

THE HEART OF LAOS

A Journey Through Nature, Culture & History

9 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Luang Prabang

Arrival in Luang Prabang, the spiritual heart of Laos and a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1995. Nestled at the confluence of the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers, this former royal capital has preserved its architectural heritage better than perhaps any other city in Southeast Asia. French colonial villas, Buddhist temples, and traditional Lao houses line streets that have changed remarkably little over the past century.

This evening we meet our Tour Leader and fellow travellers for a welcome dinner.

Overnight in Luang Prabang.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Luang Prabang: Town Touring

Today we explore Luang Prabang, beginning with the city's remarkable history. In the 14th century, Fa Ngum established Luang Prabang as the capital of Lan Xang, the "Kingdom of a Million Elephants." The city's history extends even further back – by this time, Luang Prabang had already served as the seat of local kingdoms for 600 years. Legend holds that two hermits chose the site, originally known as Xieng Thong, meaning "Copper Tree City."

We begin with an orientation walk along the main street, where colonial-era buildings now house shops, cafés, and art galleries. The compact town centre lends itself to exploration on foot, allowing us to absorb the atmosphere and discover details that would be missed from a vehicle.

Later we climb Phu Si Hill for panoramic views across the city. From this vantage point, the cruciform layout of the former Royal Palace becomes visible below, along with the Mekong River and the mountains beyond. The hill rises 100 metres (328 feet) above the surrounding town and hosts several small shrines along its paths, including Wat Chom Si at the summit, whose golden spire catches the late afternoon sun.

The city's designation as a World Heritage Site recognizes not just individual monuments, but the remarkably intact urban landscape – a rare surviving example of the fusion between traditional Lao architecture and European colonial building styles from the 19th and 20th centuries.

Overnight in Luang Prabang.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Luang Prabang Area

An early departure takes us to the Mekong River, where we board a long covered boat equipped with comfortable cushions, life jackets, and facilities for the two-hour journey to Pak Ou Caves. The boat journey itself rewards as much as the destination – we pass riverside villages, fishermen casting nets, and mountains rising from both banks.

The Pak Ou Caves comprise two caverns carved into limestone cliffs at the point where the Nam Ou River joins the Mekong. The site has been sacred for centuries, even predating Buddhism, when local people worshipped spirits believed to inhabit the caves. Today thousands of Buddha images fill every available nook and cranny, ranging from tiny 8-centimetre (3-inch) figures to statues nearly 3 metres (9 feet) tall.

The lower cave, Tham Ting, contains over 4,000 images accumulated over hundreds of years as pilgrims brought offerings. The upper cave, Tham Phum, extends deeper into the cliff, where Buddha images are placed far back in the darkness – a torch proves useful here. The figures represent various styles and periods, creating an unintended museum of Lao Buddhist art.

We return to Luang Prabang and visit the Royal Palace, now a museum containing collections spanning the 15th to 17th centuries. The last member of Lao royalty to live here was Crown Prince Sisavang Vatthana, son of King Sisavang Vong. The private chapel houses the Phra Bang Buddha, the sacred gold image that gives the city its current name. Cast from 90% pure gold and weighing approximately 50 kilograms (110

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pounds), the statue stands in the Abhayamudra pose, symbolizing the dispelling of fear.

We conclude with visits to several temples. Wat Xieng Thong, built in 1560, represents the pinnacle of Luang Prabang temple architecture with its gracefully curved, multi-tiered roofs and richly decorated wooden interior. Wat Mai displays classic design elements, while Wat Wisunalat contains wooden Buddha statues dating back 400 years.

Overnight in Luang Prabang.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Luang Prabang - Train to Vientiane - Fly to Pakse

This morning we journey through Laos aboard the China-Laos Railway, connecting Luang Prabang to Vientiane in approximately two hours. This railway, which opened in 2021, represents a significant infrastructure development for landlocked Laos, linking the country to China's broader rail network. The train offers comfortable seating with charging facilities as we travel through mountainous terrain.

Departing Luang Prabang, we witness the changing landscape – lush river valleys, traditional villages, and limestone karst formations. The route includes a stop at Vang Vieng, known for its dramatic scenery. As we approach Vientiane, views open across the Mekong River valley and the surrounding countryside.

Arriving in Vientiane (the capital, also spelled Viangchan in older texts), we connect with our onward flight to Pakse in southern Laos, arriving in time for dinner.

NOTE: Due to train schedules that are subject to change with little notice, we may accomplish this journey by air.

Overnight in Pakse.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Pakse Market - Vat Phou Temple - Don Khong

Pakse, situated in southern Laos near the Thai border, served as the capital of the Kingdom of Champasak until the early 20th century. This morning we visit Pakse's market, where vendors sell fresh produce, fragrant spices, local handicrafts, and Lao coffee – the region is renowned for coffee cultivation on the nearby Bolaven Plateau.

We continue to Vat Phou, one of Southeast Asia's most significant archaeological sites and a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2001. Built between the late 10th and early 11th centuries, this pre-Angkorian temple complex predates the great monuments of Angkor by nearly a century. The Khmer builders chose this location for its sacred mountain, Phu Kao, which dominates the site and was believed to house powerful spirits.

