salad vegetables arrives at the same time, together with a range of sauces and condiments.

Although Lao cuisine has many influences, such as Thai, Vietnamese, Chinese and French, when talking about Laos food, most people who know Laos or have been to Laos would know laap (sometimes spelt laab or larp).

Laap is a dish that is particular to Laos and is often served on special occasions such as weddings, Baci ceremonies or other celebrations as in Lao language laap means luck or good fortune. However you will find it served in every good Lao restaurant around the country.

Laap is made from chopped or thinly sliced meat or fish that is mixed with lime juice, fish sauce, mint, coriander, spring onion, chili and uncooked rice grains that have been dry fried and crushed. It is usually accompanied by vegetables including eggplant, fresh chilies, mustard leaves and lettuce. It can be eaten with ordinary rice or sticky rice and is usually eaten with fish/meat soup depending on the main ingredient being used.

If you are a visitor it is useful to ask that your laap is cooked, as in some parts of the country locals like to eat it raw, particularly fish laap.

Other Lao favorites include papaya salad (a spicy mix of green papaya, lime juice, fish sauce, fresh chilies and peanuts), barbecued fresh fish and grilled meats (often served as small kebabs) and steamed fish or chicken in banana leaves.

Laos is blessed with a huge variety of fresh fruit and most meals will conclude with a plate of freshly cut fruits such as mango, pineapple, water melon and dragon fruit.

You can wash down your Lao meal with the country's award winning beer, Beer Lao, or fresh juices made from lime, sugar cane or coconut, as well as fruit shakes.

Every region of Laos has its own specialties, for example in Luang Prabang one treat is kaipen a fried snack made of fresh water weed eaten with jaew bong, a sweet and spicy Lao paste made with roasted chilies, pork skin, galangal and other ingredients. So make sure you ask what's best to eat in each town.

In the past, a Lao family would eat home cooked meal together sitting on the floor around a Lao-style table called a pa kao or ka toke. Though this tradition is still common in the country side, it is not widely seen in urban areas nowadays.

Eating Etiquette (Customs)

- The traditional greeting is a bow with the hands placed together at the chest, it is called the “nop” or “wai”. Do not perform this gesture to a waitress, only to the people you are dining with.
- Laotian food is similar to Thai food but more basic: It is based on rice, lemon grass, coriander, holy basil, galangal, chilli and fish stock.
- Laos was once a French colony so there is a French influence to their cuisine. Baguettes are called khao ji and filtered coffee is also popular for breakfast. There are affordable and high quality French restaurants in Vientiane and Luang Prabang serving good wines.
- Sticky rice is a staple in the lowlands, but is not eaten much in the highlands.
- Many types of meat are eaten in Laos; besides the obvious chicken, beef, duck and pork, you might encounter water buffalo, frog’s legs, field rat, Laotian sausages and many others.
- Because Laos is landlocked, you are only likely to encounter freshwater fish such as Mekong catfish.
- Soups you will encounter include tom cheut, keng, and keng soua. Keng is characterized by ginger and padek, and keng soua is keng that contains both galangal and ginger. Tom cheut is a mild soup with tofu and no spices.
- Stewing, boiling and steaming are all common as is the Chinese form of stir-frying. Grilling is very popular and is known as Ping.
- Many types of food are served and shared out among diners, although all the dishes may not be served at the same time.
- It is customary to allow the host to serve themselves first.
- Do not drink the water unless it is from a bottle or has been purified.
- Beer Lao is made from rice and is suitable to be drunk with most meals. Imported beers are also available but Beer Lao is cheaper and more widely available.
- Lao-Lao is a very strong rice based liquor. You should not drink this unless you are used to drinking alcohol.
- Alcohol is always shared and has a social function.
- Much Laotian food is eaten with the hands, but it is common and acceptable to use Western cutlery when available. Chopsticks are not used traditionally in Laos but are sometimes used for noodles.
- Vegetarians should be aware that nearly all foods are cooked in fish sauce.
- Chicken or Beef salad known as Larb is the customary dish of the country.

- Kissing or petting of any kind is not acceptable in public.
- Women should dress modestly in restaurants and even men should not leave too much skin exposed.
- Do not point your feet at anyone as this is offensive.
- Some establishments will expect you to remove shoes before entering the building. Be prepared to do so.
- Do not raise your voice to waitresses or anyone else. This is very rude.
- Do not discuss communism or politics unless invited to do so by Laotians.
- As a communist nation, tipping is not necessary in Laos.

Body Language Etiquette (Customs) Do's and Don'ts

With their laidback attitude and a deep aversion to confrontation, the Lao are **pretty tolerant of foreigners** failing local social etiquette. Yet while they may not vocalize their discomfort, they may still form negative impressions of visitors who unwittingly break cultural taboos, often bearing their resentment in silence until an opportunity presents itself to be most unaccommodating toward the offending party. Here are a couple of tips to keep you from embarrassing yourself — and others.

The Lao language is quite direct and does not encompass many polite phrases. While 'thank you', kop chai, is widely used in interactions, the word for 'please' is so rare, it's only ever used in customer service recordings or when speaking to high-ranking government officials. The phrase 'excuse me', koh toht, is rarely uttered. People often bump into each other in crowded spaces like markets or tuk tuks, but usually don't feel a need to excuse themselves and instead consider it a natural part of being in close proximity to others.

Possibly the most important phrase to remember is the standard Lao greeting of sabai dee, literally meaning 'it goes well'. It can be hollered across the street at someone, but when being introduced it is accompanied by a formal gesture called the nop — press your hands together as if praying and bow your head slightly. This is somewhat the equivalent of shaking hands, so it's not always necessary.

If you're being introduced to someone new, do use the nop. A handshake is not traditional, but often also acceptable, especially in Vientiane. Kissing someone's cheek or hand will certainly overstep a Lao person's boundaries and especially make women very embarrassed.

Kissing in public is frowned upon, and holding hands is the most intimate level of romantic interest that is acceptable to express in public. Overt sexual behavior is not welcomed and neither is showing too much skin. While short shorts and see-through tops are fashionable among Lao girls, you generally won't see them in swim-wear, even when they're swimming; men swim in trunks. It's generally accepted that tourists will swim in swimwear. It's not accepted when **tourists wear their swimwear walking around the streets**, although for a while it was fairly popular in places like Vang Vieng. If you walk into a shop or a restaurant in your swim trunks or a bikini, the staff probably won't say anything, but they'll consider this behavior to be vulgar; they'd much prefer that men kept their shirts on and women covered up their curvy bits.

The one place where rules of dressing modestly are strictly observed is in temples. Women's shoulders and thighs should be covered. If you're temple-gazing, it's a good idea to bring a wrap and wear bottoms that reach the knees. Additionally, women must behave modestly when interacting with monks and are strictly prohibited from touching them or their robes. Rules for men in temples are a little more relaxed, but muscle tees and tattered clothes are considered disrespectful apparel.

Some other carefully observed Buddhist customs relate to the belief that the **head is the most sacred part of the body and the feet the most impure**; touching the

top of someone's head is therefore a strong personal violation, as it is the crown of their spiritual body. Likewise, putting one's feet up onto furniture, or using them to point at something, are very rude gestures.

Entering someone's home with dirty shoes or feet is rude behaviour; likewise always wear shoes when outside. Many shops will also ask you to take off your shoes. If you're in doubt, ask, and for your convenience, avoid wearing shoes with laces when you're shopping.

A quirky difference in gestures is that **it's rude to point your fingers upward**. While waving hello is fine, people will beckon you with their hand pointing down. The Lao only point their fingers upward when calling their pets or motioning to someone with the intention of insulting them.

The Lao concept of personal space is far more lax than in the West. Being intimately wedged against a stranger in public spaces is of little concern, and taking the liberty to pinch a child's cheek or absent-mindedly stroke someone's arm while talking to them is a common sight between people whether they're old friends or it's their first encounter. Some people may even pat a particularly rotund belly, as **joking about weight** is entirely acceptable. Yet commenting on someone's dark skin will be considered an insult and girls will find it just as upsetting as if you called someone fat in the West.

Overall, good manners are generally reflected less through token gestures, and more through the attitude with which you approach people. If you're smiling, calm and at ease you will be met in kind; if you approach people with a sour face, crossed arms and speak to them in a loud aggressive tone, Lao people will probably wonder what's wrong with you.

Keeping your cool is one of the most important cultural rules to follow while travelling in Laos; another important rule is to not try to talk politics. Attempting to elicit criticism from a Lao person about their government is a quick way to alienate yourself.

Money

Laos uses the Lao Kip (LAK) as its currency. The bank notes (see pictures below) currently in circulations are 500, 1,000, 2,000, 5,000, 10,000, 20,000, 50,000, and 100,000 Kip. No coins are currently in use in Laos.

Many websites refer to the unit of Laos money as "New Kip". This maybe because the Lao Kip has been through some changes in recent times, see history of Lao Kip below.

Brief history of Lao Money

In 1945 the Lao currency was called Free Kip.

In 1952 it was called Royal Kip, the kip was also called piastre in French. In that era, there were both coins and banknotes.

In 1976 Pathet Lao Kip replaced Royal Kip following the Pathet Lao's takeover of the country.

In 1979 Lao PDR Kip or Lao Kip or New Kip replaced Pathet Lao Kip (100 Pathet Lao Kip = 1 Kip (Lao New Kip)).

The 1979 Lao Kip, initially came in 1, 5, 10, 20, 50 and 100 Kip denominations. The 500 Kip notes were added in 1988 followed by 1,000 Kip in 1992, 2,000 and 5,000 kip notes in 1997, 10,000 and 20,000 kip notes in 2002, 50,000 kip in 2006 and 100,000 kipnotes in 2012.

At present no notes under 500 Kip are in circulation.

Lao Coins: Coins were removed from circulation many years ago.

Visa Information

All visitors entering Laos must possess valid passports. Visa can obtained from Lao Embassies and Consulates abroad. In addition, visa can also be obtained on arrival at the international checkpoint.

Visas are available in advance of arrival at Lao Embassies. This can be done in several ways through a tour company recognized by the Lao PDR from Lao Embassies or Consulate in countries.

For those wishing to extend their stay, it is possible to extend your visa at the Immigration Office in Vientiane, through travel agencies. It is also possible to obtain a Visa-on-Arrival at international checkpoints.

Validity starts from day of entry into Laos. Tourist/Business: 30 days (can be extended twice in Vientiane for 30 days). Visas must be used within three months of being issued.

Passport/Visa Note: Those requiring visas should obtain them in their home country before travelling to Laos. Visas are available on arrival at international checkpoints. On entering Laos visitors must ensure they receive an entry stamp in their passport as fines for not having one are high. All visitors' passports should be valid for at least six months.

Laos Visa Extension

If you find your visa is about to expire and you wish to stay longer in Laos, don't worry, it is possible to get all types of Laos visa (except for a Transit Visa), extended at the immigration office in Vientiane. It cost US\$2 per day if you apply before the expiry date. However, if you leave it until your visa expires you will be fined for US\$10 per day for the days you over stayed.

If you are in Vientiane, your Laos Visa extension can be done at the Immigration Office behind the Joint Development Bank (JDB) on Lane Xang Avenue, opposite the

Morning Market. The office is open Monday-Friday, from 8:00-16:00 (closed 12:00 to 13:00 at lunchtime). The office is close for applications on Friday afternoon.

Requirements

- Your passport
- One passport type photo
- Service fee of US\$3
- Application fee of 3,000 kip per person
- Visa extension fee : \$2 per day if you have valid visa, \$10 per day if your visa is already expired (overstayed days)

Get a travel agent or specialist provider to do your Laos Visa Extension for you.

Most travel agents can arrange a Laos Visa Extension for you with small overhead fee. This varies between providers, so shop around for the best deal.

The process is straight forward, just fill out the application form the submit together with your passport and pay fees. In normal circumstances your visa is usually ready the same day.

If you only plan to stay for a few more days this option could work out best. If you are in Vientiane it is very easy, you can take a public bus (around 10,000 kip) to the Lao-Thai Friendship Bridge. Complete the immigration procedures on the Lao side; the take the shuttle bus (5,000 kip) to the Thai immigration point and enter Thailand. If you want to come straight back into Laos you simply have to cross the road to the Thai immigration to exit the country. Once again, get the shuttle bus and then arrive at the Lao side, where you can apply for a Laos **Visa on Arrival**.

Your passport must have at least 6 months of remaining validity and a blank page for a visa stamp and don't forget to take enough cash (US dollars) for the visa fee and two passport sized photos.

Country Information Websites

- <http://www.tourismlaos.org>
- <http://www.ecotourismlaos.org>
- <http://www.laowebsites.com>