The temple's design integrates architecture with the natural landscape in ways that influenced later Angkorian construction. A ceremonial causeway leads from ancient barays (reservoirs) through successive terraces to the sanctuary at the mountain's base. The stone carvings – particularly those depicting Hindu deities and mythological scenes – show remarkable depth and detail despite centuries of weathering. The site originally served as a Hindu temple dedicated to Shiva before its conversion to Buddhist use.

After our visit, we continue south to Si Phan Don, meaning "Four Thousand Islands" in Lao. This 50-kilometre (31-mile) stretch of the Mekong River fragments into countless channels and islands, roughly half of which become submerged during the annual floods. The landscape here differs markedly from northern Laos – flatter, more tropical, with the Mekong reaching its widest point before continuing into Cambodia.

Overnight on Don Khong (Khong Island).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Phan Don - Phapheng Waterfalls - Pakse

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Today we embark on a boat excursion through the islands of Si Phan Don, beginning with a visit to Khone Island. During the French colonial period (1893-1945), France attempted to establish a trade route along the entire Mekong River. The Khone Falls blocked river traffic, so the French built Laos's only railway – a 7-kilometre (4-mile) line with a pier, station, hospital, and maritime office. We visit these remnants, now slowly being reclaimed by vegetation, which offer insight into colonial ambitions and the challenges the Mekong presented to navigation.

We continue to Li Phi Waterfall, known locally as Taat Somhamit. The Lao nickname translates as "Corridor of the Devil" or "Spirit Trap" – local belief held that the turbulent waters captured malevolent spirits, preventing them from traveling further downstream. The falls create a dramatic display where the Mekong drops through a series of rocky channels.

In the afternoon we travel by road to Khone Phapheng Falls, the widest waterfall in Southeast Asia. During peak flow, the falls measure 10.8 kilometres (6.7 miles) wide, with water dropping 21 metres (69 feet) in a series of cascades. The volume and power of the Mekong here explain why this barrier prevented French colonial dreams of continuous river navigation from China to the sea.

We return to Pakse, concluding our exploration of southern Laos's river landscapes.

Overnight in Pakse.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Pakse: Bolaven Plateau - Fly to Vientiane

This morning we drive from Pakse to the Bolaven Plateau, a highland region rising 1000-1350 metres (3,280-4,430 feet) above sea level. The elevation creates a cooler climate and higher rainfall than the surrounding lowlands, making the plateau ideal for agriculture. French colonists introduced coffee here in the early 20th century, and today the Bolaven Plateau produces some of Southeast Asia's finest arabica and robusta beans.

Our route passes through countryside where ethnic minority villages – including Alak, Katu, and Suay communities – maintain traditional ways of life. Rice paddies give way to banana plantations and coffee estates as we climb toward the plateau. The volcanic soil, combined with the climate, creates conditions that coffee growers prize.

We visit Tad Fane Waterfall, one of the plateau's most impressive natural features. Twin streams of water plunge 120 metres (394 feet) into a narrow gorge surrounded by protected forest. A short walk through the forest brings us to viewpoints overlooking the falls and the surrounding landscape of coffee plantations and jungle.

At a local coffee plantation, we learn about cultivation, harvesting, and processing methods. The Bolaven's coffee cherries are typically hand-picked at peak ripeness, then processed using traditional methods that have changed little over decades. We sample the finished product – the region's coffee is known for its rich flavour and low acidity.

As we explore the plateau, we may visit additional waterfalls and remote villages, depending on road conditions and time. The plateau's relative isolation has helped preserve both its natural environment and traditional cultures.

In the late afternoon we return to Pakse for our short flight back to Vientiane (aka Viangchan), Laos's capital city.

Overnight in Vientiane.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Vientiane Touring

Today's sightseeing takes us to Pha That Luang, a gold-covered large Buddhist stupa in the centre of the city. Since its initial establishment, suggested to be in the 3rd century, the stupa has undergone several reconstructions as recently as the 1930s due to foreign invasions of the area. It is generally regarded as the most important national monument in Laos and a national symbol. The architecture of the building includes many references to Lao culture and identity, and so has become a symbol of Lao nationalism.

We also stop at Haw Pha Kaew, a temple now serving as a museum of religious artifacts. It was a royal family temple for worshipping the Jade Buddha and holding religious ceremonies. The magnificent temple is three storeys high with gorgeous palace hall and huge Buddha altar. However, in 1779 A.D, the King of Siam with his army invaded the city and looted the Jade Buddha as well. Many precious collections can be

seen there, such as the gold throne, the wood carving of high quality and statues of Buddha of various sizes and shapes.

We also travel to Buddha Park (aka Xieng Khuan), a famous sculpture park with more than 200 religious statues including a huge 40-metre high reclining Buddha image. It was built in 1958 by Luang Pu Bunleua Sulilat, a monk who studied both Buddhism and Hinduism. This explains why his park is full not only of Buddha images but also of Hindu gods as well as demons and animals from both beliefs.

This evening you may wish to take a stroll along the river front and take in the giant sprawling market, with its instantly recognizable red-roofed stalls and crowds of people who come to snap up a bargain or just soak up the laidback Mekong atmosphere.

PLEASE NOTE that some or all of today's sightseeing and your departure tomorrow may be managed and guided by one of our local associates. This is due to the fact that your Tour Leader may be leaving early today with travellers who have chosen to extend their tour to include Vietnam.

Overnight in Vientiane.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Departure

Departure from Vientiane.

BON VOYAGE!!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast